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BIRDS OF PREY

BY

M.E. BRADDON

[Illustration: "Be good enough to take me straight to her," said the Captain, "I am her father."]

CONTENTS:

BIRDS OF PREY

BOOK THE FIRST.

FATAL FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE IN BLOOMSBURY.

"What about?" There are some houses whereof the outward aspect is sealed with the seal of respectability—houses which inspire confidence in the minds of the most sceptical of butchers and bakers—houses at whose area-gates the tradesman delivers his goods undoubtingly, and from whose spotless door-steps the vagabond children of the neighbourhood recoil as from a shrine too sacred for their gambols.

Such a house made its presence obvious, some years ago, in one of the smaller streets of that west-central region which lies between Holborn and St. Pancras Church. It is perhaps the nature of ultra-respectability to be disagreeably conspicuous. The unsullied brightness of No. 14 Fitzgeorge-street was a standing reproach to every other house in the dingy thorough-fare. That one spot of cleanliness made the surrounding dirt cruelly palpable. The muslin curtains in the parlour windows of No. 15 would not

have appeared of such a smoky yellow if the curtains of No. 14 had not been of such a pharisaical whiteness. Mrs. Magson, at No. 13, was a humble letter of lodgings, always more or less in arrear with the demands of quarter-day; and it seemed a hard thing that her door-steps, whereon were expended much labour and hearthstone—not to mention house-flannel, which was in itself no unimportant item in the annual expenses—should be always thrown in the shade by the surpassing purity of the steps before No. 14.

Not satisfied with being the very pink and pattern of respectability, the objectionable house even aspired to a kind of prettiness. It was as bright, and pleasant, and rural of aspect as any house within earshot of the roar and rattle of Holborn can be. There were flowers in the windows; gaudy scarlet geraniums, which seemed to enjoy an immunity from all the ills to which geraniums are subject, so impossible was it to discover a faded leaf amongst their greenness, or the presence of blight amidst their wealth of blossom. There were birdcages within the shadow of the muslin curtains, and the colouring of the newly-pointed brickwork was agreeably relieved by the vivid green of Venetian blinds. The freshly-varnished street-door bore a brass-plate, on which to look was to be dazzled; and the effect produced by this combination of white door-step, scarlet geranium, green blind, and brass-plate was obtrusively brilliant.

Those who had been so privileged as to behold the interior of the house in Fitzgeorge-street brought away with them a sense of admiration that was the next thing to envy. The pink and pattern of propriety within, as it was the pink and pattern of propriety without, it excited in every breast alike a wondering awe, as of a habitation tenanted by some mysterious being, infinitely superior to the common order of householders.

The inscription on the brass-plate informed the neighbourhood that No. 14 was occupied by Mr. Sheldon, surgeon-dentist; and the dwellers in Fitzgeorge-street amused themselves in their leisure hours by speculative discussions upon the character and pursuits, belongings and surroundings, of this gentleman.

Of course he was eminently respectable. On that question no Fitzgeorgian had ever hazarded a doubt. A householder with such a door-step and such muslin curtains could not be other than the most correct of mankind; for, if there is any external evidence by which a dissolute life or an ill-regulated mind will infallibly betray itself, that evidence is to be found in the yellowness and limpness of muslin window-curtains. The eyes are the windows of the soul, says the poet; but if a man's eyes are not open to your inspection, the windows of his house will help you to discover his character as an individual, and his solidity as a citizen. At least such was the opinion cherished in Fitzgeorge-street, Russell-square.

The person and habits of Mr. Sheldon were in perfect harmony with the aspect of the house. The unsullied snow of the door-step reproduced itself in the unsullied snow of his shirt-front; the brilliancy of the brass-plate was reflected in the glittering brightness of his gold-studs; the varnish on the door was equalled by the lustrous surface of his black-satin waistcoat; the careful pointing of the brickwork was in a manner imitated by the perfect order of his polished finger-nails and the irreproachable neatness of his hair and whiskers. No dentist or medical practitioner of any denomination had inhabited the house in Fitzgeorge-street before the coming of Philip Sheldon. The house had been unoccupied for upwards of a year, and was in the last stage of shabbiness and decay, when the bills disappeared all at once from the windows, and busy painters and bricklayers set their ladders against the dingy brickwork. Mr. Sheldon took the house on a long lease, and spent two or three hundred pounds in the embellishment of it. Upon the completion of all repairs and decorations, two great waggon-loads of furniture, distinguished by that old fashioned clumsiness which is eminently suggestive of respectability, arrived from the Euston-square terminus, while a young man of meditative aspect might have been seen on his knees, now in one empty chamber, anon in another, performing some species of indoor surveying, with a three-foot rule, a loose little oblong memorandum-book, and the merest stump of a square lead-pencil. This was an emissary from the carpet warehouse; and before nightfall it was known to more than one inhabitant in Fitzgeorge-street that the stranger was going to lay down new carpets. The new-comer was evidently of an active and energetic temperament, for within three days of his arrival the brass-plate on his street-door announced his profession, while a neat little glass-case, on a level with the eye of the passing pedestrian, exhibited specimens of his skill in mechanical dentistry, and afforded instruction and amusement to the boys of the neighbourhood, who criticised the glistening white teeth and impossibly red gums, displayed behind the plate-glass, with a like vigour and freedom of language. Nor did Mr. Sheldon's announcement of his profession confine itself to the brass-plate and the glass-case. A shabby-genteel young man pervaded the neighbourhood for some days after the surgeon-dentist's advent, knocking a postman's knock, which only lacked the galvanic sharpness of the professional touch, and delivering neatly-printed circulars to the effect that Mr. Sheldon, surgeon-dentist, of 14 Fitzgeorge-street, had invented some novel method of adjusting false teeth, incomparably superior to any existing method, and that he had, further, patented an improvement on nature in the

way of coral gums, the name whereof was an unpronounceable compound of Greek and Latin, calculated to awaken an awful reverence in the unprofessional and unclassical mind.

The Fitzgeorgians shook their heads with prophetic solemnity as they read these circulars. Struggling householders, who find it a hard task to keep the two ends which never have met and never will meet from growing farther and farther asunder every year, are apt to derive a dreary kind of satisfaction from the contemplation of another man's impending ruin. Fitzgeorge-street and its neighbourhood had existed without the services of a dentist, but it was very doubtful that a dentist would be able to exist on the custom to be obtained in Fitzgeorge-street. Mr. Sheldon may, perhaps, have pitched his tent under the impression that wherever there was mankind there was likely to be toothache, and that the healer of an ill so common to frail humanity could scarcely fail to earn his bread, let him establish his abode of horror where he might. For some time after his arrival people watched him and wondered about him, and regarded him a little suspiciously, in spite of the substantial clumsiness of his furniture and the unwinking brightness of his windows. His neighbours asked one another how long all that outward semblance of prosperity would last; and there was sinister meaning in the question.

The Fitzgeorgians were not a little surprised, and were perhaps just a little disappointed, on finding that the newly-established dentist did manage to hold his ground somehow or other, and that the muslin curtains were renewed again and again in all their spotless purity; that the supplies of rotten-stone and oil, hearthstone and house-flannel, were unfailing as a perennial spring; and that the unsullied snow of Mr. Sheldon's shirt-fronts retained its primeval whiteness. Wonderland suspicion gave place to a half-envious respect. Whether much custom came to the dentist no one could decide. There is no trade or profession in which the struggling man will not receive some faint show of encouragement. Pedestrians of agonised aspect, with handkerchiefs held convulsively before their mouths, were seen to rush wildly towards the dentist's door, then pause for a moment, stricken by a sudden terror, and anon feebly pull the handle of an inflexible bell. Cabs had been heard to approach that fatal door—generally on wet days; for there seems to be a kind of fitness in the choice of damp and dismal weather for the extraction of teeth. Elderly ladies and gentlemen had been known to come many times to the Fitzgeorgian mansion. There was a legend of an old lady who had been seen to arrive in a brougham, especially weird and nut-crackery of aspect, and to depart half an hour afterwards a beautified and renovated creature. One half of the Fitzgeorgians declared that Mr. Sheldon had established a very nice little practice, and was saving money; while the other half were still despondent, and opined that the dentist had private property, and was eating up his little capital. It transpired in course of time that Mr. Sheldon had left his native town of Little Barlingford, in Yorkshire, where his father and grandfather had been surgeon-dentists before him, to establish himself in London. He had disposed advantageously of an excellent practice, and had transferred his household goods—the ponderous chairs and tables, the wood whereof had deepened and mellowed in tint under the indefatigable hand of his grandmother—to the metropolis, speculating on the chance that his talents and appearance, address and industry, could scarcely fail to achieve a position. It was further known that he had a brother, an attorney in Gray's Inn, who visited him very frequently; that he had few other friends or acquaintance; that he was a shining example of steadiness and sobriety; that he was on the sunnier side of thirty, a bachelor, and very good-looking; and that his household was comprised of a grim-visaged active old woman imported from Barlingford, a girl who ran errands, and a boy who opened the door, attended to the consulting-room, and did some mysterious work at odd times with a file and sundry queer lumps of plaster-of-paris, beeswax, and bone, in a dark little shed abutting on the yard at the back of the house. This much had the inhabitants of Fitzgeorge-street discovered respecting Mr. Sheldon when he had been amongst them four years; but they had discovered no more. He had made no local acquaintances, nor had he sought to make any. Those of his neighbours who had seen the interior of his house had entered it as patients. They left it as much pleased with Mr. Sheldon as one can be with a man at whose hands one has just undergone martyrdom, and circulated a very flattering report of the dentist's agreeable manners and delicate white handkerchief, fragrant with the odour of eau-de-Cologne. For the rest, Philip Sheldon lived his own life, and dreamed his own dreams. His opposite neighbours, who watched him on sultry summer evenings as he lounged near an open window smoking his cigar, had no more knowledge of his thoughts and fancies than they might have had if he had been a Calmuck Tartar or an Abyssinian chief.

CHAPTER II.

PHILIP SHELDON READS THE "LANCET."

Fitzgeorge-street was chill and dreary of aspect, under a gray March sky, when Mr. Sheldon returned to it after a week's absence from London. He had been to Little Barlingford, and had spent his brief holiday among old friends and acquaintance. The weather had not been in favour of that driving hither and thither in dog-carts, or riding rakish horses long distances to beat up old companions, which is accounted pleasure on such occasions. The blustrous winds of an unusually bitter March had buffeted Mr. Sheldon in the streets of his native town, and had almost blown him off the door-steps of his kindred. So it is scarcely strange if he returned to town looking none the better for his excursion. He looked considerably the worse for his week's absence, the old Yorkshire-woman said, as she waited upon him while he ate a chop and drank two large cups of very strong tea.

Mr. Sheldon made short work of his impromptu meal. He seemed anxious to put an end to his housekeeper's affectionate interest in himself and his health, and to get her out of the room. She had nursed him nearly thirty years before, and the recollection that she had been very familiar with him when he was a handsome black-eyed baby, with a tendency to become suddenly stiff of body and crimson of visage without any obvious provocation, inclined her to take occasional liberties now. She watched him furtively as he sat in a big high-backed arm-chair staring moodily at the struggling fire, and would fain have questioned him a little about Barlingford and Barlingford people.

But Philip Sheldon was not a man with whom even a superannuated nurse can venture to take many liberties. He was a good master, paid his servants their wages with unfailing punctuality, and gave very little trouble. But he was the last person in the world upon whom a garrulous woman could venture to inflict her rambling discourse; as Nancy Woolper—by courtesy, Mrs. Woolper—was fain to confess to her next-door neighbour, Mrs. Magson, when her master was the subject of an afternoon gossip. The heads of a household may inhabit a neighbourhood for years without becoming acquainted even with the outward aspect of their neighbours; but in the lordly servants' halls of the West, or the modest kitchens of Bloomsbury, there will be interchange of civilities and friendly "droppings in" to tea or supper, let the master of the house be never so ungregarious a creature.

"You can take the tea-things, Nancy," Mr. Sheldon said presently, arousing himself suddenly from that sombre reverie in which he had been absorbed for the last ten minutes; "I am going to be very busy to-night, and I expect Mr. George in the course of the evening. Mind, I am not at home to anybody but him."

The old woman arranged the tea-things on her tray, but still kept a furtive watch on her master, who sat with his head a little bent, and his bright black eyes fixed on the fire with that intensity of gaze peculiar to eyes which see something far away from the object they seem to contemplate. She was in the habit of watching Mr. Sheldon rather curiously at all times, for she had never quite got over a difficulty in realising the fact that the black-eyed baby with whom she had been so intimate *could* have developed into this self-contained inflexible young man, whose thoughts were so very far away from her. To-night she watched him more intently than she was accustomed to do, for to-night there was some change in his face which she was trying in a dim way to account for.

He looked up from the fire suddenly, and found her eyes fixed upon him. It may be that he had been disturbed by a semi-consciousness of that curious gaze, for he looked at her angrily,—"What are you staring at, Nancy?"

It was not the first time he had encountered her watchful eyes and asked the same impatient question. But Mrs. Woolper possessed that north-country quickness of intellect which is generally equal to an emergency, and was always ready with some question or suggestion which went to prove that she had just fixed her eyes on her master, inspired by some anxiety about his interests.

"I was just a-thinking, sir," she said, meeting his stern glance unflinchingly with her little sharp gray eyes, "I was just a-thinking—you said not at home to *any one*, except Mr. George. If it should be a person in a cab wanting their teeth out sudden—and if anything could make toothache more general in this neighbourhood it would be these March winds—if it should be a patient, sir, in a cab——"

The dentist interrupted her with a short bitter laugh.

"Neither March winds nor April showers are likely to bring me patients, Nancy, on foot or in cabs, and you ought to know it. If it's a patient, ask him in, by all means, and give him last Saturday week's *Times* to read, while I rub the rust off my forceps. There, that will do; take your tray—or, stop; I've some news to tell you." He rose, and stood with his back to the fire and his eyes bent upon the hearthrug, while Mrs. Woolper waited by the table, with the tray packed ready for removal. Her master kept her waiting so for some minutes, and then turned his face half away from her, and contemplated himself absently in the glass while he spoke.

"You remember Mrs. Halliday?" he asked.

"I should think I did, sir; Miss Georgina Cradock that was—Miss Georgy they called her; your first sweetheart. And how she could ever marry that big awkward Halliday is more than I can make out. Poor fondy! I suppose she was took with those great round blue eyes and red whiskers of his."

"Her mother and father were 'took' by his comfortable farmhouse and well-stocked farm, Nancy," answered Mr. Sheldon, still contemplating himself in the glass. "Georgy had very little to do with it. She is one of those women who let other people think for them. However, Tom is an excellent fellow, and Georgy was a lucky girl to catch such a husband. Any little flirtation there may have been between her and me was over and done with long before she married Tom. It never was more than a flirtation; and I've flirted with a good many Barlingford girls in my time, as you know, Nancy."

It was not often that Mr. Sheldon condescended to be so communicative to his housekeeper. The old woman nodded and chuckled, delighted by her master's unwonted friendliness.

"I drove over to Hyley while I was at home, Nancy," continued the dentist—he called Barlingford home still, though he had broken most of the links that had bound him to it—"and dined with the Hallidays. Georgy is as pretty as ever, and she and Tom get on capitally."

"Any children, sir?"

"One girl," answered Mr. Sheldon carelessly. "She's at school in Scarborough, and I didn't see her; but I hear she's a fine bouncing lass. I had a very pleasant day with the Hallidays. Tom has sold his farm; that part of the world doesn't suit him, it seems—too cold and bleak for him. He's one of those big burly-looking men who seem as if they could knock you down with a little finger, and who shiver at every puff of wind. I don't think he'll make old bones, Nancy. But that's neither here nor there. I daresay he's good for another ten years; or I'm sure I hope so, on Georgy's account."

"It was right down soft of him to sell Hyley Farm, though," said Nancy reflectively; "I've heard tell as it's the best land for forty mile round Barlingford. But he got a rare good price for it, I'll lay."

"O, yes; he sold the property uncommonly well, he tells me. You know if a north-countryman gets the chance of making a profit, he never lets it slip through his fingers."

Mrs. Woolper received this compliment to her countrymen with a gratified grin, and Mr. Sheldon went on talking, still looking at the reflection of his handsome face in the glass, and pulling his whiskers meditatively.

"Now as Tom was made for a farmer and nothing but a farmer, he must find land somewhere in a climate that does suit him; so his friends have advised him to try a place in Devonshire or Cornwall, where he may train his myrtles and roses over his roof, and grow green peas for the London markets as late as November. There are such places to be had if he bides his time, and he's coming to town next week to look about him. So, as Georgy and he would be about as capable of taking care of themselves in London as a couple of children, I have recommended them to take up their quarters here. They'll have their lodgings for nothing, and we shall chum together on the Yorkshire system; for of course I can't afford to keep a couple of visitors for a month at a stretch. Do you think you shall be able to manage for us, Nancy?"

"O, yes, I'll manage well enough. I'm not one of your lazy London lasses that take half an hour to wipe a teacup. I'll manage easy enough. Mr. and Mrs. Halliday will be having your room, I'll lay."

"Yes; give them the best room, by all means. I can sleep anywhere. And now go downstairs and think it over, Nancy. I must get to my work. I've some letters that must be written to-night."

Mrs. Woolper departed with her tray, gratified by her master's unwonted familiarity, and not ill pleased by the thought of visitors. They would cause a great deal of trouble, certainly; but the monotony of Nancy's easy life had grown so oppressive to her as to render the idea of any variety pleasing. And then there would be the pleasure of making that iniquitous creature the London lass bestir herself, and there would be furthermore the advantage of certain little perquisites which a clever manager always secures to herself in a house where there is much eating and drinking. Mr. Sheldon himself had lived like a modern anchorite for the last four years; and Mrs. Woolper, who was pretty well acquainted with the state of his finances, had pinched and contrived for his benefit, or rather for the benefit of the black-eyed baby she had nursed nine-and-twenty years before. For his sake she had been careful and honest, willing to forego all the small profits to which she held herself entitled; but if well-to-do people were going to share her master's expenses, there would be no longer need for such scrupulous integrity; and if things were rightly managed, Thomas Halliday might be made to bear the entire cost of the household during his month's visit on the Yorkshire system.

While Mrs. Woolper meditated upon her domestic duties, the master of the domicile abandoned himself to reflections which were apparently of a very serious character. He brought a leathern desk from a side-table, unlocked it, and took out a quire of paper; but he made no further advance towards the writing of those letters on account of which he had dismissed his housekeeper. He sat, with his elbows on the table, nibbling the end of a wooden penholder, and staring at the opposite wall. His face looked pale and haggard in the light of the gas, and the eyes, fixed in that vacant stare, had a feverish brightness.

Mr. Sheldon was a handsome man—eminently handsome, according to the popular notion of masculine beauty; and if the popular ideal has been a little vulgarised by the waxen gentlemen on whose finely-moulded foreheads the wig-maker is wont to display the specimens of his art, that is no discredit to Mr. Sheldon. His features were regular; the nose a handsome aquiline; the mouth firm and well modelled; the chin and jaw rather heavier than in the waxen ideal of the hair-dresser; the forehead very prominent in the region of the perceptives, but obviously wanting in the higher faculties. The eye of the phrenologist, unaided by his fingers, must have failed to discover the secrets of Mr. Sheldon's organisation; for one of the dentist's strong points was his hair, which was very luxuriant, and which he wore in artfully-arranged masses that passed for curls, but which owed their undulating grace rather to a skilful manipulation than to any natural tendency. It has been said that the rulers of the world are straight-haired men; and Mr. Sheldon might have been a Napoleon III. so far as regards this special attribute. His hair was of a dense black, and his whiskers of the same sombre hue. These carefully-arranged whiskers were another of the dentist's strong points; and the third strong point was his teeth, the perfection whereof was a fine advertisement when considered in a professional light. The teeth were rather too large and square for a painter's or a poet's notion of beauty, and were apt to suggest an unpleasant image of some sleek brindled creature crunching human bones in an Indian jungle. But they were handsome teeth notwithstanding, and their flashing whiteness made an effective contrast to the clear sallow tint of the dentist's complexion.

Mr. Sheldon was a man of industrious habits,—fond indeed of work, and distinguished by a persistent activity in the carrying out of any labour he had planned for himself. He was not prone to the indulgence of idle reveries or agreeable day-dreams. Thought with him was labour; it was the "thinking out" of future work to be done, and it was an operation as precise and mathematical as the actual labour that resulted therefrom. The contents of his brain were as well kept as a careful trader's ledger. He had his thoughts docketed and indexed, and rarely wasted the smallest portion of his time in searching for an idea. Tonight he sat thinking until he was interrupted by a loud double knock, which was evidently familiar to him, for he muttered "George!" pushed aside his desk, and took up his stand upon the hearthrug, ready to receive the expected visitor.

There was the sound of a man's voice below,—very like Philip Sheldon's own voice; then a quick firm tread on the stairs; and then the door was opened, and a man, who himself was very like Philip Sheldon, came into the room. This was the dentist's brother George, two years his junior. The likeness between the two men was in no way marvellous, but it was nevertheless very obvious. You could scarcely have mistaken one man for the other, but you could hardly have failed to perceive that the two men were brothers. They resembled each other more closely in form than in face. They were of the same height—both tall and strongly built. Both had black eyes with a hard brightness in them, black whiskers, black hair, sinewy hands with prominent knuckles, square finger-tops, and bony wrists. Each man seemed the personification of savage health and vigour, smoothed and shapened in accordance with the prejudices of civilised life. Looking at these two men for the first time, you might approve or disapprove their appearance; they might impress you favourably or unfavourably; but you could scarcely fail to be reminded vaguely of strong, bright-eyed, savage creatures, beautiful and graceful after their kind, but dangerous and fatal to man.

The brothers greeted each other with a friendly nod. They were a great deal too practical to indulge in any sentimental display of fraternal affection. They liked each other very well, and were useful to each other, and took their pleasure together on those rare occasions when they were weak enough to waste time upon unprofitable pleasure; but neither of them would have comprehended the possibility of anything beyond this.

"Well, old fellow," said George, "I'm glad you're back again. You're looking rather seedy, though. I suppose you knocked about a good deal down there?"

"I had a night or two of it with Halliday and the old set. He's going it rather fast."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Sheldon the younger; "it's a pity he doesn't go it a little faster, and go off the hooks altogether, so that you might marry Georgy."

"How do I know that Georgy would have me, if he did leave her a widow?" asked Philip dubiously.

"O, she'd have you fast enough. She used to be very sweet upon you before she married Tom; and even if she has forgotten all that, she'd have you if you asked her. She'd be afraid to say no. She was always more or less afraid of you, you know, Phil."

"I don't know about that. She was a nice little thing enough; but she knew how to drop a poor sweetheart and take up with a rich one, in spite of her simplicity."

"O, that was the old parties' doing. Georgy would have jumped into a cauldron of boiling oil if her mother and father had told her she must do it. Don't you remember when we were children together how afraid she used to be of spoiling her frocks? I don't believe she married Tom Halliday of her own free will, any more than she stood in the corner of her own free will after she'd torn her frock, as I've seen her stand twenty times. She stood in the corner because they told her she must; and she married Tom for the same reason, and I don't suppose she's been particularly happy with him."

"Well, that's her look-out," answered Philip gloomily; "I know I want a rich wife badly enough. Things are about as bad with me as they can be."

"I suppose they *are* rather piscatorial. The elderly dowagers don't come up to time, eh? Very few orders for the complete set at ten-pound-ten?"

"I took about seventy pounds last year," said the dentist, "and my expenses are something like five pounds a week. I've been making up the deficiency out of the money I got for the Barlingford business, thinking I should be able to stand out and make a connection; but the connection gets more disconnected every year. I suppose people came to me at first for the novelty of the thing, for I had a sprinkling of decent patients for the first twelve months or so. But now I might as well throw my money into the gutter as spend it on circulars or advertisements."

"And a young woman with twenty thousand pounds and something amiss with her jaw hasn't turned up yet!"

"No, nor an old woman either. I wouldn't stick at the age, if the money was all right," answered Mr. Sheldon bitterly.

The younger brother shrugged his shoulders and plunged his hands into his trousers-pockets with a gesture of seriocomic despair. He was the livelier of the two, and affected a slanginess of dress and talk and manner, a certain "horsey" style, very different from his elder brother's studied respectability of costume and bearing. His clothes were of a loose sporting cut, and always odorous with stale tobacco. He wore a good deal of finery in the shape of studs and pins and dangling lockets and fusee-boxes; his whiskers were more obtrusive than his brother's, and he wore a moustache in addition—a thick ragged black moustache, which would have become a guerilla chieftain rather than a dweller amidst the quiet courts and squares of Gray's Inn. His position as a lawyer was not much better than that of Philip as a dentist; but he had his own plans for making a fortune, and hoped to win for himself a larger fortune than is often made in the law. He was a hunter of genealogies, a grubber-up of forgotten facts, a joiner of broken links, a kind of legal resurrectionist, a digger in the dust and ashes of the past; and he expected in due time to dig up a treasure rich enough to reward the labour and patience of half a lifetime.

"I can afford to wait till I'm forty for my good luck," he said to his brother sometimes in moments of expansion; "and then I shall have ten years in which to enjoy myself, and twenty more in which I shall have life enough left to eat good dinners and drink good wine, and grumble about the degeneracy of things in general, after the manner of elderly human nature."

The men stood one on each side of the hearth; George looking at his brother, Philip looking down at the fire, with his eyes shaded by their thick black lashes. The fire had become dull and hollow. George bent down presently and stirred the coals impatiently.

"If there's one thing I hate more than, another—and I hate a good many things—it's a bad fire," he said. "How's Barlingford—lively as ever, I suppose?"

"Not much livelier than it was when we left it. Things have gone amiss with me in London, and I've been more than once sorely tempted to make an end of my difficulties with a razor or a few drops of prussic acid; but when I saw the dull gray streets and the square gray houses, and the empty market-place, and the Baptist chapel, and the Unitarian chapel, and the big stony church, and heard the dreary bells ding-donging for evening service, I wondered how I could ever have existed a week in such a place. I had rather sweep a crossing in London than occupy the best house in Barlingford, and I told Tom Halliday so."

"And Tom is coming to London I understand by your letter."

"Yes, he has sold Hyley, and wants to find a place in the west of England. The north doesn't suit his chest. He and Georgy are coming up to town for a few weeks, so I've asked them to stay here. I may as well make some use of the house, for it's very little good in a professional sense."

"Humph!" muttered George; "I don't see your motive."

"I have no particular motive. Tom's a good fellow, and his company will be better than an empty house. The visit won't cost me anything—Halliday is to go shares in the housekeeping."

"Well, you may find it answer that way," replied Mr. Sheldon the younger, who considered that every action of a man's life ought to be made to "answer" in some way. "But I should think you would be rather bored by the arrangement: Tom's a very good fellow in his way, and a great friend of mine, but he's rather an empty-headed animal."

The subject dropped here, and the brothers went on talking of Barlingford and Barlingford people—the few remaining kindred whose existence made a kind of link between the two men and their native town, and the boon companions of their early manhood. The dentist produced the remnant of a bottle of whisky from the sideboard, and rang for hot water and sugar, wherewith to brew grog, for his own and his brother's refreshment; but the conversation flagged nevertheless. Philip Sheldon was dull and absent, answering his companion at random every now and then, much to that gentleman's aggravation; and he owned at last to being thoroughly tired and worn out.

"The journey from Barlingford in a slow train is no joke, you know, George, and I couldn't afford the express," he said apologetically, when his brother upbraided him for his distraction of manner.

"Then I should think you'd better go to bed," answered Mr. Sheldon the younger, who had smoked a couple of cigars, and consumed the contents of the whisky-bottle; "so I'll take myself off. I told you how uncommonly seedy you were looking when I first came in. When do you expect Tom and his wife?"

"At the beginning of next week."

"So soon! Well, good-night, old fellow; I shall see you before they come, I daresay. You might as well drop in upon me at my place to-morrow night. I'm hard at work on a job."

"Your old kind of work?"

"O, yes. I don't get much work of any other kind."

"And I'm afraid you'll never get much good out of that."

"I don't know. A man who sits down to whist may have a run of ill-luck before he gets a decent hand; but the good cards are sure to come if he only sits long enough. Every man has his chance, depend upon it, Phil, if he knows how to watch for it; but there are so many men who get tired and go to sleep before their chances come to them. I've wasted a good deal of time, and a good deal of labour; but the ace of trumps is in the pack, and it must turn up sooner or later. Ta-ta."

George Sheldon nodded and departed, whistling gaily as he walked away from his brother's door. Philip heard him, and turned his chair to the fire with a movement of impatience.

"You may be uncommonly clever, my dear George," soliloquised the dentist, "but you'll never make a fortune by reading wills and hunting in parish-registers for heirs-at-law. A big lump of money is not very likely to go a-begging while any one who can fudge up the faintest pretence of a claim to it is above ground. No, no, my lad, you must find a better way than that before you'll make your fortune."

The fire had burnt low again, and Mr. Sheldon sat staring gloomily at the blackening coals. Things were very bad with him—he had not cared to confess how bad they were, when he had discussed his affairs with his brother. Those neighbours and passers-by who admired the trim brightness of the dentist's abode had no suspicion that the master of that respectable house was in the hands of the Jews, and that the hearthstone which whitened his door-step was paid for out of Israelitish coffers. The dentist's philosophy was all of this world, and he knew that the soldier of fortune, who would fain be a conqueror in the great battle, must needs keep his plumage undrabbled and the golden facings of his uniform untarnished, let his wounds be never so desperate.

Having found his attempt to establish a practice in Fitzgeorge-street a failure, the only course open to Mr. Sheldon, as a man of the world, was to transfer his failure to somebody else, with more or less profit to himself. To this end he preserved the spotless purity of his muslin curtains, though the starch that stiffened them and the bleaching-powder that whitened them were bought with money for which he was to pay sixty per cent. To this end he nursed that wan shadow of a practice, and sustained that appearance of respectability which, in a world where appearance stands for so much, is in itself a kind

of capital. It certainly was dull dreary work to hold the citadel of No. 14 Fitzgeorge-street, against the besieger Poverty; but the dentist stood his ground pertinaciously, knowing that if he only waited long enough, the dupe who was to be his victim would come, and knowing also that there might arrive a day when it would be very useful for him to be able to refer to four years' unblemished respectability as a Bloomsbury householder. He had his lines set in several shady places for that unhappy fish with a small capital, and he had been tantalised by more than one nibble; but he made no open show of his desire to sell his business—since a business that is obviously in the market seems scarcely worth any man's purchase.

Things had of late grown worse with him every day; for every interval of twenty-four hours sinks a man so much the deeper in the mire when renewed accommodation-bills with his name upon them are ripening in the iron safes of Judah. Philip Sheldon found himself sinking gradually and almost imperceptibly into that bottomless pit of difficulty in whose black depths the demon Insolvency holds his dreary court. While his little capital lasted he had kept himself clear of debt, but that being exhausted, and his practice growing worse day by day, he had been fain to seek assistance from money-lenders; and now even the money-lenders were tired of him. The chair in which he sat, the poker which he swung slowly to and fro as he bent over his hearth, were not his own. One of his Jewish creditors had a bill of sale on his furniture, and he might come home any day to find the auctioneer's bills plastered against the wall of his house, and the auctioneer's clerk busy with the catalogue of his possessions. If the expected victim came now to buy his practice, the sacrifice would be made too late to serve his interest. The men who had lent him the money would be the sole gainers by the bargain.

Seldom does a man find himself face to face with a blacker prospect than that which lay before Philip Sheldon; and yet his manner to-night was not the dull blank apathy of despair. It was the manner of a man whose brain is occupied by busy thoughts; who has some elaborate scheme to map out and arrange before he is called upon to carry his plans into action.

"It would be a good business for me," he muttered, "if I had pluck enough to carry it through."

The fire went out as he sat swinging the poker backwards and forwards. The clocks of Bloomsbury and St. Pancras struck twelve, and still Philip Sheldon pondered and plotted by that dreary hearth. The servants had retired at eleven, after a good deal of blundering with bars and shutters, and unnecessary banging of doors. That unearthly silence peculiar to houses after midnight reigned in Mr. Sheldon's domicile, and he could hear the voices of distant roisterers, and the miauling of neighbouring cats, with a painful distinctness as he sat brooding in his silent room. The fact that a mahogany chiffonier in a corner gave utterance to a faint groan occasionally, as of some feeble creature in pain, afforded him no annoyance. He was superior to superstitious fancies, and all the rappings and scratchings of spirit-land would have failed to disturb his equanimity. He was a strictly practical man—one of those men who are always ready, with a stump of lead-pencil and the back of a letter, to reduce everything in creation to figures.

"I had better read up that business before they come," he said, when he had to all appearance "thought out" the subject of his reverie. "No time so good as this for doing it quietly. One never knows who is spying about in the daytime." He looked at his watch, and then went to a cupboard, where there were bundles of wood and matches and old newspapers,—for it was his habit to light his own fire occasionally when he worked unusually late at night or early in the morning. He relighted his fire now as cleverly as any housemaid in Bloomsbury, and stood watching it till it burned briskly. Then he lit a taper, and went downstairs to the professional torture-chamber. The tall horsehair chair looked unutterably awful in the dim glimmer of the taper, and a nervous person could almost have fancied it occupied by the ghost of some patient who had expired under the agony of the forceps. Mr. Sheldon lighted the gas in a movable branch which he was in the habit of turning almost into the mouths of the patients who consulted him at night. There was a cupboard on each side of the mantelpiece, and it was in these two cupboards that the dentist kept his professional library. His books did not form a very valuable collection, but he kept the cupboards constantly locked nevertheless.

He took the key from his waistcoat-pocket, opened one of the cupboards, and selected a book from a row of dingy-looking volumes. He carried the book to the room above, where he seated himself under the gas, and opened the volume at a place in which there was a scrap of paper, evidently left there as a mark. The book was a volume of the *Lancet*, and in this book he read with close attention until the Bloomsbury clocks struck three.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Sheldon's visitors arrived in due course. They were provincial people of the middle class, accounted monstrously genteel in their own neighbourhood, but in nowise resembling Londoners of the same rank.

Mr. Thomas Halliday was a big, loud-spoken, good-tempered Yorkshireman, who had inherited a comfortable little estate from a plodding, money-making father, and for whom life had been very easy. He was a farmer, and nothing but a farmer; a man for whom the supremest pleasure of existence was a cattle-show or a country horse-fair. The farm upon which he had been born and brought up was situated about six miles from Barlingford, and all the delights of his boyhood and youth were associated with that small market town. He and the two Sheldons had been schoolfellows, and afterwards boon companions, taking such pleasure as was obtainable in Barlingford together; flirting with the same provincial beauties at prim tea-parties in the winter, and getting up friendly picnics in the summer—picnics at which eating and drinking were the leading features of the day's entertainment. Mr. Halliday had always regarded George and Philip Sheldon with that reverential admiration which a stupid man, who is conscious of his own mental inferiority, generally feels for a clever friend and companion. But he was also fully aware of the advantage which a rich man possesses over a poor one, and would not have exchanged the fertile acres of Hyley for the intellectual gifts of his schoolfellows. He had found the substantial value of his comfortably furnished house and well-stocked farm when he and his friend Philip Sheldon became suitors for the hand of Georgina Cradock, youngest daughter of a Barlingford attorney, who lived next door to the Barlingford dentist, Philip Sheldon's father. Philip and the girl had been playfellows in the long-walled gardens behind the two houses, and there had been a brotherly and sisterly intimacy between the juvenile members of the two families. But when Philip and Georgina met at the Barlingford tea-parties in later years, the parental powers frowned upon any renewal of that childish friendship. Miss Cradock had no portion, and the worthy solicitor her father was a prudent man, who was apt to look for the promise of domestic happiness in the plate-basket and the linen-press, rather than for such superficial qualifications as black whiskers and white teeth. So poor Philip was "thrown over the bridge," as he said himself, and Georgy Cradock married Mr. Halliday, with all attendant ceremony and splendour, according to the "lights" of Barlingford gentry.

But this provincial bride's story was no passionate record of anguish and tears. The Barlingford Juliet had liked Romeo as much as she was capable of liking any one; but when Papa Capulet insisted on her union with Paris, she accepted her destiny with decent resignation, and, in the absence of any sympathetic father confessor, was fain to seek consolation from a more mundane individual in the person of the Barlingford milliner. Nor did Philip Sheldon give evidence of any extravagant despair. His father was something of a doctor as well as a dentist; and there were plenty of dark little phials lurking on the shelves of his surgery in which the young man could have found "mortal drugs" without the aid of the apothecary, had he been so minded. Happily no such desperate idea ever occurred to him in connection with his grief. He held himself sulkily aloof from Mr. and Mrs. Halliday for some time after their marriage, and allowed people to see that he considered himself very hardly used; but Prudence, which had always been Philip Sheldon's counsellor, proved herself also his consoler in this crisis of his life. A careful consideration of his own interests led him to perceive that the successful result of his love-suit would have been about the worst thing that could have happened to him.

Georgina had no money. All was said in that. As the young dentist's worldly wisdom ripened with experience, he discovered that the worldly ease of the best man in Barlingford was something like that of a canary-bird who inhabits a clean cage and is supplied with abundant seed and water. The cage is eminently comfortable, and the sleepy, respectable, elderly bird sighs for no better abiding-place, no wider prospect than that patch of the universe which he sees between the bars. But now and then there is hatched a wild young fledgeling, which beats its wings against the inexorable wires, and would fain soar away into that wide outer world, to prosper or perish in its freedom.

Before Georgy had been married a year, her sometime lover had fully resigned himself to the existing state of things, and was on the best possible terms with his friend Tom. He could eat his dinner in the comfortable house at Hyley with an excellent appetite; for there was a gulf between him and his old love far wider than any that had been dug by that ceremonial in the parish church of Barlingford. Philip Sheldon had awakened to the consciousness that life in his native town was little more than a kind of animal vegetation—the life of some pulpy invertebrate creature, which sprawls helplessly upon the sands whereon the wave has deposited it, and may be cloven in half without feeling itself noticeably worse for the operation. He had awakened to the knowledge that there was a wider and more agreeable world beyond that little provincial borough, and that a handsome face and figure and a vigorous intellect were commodities for which there must be some kind of market.

Once convinced of the utter worthlessness of his prospects in Barlingford, Mr. Sheldon turned his

eyes Londonwards; and his father happening at the same time very conveniently to depart this life, Philip, the son and heir, disposed of the business to an aspiring young practitioner, and came to the metropolis, where he made that futile attempt to establish himself which has been described.

The dentist had wasted four years in London, and ten years had gone by since Georgy's wedding; and now for the first time he had an opportunity of witnessing the domestic happiness or the domestic misery of the woman who had jilted him, and the man who had been his successful rival. He set himself to watch them with the cool deliberation of a social anatomist, and he experienced very little difficulty in the performance of this moral dissection. They were established under his roof, his companions at every meal; and they were a kind of people who discuss their grievances and indulge in their "little differences" with perfect freedom in the presence of a third, or a fourth, or even a fifth party.

Mr. Sheldon was wise enough to preserve a strict neutrality. He would take up a newspaper at the beginning of a little difference, and lay it down when the little difference was finished, with the most perfect assumption of unconsciousness; but it is doubtful whether the matrimonial disputants were sufficiently appreciative of this good breeding. They would have liked to have had Mr. Sheldon for a court of appeal; and a little interference from him would have given zest to their quarrels. Meanwhile Philip watched them slyly from the covert of his newspaper, and formed his own conclusions about them. If he was pleased to see that his false love's path was not entirely rose-bestrewn, or if he rejoiced at beholding the occasional annoyance of his rival, he allowed no evidence of his pleasure to appear in his face or manner.

Georgina Cradock's rather insipid prettiness had developed into matronly comeliness. Her fair complexion and pink cheeks had lost none of their freshness. Her smooth auburn hair was as soft and bright as it had been when she had braided it preparatory to a Barlingford tea-party in the days of her spinsterhood. She was a pretty, weak little woman, whose education had never gone beyond the routine of a provincial boarding-school, and who believed that she had attained all necessary wisdom in having mastered Pinnock's abridgments of Goldsmith's histories and the rudiments of the French language. She was a woman who thought that the perfection of feminine costume was a moire-antique dress and a conspicuous gold chain. She was a woman who considered a well-furnished house and a horse and gig the highest form of earthly splendour or prosperity.

This was the shallow commonplace creature whom Philip Sheldon had once admired and wooed. He looked at her now, and wondered how he could ever have felt even as much as he had felt on her account. But he had little leisure to devote to any such abstract and useless consideration. He had his own affairs to think about, and they were very desperate.

In the meantime Mr. and Mrs. Halliday occupied themselves in the pursuit of pleasure or business, as the case might be. They were eager for amusement: went to exhibitions in the day and to theatres at night, and came home to cozy little suppers in Fitzgeorge-street, after which Mr. Halliday was wont to waste the small hours in friendly conversation with his quondam companion, and in the consumption of much brandy-and-water.

Unhappily for Georgy, these halcyon days were broken by intervals of storm and cloud. The weak little woman was afflicted with that intermittent fever called jealousy; and the stalwart Thomas was one of those men who can scarcely give the time of day to a feminine acquaintance without some ornate and loud-spoken gallantry. Having no intellectual resources wherewith to beguile the tedium of his idle prosperous life, he was fain to seek pleasure in the companionship of other men; and had thus become a haunter of tavern parlours and small racecourses, being always ready for any amusement his friends proposed to him. It followed, therefore, that he was very often absent from his commonplace substantial home, and his pretty weak-minded wife. And poor Georgy had ample food for her jealous fears and suspicions; for where might a man not be who was so seldom at home? She had never been particularly fond of her husband, but that was no reason why she should not be particularly jealous about him; and her jealousy betrayed itself in a peevish worrying fashion, which was harder to bear than the vengeful ferocity of a Clytemnestra. It was in vain that Thomas Halliday and those jolly good fellows his friends and companions attested the Arcadian innocence of racecourses, and the perfect purity of that smoky atmosphere peculiar to tavern parlours. Georgy's suspicions were too vague for refutation; but they were nevertheless sufficient ground for all the alternations of temper—from stolid sulkiness to peevish whining, from murmured lamentations to loud hysterics—to which the female temperament is liable.

In the meantime poor honest, loud-spoken Tom did all in his power to demonstrate his truth and devotion. He bought his wife as many stiff silk gowns and gaudy Barlingford bonnets as she chose to sigh for. He made a will, in which she was sole legatee, and insured his life in different offices to the amount of five thousand pounds.

"I'm the sort of fellow that's likely to go off the hooks suddenly, you know, Georgy," he said, "and your

poor dad was always anxious I should make things square for you. I don't suppose you're likely to marry again, my lass, so I've no need to tie up Lottie's little fortune. I must trust some one, and I'd better confide in my little wife than in some canting methodistical fellow of a trustee, who would speculate my daughter's money upon some Stock-Exchange hazard, and levant to Australia when it was all swamped. If you can't trust me, Georgy, I'll let you see that I can trust you", added Tom reproachfully.

Whereupon poor weak little Mrs. Halliday murmured plaintively that she did not want fortunes or life insurances, but that she wanted her husband to stay at home, content with the calm and rather sleepy delights of his own fireside. Poor Tom was wont to promise amendment, and would keep his promise faithfully so long as no supreme temptation, in the shape of a visit from some friend of the jolly-good-fellow species, arose to vanquish his good resolutions. But a good-tempered, generous-hearted young man who farms his own land, has three or four good horses in his stable, a decent cellar of honest port and sherry—"none of your wishy-washy sour stuff in the way of hock or claret," cried Tom Halliday—and a very comfortable balance at his banker's, finds it no easy matter to shake off friends of the jolly-good-fellow fraternity.

In London Mr. Halliday found the spirit of jolly-dog-ism rampant. George Sheldon had always been his favourite of these two brothers; and it was George who lured him from the safe shelter of Fitzgeorge-street and took him to mysterious haunts, whence he returned long after midnight, boisterous of manner and unsteady of gait, and with garments reeking of stale tobacco-smoke.

He was always good-tempered, even after these diabolical orgies on some unknown Brocken, and protested indistinctly that there was no harm,—"'pon m' wor', ye know, ol' gur'! Geor' an' me—half-doz' oyst'r—c'gar—botl' p'l ale—str't home," and much more to the same effect. When did any married man ever take more than half a dozen oysters—or take any undomestic pleasure for his own satisfaction? It is always those incorrigible bachelors, Thomas, Richard, or Henry, who hinder the unwilling Benedick from returning to his sacred Lares and Penates.

Poor Georgy was not to be pacified by protestations about oysters and cigars from the lips of a husband who was thick of utterance, and who betrayed a general imbecility of mind and unsteadiness of body. This London excursion, which had begun in sunshine, threatened to end in storm and darkness. George Sheldon and his set had taken possession of the young farmer; and Georgy had no better amusement in the long blustrous March evenings than to sit at her work under the flaming gas in Mr. Sheldon's drawing-room, while that gentleman—who rarely joined in the dissipations of his friend and his brother—occupied himself with mechanical dentistry in the chamber of torture below.

Fitzgeorge-street in general, always on the watch to discover evidences of impecuniosity or doubtful morality on the part of any one citizen in particular, could find no food for scandal in the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Halliday to their friend and countryman. It had been noised abroad, through the agency of Mrs. Woolper, that Mr. Sheldon had been a suitor for the lady's hand, and had been jilted by her. The Fitzgeorgians had been, therefore, especially on the alert to detect any sign of backsliding in the dentist. There would have been much pleasant discussion in kitchens and back-parlours if Mr. Sheldon had been particularly attentive to his fair guest; but it speedily became known, always by the agency of Mrs. Woolper and that phenomenon of idleness and iniquity, the London "girl," that Mr. Sheldon was not by any means attentive to the pretty young woman from Yorkshire; but that he suffered her to sit alone hour after hour in her husband's absence, with no amusement but her needlework wherewith to "pass the time," while he scraped and filed and polished those fragments of bone which were to assist in the renovation of decayed beauty.

The third week of Mr. and Mrs. Halliday's visit was near its close, and as yet the young farmer had arrived at no decision as to the subject which had brought him to London. The sale of Hyley Farm was an accomplished fact, and the purchase-money duly bestowed at Tom's banker's; but very little had been done towards finding the new property which was to be a substitute for the estate his father and grandfather had farmed before him. He had seen auctioneers, and had brought home plans of estates in Herefordshire and Devonshire, Cornwall and Somersetshire, all of which seemed to be, in their way, the most perfect things imaginable—land of such fertility as one would scarcely expect to find out of Arcadia—live stock which seemed beyond all price, to be taken at a valuation.—roads and surrounding neighbourhood unparalleled in beauty and convenience—outbuildings that must have been the very archetypes of barns and stables—a house which to inhabit would be to adore. But as yet he had seen none of these peerless domains. He was waiting for decent weather in which to run down to the West and "look about him," as he said to himself. In the meantime the blustrous March weather, which was so unsuited to long railroad journeys, and all that waiting about at junctions and at little windy stations on branch lines, incidental to the inspection of estates scattered over a large area of country, served very well for "jolly-dog-ism;" and what with a hand at cards in George Sheldon's chambers, and another hand at cards in somebody else's chambers, and a run down to an early meeting at Newmarket, and an evening at some rooms where there was something to be seen which was as near prize-fighting as the

law allowed, and other evenings in unknown regions, Mr. Halliday found time slipping by him, and his domestic peace vanishing away.

It was on an evening at the end of this third week that Mr. Sheldon abandoned his mechanical dentistry for once in a way, and ascended to the drawing-room where poor Georgy sat busy with that eternal needlework, but for which melancholy madness would surely overtake many desolate matrons in houses whose common place comfort and respectable dulness are more dismal than the picturesque dreariness of a moated grange amid the Lincolnshire fens. To the masculine mind this needlework seems nothing more than a purposeless stabbing and sewing of strips of calico; but to lonely womanhood it is the prison-flower of the captive, it is the spider of Latude.

Mr. Sheldon brought his guest an evening newspaper.

"There's an account of the opening of Parliament," he said, "which you may perhaps like to see. I wish I had a piano, or some female acquaintances to drop in upon you. I am afraid you must be dull in these long evenings when Tom is out of the way."

"I am indeed dull," Mrs. Halliday answered peevishly; "and if Tom cared for me, he wouldn't leave me like this evening after evening. But he doesn't care for me."

Mr Sheldon laid down the newspaper, and seated himself opposite his guest. He sat for a few minutes in silence, beating time to some imaginary air with the tips of his fingers on the old-fashioned mahogany table. Then he said, with a half-smile upon his face,—

"But surely Tom is the best of husbands! He has been a little wild since his coming to London, I know; but then you see he doesn't often come to town."

"He's just as bad in Yorkshire," Georgy answered gloomily; "he's always going to Barlingford with somebody or other, or to meet some of his old friends. I'm sure, if I had known what he was, I would never have married him."

"Why, I thought he was such a good husband. He was telling me only a few days ago how he had made a will leaving you every sixpence he possesses, without reservation, and how he has insured his life for five thousand pounds."

"O yes, I know that; but I don't call *that* being a good husband. I don't want him to leave me his money. I don't want him to die. I want him to stay at home."

"Poor Tom! I'm afraid he's not the sort of man for that kind of thing. He likes change and amusement. You married a rich man, Mrs. Halliday; you made your choice, you know, without regard to the feelings of any one else. You sacrificed truth and honour to your own inclination, or your own interest, I do not know, and do not ask which. If the bargain has turned out a bad one, that's your look-out."

Philip Sheldon sat with his folded arms resting on the little table and his eyes fixed on Georgy's face. They could be very stern and hard and cruel, those bright black eyes, and Mrs. Halliday grew first red and then pale under their searching gaze. She had seen Mr. Sheldon very often during the years of her married life, but this was the first time he had ever said anything to her that sounded like a reproach. The dentist's eyes softened a little as he watched her, not with any special tenderness, but with an expression of half-disdainful compassion—such as a strong stern man might feel for a foolish child. He could see that this woman was afraid of him, and it served his interests that she should fear him. He had a purpose in everything he did, and his purpose to-night was to test the strength of his influence over Georgina Halliday. In the old time before her marriage that influence had been very strong. It was for him to discover now whether it still endured.

"You made your choice, Mrs. Halliday," he went on presently, "and it was a choice which all prudent people must have approved. What chance had a man, who was only heir to a practice worth four or five hundred pounds, against the inheritor of Hyley Farm with its two hundred and fifty acres, and three thousand pounds' worth of live stock, plant, and working capital? When do the prudent people ever stop to consider truth and honour, or old promises, or an affection that dates from childhood? They calculate everything by pounds, shillings, and pence; and according to their mode of reckoning you were in the right when you jilted me to marry Tom Halliday."

Georgy laid down her work and took out her handkerchief. She was one of those women who take refuge in tears when they find themselves at a disadvantage. Tears had always melted honest Tom, was his wrath never so dire, and tears would no doubt subdue Philip Sheldon.

But Georgy had to discover that the dentist was made of a stuff very different from that softer clay which composed the rollicking good-tempered farmer. Mr. Sheldon watched her tears with the cold-

blooded deliberation of a scientific experimentalist. He was glad to find that he could make her cry. She was a necessary instrument in the working out of certain plans that he had made for himself, and he was anxious to discover whether she was likely to be a plastic instrument. He knew that her love for him had never been worth much at its best, and that the poor little flickering flame had been utterly extinguished by nine years of commonplace domesticity and petty jealousy. But his purpose was one that would be served as well by her fear as by her love, and he had set himself to-night to gauge his power in relation to this poor weak creature.

"It's very unkind of you to say such dreadful things, Mr. Sheldon," she whimpered presently; "you know very well that my marriage with Tom was pa's doing, and not mine. I'm sure if I'd known how he would stay out night after night, and come home in such dreadful states time after time, I never would have consented to marry him."

"Wouldn't you?—O yes, you would. If you were a widow to-morrow, and free to marry again, you would choose just such another man as Tom—a man who laughs loud, and pays flourishing compliments, and drives a gig with a high-stepping horse. That's the sort of man women like, and that's the sort of man you'd marry."

"I'm sure I shouldn't marry at all," answered Mrs. Halliday, in a voice that was broken by little gasping sobs. "I have seen enough of the misery of married life. But I don't want Tom to die, unkind as he is to me. People are always saying that he won't make old bones—how horrid it is to talk of a person's bones!—and I'm sure I sometimes make myself wretched about him, as he knows, though he doesn't thank me for it."

And here Mrs Halliday's sobs got the better of her utterance, and Mr.
Sheldon was fain to say something of a consolatory nature.

"Come, come," he said, "I won't tease you any more. That's against the laws of hospitality, isn't it?—only there are some things which you can't expect a man to forget, you know. However, let bygones be bygones. As for poor old Tom, I daresay he'll live to be a hale, hearty old man, in spite of the croakers. People always will croak about something; and it's a kind of fashion to say that a big, hearty, six-foot man is a fragile blossom likely to be nipped by any wintry blast. Come, come, Mrs. Halliday, your husband mustn't discover that I've been making you cry when he comes home. He may be home early this evening, perhaps; and if he is, we'll have an oyster supper, and a chat about old times."

Mrs. Halliday shook her head dolefully.

"It's past ten o'clock already," she said, "and I don't suppose Tom will be home till after twelve. He doesn't like my sitting up for him; but I wonder *what* time he would come home if I didn't sit up for him?"

"Let's hope for the best," exclaimed Mr. Sheldon cheerfully. "I'll go and see about the oysters."

"Don't get them for me, or for Tom," protested Mrs. Halliday; "he will have had his supper when he comes home, you may be sure, and I couldn't eat a morsel of anything."

To this resolution Mrs. Halliday adhered; so the dentist was fain to abandon all jovial ideas in relation to oysters and pale ale. But he did not go back to his mechanical dentistry. He sat opposite his visitor, and watched her, silently and thoughtfully, for some time as she worked. She had brushed away her tears, but she looked very peevish and miserable, and took out her watch several times in an hour. Mr. Sheldon made two or three feeble attempts at conversation, but the talk languished and expired on each occasion, and they sat on in silence.

Little by little the dentist's attention seemed to wander away from his guest. He wheeled his chair round, and sat looking at the fire with the same fixed gloom upon his face which had darkened it on the night of his return from Yorkshire. Things had been so desperate with him of late, that he had lost his old orderly habit of thinking out a business at one sitting, and making an end of all deliberation and hesitation about it. There were subjects that forced themselves upon his thoughts, and certain ideas which repeated themselves with a stupid persistence. He was such an eminently practical man, that this disorder of his brain troubled him more even than the thoughts that made the disorder. He sat in the same attitude for a long while, scarcely conscious of Mrs. Halliday's presence, not at all conscious of the progress of time. Georgy had been right in her gloomy forebodings of bad behaviour on the part of Mr. Halliday. It was nearly one o'clock when a loud double knock announced that gentleman's return. The wind had been howling drearily, and a sharp, slanting rain had been pattering against the windows for the last half-hour, while Mrs. Halliday's breast had been racked by the contending emotions of anxiety and indignation.

"I suppose he couldn't get a cab," she exclaimed, as the knock startled her from her listening attitude

—for however intently a midnight watcher may be listening for the returning wanderer's knock, it is not the less startling when it comes. "And he has walked home through the wet, and now he'll have a violent cold, I daresay," added Georgy peevishly.

"Then it's lucky for him he's in a doctor's house," answered Mr. Sheldon, with a smile. He was a handsome man, no doubt, according to the popular idea of masculine perfection, but he had not a pleasant smile. "I went through the regular routine, you know, and am as well able to see a patient safely through a cold or fever as I am to make him a set of teeth."

Mr. Halliday burst into the room at this moment, singing a fragment of the "Chough and Crow" chorus, very much out of tune. He was in boisterously high spirits, and very little the worse for liquor. He had only walked from Covent Garden, he said, and had taken nothing but a tankard of stout and a Welsh rarebit. He had been hearing the divinest singing—boys with the voices of angels—and had been taking his supper in a place which duchesses themselves did not disdain to peep at from the sacred recesses of a loge grillee, George Sheldon had told him. But poor country-bred Georgina Halliday would not believe in the duchesses, or the angelic singing boys, or the primitive simplicity of Welsh rarebits. She had a vision of beautiful women, and halls of dazzling light, where there was the mad music of perpetual Post-horn Galops, with a riotous accompaniment of huzzas and the popping of champagne corks—where the sheen of satin and the glitter of gems bewildered the eye of the beholder. She had seen such a picture once on the stage, and had vaguely associated it with all Tom's midnight roisterings ever afterwards.

The roisterer's garments were very wet, and it was in vain that his wife and Philip Sheldon entreated him to change them for dry ones, or to go to bed immediately. He stood before the fire relating his innocent adventures, and trying to dispel the cloud from Georgy's fair young brow; and, when he did at last consent to go to his room, the dentist shook his head ominously.

"You'll have a severe cold to-morrow, depend upon it, Tom, and you'll have yourself to thank for it," he said, as he bade the good-tempered reprobate good night. "Never mind, old fellow," answered Tom; "if I am ill, you shall nurse me. If one is doomed to die by doctors' stuff, it's better to have a doctor one does know than a doctor one doesn't know for one's executioner."

After which graceful piece of humour Mr. Halliday went blundering up the staircase, followed by his aggrieved wife.

Philip Sheldon stood on the landing looking after his visitors for some minutes. Then he went slowly back to the sitting-room, where he replenished the fire, and seated himself before it with a newspaper in his hand.

"What's the use of going to bed, if I can't sleep?" he muttered, in a discontented tone.

CHAPTER IV.

A PERPLEXING ILLNESS.

Mr. Sheldon's prophecy was fully realised. Tom Halliday awoke the next day with a violent cold in his head. Like most big boisterous men of herculean build, he was the veriest craven in the hour of physical ailment; so he succumbed at once to the malady which a man obliged to face the world and fight for his daily bread must needs have made light of.

The dentist rallied his invalid friend.

"Keep your bed, if you like, Tom," he said, "but there's no necessity for any such coddling. As your hands are hot, and your tongue rather queer, I may as well give you a saline draught. You'll be all right by dinner-time, and I'll get George to look round in the evening for a hand at cards."

Tom obeyed his professional friend—took his medicine, read the paper, and slept away the best part of the dull March day. At half-past five he got up and dressed for dinner, and the evening passed very pleasantly—so pleasantly, indeed, that Georgy was half inclined to wish that her husband might be afflicted with chronic influenza, whereby he would be compelled to stop at home. She sighed when Philip Sheldon slapped his friend's broad shoulder, and told him cheerily that he would be "all right to-morrow." He would be well again, and there would be more midnight roistering, and she would be

again tormented by that vision of lighted halls and beautiful diabolical creatures revolving madly to the music of the Post-horn Galop.

It seemed, however, that poor jealous Mrs. Halliday was to be spared her nightly agony for some time to come. Tom's cold lasted longer than he had expected, and the cold was succeeded by a low fever—a bilious fever, Mr. Sheldon said. There was not the least occasion for alarm, of course. The invalid and the invalid's wife trusted implicitly in the friendly doctor who assured them both that Tom's attack was the most ordinary kind of thing; a little wearing, no doubt, but entirely without danger. He had to repeat this assurance very often to Georgy, whose angry feelings had given place to extreme tenderness and affection now that Tom was an invalid, quite unfitted for the society of jolly good fellows, and willing to receive basins of beef-tea and arrow-root meekly from his wife's hands, instead of those edibles of iniquity, oysters and toasted cheese.

Mr. Halliday's illness was very tiresome. It was one of those perplexing complaints which keep the patient himself, and the patient's friends and attendants, in perpetual uncertainty. A little worse one day and a shade better the next; now gaining a little strength, now losing a trifle more than he had gained. The patient declined in so imperceptible a manner that he had been ill three weeks, and was no longer able to leave his bed, and had lost alike his appetite and his spirits, before Georgy awoke to the fact that this illness, hitherto considered so lightly, must be very serious.

"I think if—if you have no objection, I should like to see another doctor, Mr. Sheldon," she said one day, with considerable embarrassment of manner. She feared to offend her host by any doubt of his skill. "You see—you—you are so much employed with teeth—and—of course you know I am quite assured of your talent—but don't you think that a doctor who had more experience in fever cases might bring Tom round quicker? He has been ill so long now; and really he doesn't seem to get any better."

Philip Sheldon shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please, my dear Mrs. Halliday," he said carelessly; "I don't wish to press my services upon you. It is quite a matter of friendship, you know, and I shall not profit sixpence by my attendance on poor old Tom. Call in another doctor, by all means, if you think fit to do so; but, of course, in that event, I must withdraw from the case. The man you call in may be clever, or he may be stupid and ignorant. It's all a chance, when one doesn't know one's man; and I really can't advise you upon that point, for I know nothing of the London profession."

Georgy looked alarmed. This was a new view of the subject. She had fancied that all regular practitioners were clever, and had only doubted Mr. Sheldon because he was not a regular practitioner. But how if she were to withdraw her husband from the hands of a clever man to deliver him into the care of an ignorant pretender, simply because she was over-anxious for his recovery?

"I always am foolishly anxious about things," she thought.

And then she looked piteously at Mr. Sheldon, and said, "What do you think I ought to do? Pray tell me. He has eaten no breakfast again this morning; and even the cup of tea which I persuaded him to take seemed to disagree with him. And then there is that dreadful sore throat which torments him so. What ought I to do, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Whatever seems best to yourself, Mrs. Halliday," answered the dentist earnestly. "It is a subject upon, which I cannot pretend to advise you. It is a matter of feeling rather than of reason, and it is a matter which you yourself must determine. If I knew any man whom I could honestly recommend to you, it would be another affair; but I don't. Tom's illness is the simplest thing in the world, and I feel myself quite competent to pull him through it, without fuss or bother; but if you think otherwise, pray put me out of the question. There's one fact, however, of which I'm bound to remind you. Like many fine big stalwart fellows of his stamp, your husband is as nervous as a hysterical woman; and if you call in a strange doctor, who will pull long faces, and put on the professional solemnity, the chances are that he'll take alarm, and do himself more mischief in a few hours than your new adviser can undo in as many weeks."

There was a little pause after this. Georgy's opinions, and suspicions, and anxieties were alike vague; and this last suggestion of Mr. Sheldon's put things in a new and alarming light. She was really anxious about her husband, but she had been accustomed all her life to accept the opinion of other people in preference to her own.

"Do you really think that Tom will soon be well and strong again?" she asked presently.

"If I thought otherwise, I should be the first to advise other measures. However, my dear Mrs. Halliday, call in some one else, for your own satisfaction."

"No," said Georgy, sighing plaintively, "it might frighten Tom. You are quite right, Mr. Sheldon; he is very nervous, and the idea that I was alarmed might alarm him. I'll trust in you. Pray try to bring him round again. You will try, won't you?" she asked, in the childish pleading way which was peculiar to her.

The dentist was searching for something in the drawer of a table, and his back was turned on the anxious questioner.

"You may depend upon it, I'll do my best, Mrs. Halliday," he answered, still busy at the drawer. Mr. Sheldon the younger had paid many visits to Fitzgeorge-street during Tom Halliday's illness. George and Tom had been the Damon and Pythias of Barlingford; and George seemed really distressed when he found his friend changed for the worse. The changes in the invalid were so puzzling, the alternations from better to worse and from worse to better so frequent, that fear could take no hold upon the minds of the patient's friends. It seemed such a very slight affair this low fever, though sufficiently inconvenient to the patient himself, who suffered a good deal from thirst and sickness, and showed an extreme disinclination for food, all which symptoms Mr. Sheldon said were the commonest and simplest features of a very mild attack of bilious fever, which would leave Tom a better man than it had found him.

There had been several pleasant little card-parties during the earlier stages of Mr. Halliday's illness; but within the last week the patient had been too low and weak for cards—too weak to read the newspaper, or even to bear having it read to him. When George came to look at his old friend—"to cheer you up a little, old fellow, you know," and so on—he found Tom, for the time being, past all capability of being cheered, even by the genial society of his favourite jolly good fellow, or by tidings of a steeplechase in Yorkshire, in which a neighbour had gone to grief over a double fence.

"That chap upstairs seems rather queerish," George had said to his brother, after finding Tom lower and weaker than usual. "He's in a bad way, isn't he, Phil?"

"No; there's nothing serious the matter with him. He's rather low to-night, that's all."

"Rather low!" echoed George Sheldon. "He seems to me so very low, that he can't sink much lower without going to the bottom of his grave. I'd call some one in, if I were you."

The dentist shrugged his shoulders, and made a little contemptuous noise with his lips.

"If you knew as much of doctors as I do, you wouldn't be in any hurry to trust a friend to the mercy of one," he said carelessly. "Don't you alarm yourself about Tom. He's right enough. He's been in a state of chronic over-eating and over-drinking for the last ten years, and this bilious fever will be the making of him."

"Will it?" said George doubtfully; and then there followed a little pause, during which the brothers happened to look at each other furtively, and happened to surprise each other in the act.

"I don't know about over-eating or drinking," said George presently; "but something has disagreed with Tom Halliday, that's very evident."

CHAPTER V.

THE LETTER FROM THE "ALLIANCE" OFFICE.

Upon the evening of the day on which Mrs. Halliday and the dentist had discussed the propriety of calling in a strange doctor, George Sheldon came again to see his sick friend. He was quicker to perceive the changes in the invalid than the members of the household, who saw him daily and hourly, and he perceived a striking change for the worse to-night.

He took care, however, to suffer no evidence of alarm or surprise to appear in the sick chamber. He talked to his friend in the usual cheery way; sat by the bedside for half an hour; did his best to arouse Tom from a kind of stupid lethargy, and to encourage Mrs. Halliday, who shared the task of nursing her husband with brisk Nancy Woolper, an invaluable creature in a sick-room. But he failed in both attempts; the dull apathy of the invalid was not to be dispelled by the most genial companionship, and Georgy's spirits had been sinking lower and lower all day as her fears increased.

She would fain have called in a strange doctor—she would fain have sought for comfort and consolation from some new quarter. But she was afraid of offending Philip Sheldon; and she was afraid of alarming her husband. So she waited, and watched, and struggled against that ever-increasing anxiety. Had not Mr. Sheldon made light of his friend's malady, and what motive could he have for deceiving her?

A breakfast-cup full of beef-tea stood on the little table by the bedside, and had been standing there for hours untouched.

"I did take such pains to make it strong and clear," said Mrs. Woolper regretfully, as she came to the little table during a tidying process, "and poor dear Mr. Halliday hasn't taken so much as a spoonful. It won't be fit for him to-morrow, so as I haven't eaten a morsel of dinner, what with the hurry and anxiety and one thing and another, I'll warm up the beef-tea for my supper. There's not a blessed thing in the house; for you don't eat nothing, Mrs. Halliday; and as to cooking a dinner for Mr. Sheldon, you'd a deal better go and throw your victuals out into the gutter, for then there'd be a chance of stray dogs profiting by 'em, at any rate."

"Phil is off his feed, then; eh, Nancy?" said George.

"I should rather think he is, Mr. George. I roasted a chicken yesterday for him and Mrs. Halliday, and I don't think they eat an ounce between, them; and such a lovely tender young thing as it was too—done to a turn—with bread sauce and a little bit of sea-kale. One invalid makes another, that's certain. I never saw your brother so upset as he is now, Mr. George, in all his life.

"No?" answered George Sheldon thoughtfully; "Phil isn't generally one of your sensitive sort."

The invalid was sleeping heavily during this conversation. George stood by the bed for some minutes looking down at the altered face, and then turned to leave the room.

"Good night, Mrs. Halliday," he said; "I hope I shall find poor old Tom a shade better when I look round to-morrow."

"I am sure I hope so," Georgy answered mournfully.

She was sitting by the window looking out at the darkening western sky, in which the last lurid glimmer of a stormy sunset was fading against a background of iron gray.

This quiet figure by the window, the stormy sky, and ragged hurrying clouds without, the dusky chamber with all its dismally significant litter of medicine-bottles, made a gloomy picture—a picture which the man who looked upon it carried in his mind for many years after that night.

George Sheldon and Nancy Woolper left the room together, the Yorkshirewoman carrying a tray of empty phials and glasses, and amongst them the cup of beef-tea.

"He seems in a bad way to-night, Nancy," said George, with a backward jerk of his head towards the sick-chamber.

"He is in a bad way, Mr. George," answered the woman gravely, "let Mr. Philip think what he will. I don't want to say a word against your brother's knowledge, for such a steady studious gentleman as he is had need be clever; and if I was ill myself, I'd trust my life to him freely; for I have heard Barlingford folks say that my master's advice is as good as any regular doctor's, and that there's very little your regular doctors know that he doesn't know as well or better. But for all that, Mr. George, I don't think he understands Mr. Halliday's case quite as clear as he might."

"Do you think Tom's in any danger?"

"I won't say that, Mr. George; but I think he gets worse instead of getting better."

"Humph!" muttered George; "if Halliday were to go off the hooks, Phil would have a good chance of getting a rich wife."

"Don't say that, Mr. George," exclaimed the Yorkshirewoman reproachfully; "don't even think of such a thing while that poor man lies at death's door. I'm sure Mr. Sheldon hasn't any thoughts of that kind. He told me before Mr. and Mrs. Halliday came to town that he and Miss Georgy had forgotten all about past times."

"O, if Phil said so, that alters the case. Phil is one of your blunt outspoken fellows, and always says what he means," said George Sheldon. And then he went downstairs, leaving Nancy to follow him at her leisure with the tray of jingling cups and glasses. He went down through the dusk, smiling to himself,

as if he had just given utterance to some piece of intense humour. He went to look for his brother, whom he found in the torture-chamber, busied with some mysterious process in connection with a lump of plaster-of-paris, which seemed to be the model of ruined battlements in the Gothic style. The dentist looked up as George entered the room, and did not appear particularly delighted by the appearance of that gentleman.

"Well," said Mr. Sheldon the younger, "busy as usual? Patients seem to be looking up."

"Patients be——toothless to the end of time!" cried Philip, with a savage laugh. "No, I'm not working to order; I'm only experimentalising."

"You're rather fond of experiments, I think, Phil," said George, seating himself near the table at which his brother was working under the glare of the gas. The dentist looked very pale and haggard in the gas-light, and his eyes had the dull sunken appearance induced by prolonged sleeplessness. George sat watching his brother thoughtfully for some time, and then produced his cigar-case. "You don't mind my smoke here?" he asked, as he lighted a cigar.

"Not at all. You are very welcome to sit here, if it amuses you to see me working at the cast of a lower jaw."

"O, that's a lower jaw, is it? It looks like the fragment of some castle-keep. No, Phil, I don't care about watching you work. I want to talk to you seriously."

"About that fellow upstairs—poor old Tom. He and I were great cronies, you know, at home. He's in a very bad way."

"Is he? You seem to be turning physician all at once, George. I shouldn't have thought your grubbing among county histories, and tattered old pedigrees, and parish registers had given you so deep an insight into the science of medicine!" said the dentist in a sneering tone.

"I don't know anything of medicine; but I know enough to be sure that Tom Halliday is about as bad as he can be. What mystifies me is, that he doesn't seem to have had anything particular the matter with him. There he lies, getting worse and worse every day, without any specific ailment. It's a strange illness, Philip."

"I don't see anything strange in it."

"Don't you? Don't you think the surrounding circumstances are strange? Here is this man comes to your house hale and hearty; and all of a sudden he falls ill, and gets lower and lower every day, without anybody being able to say why or wherefore."

"That's not true, George. Everybody in this house knows the cause of Tom Halliday's illness. He came home in wet clothes, and insisted on keeping them on. He caught a cold; which resulted in low fever. There is the whole history and mystery of the affair."

"That's simple enough, certainly. But if I were you, Phil, I'd call in another doctor."

"That is Mrs. Halliday's business," answered the dentist coolly; "if she doubts my skill, she is free to call in whom she pleases. And now you may as well drop the subject, George. I've had enough anxiety about this man's illness, and I don't want to be worried by you."

After this there was a little conversation upon general matters, but the talk dragged and languished drearily, and George Sheldon rose to depart directly he had finished his cigar.

"Good night, Philip!" he said; "if ever you get a stroke of good luck,
I hope you'll stand something handsome to me."

This remark had no particular relevance to anything that had been said that night by the two men; yet Philip Sheldon seemed in nowise astonished by it.

"If things ever *do* take a turn for the better with me, you'll find me a good friend, George," he said gravely; and then Mr. Sheldon the younger bade him good night, and went out into Fitzgeorge-street.

He paused for a moment at the corner of the street to look back at his brother's house. He could see the lighted windows of the invalid's chamber, and it was at those he looked.

"Poor Tom," he said to himself, "poor Tom! We were great cronies in the old times, and have had many a pleasant evening together!"

Mr. Sheldon the dentist sat up till the small hours that night, as he had done for many nights lately.

He finished his work in the torture-chamber, and went up to the common sitting-room, or drawing-room as it was called by courtesy, a little before midnight. The servants had gone to bed, for there was no regular nightly watch in the apartment of the invalid. Mrs. Halliday lay on a sofa in her husband's room, and Nancy Woolper slept in an adjoining apartment, always wakeful and ready if help of any kind should be wanted.

The house was very quiet just now. Philip Sheldon walked up and down the room, thinking; and the creaking of his boots sounded unpleasantly loud to his ears. He stopped before the fireplace, after having walked to and fro some time, and began to examine some letters that lay upon the mantelpiece. They were addressed to Mr. Halliday, and had been forwarded from Yorkshire. The dentist took them up, one by one, and deliberately examined them. They were all business letters, and most of them bore country post-marks. But there was one which had been, in the first instance, posted from London and this letter Mr. Sheldon examined with especial attention.

It was a big, official-looking document, and embossed upon the adhesive envelope appeared the crest and motto of the Alliance Insurance Office.

"I wonder whether that's all square," thought Mr. Sheldon, as he turned the envelope about in his hands, staring at it absently. "I ought to make sure of that. The London postmark is nearly three weeks old." He pondered for some moments, and then went to the cupboard in which he kept the materials wherewith to replenish or to make a fire. Here he found a little tin tea-kettle, in which he was in the habit of boiling water for occasional friendly glasses of grog. He poured some water from a bottle on the sideboard into this kettle, set fire to a bundle of wood, and put the kettle on the blazing sticks. After having done this he searched for a tea-cup, succeeded in finding one, and then stood watching for the boiling of the water. He had not long to wait; the water boiled furiously before the wood was burned out, and Mr. Sheldon filled the tea-cup standing on the table. Then he put the insurance-letter over the cup, with the seal downwards, and left it so while he resumed his walk. After walking up and down for about ten minutes he went back to the table and took up the letter. The adhesive envelope opened easily, and Mr. Sheldon, by this ingenious stratagem, made himself master of his friend's business.

The "Alliance" letter was nothing more than a notice to the effect that the half-yearly premium for insuring the sum of three thousand pounds on the life of Thomas Halliday would be due on such a day, after which there would be twenty-one days' grace, at the end of which time the policy would become void, unless the premium had been duly paid.

Mr. Halliday's letters had been suffered to accumulate during the last fortnight. The letters forwarded from Yorkshire had been detained some time, as they had been sent first to Hyley Farm, now in the possession of the new owner, and then to Barlingford, to the house of Georgy's mother, who had kept them upwards of a week, in daily expectation of her son-in-law's return. It was only on the receipt of a letter from Georgy, containing the tidings of her husband's illness, that Mr. Halliday's letters had been sent to London. Thus it came about that the twenty-one days of grace were within four-and-twenty hours of expiring when Philip Sheldon opened his friend's letter.

"This is serious," muttered the dentist, as he stood deliberating with the open letter in his hand; "there are three thousand pounds depending on that man's power to write a check!"

After a few minutes' reflection, he folded the letter and resealed it very carefully.

"It wouldn't do to press the matter upon him to-night," he thought; "I must wait till to-morrow morning, come what may."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. BURKHAM'S UNCERTAINTIES.

The next morning dawned gray and pale and chill, after the manner of early spring mornings, let them ripen into never such balmy days; and with the dawn Nancy Woolper came into the invalid's chamber, more wan and sickly of aspect than the morning itself.

Mrs. Halliday started from an uneasy slumber.

"What's the matter, Nancy?" she asked with considerable alarm. She had known the woman ever

since her childhood, and she was startled this morning by some indefinable change in her manner and appearance. The hearty old woman, whose face had been like a hard rosy apple shrivelled and wrinkled by long keeping, had now a white and ghastly look which struck terror to Georgy's breast. She who was usually so brisk of manner and sharp of speech, had this morning a strange subdued tone and an unnatural calmness of demeanour. "What is the matter, Nancy?" Mrs. Halliday repeated, getting up from her sofa.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Georgy," answered the old woman, who was apt to forget that Tom Halliday's wife had ever ceased to be Georgy Cradock; "don't be frightened, my dear. I haven't been very well all night,—and—and—I've been worrying myself about Mr. Halliday. If I were you, I'd call in another doctor. Never mind what Mr. Philip says. He may be mistaken, you know, clever as he is. There's no telling. Take my advice, Miss Georgy, and call in another doctor—directly—directly," repeated the old woman, seizing Mrs. Halliday's wrist with a passionate energy, as if to give emphasis to her words. Poor timid Georgy shrank from her with terror.

"You frighten me, Nancy," she whispered; "do you think that Tom is so much worse? You have not been with him all night; and he has been sleeping very quietly. What makes you so anxious this morning?"

"Never mind that, Miss Georgy. You get another doctor, that's all; get another doctor at once. Mr. Sheldon is a light sleeper. I'll go to his room and tell him you've set your heart upon having fresh advice; if you'll only bear me out afterwards."

"Yes, yes; go by all means," exclaimed Mrs. Halliday, only too ready to take alarm under the influence of a stronger mind, and eager to act when supported by another person.

Nancy Woolper went to her master's room. He must have been sleeping very lightly, if he was sleeping at all; for he was broad awake the next minute after his housekeeper's light knock had sounded on the door. In less than five minutes he came out of his room half-dressed. Nancy had told him that Mrs. Halliday had taken fresh alarm about her husband, and wished for further advice.

"She sent you to tell me that?" asked Philip.

"Yes."

"And when does she want this new doctor called in?"

"Immediately, if possible."

It was seven o'clock by this time, and the morning was brightening a little.

"Very well," said Mr. Sheldon; "her wishes shall be attended to directly. Heaven forbid that I should stand between my old friend and any chance of his speedy recovery! If a stranger can bring him round quicker than I can, let the stranger come."

* * * * *

Mr. Sheldon was not slow to obey Mrs. Halliday's behest. He was departing on his quest breakfastless, when Nancy Woolper met him in the hall with a cup of tea. He accepted the cup almost mechanically from her hand, and took it into the parlour, whither Nancy followed him. Then for the first time he perceived that change in his housekeeper's face which had so startled Georgina Halliday. The change was somewhat modified now; but still the Nancy Woolper of to-day was not the Nancy Woolper of yesterday.

"You're looking very queer, Nancy," said the dentist, gravely scrutinising the woman's face with his bright penetrating eyes. "Are you ill?"

"Well, Mr. Philip, I have been rather queer all night,—sickish and faintish-like."

"Ah, you've been over-fatiguing yourself in the sick-room, I daresay.
Take care you don't knock yourself up."

"No; it's not that, Mr. Philip. There's not many can stand hard work better than I can. It's not *that* as made me ill. I took something last night that disagreed with me."

"More fool you," said Mr. Sheldon curtly; "you ought to know better than to ill-use your digestive powers at your age. What was it? Hard cold meat and preternaturally green pickles, I suppose; or something of that kind."

"No, sir; it was only a drop of beef-tea that I made for poor Mr. Halliday. And that oughtn't to have

disagreed with a baby, you know, sir."

"Oughtn't it?" cried the dentist disdainfully. "That's a little bit of vulgar ignorance, Mrs. Woolper. I suppose it was stuff that had been taken up to Mr. Halliday."

"Yes, Mr. Philip; you took it up with your own hands."

"Ah, to be sure; so I did. Very well, then, Mrs. Woolper, if you knew as much about atmospheric influences as I do, you'd know that food which has been standing for hours in the pestilential air of a fever-patient's room isn't fit for anybody to eat. The stuff made you sick, I suppose."

"Yes, sir; sick to my very heart," answered the Yorkshirewoman, with a strange mournfulness in her voice.

"Let that be a warning to you, then. Don't take anything more that comes down from the sick-room."

"I don't think there'll be any chance of my doing that long, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't fancy Mr. Halliday is long for this world."

"Ah, you women are always ravens."

"Unless the strange doctor can do something to cure him. O, pray bring a clever man who will be able to cure that poor helpless creature upstairs. Think, Mr. Philip, how you and him used to be friends and playfellows,—brothers almost,—when you was both bits of boys. Think how bad it might seem to evil-minded folks if he died under your roof."

The dentist had been standing near the door drinking his tea during this conversation; and now for the first time he looked at his housekeeper with an expression of unmitigated astonishment.

"What, in the name of all that's ridiculous, do you mean, Nancy?" he asked impatiently. "What has my roof to do with Tom Halliday's illness—or his death, if it came to that? And what on earth can people have to say about it if he should die here instead of anywhere else?"

"Why, you see, sir, you being his friend, and Miss Georgy's sweetheart that was, and him having no other doctor, folks might take it into their heads he wasn't attended properly."

"Because I'm his friend? That's very good logic! I'll tell you what it is, Mrs. Woolper; if any woman upon earth, except the woman who nursed me when I was a baby, had presumed to talk to me as you have been talking to me just this minute, I should open the door yonder and tell her to walk out of my house. Let that serve as a hint for you, Nancy; and don't you go out of your way a second time to advise me how I should treat my friend and my patient."

He handed her the empty cup, and walked out of the house. There had been no passion in his tone. His accent had been only that of a man who has occasion to reprove an old and trusted servant for an unwarrantable impertinence. Nancy Woolper stood at the street-door watching him as he walked away, and then went slowly back to her duties in the lower regions of the house.

"It can't be true," she muttered to herself; "it can't be true."

* * * * *

The dentist returned to Fitzgeorge-street in less than an hour, bringing with him a surgeon from the neighbourhood, who saw the patient, discussed the treatment, spoke hopefully to Mrs. Halliday, and departed, after promising to send a saline draught. Poor Georgy's spirits, which had revived a little under the influence of the stranger's hopeful words, sank again when she discovered that the utmost the new doctor could do was to order a saline draught. Her husband had taken so many saline draughts, and had been getting daily worse under their influence.

She watched the stranger wistfully as he lingered on the threshold to say a few words to Mr. Sheldon. He was a very young man, with a frank boyish face and a rosy colour in his cheeks. He looked like some fresh young neophyte in the awful mysteries of medical science, and by no means the sort of man to whom one would have imagined Philip Sheldon appealing for help, when he found his own skill at fault. But then it must be remembered that Mr. Sheldon had only summoned the stranger in compliance with what he considered a womanish whim.

"He looks very young," Georgina said regretfully, after the doctor's departure.

"So much the better, my dear Mrs. Halliday," answered the dentist cheerfully; "medical science is eminently progressive, and the youngest men are the best-educated men."

Poor Georgy did not understand this; but it sounded convincing, and she was in the habit of believing what people told her; so she accepted Mr. Sheldon's opinion. How could she doubt that he was wiser than herself in all matters connected with the medical profession?

"Tom seems a little better this morning," she said presently.

The invalid was asleep, shrouded by the curtain of the heavy old-fashioned four-post bedstead.

"He is better," answered the dentist; "so much better, that I shall venture to give him a few business letters that have been waiting for him some time, as soon as he wakes."

He seated himself by the head of the bed, and waited quietly for the awakening of the patient.

"Your breakfast is ready for you downstairs, Mrs. Halliday," he said presently; "hadn't you better go down and take it, while I keep watch here? It's nearly ten o'clock."

"I don't care about any breakfast," Georgina answered piteously.

"Ah, but you'd better eat something. You'll make yourself an invalid, if you are not careful; and then you won't be able to attend upon Tom."

This argument prevailed immediately. Georgy went downstairs to the drawing-room, and tried bravely to eat and drink, in order that she might be sustained in her attendance upon her husband. She had forgotten all the throes and tortures of jealousy which she had endured on his account. She had forgotten his late hours and unholy roisterings. She had forgotten everything except that he had been very tender and kind throughout the prosperous years of their married life, and that he was lying in the darkened room upstairs sick to death.

* * * * *

Mr. Sheldon waited with all outward show of patience for the awakening of the invalid. But he looked at his watch twice during that half-hour of waiting; and once he rose and moved softly about the room, searching for writing materials. He found a little portfolio of Georgina's, and a frivolous-minded inkstand, after the semblance of an apple, with a gilt stalk and leaflet. The dentist took the trouble to ascertain that there was a decent supply of ink in the green-glass apple, and that the pens were in working order. Then he went quietly back to his seat by the bedside and waited.

The invalid opened his eyes presently, and recognised his friend with a feeble smile.

"Well, Tom, old fellow, how do you feel to-day?—a little better I hear from Mrs. H.," said the dentist cheerily.

"Yes, I think I am a shade better. But, you see, the deuce of it is I never get more than a shade better. It always stops at that. The little woman can't complain of me now, can she, Sheldon? No more late hours, or oyster suppers, eh?"

"No, no, not just yet. You'll have to take care of yourself for a week or two when you get about again." Mr. Halliday smiled faintly as his friend said this.

"I shall be very careful of myself if I ever do get about again, you may depend upon it, old fellow. But do you know I sometimes fancy I have spent my last jolly evening, and eaten my last oyster supper, on this earth? I'm afraid it's time for me to begin to think seriously of a good many things. The little woman is all right, thank God. I made my will upwards of a year ago, and insured my life pretty heavily soon after my marriage. Old Cradock never let me rest till that was done. So Georgy will be all safe. But when a man has led a careless, godless kind of a life,—doing very little harm, perhaps, but doing no particular good,—he ought to set about making up his account somehow for a better world, when he feels himself slipping out of this. I asked Georgy for her Bible yesterday, and the poor dear loving little thing was frightened out of her wits. 'O, don't talk like that, Tom,' she cried; 'Mr. Sheldon says you are getting better every hour,'—by which you may guess what a rare thing it is for me to read my Bible. No, Phil, old fellow, you've done your best for me, I know; but I'm not made of a very tough material, and all the physic you can pour down this poor sore throat of mine won't put any strength into me."

"Nonsense, dear boy; that's just what a man who has not been accustomed to illness is sure to think directly he is laid up for a day or two."

"I've been laid up for three weeks," murmured Mr. Halliday rather fretfully.

"Well, well, perhaps this Mr. Burkham will bring you round in three days, and then you'll say that your friend Sheldon was an ignoramus."

"No, no, I shan't, old fellow; I'm not such a fool as that. I'm not going to blame you when it's my own constitution that's in fault. As to that young man you brought here just now, to please Georgy, I don't suppose he'll be able to do any more for me than you have done."

"We'll contrive to bring you round between us, never fear, Tom," answered Philip Sheldon in his most hopeful tone. "Why, you are looking almost your old self this morning. You are so much improved that I may venture to talk to you about business. There have been some letters lying about for the last few days. I didn't like to bore you while you were so very low. But they look like business letters; and perhaps it would be as well for you to open them."

The sick man contemplated the little packet which the dentist had taken from his breast-pocket; and then shook his head wearily.

"I'm not up to the mark, Sheldon," he said; "the letters must keep."

"O, come, come, old fellow! That's giving way, you know. The letters may be important; and it will do you good if you make an effort to rouse yourself."

"I tell you it isn't in me to do it, Philip Sheldon. I'm past making efforts. Can't you see that, man? Open the letters yourself, if you like."

"No, no, Halliday, I won't do that. Here's one with the seal of the
Alliance Insurance Office. I suppose your premium is all right."

Tom Halliday lifted himself on his elbow for a moment, startled into new life; but he sank back on the pillows again immediately, with a feeble groan.

"I don't know about that," he said anxiously; "you'd better look to that, Phil, for the little woman's sake. A man is apt to think that his insurance is settled and done with, when he has been pommelled about by the doctors and approved by the board. He forgets there's that little matter of the premium. You'd better open the letter, Phil. I never was a good hand at remembering dates, and this illness has thrown me altogether out of gear."

Mr. Sheldon tore open that official document, which, in his benevolent regard for his friend's interest, he had manipulated so cleverly on the previous evening, and read the letter with all show of deliberation.

"You're right, Tom," he exclaimed presently. "The twenty-one days' grace expire to-day. You'd better write me a check at once, and I'll send it on to the office by hand. Where's your check-book?"

"In the pocket of that coat hanging up there."

Philip Sheldon found the check-book, and brought it to his friend, with Georgy's portfolio, and the frivolous little green-glass inkstand in the shape of an apple. He adjusted the writing materials for the sick man's use with womanly gentleness. His arm supported the wasted frame, as Tom Halliday slowly and laboriously filled in the check; and when the signature was duly appended to that document, he drew a long breath, which seemed to express infinite relief of mind.

"You'll be sure it goes on to the Alliance Office, eh, old fellow?" asked Tom, as he tore out the oblong slip of paper and handed it to his friend. "It was kind of you to jog my memory about this business. I'm such a fellow for procrastinating matters. And I'm afraid I've been a little off my load during the last week."

"Nonsense, Tom; not you."

"O yes, I have. I've had all sorts of queer fancies. Did you come into this room the night before last, when Georgy was asleep?" Mr. Sheldon reflected for a moment before answering.

"No," he said, "not the night before last."

"Ah, I thought as much," murmured the invalid. "I was off my head that night then, Phil, for I fancied I saw you; and I fancied I heard the bottles and glasses jingling on the little table behind the curtain."

"You were dreaming, perhaps."

"O no, I wasn't dreaming. I was very restless and wakeful that night. However, that's neither here nor there. I lie in a stupid state sometimes for hours and hours, and I feel as weak as a rat, bodily and

mentally; so while I have my wits about me, I'd better say what I've been wanting to say ever so long. You've been a good and kind friend to me all through this illness, Phil, and I'm not ungrateful for your kindness. If it does come to the worst with me—as I believe it will—Georgy shall give you a handsome mourning ring, or fifty pounds to buy one, if you like it better. And now let me shake hands with you, Philip Sheldon, and say thank you heartily, old fellow, for once and for ever."

The invalid stretched out a poor feeble attenuated hand, and, after a moment's pause, Philip Sheldon clasped it in his own muscular fingers. He did hesitate for just one instant before taking that hand.

He was no student of the gospel; but when he had left the sick-chamber there arose before him suddenly, as if written in letters of fire on the wall opposite to him, one sentence which had been familiar to him in his school-days at Barlingford:

And as soon as he was come, he goeth straightway to him, and saith, Master, master; and kissed him.

* * * * *

The new doctor came twice a day to see his patient. He seemed rather anxious about the case, and just a little puzzled by the symptoms. Georgy had sufficient penetration to perceive that this new adviser was in some manner at fault; and she began to think that Philip Sheldon was right, and that regular practitioners were very stupid creatures. She communicated her doubts to Mr. Sheldon, and suggested the expediency of calling in some grave elderly doctor, to supersede Mr. Burkham. But against this the dentist protested very strongly.

"You asked me to call in a stranger, Mrs. Halliday, and I have done so," he said, with the dignity of an offended man. "You must now abide by his treatment, and content yourself with his advice, unless he chooses to summon further assistance."

Georgy was fain to submit. She gave a little plaintive sigh, and went back to her husband's room, where she sat and wept silently behind the bed-curtains. There was a double watch kept in the sick-chamber now; for Nancy Woolper rarely left it, and rarely closed her eyes. It was altogether a sad time in the dentist's house; and Tom Halliday apologised to his friend more than once for the trouble he had brought upon him. If he had been familiar with the details of modern history, he would have quoted Charles Stuart, and begged pardon for being so long a-dying.

But anon there came a gleam of hope. The patient seemed decidedly better; and Georgy was prepared to revere Mr. Burkham, the Bloomsbury surgeon, as the greatest and ablest of men. Those shadows of doubt and perplexity which had at first obscured Mr. Burkham's brow cleared away, and he spoke very cheerfully of the invalid.

Unhappily this state of things did not last long. The young surgeon came one morning, and was obviously alarmed by the appearance of his patient. He told Philip Sheldon as much; but that gentleman made very light of his fears. As the two men discussed the case, it was very evident that the irregular practitioner was quite a match for the regular one. Mr. Burkham listened deferentially, but departed only half convinced. He walked briskly away from the house, but came to a dead stop directly after turning out of Fitzgeorge-street.

"What ought I to do?" he asked himself. "What course ought I to take? If I am right, I should be a villain to let things go on. If I am wrong, anything like interference would ruin me for life."

He had finished his morning round, but he did not go straight home. He lingered at the corners of quiet streets, and walked up and down the unfrequented side of a gloomy square. Once he turned and retraced his steps in the direction of Fitzgeorge-street. But after all this hesitation he walked home, and ate his dinner very thoughtfully, answering his young wife at random when she talked to him. He was a struggling man, who had invested his small fortune in the purchase of a practice which had turned out a very poor one, and he had the battle of life before him.

"There's something on your mind to-day, I'm sure, Harry," his wife said before the meal was ended.

"Well, yes, dear," he answered; "I've rather a difficult case in
Fitzgeorge-street, and I'm anxious about it."

The industrious little wife disappeared after dinner, and the young surgeon walked up and down the room alone, brooding over that difficult case in Fitzgeorge-street. After spending nearly an hour thus, he snatched his hat suddenly from the table on which he had set it down, and hurried from the house.

"I'll have advice and assistance, come what may," he said to himself, as he walked rapidly in the direction of Mr. Sheldon's house. "The case may be straight enough—I certainly can't see that the man

has any motive—but I'll have advice."

He looked up at the dentist's spotless dwelling as he crossed the street. The blinds were all down, and the fact that they were so sent a sudden chill to his heart. But the April sunshine was full upon that side of the street, and there might lie no significance in those closely-drawn blinds. The door was opened by a sleepy-looking boy, and in the passage Mr. Burkham met Philip Sheldon.

"I have been rather anxious about my patient since this morning, Mr. Sheldon," said the surgeon; "and I have come to the conclusion that I ought to confer with a man of higher standing than myself. Do you think Mrs. Halliday will object to such a course?"

"I am sure she would not have objected to it," the dentist answered very gravely, "if you had suggested it sooner. I am sorry to say the suggestion comes too late. My poor friend breathed his last half an hour ago."

BOOK THE SECOND.

THE TWO MACAIRES.

CHAPTER I.

A GOLDEN TEMPLE.

In the very midst of the Belgian iron country, under the shadow of tall sheltering ridges of pine-clad mountain-land, nestles the fashionable little watering-place called Forêtdechêne. Two or three handsome hotels; a bright white new pile of building, with vast windows of shining plate-glass, and a stately quadrangular courtyard; a tiny street, which looks as if a fragment of English Brighton had been dropped into this Belgian valley; a stunted semi-classic temple, which is at once a post-office and a shrine whereat invalids perform their worship of Hygeia by the consumption of unspeakably disagreeable mineral waters; a few tall white villas scattered here and there upon the slopes of pine-clad hills; and a very uncomfortable railway-station—constitute the chief features of Forêtdechêne. But right and left of that little cluster of shops and hotels there stretch deep sombre avenues of oak, that look like sheltered ways to Paradise—and the deep, deep blue of the August sky, and the pure breath of the warm soft air, and the tender green of the young pine-woods that clothe the sandy hills, and the delicious tranquillity that pervades the sleepy little town and bathes the hot landscape in a languorous mist, are charms that render Forêtdechêne a pleasant oasis amid the lurid woods and mountains of the iron country.

Only at stated intervals the quiet of this sleepy hollow is broken by the rolling of wheels, the jingling of bells, the cracking of whips, the ejaculations of drivers, and supplications of touters: only when the railroad carries away departing visitors, or brings fresh ones, is there anything like riot or confusion in the little town under the pine-clad hills—and even then the riot and confusion are of a very mild order, and create but a transient discord amongst the harmonies of nature.

And yet, despite the Arcadian tranquillity of the landscape, the drowsy quiet of the pine-groves, the deep and solemn shade of those dark avenues, where one might fondly hope to find some Druidess lingering beneath the shelter of the oaks, there is excitement of no common order to be found in the miniature watering-place of Forêtdechêne; and the reflective and observant traveller, on a modern sentimental journey, has only to enter the stately white building with the glittering plate-glass windows in order to behold the master-passions or the human breast unveiled for his pleasure and edification.

The ignorant traveller, impelled by curiosity, finds no bar to his entrance. The doors are as wide open

as if the mansion were an hotel; and yet it is not an hotel, though a placard which he passes informs the traveller that he may have ices and sorbets, if he will; nor is the bright fresh-looking building a theatre, for another placard informs the visitor that there are dramatic performances to be witnessed every evening in a building on one side of the quadrangle, which is a mere subsidiary attachment to the vast white mansion. The traveller, passing on his way unhindered, save by a man in livery, who deprives him of his cane, ascends a splendid staircase and traverses a handsome antechamber, from which a pair of plate-glass doors open into a spacious saloon, where, in the warm August sunlight, a circle of men and women are gathered round a great green table, gambling.

The ignorant traveller, unaccustomed to the amusements of a Continental watering-place, may perhaps feel a little sense of surprise—a something almost akin to shame—as he contemplates that silent crowd, whose occupation seems so much the more strange to him because of their silence. There is no lively bustle, none of that animation which generally attends every kind of amusement, none of the clamour of the betting-ring or the exchange. The gamblers at Forêtdechêne are terribly in earnest: and the ignorant visitor unconsciously adapts himself to the solemn hush of the place, and steps softly as he approaches the table round which they are clustered—as many sitting as can find room round the green-cloth-covered board; while behind the sitters there are people standing two or three rows deep, the hindermost watching the table over the shoulders of their neighbours. A placard upon the wall informs visitors that only constant players are permitted to remain seated at that sacred table. Perhaps a third of the players and a third of the lookers-on are women. And if there are lips more tightly contracted than other lips, and eyes with a harder, greedier light in them than other eyes, those lips and those eyes belong to the women. The ungloved feminine hands have a claw-like aspect as they scrape the glittering pieces of silver over the green cloth; the feminine throats look weird and scraggy as they crane themselves over masculine shoulders; the feminine eyes have something demoniac in their steely glare as they keep watch upon the rapid progress of the game.

Half a dozen moderate fortunes seem to be lost and won while the traveller looks on from the background, unnoticed and unseen; for if those plate-glass doors swung suddenly open to admit the seven angels of the Apocalypse, carrying the seven golden vials filled with the wrath of God, it is doubtful whether the splendour of their awful glory, or the trumpet-notes that heralded their coming, would have power to arouse the players from their profound abstraction.

Half a dozen comfortable little patrimonies seem to have changed hands while the traveller has been looking on; and yet he has only watched the table for about ten minutes; and this splendid *salon* is but an outer chamber, where one may stake as shabby a sum as two francs, if one is shabby enough to wish to do so, and where playing for half an hour or so on a pleasant summer morning one could scarcely lose more than fifty or sixty pounds. Another pair of plate-glass doors open into an inner chamber, where the silence is still more profound, and where around a larger table sit one row of players; while only here and there a little group of outsiders stand behind their chairs. There is more gilding on the walls and ceiling of this chamber; the frescoes are more delicate; the crystal chandeliers are adorned with rich clusters of sparkling drops, that twinkle like diamonds in the sun. This is the temple of gold; and in this splendid chamber one may hazard no smaller stake than half a napoleon. There are women here; but not so many women as in the outer saloon; and the women here are younger and prettier and more carefully dressed than those who stake only silver.

The prettiest and the youngest woman in this golden chamber on one particular August afternoon, nine years after the death of Tom Halliday, was a girl who stood behind the chair of a military-looking Englishman, an old man whose handsome face was a little disfigured by those traces which late hours and dissipated habits are supposed to leave behind them.

The girl held a card in one hand and a pin in the other, and was occupied in some mysterious process, by which she kept note of the Englishman's play. She was very young, with a delicate face, in whose softer lines there was a refined likeness to the features of the man whose play she watched. But while his eyes were hard and cold and gray, hers were of that dense black in which there seems such an unfathomable and mysterious depth. As she was the handsomest, so she was also the worst-dressed woman in the room. Her flimsy silk mantle had faded from black to rusty brown; the straw hat which shaded her face was sunburnt; the ribbons had lost their brightness; but there was an air of attempted fashion in the puffings and trimmings of her alpaca skirt; and there was evidence of a struggle with poverty in the tight-fitting lavender gloves, whose streaky lines bore witness to the imperfection of the cleaner's art. Elegant Parisians and the select of Brussels glanced at the military Englishman and his handsome daughter with some slight touch of supercilious surprise—one has no right to find shabbily-dressed young women in the golden temple—and it is scarcely necessary to state that it was from her own countrywomen the young person in alpaca received the most chilling glances. But those Parthian arrows shot from feminine eyes had little power to wound their object just now. The girl looked up from her perforated card very seldom; and when she raised her eyes, it was always to look in one direction—towards the great glass doors opening from the outer saloon. Loungers came and went; the doors

swung open and closed again as noiselessly as it is possible for well-regulated doors to open and shut; footsteps sounded on the polished floors; and sometimes when the young person in alpaca lifted her eyes, a passing shadow of disappointment darkened her face. A modern Laurence Sterne, on a new Sentimental Journey, might have derived some interest from the study of the girl's countenance; but the reflective and observant traveller is not to be encountered very often in this age of excursionists; and Maria and her goat may roam the highways and byways for a long time before she will find any dreamy loiterer with a mind attuned to sympathy.

The shabbily-dressed girl was looking for some one. She watched her father's play carefully—she marked her card with unfailing precision; but she performed these duties with a mechanical air; and it was only when she lifted her eyes to the great shining plate-glass doors which opened into this dangerous Paradise, that any ray of feeling animated her countenance. She was looking for some one, and the person watched for was so long coming. Ah, how difficult for the arithmetician to number the crushing disappointments, the bitter agonies that one woman can endure in a single half-hour! This girl was so young—so young; and already she had learnt to suffer.

The man played with the concentrated attention and the impassible countenance of an experienced gamester, rarely lifting his eyes from the green cloth, never looking back at the girl who stood behind him. He was winning to-day, and he accepted his good fortune as quietly as he had often accepted evil fortune at the same table. He seemed to be playing on some system of his own; and neighbouring players looked at him with envious eyes, as they saw the pile of gold grow larger under his thin nervous hands. Ignorant gamesters, who stood aloof after having lost two or three napoleons, contemplated the lucky Englishman and wondered about him, while some touch of pity leavened the envy excited by his wonderful fortune. He looked like a decayed gentleman—a man who had been a military dandy in the days that were gone, and who had all the old pretensions still, without the power to support them—a Brummel languishing at Caen; a Nash wasting slowly at Bath.

At last the girl's face brightened suddenly as she glanced upwards; and it would have been very easy for the observant traveller—if any such person had existed—to construe aright that bright change in her countenance. The some one she had been watching for had arrived.

The doors swung open to admit a man of about five-and-twenty, whose darkly-handsome face and careless costume had something of that air which was once wont to be associated with the person and the poetry of George Gordon Lord Byron. The new-comer was just one of those men whom very young women are apt to admire, and whom worldly-minded people are prone to distrust. There was a perfume of Bohemianism, a flavour of the Quartier Latin, about the loosely-tied cravat, the wide trousers, and black-velvet morning coat, with which the young man outraged the opinions of respectable visitors at Forêtdechêne. There was a semi-poetic vagabondism in the half-indifferent, half-contemptuous expression of his face, with its fierce moustache, and strongly-marked eyebrows overshadowing sleepy gray eyes—eyes that were half hidden, by their long dark lashes; as still pools of blue water lie sometimes hidden among the rushes that nourish round them.

He was handsome, and he knew that he was handsome; but he affected to despise the beauty of his proud dark face, as he affected to despise all the brightest and most beautiful things upon earth: and yet there was a vagabondish kind of foppery in his costume that contrasted sharply with the gentlemanly dandyism of the shabby gamester sitting at the table. There was a distance of nearly half a century between the style of the Regency dandy and the Quartier-Latin lion.

The girl watched the new-comer with sad earnest eyes as he walked slowly towards the table, and a faint blush kindled in her cheeks as he came nearer to the spot where she stood. He went by her presently, carrying an atmosphere of stale tobacco with him as he went; and he gave her a friendly nod as he passed, and a "Good morning, Diana;" but that was all. The faint blush faded and left her very pale: but she resumed her weary task with the card and the pin; and if she had endured any disappointment within those few moments, it seemed to be a kind of disappointment that she was accustomed to suffer.

The young man walked round the table till he came to the only vacant chair, in which he seated himself, and after watching the game for a few minutes, began to play. From the moment in which he dropped into that vacant seat to the moment in which he rose to leave the table, three hours afterwards, he never lifted his eyes from the green cloth, or seemed to be conscious of anything that was going on around or about him. The girl watched him furtively for some little time after he had taken his place at the table; but the stony mask of the professed gambler is a profitless object for a woman's earnest scrutiny.

She sighed presently, and laid her hand heavily on the chair behind which she was standing. The action aroused the man who sat in it, and he turned and looked at her for the first time.

"You are tired, Diana?"

"Yes, papa, I am very tired."

"Give me your card, then, and go away," the gamester answered peevishly; "girls are always tired."

She gave him the mysteriously-perforated card, and left her post behind his chair; and then, after roaming about the great saloon with a weary listless air, and wandering from one open window to another to look into the sunny quadrangle, where well-dressed people were sitting at little tables eating ices or drinking lemonade, she went away altogether, and roamed into another chamber where some children were dancing to the sound of a feeble violin. She sat upon a velvet-covered bench, and watched the children's lesson for some minutes, and then rose and wandered to another open window that overlooked the same quadrangle, where the well-dressed people were enjoying themselves in the hot August sunshine.

"How extravagantly everybody dresses!" she thought, "and what a shabby poverty-stricken creature one feels amongst them! And yet if I ask papa to give me a couple of napoleons out of the money he won to-day, he will only look at me from head to foot, and tell me I have a gown and a cloak and a bonnet, and ask me what more I can want, in the name of all that is unreasonable? And I see girls here whose fathers are so fond of them and so proud of them—ugly girls, decked out in silks and muslins and ribbons that have cost a small fortune—clumsy awkward girls, who look at *me* as if I were some new kind of wild animal."

The saloons at Forêtdechêne were rich in monster sheets of looking-glass; and in wandering discontentedly about the room Diana Paget saw herself reflected many times in all her shabbiness. It was only very lately she had discovered that she had some pretension to good looks; for her father, who could not or would not educate her decently or clothe her creditably, took a very high tone of morality in his paternal teaching, and, in the fear that she might one day grow vain of her beauty, had taken care to impress upon her at an early age that she was the very incarnation of all that is lean and sallow and awkward.

CHAPTER II.

THE EASY DESCENT

Amongst the many imprudences of which Horatio Paget—once a cornet in a crack cavalry regiment, always a captain in his intercourse with the world—had been guilty during the course of a long career, there was none for which he so bitterly reproached himself as for a certain foolish marriage which he had made late in his life. It was when he had thrown away the last chance that an indulgent destiny had given him, that the ruined fop of the Regency, the sometime member of the Beef-steak Club, the man who in his earliest youth had worn a silver gridiron at his button-hole, and played piquet in the gilded saloons of Georgina of Devonshire, found himself laid on a bed of sickness in dingy London lodgings, and nearer death than he had ever been in the course of his brief military career; so nearly gliding from life's swift-flowing river into eternity's trackless ocean, that the warmest thrill of gratitude which ever stirred the slow pulses of his cold heart quickened its beating as he clasped the hand that had held him back from the unknown region whose icy breath had chilled him with an awful fear. Such men as Horatio Paget are apt to feel a strange terror when the black night drops suddenly down upon them, and the "Gray Boatman's" voice sounds hollow and mysterious in the darkness, announcing that the ocean is near. The hand that held the ruined spendthrift back when the current swept so swiftly oceanward was a woman's tender hand; and Heaven only knows what patient watchfulness, what careful administration of medicines and unwearying preparation of broths and jellies and sagos and gruels, what untiring and devoted slavery, had been necessary to save the faded rake who looked out upon the world once more, a ghastly shadow of his former self, a penniless helpless burden for any one who might choose to support him.

"Don't thank *me*," said the doctor, when his feeble patient whimpered flourishing protestations of his gratitude, unabashed by the consciousness that such grateful protestations were the sole coin with which the medical man would be paid for his services; "thank that young woman, if you want to thank anybody; for if it had not been for her you wouldn't be here to talk about gratitude. And if ever you get such another attack of inflammation on the lungs, you had better pray for such another nurse, though I don't think you're likely to find one."

And with this exordium, the rough-and-ready surgeon took his departure, leaving Horatio Paget alone with the woman who had saved his life.

She was only his landlady's daughter; and his landlady was no prosperous householder in Mayfair, thriving on the extravagance of wealthy bachelors, but an honest widow, living in an obscure little street leading out of the Old Kent-road, and letting a meagrely-furnished little parlour and a still more meagrely-furnished little bedroom to any single gentleman whom reverse of fortune might lead into such a locality. Captain Paget had sunk very low in the world when he took possession of that wretched parlour and laid himself down to rest on the widow's flock-bed.

There is apt to be a dreary interval in the life of such a man—a blank dismal interregnum, which divides the day in which he spends his last shilling from the hour in which he begins to prey deliberately upon the purses of other people. It was in that hopeless interval that Horatio Paget established himself in the widow's parlour. But though he slept in the Old Kent-road, he had not yet brought himself to endure existence on that Surrey side of the water. He emerged from his lodging every morning to hasten westward, resplendent in clean linen and exquisitely-fitting gloves, and unquestionable overcoat, and varnished boots.

The wardrobe has its Indian summer; and the glory of a first-rate tailor's coat is like the splendour of a tropical sun—it is glorious to the last, and sinks in a moment. Captain Paget's wardrobe was in its Indian summer in these days; and when he felt how fatally near the Bond-street pavement was to the soles of his feet, he could not refrain from a fond admiration of the boots that were so beautiful in decay.

He walked the West-end for many weary hours every day during this period of his decadence. He tried to live in an honest gentlemanly way, by borrowing money of his friends, or discounting an accommodation-bill obtained from some innocent acquaintance who was deluded by his brilliant appearance and specious tongue into a belief in the transient nature of his difficulties. He spent his days in hanging about the halls and waiting-rooms of clubs—of some of which he had once been a member; he walked weary miles between St James's and Mayfair, Kensington Gore and Notting Hill, leaving little notes for men who were not at home, or writing a little note in one room while the man to whom he was writing hushed his breath in an adjoining chamber. People who had once been Captain Paget's fast friends seemed to have simultaneously decided upon spending their existence out of doors, as it appeared to the impecunious Captain. The servants of his friends were afflicted with a strange uncertainty as to their masters' movements. At whatever hall-door Horatio Paget presented himself, it seemed equally doubtful whether the proprietor of the mansion would be home to dinner that day, or whether he would be at home any time next day, or the day after that, or at the end of the week, or indeed whether he would ever come home again. Sometimes the Captain, calling in the evening dusk, in the faint hope of gaining admittance to some friendly dwelling, saw the glimmer of light under a dining-room door, and heard the clooping of corks and the pleasant jingling of glass and silver in the innermost recesses of a butler's pantry; but still the answer was—not at home, and not likely to be home. All the respectable world was to be out henceforth for Horatio Paget. But now and then at the clubs he met some young man, who had no wife at home to keep watch upon his purse and to wail piteously over a five-pound note ill-bestowed, and who took compassion on the fallen spendthrift, and believed, or pretended to believe, his story of temporary embarrassment; and then the Captain dined sumptuously at a little French restaurant in Castle-street, Leicester-square, and took a half-bottle of chablis with his oysters, and warmed himself with chambertin that was brought to him in a dusty cobweb-shrouded bottle reposing in a wicker-basket.

But in these latter days such glimpses of sunshine very rarely illumined the dull stream of the Captain's life. Failure and disappointment had become the rule of his existence—success the rare exception. Crossing the river now on his way westward, he was wont to loiter a little on Waterloo Bridge, and to look dreamily down at the water, wondering whether the time was near at hand when, under cover of the evening dusk, he would pay his last halfpenny to the toll-keeper, and never again know the need of an earthly coin.

"I saw a fellow in the Morgue one day,—a poor wretch who had drowned himself a week or two before. Great God, how horrible he looked! If there was any certainty they would find one immediately, and bury one decently, there'd be no particular horror in that kind of death. But to be found *like that*, and to lie in some riverside deadhouse down by Wapping, with a ghastly placard rotting on the rotting door, and nothing but ooze and slime and rottenness round about one—waiting to be identified! And who knows, after all, whether a dead man doesn't *feel* that sort of thing?"

It was after such musings as these had begun to be very common with Horatio Paget that he caught the chill which resulted in a very dangerous illness of many weeks. The late autumn was wet and cold and dreary; but Captain Paget, although remarkably clever after a certain fashion, had never been a

lover of intellectual pursuits, and imprisonment in Mrs. Kepp's shabby parlour was odious to him. When he had read every page of the borrowed newspaper, and pished and pshawed over the leaders, and groaned aloud at the announcement of some wealthy marriage made by one of his quondam friends, or chuckled at the record of another quondam friend's insolvency—when he had poked the fire savagely half a dozen times in an hour, cursing the pinched grate and the bad coals during every repetition of the operation—when he had smoked his last cigar, and varnished his favourite boots, and looked out of the window, and contemplated himself gloomily in the wretched little glass over the narrow chimney-piece,—Captain Paget's intellectual resources were exhausted, and an angry impatience took possession of him. Then, in defiance of the pelting rain or the lowering sky, he flung his slippers into the farthest corner—and the farthest corner of Mrs. Kepp's parlour was not very remote from the Captain's arm-chair—he drew on the stoutest of his varnished boots—and there were none of them very stout now—buttoned his perfect overcoat, adjusted his hat before the looking-glass, and sallied forth, umbrella in hand, to make his way westward. Westward always, through storm and shower, back to the haunts of his youth, went the wanderer and outcast, to see the red glow of cheery fires reflected on the plate-glass windows of his favourite clubs; to see the lamps in spacious reading-rooms lit early in the autumn dusk, and to watch the soft light glimmering on the rich bindings of the books, and losing itself in the sombre depths of crimson draperies. To this poor worldly creature the agony of banishment from those palaces of Pall Mall or St. James's-street was as bitter as the pain of a fallen angel. It was the dullest, deadest time of the year, and there were not many loungers in those sumptuous reading-rooms, where the shaded lamps shed their subdued light on the chaste splendour of the sanctuary; so Captain Paget could haunt the scene of his departed youth without much fear of recognition: but his wanderings in the West grew more hopeless and purposeless every day. He began to understand how it was that people were never at home when he assailed their doors with his fashionable knock. He could no longer endure the humiliation of such repulses, for he began to understand that the servants knew his errand as well as their masters, and had their answers ready, let him present himself before them when he would: so he besieged the doors of St. James's and Mayfair, Kensington Gore and Netting Hill, no longer. He knew that the bubble of his poor foolish life had burst, and that there was nothing left for him but to die.

It seemed about this time as if the end of all was very near. Captain Paget caught a chill one miserable evening on which he returned to his lodging with his garments dripping, and his beautiful varnished boots reduced to a kind of pulp; and the chill resulted in a violent inflammation of the lungs. Then it was that a woman's hand was held out to save him, and a woman's divine tenderness cared for him in his dire extremity.

The ministering angel who comforted this helpless and broken-down wayfarer was only a low-born ignorant girl called Mary Anne Kepp—a girl who had waited upon the Captain during his residence in her mother's house, but of whom he had taken about as much notice as he had been wont to take of the coloured servants who tended him when he was with his regiment in India. Horatio Paget had been a night-brawler and a gamester, a duellist and a reprobate, in the glorious days that were gone; but he had never been a profligate; and he did not know that the girl who brought him his breakfast and staggered under the weight of his coal-scuttle was one of the most beautiful women he had ever looked upon.

The Captain was so essentially a creature of the West-end, that Beauty without her glitter of diamonds and splendour of apparel was scarcely Beauty for him. He waited for the groom of the chambers to announce her name, and the low hum of well-bred approval to accompany her entrance, before he bowed the knee and acknowledged her perfection. The Beauties whom he remembered had received their patent from the Prince Regent, and had graduated in the houses of Devonshire and Hertford. How should the faded bachelor know that this girl, in a shabby cotton gown, with unkempt hair dragged off her pale face, and with grimy smears from the handles of saucepans and fire-irons imprinted upon her cheeks—how should he know that she was beautiful? It was only during the slow monotonous hours of his convalescence, when he lay upon the poor faded little sofa in Mrs. Kepp's parlour—the sofa that was scarcely less faded and feeble than himself—it was then, and then only, that he discovered the loveliness of the face which had been so often bent over him during his delirious wanderings.

"I have mistaken you for all manner of people, my dear," he said to his landlady's daughter, who sat by the little Pembroke-table working, while her mother dozed in a corner with a worsted stocking drawn over her arm and a pair of spectacles resting upon her elderly nose. Mrs. Kepp and her daughter were wont to spend their evenings in the lodger's apartment now; for the invalid complained bitterly of "the horrors" when they left him.

"I have taken you for all sorts of people, Mary Anne," pursued the Captain dreamily. "Sometimes I have fancied you were the Countess of Jersey, and I could see her smile as she looked at me when I was first presented to her. I was very young in the beautiful Jersey's time; and then there was the other one

—whom I used to drink tea with at Brighton. Ah me! what a dull world it seems nowadays! The King gone, and everything changed—everything—everything! I am a very old man, Mary Anne."

He was fifty-two years of age; he felt quite an old man. He had spent all his money, he had outlived the best friends of his youth; for it had been his fate to adorn a declining era, and he had been a youngster among elderly patrons and associates. His patrons were dead and gone, and the men he had patronised shut their doors upon him in the day of his poverty. As for his relations, he had turned his back upon them long ago, when first he followed in the shining wake of that gorgeous vessel, the Royal George. In this hour of his penniless decline there was none to help him. To have outlived every affection and every pleasure is the chief bitterness of old age; and this bitterness Horatio Paget suffered in all its fulness, though his years were but fifty-two.

"I am a very old man, Mary Anne," he repeated plaintively. But Mary Anne Kepp could not think him old. To her eyes he must for ever appear the incarnation of all that is elegant and distinguished. He was the first gentleman she had ever seen. Mrs. Kepp had given shelter to other lodgers who had called themselves gentlemen, and who had been pompous and grandiose of manner in their intercourse with the widow and her daughter; but O, what pitiful lacquered counterfeits, what Brummagem paste they had been, compared to the real gem! Mary Anne Kepp had seen varnished boots before the humble flooring of her mother's dwelling was honoured by the tread of Horatio Paget, but what clumsy vulgar boots, and what awkward plebeian feet had worn them! The lodger's slim white hands and arched instep, the patrician curve of his aquiline nose, the perfect grace of his apparel, the high-bred modulation of his courteous accents,—all these had impressed Mary Anne's tender little heart so much the more because of his poverty and loneliness. That such a man should be forgotten and deserted—that such a man should be poor and lonely, seemed so cruel a chance to the simple maiden: and then when illness overtook him, and invested him with a supreme claim upon her tenderness and pity,—then the innocent girl lavished all the treasures of a compassionate heart upon the ruined gentleman. She had no thought of fee or reward; she knew that her mother's lodger was miserably poor, and that his payments had become more and more irregular week by week and month by month. She had no consciousness of the depth of feeling that rendered her so gentle a nurse; for her life was a busy one, and she had neither time nor inclination for any morbid brooding upon her own feelings.

She protested warmly against the Captain's lamentation respecting his age.

"The idear of any gentleman calling hisself old at fifty!" she said—and Horatio shuddered at the supererogatory "r" and the "hisself," though they proceeded from the lips of his consoler;—"you've got many, many years before you yet, sir, please God," she added piously; "and there's good friends will come forward yet to help you, I make no doubt."

Captain Paget shook his head peevishly.

"You talk as if you were telling my fortune with a pack of cards," he said. "No, my girl, I shall have only one friend to rely upon, if ever I am well enough to go outside this house; and that friend is myself. I have spent the fortune my father left me; I have spent the price of my commission; and I have parted with every object of any value that I ever possessed—in vulgar parlance, I am cleaned out, Mary Anne. But other men have spent every sixpence belonging to them, and have contrived to live pleasantly enough for half a century afterwards; and I daresay I can do as they have done. If the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, I suppose the hawks and vultures take care of themselves. I have tried my luck as a shorn lamb, and the tempest has been very bitter for me; so I have no alternative but to join the vultures."

Mary Anne Kepp stared wonderingly at her mother's lodger. She had some notion that he had been saying something wicked and blasphemous; but she was too ignorant and too innocent to follow his meaning.

"O, pray don't talk in that wild way, sir," she entreated. "It makes me so unhappy to hear you go on like that."

"And why should anything that I say make you unhappy, Mary Anne?" asked the lodger earnestly.

There was something in his tone that set her pale face on fire with unwonted crimson, and she bent very low over her work to hide those painful blushes. She did not know that the Captain's tone presaged a serious address; she did not know that the grand crisis of her life was close upon her.

Horatio Paget had determined upon making a sacrifice. The doctor had told him that he owed his life to this devoted girl; and he would have been something less than man if he had not been moved with some grateful emotion. He was grateful; and in the dreary hours of his slow recovery he had ample leisure for the contemplation of the woman to whom he owed so much, if his poor worthless life could

indeed be much. He saw that she was devoted to him; that she loved him more truly than he had ever been conscious of being loved before. He saw too that she was beautiful. To an ugly woman Captain Paget might have felt extremely grateful; but he could never have thought of an ugly woman as he thought of Mary Anne Kepp. The end of his contemplation and his deliberation came to this: She was beautiful, and she loved him, and his life was utterly wretched and lonely; so he determined on proving his gratitude by a sublime sacrifice. Before the girl had lifted her face from the needlework over which she had bent to hide her blushes, Horatio Paget had asked her to be his wife. Her emotion almost overpowered her as she tried to answer him; but she struggled against it bravely, and came to the sofa on which he lay and dropped upon her knees by his side. The beggar-maid who was wooed by a king could have felt no deeper sense of her lover's condescension than that which filled the heart of this poor simple girl as she knelt by her mother's gentleman lodger.

"I—to be your wife!" she exclaimed. "O, surely, sir, you cannot mean it?"

"But I do mean it, with all my heart and soul, my dear," answered the Captain. "I'm not offering you any grand chance, Mary Anne; for I'm about as low down in the world as a man can be. But I don't mean to be poor all my life. Come, my dear, don't cry," he exclaimed, just a little impatiently—for the girl had covered her face with her hands, and tears were dropping between the poor hard-working fingers—"but lift up your head and tell me whether you will take a faded old bachelor for your husband or not."

Horatio Paget had admired many women in the bright years of his youth, and had fancied himself desperately in love more than once in his life; but it is doubtful whether the mighty passion had ever really possessed the Captain's heart, which was naturally cold and sluggish, rarely fluttered by any emotion that was not engendered of selfishness. Horatio had set up an idol and had invented a religion for himself very early in life; and that idol was fashioned after his own image, and that religion had its beginning and end in his own pleasure. He might have been flattered and pleased by Miss Kepp's agitation; but he was ill and peevish; and having all his life been subject to a profound antipathy to feminine tearfulness, the girl's display of emotion annoyed him.

"Is it to be yes, or no, my dear?" he asked, with, some vexation in his tone.

Mary Anne looked up at him with tearful, frightened eyes.

"O, yes, sir, if I can be of any use to you, and nurse you when you are ill, and work for you till I work my fingers to the bone."

She clenched her hands spasmodically as she spoke. In imagination she was already toiling and striving for the god of her idolatry—the GENTLEMAN whose varnished boots had been to her as a glimpse of another and a fairer world than that represented by Tulliver's-terrace, Old Kent-road. But Captain Paget checked her enthusiasm by a gentle gesture of his attenuated hands.

"That will do, my dear," he murmured languidly; "I'm not very strong yet, and anything in the way of fuss is inexpressibly painful to me. Ah, my poor child," he exclaimed, pityingly, "if you could have seen a dinner at the Marquis of Hertford's, you would have understood how much can be achieved without fuss. But I am talking of things you don't understand. You will be my wife; and a very good, kind, obedient little wife, I have no doubt. That is all settled. As for working for me, my love, it would be about as much as these poor little hands could do to earn me a cigar a day—and I seldom smoke less than half a dozen cigars; so, you see, that is all so much affectionate nonsense. And now you may wake your mother, my dear; for I want to take a little nap, and I can't close my eyes while that good soul is snoring so intolerably; but not a word about our little arrangement, Mary Anne, till you and your mother are alone."

And hereupon the Captain spread a handkerchief over his face and subsided into a gentle slumber. The little scene had fatigued him; though it had been so quietly enacted, that Mrs. Kepp had slept on undisturbed by the brief fragment of domestic drama performed within a few yards of her uneasy arm-chair. Her daughter awoke her presently, and she resumed her needlework, while Mary Anne made some tea for the beloved sleeper. The cups and saucers made more noise to-night than they were wont to make in the girl's careful hands. The fluttering of her heart seemed to communicate itself to the tips of her fingers, and the jingling of the crockery-ware betrayed the intensity of her emotion. He was to be her husband! She was to have a gentleman for a husband; and such a gentleman! Out of such base trifles as a West-end tailor's coat and a West-end workman's boots may be engendered the purest blossom of womanly love and devotion. Wisely may the modern philosopher cry that the history of the world is only a story of old clothes. Mary Anne had begun by admiring the graces of Stultz and Hoby, and now she was ready to lay down her life for the man who wore the perishing garments.

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Miss Kepp obeyed her lover's behest; and it was only on the following day, when she and her mother were alone together in the dingy little kitchen below Captain Paget's apartments, that she informed that worthy woman of the honour which had been vouchsafed to her. And thereupon Mary Anne endured the first of the long series of disappointments which were to arise out of her affection for the penniless Captain. The widow was a woman of the world, and was obstinately blind to the advantages of a union with a ruined gentleman of fifty. "How's he to keep you, I should like to know," Mrs. Kepp exclaimed, as the girl stood blushing before her after having told her story; "if he can't pay me regular?—and you know the difficulty I have had to get his money, Mary Anne. If he can't keep hisself, how's he to keep you?"

"Don't talk like that, mother," cried the girl, wincing under her parent's practical arguments; "you go on as if all I cared for was being fed and clothed. Besides, Captain Paget is not going to be poor always. He told me so last night, when he——"

"*He* told you so!" echoed the honest widow with unmitigated scorn; "hasn't he told me times and often that I should have my rent regular after this week, and regular after that week, and have I *ever* had it regular? And ain't I keeping him out of charity now?—a poor widow-woman like me—which I may be wanting charity myself before long: and if it wasn't for your whimpering and going on he'd have been out of the house three weeks ago, when the doctor said he was well enough to be moved; for I ast him."

"And you'd have turned him out to die in the streets, mother!" cried Mary; "I didn't think you was so 'artless."

From this time there was ill-feeling between Mrs. Kepp and her daughter, who had been hitherto one of the most patient and obedient of children. The fanatic can never forgive the wretch who disbelieves in the divinity of his god; and women who love as blindly and foolishly as Mary Anne Kepp are the most bigoted of worshippers. The girl could not forgive her mother's disparagement of her idol,—the mother had no mercy upon her daughter's folly; and after much wearisome contention and domestic misery—carefully hidden from the penniless sybarite in the parlour—after many tears and heart-burnings, and wakeful nights and prayerful watches, Mary Anne Kepp consented to leave the house quietly one morning with the gentleman lodger while the widow had gone to market. Miss Kepp left a piteous little note for her mother, rather ungrammatical, but very womanly and tender, imploring pardon for her want of duty; and, "O, mother, if you knew how good and nobel he is, you coudent be angery with me for luving him has I do, and we shall come back to you after oure marige, wich you will be pade up honourabel to the last farthin'."

After writing this epistle in the kitchen, with more deliberation and more smudging than Captain Paget would have cared to behold in the bride of his choice, Mary Anne attired herself in her Sabbath-day raiment, and left Tulliver's-terrace with the Captain in a cab. She would fain have taken a little lavender paper-covered box that contained the remainder of her wardrobe, but after surveying it with a shudder, Captain Paget told her that such a box would condemn them *anywhere*.

"You may get on sometimes without luggage, my dear," he said sententiously; "but with such luggage as *that*, never!"

The girl obeyed without comprehending. It was not often that she understood her lover's meaning, nor did he particularly care that she should understand him. He talked to her rather in the same spirit in which one talks to a faithful canine companion—as Napoleon III. may talk to his favourite Nero; "I have great plans yet unfulfilled, my honest Nero, though you may not be wise enough to guess their nature. And we must have another Boulevard, old fellow; and we must settle that little dispute about Venetia; and we must do something for those unfortunate Poles, eh—good dog?" and so on.

Captain Paget drove straight to a registrar's office, where the new Marriage Act enabled him to unite himself to Miss Kepp *sans façon*, in presence of the cabman and a woman who had been cleaning the door-step. The Captain went through the brief ceremonial as coolly as if it had been the settlement of a water-rate, and was angered by the tears that poor Mary Anne shed under her cheap black veil. He had forgotten the poetic superstition in favour of a wedding-ring, but he slipped a little onyx ring off his own finger, and put it on the clumsier finger of his bride. It was the last of his jewels—the rejected of the pawnbrokers, who, not being learned in antique intaglios, had condemned the ring as trumpery. There is always something a little ominous in the bridegroom's forgetfulness of that simple golden circle which typifies an eternal union; and a superstitious person might have drawn a sinister augury from the subject of Captain Paget's intaglio, which was a head of Nero—an emperor whose wife was by no means the happiest of women. But as neither Mary Anne nor the registrar, neither the cabman nor the charwoman who had been cleaning the door-step, had ever heard of Nero, and as Horatio Paget was much too indifferent to be superstitious, there was no one to draw evil inferences: and Mary Anne went away with her gentleman husband, proud and happy, with a happiness that was only disturbed

now and then by the image of an infuriated mother.

Captain Paget took his bride to some charming apartments in Halfmoon-street, Mayfair; and she was surprised to hear him tell the landlady that he and his wife had just arrived from Devonshire, and that they meant to stay a week or so in London, *en passant*, before starting for the Continent.

"My wife has spent the best part of her life in the country," said the Captain, "so I suppose I must show her some of the sights of London in spite of the abominable weather. But the deuce of it is, that my servant has misunderstood my directions, and gone on to Paris with the luggage. However, we can set that all straight to-morrow."

Nothing could be more courteously acquiescent than the manner of the landlady; for Captain Paget had offered her references, and the people to whom he referred were among the magnates of the land. The Captain knew enough of human nature to know that if references are only sufficiently imposing, they are very unlikely to be verified. The swindler who refers his dupe to the Duke of Sutherland and Baring Brothers has a very good chance of getting his respectability accepted without inquiry, on the mere strength of those sacred names.

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From this time until the day of her death Mary Anne Paget very seldom heard her husband make any statement which she did not know to be false. He had joined the ranks of the vultures. He had lain down upon his bed of sickness a gentlemanly beggar; he arose from that couch of pain and weariness a swindler.

Now began those petty shifts and miserable falsifications whereby the birds of prey thrive on the flesh and blood of hapless pigeons. Now the dovecotes were fluttered by a new destroyer—a gentlemanly vulture, whose suave accents and perfect manners were fatal to the unwary. Henceforth Horatio Cromie Nugent Paget flourished and fattened upon the folly of his fellow-men. As promoter of joint-stock companies that never saw the light; as treasurer of loan-offices where money was never lent; as a gentleman with capital about to introduce a novel article of manufacture from the sale of which a profit of five thousand a year would infallibly be realized, and desirous to meet with another gentleman of equal capital; as the mysterious X.Y.Z. who will—for so small a recompense as thirty postage-stamps—impart the secret of an elegant and pleasing employment, whereby seven-pound-ten a-week may be made by any individual, male or female;—under every flimsy disguise with which the swindler hides his execrable form, Captain Paget plied his cruel trade, and still contrived to find fresh dupes. Of course there were occasions when the pigeons were slow to flutter into the fascinating snare, and when the vulture had a bad time of it; and it was a common thing for the Captain to sink from the splendour of Mayfair or St. James's-street into some dingy transpontine hiding-place. But he never went back to Tulliver's-terrace, though Mary Anne pleaded piteously for the payment of her poor mother's debt. When her husband was in funds, he patted her head affectionately, and told her that he would see about it—i.e. the payment of Mrs. Kepp's bill; while, if she ventured to mention the subject to him when his purse was scantily furnished, he would ask her fiercely how he was to satisfy her mother's extortionate claims when he had not so much as a sixpence for his own use.

Mrs. Kepp's bill was never paid, and Mary Anne never saw her mother's face again. Mrs. Paget was one of those meek loving creatures who are essentially cowardly. She could not bring herself to encounter her mother without the money owed by the Captain; she could not bring herself to endure the widow's reproaches, the questioning that would be so horribly painful to answer, the taunts that would torture her poor sorrowful heart.

Alas for her brief dream of love and happiness! Alas for her foolish worship of the gentleman lodger! She knew now that her mother had been wiser than herself, and that it would have been better for her if she had renounced the shadowy glory of an alliance with Horatio Cromie Nugent Paget, whose string of high-sounding names, written on the cover of an old wine-book, had not been without its influence on the ignorant girl. The widow's daughter knew very little happiness during the few years of her wedded life. To be hurried from place to place; to dine in Mayfair to-day, and to eat your dinner at a shilling ordinary in Whitecross-street to-morrow; to wear fine clothes that have not been paid for, and to take them off your back at a moment's notice when they are required for the security of the friendly pawnbroker; to know that your life is a falsehood and a snare, and that to leave a place is to leave contempt and execration behind you,—these things constitute the burden of a woman whose husband lives by his wits. And over and above these miseries, Mrs. Paget had to endure all the variations of temper to which the schemer is subject. If the pigeons dropped readily into the snare, and if their plumage proved well worth the picking, the Captain was very kind to his wife, after his own fashion; that is to say, he took her out with him, and after lecturing her angrily because of the shabbiness of her bonnet, bought her a new one, and gave her a dinner that made her ill, and then sent her home in a cab, while he finished the evening in more congenial society. But if the times were bad for the vulture

tribe—O, then, what a gloomy companion for the domestic hearth was the elegant Horatio! After smiling his false smile all day, while rage and disappointment were gnawing at his heart, it was a kind of relief to the Captain to be moody and savage by his own fireside. The human vulture has something of the ferocity of his feathered prototype. The man who lives upon his fellow-men has need to harden his heart; for one sentiment of compassion, one touch of human pity, would shatter his finest scheme in the hour of its fruition. Horatio Paget and compassion parted fellowship very early in the course of his unscrupulous career. What if the pigeon has a widowed mother dependent on his prosperity, or half a dozen children who will be involved in his ruin? Is the hawk to forego his natural prey for any such paltry consideration as a vulgar old woman or a brood of squalling brats?

Captain Paget was not guilty of any persistent unkindness towards the woman whose fate he had deigned to link with his own. The consciousness that he had conferred a supreme honour on Mary Anne Kepp by offering her his hand, and a share of his difficulties, never deserted him. He made no attempt to elevate the ignorant girl into companionship with himself. He shuddered when she misplaced her h's and turned from her peevishly, with a muttered oath, when she was more than usually ungrammatical: but though he found it disagreeable to hear her, he would have found it troublesome to set her right; and trouble was a thing which Horatio Paget held in gentlemanly aversion. The idea that the mode of his existence could be repulsive to his wife—that this low-born and low-bred girl could have scruples that he never felt, and might suffer agonies of remorse and shame of which his coarser nature was incapable—never entered the Captain's mind. It would have been too great an absurdity for the daughter of plebeian Kepps to affect a tenderness of conscience unknown to the scion of Pagets and Cromies and Nugents. Mary Anne was afraid of her elegant husband; and she worshipped and waited upon him in meek silence, keeping the secret of her own sorrows, and keeping it so well that he never guessed the manifold sources of that pallor of countenance and hollow brightness of eye which had of late annoyed him when he looked at his wife. She had borne him a child—a sweet girl baby, with those great black eyes that always have rather a weird look in the face of infancy; and she would fain have clung to the infant as the hope and consolation of her joyless life. But the vulture is not a domestic bird, and a baby would have been an impediment in the rapid hegiras which Captain Paget and his wife were wont to make. The Captain put an advertisement in a daily paper before the child was a week old; and in less than a fortnight after Mary Anne had looked at the baby face for the first time, she was called upon to surrender her treasure to an elderly woman of fat and greasy aspect, who had agreed to bring the infant up "by hand" in a miserable little street in a remote and dreary district lying between Vauxhall and Battersea.

Mary Anne gave up the child uncomplainingly, as meekly as she would have surrendered herself if the Captain had brought a masked executioner to her bedside, and had told her a block was prepared for her in the adjoining chamber. She had no idea of resistance to the will of her husband. She endured her existence for nearly five years after the birth of her child, and during those miserable years the one effort of her life was to secure the miserable stipend paid for the little girl's maintenance; but before the child's fifth birthday the mother faded off the face of the earth. She died in a miserable lodging not very far from Tulliver's-terrace, expiring in the arms of a landlady who had comforted her in her hour of need, as she had comforted the ruined gentleman. Captain Paget was a prisoner in Whitecross-street at the time of his wife's death, and was much surprised when he missed her morning visits, and the little luxuries she had been wont to bring him.

He had missed her for more than a week, and had written to her twice—rather angrily on the second occasion—when a rough unkempt boy in corduroy waited upon him in the dreary ward, where he and half a dozen other depressed and melancholy men sat at little tables writing letters, or pretending to read newspapers, and looking at one another furtively every now and then. There is no prisoner so distracted by his own cares that he will not find time to wonder what his neighbour is "in for."

The boy had received instructions to be careful how he imparted his dismal tidings to the "poor dear gentleman;" but the lad grew nervous and bewildered at sight of the Captain's fierce hook-nose and scrutinising gray eyes, and blurted out his news without any dismal note of warning.

"The lady died at two o'clock this morning, please, sir; and mother said I was to come and tell you, please, sir."

Captain Paget staggered under the blow.

"Good God!" he cried, as he dropped upon a rickety Windsor chair, that creaked under his weight; "and I did not even know that she was ill!"

Still less did he know that all her married life had been one long heart-sickness—one monotonous agony of remorse and shame.

CHAPTER III.

"HEART BARE, HEART HUNGRY, VERY POOR."

Diana Paget left the Kursaal, and walked slowly along the pretty rustic street; now dawdling before a little print-shop, whose contents she knew by heart, now looking back at the great windows of that temple of pleasure which she had just quitted.

"What do they care what becomes of me?" she thought, as she looked up at the blank vacant windows for the last time before she left the main street of Forêtdechêne, and turned into a straggling side-street, whose rugged pavement sloped upward towards the pine-clad hills. The house in which Captain Paget had taken up his abode was a tall white habitation, situated in the narrowest of the narrow by-ways that intersect the main street of the pretty Belgian watering-place; a lane in which the inhabitants of opposite houses may shake hands with one another out of the window, and where the odour of the cabbages and onions so liberally employed in the *cuisine* of the native offends the nose of the foreigner from sunrise to sunset.

Diana paused for a moment at the entrance to this lane, but, after a brief deliberation, walked onwards.

"What is the use of my going home?" she thought; "*they* won't be home for hours to come."

She walked slowly along the hilly street, and from the street into a narrow pathway winding upward through the pine-wood. Here she was quite alone, and the stillness of the place soothed her. She took off her hat, and slung the faded ribbons across her arm; and the warm breeze lifted the loose hair from her forehead as she wandered upwards. It was a very beautiful face from which that loose dark hair was lifted by the summer wind. Diana Paget inherited something of the soft loveliness of Mary Anne Kepp, and a little of the patrician beauty of the Pagets. The eyes were like those which had watched Horatio Paget on his bed of sickness in Tulliver's-terrace. The resolute curve of the thin flexible lips, and the fine modelling of the chin, were hereditary attributes of the Nugent Pagets; and a resemblance to the lower part of Miss Paget's face might have been traced in many a sombre portrait of dame and cavalier at Thorpehaven Manor, where a Nugent Paget, who acknowledged no kindred with the disreputable Captain, was now master.

The girl's reflections as she slowly climbed the hill were not pleasant. The thoughts of youth should be very beautiful; but youth that has been spent in the companionship of reprobates and tricksters is something worse than age; for experience has taught it to be bitter, while time has not taught it to be patient. For Diana Paget, childhood had been joyless, and girlhood lonely. That blank and desolate region, that dreary flat of fenny waste ground between Vauxhall and Battersea, on which the child's eyes had first looked, had been typical of her loveless childhood. With her mother's death faded the one ray of light that had illumined her desolation. She was shifted from one nurse to another; and bar nurses were not allowed to love her, for she remained with them as an encumbrance and a burden. It was so difficult for the Captain to pay the pitiful sum demanded for his daughter's support—or rather it was so much easier for him not to pay it. So there always came a time when Diana was delivered at her father's lodgings like a parcel, by an indignant nurse, who proclaimed the story of her wrongs in shrill feminine treble, and who was politely informed by the Captain that her claim was a common debt, and that she had the remedy in her own hands, but that the same code of laws which provided her with that remedy, forbade any obnoxious demonstration of her anger in a gentleman's apartment. And then Miss Paget, after hearing all the tumult and discussion, would be left alone with her father, and would speedily perceive that her presence was disagreeable to him.

When she outgrew the age of humble foster-mothers and cottages in the dreariest of the outlying suburbs, the Captain sent his daughter to school: and on this occasion he determined on patronising a person whom he had once been too proud to remember among the list of his kindred. There are poor and straggling branches upon every family tree; and the Pagets of Thorpehaven had needy cousins who, in the mighty battle of life, were compelled to fight amongst the rank and file. One of these poor cousins was a Miss Priscilla Paget, who at an early age had exhibited that affection for intellectual pursuits and that carelessness as to the duties of the toilet which are supposed to distinguish the predestined blue-stocking. Left quite alone in the world, Priscilla put her educational capital to good use; and after holding the position of principal governess for nearly twenty years in a prosperous boarding-school at Brompton, she followed her late employer to her grave with unaffected sorrow, and within a month of the funeral invested her savings in the purchase of the business, and established herself as mistress of the mansion. To this lady Captain Paget confided his daughter's education; and in Priscilla Paget's house Diana found a shelter that was almost like a home, until her kinswoman became

weary of promises that were never kept, and pitiful sums paid on account of a debt that grew bigger every day—very weary likewise of conciliatory hampers of game and barrels of oysters, and all the flimsy devices of a debtor who is practised in the varied arts of the gentlemanly swindler.

The day came when Miss Paget resolved to be rid of her profitless charge; and once more Diana found herself delivered like a parcel of unordered goods at the door of her father's lodging. Those are precocious children who learn their first lessons in the school of poverty; and the girl had been vaguely conscious of the degradation involved in this process at the age of five. How much more keenly did she feel the shame at the age of fifteen! Priscilla did her best to lessen the pain of her pupil's departure.

"It isn't that I've any fault to find with you, Diana, though you must remember that I have heard some complaints of your temper," she said, with gentle gravity; "but your father is too trying. If he didn't make me any promises, I should think better of him. If he told me frankly that he couldn't pay me, and asked me to keep you out of charity,"—Diana drew herself up with a little shiver at this word,—"why, I might turn it over in my mind, and see if it could be done. But to be deceived time after time, as I've been deceived—you know the solemn language your father has used, Diana, for you have heard him—and to rely on a sum of money on a certain date, as I have relied again and again, after Horatio's assurance that I might depend upon him—it's too bad, Diana; it's more than any one can endure. If you were two or three years older, and further advanced in your education, I might manage to do something for you by making you useful with the little ones; but I can't afford to keep you and clothe you during the next three years for nothing, and so I have no alternative but to send you home."

The "home" to which Diana Paget was taken upon this occasion was a lodging over a toyshop in the Westminster-road, where the Captain lived in considerable comfort on the proceeds of a Friendly and Philanthropic Loan Society.

But no very cordial welcome awaited Diana in the gaudily-furnished drawing-room over the toyshop. She found her father sleeping placidly in his easy-chair, while a young man, who was a stranger to her, sat at a table near the window writing letters. It was a dull November day—a very dreary day on which to find one's self thrown suddenly on a still drearier world; and in the Westminster-bridge-road the lamps were already making yellow patches of sickly light amidst the afternoon fog.

The Captain twitched his silk handkerchief off his face with an impatient gesture as Diana entered the room.

"Now, then, what is it?" he asked peevishly, without looking at the intruder.

He recognised her in the next moment; but that first impatient salutation was about as warm a welcome as any which Miss Paget received from her father. In sad and bitter truth, he did not care for her. His marriage with Mary Anne Kepp had been the one grateful impulse of his life; and even the sentiment which had prompted that marriage had been by no means free from the taint of selfishness. But he had been quite unprepared to find that this grand sacrifice of his life should involve another sacrifice in the maintenance of a daughter he did not want; and he was very much inclined to quarrel with the destiny that had given him this burden.

"If you had been a boy, I might have made you useful to me sooner or later," the Captain said to his daughter when he found himself alone with her late on the night of her return; "but what on earth am I to do with a daughter, in the unsettled life I lead? However, since that old harridan has sent you back, you must manage in the best way you can," concluded Captain Paget with a discontented sigh.

From this time Diana Paget had inhabited the nest of the vultures, and every day had brought its new lesson of trickery and falsehood. There are men—and bad men too—who would have tried to keep the secret of their shifts and meannesses hidden from an only child; but Horatio Paget believed himself the victim of man's ingratitude, and his misdoings the necessity of an evil destiny. It is not easy for the unsophisticated intellect to gauge those moral depths to which the man who lives by his wits must sink before his career is finished, or to understand how, with every step in the swindler's downward road, the conscience grows tougher, the perception of shame blunter, the savage selfishness of the animal nature stronger. Diana Paget had discovered some of her father's weaknesses during her miserable childhood; and in the days of her unpaid-for schooling she had known that his most solemn promises were no more to be relied on than the capricious breath of a summer breeze. So the revelations which awaited her under the paternal roof were not utterly strange or entirely unexpected. Day by day she grew more accustomed to that atmosphere of fraud and falsehood. The sense of shame never left her; for there is a pride that thrives amidst poverty and degradation, and of such pride Diana Paget possessed no small share. She writhed under the consciousness that she was the daughter of a man who had forfeited all right to the esteem of his fellow-men. She valued the good opinion of others, and would fain have been beloved and admired, trusted and respected; for she was ambitious: and the though that she might one day do something which should lift her above the vulgar level was the day-

dream that had consoled her in many an hour of humiliation and discomfort. Diana Paget felt the Captain's shame as keenly as her mother had felt it; but the remorse which had agonised gentle Mary Anne, the tender compassion for others which had wrung that fond and faithful heart, had no place in the breast of the Captain's daughter.

Diana felt so much compassion for herself, that she had none left to bestow upon other people. Her father's victims might be miserable, but was not she infinitely more wretched? The landlady who found her apartments suddenly tenantless and her rent unpaid might complain of the hardness of her fortune; but was it not harder for Diana, with the sensitive feelings and keen pride of the Pagets, to endure all the degradation involved in the stealthy carrying away of luggage and a secret departure under cover of night?

At first Miss Paget had been inclined to feel aggrieved by the presence of the young man whom she had seen writing letters in the gloomy dusk of the November afternoon; but in due time she came to accept him as a companion, and to feel that her joyless life would have been drearier without him. He was the secretary of the Friendly and Philanthropic Loan Society, and of any other society organised by the Captain. He was Captain Paget's amanuensis and representative—Captain Paget's tool, but not Captain Paget's dupe; for Valentine Hawkehurst was not of that stuff of which dupes are made.

The man who lives by his wits has need of a faithful friend and follower. The chief of the vultures must not be approached too easily. There must be a preparatory ordeal, an outer chamber to be passed, before the victim is introduced to the sanctuary which is irradiated by the silver veil of the prophet. Captain Paget found an able coadjutor in Valentine Hawkehurst, who answered one of those tempting advertisements in which A. B.C. or X. Y. Z. was wont to offer a salary of three hundred a year to any gentlemanly person capable of performing the duties of secretary to a newly-established company. It was only after responding to this promising offer that the applicant was informed that he must possess one indispensable qualification in the shape of a capital of five hundred pounds. Mr Hawkehurst laughed aloud when the Captain imparted this condition with that suave and yet dignified manner which was peculiar to him.

"I ought to have known it was a dodge of that kind," said the young man coolly. "Those very good things—duties light and easy, hours from twelve till four, speedy advancement certain for a conscientious and gentlemanly person, and so on—are always of the genus *do*. Your advertisement is very cleverly worded, my dear sir; only it's like the rest of them, rather *too* clever. It is so difficult for a clever man not to be too clever. The prevailing weakness of the human intellect seems to me to be exaggeration. However, as I haven't a five-pound note in the world, or the chance of getting one, I'll wish you good morning, Captain Paget."

There are people whose blood would have been turned to ice by the stony glare of indignation with which Horatio Paget regarded the man who had dared to question his probity. But Mr. Hawkehurst had done with strong impressions long before he met the Captain; and he listened to that gentleman's freezing reproof with an admiring smile. Out of this very unpromising beginning there arose a kind of friendship between the two men. Horatio Paget had for some time been in need of a clever tool; and in the young man whose cool insolence rose superior to his own dignity he perceived the very individual whom he had long been seeking. The young man who was unabashed by the indignation of a scion of Nugents and Cromies and Pagets must be utterly impervious to the sense of awe; and it was just such an impervious young man that the Captain wanted as his coadjutor. Thus arose the alliance, which grew stronger every day, until Valentine took up his abode under the roof of his employer and patron, and made himself more thoroughly at home there than the unwelcome daughter of the house.

The history of Valentine Hawkehurst's past existence was tolerably well known to the Captain; but the only history of the young man's early life ever heard by Diana was rather vague and fragmentary. She discovered, little by little, that he was the son of a spendthrift *littérateur*, who had passed the greater part of his career within the rules of the King's Bench; that he had run away from home at the age of fifteen, and had tried his fortune in all those professions which require no educational ordeal, and which seem to offer themselves invitingly to the scapegrace and adventurer. At fifteen Valentine Hawkehurst had been errand-boy in a newspaper office; at seventeen a penny-a-liner, whose flimsy was pretty sure of admission in the lower class of Sunday papers. In the course of a very brief career he had been a provincial actor, a *manège* rider in a circus, a billiard-marker, and a betting agent. It was after having exhausted these liberal professions that he encountered Captain Paget.

Such was the man whom Horatio Paget admitted to companionship with his only daughter. It can scarcely be pleaded in excuse for the Captain that he might have admitted a worse man than Valentine Hawkehurst to his family circle, for the Captain had never taken the trouble to sound the depths of his coadjutor's nature. There is nothing so short-sighted as selfishness; and beyond the narrow circle immediately surrounding himself, there was no man more blind than Horatio Paget.

* * * * *

It was dusk when Diana grew tired of the lonely pathways among the hills, where the harmonies of a band stationed in the valley were wafted in gusts of music by the fitful summer breeze. The loneliness of the place soothed the girl's feverish spirits; and, seated in a little classic temple upon the summit of a hill, she looked pensively downward through the purple mists at the newly-lighted lamps twinkling faintly in the valley.

"One does not feel the sting of one's shabbiness here," thought Miss Paget: "the trees are all dressed alike. Nature makes no distinction. It is only Fortune who treats her children unfairly."

The Captain's daughter walked slowly back to the little town in the deepening dusk. The lodging occupied by Horatio Paget and his household consisted of four roomy chambers on the second story of a big rambling house. The rooms were meanly furnished, and decorated with the tawdry ornamentation dear to the continental mind; but there were long wide windows and an iron balcony, on which Diana Paget was often pleased to sit.

She found the sitting-room dark and empty. No dinner had been prepared; for on lucky days the Captain and his *protégé* were wont to dine at the *table d'hôte* of one of the hotels, or to feast sumptuously *à la carte*, while on unlucky days they did not dine at all. Diana found a roll and some cream cheese in a roomy old cupboard that was flavoured with mice; and after making a very indifferent meal in the dusky chamber, she went out upon the balcony, and sat there looking down upon the lighted town.

She had been sitting there for nearly an hour in the same attitude, when the door of the sitting-room was opened, and a footstep sounded behind her. She knew the step; and although she did not lift her head, her eyes took a new brightness in the summer dusk, and the listless grace of her attitude changed to a statuesque rigidity, though there was no change in the attitude itself.

She did not stir till a hand was laid softly on her shoulder, and a voice said,—"Diana!"

The speaker was Valentine Hawkehurst, the young man whose entrance to the golden temple had been so closely watched by Captain Paget's daughter.

She rose as he spoke, and turned to him. "You have been losing, I suppose, Mr. Hawkehurst," she said, "or you would not have come home?"

"I am compelled to admit that you are right in your premise, Miss Paget, and your deduction is scarcely worth discussion. I *have* been losing—confoundedly; and as they don't give credit at the board of green cloth yonder, there was no excuse for my staying. Your father has not been holding his own within the last hour or two; but when I left the rooms he was going to the Hotel d'Orange with some French fellows for a quiet game of *écarté*. Our friend the Captain is a great card, Miss Paget, and has a delightful talent for picking up distinguished acquaintance."

There are few daughters who would have cared to hear a father spoken of in this free-and-easy manner; but Diana Paget was quite unmoved. She had resumed her old attitude, and sat looking towards the lighted windows of the Kursaal, while Mr. Hawkehurst lounged against the angle of the window with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth.

For three years Valentine Hawkehurst had lived in constant companionship with the Captain's daughter; and in that time his manner to her had undergone considerable variation. Of late it had been something in the manner of an elder brother, whose fraternal breast is impervious to the influence of a sister's loveliness or a sister's fascination. If Diana Paget had been a snub-nosed young person with red hair and white eyelashes, Mr. Hawkehurst could scarcely have treated her with a more friendly indifference, a more brotherly familiarity.

Unhappily this line of conduct, which is perhaps the wisest and most honourable plan that a man can pursue when he finds himself thrown into a dangerously familiar association with a beautiful and unprotected woman, is the very line of proceeding which a beautiful woman can never bring herself to forgive. A chivalrous stiffness, a melancholy dignity, a frozen frigidity, which suggest the fiery bubbling of the lava flood beneath the icy surface,—these are delightful to the female mind. But friendly indifference and fraternal cordiality constitute the worst insult that can be offered to her beauty, the most bitter outrage upon the majesty of her sex.

"I suppose it will be midnight before papa comes home, Mr. Hawkehurst," Diana said abruptly, when her companion had finished his cigar, and had thrown the end of it over the balcony.

"Past midnight more likely, Miss Paget. May I ask how I have become Mr. Hawkehurst all of a sudden, when for the last three years I have been usually known as Valentine—or Val?"

The girl turned her head with a gesture in which the carelessness of his own manner was imitated. She stole a rapid look at him as she answered, "What does it matter whether I call you by one name or another?"

"What does anything matter? I believe Mr. Toots was an unconscious philosopher. There is nothing in the world of any consequence, except money. Go and look at those poor devils yonder, and you will see what that is worth," he cried, pointing to the lighted Kursaal; "there you behold the one great truth of the universe in action. There is nothing but money, and men are the slaves of money, and life is only another name for the pursuit of money. Go and look at beauty yonder fading in the light and heat; at youth that changes to age before your eyes; at friendship which turns to hate when the chances of the game are with my friend and against me. The Kursaal is the world in little, Diana; and this great globe of ours is nothing but a gigantic gaming-table—a mighty temple for the worship of the golden calf."

"Why do you imitate those people yonder, if you despise them so heartily?"

"Because I am like them and of them. I tell you that money is the beginning and end of all things. Why am I here, and why is my life made up of baseness and lies? Because my father was an improvident scoundrel, and did not leave me five hundred a year. I wonder what I should have been like, by the bye, if I had been blest with five hundred a year?"

"Honest and happy," answered the girl earnestly. She forgot her simulated indifference, and looked at him with sad earnest eyes. He met the glance, and the expression of his own face changed from its cynical smile to a thoughtful sadness.

"Honest perhaps; and yet I almost doubt if anything under five thousand a year would have kept me honest. Decidedly not happy; the men who can be happy on five hundred a year are made of a duller stuff than the clay which serves for a Hawkehurst."

"You talk about not being happy with five hundred a year!" Diana exclaimed impatiently. "Surely any decent existence would be happiness to you compared to the miserable life you lead,—the shameful, degraded life which shuts you out of the society of respectable people and reduces you to the level of a thief. If you had any pride, Valentine, you would feel it as bitterly as I do."

"But I haven't any pride. As for my life,—well, I suppose it is shameful and degraded, and I know that it's often miserable; but it suits me better than jog-trot respectability, I can dine one day on truffled turkey and champagne, another day upon bread and cheese and small beer; but I couldn't eat beef and mutton always. That's what kills people of my temperament. There are born scamps in the world, Diana, and I am one of them. My name is Robert Macaire, and I was created for the life I lead. Keep clear of me if you have any hankering after better things; but don't try to change my nature, for it is wasted labour."

"Valentine, it is so cruel of you to talk like that."

"Cruel to whom?"

"To—those—who care for you."

It was quite dark now; but even in the darkness Diana Paget's head drooped a little as she said this. Mr. Hawkehurst laughed aloud.

"Those who care for me!" he cried; "no such people ever lived. My father was a drunken scoundrel, who suffered his children to grow up about him as he would have suffered a litter of puppies to sprawl upon his hearth, only because there was less trouble in letting them lie there than in kicking them out. My mother was a good woman in the beginning, I know; but she must have been something more than a mortal woman if she had not lost some of her goodness in twelve years of such a life as she led with my father. I believe she was fond of me, poor soul; but she died six months before I ran away from a lodging in the Rules, which it is the bitterest irony to speak of as my home. Since then I have been Robert Macaire, and have about as many friends as such a man usually has."

"You can scarcely wonder if you have few friends," said Miss Paget, "since there is no one in the world whom you love."

She watched him through the darkness after saying this, watched him closely, though it was too dark for her to see the expression of his face, and any emotion to which her words might have given rise could be betrayed only by some gesture or change of attitude. She watched him in vain, for he did not

stir. But after a pause of some minutes he said slowly,—

"Such a man as I cannot afford to love any one. What have I to offer to the woman I might pretend to love? Truth, or honour, or honesty, or constancy? Those are commodities I have never dealt in. If I know what they are, and that I have never possessed them, it is about as much as I do know of them. If I have any redeeming grace, Diana Paget, it lies in the fact that I know what a worthless wretch I am. Your father thinks he is a great man, a noble suffering creature, and that the world has ill-used him. I know that I am a scoundrel, and that let my fellow-men treat me as badly as they please, they can never give me worse usage than I deserve. And am I a man to talk about love, or to ask a woman to share my life? Good God, what a noble partner I should offer her! what a happy existence I could assure her!"

"But if the woman loved you, she would only love you better for being unfortunate."

"Yes, if she was very young and foolish and romantic. But don't you think I should be a villain if I traded on her girlish folly? She would love me for a year or two perhaps, and bear all the changes of my temper; but the day would come when she would awake from her delusion, and know that she had been cheated. She would see other women—less gifted than herself, probably—and would see the market they had made of their charms; would see them rich and honoured and happy, and would stand aside in the muddy streets to be splashed by the dirt from their carriage-wheels. And then she would consider the price for which she had bartered her youth and her beauty, and would hate the man who had cheated her. No, Diana, I am not such a villain as the world may think me. I am down in the dirt myself, and I'm used to it. I won't drag a woman into the gutter just because I may happen to love her."

There was a long silence after this—a silence during which Diana Paget sat looking down at the twinkling lights of the Kursaal. Valentine lighted a second cigar and smoked it out, still in silence. The clocks struck eleven as he threw the end of his cigar away; a tiny, luminous speck, which shot through the misty atmosphere below the balcony like a falling star.

"I may as well go and see how your father is getting on yonder," he said, as the spark of light vanished in the darkness below. "Good night, Diana. Don't sit too long in the cold night air; and don't sit up for your father—there's no knowing when he may be home."

The girl did not answer him. She listened to the shutting of the door as it closed behind him, and then folded her arms upon the iron rail of the balcony, laid her head upon them, and wept silently. Her life was very dreary, and it seemed to her as if the last hope which had sustained her against an unnatural despair had been taken away from her to-night.

Twelve o'clock sounded with a feeble little *carillon* from one of the steeples, and still she sat with her head resting upon her folded arms. Her eyes were quite dry by this time, for with her tears were very rare, and the passion which occasioned them must needs be intense. The night air grew chill and damp; but although she shivered now and then beneath that creeping, penetrating cold which is peculiar to night air, she did not stir from her place in the balcony till she was startled by the opening of the door in the room behind her.

All was dark within, but Diana Paget was very familiar with the footstep that sounded on the carpetless floor. It was Valentine Hawkehurst, and not her father, whose step her quick ear distinguished.

"Diana," he called; and then he muttered in a tone of surprise, "all dark still. Ah! she has gone to bed, I suppose. That's a pity!" The figure in the balcony caught his eye at this moment.

"What in goodness' name has kept you out there all this time?" he asked; "do you want to catch your death of cold?"

He was standing by the mantelpiece lighting a candle as he asked this unceremonious question. The light of the candle shone full upon his face when Diana came into the room, and she could see that he was paler than usual.

"Is there anything the matter?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes; there is a great deal the matter. You will have to leave Forêtdechêne by the earliest train to-morrow morning, on the first stage of your journey to England. Look here, my girl! I can give you just about the money that will carry you safely to London; and when you are once there, Providence must do the rest."

"Valentine, what do you mean?"

"I mean, that you cannot get away from this place—you cannot dissever yourself from the people you

have been living with, too soon. Come, come, don't shiver, child. Take a few drops of this cognac, and let me see the colour come back to your face before I say any more."

He poured the dregs of a bottle of brandy into a glass, and made her drink the spirit. He was obliged to force the rim of the glass between her set teeth before he could succeed in this.

"Come, Diana," he said, after she had drunk, "you have been a pupil in the school of adversity so long, that you ought to be able to take misfortunes pretty quietly. There's a balance struck, somehow or other, depend upon it, my girl; and the prosperous people who pay their debts have to suffer, as well as the Macaire family. I'm a scamp and a scoundrel, but I'm your true friend nevertheless, Diana; and you must promise to take my advice. Tell me that you will trust me."

"I have no one else to trust."

"No one else in this place. But in England you have your old friend,—the woman with whom you were at school. Do you think she would refuse to give you a temporary home if you sued to her *in formâ pauperis?*"

"No, I don't think she would refuse. She was very good to me. But why am I to go back to London?"

"Because to stay here would be ruin and disgrace to you; because the tie that links you to Horatio Paget must be cut at any hazard."

"But why?"

"For the best or worst of reasons. Your father has been trying a trick to-night which has been hitherto so infallible, that I suppose he had grown careless as to his execution of it. Or perhaps he took a false measure of the man he was playing with. In any case, he has been found out, and has been arrested by the police."

"Arrested, for cheating at cards!" exclaimed the girl, with a look of unspeakable disgust and horror. Valentine's arm was ready to support her, if she had shown any symptom of fainting; but she did not. She stood erect before him, very pale but firm as a rock.

"And you want me to go away?" she said.

"Yes, I want you to disappear from this place before you become notorious as your father's daughter. That would be about the worst reputation which you could carry through life. Believe me that I wish you well, Diana, and be ruled by me."

"I will," she answered, with a kind of despairing resignation. "It seems very dreary to go back to England to face the world all alone. But I will do as you tell me."

She did not express any sympathy for her father, then languishing under arrest, whereby she proved herself very wicked and unwomanly, no doubt. But neither womanly virtues nor Christian graces are wont to flourish in the school in which Diana Paget had been reared. She obeyed Valentine Hawkehurst to the letter, without any sentimental lamentations whatever. Her scanty possessions were collected, and neatly packed, in little more than an hour. At three o'clock she lay down in her tawdry little bed-chamber to take what rest she might in the space of two hours. At six she stood by Valentine Hawkehurst on the platform of the railway station, with her face hidden by a brown gauze veil, waiting till the train was made ready to start.

It was after she was seated in the carriage that she spoke for the first time of her father.

"Is it likely to go very hard with him?" she asked.

"I hope not. We must try to pull him through it as well as we can. The charge may break down at the first examination. Good bye."

"Good bye, Valentine."

They had just time to shake hands before the train moved off. Another moment and Miss Paget and her fellow-passengers were speeding towards Liége.

Mr. Hawkehurst drew his hat over his eyes as he walked away from the station.

"The world will seem very dull and empty to me without her," he said to himself. "I have done an unselfish thing for once in my life. I wonder whether the recording angel will carry that up to my credit, and whether the other fellow will blot out any of the old score in consideration of this one little bit of self-sacrifice."

BOOK THE THIRD.

HEAPING UP RICHES.

CHAPTER I.

A FORTUNATE MARRIAGE.

Eleven years had passed lightly enough over the glossy raven locks of Mr. Philip Sheldon. There are some men with whom Time deals gently, and he was one of them. The hard black eyes had lost none of their fierce brightness; the white teeth flashed with all their old brilliancy; the complexion, which had always been dusky of hue, was perhaps a shade or two darker; and the fierce black eyes seemed all the blacker by reason of the purple tinge beneath them. But the Philip Sheldon of to-day was, taken altogether, a handsomer man than the Philip Sheldon of eleven years ago.

Within those eleven years the Bloomsbury dentist had acquired a higher style of dress and bearing, and a certain improvement of tone and manner. He was still an eminently respectable man, and a man whose chief claim to the esteem of his fellows lay in the fact of his unimpeachable respectability; but his respectability of to-day, as compared with that of eleven years before, was as the respectability of Tyburnia when contrasted with that of St. Pancras. He was not an aristocratic-looking man, or an elegant man; but you felt, as you contemplated him, that the bulwarks of the citadel of English respectability are defended by such as he.

Mr. Sheldon no longer experimentalised with lumps of beeswax and plaster-of-paris. All the appalling paraphernalia of his cruel art had long since been handed over to an aspiring young dentist, together with the respectable house in Fitzgeorge-street, the furniture, and—the connexion. And thus had ended Philip Sheldon's career as a surgeon-dentist. Within a year of Tom Halliday's death his disconsolate widow had given her hand to her first sweetheart, not forgetful of her dead husband or ungrateful for much kindness and affection experienced at his hands, but yielding rather to Philip's suit because she was unable to advance any fair show of reason whereby she might reject him.

"I told you, she'd be afraid to refuse you," said George Sheldon, when the dentist came home from Barlingford, where Tom Halliday's widow was living with her mother.

Philip had answered his brother's questions rather ambiguously at first, but in the end had been fain to confess that he had asked Mrs. Halliday to marry him, and that his suit had prospered.

"That way of putting it is not very complimentary to me," he said, drawing himself up rather stiffly. "Georgy and I were attached to each other long ago, and it is scarcely strange if——"

"If you should make a match of it, Tom being gone. Poor old Tom! He and I were such cronies. I've always had an idea that neither you nor the other fellow quite understood that low fever of his. You did your best, no doubt; but I think you ought to have pulled him through somehow. However, that's not a pleasant subject to talk of just now; so I'll drop it, and wish you joy, Phil. It'll be rather a good match for you, I fancy," added George, contemplating his brother with a nervous twitching of his lips, which suggested that his mouth watered as he thought of Philip's good fortune.

"It's a very nice thing you drop into, old fellow, isn't it?" he asked presently, seeing that his brother was rather disinclined to discuss the subject.

"You know the state of my affairs well enough to be sure that I couldn't afford to marry a poor woman," answered Philip.

"And that it has been for a long time a vital necessity with you to marry a rich one," interjected his brother.

"Georgy will have a few hundreds, and——"

"A few thousands, you mean, Phil," cried Sheldon the younger with agreeable briskness; "shall I tot it up for you?"

He was always eager to "tot" things up, and would scarcely have shrunk from setting down the stars of heaven in trim double columns of figures, had it seemed to his profit to do so.

"Let us put it in figures, Phil," he said, getting his finger-tips in order for the fray. "There's the money for Hyley Farm—twelve thousand three hundred and fifty, I had it from poor Tom's own lips. Then there's that little property on Sheepfield Common—say seven-fifty, eh?—well, say seven hundred, if you like to leave a margin; and then there are the insurances—three thou' in the Alliance, fifteen hundred in the Phoenix, five hundred in the Suffolk Friendly; the total of which, my dear boy, is eighteen thousand five hundred pounds; and a very nice thing for you to drop into, just as affairs were looking about as black as they could look."

"Yes," answered Mr. Sheldon the elder, who appeared by no means to relish this "totting-up" of his future wife's fortune; "I have no doubt I ought to consider myself a very lucky man."

"So Barlingford folks will say when they hear of the business. And now
I hope you're not going to forget your promise to me."

"What promise?"

"That if you ever did get a stroke of luck, I should have a share of it—eh, Phil?"

Mr. Sheldon caressed his chin, and looked thoughtfully at the fire.

"If my wife lets me have the handling of any of her money, you may depend upon it I'll do what I can for you," he said, after a pause.

"Don't say that, Phil," remonstrated George. "When a man says he'll do what he can for you, it's a sure sign he means to do nothing. Friendship and brotherly feeling are at an end when it comes to a question of 'ifs' and 'cans.' *If* your wife lets you have the handling of any of her money!" cried the lawyer, with unspeakable derision; "that's too good a joke for you to indulge in with me. Do you think I believe you will let that poor little woman keep custody of her money a day after she is your wife, or that you will let her friends tie it up for her before she marries you? No, Phil, you didn't lay your plans for that."

"What do you mean by my laying plans?" asked the dentist.

"That's a point we won't discuss, Philip," answered the lawyer coolly. "You and I understand each other very well without entering into unpleasant details. You promised me a year ago—before Tom Halliday's death—that if you ever came into a good thing, I should share in it. You have come into an uncommonly good thing, and I shall expect you to keep your promise."

"Who says I am going to break it?" demanded Philip Sheldon with an injured air. "You shouldn't be in such a hurry to cry out, George. You take the tone of a social Dick Turpin, and might as well hold a pistol to my head while you're about it. Don't alarm yourself. I have told you I will do what I can for you. I cannot, and I shall not, say more."

The two men looked at each other. They were in the habit of taking the measure of all creation in their own eminently practical way, and each took the other's measure now. After having done which, they parted with all cordial expressions of good-will and brotherly feeling. George went back to his dusty chambers in Gray's Inn, and Philip prepared for his return to Barlingford and his marriage with Georgina Halliday.

For ten years Georgy had been Philip Sheldon's wife, and she had found no reason to complain of her second choice. The current of her life had flowed smoothly enough since her first lover had become her husband. She still wore moire-antique dresses and gold chains; and if the dresses were of more simple fashion, and the chains were less obtrusively displayed, she had to thank Mr. Sheldon for the refinement in her taste. Her views of life in general had expanded under Mr. Sheldon's influence. She no longer thought a high-wheeled dog-cart and a skittish mare the acme of earthly splendour; for she had a carriage and pair at her service, and a smart little page-boy to leap off the box in attendance on her when she paid visits or went shopping. Instead of the big comfortable old-fashioned farmhouse at Hyley, with its mysterious passages and impenetrable obscurities in the way of cupboards, she occupied an intensely new detached villa in Bayswater, in which the eye that might chance to grow weary of sunshine and glitter would have sought in vain for a dark corner wherein to repose itself.

Mr. Sheldon's fortunes had prospered since his marriage with his friend's widow. For a man of his practical mind and energetic temperament, eighteen thousand pounds was a strong starting-point. His first step was to clear off all old engagements with Jews and Gentiles, and to turn his back on the respectable house in Fitzgeorge-street. The earlier months of his married life he devoted to a pleasant

tour on the Continent; not wasting time in picturesque by-ways, or dawdling among inaccessible mountains, or mooning about drowsy old cathedrals, where there were pictures with curtains hanging before them, and prowling vergers who expected money for drawing aside the curtains; but rattling at the highest continental speed from one big commercial city to another, and rubbing off the rust of Bloomsbury in the exchanges and on the quays of the busiest places in Europe. The time which Mr. Sheldon forbore to squander in shadowy gothic aisles and under the shelter of Alpine heights, he accounted well bestowed in crowded cafés, and at the public tables of noted hotels, where commercial men were wont to congregate; and as Georgy had no aspirings for the sublimity of Vandyke and Raphael, or the gigantic splendours of Alpine scenery, she was very well pleased to see continental life with the eyes of Philip Sheldon. How could a half-educated little woman, whose worldly experience was bounded by the suburbs of Barlingford, be otherwise than delighted by the glare and glitter of foreign cities? Georgy was childishly enraptured with everything she saw, from the sham diamonds and rubies of the Palais Royal, to the fantastical bonbons of Berlin.

Her husband was very kind to her—after his own particular fashion, which was very different from blustering Tom Halliday's weak indulgence. He allotted and regulated her life to suit his own convenience, it is true; but he bought her handsome dresses, and took her with him in hired carriages when he drove about the strange cities. He was apt to leave Georgy and the hired carriage at the corner of some street, or before the door of some cafe, for an hour at a time, in the course of his peregrinations; but she speedily became accustomed to this, and provided herself with the Tauchnitz edition of a novel, wherewith to beguile the tedium of these intervals in the day's amusement. If Tom Halliday had left her for an hour at a street-corner, or before the door of a café, she would have tortured herself and him by all manner of jealous suspicions and vague imaginings. But there was a stern gravity in Mr. Sheldon's character which precluded the possibility of any such shadowy fancies. Every action of his life seemed to involve such serious motives, the whole tenor of his existence was so orderly and business-like, that his wife was fain to submit to him, as she would have submitted to some ponderous infallible machine, some monster of modern ingenuity and steam power, which cut asunder so many bars of iron, or punched holes in so many paving-stones in a given number of seconds, and was likely to go on dividing iron or piercing paving-stones for ever and ever.

She obeyed him, and was content to fashion her life according to his will, chiefly because she had a vague consciousness that to argue with him, or to seek to influence him, would be to attempt the impossible. Perhaps there was something more than this in her mind—some half-consciousness that there was a shapeless and invertebrate skeleton lurking in the shadowy background of her new life, a dusky and impalpable creature which it would not be well for her to examine or understand. She was a cowardly little woman, and finding herself tolerably happy in the present, she did not care to pierce the veil of the future, or to cast anxious glances backward to the past. She thought it just possible that there might be people in the world base enough to hint that Philip Sheldon had married her for love of her eighteen thousand pounds, rather than from pure devotion to herself. She knew that certain prudent friends and kindred in Barlingford had elevated their hands and eyebrows in speechless horror when they discovered that she had married her second husband without a settlement; while one grim and elderly uncle had asked her whether she did not expect her father to turn in his grave by reason of her folly.

Georgy had shrugged her shoulders peevishly when her Barlingford friends remonstrated with her, and had declared that people were very cruel to her, and that it was a hard thing she could not choose for herself for once in her life. As to the settlements that people talked of, she protested indignantly that she was not so mean as to fancy her future husband a thief, and that to tie up her money in all sorts of ways would be to imply as much. And then, as it was only a year since poor dear Tom's death, she had been anxious to marry without fuss or parade. In fact, there were a hundred reasons against legal interference, and legal tying-up of the money, with all that dreadful jargon about "whereas," and "hereinafter," and "provided always," and "nothing herein contained," which seems to hedge round a sum of money so closely, that it is doubtful whether the actual owner will ever be free to spend a sixpence of it after the execution of that formidable document intended to protect it from possible marauders.

George Sheldon had said something very near the truth when he had told Philip that Mrs. Halliday would be afraid to refuse him. The fair-haired, fair-faced little woman did in some manner fear the first lover of her girlhood. She had become his wife, and so far all things had gone well with her; but if misery and despair had been the necessary consequences of her union with him, she must have married him all the same, so dominant was the influence by which he ruled her. Of course Georgy was not herself aware of her own dependence. She accepted all things as they were presented to her by a stronger mind than her own. She wore her handsome silk dresses, and was especially particular as to the adjustment of her bonnet-strings, knowing that the smallest impropriety of attire was obnoxious to the well-ordered mind of her second husband. She obeyed him very much as a child obeys a strict but

not unkind schoolmaster. When he took her to a theatre or a racecourse, she sat by his side meekly, and felt like a child who has been good and is reaping the reward of goodness. And this state of things was in nowise disagreeable to her. She was perhaps quite as happy as it was in her nature to be; for she had no exalted capacity for happiness or misery. She felt that it was pleasant to have a handsome man, whose costume was always irreproachable, for her husband. Her only notion of a bad husband was a man who stayed out late, and came home under the influence of strong liquors consumed in unknown localities and amongst unknown people. So, as Mr. Sheldon rarely went out after dinner, and was on all occasions the most temperate of men, she naturally considered her second husband the very model of conjugal perfection. Thus it was that domestic life had passed smoothly enough for Mr. Sheldon and his wife during the ten years which had elapsed since their marriage.

As to the eighteen thousand pounds which she had brought Philip Sheldon, Georgy asked no questions. She knew that she enjoyed luxuries and splendours which had never been hers in Tom Halliday's lifetime, and she was content to accept the goods which her second husband provided. Mr. Sheldon had become a stockbroker, and occupied an office in some dusky court within a few hundred yards of the Stock Exchange. He had, according to his own account, trebled Georgy's thousands since they had been in his hands. How the unsuccessful surgeon-dentist had blossomed all at once into a fortunate speculator was a problem too profound for Georgy's consideration. She knew that her husband had allied himself to a certain established firm of stockbrokers, and that the alliance had cost him some thousands of Tom Halliday's money. She had heard of preliminary steps to be taken to secure his admission as a member of some mysterious confraternity vaguely spoken of as "the House;" and she knew that Tom Halliday's thousands had been the seed from which had sprung other thousands, and that her husband had been altogether triumphant and successful.

It may be that it is easier to rig the market than to induce a given number of people to resort to a certain dull street in Bloomsbury for the purpose of having teeth extracted by an unknown practitioner. It is possible that the stockbroker is like the poet, a creature who is born, and not made; a gifted and inspired being, not to be perfected by any specific education; a child of spontaneous instincts and untutored faculties. Certain it is that the divine afflatus from the nostrils of the god Plutus seemed to have descended upon Philip Sheldon; for he had entered the Stock Exchange an inexperienced stranger, and he held his place there amongst men whose boyhood had been spent in the offices of Capel-court, and whose youthful strength had been nourished in the chop-houses of Pinch-lane and Thread-needle-street.

Mrs. Sheldon was satisfied with the general knowledge that Mr. Sheldon had been fortunate, and had never sought any more precise knowledge of her husband's affairs. Nor did she seek such knowledge even now, when her daughter was approaching womanhood, and might ere long need some dower out of her mother's fortune. Poor Tom, trusting implicitly in the wife he loved, and making his will only as a precautionary measure, at a time when he seemed good for fifty years of life and strength, had not troubled himself about remote contingencies, and had in no wise foreseen the probability of a second husband for Georgy and a stepfather for his child.

Two children had been born to Mr. Sheldon since his marriage, and both had died in infancy. The loss of these children had fallen very heavily on the strong hard man, though he had never shed a tear or uttered a lamentation, or wasted an hour of his business-like existence by reason of his sorrow. Georgy had just sufficient penetration to perceive that her husband was bitterly disappointed when no more baby-strangers came to replace those poor frail little lives which had withered away and vanished in spite of his anxiety to hold them.

"It seems as if there was a blight upon *my* children," he once said bitterly; and this was the only occasion on which his wife heard him complain of his evil fortune.

But one day, when he had been particularly lucky in some speculation, when he had succeeded in achieving what his brother George spoke of as the "biggest line he had ever done," Philip Sheldon came home to the Bayswater villa in a particularly bad humour, and for the first time since her marriage Georgy heard him quote a line of Scripture.

"Heaping up riches," he muttered, as he paced up and down the room; "heaping up riches, and ye cannot tell who shall gather them."

His wife knew then that he was thinking of his children. During the brief lives of those two fragile boy-babies the stockbroker had been wont to talk much of future successes in the way of money-making to be achieved by him for the enrichment and exaltation of these children. They were gone now, and no more came to replace them. And though Philip Sheldon still devoted himself to the sublime art of money-making, and still took delight in successful time-bargains and all the scientific combinations of the money-market, the salt of life had lost something of its savour, and the chink of gold had lost somewhat of its music.

CHAPTER II.

CHARLOTTE.

The little villa at Bayswater was looking its brightest on a resplendent midsummer afternoon, one year after Diana Paget's hurried hegira from Forêtdechêne. If the poor dentist's house in dingy Bloomsbury had been fresh and brilliant of aspect, how much more brilliant was the western home of the rich stockbroker, whose gate was within five minutes' walk of that aristocratic Eden, Kensington Gardens! Mr. Sheldon's small domain was called The Lawn, and consisted of something over half an acre of flower-garden and shrubbery, a two-stall stable and coach-house, a conservatory and fernery, and a moderate-sized house in the gothic or mediæval style, with mullioned windows in the dining-room and oriels in the best bedroom, and with a great deal of unnecessary stone-work and wooden excrescence in every direction.

The interior of Mr. Sheldon's dwelling bore no trace of that solid old-fashioned clumsiness which had distinguished his house in Fitzgeorge-street. Having surrendered his ancestral chairs and tables in liquidation of his liabilities, Philip Sheldon was free to go with the times, and had furnished his gothic villa in the most approved modern style, but without any attempt at artistic grace or adornment. All was bright, and handsome, and neat, and trim; but the brightness and the neatness savoured just a little of furnished apartments at the seaside, and the eye sought in vain for the graceful disorder of an elegant home. The dining-room was gorgeous with all the splendour of new mahogany and crimson morocco; the drawing-room was glorified by big looking-glasses, and the virginal freshness of gilt frames on which the feet of agile house-fly or clumsy blue-bottle had never rested. The crimsons, and blues, and greens, and drabs of the Brussels carpets retained the vivid brightness of the loom. The drops of the chandeliers twinkled like little stars in the sunshine; the brass birdcages were undimmed by any shadow of dulness. To Georgy's mind the gothic villa was the very perfection of a dwelling-place. The Barlingford housekeepers were wont to render their homes intolerable by extreme neatness. Georgy still believed in the infallibility of her native town, and the primness of Barlingford reigned supreme in the gothic villa. There were no books scattered on the polished walnut-wood tables in the drawing-room, no cabinets crammed with scraps of old china, no pictures, no queer old Indian feather-screens, no marvels of Chinese carving in discoloured ivory; none of those traces which the footsteps of the "collector" leave behind him. Mr. Sheldon had no leisure for collecting; and Georgy preferred the gaudy pink-and-blue vases of a Regent-street china-shop to all the dingy *chefs-d'oeuvre* of a Wedgwood, or the quaint shepherds and shepherdesses of Chelsea. As for books, were there not four or five resplendent volumes primly disposed on one of the tables; an illustrated edition of Cowper's lively and thrilling poems; a volume of Rambles in Scotland, with copper-plate engravings of "Melrose by night," and Glasgow Cathedral, and Ben Nevis, and other scenic and architectural glories of North Britain; a couple of volumes of *Punch*, and an illustrated "Vicar of Wakefield;" and what more could elevated taste demand in the way of literature? Nobody ever read the books; but Mrs. Sheldon's visitors were sometimes glad to take refuge in the Scottish scenery and the pictorial Vicar during that interval of dulness and indigestion which succeeds a middle-class dinner. Georgy read a great many books; but they were all novels, procured from the Bayswater branch of a fashionable circulating library, and were condemned unread by Mr. Sheldon, who considered all works of fiction perfectly equal in demerit, and stigmatised them, in a general way, as "senseless trash." He had tried to read novels in the dreary days of his Bloomsbury probation; but he had found that the heroes of them were impracticable beings, who were always talking of honour and chivalry, and always sacrificing their own interests in an utterly preposterous manner; and he had thrown aside story after story in disgust.

"Give me a book that is something like life, and I'll read it," he exclaimed impatiently; "but I can't swallow the high-flown prosings of impossibly virtuous inanities."

One day, indeed, he had been struck by the power of a book, a book written by a certain Frenchman called Balzac. He had been riveted by the hideous cynicism, the supreme power of penetration into the vilest corners of wicked hearts; and he flung the book from him at last with an expression of unmitigated admiration.

"That man knows his fellows," he cried, "and is not hypocrite enough to conceal his knowledge, or to trick out his puppets in the tinsel and rags of false sentiment in order that critics and public may cry, 'See, what noble instincts, what generous impulses, what unbounded sympathy for his fellow-creatures

this man has!' This Frenchman is an artist, and is not afraid to face the difficulties of his art. What a scoundrel this Philippe Bridau is! And after wallowing in the gutter, he lives to bespatter his virtuous brother with the mire from his carriage wheels. That is *real* life. Your English novelist would have made his villain hang himself with the string of his waistcoat in a condemned cell, while his amiable hero was declared heir to a dukedom and forty thousand a year. But this fellow Balzac knows better than that."

The days had passed when Mr. Sheldon had leisure to read Balzac. He read nothing but the newspapers now, and in the newspapers he read very little more than the money articles and such political news as seemed likely to affect the money-market. There is no such soul-absorbing pursuit as the race which men run whose goal is the glittering Temple of Plutus. The golden apples which tempted Atalanta to slacken her pace are always rolling *before* the modern runner, and the greed of gain lends the wings of Hermes to his feet. Mr. Sheldon had sighed for pleasures sometimes in the days of his Bloomsbury martyrdom. He had sat by his open window on sultry summer evenings, smoking his solitary cigar, and thinking moodily of all the pleasant resting-places from which other men were looking out at that golden western sky, deepening into crimson and melting into purples which even the London smoke could not obscure. He had sat alone, thinking of jovial parties lounging in the bow-windows of Greenwich taverns, with cool green hock-glasses and pale amber wine, and a litter of fruit and flowers on the table before them, while the broad river flowed past them with all the glory of the sunset on the rippling water, and one black brig standing sharply out against the yellow sky. He had thought of Richmond, and the dashing young men who drive there every summer in drags, with steel chain and bar clanking and glittering in front of the team, and two solemn grooms with folded arms seated stiff and statue-like behind. He had thought of Epsom, and the great Derby mob; and all of those golden goblets of pleasure which prosperous manhood drains to the very dregs. He had fancied the enjoyments which would be his if ever he were rich enough to pay for them. And now he was able to afford all such pleasures he cared nothing for them; for the ecstasy of making money seemed better than any masculine dissipation or delight. He did sometimes dine at Greenwich. He knew the *menus* of the different taverns by heart, and had discovered that they were all alike vanity and indigestion; but he never seated himself at one of those glistening little tables, or deliberated with an obsequious waiter over the mysteries of the wine *carte*, without a settled purpose to be served by the eating of the dinner, and a definite good to be achieved by the wine he ordered. He gave many such entertainments at home and abroad; but they were all given to men who were likely to be useful to him—to rich men, or the toadies and hangers-on of rich men, the grand viziers of the sultans of the money-market. Such a thing as pleasure or hospitality pure and simple had no place in the plan of Mr. Sheldon's life. The race in which he was running was not to be won by a loiterer. The golden apples were always rolling on before the runner; and woe be to him who turned away from the course to dally with the flowers or loiter by the cool streams that beautified the wayside.

Thus it was that Mr. Sheldon's existence grew day by day more completely absorbed by business pursuits and business interests. Poor Georgy complained peevishly of her husband's neglect; but she did not dare to pour her lamentations into the ear of the offender. It was a kind of relief to grumble about his busy life to servants and humble female friends and confidantes; but what could she say to Philip Sheldon himself? What ground had she for complaint? He very seldom stayed out late; he never came home tipsy. He was quite as cool and clear-headed and business-like, and as well able to "tot up" any given figures upon the back of an envelope after one of those diplomatic little Greenwich dinners as he was the first thing after breakfast. It had been an easy thing to tyrannise over poor Tom Halliday; but this man was a grave inscrutable creature, a domestic enigma which Georgy was always giving up in despair. But so completely did Mr. Sheldon rule his wife, that when he informed her inferentially that she was a very happy woman, she accepted his view of the subject, and was content to believe herself blest.

In spite of those occasional grumblings to servants and female friends, Mrs. Sheldon did think herself happy. Those occasional complaints were the minor notes in the harmony of her life, and only served to make the harmony complete. She read her novels, and fed a colony of little feeble twittering birds that occupied a big wire cage in the breakfast-parlour. She executed a good deal of fancy-work with beads and Berlin-wool; she dusted and arranged the splendours of the drawing-room with her own hands; and she took occasional walks in Kensington Gardens.

This was the ordinary course of her existence, now and then interrupted by such thrilling events as a dinner given to some important acquaintance of Mr. Sheldon's, or a visit to the school at which Charlotte Halliday was completing her education.

That young lady had been removed from the Scarborough boarding-school to a highly respectable establishment at Brompton, within a few months of her mother's marriage with Mr. Sheldon. She had been a rosy-cheeked young damsel in pinafores at the time of that event, too young to express any strong feeling upon the subject of her mother's second choice; but not too young to feel the loss of her father very deeply. Tom Halliday had been fondly attached to that bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked damsel of

nine years' growth, and the girl had fully reciprocated his affection. How often they had talked together of the future, which was to be so delightful for them both; the new farm, which was to be such a paradise in comparison to Hyley; the pony that Charlotte was to ride when she should be old enough to wear a habit like a lady, and to go about with her father to market-towns and corn-exchanges! The little girl had remembered all this, and had most bitterly lamented the loss of that dear and loving father.

She remembered it all to this day; she regretted her loss to this day, though she was nearly of age, and on the point of leaving school for ever, after having prolonged her school-days considerably beyond the usual period, at the express wish of her stepfather. To say that she disliked Mr. Sheldon is only to admit that she was subject to the natural prejudices of humanity. He had usurped the place of a beloved father, and he was in every way the opposite of that father. He had come between Charlotte Halliday and her mother, and had so absorbed the weak little woman into himself, as to leave Charlotte quite alone in the world. And yet he did his duty as few stepfathers do it. Charlotte admitted that he was very kind to her, that he was an excellent husband, and altogether the most conscientious and respectable of mankind; but she admitted with equal candour that she had never been able to like him. "I daresay it is very wicked of me not to be fond of him, when he is so good and generous to me," she said to her chosen friend and companion; "but I never can feel quite at home with him. I try to think of him as a father sometimes, but I never can get over the 'step.' Do you know I have dreamed of him sometimes? and though he is so kind to me in reality, I always fancy him cruel to me in my dreams. I suppose it is on account of his black eyes and black whiskers," added Miss Halliday, in a meditative tone. "It is certainly a misfortune for a person to have blacker eyes and whiskers than the rest of the world; for there seems something stern and hard, and almost murderous, in such excessive blackness."

Charlotte Halliday was a very different creature from the mother whom Mr. Sheldon had absorbed into himself. Georgy was one of the women who have "no characters at all," but Georgy's daughter was open to the charge of eccentricity rather than of inanity. She was a creature of fancies and impulses. She had written wild verses in the secrecy of her own chamber at midnight, and had torn her poetic effusions into a thousand fragments the morning after their composition. She played and sang very sweetly, and danced admirably, and did everything in a wild way of her own, which was infinitely more charming than the commonplace perfection of other women. She was not a beauty according to those established rules which everybody believes in until they meet a woman who sins against them all and yet is beautiful. Miss Halliday had thick black eyebrows, and large gray eyes which people were apt to mistake for black. She had a composite nose, and one of the sweetest mouths that ever smiled upon enraptured mankind. Nature had given her just a little more chin than a Greek sculptor would have allowed her; but, by way of make-weight, the same careless Nature had bestowed upon her a throat which Phidias himself might have sought in vain to improve upon. And Nature had planted this young lady's head upon her shoulders with a grace so rare that it must needs be a happy accident in the workmanship of that immortal artist. Indeed it seemed as if Charlotte Halliday owed her charms to a series of happy accidents. The black eyebrows which made her face so piquant might have been destruction to another woman. The round column-like throat needed a fine frank face to surmount it, and the fine frank face was rendered gracious and womanly by the wealth of waving dark hair which framed it. The girl was one of those bright happy creatures whom men worship and women love, and whom envy can scarcely dislike. She was so infinitely superior to both father and mother, that a believer in hereditary attributes was fain to invent some mythical great-grandmother from whom the girl's graces might have been derived. But she had something of her father's easy good-nature and imprudent generosity; and was altogether one of those impulsive creatures whose lives are perpetual difficulties and dilemmas. More lectures had been delivered for her edification than for any other young lady in the Brompton boarding-school, and yet she had been the favourite and delight of everybody in the establishment, from the mistress of the mansion down to the iniquitous boy who cleaned the boots, and who was hounded and hunted, and abused and execrated, from dewy morn to dusky eve.

"I allus puts plenty of elbow-grease on your boots, Miss 'Allundale, though cook does heave saucepan-lids at my 'ed and call me a lazy wiper," this incorrigible imp protested to Charlotte one morning, when she had surprised him in tears and had consoled his woes by a donation of pence.

"All things love thee, so do I," says the lover to his mistress; and it is almost impossible not to adore a young lady who is universally beloved, for the simple reason that this general affection is very rarely accorded to any but a loving nature. There is an instinct in these things. From all the ruck of Cheapside a vagrant dog will select the man who has most toleration for the canine species, and is most likely to give him shelter. A little child coming suddenly into a circle of strangers knows in which lap it may find a haven, on which bosom it may discover safety and comfort. If mistress and schoolfellows, servants and shoeblack, dogs and cats, were fond of Charlotte Halliday, their affection had been engendered by her own sweet smiles and loving words, and helping hands always ready to give substantial succour or to aid by active service.

She had been at the Brompton gynæceum nearly eleven years—only leaving it for her holidays—and

now her education was finished, and Mr. Sheldon could find no excuse for leaving her at school any longer, so her departure had been finally agreed upon.

To most damsels of twenty-one this would have been a subject for rejoicing; but it was not so with Charlotte. She did not like her stepfather; and her mother, though very affectionate and gentle, was a person whose society was apt to become wearisome any time after the first half-hour of social intercourse. At Hyde Lodge Charlotte had a great deal more of Lingard and condensed and expurgated Gibbon than was quite agreeable; she had to get up at a preternatural hour in the morning and to devote herself to "studies of velocity," whose monotony became wearing as the drip, drip, drip of water on the skull of the tortured criminal. She was very tired of all the Hyde-Lodge lessons and accomplishments, the irregular French verbs—the "braires" and "traires" which were so difficult to remember, and which nobody ever could want to use in polite conversation; the ruined castles and dilapidated windmills, the perpetual stumpy pieces of fallen timber and jagged posts, executed with a BBB pencil; the chalky expanse of sky, with that inevitable flight of crows scudding across it:—why must there be always crows scudding across a drawing-master's sky, and why so many jagged posts in a drawing-master's ideal of rural beauty? Charlotte was inexpressibly weary of all the stereotyped studies; but she liked Hyde Lodge better than the gothic villa. She liked the friendly schoolfellows with their loud talk and boisterous manners, the girls who called her "Halliday," and who were always borrowing her reels of crochet-cotton and her pencils, her collars and pocket-handkerchiefs. She liked the free-and-easy schoolgirl talk better than her mother's tame discourse; she preferred the homely litter of the spacious schoolroom to the prim splendours of Georgy's state chambers; and the cool lawn and shrubberies of Hyde Lodge were a hundred-fold more pleasant to her than the stiff little parterre at Bayswater, wherein scarlet geraniums and calceolarias flourished with an excruciating luxuriance of growth and an aggravating brilliancy of colour. She liked any place better than the hearth by which Philip Sheldon brooded with a dark thoughtful face, and a mind absorbed by the mysteries and complications of the Stock Exchange.

On this bright June afternoon other girls were chattering gaily about the fun of the breaking-up ball and the coming delights of the holidays, but Charlotte sighed when they reminded her that the end of her last half was close at hand.

She sat under a group of trees on the lawn, with a crochet antimacassar lying in her lap, and with her friend and favourite, Diana Paget, sitting by her side.

Hyde Lodge was that very establishment over which Priscilla Paget had reigned supreme for the last seventeen years of her life, and among all the pupils in a school of some forty or fifty girls, Diana was the one whom Charlotte Halliday had chosen for her dearest companion and confidante, clinging to her with a constancy not to be shaken by ill-fortune or absence. The girl knew very well that Diana Paget was a poor relation and dependant; that her bills had never been paid; that all those incalculable and mysterious "extras," which are the martyrdom of parents and the delight of schoolmistresses, were a dead letter so far as Diana was concerned. She knew that "poor Di" had been taken home suddenly one day, not in compliance with any behest of her father's, but for the simple reason that her kinswoman's patience had been worn out by the Captain's dishonesty. It is doubtful whether Priscilla Paget had ever communicated these facts in any set phrase, but in a boarding-school such things make themselves known, and the girls had discussed the delinquencies of that dreadful creature, Captain Paget, very freely in the security of their dormitories.

Charlotte knew that her dearest friend was not a person whom it was advantageous to know. She had seen Diana depart ignominiously, and return mysteriously after an absence of some years, very shabby, very poor, very sombre and melancholy, and with no inclination to talk of those years of absence. Miss Halliday had known all this, and had asked no questions. She took the returned wanderer to her heart, and cherished her with an affection which was far beyond the average measure of sisterly love.

"I thought I should never see you again, dear," she cried when she and Diana had retired to a corner of the schoolroom to talk confidentially on the morning of Miss Paget's return; "and I missed you so cruelly. Other girls are very nice and very kind to me. There is a new girl, Miss Spencer—that girl with flaxen hair, standing by the big Canterbury—whom I get on with delightfully; but there is no one in the world like you, Di. And where have you been all this time? With your papa, I suppose."

"Yes," answered Miss Paget gloomily; "I have been with my father. Don't ask me anything about the last three years, Lotta. I have been utterly wretched and miserable, and I can't bear to talk about my misery."

"And you shan't talk of it, darling," cried Charlotte, pursing up her mouth for a kiss in a manner which might have been distraction to a masculine mind of average susceptibility. "You shan't talk of anything or think of anything the least, least, least bit unpleasant; and you shall have my gold pencil-case," added Miss Halliday, wrenching that trinket suddenly from the ribbon by which it hung at her

side. Perhaps there was just the least touch of Georgy's childishness in this impulsive habit of giving away all her small possessions, for which Lotta was distinguished. "Yes, you must, dear," she went on. "Mamma gave it me last half; but I don't want it; I don't like it; in point of fact, I have had it so long that I positively loathe it. And I know it's a poor trumpery thing, though mamma gave two guineas for it; but you know she is always imposed upon in shops. Do, do, do take it, darling, just to oblige me. And now, tell me, dear,—you're going to stop here for ever and ever, now you've come back" asked Charlotte, after having thrust the gold pencil-case into Diana's unwilling hand.

"I don't know about for ever and ever, dear," Miss Paget replied presently; "but I daresay I shall stay here till I'm tired of the place and everybody about it. You won't be here very long, you know, Lotta; for you'll be twenty next birthday, and I suppose you'll be leaving school before you're twenty-one. Most of the girls leave at eighteen or nineteen at latest; and you've been here so long, and are so much farther advanced than others are. I am not going to be a pupil again—that's out of the question; for I'm just twenty-two, as you know. But Priscilla has been good enough to let me stay as a kind of second teacher for the little ones. It will be dull work going through the stupid abridgments of history and geography, and the scrappy bits of botany and conchology, with those incorrigible little ones; but of course I am very grateful to my cousin for giving me a home under any conditions, after papa's dishonourable conduct. If it were not for her, Lotta, I should have no home. What a happy girl you are, to have a respectable man for your father!"

Charlotte's brow darkened a little as her friend said this.

"He is not my own father, you know," she said gravely, "and I should be a great deal happier if mamma and I were alone in the world. We could live in some dear little cottage on wide open downs near the sea, and I could have a linsey habit, and a pony, and ride about all day, and read and play to mamma at night. Of course Mr. Sheldon is very respectable, and I daresay it's very wicked of me; but O, Diana, I think I should like him better if he were not *quite* so respectable. I saw your papa once when he came to call, and I thought him nicer than my stepfather. But then I'm such a frivolous creature, Di, and am always thinking what I ought not to think."

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Nearly a year had passed since Diana's return, and the girl's life had been very monotonous during that time. She had stuck bravely to the abridgments and the juvenile scraps of —ologies, and had been altogether a model of propriety, sewing on such a number of strings and buttons during the period as can only be compassed by the maternal mind. Her existence had been by no means as joyless or desolate as such an existence is generally represented by the writer of fiction. There was plenty of life and bustle in the big prosperous boarding-school, if there was not much variety. There were small scandals and small intrigues; departures and arrivals; wonderful hampers of cake and wine to be divided among the elect of a fashionable dormitory—for there is as wide a difference between the tone and status of the bedrooms in a ladies'-school as between the squares of Berkeley and Bedford. There were breaking-up parties, and the free-and-easy idleness of the holidays, when a few dark-complexioned girls from the colonies, a yellow-haired damsel from the remote north of Scotland, and Miss Diana Paget, were wont to cluster round the fire in the smaller of the schoolrooms to tell ghost-stories or talk scandal in the gloaming.

It was a life which, taken with all its small hardships and petty annoyances, should have been as the life of Paradise compared to that which Diana had led with her father and Mr. Hawkehurst. Whether the girl fully appreciated the change from the Bohemianism of her late existence to the respectability of Hyde Lodge was a question which no one had asked of her. She had fits of despondency now and then, even in the midst of her duties, and was apt to fall into a sombre reverie over one of the abridgments, whereby she was neglectful of her pupils' aspirates, and allowed Henry the Second to be made the poorer by the loss of an H, or Heliogabalus to be described by a name which that individual himself would have failed to recognise.

There were times when, in the midst of that shrill Babel, the schoolroom, Diana Paget heard the summer winds sighing in the pine-woods above Forêtdechêne, and fancied herself standing once more in that classic temple on whose plastered wall Valentine had once cut her initials with his penknife in a fantastical monogram, surmounted by a death's-head and encircled by a serpent. She thought of that familiar companion very often, in spite of her juvenile pupils and the sewing-on of tapes and buttons. He had seemed to her a perpetual enigma and mystery when she was with him; and now that she was far away from him, he was more than ever an inscrutable creature. Was he altogether vile, she wondered, or was there some redeeming virtue in his nature? He had taken trouble to secure her escape from shame and disgrace, and in doing this he surely had performed a good action; but was it not just possible that he had taken this opportunity of getting rid of her because her presence was alike wearisome and inconvenient? She thought very bitterly of her fellow Bohemian when this view of his

conduct presented itself to her; how heartlessly he had shuffled her off,—how cruelly he had sent her out into the hard pitiless world, to find a shelter as best she might!

"What would have become of me if Priscilla had refused to take me in?" she asked herself. "I wonder whether Mr. Hawkehurst ever considered that."

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More than one letter had come to Diana from her old companion since her flight from the little Belgian watering-place. The first letter told her that her father had "tided over *that* business, and was in better feather than before the burst-up at the Hôtel d'Orange." The letter was dated from Paris, but gave no information as to the present arrangements or future plans of the writer and his companion. Another letter, dated from the same place, but not from the same address, came to her six months afterwards, and anon another; and it was such a wonderful thing for Captain Paget to inhabit the same city for twelve months together, that Diana began to cherish faint hopes of some amendment in the scheme of her father's life and of Valentine's, since any improvement in her father's position would involve an improvement in that of his *protégé*.

Miss Paget's regard for her father was by no means an absorbing affection. The Captain had never cared to conceal his indifference for his only child, or pretended to think her anything but a nuisance and an encumbrance—a superfluous piece of luggage more difficult to dispose of than any other luggage, and altogether a stumbling-block in the stony path of a man who has to live by his wits. So perhaps it is scarcely strange that Diana did not think of her absent father with any passionate tenderness or sad yearning love. She thought of him very often; but her thoughts of him were painful and bitter. She thought still more often of his companion; and her thoughts of him were even more bitter.

The experiences of Diana Paget are not the experiences which make a pure or perfect woman. There are trials which chasten the heart and elevate the mind; but it is doubtful whether it can be for the welfare of any helpless, childish creature to be familiar with falsehood and chicanery, with debt and dishonour, from the earliest awakening of the intellect; to feel, from the age of six or seven, all the shame of a creature who is always eating food that will not be paid for, and lying on a bed out of which she may be turned at any moment with shrill reproaches and upbraidings; to hear her father abused and vilified by vulgar gossips over a tea-table, and to be reminded every day and every hour that she is an unprofitable encumbrance, a consumer of the bread of other people's children, an intruder in the household of poverty, a child whose heritage is shame and dishonour. These things had hardened the heart of Captain Paget's daughter. There had been no counteracting influence—no fond, foolish loving creature near at hand to save the girl from that perdition into which the child or woman who has never known what it is to be loved is apt to fall. For thirteen years of Diana's life all love and tenderness, endearing words, caressing touches, fond admiring looks, had been utterly unknown to her. To sit in a room with a father who was busy writing letters, and who was wont to knit his brows peevishly if she stirred, or to mutter an oath if she spoke; to be sent to a pawnbroker's in the gloaming with her father's watch, and to be scolded and sworn at on her return if the money-lender had advanced a less sum than was expected on that security—do not compose the most delightful or improving experiences of a home life. But Diana could remember little of a more pleasant character respecting her existence during those brief periods when she was flung back upon her father's hands, and while that gentleman was casting about for some new victim on whom to plant her.

At Hyde Lodge, for the first time, the girl knew what it was to be loved. Bright, impulsive Charlotte Halliday took a fancy to her, as the schoolgirl phrase goes, and clung to her with a fond confiding affection. It may be that the softening influence came too late, or that there was some touch of natural hardness and bitterness in Diana's mind; for it is certain that Charlotte's affection did not soften the girl's heart or lessen her bitter consciousness of the wide difference between her own fortunes and those of the happier daughters whose fathers paid their debts. The very contrast between Charlotte's position and her own may have counteracted the good influence. It was very easy for Charlotte to be generous and amiable. *She* had never been hounded from pillar to post by shrewish matrons who had no words too bitter for their unprofitable charge. *She* had never known what it was to rise up in the morning uncertain where she should lie down at night, or whether there would be any shelter at all for her hapless head; for who could tell that her father would be found at the lodging where he had last been heard of, and how should she obtain even workhouse hospitality, whose original parish was unknown to herself or her protector? To Charlotte these shameful experiences would have been as incomprehensible as the most abstruse theories of a metaphysician. Was it any wonder, then, if Charlotte was bright and womanly, and fond and tender—Charlotte, who had never been humiliated by the shabbiness of her clothes, and to whom the daily promenade had never been a shame and a degradation by reason of obvious decay in the heels of her boots?

"If your father would dress you decently, and supply you with proper boots, I could almost bring myself to keep you for nothing," Priscilla had said to her reprobate kinsman's daughter; "but the more one does for that man the less he will do himself; so the long and the short of it is, that you will have to go back to him, for I cannot consent to have such an expensive establishment as mine degraded by the shabbiness of a relation."

Diana had been obliged to listen to such speeches as this very often during her first residence at Hyde Lodge, and then, perhaps, within a few minutes after Priscilla's lecture was concluded, Charlotte Halliday would bound into the room, looking as fresh and bright as the morning, and dressed in silk that rustled with newness and richness. Keenly as Diana felt the difference between her friend's fortune and her own, she did nevertheless in some manner return Charlotte's affection. Her character was not to be altered all at once by this new atmosphere of love and tenderness; but she loved her generous friend and companion after her own fitful fashion, and defended her with passionate indignation if any other girl dared to hint the faintest disparagement of her graces or her virtues. She envied and loved her at the same time. She would accept Charlotte's affection one day with unconcealed pleasure, and revolt against it on the next day as a species of patronage which stung her proud heart to the quick.

"Keep your pity for people who ask you for it," she had exclaimed once to poor bewildered Charlotte; "I am tired of being consoled and petted. Go and talk to your prosperous friends, Miss Halliday; I am sick to death of hearing about your new frocks, and your holidays, and the presents your mamma is always bringing you."

And then when Charlotte looked at her friend with a sad perplexed face, Diana relented, and declared that she was a wicked discontented creature, unworthy of either pity or affection.

"I have had so much misery in my life, that I am very often inclined to quarrel with happy people without rhyme or reason, or only because they are happy," she said in explanation of her impatient temper.

"But who knows what happiness may be waiting for you in the future, Di?" exclaimed Miss Halliday. "You will marry some rich man by-and-by, and forget that you ever knew what poverty was."

"I wonder where the rich man is to come from who will marry Captain Paget's daughter?" Diana asked contemptuously. "Never mind where he comes from; he will come, depend upon it. The handsome young prince with the palace by the Lake of Como will come to fall in love with my beautiful Diana, and then she will go and live at Como; and desert her faithful Charlotte, and live happy ever afterwards."

"Don't talk nonsense, Lotta," cried Miss Paget. "You know what kind of fate lies before me as well as I do. I looked at myself this morning, as I was plaiting my hair before the glass—you know how seldom one gets a turn at the glass in the blue room—and I saw a dark, ugly, evil-minded-looking creature, whose face frightened me. I have been getting wicked and ugly ever since I was a child. An aquiline nose and black eyes will not make a woman a beauty; she wants happiness, and hope, and love, and all manner of things that I have never known, before she can be pretty."

"I have seen a beautiful woman sweeping a crossing," said Charlotte doubtfully.

"Yes, but what sort of beauty was it?—a beauty that made you shudder. Don't talk about these things, Charlotte; you only encourage me to be bitter and discontented. I daresay I ought to be very happy, when I remember that I have dinner every day, and shoes and stockings, and a bed to lie down upon at night; and I am happier, now that I work for my living, than I was in the old time, when my cousin was always grumbling about her unpaid bills. But my life is very dreary and empty; and when I look forward to the future, it seems like looking out upon some level plain that leads nowhere, but across which I must tramp on for ever and ever, until I drop down and die."

It was something in this fashion that Miss Paget talked, as she sat in the garden with Charlotte Halliday at the close of the half-year. She was going to lose her faithful friend—the girl who, so much richer, and happier, and more amiable than herself, had yet clung to her so fondly; she was going to lose this tender companion, and she was more sorry for the loss than she cared to express.

"You must come and see us very often," Charlotte said for the hundredth time; "mamma will be so glad to have you, for my sake; and my stepfather never interferes with our arrangements. O, Di, how I wish you would come and live with us altogether! Would you come, if I could manage to arrange it?"

"How could I come? What Quixotic nonsense you talk, Lotta!"

"Not at all, dear; you could come as a sort of companion for me, or a sort of companion for mamma.

What does it matter how you come, if I can only have you? My life will be so dreary in that dreadful new-looking house, unless I have a companion I love. Will you come, Di?—only tell me you will come! I am sure Mr. Sheldon would not refuse, if I asked him to let you live with us. Will you come, dear?—yes or no. You would be glad to come, if you loved me."

"And I do love you, Lotta, with all my heart," answered Miss Paget, with unusual fervour; "but then the whole of my heart is not much. As to coming to live with you, of course it would be a hundred thousand times pleasanter than the life I lead here; but it is not to be supposed that Mr. Sheldon will consent to have a stranger in his house just because his impulsive stepdaughter chooses to take a fancy to a schoolfellow who isn't worthy of half her affection."

"Let me be the judge of that. As to my stepfather, I am almost sure of his consent. You don't know how indulgent he is to me; which shows what a wicked creature I must be not to like him. You shall come to us, Diana, and be my sister; and we will play and sing our pet duets together, and be as happy as two birds in a cage, or a good deal happier—for I never could quite understand the ecstatic delight of perpetual hempseed and an occasional peck at a dirty lump of sugar."

After this there came all the bustle of packing and preparation for departure, and a kind of saturnalia prevailed at Hyde Lodge—a saturnalia which terminated with the breaking-up ball: and who among the crowd of fair young dancers so bright as Charlotte Halliday, dressed in the schoolgirl's festal robes of cloud-like muslin, and with her white throat set off by a black ribbon and a gold locket?

Diana sat in a corner of the schoolroom towards the close of the evening, very weary of her share in the festival, and watched her friend, half in sadness, half in envy.

"Perhaps if I were like her, *he* would love me," she thought.

CHAPTER III.

GEORGE SHELDON'S PROSPECTS.

For George Sheldon the passing years had brought very little improvement of fortune. He occupied his old dingy chambers in Gray's Inn, which had grown more dingy under the hand of Time; and he was wont to sit in his second-floor window on sultry summer Sundays, smoking his solitary cigar, and listening to the cawing of the rooks in the gardens beneath him, mingled with the voices of rebellious children, and shrill mothers threatening to "do for them," or to "flay them alive," in Somebody's Rents below. The lawyer used to be quite meditative on those Sunday afternoons, and would wonder what sort of a fellow Lord Bacon was, and how he contrived to get into a mess about taking bribes, when so many other fellows had done it quietly enough before the Lord of Verulam's day, and even yet more quietly since—agreeably instigated thereto by the casuistry of Escobar.

Mr. Sheldon's prospects were by no means promising. From afar off he beheld his brother's star shining steadily in the commercial firmament; but, except for an occasional dinner, he was very little the better for the stockbroker's existence. He had reminded his brother very often, and very persistently, of that vague promise which the dentist had made in the hour of his adversity—the promise to help his brother if ever he did "drop into a good thing." But as it is difficult to prevent a man who is disposed to shuffle from shuffling out of the closest agreement that was ever made between Jones of the one part, and Smith of the other part, duly signed, and witnessed, and stamped with the sixpenny seal of infallibility, so is it still more difficult to obtain the performance of loosely-worded promises, uttered in the confidential intercourse of kinsmen.

In the first year of his married life Philip Sheldon gave his brother a hundred pounds for the carrying out of some grand scheme which the lawyer was then engaged in, and which, if successful, would secure for him a much larger fortune than Georgy's thousands. Unhappily the grand scheme was a failure; and the hundred pounds being gone, George applied again to his brother, reminding him once more of that promise made in Bloomsbury. But on this occasion Mr. Sheldon plainly told his kinsman that he could do no more for him.

"You must fight your own battle, George," he said, "as I have fought mine."

"Thank you, Philip," said the younger brother; "I would rather fight it any other way."

And then the two men looked at each other, as they were in the habit of doing sometimes, with a singularly intent gaze.

"You're very close-fisted with Tom Halliday's money," George said presently. "If I'd asked poor old Tom himself, I'm sure he wouldn't have refused to lend me two or three hundred."

"Then it's a pity you didn't ask him," Mr. Sheldon answered, with supreme coolness.

"I should have done so fast enough, if I had thought he was going to die so suddenly. It was a bad day for me, and for him too, when he came to Fitzgeorge-street."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mr. Sheldon sharply.

"You can pretty well guess my meaning, I should think," George answered in a sulky tone.

"No, I can't; and what's more, I don't mean to try. I'll tell you what it is, Master George; you've been treating me to a good many hints and innuendoes lately; and you must know very little of me if you don't know that I'm the last kind of man to stand that sort of thing from you, or from any one else. You have tried to take the tone of a man who has some kind of hold upon another. You had better understand at once that such a tone won't answer with me. If you had any hold upon me, or any power over me, you'd be quick enough to use it; and you ought to be aware that I know that, and can see to the bottom of such a shallow little game as yours."

Mr. Sheldon the younger looked at his brother with an expression of surprise that was not entirely unmingled with admiration.

"Well, you *are* a cool hand, Phil!" he said.

Here the conversation ended. The two brothers were very good friends after this, and George presented himself at the gothic villa whenever he received an invitation to dine there. The dinners were good, and the men who ate them were men of solidity and standing in the commercial world; and George was very glad to eat good dinners, and to meet eligible men; but he never again asked his brother for the loan of odd hundreds.

He grubbed on, as best he might, in the dingy Gray's-Inn chambers. He had a little business—business which lay chiefly amongst men who wanted to borrow money, or whose halting footsteps required guidance through the quagmire of the Bankruptcy Court. He just contrived to keep his head above water, and his name in the Law-list, by means of such business; but the great scheme of his life remained as yet unripened, an undeveloped shadow to which he had in vain attempted to give a substance.

The leading idea of George Sheldon's life was the idea that there were great fortunes in the world waiting for claimants; and that a share of some such fortune was to be obtained by any man who had the talent to dig it out of the obscurity in which it was hidden. He was a student of old county histories, and a searcher of old newspapers; and his studies in that line had made him familiar with many strange stories—stories of field-labourers called away from the plough to be told they were the rightful owners of forty thousand a year; stories of old white-haired men starving to death in miserable garrets about Bethnal-green or Spitalfields, who could have claimed lands and riches immeasurable, had they known how to claim them; stories of half-crazy old women, who had wandered about the world with reticules of discoloured papers clamorously asserting their rights and wrongs unheeded and unbelieved, until they encountered sharp-witted lawyers who took up their claims, and carried them triumphantly into the ownership of illimitable wealth.

George Sheldon had read of these things until it had seemed to him that there must be some such chance for any man who would have patience to watch and wait for it. He had taken up several cases, and had fitted link after link together with extreme labour, and had hunted in parish registers until the cold mouldy atmosphere of vestries was as familiar to him as the air of Gray's Inn. But the cases had all broken down at more or less advanced stages; and after infinite patience and trouble, a good deal of money spent upon travelling and small fees to all manner of small people, and an incalculable number of hours wasted in listening to the rambling discourse of parish-clerks and oldest inhabitants, Mr. Sheldon had been compelled to abandon his hopes time after time, until a man with less firmly rooted ideas would have given up the hunting of registers and grubbing up of genealogies as a delusion and a snare.

George Sheldon's ideas were very firmly rooted, and he stuck to them with that dogged persistency which so often achieves great ends, that it seems a kind of genius. He saw his brother's success, and contemplated the grandeurs of the gothic villa in a cynical rather than an envious spirit. How long would it all last? How long would the stockbroker float triumphantly onward upon that wonderful tide

which is constituted by the rise and fall of the money-market?

"That sort of thing is all very well while a man keeps his head cool and clear," thought George; "but somehow or other men always seem to lose their heads on the Stock Exchange before they have done with it, and I daresay my wise brother will drop into a nice mess sooner or later. Setting aside all other considerations, I think I would rather have my chances than his; for I speculate very little more than my time and trouble, and I stand in to win a bigger sum than he will ever get in his line, let stocks rise and fall as they may."

During that summer in which Miss Halliday bade farewell to Hyde Lodge and her school-days, George Sheldon was occupied with the early steps in a search which he hoped would end in the discovery of a prize rich enough to reward him for all his wasted time and labour.

Very early in the previous year there had appeared the following brief notice in the *Observer*:—

"The Rev. John Haygarth, late vicar of Tilford Haven, Kent, died lately, without a will, or relation to claim his property, 100,000 pounds. The Crown therefore claimed it. And last court-day the Prerogative Court of Canterbury decreed letters of Administration to Mr. Paul, the nominee of the Crown."

Some months after this an advertisement had been inserted in the *Times* newspaper to the following effect:—

"NEXT OF KIN.—If the relatives or next of kin of the Rev. John Haygarth, late vicar of Tilford Haven, in the county of Kent, clerk, deceased, who has left property of the value of one hundred thousand pounds, will apply, either personally or by letter, to Stephen Paul, Esq., solicitor for the affairs of Her Majesty's Treasury, at the Treasury Chambers, Whitehall, London, they may hear of something to their advantage. The late Rev. John Haygarth is supposed to have been the son of Matthew Haygarth, late of the parish of St. Judith, Ullerton, and Rebecca his wife, formerly Rebecca Caulfield, spinster, late of the same parish; both long since deceased."

Upon the strength of this advertisement George Sheldon began his search. His theory was that there always existed an heir-at-law somewhere, if people would only have the patience to hunt him or her out; and he attributed his past failures rather to a want of endurance on his own part than to the breaking down of his pet theory.

On this occasion he began his work with more than usual determination.

"This is the biggest chance I've ever had," he said to himself, "and I should be something worse than a fool if I let it slip through my fingers."

The work was very dry and dreary, involving interminable hunting of registers, and questioning of oldest inhabitants. And the oldest inhabitants were so stupid, and the records of the registers so bewildering. One after another Mr. Sheldon set himself to examine the lines of the intestate's kindred and ancestors; his father's only sister, his grandfather's brothers and sisters, and even to the brothers and sisters of his great-grandfather. At that point the Haygarth family melted away into the impenetrable darkness of the past. They were no high and haughty race of soldiers and scholars, churchmen and lawyers, or the tracing of them would have been a much easier matter. Burke would have told of them. There would have been old country houses filled with portraits, and garrulous old housekeepers learned in the traditions of the past. There would have been mouldering tombs and tarnished brasses in quiet country churches, with descriptive epitaphs, and many escutcheons. There would have been crumbling parchments recording the prowess of Sir Reginald, knight, or the learning of Sir Rupert, counsellor and judge. The Haygarths were a race of provincial tradesmen, and had left no better record of their jog-trot journey through this world than the registry of births, marriages, and deaths in obscure churches, or an occasional entry in the fly-leaf of a family Bible.

At present Mr. Sheldon was only at the beginning of his work. The father and grandfather and uncle and great-uncles, the great-grandfather and great-great-uncles, with all their progenies, lay before him in a maze of entanglement which it would be his business to unravel. And as he was obliged to keep his limited legal connection together while he devoted himself to this task, the work promised to extend over months, or indeed years; and in the meanwhile there was always the fear that some one else, as quick-witted and indefatigable as himself, would take up the same tangled skein and succeed in the unravelment of it. Looking this fact full in the face, Mr. Sheldon decided that he must have an able and reliable coadjutor; but to find such a coadjutor, to find a man who would help him, on the chance of success, and not claim too large a share of the prize if success came, was more than the speculative attorney could hope. In the meantime his work progressed very slowly; and he was tormented by perpetual terror of that other sharp practitioner who might be following up the same clue, and whose agents might watch him in and out of parish churches, and listen at street-corners when he was

hunting an oldest inhabitant.

CHAPTER IV.

DIANA FINDS A NEW HOME.

The holidays at Hyde Lodge brought at least repose for Diana Paget. The little ones had gone home, with the exception of two or three young colonists, and even they had perpetual liberty from lessons; so Diana had nothing to do but sit in the shady garden, reading or thinking, in the drowsy summer afternoons. Priscilla Paget had departed with the chief of the teachers for a seaside holiday; other governesses had gone to their homes; and but for the presence of an elderly Frenchwoman, who slept through one half of the day, and wrote letters to her kindred during the other half, Diana would have been the only responsible person in the deserted habitation.

She did not complain of her loneliness, or envy the delights of those who had departed. She was very glad to be quite alone, free to think her own thoughts, free to brood over those unforgotten years in which she had wandered over the face of the earth with her father and Valentine Hawkehurst. The few elder girls remaining at the Lodge thought Miss Paget unsociable because she preferred a lonely corner in the gardens and some battered old book of namby-pamby stories to the delights of their society, and criticised her very severely as they walked listlessly to and fro upon the lawn with big garden-hats, and arms entwined about each other's waists.

Alas for Diana, the battered book was only an excuse for solitude, and for a morbid indulgence in her own sad thoughts! She had lived the life of unblemished respectability for a year, and looking back now at the Bohemian wanderings, she regretted those days of humiliation and misery, and sighed for the rare delights of that disreputable past! Yes, she had revolted against the degraded existence; and now she was sorry for having lost its uncertain pleasures, its fitful glimpses of sunshine. Was that true which Valentine had said, that no man can eat beef and mutton every day of his life; that it is better to be unutterly miserable one day and uproariously happy the next, than to tread one level path of dull content? Miss Paget began to think that there had been some reason in her old comrade's philosophy; for she found the level path very dreary. She let her thoughts wander whither they would in this quiet holiday idleness, and they went back to the years which she had spent with her father. She thought of winter evenings in London when Valentine had taken her the round of the theatres, and they had sat together in stifling upper boxes,—she pleased, he critical, and with so much to say to each other in the pauses of the performance. How kind he had been to her; how good, how brotherly! And then the pleasant walk home, through crowded noisy thoroughfares, and anon by long lines of quiet streets, in which they used to look up at the lighted windows of houses where parties were being given, and sometimes stop to listen to the music and watch the figures of the dancers flitting across the blinds. She thought of the journeys she had travelled with her father and Valentine by land and sea; the lonely moonlight watches on the decks of steamers; the long chill nights in railway-carriages under the feeble glimmer of an oil-lamp, and how she and Valentine had beguiled the tedious hours with wild purposeless talk while Captain Paget slept. She remembered the strange cities which she and her father's *protégé* had looked at side by side; he with a calm listlessness of manner, which might either be real or assumed, but which never varied; she with an inward tremor of excitement and surprise. They had been very happy together, this lonely unprotected girl and the reckless adventurer. If his manner to her had been fitful, it had been sometimes dangerously, fatally kind. She looked back now, and remembered the days which she had spent with him, and knew that all the pleasures possible in a prosperous and successful life could never bring for her such delight as she had known in the midst of her wanderings; though shame and danger lurked at every corner, and poverty, disguised in that tawdry masquerade habit in which the swindler dresses it, accompanied her wherever she went.

She had been happy with him because she had loved him. That close companionship, sisterly and brotherly though it had seemed, had been fatal for the lonely and friendless daughter of Horatio Paget. In her desolation she had clung to the one creature who was kind to her, who did not advertise his disdain for herself and her sex, or openly avow that she was a nuisance and an encumbrance. Every slight put upon her by her father had strengthened the chain that bound her to Valentine Hawkehurst; and as the friendship between them grew closer day by day, until all her thoughts and fancies took their colour from his, it seemed a matter of course that he should love her, and she never doubted his feelings or questioned her own. There had been much in his conduct to justify her belief that she was beloved; so this inexperienced, untutored girl may surely be forgiven if she rested her faith in that

fancied affection, and looked forward to some shadowy future in which she and Valentine would be man and wife, all in all to each other, free from the trammels of Captain Paget's elaborate schemes, and living honestly, somehow or other, by means of literature, or music, or pen-and-ink caricatures, or some of those liberal arts which have always been dear to the children of Bohemia. They would have lodgings in some street near the Thames, and go to a theatre or a concert every evening, and spend long summer days in suburban parks or on suburban commons, he lying on the grass smoking, she talking to him or reading to him, as his fancy might dictate. Before her twentieth birthday, the proudest woman is apt to regard the man she loves as a grand and superior creature; and there had been a certain amount of reverential awe mingled with Diana's regard for Mr. Hawkehurst, scapegrace and adventurer though he was.

Little by little that bright girlish dream had faded away. Fancy's enchanted palace had been shattered into a heap of shapeless ruin by those accidental scraps of hard worldly wisdom with which Valentine had pelted the fairy fabric. He a man to love, or to marry for love! Why, he talked like some hardened world-weary sinner who had done with every human emotion. The girl shuddered as she heard him. She had loved him, and believed in his love. She had fancied a tender meaning in the voice which softened when it spoke to her, a pensive earnestness in the dark eyes which looked at her; but just when the voice had seemed softest and sweetest, the pensive eyes most eloquently earnest, the adventurer's manner had changed all at once, and for ever. He had grown hard, and cold, and indifferent. He had scarcely tried to conceal the fact that the girl's companionship bored and wearied him. He had yawned in her face, and had abandoned himself to moody abstraction when accident obliged him to be alone with her. Miss Paget's pride had been equal to the occasion. Mary Anne Kepp would have dissolved into tears at the first unkind word from the lips of her beloved; but Mary Anne Kepp's daughter, with the blood of the Cromie Pagets in her veins, was quite a different person. She returned Mr. Hawkehurst's indifference with corresponding disregard. If his manner was cold as a bleak autumn, hers was icy as a severe winter; only now and then, when she was very tired of her joyless existence, her untutored womanhood asserted itself, and she betrayed the real state of her feelings—betrayed herself as she had done on her last night at Forêtdechêne, when she and Valentine had looked down at the lighted windows shining dimly through the purple of the summer night. She looked back at the past now in the quiet of the school-garden, and tried to remember how miserable she had been, what agonies of despair she had suffered, how brief had been her delights, how bitter her disappointments. She tried to remember what tortures she had suffered from that wasted passion, that useless devotion. She tried to rejoice in the consciousness of the peace and respectability of her present life; but she could not. That passionate yearning for the past possessed her so strongly. She could remember nothing except that she had been with him. She had seen his face, she had heard his voice; and now how long and weary the time might be before she could again see that one beloved face or hear the dear familiar voice! The brightest hope she had in these midsummer holidays was the hope of a letter from him; and even that might be the prelude of disappointment. She wrestled with herself, and tried to exorcise those ghosts of memory which haunted her by day and wove themselves into her dreams by night; but they were not to be laid at rest. She hated her folly; but her folly was stronger than herself.

For three weeks Diana Paget had no companions but her sorrowful memories—her haunting shadows; but at the end of that time the stagnant mill-pond of her life was suddenly ruffled—the dull course of existence was disturbed by the arrival of two letters. She found them lying by her plate upon the breakfast-table one bright July morning; and while she was yet far away from the table she could see that one of the envelopes bore a foreign stamp, and was directed by the hand of Valentine Hawkehurst. She seated herself at the table in a delicious flutter of emotion, and tore open that foreign envelope, while the French governess poured out the tea, and while the little group of schoolgirls nudged one another and watched her eager face with insolent curiosity.

The first letter contained only a few lines.

"MY DEAR DIANA," wrote the young man, "your father has decided on returning to London, where I believe he really intends to make a respectable start, if he can only get the opening and the help he wants. I know you will be glad to hear this. I don't exactly say where we shall take up our quarters; but the Captain will of course come to see you; and if I can chasten my outward semblance sufficiently to venture within the sacred precincts of a lady's school, I shall come with him. Direct to the old address, if you write before the end of the month, and believe me, as always, your friend." "VALENTINE."

The second letter was in Charlotte Halliday's big bold hand, and was frank, impetuous, and loving as the girl herself.

"MY OWN DEAREST DI,—It is all arranged," wrote Miss Halliday, dashing at once into the heart of the subject. "I talked mamma over the very first day after my return, and then there was nothing more to be done than to talk over Mr. Sheldon. Of course there was just a little difficulty in that, for he is so awfully practical; and he wanted to know why I wanted a companion, and what *use* you would be in the

house; as if the very last thing one required in a companion was companionship. I'm almost afraid to tell you the iniquitous fables I invented about your extreme usefulness; your genius for millinery, and the mints of money you would save by making up mamma's flimsy little caps; your taste for dress-making, &c. &c. &c. You *are* the cleverest creature in the world, you know, Di; for you must remember how you altered that green silk dress for me when Miss Person had made me a square-shouldered fright. So, after a great deal of humming, and haing, and argufication—*is* there such a word as 'argufication,' I wonder?—my stepfather said that if my heart was set upon having you, and if I thought you would be useful, you might come to us; but that he could not afford to give you any salary, and that if you wanted a new dress now and then, I must buy it for you out of my own allowance; and I will, darling, if you will only come and be my friend and sister. My life is dreadfully dull without you. I walk up and down the stiff little gravel paths, and stare at the geraniums and calceolarias. Mariana might have been dreary in her moated grange; but I daresay the Lincolnshire flowers grew wild and free, and she was spared the abomination of gaudy little patches of red and yellow, and waving ribbons of blue and white, which constitute the glory of modern gardening. Do come to me, dear. I have no one to talk to, and nothing to do. Mamma is a dear good affectionate soul; but she and I don't understand each other. I don't care for her twittering little birds, and she doesn't care for my whims and fancies. I have read novels until I am tired. I am not allowed to go out by myself, and mamma can scarcely walk to Kensington-gardens without sinking under the exertion. We drive out sometimes; but I am sick to death of crawling slowly up and down by the Serpentine staring at people's bonnets. I might enjoy it, perhaps, if I had you with me to make fun out of some of the bonnets. The house is very comfortable; but it always seems to me unpleasantly like some philanthropic institution in miniature. I long to scratch the walls, or break the windows; and I begin to understand the feelings of those unhappy paupers who tear up their clothes: they get utterly tired of their stagnation, you see, and must do something wicked and rebellious rather than do nothing at all. You will take pity upon my forlorn state, won't you, Di? I shall come to Hyde Lodge to-morrow afternoon with mamma, to hear your ulti—what's its name?—and in the meanwhile, and for ever afterwards, believe me to be your devoted and unchanging LOTTA."

Diana Paget's eyes grew dim as she read this letter.

"I love her very dearly," she thought, "but not one hundred-fold as much as I ought to love her."

And then she went back to Mr. Hawkehurst's epistle, and read and re-read its half-dozen lines, wondering when he would come to London, and whether she would see him when he came. To see him again! The thought of that possibility seemed like a spot of vivid light, which dazzled her eyes and made them blind to anything around or beyond it. As for this offer of a strange home in the household of Mr. Sheldon, it seemed to her a matter of so very little importance where she went or what became of her, that she was quite willing to let other people decide her existence. Anything would be better than the monotony of Hyde Lodge. If Valentine Hawkehurst came to see her at Mr. Sheldon's house, he would be permitted to see her alone, most likely, and it would be something like the old times; whereas at the Lodge Priscilla Paget or one of the governesses would undoubtedly be present at any interview between Diana and her old friend, and the real Valentine would be hidden under the semblance of a respectable young man, with very little to say for himself. Perhaps this one thought exercised considerable influence over Miss Paget's decision. She wanted so much to see Valentine alone, to know whether he had changed, to see his face at the first moment of meeting, and to discover, if possible, the solution of that enigma which was the grand mystery of her life—that one perpetual question which was always repeating itself in her brain—whether he was altogether cold and indifferent, or if there was not some hidden warmth, some secret tenderness beneath that repelling outward seeming.

In the afternoon Miss Halliday called with Mrs. Sheldon, and there was a long discussion about Diana Paget's future life. Georgy abandoned herself as unhesitatingly to the influence of her daughter as she did to that of her husband, and had been brought to think that it would be the most delightful thing in the world to have Miss Paget for a useful companion.

"And will you really make my caps, dear?" she said, when she had grown at her ease with Diana. "Miss Terly in the Bayswater-road charges me so much for the simplest little lace head-dress; and though Mr. Sheldon is very good about those sort of things, I know he sometimes thinks my bills rather high."

Diana was very indifferent about her future, and the heart must have been very hard which could have resisted Charlotte's tender pleading; so it was ultimately decided that Miss Paget should write to her kinswoman to describe the offer that had been made to her of a new home, and to inquire if her services could be conveniently dispensed with at Hyde Lodge. After which decision Charlotte embraced her friend with enthusiasm, and departed, bearing off Mrs. Sheldon to the carriage which awaited them at the gates of Priscilla Paget's umbrageous domain.

Diana sighed as she went back to the empty schoolroom. Even Charlotte's affection could not

altogether take the sting out of dependence. To go into a strange house amongst strange people, and to hold a place in it only on the condition of being perpetually useful and unfailingly good-tempered and agreeable, is scarcely the pleasantest prospect which this world can offer to a proud and beautiful woman. Diana remembered her bright vision of Bohemianism in a lodging near the Strand. It would be very delightful to ride on sufferance in Mrs. Sheldon's carriage, no doubt; but O, how much pleasanter it would have been to sit by Valentine Hawkehurst in a hansom cab spinning along the road to Greenwich or Richmond!

She had promised to despatch her letter to Priscilla by that afternoon's post, and she kept her promise. The reply came by return of post, and was very kind. Priscilla advised her by all means to accept Miss Halliday's offer, which would give her a much better position than that which she occupied at Hyde Lodge. She would have time to improve herself, no doubt, Priscilla said, and might be able to hope for something still better in the course of two or three years; "for you must look the world straight in the face, Diana," wrote the schoolmistress, "as I did before I was your age; and make up your mind to rely upon your own exertions, since you know what your father is, and how little you have to hope for from him. As you are to have no salary with the Sheldons, and will no doubt be expected to make a good appearance, I shall do what I can to help you with your wardrobe."

This letter decided the fate of Captain Paget's daughter. A week after Miss Halliday's visit to Hyde Lodge a hack cab carried Diana and all her earthly possessions to the Lawn, where Charlotte received her with open arms, and where she was inducted into a neatly furnished bedchamber adjoining that of her friend. Mr. Sheldon scrutinised her keenly from under the shadow of his thick black brows when he came home to dinner. He treated her with a stiff kind of politeness during the orderly progress of the meal; and once, when he looked at her, he was surprised to find that she was contemplating him with an expression of mingled wonder and reverence.

He was the first eminently respectable man whom Miss Paget had ever encountered in familiar intercourse, and she was regarding him attentively, as an individual with scientific tastes might regard some natural curiosity.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE LAWN.

Life at the Lawn went by very smoothly for Mr. Sheldon's family. Georgy was very happy in the society of a companion who seemed really to have a natural taste for the manufacture of pretty little head-dresses from the merest fragments of material in the way of lace and ribbon. Diana had all that versatile cleverness and capacity for expedients which is likely to be acquired in a wandering and troubled life. She had learned more in her three years of discomfort with her father than in all the undeviating course of the Hyde-Lodge studies; she had improved her French at one *table d'hôte*, her German at another; she had caught some new trick of style in every concert-room, some fresh combination of costume on every racecourse; and, being really grateful for Charlotte's disinterested affection, she brought all her accomplishments to bear to please her friend and her friend's household.

In this she succeeded admirably. Mrs. Sheldon found her daughter's society much more delightful now that the whole pressure of Charlotte's intellect and vitality no longer fell entirely upon herself. She liked to sit lazily in her arm-chair while the two girls chattered at their work, and she could venture an occasional remark, and fancy that she had a full share in the conversation. When the summer weather rendered walking a martyrdom and driving an affliction, she could recline on her favourite sofa reading a novel, soothed by the feeble twittering of her birds; while Charlotte and Diana went out together, protected by the smart boy in buttons, who was not altogether without human failings, and was apt to linger behind his fair charges, reading the boards before the doors of newsvendors' shops, or looking at the cartoons in *Punch* exhibited in the stationers' windows.

Mr. Sheldon made a point of pleasing his stepdaughter whenever it was possible for him to do so without palpable inconvenience to himself; and as she was to be gratified by so small a pecuniary sacrifice as the trifling increase of tradesmen's bills caused by Miss Paget's residence in the gothic villa, he was the last man in the world to refuse her that indulgence. His own pursuits were of so absorbing a nature as to leave little leisure for concern about other people's business. He asked no questions about his stepdaughter's companion; but he was not the less surprised to see this beautiful high-bred woman content to sit at his board as an unsalaried dependent.

"Your friend Miss Paget looks like a countess," he said one day to Charlotte. "I thought girls generally pitched upon some plain homely young woman for their pet companion, but you seem to have chosen the handsomest girl in the school."

"Yes, she is very handsome, is she not? I wish some of your rich City men would marry her, papa."

Miss Halliday consented to call her mother's husband "papa," though the caressing name seemed in a manner to stick in her throat. She had loved that blustrous good-tempered Tom Halliday so very dearly, and it was only to please poor Georgy that she brought herself to address any other man by the name that had been his.

"My City men have something better to do than to marry a young woman without a sixpence," answered Mr. Sheldon. "Why don't you try to catch one of them for yourself?"

"I don't like City men," said Charlotte quickly; and then she blushed, and added apologetically, "at least not the generality of City men, papa."

Diana had waited until her destiny was settled before answering Valentine Hawkehurst's letter; but she wrote to him directly she was established at the Lawn, and told him the change in her plans.

"I think papa had better let me come to see him at his lodgings," she said, "wherever they may be; for I should scarcely care about Mr. Sheldon seeing him. No one here knows anything definite about my history; and as it is just possible Mr. Sheldon may have encountered my father somehow or other, it would be as well for him to keep clear of this house. I could not venture to say this to papa myself, but perhaps you could suggest it without offending him. You see I have grown very worldly-wise, and am learning to protect my own interests in the spirit which you have so instilled into me. I don't know whether that sort of spirit is likely to secure one's happiness, but I have no doubt it is the wisest and best for this world."

Miss Paget could not refrain from an occasional sneer when she wrote to her old companion. He never returned her sneers, or noticed them. His letters were always frank, friendly, and brotherly in tone.

"Neither my good opinion nor my bad opinion is of any consequence to him," Diana thought bitterly. It was late in August when Captain Paget and his *protégé* came to town. Valentine suggested the wisdom of leaving Diana in her new home uncompromised by any past associations. But this was a suggestion which Horatio Paget could not accept. His brightest successes in the way of scheming had been matured out of chance acquaintanceships with eligible men. A man who could afford such a luxury as a companion for his daughter must needs be eligible, and the Captain was not inclined to sacrifice his acquaintance from any extreme delicacy.

"My daughter seems to have made new friends for herself, and I should like to see what kind of people they are," he said conclusively. "We'll look them up this evening, Val."

Mr. George Sheldon dined at the Lawn on the day on which Horatio Paget determined on "looking up" his daughter's new friends, and he and the two girls were strolling in the garden when the Captain and Mr. Hawkehurst were announced. They had been told that Miss Paget was in the garden.

"Be good enough to take me straight to her," said the Captain to the boy in buttons; "I am her father."

Horatio Paget was too old a tactician not to know that by an unceremonious plunge into the family circle he was more likely to secure an easy footing in the household than by any direct approach of the master. He had seen the little group in the garden, and had mistaken George for the head of the house.

Diana turned from pale to red, and from red to pale again, as she recognised the two men. There had been no announcement of their coming. She did not even know that they were in England.

"Papa!" she cried, and then held out her hand and greeted him; coldly enough, as it seemed to Charlotte, who fancied that any kind of *real* father must be very dear.

But Captain Paget was not to be satisfied by that cold greeting. It suited his purpose to be especially paternal on this occasion. He drew his daughter to his breast, and embraced her affectionately, very much to that young lady's surprise.

Then, having abandoned himself entirely for the moment to this tender impulse of paternity, he suddenly put his daughter aside, as if he had all at once remembered his duty to society, drew himself up stiffly, and saluted Miss Halliday and George Sheldon with uncovered head.

"Mr. Sheldon, I believe?" he murmured.

"George Sheldon," answered that gentleman; "my brother Philip is in the drawing-room yonder, looking at us."

Philip Sheldon came out into the garden as George said this, It was one of those sultry evenings on which the most delightful of gothic villas is apt to be too stifling for endurance; and in most of the prim suburban gardens there were people lounging listlessly among the flower-beds. Mr. Sheldon came to look at this patrician stranger who had just embraced his daughter's companion; whereupon Captain Paget introduced himself and his friend Mr. Hawkehurst. After the introduction Mr. Sheldon and the Captain fell into an easy conversation, while the two girls walked slowly along the gravel pathway with Valentine by their side, and while George loitered drearily along, chewing the stalk of a geranium, and pondering the obscure reminiscences of the last oldest inhabitant whose shadowy memories he had evoked in his search after new links in the chain of the Haygarths.

The two girls walked in the familiar schoolgirl fashion of Hyde Lodge, Charlotte's arm encircling the waist of her friend. They were both dressed in white muslin, and looked very shadowy and sylph-like in the summer dusk. Mr. Hawkehurst found himself in a new atmosphere in this suburban garden, with these two white-robed damsels by his side; for it seemed to him that Diana with Charlotte's arm round her waist, and a certain shy gentleness of manner which was new to him, was quite a different person from that Miss Paget whose wan face had looked at him so anxiously in the saloons of the Belgian Kursaal.

At first there was considerable restraint in the tone of the conversation, and some little of that unnecessary discussion as to whether this evening was warmer than the preceding evening, or whether it was not, indeed, the warmest evening of all that summer. And then, when the ice was broken, Mr. Hawkehurst began to talk at his ease about Paris, which city Miss Halliday had never seen; about the last book, the last play, the last folly, the last fashionable bonnet; for it was one of the special attributes of this young Robert Macaire to be able to talk about anything, and to adapt himself to any society. Charlotte opened her eyes to their widest extent as she listened to this animated stranger. She had been so wearied by the dry as dust arguments of City men who had discussed the schemes of great contractors, "which will never be carried out, sir, while money is at its present rate, mark my words,"—or the chances of a company "which is eaten up by debenture-bonds and preference-shares, sir, and will never pay its original proprietors one sixpence of interest on their capital," with a great deal more of the same character; and it was quite new to her to hear about novels, theatres, and bonnets from masculine lips, and to find that there were men living who could interest themselves in such frivolities. Charlotte was delighted with Diana's friend. It was she who encouraged Valentine every now and then by some exclamation of surprise or expression of interest, while Miss Paget herself was thoughtful and silent.

It was not thus that she had hoped to meet Valentine Hawkehurst. She stole a look at him now and then as he walked by her side. Yes, it was the old face—the face which would have been so handsome if there had been warmth and life in it, instead of that cold listlessness which repelled all sympathy, and seemed to constitute a kind of mask behind which the real man hid himself.

Diana looked at him, and remembered her parting from him in the chill gray morning on the platform at Forêtdechêne. He had let her go out alone into the dreary world to encounter what fate she might, without any more appearance of anxiety than he might have exhibited had she been starting for a summer-day's holiday; and now, after a year of separation, he met her with the same air of unconcern, and could discourse conventional small talk to another woman while she walked by his side.

While Mr. Hawkehurst was talking to Mr. Sheldon's stepdaughter, Captain Paget had contrived to make himself very agreeable to that gentleman himself. Lord Lytton has said that "there is something strange and almost mesmerical in the *rapport* between two evil natures. Bring two honest men together, and it is ten to one if they recognise each other as honest; differences in temper, manner, even politics, may make each misjudge the other. But bring together two men unprincipled and perverted—men who, if born in a cellar, would have been food for the hulks or gallows—and they understand each other by instant sympathy." However this might be with these two men, they had speedily become upon very easy terms with each other. Mr. Sheldon's plans for the making of money were very complicated in their nature, and he had frequent need of clever instruments to assist in the carrying out of his arrangements. Horatio Paget was the exact type of man most likely to be useful to such a speculator as Philip Sheldon. He was the very ideal of the "Promoter," the well-dressed, well-mannered gentleman, beneath whose magic wand new companies arise as if by magic; the man who, without a sixpence in his own pocket, can set a small Pactolus flowing from the pockets of other people; the man who, content himself to live in a humble second floor at Chelsea, can point to gigantic hotels which are as the palaces of a new Brobdignag, and say, "Lo, these arose at my bidding!" Mr. Sheldon was always on the alert to discover anything or anybody likely to serve his own interest, either in the present or the future; and he came to the conclusion that Miss Paget's father was a person upon whom

an occasional dinner might not be altogether thrown away.

"Take a chop with us to-morrow at six," he said, on parting from the Captain, "and then you can hear the two girls play and sing. They play remarkably well, I believe, from what other people tell me; but I am not a musical man myself."

Horatio Paget accepted the invitation as cordially as it was given. It is astonishing how genial and friendly these men of the world can be at the slightest imaginable notice. One can fancy the striped tigers of Bengal shaking paws in the jungle, the vultures hob-nobbing in a mountain cleft over the torn carcass of a stag, the kites putting their beaks together after dining on a nest of innocent doves.

"Then we shall expect to see you at sharp six," said Mr. Sheldon, "and your friend Mr. Hawkehurst with you, of course."

After this the two gentlemen departed. Valentine shook hands with Diana, and took a more ceremonious leave of Charlotte. George Sheldon threw away his chewed geranium-stalk in order to bid good evening to the visitors; and the little party walked to the garden-gate together.

"That Sheldon seems a very clever fellow," said Captain Paget, as he and Valentine walked towards the Park, which they had to cross on their way to Chelsea, where the Captain had secured a convenient lodging. "I wonder whether he is any relation to the Sheldon who is in with a low set of money-lenders?"

"What, the Sheldon of Gray's Inn?" exclaimed Mr. Hawkehurst. "We can easily find that out."

* * * * *

Horatio Paget and Valentine Hawkehurst were frequent visitors at the Lawn after that first evening. Mr. Sheldon found the Captain useful to him in the carrying out of certain business arrangements on more than one occasion, and the relations between the respectable stockbroker and the disreputable adventurer assumed a very friendly character. Diana wondered to see so spotless a citizen as Philip Sheldon hand-and-glove with her father. Mrs. Sheldon and Charlotte were delighted with the Captain and his *protégé*; these two penniless Bohemians were so much more agreeable to the feminine mind than the City men who were wont to sit in the dining-room slowly imbibing Mr. Sheldon's old port in the long summer evenings, while their wives endured the abomination of desolation with Georgy and Charlotte in the drawing-room. Captain Paget paid Mrs. Sheldon flowery compliments, and told her delightful stories of the aristocracy and all that shining West-end world with which he had once been familiar. Poor simple Georgy regarded him with that reverential awe which a middle-class country-bred woman is prone to feel for a man who bears upon him that ineffaceable stamp of high birth and good breeding, not to be destroyed by half a century of degradation. Nor could Charlotte withhold her admiration from the man whose tone was so infinitely superior to that of all the other men she had encountered. In his darkest hour Captain Paget had found his best friends, or his easiest dupes, among women. It had gone hard with him when his dear friend had withheld the temporary accommodation of a five-pound note; but it had been much harder when his friend's wife had refused the loan of "a little silver."

Valentine Hawkehurst came very often to the Lawn, sometimes with his friend and patron, sometimes alone. He brought the young ladies small offerings in the way of a popular French novel adapted for feminine perusal, or an occasional box for some theatre which had fallen upon evil days, and was liberal in the circulation of "paper." He met the two girls sometimes in their morning walks in Kensington-gardens, and walked with them in the leafy avenues, and only left them at the gate by which they departed. So much of his life was a listless waiting for the arising of new chances, that he had ample time to waste in feminine society, and he seemed very well inclined to loiter away the leisure hours of existence in the companionship of Diana and her friend.

And was Miss Paget glad of his coming, and pleased to be in his company? Alas, no! The time had been, and only within a few months, when she had sickened for the sight of his familiar face, and fancied that the most exquisite happiness life could afford her would be to see him once more, anywhere, under any circumstances. She saw him now almost daily, and she was miserable. She saw him; but another woman had come between her and the man she loved: and now, if his voice took a softer tone, or if his eyes assumed a tender earnestness of expression, it might be Charlotte's influence which wrought the transformation. Who could say that it was not on Charlotte's account he came so often, and lingered so long? Diana looked at him sometimes with haggard angry eyes, which saw that it was Miss Halliday who absorbed his attention. It was Charlotte—Charlotte, who was so bright and happy a creature that the coldest heart must needs have been moved and melted by her fascination. What was the cold patrician beauty of Miss Paget's face when compared with the changeful charm of this radiant girl, with the flashing gray eyes and piquant features, and all those artless caprices of

manner which made her arch loveliness irresistible? Diana's heart grew sick and cold as she watched these two day by day, and saw the innocent school-girl's ascendancy over the adventurer. The attributes which made Charlotte charming were just those very attributes which Valentine Hawkehurst had been least accustomed to discover in the womankind he had hitherto encountered. He had seen beautiful women, elegant and fascinating women, without number; but this frank girlish nature, this happy childlike disposition, was entirely new to him. How should he have met bright childlike creatures in the pathways which he had trodden? For the first time in his life a fresh young heart revealed its treasures of purity and tenderness before his world-weary eyes, and his own heart was melted by the new influence. He had admired Diana; he had been touched by her girlish fancy for him, and had loved her as well as he had believed himself capable of loving any woman. But when Prudence and Honour counselled him to stifle and crush his growing affection for the beautiful companion of his wanderings, the struggle had involved no agony of regret or despair. He had told himself that no good could ever come of his love for Captain Paget's daughter, and he had put aside that love before it had taken any vital root in his heart. He had been very strong and resolute in this matter—resisting looks of sad surprise which would have melted a softer nature. And he had been proud of his own firmness. "Better for her, and better for me," he had said to himself: "let her outlive her foolish schoolgirl fancies, and wait patiently till her beauty wins her a rich husband. As for me, I must marry some prosperous tradesman's widow, if I ever marry at all."

The influence of the world in which his life had been spent had degraded Valentine Hawkehurst, and had done much to harden him; and yet he was not altogether hard. He discovered his own weakness very soon after the beginning of his acquaintance with Mr. Sheldon's stepdaughter. He knew very well that if he had been no fitting lover for Diana Paget, he was still less a fitting lover for Charlotte Halliday. He knew that although it might suit Mr. Sheldon's purpose to make use of the Captain and himself as handy instruments for the accomplishment of somewhat dirty work, he would be the very last man to accept one of those useful instruments as a husband for his stepdaughter. He knew all this; and knew that, apart from all worldly considerations, there was an impassable gulf between himself and Charlotte. What could there be in common between the unprincipled companion of Horatio Paget and this innocent girl, whose darkest sin had been a neglected lesson or an ill-written exercise? If he could have given her a home and a position, an untarnished name and respectable associations, he would even yet have been unworthy of her affection, unable to assure her happiness.

"I am a scoundrel and an adventurer," he said to himself, in his most contemptuous spirit. "If some benevolent fairy were to give me the brightest home that was ever created for man, and Charlotte for my wife, I daresay I should grow tired of my happiness in a week or two, and go out some night to look for a place where I could play billiards and drink beer. Is there any woman upon this earth who could render my existence supportable *without* billiards and beer?"

Knowing himself much better than the Grecian philosopher seemed to think it possible for human nature to know itself, Mr. Hawkehurst decided that it was his bounden duty, both for his own sake and that of the young lady in question, to keep clear of the house in which Miss Halliday lived, and the avenue in which she was wont to walk. He told himself this a dozen times a day, and yet he made his appearance at the Lawn whenever he had the poorest shadow of an excuse for going there; and it seemed as if the whole business of his life lay at the two ends of Charlotte's favourite avenue, so often did he find himself called upon to perambulate that especial thoroughfare. He knew that he was weak and foolish and dishonourable; he knew that he was sowing the dragon's teeth from which were to spring up armed demons that would rend and tear him. But Charlotte's eyes were unspeakably bright and bewitching, and Charlotte's voice was very sweet and tender. A thrilling consciousness that he was not altogether an indifferent person in Charlotte's consideration had possessed him of late when he found himself in that young lady's society, and a happiness which had hitherto been strange to him gave a new zest to his purposeless life.

He still affected the old indifference of manner, the idle listless tone of a being who has finished with all the joys and sorrows, affections and aspirations, of the world in which he lives. But the pretence had of late become a very shallow one. In Charlotte's presence he was eager and interested in spite of himself—childishly eager about the veriest trifles which interested her. Love had taken up the glass of Time; and the days and hours were reckoned by a new standard; everything in the world had suffered some wondrous change, which Valentine Hawkehurst tried in vain to understand. The very earth upon which he walked had undergone some mystic process of transformation; the very streets of London were new to him. He had known Kensington-gardens from his boyhood; but not those enchanted avenues of beech and elm in which he walked with Charlotte. In the plainest and most commonplace phraseology, Mr. Hawkehurst had fallen in love. This penniless adventurer, who at eight-and-twenty years of age was steeped to the lips in the worst experiences of a very indifferent world, found himself all at once hanging upon the words and living upon the looks of an ignorant schoolgirl.

The discovery that he was capable of this tender weakness had an almost overwhelming effect upon

Mr. Hawkehurst. He was ashamed of this touch of humanity, this foolish affection which had awakened all that was purest and best in a nature that had been so long abandoned to degrading influences. For some time he fought resolutely against that which he considered his folly; but the training which had made him the master of many a perplexing position had not given him the mastery over his own inclinations; and when he found that Charlotte's society had become the grand necessity of his life, he abandoned himself to his fate without further resistance. He let himself drift with the tide that was so much stronger than himself; and if there were breakers ahead, or fatal rocks lurking invisible beneath the blue waters, he must take his chance. His frail bark must go to pieces when her time came. In the meanwhile it was so delicious to float upon the summer sea, that a man could afford to forget future possibilities in the way of rocks and quicksands.

Miss Paget had known very few pleasures in the course of her uncared-for youth; but she hitherto had experienced no such anguish as that which she had now to endure in her daily intercourse with Valentine and Charlotte. She underwent her martyrdom bravely, and no prying eye discovered the sufferings which her proud nature supported in silence. "Who takes any heed of my feelings, or cares whether I am glad or sorry?" she thought; "*he* does not."

CHAPTER VI.

THE COMPACT OF GRAY'S INN.

The sand which ran so swiftly in the glass which that bright young urchin Love had wrested from the hand of grim old Time ran with an almost equal swiftness in the hour-glasses of lodging-house keepers and tradespeople, and the necessities of every day demanded perpetual exertion on the part of Mr. Hawkehurst, let Charlotte's eyes be never so bright, and Charlotte's society never so dear. For Captain Paget and his *protégé* there was no such thing as rest; and the ingenious Captain took care that the greater part of the labour should be performed by Valentine, while the lion's share of the spoil was pounced upon by the ready paw of the noble Horatio. Just now he found his pupil unusually plastic, unusually careless of his own interests, and ready to serve his master with agreeable blindness. Since that awkward little affair at Forêtdechêne, that tiresome entanglement about a King of Spades which had put in an appearance at a moment when no such monarch was to be expected, Captain Paget had obtained the means of existence in a manner which was almost respectable, if not altogether honest; for it is not to be supposed that honesty and respectability are by any means synonymous terms. It was only by the exercise of superhuman address that the Captain had extricated himself from that perplexing predicament at the Belgian watering-place; and it may be that the unpleasant experiences of that particular evening were not without a salutary effect upon the adventurer's future plans.

"It was touch-and-go work, Val," he said to his companion; "and if I hadn't carried matters with a high hand, and sprung my position as an officer in the English service upon those French ruffians, I don't know where it would have ended."

"It might have come to a metallic ornamentation of the ankle, and some amiable 444, who has murdered his grandmother with a red-hot poker and extenuating circumstances, for your companion," murmured Valentine. "I wouldn't try it on with that supererogatory king again on this side of the Channel, if I were you."

The Captain bestowed a freezing look on his flippant *protégé* and then commenced a very grave discussion of future ways and means, which ended in an immediate departure for Paris, where the two men entered upon an unpretentious career in the commercial line as agents and travellers for the patentees of an improved kind of gutta percha, which material was supposed to be applicable to every imaginable purpose, from the sole of an infant's boot to the roof of a cathedral. There are times when genius must stoop to pick up its daily pittance; and for twelve months the elegant Horatio Paget was content to devote his best energies to the perpetual praise of the Incorrodible and Indestructible and Incombustible India-rubber, in consideration of a very modest percentage on his commercial transactions in that material. To exert the persuasive eloquence of a Burke or a Thurlow in order to induce a man to roof his new warehouses with a fabric which you are aware will be torn into ribbons by the first run of stormy weather, for the sake of obtaining two-and-a-half per cent on his investment, may not be in accordance with the honourable notions of a Bayard, and yet in a commercial sense may be strictly correct. It was only when Captain Paget had made a comfortable little purse out of his percentage upon the Incorrodible and Incombustible that he discovered the extreme degradation of his

position as agent and traveller. He determined on returning to the land of his birth. Joint-stock companies were beginning to multiply in the commercial world at this period; and wherever there are many schemes for the investment of public capital there is room for such a man as Horatio Paget—a man who, with the aid of a hired brougham, can inspire confidence in the breast of the least daring speculator.

The Captain came, accompanied as usual by that plastic tool and subaltern, Valentine Hawkehurst, who, being afflicted with a chronic weariness of everything in life, was always eager to abandon any present pursuit in favour of the vaguest contingency, and to shake off the dust of any given locality from his vagabond feet. Captain Paget and his *protégé* came to London, where a fortunate combination of circumstances threw them in the way of Mr. Sheldon.

The alliance which arose between that gentleman and the Captain opened a fair prospect for the latter. Mr. Sheldon was interested in the formation of a certain joint-stock company, but had his own reasons for not wishing to be identified with it. A stalking-horse is by no means a difficult kind of animal to procure in the cattle-fairs of London; but a stalking-horse whose paces are sufficiently showy and imposing—a high-stepper, of thoroughbred appearance, and a mouth sensitively alive to the lightest touch of the curb, easy to ride or drive, warranted neither a kicker nor a bolter—is a quadruped of rare excellence, not to be met with every day. Just such a stalking-horse was Captain Paget; and Mr. Sheldon lost no time in putting him into action. It is scarcely necessary to say that the stockbroker trusted his new acquaintance only so far as it was absolutely necessary to trust him; or that the Captain and the stockbroker thoroughly understood each other without affecting to do so. For Horatio Paget the sun of prosperity arose in unaccustomed splendour. He was able to pay for his lodgings, and was an eminently respectable person in the eyes of his landlord. He enjoyed the daily use of a neatly-appointed brougham, in which only the most practised eye could discover the taint of the livery stable. He dined sumptuously at fashionable restaurants, and wore the freshest of lavender gloves, the most delicate of waxen heath-blossoms or creamy-tinted exotics in the button-hole of his faultless coat.

While the chief flourished, the subaltern was comparatively idle. The patrician appearance and manners of the Captain were a perennial source of profit to that gentleman; but Valentine Hawkehurst had not a patrician appearance; and the work which Mr. Sheldon found for him was of a more uncertain and less profitable character than that which fell to the share of the elegant Horatio. But Valentine was content. He shared the Captain's lodging, though he did not partake of the Captain's dinners or ride in the smart little brougham. He had a roof to shelter him, and was rarely unprovided with the price of some kind of dinner; and as this was the highest order of prosperity he had ever known, he was content. He was more than content; for the first time in his existence he knew what it was to be happy. A purer joy than life had ever held for him until now made him careless whether his dinner cost eighteenpence or eighteen shillings; whether he rode in the most perfect of broughams or walked in the mud. He took no heed for the future; he forgot the past, and abandoned himself heart and soul to the new delights of the present.

Never had Philip Sheldon found so willing a tool, so cheap a drudge. Valentine was ready to do anything or everything for Charlotte's stepfather, since his relations with that gentleman enabled him to spend so much of his life with Charlotte.

But even in this sublimated state of mind Mr. Hawkehurst was not exempt from the great necessity of Mr. Skimpole and humanity at large. He wanted pounds. His garments were shabby, and he desired new and elegant raiment in which to appear to advantage before the eyes of the woman he loved. It had been his privilege on several occasions to escort Mrs. Sheldon and the two younger ladies to a theatre; and even this privilege had cost him money. He wanted pounds to expend upon those new books and music which served so often as the excuse for a visit to the Lawn. He wanted pounds for very trivial purposes; but he wanted them desperately. A lover without pounds is the most helpless and contemptible of mankind; he is a knight-errant without his armour, a troubadour without his lute.

In his dilemma Mr. Hawkehurst resorted to that simple method which civilisation has devised for the relief of pecuniary difficulties of a temporary nature. He had met George Sheldon several times at the Lawn, and had become tolerably intimate with that gentleman, whom he now knew to be "the Sheldon of Gray's Inn," and the ally and agent of certain bill-discounters. To George he went one morning; and after requesting that Captain Paget should know nothing of his application, explained his requirements. It was a very small sum which he asked for, modestly conscious that the security he had to offer was of the weakest. He only wanted thirty pounds, and was willing to give a bill at two months for five-and-thirty.

There was a good deal of hesitation on the part of the lawyer; but Valentine had expected to meet with some difficulty, and was not altogether unprepared for a point-blank refusal. He was agreeably surprised when George Sheldon told him he would manage that "little matter; only the bill must be for

forty." But in proof of the liberal spirit in which Mr. Hawkehurst was to be treated, the friendly lawyer informed him that the two months should be extended to three.

Valentine did not stop to consider that by this friendly process he was to pay at the rate of something over a hundred and thirty per cent per annum for the use of the money he wanted. He knew that this was his only chance of getting money; so he shut his eyes to the expensive nature of the transaction, and thanked Mr. Sheldon for the accommodation granted to him.

"And now we've settled that little business, I should like to have a few minutes' private chat with you," said George, "on the understanding that what passes between you and me is strictly confidential."

"Of course!"

"You seem to have been leading rather an idle life for the last few months; and it strikes me, Mr. Hawkehurst, you're too clever a fellow to care about that sort of thing."

"Well, I have been in some measure wasting my sweetness on the desert air," Valentine answered carelessly. "The governor seems to have slipped into a good berth by your brother's agency; but I am not Horatio Nugent Cromie Paget, and the brougham and lavender kids of the Promoter are not for me."

"There is money to be picked up by better dodges than promoting," replied the attorney ambiguously; "but I suppose you wouldn't care for anything that didn't bring immediate cash? You wouldn't care to speculate the chances, however well the business might promise?"

"*C'est selon!* That's as may be," answered Valentine coolly. "You see those affairs that promise so much are apt to fail when it comes to a question of performance. I'm not a capitalist; I can't afford to become a speculator. I've been living from hand to mouth lately by means of occasional contributions to a sporting weekly, and a little bit of business which your brother threw in my way. I've been able to be tolerably useful to him, and he promises to get me something in the way of a clerkship, foreign correspondence, and that kind of thing."

"Humph!" muttered George Sheldon; "that means eighty pounds a year and fourteen hours' work a day, letters that must be answered by this mail, and so on. I don't think that kind of drudgery would ever suit you, Hawkehurst. You've not served the right apprenticeship for that sort of thing; you ought to try for some higher game. What should you say to an affair that might put two or three thousand pounds in your pocket if it was successful?"

"I should feel very much inclined to fancy it a bubble—one of those dazzling rainbow-tinted globes which look so bright dancing about in the sunshine, and explode into nothing directly they encounter any tangible substance. However, my dear Sheldon, if you really have any employment to offer to a versatile young man who is not overburdened with vulgar prejudices, you'd better put the business in plain words."

"I will," answered George; "but it's not an affair that can be discussed in five minutes. It's rather a serious matter, and involves a good deal of consideration. I know that you're a man of the world, and a very clever fellow into the bargain; but there's something more than that wanted for this business, and that is patience. The hare is a very fine animal in her way, you know; but a man must have a little of the tortoise in him if he wants to achieve anything out of the common run in the way of good luck. I have been working, and waiting, and speculating the chances for the last fifteen years, and I think I've got a good chance at last. But there's a good deal of work to be done before the business is finished; and I find that I must have some one to help me."

"What sort of business is it?"

"The search for the heir-at-law of a man who has died intestate within the last ten years."

The two men looked at each other at this juncture; and Valentine Hawkehurst smiled significantly.

"Within the last ten years?" he said. "That's rather a wide margin."

"Do you think you would be a good hand at hunting up the missing links in the chain of a family history?" asked Mr. Sheldon. "It's rather tiresome work, you know, and requires no common amount of patience and perseverance."

"I can persevere," said Valentine decisively, "if you can show me that it will be worth my while to do so. You want an heir-at-law, and I'm to look for him. What am I to get while I'm looking for him? and what is to be my reward if I find him?"

"I'll give you a pound a week and your travelling expenses while you're employed in the search; and I'll give you three thousand pounds on the day the heir gets his rights."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Hawkehurst, rather doubtfully; "three thousand pounds is a very respectable haul. But then, you see, I may fail to discover the heir; and even if I do find him the chances are ten to one that the business would be thrown into Chancery at the last moment; in which case I might wait till doomsday for the reward of my labours."

George Sheldon shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He had expected this penniless adventurer to catch eagerly at the chance he offered. "Three thousand pounds are not to be picked up in the streets," he said. "If you don't care to work with me, I can find plenty of clever fellows in London who'll jump at the business."

"And you want me to begin work—?"

"Immediately."

"And how am I to pay forty pounds in three months out of a pound a week?"

"Never mind the bill," said Mr. Sheldon, with lofty generosity. "If you work heart and soul for me, I'll square that little matter for you; I'll get it renewed for another three months."

"In that case I'm your man. I don't mind a little hard work just now, and I can live upon a pound a week where another man would starve. So now for my instructions."

There was a brief pause, during which the lawyer refreshed himself by walking up and down his office two or three times with his hands in his pockets. After which relief he seated himself before his desk, took out a sheet of foolscap, and selected a pen from the inkstand.

"It's just as well to put things in a thoroughly business-like manner," he said presently. "I suppose you'd have no objection to signing a memorandum of agreement—nothing that would be of any use in a court of law, you know, but a simple understanding between man and man, for our own satisfaction, as a safeguard against all possibility of misunderstanding in the future. I've every reason to consider you the most honourable of men, you know; but honourable men turn round upon each other sometimes. You might ask me for something more than three thou' if you succeeded in your search."

"Precisely; or I might make terms with the heir-at-law, and throw you over. Perhaps that was your idea?"

"Not exactly. The first half of the chain is in my hands, and the second half will be worth nothing without it. But to prevent all unpleasantness we may as well put our intentions upon record."

"I've not the least objection," replied Valentine with supreme indifference. "Draw up whatever memorandum you please, and I'll sign it. If you don't mind smoke, I should like to console myself with a cigar while you draw the bond."

The question was a polite formula, the atmosphere of George Sheldon's office being redolent of stale tobacco.

"Smoke away," said the lawyer; "and if you can drink brandy-and-soda at this time of day, you'll find the *de quoi* in that cupboard. Make yourself at home."

Mr. Hawkehurst declined the brandy-and-soda, and regaled himself only with a cigar, which he took from his own case. He sat in one of the second-floor windows smoking, and looking dreamily into the gardens, while George Sheldon drew up the agreement. He was thinking that any hazard which took him away from London and Charlotte Halliday might be a fortunate one.

The lawyer finished his document, which he read aloud for the benefit of the gentleman who was to sign it. The agreement was in the following terms:—

"Memorandum of agreement between George Sheldon on the one part, and Valentine Hawkehurst on the other part, whereby it is this day mutually agreed by and between the parties hereto as follows:

"1. That, in consideration of a weekly salary of one pound while in pursuit of certain inquiries, and of the sum of three thousand pounds to be paid upon the arising of a certain event, namely, the establishment of an heir-at-law to the estates of the late John Haygarth, the said Valentine Hawkehurst shall act as agent for the said George Sheldon, and shall not at any time during the continuance of this agreement do any act to prejudice the inquiry or the steps now being taken by the said George Sheldon to discover and establish an heir-at-law to the estates of the late John Haygarth.

"2. That at no time hereafter shall the said Valentine Hawkehurst be entitled to a larger recompense than is herein-before provided; nor shall he be liable to the said George Sheldon for the return of any moneys which the said George Sheldon may advance on account of the said inquiries in the event of the same not resulting in the establishment of an heir to the estates of the late John Haygarth.

"3. That the said Valentine Hawkehurst shall not alter his character of agent to the said George Sheldon during the prosecution of the said inquiry; that he shall deliver over to the said George Sheldon all documents and other forms of evidence that may arise from his, the said Valentine Hawkehurst's, inquires; and that he shall week by week, and every week, and as often as may be necessary, report to the said George Sheldon the result of such inquiries, and that he shall not on any pretence whatever be at liberty to withhold such fruits of his researches, nor discover the same to any one else than the said George Sheldon, under a penalty of ten thousand pounds, to be recovered as liquidated damages previously agreed between the parties as the measure of damages payable to the said George Sheldon upon the breach of this agreement by the said Valentine Hawkehurst.

"In witness whereof the parties hereto have this 20th day of September 1862 set their hands and affixed their seals."

"That sounds stiff enough to hold water in a court of law," said Valentine, when George Sheldon had recited the contents of the document.

"I don't suppose it would be much good in Chancery-lane," returned the lawyer carelessly; "though I daresay it sounds rather formidable to you. When one gets the trick of the legal jargon, it's not easy to draw the simplest form of agreement without a few superfluous words. I may as well call in my clerk to witness our signatures, I suppose."

"Call in any one you like."

The clerk was summoned from a sunless and airless den at the back of his principal's office. The two men appended their signatures to the document; the clerk added his in witness of the genuine nature of those signatures. It was an affair of two minutes. The clerk was dismissed. Mr. Sheldon blotted and folded the memorandum, and laid it aside in one of the drawers of his desk.

"Come," he said cheerily, "that's a business-like beginning at any rate. And now you'd better have some brandy-and-soda, for what I've got to say will take some time in the saying of it."

On this occasion Mr. Hawkehurst accepted the lawyer's hospitality, and there was some little delay before the conversation proceeded.

It was a very long conversation. Mr. Sheldon produced a bundle of papers, and exhibited some of them to his agent, beginning with that advertisement in the *Times* which had first attracted his notice, but taking very good care *not* to show his coadjutor the obituary in the *Observer*, wherein the amount of the intestate's fortune was stated. The ready wits which had been sharpened at so many different grindstones proved keen enough for the occasion. Valentine Hawkehurst had had little to do with genealogies or baptismal registers during his past career; but his experiences were of such a manifold nature that he was not easily to be baffled or mystified by any new experience. He showed himself almost as quick at tracing up the intricacies of a family tree as Mr. Sheldon, the astute attorney and practised genealogist.

"I have traced these Haygarths back to the intestate's great-grandfather, who was a carpenter and a Puritan in the reign of Charles the First. He seems to have made money—how I have not been able to discover with any certainty; but it is more than probable he served in the civil wars, and came in for some of the plunder those crop-eared, psalm-singing, pierce-the-brain-of-the-tyrant-with-the-nail-of-Jael scoundrels were always in the way of, at the sack of Royalist mansions. The man made money; and his son, the grandfather of the intestate, was a wealthy citizen in the reigns of Anne and the first George. He was a grocer, and lived in the market-place of Ullerton in Leicestershire; an out-of-the-way sleepy place it is now, but was prosperous enough in those days, I daresay. This man (the grandfather) began the world well off, and amassed a large fortune before he had done with it. The lucky beggar lived in the days when free trade and competition were unknown, when tea was something like sixty shillings a pound, and when a psalm-singing sleek-haired fellow, with a reputation for wealth and honesty, might cheat his customers to his heart's content. He had one son, Matthew, who seems, from what I can gather, to have been a wild sort of fellow in the early part of his career, and not to have been at any time on the best possible terms with the sanctimonious dad. This Matthew married at fifty-three years of age, and died a year after his marriage, leaving one son, who afterwards became the reverend intestate; with whom, according to the evidence at present before me, ends the direct line of the Haygarths." The lawyer paused, turned over two or three papers, and then resumed his explanation. "The sanctimonious grocer, Jonathan Haygarth, had one other child besides the son—a daughter called

Ruth, who married a certain Peter Judson, and became the mother of a string of sons and daughters; and it is amongst the descendants of these Judsons that we may have to look for our heir at law, unless we find him nearer home. Now my idea is that we *shall* find him nearer home."

"What reason have you for forming that idea?" asked Valentine.

"I will tell you. This Matthew Haygarth is known to have been a wild fellow. I obtained a good deal of fragmentary information about him from an old man in some almshouses at Ullerton, whose grandfather was a schoolfellow of Matthew's. He was a scapegrace, and was always spending money in London while the respectable psalm-singer was hoarding it in Ullerton. There used to be desperate quarrels between the two men, and towards the end of Jonathan Haygarth's life the old man made half a dozen different wills in favour of half a dozen different people, and cutting off scapegrace Matthew with a shilling. Fortunately for scapegrace Matthew, the old man had a habit of quarrelling with his dearest friends—a fashion not quite exploded in this enlightened nineteenth century—and the wills were burnt one after another, until the worthy Jonathan became as helpless and foolish as his great contemporary and namesake, the Dean of St. Patrick's; and after having died 'first at top,' did his son the favour to die altogether, *intestate*, whereby the roisterer and spendthrift of Soho and Covent-garden came into a very handsome fortune. The old man died in 1766, aged eighty; a very fine specimen of your good old English tradesman of the Puritanical school. The roisterer, Matthew, was by this time forty-six years of age, and, I suppose, had grown tired of roistering. In any case he appears to have settled down very quietly in the old family house in the Ullerton market-place, where he married a respectable damsel of the Puritan school, some seven years after, and in which house, or in the neighbourhood whereof, he departed this life, with awful suddenness, one year after his marriage, leaving his son and heir, the reverend intestate. And now, my dear Hawkehurst, you're a sharp fellow, and I daresay a good hand at guessing social conundrums; so perhaps you begin to see my idea."

"I can't say I do."

"My notion is, that Matthew Haygarth may possibly have married before he was fifty-three years of age. Men of his stamp don't often live to that ripe age without being caught in matrimonial toils somehow or other. It was in the days of Fleet marriages—in the days when young men about town were even more reckless and more likely to become the prey of feminine deception than they are now. The fact that Matthew Haygarth revealed no such marriage is no conclusive evidence against my hypothesis. He died very suddenly—intestate, as it seems the habit of these Haygarths to die; and he had never made any adjustment of his affairs. According to the oldest inhabitant in Ullerton almshouses, this Matthew was a very handsome fellow, generous-hearted, open-handed—a devil-may-care kind of a chap, the type of the rollicking heroes in old comedies; the very man to fall over head and ears in love before he was twenty, and to go through fire and water for the sake of the woman he loved: in short, the very last man upon earth to live a bachelor until his fifty-fourth year."

"He may—"

"He may have been a profligate, you were going to say, and have had baser ties than those of Church and State. So he may; but if he was a scoundrel, tradition flatters him. Of course all the information one can gather about a man who died in 1774 must needs be of a very uncertain and fragmentary character. But if I can trust the rather hazy recollections of my oldest inhabitant about what his father told him *his* father had said of wild Mat Haygarth, the young man's wildness was very free from vice. There is no legend of innocence betrayed or infamy fostered by Matthew Haygarth. He appears to have enjoyed what the young men of that day called life—attended cock-fights, beat the watch, gambled a little, and was intimately acquainted with the interior of the Fleet and Marshalsea prisons. For nearly twenty years he seems to have lived in London; and during all those years he was lost sight of by the Ullerton people. My oldest inhabitant's grandfather was clerk to a merchant in the city of London, and had therefore some opportunity of knowing his old schoolfellow's proceedings in the metropolis. But the two townsmen don't seem to have seen much of each other in the big city. Their meetings were rare, and, so far as I can make out, for the most part accidental. But, as I said before, my oldest inhabitant is somewhat hazy, and excruciatingly prolix; his chaff is in the proportion of some fifty to one of his wheat. I've given a good deal of time to this case already, you see, Mr. Hawkehurst; and you'll find *your* work very smooth sailing compared to what I've gone through."

"I daresay that sort of investigation is rather tiresome in the earlier stages."

"You'd say so, with a vengeance, if you had to do it," answered George Sheldon almost savagely. "You start with the obituary of some old bloke who was so disgustingly old when he consented to die that there is no one living who can tell you when he was born, or who were his father and mother; for, of course, the old idiot takes care not to leave a blessed document of any kind which can aid a fellow in his researches. And when you've had the trouble of hunting up half a dozen men of the same name, and have addled your wretched brains in the attempt to patch the half dozen men—turning up at different

periods and in different places—into one man, they all tumble to pieces like a child's puzzle, and you find yourself as far as ever from the man you want. However, *you* won't have to do any of that work," added Mr. Sheldon, who was almost in a passion when he remembered the trouble he had gone through. "The ground has been all laid out for you, by Jove, as smooth as a bowling-green; and if you look sharp, you'll pick up your three thou' before you know where you are."

"I hope I shall," answered Valentine coolly. He was not the sort of person to go into raptures about three thousand pounds, though such a sum must needs have seemed to him the wealth of a small Rothschild. "I know I want money badly enough, and am ready and willing to work for it conscientiously, if I get the chance. But to return to this Matthew Haygarth. Your idea is that there may have been a marriage previous to the one at Ullerton?"

"Precisely. Of course there may have been no such previous marriage; but you see it's on the cards; and since it is on the cards, my notion is that we had better hunt up the history of Matthew Haygarth's life in London, and try to find our heir-at-law there before we go in for the Judsons. If you knew how the Judsons have married and multiplied, and lost themselves among herds of other people, you wouldn't care about tracing the ramifications of *their* family tree," said Mr. Sheldon, with a weary sigh.

"So be it," exclaimed Mr. Hawkehurst carelessly; "we'll leave the
Judsons alone, and go in for Matthew Haygarth."

He spoke with the air of an archaeological Hercules, to whom difficulties were nothing. It seemed as if he would have been quite ready to "go in" for some sidereal branch of the Plantagenets, or the female descendants of the Hardicanute family, if George Sheldon had suggested that the intestate's next of kin was to be found *there*.

"Mat Haygarth, by all means," he said. He was on jolly-good-fellow-ish terms with the dead-and-gone grocer's son already, and had the tone of a man who had been his friend and boon companion. "Mat Haygarth is our man. But how are we to ferret out his doings in London? A man who was born in 1720 is rather a remote kind of animal."

"The secret of success in these matters is time," answered the lawyer sententiously: "a man must have no end of time, and he must keep his brain clear of all other business. Those two conditions are impossible for me, and that's why I want a coadjutor: now you're a clever young fellow, with no profession, with no particular social ties, as I can make out, and your time is all your own; ergo, you're the very man for this business. The thing is to be done: accept that for a certainty. It's only a question of time. Indeed, when you look at life philosophically, what is there on earth that is *not* a question of time? Give the crossing-sweeper between this and Chancery-lane time enough, and he might develop into a Rothschild. He might want nine hundred years or so to do it in; but there's no doubt he could do it, if you gave him time."

Mr. Sheldon was becoming expansive under the influence of the brandy-and-soda; for even that mild beverage is not without its effect on the intellectual man.

"As to this Haygarth case," he resumed, after the consumption of a little more soda and a little more brandy, "it's a sure success, if we work it properly; and you know three thou' is not to be despised," added George persuasively, "even if a fellow has to wait some time for it."

"Certainly not. And the bulk of the Haygarthian fortune—I suppose that's something rather stiff?" returned Valentine, in the same persuasive tone.

"Well, you may suppose it's a decent figure," answered Mr. Sheldon, with an air of deprecation, "or how could I afford to give you three thou' out of the share I'm likely to get?"

"No, to be sure. I think I shall take to the work well enough when once I get my hand in; but I shall be very glad of any hint you can give me at starting."

"Well, my advice is this: begin at the beginning; go down to Ullerton; see my oldest inhabitant. I pumped him as dry as I could, but I couldn't give myself enough time for thoroughly exhaustive pumping; one has to waste a small eternity before one gets anything valuable out of those hazy old fellows. Follow up this Matthew from his birth; see the place where he was born; ferret out every detail of his life, so far as it is to be ferreted; trace his way step by step to London, and when you get him there, stick to him like a leech. Don't let him slip through your fingers for a day; hunt him from lodging to lodging, from tavern to tavern, into jail and out of jail—tantivy, yoicks, hark-forward! I know it's deuced hard work; but a man must work uncommonly hard in these days before he picks up three thou'. In a few words, the game is all before you; so go in and win," concluded George Sheldon, as he poured the last amber drops from the slim smoke-coloured bottle, and swallowed his glass of brandy undiluted by soda.

CHAPTER VII.

AUNT SARAH.

After that interview in Gray's Inn, there were more interviews of a like character. Valentine received further instructions from George Sheldon, and got himself posted up in the Haygarthian history, so far as the lawyer's information furnished the materials for such posting. But the sum total of Mr. Sheldon's information seemed very little to his coadjutor when the young man looked the Haygarthian business full in the face and considered what he had to do. He felt very much like a young prince in the fairy tale who has been bidden to go forth upon an adventurous journey in a trackless forest, where if he escape all manner of lurking dangers, and remember innumerable injunctions, such as not to utter a single syllable during the whole course of his travels, or look over his left shoulder, or pat any strange dog, or gather forest fruit or flower, or look at his own reflection in mirror or water-pool, shining brazen shield or jewelled helm, he will ultimately find himself before the gates of an enchanted castle, to which he may or may not obtain admittance.

Valentine fancied himself in the position of this favourite young prince. The trackless forest was the genealogy of the Haygarths; and in the enchanted castle he was to find the crown of success in the shape of three thousand pounds. Could he marry Charlotte on the strength of those three thousand pounds, if he were so fortunate as to unravel the tangled skein of the Haygarth history? Ah, no; that black-whiskered stockbroking stepfather would ask for something more than three thousand pounds from the man to whom he gave his wife's daughter.

"He will try to marry her to some rich City swell, I dare say," thought Valentine. "I should be no nearer her with three thousand pounds for my fortune than I am without a sixpence. The best thing I can do for her happiness and my own is to turn my back upon her, and devote myself to hunting the Haygarths. It's rather hard too, just as I have begun to fancy that she likes me a little."

In the course of those interviews in Gray's Inn which occurred before Valentine took any active steps in his new pursuit, certain conditions were agreed upon between him and Mr. Sheldon. The first and most serious of these conditions was, that Captain Paget should be in nowise enlightened as to his *protégé's* plans. This was a strong point with George Sheldon. "I have no doubt Paget's a very good fellow," he said. (It was his habit to call everybody a good fellow. He would have called Nana Sahib a good fellow, and would have made some good-natured excuse for any peccadilloes on the part of that potentate). "Paget's an uncommonly agreeable man, you know; but he is not the man I should care to trust with this kind of secret." Mr. Sheldon said this with a tone that implied his willingness to trust Captain Paget with every other kind of secret, from the contents of his japanned office-boxes to the innermost mysteries of his soul.

"You see Paget is thick with my brother Phil," he resumed; "and whenever I find a man thick with my relations, I make it a point to keep clear of that man myself. Relations never have worked well in harness, and never will work well in harness. It seems to be against nature. Now Phil has a dim kind of idea of the game I want to play, in a general way, but nothing more than a dim idea. He fancies I'm a fool, and that I'm wasting my time and trouble. I mean him to stick to that notion. For, you see, in a thing of this kind there's always a chance of other people cutting in and spoiling a man's game. Of course, that advertisement I read to you was seen by other men besides me, and may have been taken up. My hope is that whoever has taken it up has gone in for the female branch, and got himself snowed up under a heap of documentary evidence about the Judsons. That's another reason why we should put our trust in Matthew Haygarth. The Judson line is the obvious line to follow, and there are very few who would think of hunting up evidence for a hypothetical first marriage until they had exhausted the Judsons. Now, I rely upon you to throw dust in Paget's eyes, so that there may be no possibility of my brother getting wind of our little scheme through him."

"I'll take care of that," answered Valentine; "he doesn't want me just now. He's in very high feather, riding about in broughams and dining at West-end taverns. He won't be sorry to get rid of me for a short time."

"But what'll be your excuse for leaving town? He'll be sure to want a reason, you know."

"I'll invent an aunt at Ullerton, and tell him I'm going down to stop with her."

"You'd better not say Ullerton; Paget might take it into his head to follow you down there in order to see what sort of person your aunt was, and whether she had any money. Paget's an excellent fellow, but there's never any knowing what that sort of man will do. You'd better throw him off the scent altogether. Plant your aunt in Surrey—say Dorking."

"But if he should want to write to me?"

"Tell him to address to the post-office, Dorking, as your aunt is inquisitive, and might tamper with your correspondence. I daresay his letters will keep."

"He could follow me to Dorking as easily as to Ullerton."

"Of course he could," answered George Sheldon; "but then, you see, at Dorking the most he could find out would be that he'd been made a fool of; whereas if he followed you to Ullerton, he might ferret out the nature of your business there."

Mr. Hawkehurst perceived the wisdom of this conclusion, and agreed to make Dorking the place of his relative's abode.

"It's very near London," he suggested thoughtfully; "the Captain might easily run down."

"And for that very reason he's all the less likely to do it," answered the lawyer; "a man who thinks of going to a place within an hour's ride of town knows he can go any day, and is likely to think of going to the end of the chapter without carrying out his intention. A man who resolves to go to Manchester or Liverpool has to make his arrangements accordingly, and is likely to put his idea into practice. The people who live on Tower-hill very seldom see the inside of the Tower. It's the good folks who come up for a week's holiday from Yorkshire and Cornwall who know all about the Crown jewels and John of Gaunt's armour. Take my advice, and stick to Dorking."

Acting upon this advice, Valentine Hawkehurst lay in wait for the Promoter that very evening. He went home early, and was seated by a cheery little bit of fire, such as an Englishman likes to see at the close of a dull autumn day, when that accomplished personage returned to his lodgings.

"Deuced tiresome work," said the Captain, as he smoothed the nap of his hat with that caressing tenderness of manipulation peculiar to the man who is not very clear as to the means whereby his next hat is to be obtained,—"deuced slow, brain-belabouring work! How many people do you think I've called upon to-day, eh, Val? Seven-and-thirty! What do you say to that? Seven-and-thirty interviews, and some of them very tough ones. I think that's enough to take the steam out of a man."

"Do the moneyed swells bite?" asked Mr. Hawkehurst, with friendly interest.

"Rather slowly, my dear Val, rather slowly. The mercantile fisheries have been pretty well whipped of late years, and the fish are artful—they are uncommonly artful, Val. Indeed, I'm not quite clear at this present moment as to the kind of fly they'll rise to most readily. I'm half inclined to be doubtful whether your gaudy pheasant-feather, your brougham and lavender-kid business is the right thing for your angler. It has been overdone, Val, considerably overdone; and I shouldn't wonder if a sober little brown fly—a shabby old chap in a rusty greatcoat, with a cotton umbrella under his arm—wouldn't do the trick better. That sort of thing would look rich, you see, Val—rich and eccentric; and I think on occasions—with a *very* downy bird—I'd even go so far as a halfp'orth of snuff in a screw of paper. I really think a pinch of snuff out of a bit of paper, taken at the right moment, might turn the tide of a transaction."

Impressed by the brilliancy of this idea, Captain Paget abandoned himself for the moment to profound meditation, seated in his favourite chair, and with his legs extended before the cheerful blaze. He always had a favourite chair in every caravanserai wherein he rested in his manifold wanderings, and he had an unerring instinct which guided him in the selection of the most comfortable chair, and that one corner, to be found in every room, which is a sanctuary secure from the incursions of Boreas.

The day just ended had evidently not been a lucky one, and the Captain's gaze was darkly meditative as he looked into the ruddy little fire.

"I think I'll take a glass of cold water with a dash of brandy in it, Val," he said presently; and he said it with the air of a man who rarely tasted such a beverage; whereas it was as habitual with him to sit sipping brandy-and-water for an hour or so before he went to bed as it was for him to light his chamber candle. "That fellow Sheldon knows how to take care of himself," he remarked thoughtfully, when Valentine had procured the brandy-and-water. "Try some of that cognac, Val; it's not bad. To tell you the truth, I'm beginning to get sick of this promoting business. It pays very little better than the India-rubber agency, and it's harder work. I shall look about me for something fresh, if Sheldon doesn't treat me handsomely. And what have you been doing for the last day or two?" asked the Captain, with a searching glance at his *protégé's* face. "You're always hanging about Sheldon's place; but you don't seem to do much business with him. You and his brother George seem uncommonly thick."

"Yes, George suits me better than the stockbroker. I never could get on very well with your ultra-respectable men. I'm as ready to 'undertake a dirty job' as any man; but I don't like a fellow to offer me

dirty work and pretend it's clean."

"Ah, he's been getting you to do a little of the bear business, I suppose," said the Captain. "I don't see that your conscience need trouble you about that. Amongst a commercial people money must change hands. I can't see that it much matters how the change takes place."

"No, to be sure; that's a comfortable way of putting it, at any rate. However, I'm tired of going about in the ursine guise, and I'm going to cut it. I've an old aunt settled at Dorking who has got a little bit of money to leave, and I think I'll go and look her up."

"An aunt at Dorking! I never heard of her before."

"O yes you have," answered Mr. Hawkehurst, with supreme nonchalance; "you've heard of her often enough, only you've a happy knack of not listening to other people's affairs. But you must have been wrapped up in yourself with a vengeance if you don't remember to have heard me speak of my aunt—Sarah."

"Well, well, it may be so," murmured the Captain, almost apologetically. "Your aunt Sarah? Ah, to be sure; I have some recollection: is she your father's sister?"

"No; she's the sister of my maternal grandmother—a great-aunt, you know. She has a comfortable little place down at Dorking, and I can get free quarters there whenever I like; so as you don't particularly want me just now, I think I'll run down to her for a week or two."

The Captain had no objection to offer to this very natural desire on the part of his adopted son; nor did he concern himself as to the young man's motive for leaving London.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARLOTTE PROPHESIES RAIN.

Mr. Hawkehurst had no excuse for going to the Lawn before his departure; but the stately avenues between Bayswater and Kensington are free to any man; and, having nothing better to do, Valentine put a shabby little volume of Balzac in his pocket, and spent his last morning in town under the shadow of the mighty elms, reading one of the great Honoré's gloomiest romances, while the autumn leaves drifted round him, dancing fairy measures on the grass, and scraping and scuffling on the gravel, and while children with hoops and children with balls scampered and screamed in the avenue by which he sat. He was not particularly absorbed by his book. He had taken it haphazard from the tattered collection of cheap editions which he carried about with him in his wanderings, ignominiously stuffed into the bottom of a portmanteau, amongst boots and clothes-brushes and disabled razors.

"I'm sick of them all," he thought; "the De Beauseants, and Rastignacs, the German Jews, and the patrician beauties, and the Israelitish Circes of the Rue Taitbout, and the sickly self-sacrificing provincial angels, and the ghastly *vieilles filles*. Had that man ever seen such a woman as Charlotte, I wonder—a bright creature, all smiles and sunshine, and sweet impulsive tenderness; an angel who can be angelic without being *poitrinaire*, and whose amiability never degenerates into scrofula? There is an odour of the dissecting-room pervading all my friend Balzac's novels, and I don't think he was capable of painting a fresh, healthy nature. What a mass of disease he would have made Lucy Ashton, and with what dismal relish he would have dilated upon the physical sufferings of Amy Robsart in the confinement of Cumnor Hall! No, my friend Honoré, you are the greatest and grandest of painters of the terrible school; but the time comes when a man sighs for something brighter and better than your highest type of womanhood."

Mr. Hawkehurst put his book in his pocket, and abandoned himself to meditation, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands, unconscious of the trundling hoops and screaming children.

"She is better and fairer than the fairest heroine of a novel," he thought. "She is like Heloise. Yes, the quaint old French fits her to a nicety:

'Elle ne fu oscure ne brune,
Ains fu clere comme la lune,

Envers qui les autres estoiles
Ressemblent petites chandoiles.'

Mrs. Browning must have known such a woman:

'Her air had a meaning, her movements a grace;
You turned from the fairest to gaze on her face;'

and yet

'She was not as pretty as women I know.'

Was she not?" mused the lover. "Is she not? Yes," he cried suddenly, as he saw a scarlet petticoat gleaming in the distance, and a bright young face under a little black turban hat—prettiest and most bewitching of all feminine headgear, let fashion change as it may. "Yes," he cried, "she is the loveliest creature in the world, and I love her to distraction." He rose, and went to meet the loveliest creature in the world, whose earthly name was Charlotte Halliday. She was walking with Diana Paget, who, to more sober judges, might have seemed the handsomer woman of the two. Alas for Diana! the day had been when Valentine Hawkehurst considered her very handsome, and had need to fight a hard battle with himself in order not to fall in love with her. He had been conqueror in that struggle of prudence and honour against nascent love, only to be vanquished utterly by Charlotte's brighter charms and Charlotte's sunnier nature.

The two girls shook hands with Mr. Hawkehurst. An indifferent observer might have perceived that the colour faded from the face of one, while a blush mounted to the cheeks of the other. But Valentine did not see the sudden pallor of Diana's face—he had eyes only for Charlotte's blushes. Nor did Charlotte herself perceive the sudden change in her dearest friend's countenance. And that perhaps is the bitterest sting of all. It is not enough that some must weep while others play; the mourners must weep unnoticed, unconsoled; happiness is so apt to be selfish.

Of course the conversation was the general sort of thing under the given circumstances—just a little more inane and disjointed than the ordinary small talk of people who meet each other in their walks abroad.

"How do you do, Mr. Hawkehurst?—Very well, thank you.—Mamma is very well; at least no, not quite well; she has one of her headaches this morning. She is rather subject to headache, you know; and the canaries sing so loud. Don't the canaries sing abominably loud, Diana?—loudly they would have made me say at Hyde Lodge; but it is only awfully clever people who know when to use adverbs."

And Miss Halliday having said all this in a hurried and indeed almost breathless manner, stopped suddenly, blushing more deeply than at first, and painfully aware of her blushes. She looked imploringly at Diana; but Diana would not come to the rescue; and this morning Mr. Hawkehurst seemed as a man struck with sudden dumbness.

There followed presently a little discussion of the weather. Miss Halliday was possessed by the conviction that there would be rain—possibly not immediate rain, but before the afternoon inevitable rain. Valentine thought not; was, indeed, positively certain there would be no rain; had a vague idea that the wind was in the north; and quoted a dreary Joe-Millerism to prove the impossibility of rain while the wind came from that quarter. Miss Halliday and Mr. Hawkehurst held very firmly to their several opinions, and the argument was almost a quarrel—one of those little playful quarrels which form some of the most delicious phases of a flirtation. "I would not mind wagering a fortune—if I had one—on the certainty of rain," cried Charlotte with kindling eyes.

"And I would not shrink from staking my existence on the conviction that there will be no rain," exclaimed Valentine, looking with undisguised tenderness at the glowing animated face.

Diana Paget took no part in that foolish talk about the possibilities of the weather. She walked silently by the side of her friend Charlotte, as far away from her old comrade, it seemed to her, as if the Atlantic's wild waste of waters had stretched between them. The barrier that divided them was only Charlotte; but then Miss Paget knew too well that Charlotte in this case meant all the world.

The ice had been broken by that discussion as to rain or no rain, and Miss Halliday and Mr. Hawkehurst talked pleasantly for some time, while Diana still walked silently by her friend's side, only speaking when compelled to do so. The strangeness of her manner would have been observed by any one not utterly absorbed by that sublime egotism called love; but Valentine and Charlotte were so absorbed, and had no idea that Miss Paget was anything but the most delightful and amusing of companions.

They had taken more than one turn in the broad avenue, when Charlotte asked Mr. Hawkehurst some question about a piece which was speedily to be played at one of the theatres.

"I do so much want to see this new French actress," she said. "Do you think there is any possibility of obtaining orders, Mr. Hawkehurst? You know what a dislike Mr. Sheldon has to paying for admission to a theatre, and my pocket-money was exhausted three weeks ago, or I wouldn't think of giving you any trouble about it."

Philosophers have observed that in the life of the plainest woman there is one inspired moment in which she becomes beautiful. Perhaps it is when she is asking a favour of some masculine victim—for women have a knack of looking their prettiest on such occasions. Charlotte Halliday's pleading glance and insinuating tone were irresistible. Valentine would have given a lien on every shilling of his three thousand pounds rather than disappoint her, if gold could purchase the thing she craved. It happened fortunately that his occasional connection with the newspapers made it tolerably easy for him to obtain free admissions to theatres.

"Do not speak of the trouble; there will be no trouble. The orders shall be sent you, Miss Halliday."

"O, thanks—a thousand thanks! Would it be possible to get a box, and for us all to go together?" asked the fair encroacher; "mamma is so fond of the theatre. She used to go often with poor papa, at York and in London. And you are such an excellent critic, Mr. Hawkehurst, and it would be so nice to have you with us,—wouldn't it, Di? You know what a good critic Mr. Hawkehurst is?"

"Yes," answered Diana; "we used to go to theatres together very often."

This was a cry of anguish wrung from a bleeding heart; but to the two absorbed egotists it seemed the simplest of casual observations.

"Do you think you could manage to get a box, Mr. Hawkehurst?" asked the irresistible enslaver, putting her head on one side, in a manner which, for the protection of weak mankind, should be made penal.

"I will try my uttermost," answered Valentine.

"O, then I'm sure you will succeed. And we shall be amused by your deliciously bitter criticisms between the acts. One would think you had studied under Douglas Jerrold."

"You do me too much honour. But before the new piece is produced I shall have left London, and shall not have the pleasure of accompanying you to the theatre."

"You are going to leave London?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"So soon!" cried Charlotte, with undisguised regret; "and for a long time, I suppose?" she added, very mournfully.

Miss Paget gave a little start, and a feverish flush lit up her face for one brief moment.

"I am glad he is going," she thought; "I am very glad he is going."

"Yes," said Valentine, in reply to Charlotte's inquiry, "I am likely to be away for a considerable time; indeed my plans are at present so vague, that I cannot tell when I may come back to town."

He could not resist the temptation to speak of his absence as if it were likely to be the affair of a lifetime. He could not refrain from the delight of sounding the pure depths of that innocent young heart. But when the tender gray eyes looked at him, so sweet in their sudden sadness, his heart melted, and he could trifle with her unconscious love no longer.

"I am going away on a matter of business," he said, "which may or may not occupy some time; but I don't suppose I shall be many weeks away from London."

Charlotte gave a little sigh of relief.

"And are you going very far?" she asked.

"Some distance; yes—a—hundred and fifty miles or so," Valentine answered very lamely. It had been an easy thing to invent an ancient aunt Sarah for the mystification of the astute Horatio; but Valentine Hawkehurst could not bring himself to tell Charlotte Halliday a deliberate falsehood. The girl looked at him wonderingly, as he gave that hesitating answer to her question. She was at a loss to understand

why he did not tell her the place to which he was going, and the nature of the business that took him away.

She was very sorry that he was going to disappear out of her life for a time so uncertain, that while on the one hand it might be only a few weeks, it might on the other hand be for ever. The life of a young English damsel, in a prim villa at Bayswater, with a very commonplace mother and a practical stockbroking stepfather, is rather a narrow kind of existence; and to such a damsel the stranger whose hand lifts the curtain that shrouds new and brighter worlds is apt to become a very important personage, especially when the stranger happens to be young and handsome, and invested with that dash of Bohemianism which to artless and sentimental girlhood has such a flavour of romance.

Charlotte was very silent as she retraced her steps along the broad gravel walk. As they drew near the Bayswater-gate she looked at her watch. It was nearly one o'clock, and she had promised Mrs. Sheldon to be home at one for luncheon, and afterwards shopping.

"I'm afraid we must hurry home, Di," she said.

"I am quite ready to go," answered Miss Paget promptly. "Good-bye, Valentine."

"Good-bye, Diana; good-bye, Miss Halliday."

Mr. Hawkehurst shook hands with both young ladies; but shaking hands with Charlotte was a very slow process compared to the same performance with Diana.

"Good-bye," he repeated, in a lingering tone; and then, after standing for some moments silent and irresolute, with his hat in his hand, he put it on suddenly and hurried away.

The two girls had walked a few steps towards the gate when Charlotte stopped before a stony-looking alcove, which happened at this nursery-dinner-hour to be empty.

"I'm so tired, Di," she said, and went into the alcove, where she sat down to rest. She had a little veil attached to her turban hat—a little veil which she now drew over her face. The tears gathered slowly in her eyes and fell through that flimsy morsel of lace with which she would fain have hidden her childish sorrow. The tears gathered and fell on her lap as she sat in silence, pretending not to cry. This much rain at least was there to justify her prediction, uttered in such foolish gaiety of heart half an hour before.

Miss Halliday's eyes were undimmed by tears when she went back to the gothic villa; but she had a feeling that some great sorrow had come upon her—a vague idea that the last lingering warmth and brightness of summer had faded all in a moment, and that chill gray winter had closed in upon Bayswater without any autumnal interval. What was it that she had lost? Only the occasional society of a young man with a handsome pale face, a little haggard and wan from the effect of dissipated habits and a previous acquaintance with care and difficulty—only the society of a penniless Bohemian who had a certain disreputable cleverness and a dash of gloomy sentimentality, which the schoolgirl mistook for genius. But then he was the first man whose eyes had ever softened with a mysterious tenderness as they looked at her—the first whose voice had grown faintly tremulous when it syllabled her name.

There was some allusion to Mr. Hawkehurst's departure in the course of dinner, and Philip Sheldon expressed some surprise.

"Going to leave town?" he said.

"Yes, papa," Charlotte answered; "he is going a long way into the country,—a hundred and fifty miles, he said."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No; he seemed unwilling to mention the place. He only said something about a hundred and fifty miles."

CHAPTER IX.

MR. SHELDON ON THE WATCH.

Mr. Sheldon had occasion to see Captain Paget early the following day, and questioned him closely about his *protégé's* movements. He had found Valentine a very useful tool in sundry intricate transactions of the commercial kind, and he expected his tools to be ready for his service. He was therefore considerably annoyed by Valentine's abrupt departure.

"I think young Hawkehurst might have told me he was going out of town," he said. "What the deuce has taken him off in such a hurry?"

"He is going to see some mysterious old aunt at Dorking, from whom he seems to expect money," the Captain answered carelessly. "I daresay I can do what you want, Sheldon."

"Very likely. But how comes that young fellow to have an aunt at Dorking? I fancy I've heard him say he was without a relative or a friend in the world—always excepting yourself."

"The aunt may be another exception; some poor old soul that he's half ashamed to own, I daresay—the inmate of an almshouse, perhaps. Val's expectations may be limited to a few pounds hoarded in a china teapot."

"I should have thought Hawkehurst the last man in the world to care about looking after that sort of thing. I could have given him plenty to do if he had stopped in town. He and my brother George are uncommonly intimate, by the bye," added Mr. Sheldon meditatively. It was his habit to be rather distrustful of his brother and of all his brother's acquaintance. "I suppose you can give me Hawkehurst's address, in case I should want to write to him?" he said.

"He told me to send my letters to the post-office, Dorking," answered the Captain, "which really looks as if the aunt's residence were something in the way of an almshouse."

No more was said about Valentine's departure. Captain Paget concluded his business with his patron and departed, leaving the stockbroker leaning forward upon his desk in a thoughtful attitude and scribbling purposeless figures upon his blotting-paper.

"There's something queer in this young man running away from town; there's some mystification somewhere," he thought. "He has not gone to Dorking, or he would scarcely have told Lotta that he was going a hundred and fifty miles from town. He would be likely to be taken off his guard by her questions, and would tell the truth. I wonder whether Paget is in the secret. His manner seemed open enough; but that sort of man can pretend anything. I've noticed that he and George have been very confidential lately. I wonder whether there's any underhand game on the cards between those two."

The game of which Mr. Sheldon thought as he leant over his blotting-paper was a very different kind of game from that which really occupied the attention of George and his friend.

"I'll go to his lodgings at once," he said to himself by-and-by, rising and putting on his hat quickly in his eagerness to act upon his resolution. "I'll see if he really has left town."

The stockbroker hailed the first empty hansom to be seen in the crowded thoroughfare from which his shady court diverged. In less than an hour he alighted before the door of the house in which Captain Paget lodged.

"Is Mr. Hawkehurst in?" he asked of the girl who admitted him.

"No, sir; he's just left to go into the country. He hasn't been gone ten minutes. You might a'most have met him."

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"I heard say it was Dorking, sir."

"Humph! I should like to have seen him before he went. Did he take much luggage?"

"One portmanter, sir."

"I suppose you didn't notice where he told the man to drive?"

"Yes, sir; it was Euston-square."

"Ah! Euston-square. I'll go there, then, on the chance of catching him," said Mr. Sheldon.

He bestowed a donation upon the domestic, reentered his hansom, and told the man to drive to Euston-square "like a shot."

"So! His destination is Dorking, and he goes from Euston-square!" muttered Mr. Sheldon, in sombre meditation, as the hansom rattled and rushed, and jingled and jolted, over the stones. "There's something under the cards here."

Arrived at the great terminus, the stockbroker made his way to the down platform. There was a lull in the day's traffic, and only a few listless wretches lounging disconsolately here and there, with eyes ever and anon lifted to the clock. Amongst these there was no Valentine Hawkehurst.

Mr. Sheldon peered into all the waiting-rooms, and surveyed the refreshment-counter; but there was still no sign of the man he sought. He went back to the ticket-office; but here again all was desolate, the shutters of the pigeon-holes hermetically closed, and no vestige of Valentine Hawkehurst.

The stockbroker was disappointed, but not defeated. He returned to the platform, looked about him for a few moments, and then addressed himself to a porter of intelligent aspect.

"What trains have left here within the last half-hour?" he asked.

"Only one, sir; the 2.15 down, for Manchester."

"You didn't happen to notice a dark-eyed, dark-haired young man among the passengers—second class?" asked Mr. Sheldon.

"No, sir. There are always a good many passengers by that train; I haven't time to notice their faces."

The stockbroker asked no further questions. He was a man who did not care to be obliged to others for information which he could obtain for himself. He walked straight to a place where the time-tables were pasted on the wall, and ran his finger along the figures till he came to those he wanted.

The 2.15 train was a fast train, which stopped at only four places—Rugby, Ullerton, Murford, and Manchester.

"I daresay he has gone to Manchester," thought Mr. Sheldon—"on some racing business most likely, which he wants to keep dark from his patron the Captain. What a fool I am to trouble myself about him, as if he couldn't stir without meaning mischief to me! But I don't understand the friendship between him and George. My brother George is not likely to take up any man without some motive."

After these reflections Mr. Sheldon left the station and went back to his office in another hansom, still extremely thoughtful and somewhat disquieted.

"What does it matter to me where they go or what they do?" he asked himself, impatient of some lurking weakness of his own; "what does it matter to me whether those two are friendly or unfriendly? They can do me no harm."

There happened to be a kind of lull in the stormy regions of the Stock Exchange at the time of Valentine Hawkehurst's departure. Stagnation had descended upon that commercial ocean, which is such a dismal waste of waters for the professional speculator in its hour of calm. All the Bulls in the zoological creation would have failed to elevate the drooping stocks and shares and first-preference bonds and debentures, which hung their feeble heads and declined day by day, the weaker of them threatening to fade away and diminish to a vanishing-point, as it seemed to some dejected holders who read the Stock-Exchange lists and the money article in the Times with a persistent hopefulness which struggled against the encroachments of despair. The Bears had been busy, but were now idle—having burnt their fingers, commercial gentlemen remarked. So Bulls and Bears alike hung listlessly about a melancholy market, and conversed together dolefully in corners; and the burden of all their lamentations was to the effect that there never had been such times, and things never had been so bad, and it was a question whether they would ever right themselves. Philip Sheldon shared in the general depression. His face was gloomy, and his manner for the time being lost something of its brisk, business-like cheerfulness. The men who envied his better fortunes watched him furtively when he showed himself amongst them, and wondered whether Sheldon, of Jull, Girdlestone, and Sheldon, had been hit by these bad times.

It was not entirely the pressure of that commercial stagnation which weighed on the spirits of Philip Sheldon. The stockbroker was tormented by private doubts and uncertainties which had nothing to do with the money-market.

On the day after Valentine's journey to Ullerton, Mr. Sheldon the elder presented himself at his brother's office in Gray's Inn. It was his habit to throw waifs and strays of business in the attorney's way, and to make use of him occasionally, though he had steadily refused to lend or give him money; and it was his habit, as it were, to keep an eye upon his younger brother—rather a jealous eye, which

took note of all George's doings, and kept suspicious watch upon all George's associates. Going unannounced into his brother's office on this particular morning, Philip Sheldon found him bending over an outspread document—a great sheet of cartridge-paper covered with a net-work of lines, dotted about with circles, and with little patches of writing in red and black ink in the neatest possible penmanship. Mr. Sheldon the elder, whose bright black eyes were as the eyes of the hawk, took note of this paper, and had caught more than one stray word that stood out in larger and bolder characters than its neighbours, before his brother could fold it; for it is not an easy thing for a man to fold an elephantine sheet of cartridge when he is nervously anxious to fold it quickly, and is conscious that the eyes of an observant brother are upon him.

Before George had mastered the folding of the elephantine sheet, Philip had seen and taken note of two words. One of these was the word INTESTATE, and the other the name HAYGARTH.

"You seem in a great hurry to get that document out of the way," said
Philip, as he seated himself in the client's chair.

"Well, to tell the truth, you rather startled me," answered George. "I didn't know who it might be, you know; and I was expecting a fellow who—" And then Mr. Sheldon the younger broke off abruptly, and asked, with rather a suspicious air, "Why didn't that boy announce you?"

"Because I wouldn't let him. Why should he announce me? One would think you were carrying on some political conspiracy, George, and had a modern Thistlewood gang hidden in that cupboard yonder. How thick you and Hawkehurst are, by the bye!"

In spite of the convenient "by the bye," this last remark of the stockbroker's sounded rather irrelevant.

"I don't know about being 'thick.' Hawkehurst seems a very decent young fellow, and he and I get on pretty well together. But I'm not as 'thick' with him as I was with Tom Halliday."

It was to be observed that Mr. Sheldon the younger was very apt to refer to that friendship with the dead Yorkshireman in the course of conversation with Philip.

"Hawkehurst has just left town," said Philip indifferently.

"Yes, I know he has."

"When did you hear it?"

"I saw him last night," answered George, taken off his guard by the carelessness of his brother's manner.

"Did you?" cried Mr. Sheldon. "You make a mistake there. He left town at two o'clock yesterday."

"How do you happen to know that?" asked George sharply.

"Because I happened to be at the station and saw him take his ticket. There's something underhand in that journey of his by the way; for Paget told me he was going to Dorking. I suppose he and Paget have some game of their own on the cards. I was rather annoyed by the young man's departure, as I had some work for him. However, I can find plenty of fellows to do it as well as Hawkehurst could have done."

George was looking into an open drawer in his desk while his brother said this. He had a habit of opening drawers and peering into them absently during the progress of an interview, as if looking for some particular paper, that was never to be found.

After this the conversation became less personal. The brothers talked a little of the events of the day, the money-article in that morning's Times, the probability or improbability of a change in the rate of discount. But this conversation soon flagged, and Mr. Sheldon rose to depart.

"I suppose that sheet of cartridge-paper which you had so much trouble to fold is one of your genealogical tables," he said as he was going. "You needn't try to keep things dark from me, George. I'm not likely to steal a march upon you; my own business gives me more work than I can do. But if you have really got a good thing at last, I shouldn't mind going into it with you, and finding the money for the enterprise."

George Sheldon looked at his elder brother with a malicious flitter in his eyes.

"On condition that you got the lion's share of the profits," he said. "O yes; I know how generous you are, Phil. I have asked you for money before today, and you have refused it."

Mr. Sheldon's face darkened just a little at this point. "Your manner of asking it was offensive," he said.

"Well, I'm sorry for that," answered George politely. "However, you refused me money when I did want it; so you needn't offer it me now I don't want it. There are some people who think I have sacrificed my life to a senseless theory; and perhaps you are one of them. But there is one thing you may be certain of, Philip Sheldon: if ever I *do* get a good chance, I shall know how to keep it to myself."

There are men skilled in the concealment of their feelings on all ordinary occasions, who will yet betray themselves in a crisis of importance. George Sheldon would fain have kept his project hidden from his elder brother; but in this one unguarded moment he forgot himself, and allowed the sense of triumph to irradiate his face.

The stockbroker was a reader of men rather than books; and it is a notable thing what superiority in all worldly wisdom is possessed by men who eschew books. He was able to translate the meaning of George's smile—a smile of mingled triumph and malice.

"The fellow *has* got a good thing," he thought to himself, "and Hawkehurst is in it. It must be a deuced good thing too, or he wouldn't refuse my offer of money." Mr. Sheldon was the last man in the world to reveal any mortification which he might experience from his brother's conduct.

"Well, you're quite right to stick to your chance, George," he said, with agreeable frankness. "You've waited long enough for it. As for me, I've got my fingers in a good many pies just at present; so perhaps I had better keep them out of yours, whatever plums there may be to be picked out of it by an enterprising Jack Horner. Pick out your plums for yourself, old fellow, and I'll be one of the first to call you a good boy for your pains."

With this Mr. Sheldon slapped his brother's shoulder and departed.

"I think I've had the best of Master Phil for once," muttered George; and then he thrust his sinewy hands into the depths of his trousers-pocket, and indulged in a silent laugh, which displayed his strong square white teeth to perfection. "I flatter myself I took a rise out of Phil to-day," he muttered.

The sense of a malicious triumph over a social enemy is a very delightful kind of thing,—so delightful that a man is apt to ignore the possible cost of the enjoyment. It is like the pleasure of kicking a man who is down—very delicious in its way; only one never knows how soon the man may be up again.

George Sheldon, who was tolerably skilled in the science of human nature, should have known that "taking a rise" out of his brother was likely to be a rather costly operation. Philip was not the safest man to deal with at any time; but he was most dangerous when he was "jolly."

BOOK THE FOURTH.

VALENTINE HAWKEHURST'S RECORD.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLDEST INHABITANT.

Black Swan Inn, Ullerton, October 2nd.

As the work I am now employed in is quite new to me, and I am to keep Sheldon posted up in this business day by day, I have decided on jotting down the results of my inquiries in a kind of diary. Instead of writing my principal a formal letter, I shall send a copy of the entries in the diary, revised

and amended. This will insure exactitude; and there is just the possibility that the record may be useful to me hereafter. To remember all I hear and pick up about these departed Haygarths without the aid of pen and ink would be out of the question; so I mean to go in for unlimited pen and ink like a hero, not to say a martyr.

And I am to do all this for twenty shillings a week, and the remote possibility of three thousand pounds! O genius, genius! in all the markets of this round world is there no better price for you than that?

How sweetly my Charlotte looked at me yesterday, when I told her I was going away! If I could have dared to kneel at her feet under those whispering elms,—unconscious of the children, unconscious of the nursemaids,—if I could have dared to cry aloud to her, "I am a penniless reprobate, but I love you; I am a disreputable pauper, but I adore you! Have pity upon my love and forget my worthlessness!" If I could have dared to carry her away from her prim suburban home and that terrible black-whiskered stockbroking stepfather! But how is a man to carry off the woman he adores when he has not the *de quoi* for the first stage of the journey?

With three thousand pounds in my pocket, I think I could dare anything. Three thousand pounds! One year of splendour and happiness, and then—the rest is chaos!

I have seen the oldest inhabitant. *Ay de mi*! Sheldon did not exaggerate the prosiness of that intolerable man. I thought of the luckless wedding guest in Coleridge's grim ballad as I sat listening to this modern-ancient mariner. I had to remind myself of all the bright things to be bought for three thousand pounds, every now and then, in order to endure with fortitude, if not serenity. And now the day's work is done, I begin to think it might as well have been left undone. How am I to disintegrate the mass of prosiness which I have heard this day? For three mortal hours did I listen to my ancient mariner; and how much am I the wiser for my patience? Clever as you may fancy yourself, my friend Hawkehurst, you don't seem to be the man for this business. You have not the legal mind. Your genius is not the genius of Scotland-yard, and I begin to fear that in your new line you may prove yourself a failure.

However, where all is dark to me the astute Sheldon may see daylight, so I'll observe the letter of my bond, and check off the residuum of the ancient mariner's prosiness.

By dint of much pumping I obtained from my ancient, first, his father's recollections of Matthew Haygarth a few years before his death, and secondly, his grandfather's recollections of Matthew in his wild youth. It seems that in those last years of his life Matthew was a most sober and estimable citizen; attended the chapel of a nonconforming sect; read the works of Baxter, and followed in the footsteps of his departed father; was a kind husband to a woman who appears to me to have been rather a pragmatical and icy personage, but who was esteemed a model of womanly virtue, and who had money. Strange that these respectable and wealthy citizens should be so eager to increase their store by alliance with respectable and wealthy citizenesses.

In his later years Matthew Haygarth seems to have imitated his father in many respects. Like his father, he executed more than one will; and, like his father, he died intestate. The lawyer who drew up his will on more than one occasion was a man called Brice—like his client, eminently respectable.

After his marriage, our esteemed Matthew retired to a modest mansion in the heart of the country, and some ten or fifteen miles from Ullerton. The mansion in question is at a place called Dewsdale, and was the property of the wife, and accrued to him through her.

This house and estate of some thirty acres was afterwards sold by the rev. intestate, John Haygarth, shortly after his coming of age, and within a year of his mother's death.

This much and no more could I extort from the oldest inhabitant relative to the latter days of our Matthew.

Respecting his wild youth I obtained the following crumbs of enlightenment. In the year 1741-2, being then one-and-twenty years of age, he left Ullerton. It is my ancient mariner's belief that he ran away from home, after some desperate quarrel with his father; and it is also the belief of my ancient that he stayed away, without intermission, for twenty years,—though on what precise fact that belief is founded is much more than I can extract from the venerable proser.

My ancient suggests—always in the haziest and most impracticable manner—the possibility that Matthew in his wild days lodged somewhere Clerkenwell way. He has a dim idea that he has heard his grandfather speak of St. John's-gate, Clerkenwell, in connection with Matthew Haygarth; but, as my ancient's grandfather seems to have been almost imbecile at the time he made such remarks, *this* is not much.

He has another idea—also very vague and impracticable—of having heard his grandfather say something about an adventure of Matthew Haygarth's, which was rather a heroic affair in its way—an adventure in which, in some inexplicable manner, the wild Matthew is mixed up with a dancing-girl, or player-girl, of Bartholomew Fair, and a nobleman.

This is the sum-total of the information to be extracted in three mortal hours from my ancient. Altogether the day has been very unsatisfactory; and I begin to think I'm not up to the sort of work required of me.

Oct. 3rd. Another long interview with my ancient. I dropped in directly after my breakfast, and about an hour after his dinner. I sat up late last night, occupied till nearly ten in copying my diary for Sheldon—which was just in time for the London post—and lingering over my cigar till past midnight, thinking of Charlotte. So I was late this morning.

My ancient received me graciously. I took him half a pound of mild bird's-eye tobacco, on diplomatic grounds. He is evidently the sort of person who would receive Mephistopheles graciously, if the fiend presented him with tobacco.

I returned to the charge—diplomatically, of course; talked about Ullerton and Ullerton people in general, insinuating occasional questions about the Haygarths. I was rewarded by obtaining some little information about Mrs. Matthew. That lady appears to have been a devoted disciple of John Wesley, and was fonder of travelling to divers towns and villages to hear the discourses of that preacher than her husband approved. It seems they were wont to disagree upon this subject.

For some years before her marriage Mrs. Matthew was a member of a Wesleyan confraternity, in those days newly established at Ullerton. They held meetings and heard sermons in the warehouse of a wealthy draper; and shortly before Mrs. Matthew's demise they built a chapel, still extant, in a dingy little thoroughfare known as Waterhouse-lane.

On these points my ancient mariner is tolerably clear. They belong to the period remembered by his father.

And now I believe him to be pumped dry. I gave him my benediction, and left him smoking some of my tobacco, content with himself and with the world—always excepting the authorities, or board, of the almshouses, against whom he appears to nourish a grievance.

After leaving him, I walked about Ullerton for an hour or so before returning to my humble hostelry. The streets of Ullerton are sealed with the seal of desolation—the abomination of desolation reigns in the market-place, where the grass flourishes greenly in the interstices of the pavement. The place has known prosperity, and is prosperous no longer; but although its chief trade has left it, there are still some three or four factories in full swing. I heard clanging bells, and met bare-headed women and uncouth-looking men hurrying to and fro. I went to look at the Wesleyan chapel in Waterhouse-lane. It is a queer little building, and bears some resemblance to a toy Noah's Ark in red brick. Tall warehouses have arisen about it and hemmed it in, and the slim chimney-shaft of a waterworks throws a black shadow aslant its unpretending facade. I inquired the name of the present minister. He is called Jonah Goodge, began life as a carpenter, and is accounted the pink and pattern of piety. *Oct. 4th.* A letter from Sheldon awaited me in the coffee-room letter-rack when I went downstairs to breakfast.

"MY DEAR HAWKEHURST,—Don't be disheartened if the work seems slow at first. You'll soon get used to it.

"I should recommend you to adopt the following tactics:

"1st. Go to the house at Dewsdale, inhabited by M.H. and his wife. You may have some difficulty in obtaining admission—and full liberty to explore and examine—from the present servant or owner; but you are not the man I take you for if you cannot overcome such a difficulty. I enclose a few of my cards, which you can use at your discretion. They show professional status. It would be as well to call yourself my articled clerk, and to state that you are prosecuting an inquiry on the behalf of a client of mine, who wishes to prove a certain event in the past connected remotely with the H. family. If asked whether your business relates to the property left by the rev. intestate, you must reply decisively in the negative. But I must remind you that extreme caution is required in every move you make. Wherever you can do your work *without* any reference to the name of Haygarth, avoid such reference. Always remember that there may be other people on the same scent.

"2nd. Examine the house in detail; look for old pictures, old furniture, old needlework—if you are lucky enough to find the Haygarth furniture was sold with the property, which I should think probable. The rev. intestate must have been at the University when he made the sale; and a young Cantab would in all likelihood pass over his ancestral chairs and tables to the purchaser of his ancestral mansion, as

so much useless lumber. It is proverbial that walls have ears. I hope the Dewsdale walls may have tongues, and favour you with a little information.

"3rd. When you have done all that is to be done at Dewsdale, your next work must be to hunt up any scion of the lawyer Brice, if such scion be in existence at Ullerton. Or if not to be found in Ullerton, ascertain where the descendant, or decendants, of Brice is, or are, to be found. Brice, the lawyer, must have known the contents of those wills executed and afterwards destroyed by Haygarth, and may have kept rough draughts, copies, or memoranda of the same. This is most important.—Yours truly, G.S."

This Sheldon is a wonderful man, and a cautious!—no Signature to his letter.

I started for Dewsdale immediately after my breakfast. I have made arrangements for boarding in this house, which is a second-rate commercial inn. They have agreed to give me board and lodging for twenty shillings a week—the full amount of my stipend: so all that I gain by my researches in the affairs of the departed Matthew is food and shelter. However, as this food and shelter is perhaps more honestly obtained than those little dinners which I have so often eaten with the great Horatio, I will try to fancy a sweetness in the tough steaks and greasy legs of mutton. O sheep of Midlandshire! why cultivate such ponderous calves, and why so incline to sinews? O cooks of Midlandshire! why so superficial in the treatment of your roasts, so impetuous and inconsiderate when you boil?

A railroad now penetrates the rural district in which the village of Dewsdale is situated. There is a little station, something like a wooden Dutch oven, within a mile of the village; and here I alighted. The morning savoured of summer rather than autumn. The air was soft and balmy, the sunshine steeped the landscape in warm light, and the red and golden tints of the fading foliage took new splendour from that yellow sunshine. A man whose life is spent in cities must be dull of soul indeed if he does not feel a little touched by the beauty of rustic scenery, when he finds himself suddenly in the heart of the country. I had seen nothing so fair as those English fields and copses since I left the pine-clad hills of Forêtdechêne. An idiotic boy directed me across some fields to Dewsdale. He sent me a mile out of the way; but I forgave and blest him, for I think the walk did me good. I felt as if all manner of vicious vapours were being blown out of my head as the soft wind lifted my hair.

And so to Dewsdale. Strolling leisurely through those quiet meadows, I fell to thinking of many things that seldom came into my mind in London. I thought of my dead mother—a poor gentle creature—too frail to carry heroically the burden laid upon her, and so a little soured by chronic debt and difficulty. I have reason to remember her tenderly; we shared so much misery together. I believe my father married her in the Rules of the Bench; and if I am not sure upon this point, I know for a certainty that I was born within those mystic boundaries.

And then my mind wandered to those nomadic adventures in which poor Diana Paget and I were so much together. I think we were a little fond of each other in those days; but in that matter I was at least prudent; and now the transient fancy has faded, on Di's part as well as on mine.

If I could be as prudent where Charlotte H. is concerned!

But prudence and Charlotte's eyes cannot hold their own in the same brain. Of two things, one, as our neighbours say: a man must cease to be prudent, or he must forget those bewitching gray eyes.

I know she was sorry when she heard of my intended departure.

This is her birthday. She is twenty-one years of age to-day. I remember the two girls talking of it, and Miss Halliday declaring herself "quite old." My dear one, I drink your health in this poor tavern liquor, with every tender wish and holy thought befitting your innocent girlhood!

CHAPTER II.

MATTHEW HAYGARTH'S RESTING-PLACE.

I found the house at Dewsdale without difficulty. It is a stiff, square, red-brick dwelling-place, with long narrow windows, a high narrow door, and carved canopy; a house which savours of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*; a house in which the short-faced gentleman might have spent his summer holidays after Sir Roger's death. It stands behind a high iron gate, surmounted by a handsome coat of arms; and before it there lies a pleasant patch of greensward, with a pond and a colony of cackling geese, which craned

their necks and screamed at me as I passed them.

The place is the simplest and smallest of rural villages. There is a public-house—the Seven Stars; a sprinkling of humble cottages; a general shop, which is at once a shoemaker's, a grocer's, a linen draper's, a stationer's, and a post office. These habitations, a gray old church with a square tower, half hidden by the sombre foliage of yews and cedars, and the house once inhabited by the Haygarths, comprise the whole of the village. The Haygarthian household is now the rectory. I ascertained this fact from the landlord of the Seven Stars, at which house of entertainment I took a bottle of soda-water, in order to *sonder le terrain* before commencing business.

The present rector is an elderly widower with seven children; an easy good-natured soul, who is more prone to bestow his money in charity than to punctuality in the payment of his debts.

Having discovered thus much, I rang the bell at the iron gate and boarded the Haygarthian mansion. The rector was at home, and received me in a very untidy apartment, *par excellence* a study. A boy in a holland blouse was smearing his face with his inky fingers, and wrestling with a problem in Euclid, while his father stood on a step-ladder exploring a high shelf of dusty books.

The rector, whose name is Wendover, descended from the step-ladder and shook the dust from his garments. He is a little withered old man, with a manner so lively as to be on the verge of flightiness. I observed that he wiped his dusty palms on the skirts of his coat, and argued therefrom that he would be an easy person to deal with. I soon found that my deduction was correct.

I presented Sheldon's card and stated my business, of course acting on that worthy's advice. Could Mr. Wendover give me any information relating to the Haygarth family?

Fortune favoured me throughout this Dewsdale expedition. The rector is a simple garrulous old soul, to whom to talk is bliss. He has occupied the house five-and-thirty years. He rents it of the lord of the manor, who bought it from John Haygarth. Not a stick of furniture has been removed since our friend Matthew's time; and the rev. intestate may have wrestled with the mysteries of Euclid on the same old-fashioned mahogany table at which I saw the boy in brown holland.

Mr. Wendover left his books and manuscripts scattered on the floor of the study, and conducted me to a cool shady drawing-room, very shabbily furnished with the spindle-legged chairs and tables of the last century. Here he begged me to be seated, and here we were ever and anon interrupted by intruding juveniles, the banging of doors, and the shrill clamour of young voices in the hall and garden.

I brought all the diplomacy of which I am master to bear in my long interview with the rector; and the following is a transcript of our conversation, after a good deal of polite skirmishing:—

Myself. You see, my dear sir, the business I am concerned in is remotely connected with these Haygarths. Any information you will kindly afford me, however apparently trivial, may be of service in the affair I am prosecuting.

The Rector. To be sure, to be sure! But, you see, though I've heard a good deal of the Haygarths, it is all gossip—the merest gossip. People are so fond of gossip, you know—especially country people: I have no doubt you have remarked that. Yes, I have heard a great deal about Matthew Haygarth. My late clerk and sexton,—a very remarkable man, ninety-one when he died, and able to perform his duties very creditably within a year of his death—very creditably; but the hard winter of '56 took him off, poor fellow, and now I have a young man. Old Andrew Hone—that was my late clerk's name—was employed in this house when a lad, and was very fond of talking about Matthew Haygarth and his wife. She was a rich woman, you know, a very rich woman—the daughter of a brewer at Ullerton; and this house belonged to her—inherited from her father.

Myself. And did you gather from your clerk that Matthew Haygarth and his wife lived happily together?

The Rector. Well, yes, yes: I never heard anything to the contrary. They were not a young couple, you know. Rebecca Caulfield was forty years of age, and Matthew Haygarth was fifty-three when he married; so, you see, one could hardly call it a love-match. [*Abrupt inroad of bouncing damsel, exclaiming "Pa!"*] Don't you see I'm engaged, Sophia Louisa? Why are you not at your practice? [*Sudden retreat of bouncing damsel, followed by the scrambling performance of scale of C major in adjoining chamber, which performance abruptly ceases after five minutes.*] You see Mrs. Haygarth was *not* young, as I was about to observe when my daughter interrupted us; and she was perhaps a little more steadfast in her adherence to the newly arisen sect of Wesleyans than was pleasing to her husband, although he consented to become a member of that sect. But as their married life lasted only a year, they had little time for domestic unhappiness, even supposing them not to be adapted to each other.

Myself. Mrs Matthew Haygarth did not marry again?

The Rector. No; she devoted herself to the education of her son, and lived and died in this house. The room which is now my study she furnished with a small reading-desk and a couple of benches, now in my nursery, and made it into a kind of chapel, in which the keeper of the general shop—who was, I believe, considered a shining light amongst the Wesleyan community—was in the habit of holding forth every Sunday morning to such few members of that sect as were within reach of Dewsdale. She died when her son was nineteen years of age, and was buried in the family vault in the churchyard yonder. Her son's adherence to the Church of England was a very great trouble to her. [*Inroad of boy in holland, very dejected and inky of aspect, also exclaiming "Pa!"*] No, John; not till that problem is worked out. Take that cricket-bat back to the lobby, sir, and return to your studies. [*Sulky withdrawal of boy.*] You see what it is to have a large family, Mr.—Sheldon. I beg pardon, Mr.———

Myself. Hawkehurst, clerk to Mr. Sheldon.

The Rector. To be sure. I have some thoughts of the Law for one of my elder sons; the Church is terribly overcrowded. However, as I was on the point of saying when my boy John disturbed us, though I have heard a great deal of gossip about the Haygarths, I fear I can give you very little substantial information. Their connection with Dewsdale lasted little more than twenty years. Matthew Haygarth was married in Dewsdale church, his son John was christened in Dewsdale church, and he himself is buried in the churchyard. That is about as much positive information as I can give you; and you will perhaps remark that the parish register would afford you as much.

After questioning the good-natured old rector rather closely, and obtaining little more than the above information, I asked permission to see the house.

"Old furniture and old pictures are apt to be suggestive," I said; "and perhaps while we are going over the house you may happen to recall some further particulars relating to the Haygarth family."

Mr. Wendover assented. He was evidently anxious to oblige me, and accepted my explanation of my business in perfect good faith. He conducted me from room to room, waiting patiently while I scrutinised the panelled walls and stared at the attenuated old furniture. I was determined to observe George Sheldon's advice to the very letter, though I had little hope of making any grand melodramatic discovery in the way of documents hidden in old cabinets, or mouldering behind sliding panels.

I asked the rector if he had ever found papers of any kind in forgotten nooks and corners of the house or the furniture. His reply was a decided negative. He had explored and investigated every inch of the old dwelling-place, and had found nothing.

So much for Sheldon's idea.

Mr. Wendover led me from basement to garret, encountering bouncing daughters and boys in brown holland wherever we went; and from basement to garret I found that all was barren. In the whole of the house there was but one object which arrested my attention, and the interest which that one object aroused in my mind had no relation to the Haygarthian fortune.

Over a high carved chimney-piece in one of the bedchambers there hung a little row of miniatures—old-fashioned oval miniatures, pale and faded—pictures of men and women with the powdered hair of the Georgian period, and the flowing full-bottomed wigs familiar to St. James's and Tunbridge-wells in the days of inoffensive Anne. There were in all seven miniatures, six of which specimens of antique portraiture were prim and starched and artificial of aspect. But the seventh was different in form and style: it was the picture of a girlish face looking out of a frame of loose unpowdered locks; a bright innocent face, with gray eyes and marked black eyebrows, pouting lips a little parted, and white teeth gleaming between lips of rosy red; such a face as one might fancy the inspiration of an old poet. I took the miniature gently from the little brass hook on which it hung, and stood for some time looking at the bright frank face.

It was the picture of Charlotte Halliday. Yes; I suppose there is a fatality in these things. It was one of those marvellous accidental resemblances which every man has met with in the course of his life. Here was this dead-and-gone beauty of the days of George the Second smiling upon me with the eyes and lips of Philip Sheldon's stepdaughter!

Or was it only a delusion of my own? Was my mind so steeped in the thought of that girl—was my heart so impressed by her beauty, that I could not look upon a fair woman's face without conjuring up her likeness in the pictured countenance? However this may be, I looked long and tenderly at the face which seemed to me to resemble the woman I love.

Of course I questioned the rector as to the original of this particular miniature. He could tell me

nothing about it, except that he thought it was not one of the Caulfields or Haygarths. The man in the full-bottomed Queen-Anne wig was Jeremiah Caulfield, brewer, father of the pious Rebecca; the woman with the high powdered head was the pious Rebecca herself; the man in the George-the-Second wig was Matthew Haygarth. The other three were kindred of Rebecca's. But the wild-haired damsel was some unknown creature, for whose presence Mr. Wendover was unable to account.

I examined the frame of the miniature, and found that it opened at the back. Behind the ivory on which the portrait was painted there was a lock of dark hair incased in crystal; and on the inside of the case, which was of some worthless metal gilded, there was scratched the name "Molly."

How this Molly with the loose dark locks came to be admitted among the prim, and pious Caulfields is certainly more than I can understand.

My exploration of the house having resulted only in this little romantic accident of the likeness to Charlotte, I prepared to take my departure, no wiser than when I had first crossed the threshold. The rector very politely proposed to show me the church; and as I considered that it would be well to take a copy of the Haygarthian entries in the register, I availed myself of his offer. He despatched a maid-servant to summon his clerk, in order that that functionary might assist in the investigation of the registers. The girl departed on this errand, while her master conducted me across his garden, in which there is now a gate opening into the churchyard.

It is the most picturesque of burial-grounds, darkened by the shadow of those solemn yews and spreading cedars. We walked very slowly between the crumbling old tombstones, which have almost all grown one-sided with time. Mr. Wendover led me through a little labyrinth of lowly graves to a high and ponderous iron railing surrounding a square space, in the midst of which there is a stately stone monument. In the railing there is a gate, from which a flight of stone step leads down to the door of a vault. It is altogether rather a pretentious affair, wherein one sees the evidence of substantial wealth unelevated by artistic grace or poetic grandeur.

This is the family vault of the Caulfields and Haygarths.

"I've brought you to look at this tomb," said the rector, resting his hand upon the rusted railing, "because there is rather a romantic story connected with it—a story that concerns Matthew Haygarth, by the bye. I did not think of it just now, when we were talking of him; but it flashed on my memory as we came through the garden. It is rather a mysterious affair; and though it is not very likely to have any bearing upon the object of your inquiry, I may as well tell you about it,—as a leaf out of family history, you know, Mr. Hawkehurst, and as a new proof of the old adage that truth is stranger than fiction."

I assured the rector that I should be glad to hear anything he could tell me.

"I must premise that I only tell the story as I got it from my old clerk, and that it may therefore seem rather indistinct; but there is an entry in the register yonder to show that it is not without foundation. However, I will waste no more words in preamble, but give you the story, which is simply this:"—

The rector seated himself on a dilapidated old tombstone, while I leaned against the rails of the Haygarth vault, looking down upon him.

"Within a month or two of Matthew Haygarth's death a kind of melancholy came over him," said the rector. "Whether he was unhappy with his wife, or whether he felt his health declining, is more than I can say. You must remember that my informant was but a lad at the time of which I speak, and that when he talked to me about the subject sixty years afterwards he was a very old man, and his impressions were therefore more or less vague. But upon certain facts he was sufficiently positive; and amongst the circumstances he remembered most vividly are those of the story I am going to tell you.

"It seems that within a very few weeks of Matthew's death, his wife, Rebecca Haygarth, started on an expedition to the north, in the company of an uncle, to hear John Wesley preach on some very special occasion, and to assist at a love-feast. She was gone more than a fortnight; and during her absence Matthew Haygarth mounted his horse early one morning and rode away from Dewsdale.

"His household consisted of three maids, a man, and the lad Andrew Hone, afterwards my sexton. Before departing on his journey Mr. Haygarth had said that he would not return till late the next evening, and had requested that only the man (whose name I forget) should sit up for him." He was punctiliously obeyed. The household, always of early habits, retired at nine, the accustomed hour; and the man-servant waited to receive his master, while the lad Andrew, who slept in the stables, sat up to keep his fellow-servant company.

"At ten o'clock Mr. Haygarth came home, gave his horse into the charge of the lad, took his candle from the man-servant, and walked straight upstairs, as if going to bed. The man-servant locked the

doors, took his master the key, and then went to his own quarters. The boy remained up to feed and groom the horse, which had the appearance of having performed a hard day's work.

"He had nearly concluded this business when he was startled by the slamming of the back door opening into the courtyard, in which were the stables and outhouses. Apprehending thieves, the boy opened the door of the stable and looked out, doubtless with considerable caution.

"It was broad moonlight, and he saw at a glance that the person who had opened the door was one who had a right to open it. Matthew Haygarth was crossing the courtyard as the lad peeped out. He wore a long black cloak, and his head drooped upon his breast as if he had been in dejection. The lad—being, I suppose, inquisitive, after the manner of country lads—made no more ado, but left his unfinished work and crept stealthily after his master, who came straight to this churchyard,—indeed to this very spot on which we are now standing.

"On this spot the boy Andrew Hone became the secret witness of a strange scene. He saw an open grave close against the rails yonder, and he saw a little coffin lowered silently into that grave by the sexton of that time and a strange man, who afterwards went away in a mourning coach, which was in waiting at the gate, and in which doubtless the stranger and the little coffin had come.

"Before the man departed he assisted to fill up the grave; and when it was filled Matthew Haygarth gave money to both the men—gold it seemed to the lad Andrew, and several pieces to each person. The two men then departed, but Mr. Haygarth still lingered.

"As soon as he fancied himself alone, he knelt down beside the little grave, covered his face with his hands, and either wept or prayed, Andrew Hone could not tell which. If he wept, he wept silently.

"From that night, my sexton said, Matthew Haygarth faded visibly. Mistress Rebecca came home from her love-feast, and nursed and tended her husband with considerable kindness, though, so far as I can make out, she was at the best a stern woman. He died three weeks after the event which I have described, and was buried in that vault close to the little grave." I thanked Mr. Wendover for his succinct narrative, and apologised for the trouble I had occasioned him.

"Do not speak of the trouble," he answered kindly; "I am used to telling that story. I have heard it a great many times from poor old Andrew, and I have told it a great many times."

"The story has rather a legendary tone," I said; "I should have scarcely thought such a thing possible."

The rector shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating gesture.

"In our own day," he replied, "such an occurrence would be almost impossible; but you must remember that we are talking of the last century—a century in which, I regret to say, the clergy of the Church of England were sadly lax in the performance of their duties. The followers of Wesley and Whitefield could scarcely have multiplied as they did if the flocks had not been cruelly neglected by their proper shepherds. It was a period in which benefices were bestowed constantly on men obviously unfitted for the holy office—men who were gamblers and drunkards, patrons of cock-pits, and in many cases open and shameless reprobates. In such an age almost anything was possible; and this midnight and unhallowed interment may very well have taken place either with the consent or without the knowledge of the incumbent, who, I am told, bore no high character for piety or morality."

"And you say there is an entry in the register?"

"Yes, a careless scrawl, dated Sept. 19th, 1774, recording the burial of one Matthew Haygarth, aged four years, removed from the burial-ground attached to the parish church of Spotswold."

"Then it was a reinterment?"

"Evidently."

"And is Spotswold in this county?"

"Yes; it is a very small village, about fifty miles from here."

"And Matthew Haygarth died very soon after this event?"

"He did. He died very suddenly—with an awful suddenness—and died intestate. His widow was left the possessor of great wealth, which increased in the hands of her son John Haygarth, a very prudent and worthy gentleman, and a credit to the Church of which he was a member. He only died very lately, I believe, and must therefore have attained a great age."

It is quite evident that Mr. Wendover had not seen the advertisement in the Times, and was ignorant of the fact that the accumulated wealth of Haygarths and Caulfields is now waiting a claimant.

I asked permission to see the register containing the entry of the mysterious interment; and after the administration of a shilling to the clerk—a shilling at Dewsdale being equal to half a crown in London—the vestry cupboard was opened by that functionary, and the book I required was produced from a goodly pile of such mouldy brown leather-bound volumes.

The following is a copy of the entry:—

"On Thursday last past, being ye 19 Sep'tr, A.D. 1774, was interr'd ye bodie off onne Matthewe Haygarthe, ag'd foure yeres, remoov'd fromm ye Churcheyarde off St. Marie, under ye hil, Spotswolde, in this Co. Pade forr so doeing, sevven shill."

After having inspected the register, I asked many further questions, but without eliciting much further information. So I expressed my thanks for the courtesy that had been shown me, and took my departure, not wishing to press the matter so closely as to render myself a nuisance to the worthy Wendover, and bearing in mind that it would be open to me to return at any future time.

And now I ask myself—and I ask the astute Sheldon—what is the meaning of this mysterious burial, and is it likely to have any bearing on the object of our search? These are questions for the consideration of the astute S.

I spent my evening in jotting down the events of the day, in the above free-and-easy fashion for my own guidance, and in a more precise and business-like style for my employer. I posted my letter before ten o'clock, the hour at which the London mail is made up, and then smoked my cigar in the empty streets, overshadowed by gaunt square stacks of building and tall black chimneys; and so back to my inn, where I took a glass of ale and another cigar, and then to bed, as the worthy Pepys might have concluded.

CHAPTER III.

MR. GOODGE'S WISDOM.

Oct. 5th. My dreams last night were haunted by the image of gray-eyed Molly, with her wild loose hair. She must needs have been a sweet creature; and how she came amongst those prim fishy-eyed men and women with absurd head-gear is much more than I can understand. That she should mix herself up with Diana Paget, and play *rouge-et-noir* at Forêtdechêne in a tucked-up chintz gown and a quilted satin petticoat, in my dreams last night—that I should meet her afterwards in the little stucco temple on the Belgian hills, and stab her to the heart, whereon she changed into Charlotte Halliday—is only in the nature of dreams, and therefore no subject for wonder.

On referring to Sheldon's letter I found that the next people to be looked up were descendants of Brice the lawyer; so I devoted my breakfast-hour to the cultivation of an intimacy with the oldest of the waiters—a very antique specimen of his brotherhood, with a white stubble upon his chin and a tendency to confusion of mind in the matter of forks and spoons.

"Do you know, or have you ever known, an attorney of the name of Brice in this town?" I asked him.

He rubbed the white stubble contemplatively with his hand, and then gave his poor old head a dejected shake. I felt at once that I should get very little good out of *him*.

"No," he murmured despondently, "not that I can call to mind."

I should like to know what he *could* call to mind, piteous old meanderer!

"And yet you belong to Ullerton, I suppose?"

"Yes; and have belonged to it these seventy-five years, man and boy;" whereby, no doubt, the dreary confusion of the unhappy being's mind. Figurez donc, mon cher. Qui-que-ce-soit, fifty-five years or so of commercial breakfasts and dinners in such a place as Ullerton! Five-and-fifty years of steaks and chops; five-and-fifty years of ham and eggs, indifferently buttered toasts, and perennial sixes of brandy-and-water! After rambling to and fro with spoons and forks, and while in progress of clearing my table, and

dropping the different items of my breakfast equipage, the poor soddened faded face of this dreary wanderer became suddenly illumined with a faint glimmer that was almost the light of reason.

"There were a Brice in Ullerton when I were a lad; I've heard father tell on him," he murmured slowly.

"An attorney?"

"Yes. He were a rare wild one, he were! It was when the Prince of Wales were Regent for his poor old mad father, as the saying is, and folks was wilder like in general in those times, and wore spencers—lawyer Brice wore a plum-coloured one."

Imagine then again, mon cher, an attorney in a plum-coloured spencer! Who, in these enlightened days, would trust his business to such a practitioner? I perked up considerably, believing that my aged imbecile was going to be of real service to me.

"Yes, he were a rare wild one, he were," said my ancient friend with excitement. "I can remember him as well as if it was yesterday, at Tiverford races—there was races at Tiverford in those days, and gentlemen jocks. Lawyer Brice rode his roan mare—Queen Charlotte they called her. But after that he went wrong, folks said—speckilated with some money, you see, that he didn't ought to have touched—and went to America, and died."

"Died in America, did he? Why the deuce couldn't he die in Ullerton? I should fancy it was a pleasanter place to die in than it is to live in. And how about his sons?"

"Lawyer Brice's sons?"

"Yes, of course."

My imbecile's lips expanded into a broad grin.

"Lawyer Brice never had no sons," he exclaimed, with a tone which seemed to express a contemptuous pity for my ignorance; "he never married."

"Well, well; his brothers. He had brothers, I suppose?"

"Not as *I* ever heard tell on," answered my imbecile, relapsing into hopeless inanity.

It was clear that no further help was to be obtained from him. I went to the landlord—a brisk business-like individual of Transatlantic goaheadism. From him I learned that there were no Brices in Ullerton, and never had been within the thirty years of his experience in that town. He gave me an Ullerton directory in confirmation of that fact—a neat little shilling volume, which I begged leave to keep for a quarter of an hour before returning it.

Brice was evidently a failure. I turned to the letter G, and looked up the name of Goodge. Goodge, Jonah, minister of Beulah Chapel, resided at No. 7, Waterhouse-lane—the lane in which I had seen the chapel.

I determined upon waiting on the worthy Goodge. He may be able to enlighten me as to the name of the pastor who preached to the Wesleyan flock in the time of Rebecca Caulfield; and from the descendants of such pastor I may glean some straws and shreds of information. The pious Rebecca would have been likely to confide much to her spiritual director. The early Wesleyans had all the exaltation of the Quietists, and something of the lunatic fervour of the Convulsionists, who kicked and screamed themselves into epilepsy under the influence of the Unigenitus Bull. The pious Rebecca was no doubt an enthusiast.

* * * * *

I found No. 7, Waterhouse-lane. It is a neat little six-roomed house, with preternaturally green palings enclosing about sixty square feet of bright yellow gravel, adorned by a row of whitewashed shells. Some scarlet geraniums bloomed in pots of still more vivid scarlet; and the sight of those bright red blossoms recalled Philip Sheldon's garden at Bayswater, and that sweet girl by whose side I have walked its trim pathways.

But business is business; and if I am ever to sue for my Charlotte's hand, I must present myself before her as the winner of the three thousand. Remembering this, I lifted Mr. Goodge's knocker, and presently found myself in conversation with that gentleman.

Whether unordained piety has a natural tendency to become greasy of aspect, and whether, among the many miracles vouchsafed to the amiable and really great Wesley, he received for his disciples of

all time to come the gift of a miraculous straightness and lankiness of hair, I know not; but I do know that every Methodist parson I have had the honour to know has been of one pattern, and that Mr. Goodge is no exception to the rule.

I am bound to record that I found him a very civil person, quite willing to afford me any help in his power, and far more practical and business-like than the rector of Dewsdale.

It seems that the gift of tongues descended on the Goodges during the lifetime of John Wesley himself, and during the earlier part of that teacher's career. It was a Goodge who preached in the draper's warehouse, and it was the edifying discourse of a Goodge which developed the piety of Miss Rebecca Caulfield, afterwards Mrs. Haygarth.

"That Goodge was my great-uncle," said the courteous Jonah, "and there was no one in Ullerton better acquainted with Rebecca Caulfield. I've heard my grandmother talk of her many a time. She used to send him poultry and garden-stuff from her house at Dewsdale, and at his instigation she contributed handsomely to the erection of the chapel in which it is my privilege to preach."

I felt that I had struck upon a vein of gold. Here was a sharp-witted, middle-aged man—not an ancient mariner, or a meandering imbecile—who could remember the talk of a grandmother who had known Matthew Haygarth's wife. And this visit to Mr. Goodge was my own idea, not prompted by the far-seeing Sheldon. I felt myself advancing in the insidious arts of a private inquirer.

"I am employed in the prosecution of a business which has a *remote* relation to the Haygarth family history," I said; "and if you can afford me any information on that subject I should be extremely obliged."

I emphasised the adjective "remote," and felt myself, in my humble way, a Talleyrand.

"What kind of information, do you require?" asked Mr. Goodge thoughtfully.

"Any information respecting Matthew Haygarth or his wife."

Mr. Goodge became profoundly meditative after this.

"I am not given to act unadvisedly," he began—and I felt that I was in for a little professional discourse: "the creatures of impulse are the children of Satan, the babes of Lucifer, the infants of Beelzebub. I take counsel in the silence of the night, and wait the whispers of wisdom in the waking hours of darkness. You must allow me time to ponder this business in my heart and to be still."

I told Mr. Goodge that I would willingly await his own time for affording me any information in his power to give.

"That is pleasant," said the pastor blandly: "the worldly are apt to rush blindly through life, as the roaring lion rushes through the forest. I am not one of those rushing worldlings. I presume, by the way, that such information as I may afford is likely to become a source of pecuniary profit to your employer?"

I began to see that my friend Goodge and the rector of Dewsdale were very different kind of people, and that I must play my cards accordingly.

"That will depend upon the nature of your information," I replied diplomatically; "it may be worth something to us, or it may be worthless."

"And in case it should be worth something?"

"In that case my employer would be glad to remunerate the person from whom he obtained it."

Mr. Goodge again became meditative.

"It was the habit of the sainted Wesley to take counsel from the Scriptures," he said presently: "if you will call again tomorrow, young man, I shall have taken counsel, and may be able to entreat with you."

I did not much relish being addressed as "young man," even by such a shining light as the Rev. Jonah Goodge. But as I wanted the Rev. Jonah's aid, I submitted with a tolerable grace to his patriarchal familiarity, and bade him good morning, after promising to call again on the following day. I returned to my inn and wrote to Sheldon in time for the afternoon mail, recounting my interview with Mr. Goodge, and asking how far I should be authorised to remunerate that gentleman, or to pledge myself to remunerate him for such information as he might have to dispose of.

Oct. 6th. A letter from Sheldon.

"DEAR HAWKEHURST,—There may be something very important behind that mysterious burial at Dewsdale. Go without delay to Spotswold; examine registers, tombstones, &c; hunt up oldest inhabitant or inhabitants, from whom you may be able to discover whether any Haygarth or Haygarths ever lived there, and all that is known respecting such Haygarth or Haygarths. You have got a clue to *something*. Follow it up till it breaks off short, as such clues often do, or till you find it is only leading you on a wild-goose chase. The Dewsdale business is worth investigation.

"Mem. How about descendants of lawyer Brice?—Yours truly, G.S.

"G.'s Inn, Oct. 5th."

Before starting for Spotswold it was necessary for me to see Mr. Goodge. I found that gentleman in a pious and yet business-like frame of mind. He had taken counsel from the Scriptures, like the founder of his sect; but I fancy with rather less spiritual aspirations.

"The text upon which the lot fell was the 12th verse of the 9th chapter in the Book of Proverbs, 'If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself,'" he said solemnly; "whereby I perceive that I shall not be justified in parting with that which you seek without fitting recompense. I ask you, therefore, young man, what are you prepared to give?"

The Rev. Jonah's tone could scarcely have been more lofty, or his manner more patronising, if he had been Saul and I the humble David; but a man who is trying to earn three thousand pounds must put up with a great deal. Finding that the minister was prepared to play the huckster, I employed no further ceremony.

"The price must of course depend on the quality of the article you have to sell," I said; "I must know that before I can propose terms."

"Suppose my information took the form of letters?"

"Letters from whom—to whom?"

"From Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth to my great-uncle, Samson Goodge."

"How many of such letters have you to sell?"

I put it very plainly; but the Rev. Jonah's susceptibilities were not of the keenest order. He did not wince.

"Say forty odd letters."

I pricked up my ears; and it needed all my diplomacy to enable me to conceal my sense of triumph. Forty odd letters! There must be an enormous amount of information in forty odd letters; unless the woman wrote the direst twaddle ever penned by a feminine correspondent.

"Over what period do the dates of these letters extend?" I asked.

"Over about seven years; from 1769 to 1776."

Four years prior to the marriage with our friend Matthew; three years after the marriage.

"Are they tolerably long letters, or mere scrawls?"

"They were written in a period when nobody wrote short letters," answered Mr. Goodge sententiously,—"the period of Bath post and dear postage. The greater number of the epistles cover three sides of a sheet of letter-paper; and Mrs. Rebecca's caligraphy was small and neat."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I suppose it is no use my asking you to let me see one of these letters before striking a bargain—eh, Mr. Goodge?" "Well, I think not," answered the oily old hypocrite. "I have taken counsel, and I will abide by the light that has been shown me. 'If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself;' such are the words of inspiration. No, I think not."

"And what do you ask for the forty odd letters?"

"Twenty pounds."

"A stiff sum, Mr. Goodge, for forty sheets of old letter-paper."

"But if they were not likely to be valuable, you would scarcely happen to want them," answered the minister. "I have taken counsel, young man."

"And those are your lowest terms?"

"I cannot accept sixpence less. It is not in me to go from my word. As Jacob served Laban seven years, and again another seven years, having promised, so do I abide by my bond. Having said twenty pounds, young man, Heaven forbid that I should take so much as twenty pence less than those twenty pounds!"

The solemn unction with which he pronounced this twaddle is beyond description. The pretence of conscientious feeling which he contrived to infuse into his sordid bargain-driving might have done honour to Molière's Tartuffe. Seeing that he was determined to stick to his terms, I departed. I telegraphed to Sheldon for instructions as to whether I was to give Goodge the money he asked, and then went back to my inn, where I devoted myself for the next ten minutes to the study of a railway time-table, with a view to finding the best route to Spotswold.

After a close perusal of bewildering strings of proper names and dazzling columns of figures, I found a place called Black Harbour, "for Wisborough, Spotswold, and Chilton." A train left Ullerton for Black Harbour at six o'clock in the afternoon, and was due at the latter place at 8.40.

This gave me an interval of some hours, in which I could do nothing, unless I received a telegram from Sheldon. The chance of a reply from him kept me a prisoner in the coffee-room of the Swan Inn, where I read almost every line in the local and London newspapers pending the arrival of the despatch, which came at last.

"Tell Goodge he shall have the sum asked, and get the letters at once.
Money by to-night's post."

This was Sheldon's message; sharp and short, and within the eighteen penny limit. Acting upon this telegram, I returned to the abode of Mr. Goodge, told him his terms were to be complied with, showed him the telegram, at his request, and asked for the letters.

I ought to have known my reverend friend better than to imagine he would part with those ancient documents except for money upon the counter.

He smiled a smile which might have illuminated the visage of
Machiavelli.

"The letters have kept a long time, young man," he said, after having studied the telegram as closely as if it had been written in Punic; "and to you, they are in nowise the worse for keeping: so they will keep yet longer. 'If thou be wise, then shalt be wise for thyself.' You can come for the letters tomorrow, and bring the money with you. Say at 11 A.M."

I put on my hat and bade my friend good day. I have often been tempted to throw things at people, and have withheld my hand; but I never felt Satan so strong upon me as at that moment, and I very much fear that if I had had anything in the way of a kitchen-poker or a carving-knife about me, I should have flung that missile at the patriarchal head of my saintly Jonah. As it was, I bade him good day and returned to the Swan, where I took a hurried repast and started for the station, carrying a light carpet-bag with me, as I was not likely to return till the following night, at the earliest.

I arrived at the station ten minutes before the starting of the train, and had to endure ten minutes of that weariness called waiting. I exhausted the interest of all the advertisements on the station walls; found out how I could have my furniture removed with the utmost convenience—supposing myself to possess furniture; discovered where I ought to buy a dinner-service, and the most agreeable kind of blind to screen my windows in sunny weather. I was still lingering over the description of this new invention in blinds, when a great bell set up a sudden clanging, and the down train from London came thundering into the station.

This was also the train for Black Harbour. There were a good many passengers going northwards, a good many alighting at Ullerton; and in the hurry and confusion I had some difficulty in finding a place in a second-class carriage, the passengers therein blocking up the windows with that unamiable exclusiveness peculiar to railway travellers. I found a place at last, however; but in hurrying from carriage to carriage I was startled by an occurrence which I have since pondered very seriously.

I ran bolt against my respected friend and patron Horatio Paget.

We had only time to recognise each other with exclamations of mutual surprise when the clanging

bell rang again, and I was obliged to scuffle into my seat. A moment's delay would have caused me to be left behind. And to have remained behind would have been very awkward for me; as the Captain would undoubtedly have questioned me as to my business in Ullerton. Was I not supposed to be at Dorking, enjoying the hospitality of an aged aunt?

It would have been unlucky to lose that train.

But what "makes" the gallant Captain in Ullerton? That is a question which I deliberated as the train carried me towards Black Harbour.

Sheldon warned me of the necessity for secrecy, and I have been as secret as the grave. It is therefore next to an impossibility that Horatio Paget can have any idea of the business I am engaged in. He is the very man of all others to try and supersede me if he had an inkling of my plans; but I am convinced he can have no such inkling.

And yet the advertisement of the Haygarth property in the *Times* was as open to the notice of all the world as it was open to the notice of George Sheldon. What if my patron should have been struck by the same advertisement, and should have come to Ullerton on the same business?

It is possible, but it is not likely. When I left town the Captain was engaged in Philip Sheldon's affairs. He has no doubt come to Ullerton on Philip Sheldon's business. The town, which seems an abomination of desolation to a man who is accustomed to London and Paris, is nevertheless a commercial centre; and the stockbroker's schemes may involve the simple Ullertonians, as well as the more experienced children of the metropolis.

Having thought the business out thus, I gave myself no further trouble about the unexpected appearance of my friend and benefactor.

At Black Harbour I found a coach, which carried me to Spotswold, whither I travelled in a cramped and painful position as regards my legs, and with a pervading sensation which was like a determination of luggage to the brain, so close to my oppressed head was the heavily-laden roof of the vehicle. It was pitch dark when I and two fellow-passengers of agricultural aspect were turned out of the coach at Spotswold, which in the gloom of night appeared to consist of half a dozen houses shut in from the road by ghastly white palings, a grim looming church, and a low-roofed inn with a feeble light glimmering athwart a red stuff curtain.

At this inn I was fain to take up my abode for the night, and was conducted to a little whitewashed bedchamber, draperied with scanty dimity and smelling of apples—the humblest, commonest cottage chamber, but clean and decent, and with a certain countrified aspect which was pleasing to me. I fancied myself the host of such an inn, with Charlotte for my wife; and it seemed to me that it would be nice to live in that remote and unknown village, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot." I beguiled myself by such foolish fancies—I, who have been reared amidst the clamour and riot of the Strand!

Should I be happy with that dear girl if she were mine? Alas! I doubt it. A man who has led a disreputable life up to the age of seven-and-twenty is very likely to have lost all capacity for such pure and perfect happiness as that which good men find in the tranquil haven of a home.

Should I not hear the rattle of the billiard-balls, or the voice of the *croupier* calling the main, as I sat by my quiet fireside? Should I not yearn for the glitter and confusion of West-end dancing-rooms, or the mad excitement of the ring, while my innocent young wife was sitting by my side and asking me to look at the blue eyes of my first-born?

No; Charlotte is not for me. There must be always the two classes—the sheep and the goats; and my lot has been cast among the goats.

And yet there are some people who laugh to scorn the doctrines of
Calvin, and say there is no such thing as predestination.

Is there not predestination? Was not I predestined to be born in a gaol and reared in a gutter, educated among swindlers and scoundrels, fed upon stolen victuals, and clad in garments never to be paid for? Did no Eumenides preside over the birth of Richard Savage, so set apart for misery that the laws of nature were reversed, and even his mother hated him? Did no dismal fatality follow the footsteps of Chatterton? Has no mysterious ban been laid upon the men who have been called Dukes of Buckingham?

What foolish lamentations am I scribbling in this diary, which is intended to be only the baldest record of events! It is so natural to mankind to complain, that, having no ear in which to utter his discontent, a man is fain to resort to pen and ink.

I devoted my evening to conversation with the landlord and his wife, but found that the name of Haygarth was as strange to them as if it had been taken from an inscription in the tomb of the Pharaohs. I inquired about the few inhabitants of the village, and ascertained that the oldest man in the place is the sexton, native-born, and supposed by mine host never to have travelled twenty miles from his birthplace. His name is Peter Drabbles. What extraordinary names that class of people contrive to have! My first business to-morrow morning will be to find my friend Drabbles—another ancient mariner, no doubt—and to examine the parish registers.

Oct. 7th. A misty morning, and a perpetual drizzle—to say nothing of a damp, penetrating cold, which creeps through the thickest overcoat, and chills one to the bone. I do not think Spotswold can have much brightness or prettiness even on the fairest summer morning that ever beautified the earth. I know that, seen as I see it to-day, the place is the very archetype of all that is darksome, dull, desolate, dismal, and dreary. (How odd, by the way, that all that family of epithets should have the same initial!) A wide stretch of moorland lies around and about the little village, which crouches in a hollow, like some poor dejected animal that seeks to shelter itself from the bitter blast. On the edge of the moorland, and above the straggling cottages and the little inn, rises the massive square tower of an old church, so far out of proportion to the pitiful cluster of houses, that I imagine it must be the remnant of some monastic settlement.

Towards this church I made my way, under the dispiriting drip, drip of the rain, and accompanied by a feeble old man, who is sexton, clerk, gravedigger, and anything or everything of an official nature.

We went into the church after my ancient mariner No. 2 had fumbled a good deal with a bunch of ghostly-looking keys. The door opened with a dismal scroop, and shut with an appalling bang. Grim and dark as the church is without, it is grimmer and darker within, and damp and vault-like, *à faire frémir*. There are all the mysterious cupboards and corners peculiar to such edifices; an organ-loft, from which weird noises issue at every opening or closing of a door; a vaulted roof, which echoes one's footsteps with a moan, as of some outraged spirit hovering in empty space, and ejaculating piteously, "Another impious intruder after the sacramental plate! another plebeian sole trampling on the brasses of the De Montacutes, lords of the manor!"

The vestry is, if anything, more ghostly than the general run of vestries; but the business mind is compelled to waive all considerations of a supernatural character. For the moment there flashed across my brain the shadows of all the Christmas stories I had ever read or heard concerning vestries; the phantom bridal, in which the bride's beautiful white hand changed to the bony fingers of a skeleton as she signed the register; the unearthly christening, in which all at once, after the ceremony having been conducted with the utmost respectability, to the edification of the unauthorised intruder hiding behind a pillar, the godfathers and godmothers, nurse and baby, priest and clerk, became in a moment dilapidated corpses; whereon the appalled intruder fell prone at the foot of his pillar, there to be discovered the next morning by his friends, and the public generally, with his hair blanched to an awful whiteness, or his noble intellect degraded to idiocy. For a moment, the memory of about a hundred Christmas stories was too much for me—so weird of aspect and earthy of atmosphere was the vestry at Spotswold. And then "being gone" the shadows of the Christmas stories, I was a man and a lawyer's clerk again, and set myself assiduously to search the registers and interrogate my ancient.

I found that individual a creature of mental fogginess compared with whom my oldest inhabitant of Ullerton would have been a Pitt, Earl of Chatham. But I questioned and cross-questioned him until I had in a manner turned his poor old wits the seamy side without, and had discovered, first, that he had never known any one called Haygarth in the whole course of those seventy-five years' vegetation which politeness compelled me to speak of as his "life;" secondly, that he had never known any one who knew a Haygarth; thirdly, that he was intimately acquainted with every creature in the village, and that he knew that no one of the inhabitants could give me the smallest shred of such information as I required.

Having extorted so much as this from my ancient with unutterable expenditure of time and trouble, I next set to work upon the registers.

If the ink manufactured in the present century is of no more durable nature than that abominable fluid employed in the penmanship of a hundred years ago, I profoundly pity the generations that are to come after us. The registers of Spotswold might puzzle a Bunsen. However, bearing in mind the incontrovertible fact that three thousand pounds is a very agreeable sum of money, I stuck to my work for upwards of two hours, and obtained as a result the following entries:—

"1. Matthew Haygarthe, aged foure yeares, berrid in this churcheyarde, over against ye tombe off Mrs. Martha Stileman, about 10 fete fromm ye olde yue tre. Febevarie 6th, 1753."

"2. Mary Haygarthe, aged twentie sevene yeers, berrid under ye yue tree, Nov. 21, 1754."

After copying these two entries, I went out into the churchyard to look for Mary Haygarth's grave.

Under a fine old yew—which had been old a hundred years ago, it seems—I found huddled amongst other headstones one so incrusted with moss, that it was only after scraping the parasite verdure from the stone with my penknife that I was able to discover the letters that had been cut upon it. I found at last a brief inscription:

"Here lieth ye body of MARY HAYGARTH, aged 27. Born 1727. Died 1754. This stone has been set up by one who sorroweth without hope of consolation." A strange epitaph: no scrap of Latin, no text from Scripture, no conventional testimony to the virtues and accomplishments of the departed, no word to tell whether the dead woman had been maid, wife, or widow. It was the most provoking inscription for a lawyer or a genealogist, but such as might have pleased a poet.

I fancy this Mary Haygarth must have been some quiet creature, with very few friends to sorrow for her loss; perhaps only that one person who sorrowed without hope of consolation.

Such a tombstone might have been set above the grave of that simple maid who dwelt "beside the banks of Dove."

This is the uttermost that my patience or ingenuity can do for me at Spotswold. I have exhausted every possibility of obtaining further information. So, having written and posted my report to Sheldon, I have no more to do but to return to Ullerton. I take back with me nothing but the copy of the two entries in the register of burials. Who this Matthew Haygarth or this Mary Haygarth was, and how related to *the* Matthew, is an enigma not to be solved at Spotswold.

Here the story of the Haygarths ends with the grave under the yew-tree.

BOOK THE FIFTH.

RELICS OF THE DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

BETRAYED BY A BLOTTING-PAD.

At an early hour upon the day on which Valentine Hawkehurst telegraphed to his employer, Philip Sheldon presented himself again at the dingy door of the office in Gray's Inn.

The dingy door was opened by the still more dingy boy; and Mr. Sheldon the elder—who lived in a state of chronic hurry, and had a hansom cab in attendance upon him at almost every step of his progress through life—was aggravated by the discovery that his brother was out.

"Out!" he repeated, with supreme disgust; "he always *is* out, I think.
Where is he to be found?"

The boy replied that his master would be back in half an hour, if Mr.
Sheldon would like to wait.

"Like to wait!" cried the stockbroker; "when will lawyers' clerks have sense enough to know that nobody on this earth ever *liked* to wait? Where's your master gone?"

"I think he's just slipped round into Holborn, sir," the boy replied, with some slight hesitation. He was very well aware that George had secrets from his brother, and that it was not judicious to be too free in his communications to the elder gentleman. But the black eyes and white teeth of the stockbroker seemed very awful to him; and if Philip chose to question him, he must needs answer the truth, not

having been provided by his master with any convenient falsehood in case of inquiry.

"What part of Holborn?" asked Philip sharply.

"I did hear tell as it was the telegraph office."

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon; and then he dashed downstairs, leaving the lad on the threshold of the door staring after him with eyes of wonder.

The telegraph office meant business; and any business of his brother's was a matter of interest to Mr. Sheldon at this particular period. He had meditated the meaning of George's triumphant smile in the secluded calm of his own office; and the longer he had meditated, the more deeply rooted had become his conviction that his brother was engaged in some very deep and very profitable scheme, the nature of which it was his bounden duty to discover.

Impressed by this idea, Mr. Sheldon returned to the hansom-cab, which was waiting for him at the end of Warwick-court, and made his way to the telegraph office. The ostensible motive of his call in Gray's Inn was sufficient excuse for this following up of his brother's footsteps. It was one of those waifs and strays of rather disreputable business which the elder man sometimes threw in the way of the younger.

As the wheel of the hansom ground against the kerbstone in front of the telegraph office, the figure of George Sheldon vanished in a little court to the left of that establishment. Instead of pursuing this receding figure, Philip Sheldon walked straight into the office.

It was empty. There was no one in any of the shaded compartments, so painfully suggestive of pecuniary distress and the stealthy hypothecation of portable property. A sound of rattling and bumping in an inner office betrayed the neighbourhood of a clerk; but in the office Mr. Sheldon was alone.

Upon the blotting-pad on the counter of the central partition the stockbroker perceived one great blot of ink, still moist. Ha laid the tip of his square forefinger upon it, to assure himself of that fact, and then set himself deliberately to scrutinise the blotting-paper. He was a man who seldom hesitated. His greatest *coups* on the money-market had been in a great measure the result of this faculty of prompt decision. To-day he possessed himself of the blotting-pad, and examined the half-formed syllables stamped upon it with as much coolness and self-possession as if he had been seated in his own office reading his own newspaper. A man given to hesitation would have looked to the right and the left and watched for his opportunity—and lost it. Philip Sheldon knew better than to waste his chances by needless precaution; and he made himself master of all the intelligence the blotting-pad could afford him before the clerk emerged from the inner den where the rattling and stamping was going forward.

"I thought as much," muttered the stockbroker, as he recognised traces of his brother's sprawling penmanship upon the pad. The message had been written with a heavy hand and a spongy quill pen, and had left a tolerably clear impression of its contents on the blotting-paper.

Here and there the words stood out bold and clear; here and there, again, there was only one decipherable letter amongst a few broken hieroglyphics. Mr. Sheldon was accustomed to the examination of very illegible documents, and he was able to master the substance of that random impression. If he could not decipher the whole, he made out sufficient for his purpose. Money was to be offered to a man called Goodge for certain letters. He knew his brother's affairs well enough to know that these letters for which money was to be offered must needs be letters of importance in some search for an heir-at-law. So far all was clear and simple; but beyond this point he found himself at fault. Where was this Goodge to be found? and who was the person that was to offer him money for the letters? The names and address, which had been written first, had left no impression on the blotting-pad, or an impression so faint as to be useless for any practical purpose.

Mr. Sheldon put down the pad and lingered by the door of the office deliberating, when the rattling and hammering came to an abrupt termination, and the clerk emerged from the interior den.

"O," he exclaimed, "it's all right. Your message shall go directly."

The stockbroker, whose face was half averted from the clerk, and who stood between that functionary and the light from the open doorway, at once comprehended the error that had arisen. The clerk had mistaken him for his brother.

"I'm not quite clear as to whether I gave the right address," he said promptly, with his face still averted, and his attention apparently occupied by a paper in his hand. "Just see how I wrote it, there's a good fellow."

The clerk withdrew for a few minutes, and returned with the message in his hand.

"From George Sheldon to Valentine Hawkehurst, Black Swan Inn, Ullerton," he read aloud from the document.

"All right, and thanks," cried the stockbroker.

He gave one momentary glance at the clerk, and had just time to see that individual's look of bewilderment as some difference in his voice and person from the voice and person of the black-whiskered man who had just left the office dawned upon his troubled senses. After that one glance Mr. Sheldon darted across the pavement, sprang into his cab, and called to the driver, "Literary Institution, Burton-street, as fast as you can go."

"I'll try my luck in the second column of the *Times*," he said to himself. "If George's scheme is what I take it to be, I shall get some clue to it there." He took a little oblong memorandum-book from his pocket, and looked at his memoranda of the past week. Among those careless jottings he found one memorandum scrawled in pencil, amongst notes and addresses in ink, "*Haygarth—intestate. G.S. to see after.*"

"That's it," he exclaimed; "Haygarth—intestate; Valentine Hawkehurst *not* at Dorking, but working for my brother; Goodge—letters to be paid for. It's all like the bits of mosaic that those antiquarian fellows are always finding in the ruins of Somebody's Baths; a few handfuls of coloured chips that look like rubbish, and can yet be patched into a perfect geometric design. I'll hunt up a file of the *Times* at the Burton Institution, and find out this Haygarth, if he is to be found there."

The Burton Institution was a somewhat dingy temple devoted to the interests of science and literature, and next door to some baths that were very popular among the denizens of Bloomsbury. People in quest of the baths were apt to ascend the classic flight of steps leading to the Institution, when they should have descended to a lowlier threshold lurking modestly by the side of that edifice. The Baths and the Institution had both been familiar to Mr. Sheldon in that period of probation which he had spent in Fitzgeorge-street. He was sufficiently acquainted with the librarian of the Institution to go in and out uninterrogated, and to make any use he pleased of the reading-room. He went in to-day, asked to see the latest bound volumes of the *Times* and the latest files of unbound papers, and began his investigation, working backwards. Rapidly and dexterously as he turned the big leaves of the journals, the investigation occupied nearly three-quarters of an hour; but at the expiration of that time he had alighted on the advertisement published in the March of the preceding year.

He gave a very low whistle—a kind of phantom whistle—as he read this advertisement. "John Haygarth!—a hundred thousand pounds!"

The fortune for which a claimant was lacking amounted to a hundred thousand pounds! Mr. Sheldon knew commercial despots who counted their wealth by millions, and whose fiat could sway the exchanges of Europe; but a hundred thousand pounds seemed to him a very nice thing nevertheless, and he was ready to dispute the prize the anticipation whereof had rendered his brother so triumphant.

"He has rejected me as a coadjutor," he thought, as he went back to his cab after having copied the advertisement; "he shall have me as an antagonist."

"Omega-street, Chelsea, next call," he cried to the driver; and was soon beyond the confines of Bloomsbury, and rattling away towards the border-land of Belgravia. He had completed his search of the newspapers at ten minutes past twelve, and at twenty minutes to one he presented himself at the lodging-house in Omega-street, where he found Captain Paget, in whose "promoting" business there happened to be a lull just now. With this gentleman he had a long interview; and the result of that interview was the departure of the Captain by the two o'clock express for Ullerton. Thus had it happened that Valentine Hawkehurst and his patron encountered each other on the platform of Ullerton station.

CHAPTER II.

VALENTINE INVOKES THE PHANTOMS OF THE PAST.

Oct. 7th, Midnight. I was so fortunate as to get away from Spotswold this morning very soon after the

completion of my researches in the vestry, and at five o'clock in the afternoon I found myself once more in the streets of Ullerton. Coming home in the train I meditated seriously upon the unexpected appearance of Horatio Paget at the head-quarters of this Haygarthian investigation; and the more I considered that fact, the more I felt inclined to doubt my patron's motives, and to fear his interference. Can his presence in Ullerton have any relation to the business that has brought me here? That is the question which I asked myself a hundred times during my journey from Spotswold; that is the question which I ask myself still.

I have no doubt I give myself unnecessary trouble; but I know that old man's Machiavellian cleverness only too well; and I am inclined to look with suspicion upon every action of his. My first business on returning to this house was to ascertain whether any one bearing his name, or answering to my description of him, had arrived during my absence. I was relieved by finding that no stranger whatever had put up at the inn since the previous forenoon. Who may have used the coffee-room is another question, not so easily set at rest. In the evening a great many people come in and go out; and my friend and patron may have taken his favourite brandy-and-soda, skimmed his newspaper, and picked up whatever information was to be obtained as to *my* movements without attracting any particular attention.

In the words of the immortal lessee of the Globe Theatre, "Why I should fear I know not … and yet I feel I fear!"

I found a registered letter from George Sheldon, enclosing twenty pounds in notes, and furnished therewith I went straight to my friend Jonah, whom I found engaged in the agreeable occupation of taking tea. I showed him the money; but my estimate of the reverend gentleman's honour being of a very limited nature, I took care not to give it to him till he had produced the letters. On finding that I was really prepared to give him his price, he went to an old-fashioned bureau, and opened one of those secret recesses which cannot for three minutes remain a secret to any investigator possessed of a tolerably accurate eye or a three-foot rule. From this hiding-place—which he evidently considered a triumph of mechanical art, worthy the cabinet of a D'Argenson or a Fouché—he produced a packet of faded yellow letters, about which there lurked a faint odour of dried rose-leaves and lavender, which seemed the very perfume of the past.

When my reverend friend had laid the packet on the table within reach of my hand, and not till then, I gave him the bank-notes. His fat old fingers closed upon them greedily, and his fishy old eyes were illumined by a faint glimmer which I believe nothing but bank-notes could have kindled in them.

After having assured himself that they were genuine acknowledgments of indebtedness on the part of the old lady in Thread-needle-street, and not the base simulacra of Birmingham at five-and-twenty shillings a dozen—thirteen as twelve—Mr. Goodge obligingly consented to sign a simple form of receipt which I had drawn up for the satisfaction of my principal.

"I think you said there were forty-odd letters," I remarked, before I proceeded to count the documents in the presence of Mr. Goodge.

That gentleman looked at me with an air of astonishment, which, had I not known him to be the most consummate of hypocrites, would have seemed to be simplicity itself.

"I said from thirty to forty," he exclaimed; "I never said there were forty-odd letters."

I looked at him and he looked at me. His face told me plainly enough that he was trying to deceive me, and my face told him plainly enough that he had no chance of succeeding in that attempt. Whether he was keeping back some of the letters with a view to extorting more money from me hereafter, or whether he was keeping them with the idea of making a better bargain with somebody else, I could not tell; but of the main fact I was certain—he had cheated me.

I untied the red tape which held the letters together. Yes, there was a piece of circumstantial evidence which might have helped to convict my friend had he been on his trial in a criminal court. The red tape bore the mark of the place in which it had been tied for half a century; and a little way within this mark the trace of a very recent tying. Some of the letters had been extracted, and the tape had been tied anew.

I had no doubt that this had been done while my negotiation with Mr. Goodge had been pending. What was I to do? Refuse the letters, and demand to have my principal's money returned to me? I knew my friend well enough to know that such a proceeding would be about as useless as it would be to request the ocean to restore a cup of water that had been poured into it. The letters he had given me might or might not afford some slight link in the chain I was trying to put together; and the letters withheld from me might be more or less valuable than those given to me. In any case the transaction

was altogether a speculative one; and George Sheldon's money was hazarded as completely as if it had been put upon an outsider for the Derby.

Before bidding him a polite farewell, I was determined to make Mr. Goodge thoroughly aware that he had not taken me in.

"You said there were more than forty letters," I told him; "I remember the phrase 'forty-odd,' which is a colloquialism one would scarcely look for in Tillotson or in John Wesley, who cherished a prejudice in favour of scholarship which does not distinguish all his followers. You said there were forty-odd letters, and you have removed some of them from the packet. I am quite aware that I have no legal remedy against you, as our contract was a verbal one, made without witnesses; so I must be content with what I get; but I do not wish you to flatter yourself with the notion that you have hoodwinked a lawyer's clerk. You are not clever enough to do that, Mr. Goodge, though you are knave enough to cheat every attorney in the Law List."

"Young man, are you aware——?"

"As I have suffered by the absence of any witness to our negotiation, I may as well profit by the absence of any witness to our interview. You are a cheat and a trickster, Mr. Goodge, and I have the honour to wish you good afternoon!"

"Go forth, young man!" cried the infuriated Jonah whose fat round face became beet-root colour with rage, and who involuntarily extended his hand to the poker—for the purpose of defence and not defiance, I believe. "Go forth, young man! I say unto you, as Abimelech said unto Jedediah, go forth."

I am not quite clear as to the two scriptural proper names with which the Rev. Jonah embellished his discourse on this occasion; but I know that sort of man always has a leaning to the Abimelech and Jedediahs of biblical history; solely, I believe, because the names have a sonorous roll with them that is pleasant in the mouth of the charlatan.

As I was in the act of going forth—quite at my leisure, for I had no fear of the clerical poker—my eye happened to alight on a small side-table, covered with a chessboard-patterned cloth in gaudy colours, and adorned with some of those sombre volumes which seem like an outward evidence of the sober piety of their possessor. Among the sombre volumes lay something which savoured of another hemisphere than that to which those brown leather-bound books belonged. It was a glove—a gentleman's glove, of pale lavender kid—small in size for a masculine glove, and bearing upon it the evidence of the cleaner's art. Such might be the glove of an exiled Brummel, but could never have encased the squat paw of a Jonah Goodge. It was as if the *point d'Alençon* ruffle of Chesterfield had been dropped in the study of John Wesley.

In a moment there flashed into my mind an idea which has haunted me ever since. That glove had belonged to my respected patron, Horatio Paget, and it was for his benefit the letters had been abstracted from the packet. He had been with Jonah Goodge in the course of that day, and had bought him over to cheat me.

And then I was obliged to go back to the old question, Was it possible that the Captain could have any inkling of my business? Who could have told him?

Who could have betrayed a secret which was known only to George Sheldon and myself?

After all, are there not other people than Horatio Paget who wear cleaned lavender gloves? But it always has been a habit with the Captain to leave one loose glove behind him; and I daresay it was the recollection of this which suggested the idea of his interference in the Goodge business.

I devoted my evening to the perusal of Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth's letters. The pale ink, the quaint cramped hand, the old-fashioned abbreviations, and very doubtful orthography rendered the task laborious; but I stuck to my work bravely, and the old clock in the market-place struck two as I began the last letter. As I get deeper into this business I find my interest in it growing day by day—an interest *sui generis*, apart from all prospect of gain—apart even from the consideration that by means of this investigation I am obtaining a living which is earned *almost* honestly; for if I tell an occasional falsehood or act an occasional hypocrisy, I am no worse than a secretary of legation of an Old Bailey barrister.

The pleasure which I now take in the progress of this research is a pleasure that is new to me: it is the stimulus which makes a breakneck gallop across dreary fields gridironed with dykes and stone walls so delicious to the sportsman; it is the stimulus which makes the task of the mathematician sweet to him when he devotes laborious days to the solution of an abstruse problem; it is the stimulus that sustains the Indian trapper against all the miseries of cold and hunger, foul weather, and aching limbs;

it is the fever of the chase—that inextinguishable fire which, once lighted in the human breast, is not to be quenched until the hunt is ended.

I should like to earn three thousand pounds; but if I were to be none the richer for my trouble, I think, now that I am so deeply involved in this business, I should still go on. I want to fathom the mystery of that midnight interment at Dewsdale; I want to know the story of that Mary Haygarth who lies under the old yew-tree at Spotswold, and for whose loss some one sorrowed without hope of consolation.

Was that a widower's commonplace, I wonder, and did the unknown mourner console himself ultimately with a new wife? Who knows? as my Italian friends say when they discuss the future of France. Shall I ever penetrate that mystery of the past? My task seems to me almost as hopeless as if George Sheldon had set me to hunt up the descendants of King Solomon's ninety-ninth wife. A hundred years ago seems as far away, for all practical purposes, as if it were on the other side of the flood.

The letters are worth very little. They are prim and measured epistles, and they relate much more to spiritual matters than to temporal business. Mrs. Rebecca seems to have been so much concerned for the health of her soul that she had very little leisure to think of anything so insignificant as the bodies of other people. The letters are filled with discourses upon her own state of mind; and the tone of them reveals not a little of that pride whose character it is to simulate humility. Mrs. Rebecca is always casting ashes on her head; but she takes care to let her friend and pastor know what a saintly head it is notwithstanding.

I have laid aside three of the most secular letters, which I selected after wading through unnumbered pages of bewailings in the strain of a Wesleyan Madame Guyon. These throw some little light upon the character of Matthew Haygarth, but do not afford much information of a tangible kind. I have transcribed the letters verbatim, adhering even to certain eccentricities of orthography which were by no means unusual in an age when the Pretender to the crown of Great Britain wrote of his father as *Gems*.

The first letter bears the date of August 30th, 1773, one week after the marriage of the lady to our friend Matthew.

"REVERED FRIEND AND PASTOR,—On Monday sennite we arriv'd in London, wich seems to me a mighty bigg citty, but of no more meritt or piety than Babylon of old. My husband, who knows ye towne better than he knows those things with wich it would more become him to be familiar, was pleas'd to laugh mightily at that pious aversion wherewith I regarded some of ye most notable sights in this place. We went t'other night to a great garden called by some Spring Garden, by others Vauxhall,—as having been at one time ye residence or estate of that Arch Fiend and Papistical traitor Vaux, or Faux; but although I felt obligated to my husband for ye desire to entertain me with a fine sight, I could not but look with shame upon serious Christians disporting themselves like children amongst coloured lamps, and listening as if enraptured to profane music, when, at so much less cost of money or of health, they might have been assembled together to improve and edify one another.

"My obliging Mathew would have taken me to other places of the like character; but inspir'd, as I hope and believe, by ye direction of ye spirit, I took upon myself to tell him what vain trifling is all such kind of pleasure. He argu'd with me stoutly, saying that ye King and Queen, who are both shining examples of goodness and piety, do attend Vauxhall and Ranelagh, and are to be seen there frequent, to the delight of their subjects. On which I told him that, much as I esteemed my sovereign and his respectable consort, I would compleat my existence without having seen them rather than I would seek to encounter them in a place of vain and frivolous diversion. He listen'd to my discoorse in a kind and sober temper, but he was not convinc'd; for by and by he falls of a sudden to sighing and groaning, and cries out, 'O, I went to Vauxhall once when ye garden was not many years made, and O, how bright ye lamps shone, like ye stars of heaven fallen among bushes! and O, how sweet ye music sounded, like ye hymns of angels in ye dewy evening! but that was nigh upon twenty years gone by, and all ye world is changed since then.'

"You will conceive, Reverend Sir, that I was scandalised by such a foolish rapsodie, and in plain words admonish'd my husband of his folly. Whereupon he speedily became sober, and asked my pardon; but for all that night continued of a gloomy countenance, ever and anon falling to sighing and groning as before. Indeed, honour'd Sir, I have good need of a patient sperrit in my dealings with him; for altho' at times I think he is in a fair way to become a Christian, there are other times when I doubt Satan has still a hold upon him, and that all my prayers and admonitions have been in vaine.

"You, who know the wildness and wickedness of his past life—so far as that life was ever known to any but himself, who was ever of a secret and silent disposition concerning his own doings in this city, tho' free-spoken and frank in all common matters—you, honour'd sir, know with how serious an intention I have taken upon myself the burden of matrimony, hoping thereby to secure the compleat

conversion of this waywarde soul. You are aware how it was ye earnest desire of my late respected father that Mathew Haygarth and I shou'd be man and wife, his father and my father haveing bin friends and companions in ye days of her most gracious majesty Queen Anne. You know how, after being lost to all decent company for many years, Mathew came back after his father's death, and lived a sober and serious life, attending amongst our community, and being seen to shed tears on more than one occasion while listening to the discourse of our revered and inspired founder. And you, my dear and honour'd pastor, will feel for me when I tell you how I am tormented by ye fear of backsliding in this soul which I have promised to restore to ye fold. It was but yesterday, when walking with him near St. John's Gate at Clerkenwell, he came to a standstill all of a sudden, and he cried in that impetuous manner which is even yet natural to him, 'Look ye now, Becky, wouldst like to see the house in which the happiest years of my life was spent?' And I making no answer, as thinking it was but some sudden freak, he points out a black dirty-looking dwelling-place, with overhanging windows and a wide gabled roof. 'Yonder it stands, Becky,' he cries; 'number seven John-street, Clerkenwell; a queer dingy box of four walls, my wench—a tumble-down kennel, with a staircase that 'twould break your neck to mount, being strange to it—and half a day's journey from the court-end of town. But that house was once paradise to me; and to look at it even now, though 'tis over eighteen years since I saw the inside of it, will bring the tears into these poor old eyes of mine'. And then he walk'd on so fast that I could scarce keep pace with him, till we came to Smithfield; and then he began to tell me about Bartholomew-fair and the brave sights he had seen; and must needs show me where had stood the booth of one Fielding —since infamously notorious as the writer of some trashy novels, the dulness whereof is only surpassed by their profligacy: and then he talks of Fawkes the conjurer, who made a great fortune, and of some humble person called 'Tiddy Doll,' a dealer in gingerbread and such foolish wares. But he could tell me nothing of those early preachings of our revered founder in Moorfields, which would have been more pleasant to me than all this vain babble about drolls and jesters, gingerbread bakers and showmen.

"When we had walked the round of the place, and it was time to take coach for our lodging at Chelsea —he having brought me thus far to see St. Paul's and the prison of Newgate, the Mint and Tower—the gloomy fit came on him again, and all that evening he was dull and sorrowful, though I read aloud to him from the printed sermons of a rising member of our community. So you will see, honour'd sir, how difficult it is for these children of Satan to withdraw themselves from that master they have once served; since at the sober age of fifty-three yeares my husband's weak heart yet yearns after profligate faires and foolish gardens lighted by color'd lampes.

"And now no more, reverend friend, my paper being gone and it being full time to reflect that y'r patience must be gone also. Service to Mrs. Goodge. I have no more room but to assure you that y'r gayeties of this foolish and erring citty have no power to withdraw y'r heart of her whose chief privilege it is to subscribe herself,

"Your humble follower and servant."

"Rebecca Haygarth."

To my mind there seems just a shadowy hint of some bygone romance in this letter. Why did the dingy house in John-street bring the tears into Matthew's eyes? and why did the memory of Vauxhall and Bartholomew fair seem so sweet to him? And then that sighing and groaning and dolefulness of visage whenever the thought of the past came back to him?

What did it all mean, I wonder? Was it only his vanished youth, which poor, sobered, converted, Wesleyanised Matthew regretted? or were there pensive memories of something even sweeter than youth associated with the coloured lamps of Vauxhall and the dinginess of Clerkenwell? Who shall sound the heart of a man who lived a hundred years ago? and where is the fathom-line which shall plumb its mysteries? I should need a stack of old letters before I could arrive at the secret of that man's life.

The two other letters, which I have selected after some deliberation, relate to the last few weeks of Matthew's existence; and in these again I fancy I see the trace of some domestic mystery, some sorrowful secret which this sober citizen kept hidden from his wife, but which he was on several occasions half inclined to reveal to her.

Perhaps if the lady's piety—which seems to have been thoroughly sincere and praiseworthy, by the bye—had been a little less cold and pragmatical in its mode of expression, poor Matthew might have taken heart of grace and made a clean breast of it.

That there was a secret in the man's life I feel convinced; but that conviction goes very little way towards proving any one point of the smallest value to George Sheldon.

I transcribe an extract from each of the two important letters; the first written a month before Matthew's death, the second a fortnight after that event.

"And indeed, honour'd sir, I have of late suffered much uneasinesse of speritt concerning my husband. Those fits of ye mopes of w'h I informed you some time back have again come upon him. For awhile I did hope that these melancholic affections were ye fruit put forth by a regenerate soul; but within this month last past it has been my sorrow to discover that these gloomy disorders arise rather from ye promptings of the Evil One. It has pleased Mr. Haygarthe of late to declare that his life is nigh at an end; and indeed he affects a conviction that his days are number'd. This profane and impertinent notion I take to be a direct inspiration of Satan, of a like character to ye sudden and unaccountable fitts of laughter which have seized upon many pious Christians in the midst of earnest congregations; whereby much shame and discomfiture has been brought upon our sect. Nor is there any justification for this presumptuous certainty entertained by my husband, inasmuch as his health is much as it has ordinarily been for ye last ten years. He does acknowledge this with his own lips, and immediately after cries out that his race is run, and ye hand of death is upon him; which I cannot but take as ye voice of ye enemy speaking through that weak mouth of ye flesh.

"On Sunday night last past, ye gloomy fitt being come upon him after prayers, Mr. Haygarthe began all on a sudden, as it is his habit to do:

"'There is something I would fain tell ye, wench,' he cries out, 'something about those roistering days in London, which it might be well for thee to know.'

"But I answered him directly, that I had no desire to hear of profane roisterings, and that it would be better for him to keep his peace, and listen reverently to the expounding of the Scriptures, which Humphrey Bagot, our worthy pastor and friend, had promised to explain and exemplify after supper. We was seated at ye time in ye blue parlour, the table being spread for supper, and were awaiting our friend from the village, a man of humble station, being but a poor chapman and huckster, but of exalted mind and a most holy temper, and sells me the same growth of Bohea as that drunk by our gracious queen at Windsor.

"After I had thus reproved him—in no unkind speritt—Mr. Haygarthe fell to sighing; and then cries out all at once:

"'When I am on my death-bed, wife, I will tell thee something: be sure thou askest me for it; or if death come upon me unawares, thou wouldst do well to search in the old tulip-leaf bureau for a letter, since I may tell thee that in a letter which I would not tell with these lips.'

"Before there was time to answer him in comes Mr. Bagot, and we to supper; after which he did read the sixth chapter of Hebrews and expound it at much length for our edifying; at the end whereof Satan had obtained fast hold of Mr. Haygarthe, who was fallen asleep and snoring heavily."

Here is plain allusion to some secret, which that pragmatical idiot, Mrs. Rebecca, studiously endeavoured not to hear. The next extract is from a letter written when the lips that had been fain to speak were stilled for ever. Ah, Mistress Rebecca, you were but mortal woman, although you were also a shining light amongst the followers of John Wesley; and I wonder what you would have given for poor Matthew's secret *then*.

"Some days being gone after this melancholic event, I bethought me of that which my husband had said to me before I left Dewsdale for that excursion to the love-feasts at Kemberton and Kesfield, Broppindean and Dawnfold, from which I returned but two short weeks before my poor Matthew's demise. I called to remembrance that discourse about approaching death which in my poor human judgment I did esteem a pestilent error of mind, but which I do now recognise as a spiritual premonition; and I set myself earnestly to look for that letter which Matthew told me he would leave in the tulip-leaf bureau. But though I did search with great care and pains, my trouble was wasted, inasmuch as there was no letter. Nor did I leave off to search until ev'ry nook and crevvis had been examin'd. But in one of ye secret drawers, hidden in an old dog's-eared book of prayers, I did find a lock of fair hair, as if cut from the head of a child, entwin'd curiously with a long plait of dark hair, which, by reason of ye length thereof, must needs have been the hair of a woman, and with these the miniature of a girl's face in a gold frame. I will not stain this paper, which is near come to an end, by the relation of such suspicions as arose in my mind on finding these curious treasures; nor will I be of so unchristian a temper as to speak ill of the dead. My husband was in his latter days exemplarily sober, and a humble acting Xtian. Ye secrets of his earlier life will not now be showne to me on this side heaven. I have set aside ye book, ye picture, and ye plaited hair in my desk for conveniency, where I will show them to you when I am next rejoic'd by y'r improving conversation. Until then, in grief or in happiness, in health and sickness, I trust I shall ever continue, with y'r same sincerity,

"Your humble and obliged Servant and disciple

"REBECCA HAYGARTHE."

Thus end my excerpts from the correspondence of Mrs. Haygarthe. They are very interesting to me, as containing the vague shadow of a vanished existence; but whether they will ever be worth setting forth in an affidavit is extremely uncertain. Doubtless that miniature of an unknown girl which caused so much consternation in the mind of sober Mrs. Rebecca was no other than the "Molly" whose gray eyes reminded me of Charlotte Halliday.

As I copied Mrs. Rebecca's quaint epistles, in the midnight stillness, the things of which I was writing arose before me like a picture. I could see the blue parlour that Sunday evening; the sober couple seated primly opposite to each other; the china monsters on the high chimneypiece; the blue-and-white Dutch tiles, with queer squat figures of Flemish citizens on foot and on horseback; the candles burning dimly on the spindle-legged table—two poor pale flames reflected ghastly in the dark polished panels of the wainscot; the big open Bible on an adjacent table; the old silver tankard, and buckhorn-handled knives and forks set out for supper; the solemn eight-day clock, ticking drearily in the corner; and amid all that sombre old-fashioned comfort, gray-haired Matthew sighing and lamenting for his vanished youth.

I have grown strangely romantic since I have fallen in love with Charlotte Halliday. The time was when I should have felt nothing but a flippant ignorant contempt for poor Haygarth's feeble sighings and lamentings; but now I think of him with a sorrowful tenderness, and am more interested in his poor commonplace life, that picture, and those two locks of hair, than in the most powerful romance that ever emanated from mortal genius. It has been truly said, that truth is stranger than fiction: may it not as justly be said, that truth has a power to touch the human heart which is lacking in the most sublime flights of a Shakespeare, or the grandest imaginings of an Aeschylus? One is sorry for the fate of Agamemnon; but one is infinitely more sorrowful for the cruel death of that English Richard in the dungeon at Pomfret, who was a very insignificant person as compared to the king of men and of ships.

CHAPTER III.

HUNTING THE JUDSONS.

Oct. 10th. Yesterday and the day before were blank days. On Saturday I read Mrs. Rebecca's letters a second time after a late breakfast, and spent a lazy morning in the endeavour to pick up any stray crumbs of information which I might have overlooked the previous night. There was nothing to be found, however; and, estimable as I have always considered the founder of the Wesleyan fraternity, I felt just a little weary of his virtues and his discourses, his journeyings from place to place, his love-feasts and his prayer-meetings, before I had finished with Mrs. Haygarth's correspondence. In the afternoon I strolled about the town; made inquiries at several inns, with a view to discover whether Captain Paget was peradventure an inmate thereof; looked in at the railway-station, and watched the departure of a train; dawdled away half an hour at the best tobacconist's shop in the town on the chance of encountering my accomplished patron, who indulges in two of the choicest obtainable cigars per diem, and might possibly repair thither to make a purchase, if he were in the place. Whether he is still in Ullerton or not I cannot tell; but he did not come to the tobacconist's; and I was fain to go back to my inn, having wasted a day. Yet I do not think that George Sheldon will have cause to complain of me, since I have worked very closely for my twenty shillings per week, and have devoted myself to the business in hand with an amount of enthusiasm which I did not think it possible for me to experience—except for——

I went to church on Sunday morning, and was more devoutly inclined than it has been my habit to feel; for although a man who lives by his wits must not necessarily be a heathen or an atheist, it is very difficult for him to be anything like a Christian. Even my devotion yesterday was not worth much, for my thoughts went vagabondising off to Charlotte Halliday in the midst of a very sensible practical sermon.

In the afternoon I read the papers, and dozed by the fire in the coffee-room—two-thirds coke by the way, and alternating from the fierceness of a furnace to the dreary blackness of an exhausted coal-mine—still thinking of Charlotte.

Late in the evening I walked the streets of the town, and thought what a lonely wretch I was. The desert of Sahara is somewhat dismal, I daresay; but in its dismality there is at least a flavour of romance, a smack of adventure. O, the hopeless dulness, the unutterable blankness of a provincial town late on a Sunday night, as it presents itself to the contemplation of a friendless young man without a sixpence in his pocket, or one bright hope to tempt him to forgetfulness of the past in pleasant dreaming of the future!

Complaining again! O pen, which art the voice of my discontent, your spluttering is like this outburst of unmanly fretfulness and futile rage! O paper, whose flat surface typifies the dull level of my life, your greasy unwillingness to receive the ink is emblematic of the soul's revolt against destiny!

This afternoon brought me a letter from Sheldon, and opened a new channel for my explorations in that underground territory, the past. That man has a marvellous aptitude for his work; and has, what is more than aptitude, the experience of ten years of failure. Such a man must succeed sooner or later. I wonder whether his success will come while I am allied to him. I have been used to consider myself an unlucky wretch, a creature of ill-fortune to others as well as to myself. It is a foolish superstition, perhaps, to fancy one's self set apart for an evil destiny; but the Eumenides have been rather hard upon me. Those "amiable" deities, whom they of Colonae tried so patiently to conciliate with transparent flatteries, have marked me for their prey from the cradle—I don't suppose that cradle was paid for, by the bye. I wonder whether there is an avenging deity whose special province it is to pursue the insolvent—a Nemesis of the Bankruptcy Court.

My Sheldon's epistle bears the evidence of a very subtle brain, as I think. It is longer than his previous letters. I transcribe it here, as I wish this record to be a complete brief of my proceedings in this Haygarth business.

"Gray's Inn, Sunday night.

"DEAR HAWKEHURST,—The copies of the letters came duly to hand, and I think you have made your selections with much discretion, always supposing you have overlooked nothing in the remaining mass of writing. I will thank you to send me the rest of the letters, by the way. You can take notes of anything likely to be useful to yourself, and it will be as well for me to possess the originals.

"I find one very strong point in the first letter of your selection, viz. the allusion to a house in John-street. It is clear that Matthew lived in that house, and in that neighbourhood there may even yet remain some traces of his existence. I shall begin a close investigation to-morrow within a certain radius of that spot; and if I have the good luck to fall upon any clear-headed centenarians, I may pick up something.

"There are some alms-houses hard by Whitecross-street prison, where the inmates live to ages that savour of the Pentateuch. Perhaps there I may light upon some impoverished citizen fallen from a good estate who can remember some contemporary of Matthew's. London was smaller in those days than it is now, and men lived out their lives in one spot, and had leisure to be concerned about the affairs of their neighbours. As I have now something of a clue to Matthew's roistering days, I shall set to work to follow it up closely; and your provincial researches and my metropolitan investigations proceeding simultaneously, we may hope to advance matters considerably ere long. For your own part, I should advise you forthwith to hunt up the Judson branch. You will remember that Matthew's only sister was a Mrs. Judson of Ullerton. I want to find an heir-at-law in a direct line from Matthew; and you know my theory on that point. But if we fail in that direction, we must of course fall back upon the Judsons, who are a disgustingly complicated set of people, and will take half a lifetime to disentangle, to say nothing of other men who may be working the same business, and who are pretty sure to have pinned their faith on the female branch of the Haygarthian tree.

"I want you to ferret out some of the Judson descendants with a view to picking up further documentary evidence in the shape of old letters, inscriptions in old books, and so on. That Matthew had a secret is certain; and that he was very much inclined to reveal that secret in his later days is also certain. Who shall say that he did not tell it to his only sister, though he was afraid to tell it to his wife?

"You have acted with so much discretion up to this point, that I do not care to trouble you with any further hints or suggestions. When money is wanted, it shall be forthcoming; but I must beg you to manage things economically, as I have to borrow at a considerable sacrifice; and should this affair prove a failure, my ruin is inevitable.

"Yours, &c. G.S."

My friend Sheldon is a man who can never have been more than "yours et-cetera" to any human creature. I suppose what he calls ruin would be a quiet passage through the Bankruptcy Court, and a new set of chambers. I should not suppose that sort of ruin would be very terrible for a man whose sole possessions are a few weak-backed horsehair chairs, a couple of battered old desks, half a dozen empty japanned boxes, a file of *Bell's Life*, and a Turkey carpet in which the progress of corruption is evident to the casual observer.

The hunting-up of the Judsons is a very easy matter as compared to the task of groping in the dimness of the past in search of some faint traces of the footsteps of departed Haygarths. Whereas the Haygarth family seem to be an extinct race, the Judsonian branch have bred and mustered in the land; and my chief difficulty in starting has been an *embarras de richesse*, in the shape of half a page of Judsons in the Ullerton directory.

Whether to seek out Theodore Judson, the attorney, in Nile street East, or the Rev. James Judson, curate of St. Gamaliel; whether to appeal in the first instance to Judson & Co., haberdashers and silk mercers, of the Ferrygate, or to Judson of Judson and Grinder, wadding manufacturers in Lady-lane—was the grand question. On inquiring of the landlord as to the antecedents of these Judsons, I found that they were all supposed to spring from one common stock, and to have the blood of old Jonathan Haygarth in their veins. The Judsons had been an obscure family—people of "no account," my landlord told me, until Joseph Judson, chapman and cloth merchant in a very small way, was so fortunate as to win the heart of Ruth Haygarth, only daughter of the wealthy Nonconformist grocer in the market-place. This marriage had been the starting-point of Joseph Judson's prosperity. Old Haygarth had helped his industrious and respectable son-in-law along the stony road that leads to fortune, and had no doubt given him many a lift over the stones which bestrew that toilsome highway. My landlord's information was as vague as the information of people in general; but it was easily to be made out, from his scanty shreds and scraps of information, that the well-placed Judsons of the present day had almost all profited to some extent by the hard-earned wealth of Jonathan Haygarth. "They've nearly all of them got the name of Haygarth mixed up with their other names somehow," said my landlord. "Judson of Judson and Grinder is Thomas Haygarth Judson. He's a member of our tradesman's club, and worth a hundred thousand pounds, if he's worth a sixpence."

I have observed, by the way, that a wealthy tradesman in a country town is never accredited with less than a hundred thousand; there seems a natural hankering in the human mind for round numbers.

"There's J.H. Judson of St. Gamaliel," continued my landlord—"he's James Haygarth Judson; and young Judson the attorney's son puts 'Haygarth Judson' on his card, and gets people to call him Haygarth Judson when they will—which in a general way they won't, on account of his giving himself airs, which you may see him any summer evening walking down Ferrygate as if the place belonged to him, and he didn't set much value on it. They *do* say his father's heir-at-law to a million of money left by the last of the Haygarths, and that he and the son are trying to work up a claim to the property against the Crown. But I have heard young Judson deny it in our room when he was spoken to about it, and I don't suppose there's much ground for people's talk."

I was sorry to discover there was any ground for such talk; Mr. Judson the lawyer would be no insignificant opponent. I felt that I must give a very wide berth to Mr. Theodore Judson the attorney, and his stuck-up son, unless circumstances should so shape themselves as to oblige us to work with him. In the meanwhile any move I made amongst the other Judsons would be likely, I thought, to come to the knowledge of these particular members of the family.

"Are the Judson family very friendly with one another?" I artfully inquired.

"Well, you see, some of 'em are, and some of 'em ain't. They're most of 'em third and fourth cousins, you see, and that ain't a very near relationship in a town where there's a good deal of competition, and interests often clash. Young Theodore—Haygarth Judson as he calls himself—is very thick with Judson of St. Gamaliel's, they were at college together, you see: and fine airs they give themselves on the strength of a couple of years or so at Cambridge. Those two get on very well together. But Judson of the Lady-lane Mills don't speak to either of 'em when he meets 'em in the street, and has been known to cut 'em dead in my room. William Judson of Ferrygate is a dissenter, and keeps himself to himself very close. The other Judsons are too fast a lot for him: though what's the harm of a man taking a glass or two of brandy-and-water of an evening with his friends is more than *I* can find out," added mine host, musingly.

It was to William Judson the dissenter, who kept himself to himself, that I determined to present myself in the first instance. As a dissenter, he would be likely to have more respect for the memory of the Nonconformist and Wesleyan Haygarths, and to have preserved any traditions relating to them with more fidelity than the Anglican and frivolous members of the Judson family. As an individual who kept himself to himself, he would be unlikely to communicate my business to his kindred.

I lost no time in presenting myself at the house of business in Ferrygate, and after giving the servant George Sheldon's card, and announcing myself as concerned in a matter of business relating to the Haygarth family, I was at once ushered into a prim counting-house, where a dapper little old gentleman in spotless broadcloth, and a cambric cravat and shirt frill which were soft and snowy as the plumage of the swan, received me with old-fashioned courtesy. I was delighted to find him seventy-five years of age at the most moderate computation, and I should have been all the better pleased if he had been older. I very quickly discovered that in Mr. Judson the linen draper I had to deal with a very different person from the Rev. Jonah Goodge. He questioned me closely as to my motive in seeking information on the subject of the departed Haygarth, and I had some compunction in diplomatising with him as I had diplomatised with Mr. Goodge. To hoodwink the wary Jonah was a triumph—to deceive the confiding linen draper was a shame. However, as I have before set down, I suppose at the falsest I am not much farther from the truth than a barrister or a diplomatist. Mr. Judson accepted my account of myself in all simplicity, and seemed quite pleased to have an opportunity of talking about the deceased Haygarths.

"You are not concerned in the endeavour to assert Theodore Judson's claim to the late John Haygarth's property, eh?" the old man asked me presently, as if struck by a sudden misgiving.

I assured him that Mr. Theodore Judson's interests and mine were in no respect identical.

"I am glad of that," answered the draper; "not that I owe Theodore Judson a grudge, you must understand, though his principles and mine differ very widely. I have been told that he and his son hope to establish a claim to that Haygarth property; but they will never succeed, sir—they will never succeed. There was a young man who went to India in '41; a scamp and a vagabond, sir, who was always trying to borrow money in sums ranging from a hundred pounds, to set him up in business and render him a credit to his family, to a shilling for the payment of a night's lodging or the purchase of a dinner. But that young man was the great-grandson of Ruth Haygarth—the eldest surviving grandson of Ruth Haygarth's eldest son; and if that man is alive, he is rightful heir to John Haygarth's money. Whether he is alive or dead at this present moment is more than I can tell, since he has never been heard of in Ullerton since he left the town; but until Theodore Judson can obtain legal proof of that man's death he has no more chance of getting one sixpence of the Haygarth estate than I have of inheriting the crown of Great Britain."

The old man had worked himself into a little passion before he finished this speech, and I could see that the Theodore Judsons were as unpopular in the draper's counting-house as they were at the Swan Inn.

"What was this man's Christian name?" I asked.

"Peter. He was called Peter Judson; and was the great-grandson of my grandfather, Joseph Judson, who inhabited this very house, sir, more than a hundred years ago. Let me see: Peter Judson must have been about five-and-twenty years of age when he left Ullerton; so he is a middle-aged man by this time if he hasn't killed himself, or if the climate hasn't killed him long ago. He went as supercargo to a merchant vessel: he was a clever fellow, and could work hard when it suited him, in spite of his dissipated life. Theodore Judson is a very good lawyer; but though he may bring all his ingenuity to bear, he will never advance a step nearer to the possession of John Haygarth's money till he obtains evidence of Peter Judson's death; and he's afraid to advertise for that evidence for fear he might arouse the attention of other claimants."

Much as I was annoyed to find that there were claimants lying in wait for the rev. intestate's wealth, I was glad to perceive that Theodore Judson's unpopularity was calculated to render his kindred agreeably disposed to any stranger likely to push that gentleman out of the list of competitors for these great stakes, and I took my cue from this in my interview with the simple old draper.

"I regret that I am not at liberty to state the nature of my business," I said, in a tone that was at once insinuating and confidential; "but I think I may venture to go so far as to say, without breach of trust to my employer, that whoever may ultimately succeed to the Rev. John Haygarth's money, neither Mr. Judson the lawyer nor his son will ever put a finger on a penny of it."

"I am not sorry to hear it," answered Mr. Judson, enraptured; "not that I owe the young man a grudge, you must understand, but because he is particularly undeserving of good fortune. A young man who passes his own kindred in the streets of his native town without the common courtesy due to age or respectability; a young man who sneers at the fortune acquired in an honest and reputable trade; a young man who calls his cousins counter-jumpers, and his aunts and uncles 'swaddlers'—a vulgar term of contempt applied to the earlier members of the Wesleyan confraternity—such a young man is not the individual to impart moral lustre to material wealth; and I am free to confess that I had rather any one else than Theodore Judson should inherit this vast fortune. Why, are you aware, my dear sir, that he has

been seen to drive tandem through this very street, as it is; and I should like to know how many horses he would harness to that gig of his, or how openly he would insult his relatives, if he had a hundred thousand pounds to deal with?"

"A hundred thousand pounds!" exclaimed I; "am I to understand that the fortune left by the Reverend John Haygarth amounts to that sum?"

"To every penny of it, sir; and a nice use Theodore Judson and that precious son of his would make of it if it fell into their hands."

For a second time Mr. Judson the draper had worked himself into a little passion, and the conversation had to be discontinued for some minutes while he cooled down to his ordinary temperament.

"O ho!" said I within myself, while awaiting the completion of this cooling-down process; "so *this* is the stake for which my friend Sheldon is playing!"

"I'll tell you what I will do for you, Mr.—Mr. Hawke-shell,"—Mr. Judson said at last, making a compound of my own and my employer's names; "I will give you a line of introduction to my sister. If any one can help you in hunting up intelligence relating to the past she can. She is two years my junior —seventy-one years of age, but as bright and active as a girl. She has lived all her life in Ullerton, and is a woman who hoards every scrap of paper that comes in her way. If old letters or old newspapers can assist you, she can show you plenty amongst her stores."

Upon this the old man wrote a note, which he dried with sand out of a perforated bottle, as Richard Steele may have dried one of those airy tender essays which he threw off in tavern parlours for the payment of a jovial dinner.

Provided with this antique epistle, written on Bath post and sealed with a great square seal from a bunch of cornelian monstrosities which the draper carried at his watch-chain, I departed to find Miss Hephzibah Judson, of Lochiel Villa, Lancaster-road.

CHAPTER IV.

GLIMPSES OF A BYGONE LIFE.

October 10th. I found the villa inhabited by Miss Hephzibah Judson very easily, and found it one of those stiff square dwelling-houses with brass curtain-rods, prim flower-beds, and vivid green palings, only to be discovered in full perfection in the choicer suburb of a country town.

I had heard enough during my brief residence in Ullerton to understand that to live in the Lancaster-road was to possess a diploma of respectability not easily vitiated by individual conduct. No disreputable persons had ever yet set up their unholy Lares and Penates in one of those new slack-baked villas; and that person must have been very bold who, conscious of moral unfitness or pecuniary shortcoming, should have ventured to pitch his tent in that sacred locality.

Miss Hephzibah Judson was one of the individuals whose shining sanctity of life and comfortable income lent a reflected brightness to the irreproachable suburb. I was admitted to her abode by an elderly woman of starched demeanour but agreeable visage, who ushered me into a spotless parlour, whereof the atmosphere was of that vault-like coldness peculiar to a room which is only inhabited on state occasions. Here the starched domestic left me while she carried my letter of introduction to her mistress. In her absence I had leisure to form some idea of Miss Judson's character on the mute evidence of Miss Judson's surroundings. From the fact that there were books of a sentimental and poetical tenor amongst the religious works ranged at mathematically correct distances upon the dark green table-cover—from the presence of three twittering canaries in a large brass cage—from the evidence of a stuffed Blenheim spaniel, with intensely brown eyes, reclining on a crimson velvet cushion under a glass shade—I opined that Miss Judson's piety was pleasantly leavened by sentiment, and that her Wesleyanism was agreeably tempered by that womanly tenderness which, failing more legitimate outlets, will waste itself upon twittering canaries and plethoric spaniels.

I was not mistaken. Miss Judson appeared presently, followed by the servant bearing a tray of cake and wine. This was the first occasion on which I had been offered refreshment by any person to whom I

had presented myself. I argued, therefore, that Miss Judson was the weakest person with whom I had yet had to deal; and I flattered myself with the hope that from Miss Judson's amiable weakness, sentimentality, and womanly tenderness, I should obtain better aid than from more business-like and practical people.

I fancied that with this lady it would be necessary to adopt a certain air of candour. I therefore did not conceal from her the fact that my business had something to do with that Haygarthian fortune awaiting a claimant.

"The person for whom you are concerned is not Mr. Theodore Judson?" she asked, with some asperity.

I assured her that I had never seen Theodore Judson, and that I was in no manner interested in his success.

"In that case I shall be happy to assist you as far as lies in my power; but I can do nothing to advance the interests of Theodore Judson junior. I venture to hope that I am a Christian; and if Theodore Judson junior were to come here to me and ask my forgiveness, I should accord that forgiveness as a Christian; but I cannot and will not lend myself to the furtherance of Theodore Judson's avaricious designs. I cannot lend myself to the suppression of truth or the assertion of falsehood. Theodore Judson senior is not the rightful heir to the late John Haygarth's fortune, though I am bound to acknowledge that his claim would be prior to my brother's. There is a man who stands before the Theodore Judsons, and the Theodore Judsons know it. But were they the rightful claimants, I should still consider them most unfitted to enjoy superior fortune. If that dog could speak, he would be able to testify to ill-usage received from Theodore Judson junior at his own garden-gate, which would bespeak the character of the man to every thoughtful mind. A young man who could indulge his spiteful feelings against an elderly kinswoman at the expense of an unoffending animal is not the man to make worthy use of fortune."

I expressed my acquiescence with this view of the subject; and I was glad to perceive that with Miss Judson, as with her brother, the obnoxious Theodores would stand me in good stead. The lady was only two years younger than her brother, and even more inclined to be communicative. I made the most of my opportunity, and sat in the vault-like parlour listening respectfully to her discourse, and from time to time hazarding a leading question, as long as it pleased her to converse; although it seemed to me as if a perennial spring of cold water were trickling slowly down my back and pervading my system during the entire period. As the reward of my fortitude I obtained Miss Judson's promise to send me any letters or papers she might find amongst her store of old documents relating to the personal history of Matthew Haygarth.

"I know I have a whole packet of letters in Matthew's own hand amongst my grandmother's papers," said Miss Judson. "I was a great favourite with my grandmother, and used to spend a good deal of my time with her before she died—which she did while I was in pinafores; but young people wore pinafores much longer in my time than they do now; and I was getting on for fourteen years of age when my grandmother departed this life. I've often heard her talk of her brother Matthew, who had been dead some years when I was born. She was very fond of him, and he of her, I've heard her say; and she used often to tell me how handsome he was in his youth; and how well he used to look in a chocolate and gold-laced riding coat, just after the victory of Culloden, when he came to Ullerton in secret, to pay her a visit—not being on friendly terms with his father."

I asked Miss Judson if she had ever read Matthew Haygarth's letters.

"No," she said; "I look at them sometimes when I'm tidying the drawer in which I keep them, and I have sometimes stopped to read a word here and there, but no more. I keep them out of respect to the dead; but I think it would make me unhappy to read them. The thoughts and the feelings in old letters seem so fresh that they bring our poor mortality too closely home to us when we remember how little except those faded letters remains of those who wrote them. It is well for us to remember that we are only travellers and wayfarers on this earth; but sometimes it seems just a little hard to think how few traces of our footsteps we leave behind us when the journey is finished."

The canaries seemed to answer Miss Judson with a feeble twitter of assent: and I took my leave, with a feeling of compassion in my heart. I, the scamp—I, Robert Macaire the younger—had pity upon the caged canaries, and the lonely old woman whose narrow life was drawing to its close, and who began to feel how very poor a thing it had been after all.

Oct. 11th. I have paid the penalty of my temerity in enduring the vault-like chilliness of Miss Hephzibah Judson's parlour, and am suffering to-day from a sharp attack of influenza; that complaint which of all others tends to render a man a burden to himself, and a nuisance to his fellow-creatures.

Under these circumstances I have ordered a fire in my own room—a personal indulgence scarcely warranted by Sheldon's stipend—and I sit by my own fire pondering over the story of Matthew Haygarth's life.

On the table by my side are scattered more than a hundred letters, all in Matthew's bold hand; but even yet, after a most careful study of those letters, the story of the man's existence is far from clear to me. The letters are full of hints and indications, but they tell so little plainly. They deal in enigmas, and disguise names under the mask of initials.

There is much in these letters which relates to the secret history of Matthew's life. They were written to the only creature amongst his kindred in whom he fully confided. This fact transpires more than once, as will be seen anon by the extracts I shall proceed to make; if my influenza—which causes me to shed involuntary tears that give me the appearance of a drivelling idiot, and which jerks me nearly out of my chair every now and then with a convulsive sneeze—will permit me to do anything rational or useful.

I have sorted and classified the letters, first upon one plan, then upon another, until I have classified and sorted them into chaos. Having done this, my only chance is to abandon all idea of classification, and go quietly through them in consecutive order according to their dates, jotting down whatever strikes me as significant. George Sheldon's acumen must do the rest.

Thus I begin my notes, with an extract from the fourth letter in the series. Mem. I preserve Matthew's own orthography, which is the most eccentric it was ever my lot to contemplate.

"*December* 14, '42. Indeed, my dear Ruth, I am ventursom wear you are concurn'd, and w'd tell you that I w'd taik panes to kepe fromm another. I saw ye same girl w'h it was my good fortun to saive from ye molestashun of raketters and mohoks at Smithfelde in September last past. She is ye derest prittiest creture you ever saw, and as elegant and genteel in her speche and maner as a Corte lady, or as ye best bredd person in Ullerton. I mett her in ye nayborood of ye Marchalsee prison wear her father is at this pressent time a prisener, and had som pleassant talke with her. She rememberr'd me at once, and seme'd mitily gladd to see me. Mem. Her pritty blu eys wear fill'd with teares wen she thank'd me for having studd up to be her champyun at ye Fare. So you see, Mrs. Ruth, ye brotherr is more thort off in London than with them which hav ye rite to regard him bestt. If you had scen ye pore simpel childeish creetur and heeard her tell her arteless tale, I think y'r kinde hart w'd have bin sore to considder so much unmiritted misfortun: ye father is in pore helth, a captiv, ye mother has binn dedd thre yeres, and ye pore orfann girl, Mollie, has to mentane ye burden of ye sick father, and a yung helples sister. Think of this, kinde Mrs. Ruth, in y'r welthy home. Mem. Pore Mrs. Mollie is prittier than ye fineist ladies that wear to be sene at ye opening of ye grand new roome at Ranellar this spring last past, wear I sor ye too Miss Gunings and Lady Harvey, wich is alsoe accounted a grate buty."

I think this extract goes very far to prove that my friend Matthew was considerably smitten by the pretty young woman whose champion he had been in some row at Bartholomew Fair. This fits into one of the scraps of information afforded by my ancient inhabitant in Ullerton Almshouses, who remembers having heard his grandfather talk of Mat Haygarth's part in some fight or disturbance at the great Smithfield festival.

My next extract treats again of Mollie, after an interval of four months. It seems as if Matthew had confided in his sister so far as to betray his tenderness for the poor player-girl of the London booths; but I can find no such letter amongst those in my hands. Such an epistle may have been considered by Mrs. Ruth too dangerous to be kept where the parental eye might in some evil hour discover it. Matthew's sister was unmarried at this date, and lived within the range of that stern paternal eye. Matthew's letter appears to me to have been written in reply to some solemn warning from Ruth.

"*April* 12, 1743. Sure, my dear sister cannot think me so baise a retch as to injoore a pore simpel girl hoo confides in me as ye best and trooest of mortals, wich for her dere saik I will strive to be. If so be my sister cou'd think so ill of me it wou'd amost temt me to think amiss of her, wich cou'd imagen so vile a thort. You tel me that Mrs. Rebecka Caulfeld is mor than ever estemed by my father; but, Ruth, I am bounde to say, my father's esteme is nott to be ye rule of my ackshuns thro' life, for it semes to me their is no worser tyrrannie than ye wich fathers do striv to impose on there children, and I do acount that a kind of barbarity wich wou'd compel ye hart of youth to sute ye proodense of age. I do not dout but Mrs. Rebecka is a mitey proper and well-natur'd person, tho' taken upp with this new sekt of methodys, or, as sum do call them in derission, swaddlers and jumpers, set afoot by ye madbrain'd young man, Wesley, and one that is still madder, Witfelde. Thear ar I dare sware many men in Ullerton wich wou'd be gladd to obtane Mrs. Rebecka's hand and fortun; but if ye fortun wear ten times more, I wou'd not preetend to oferr my harte to herr w'h can never be its misteress. Now, my deare sister, having gone as farr towards satisfieing all y'r queerys as my paper wou'd welle permitt, I will say no more but to begg you to send me all ye knews, and to believe that none can be more affectionately y'r

humble servant than your brother.

"MATHEW HAYGARTH."

In this extract we have strong ground for supposing that our Matthew truly loved the player-girl, and meant honestly by his sweetheart. There is a noble indignation in his repudiation of his sister's doubts, and a manly determination not to marry Mrs. Rebecca's comfortable fortune. I begin to think that Sheldon's theory of an early and secret marriage will turn up a trump card; but Heaven only knows how slow or how difficult may be the labour of proving such a marriage. And then, even if we can find documentary evidence of such an event, we shall have but advanced one step in our obscure path, and should have yet to discover the issue of that union, and to trace the footsteps of Matthew's unknown descendants during the period of a century.

I wonder how Sisyphus felt when the stone kept rolling back upon him. Did he ever look up to the top of the mountain and calculate the distance he must needs traverse before his task should be done?

The next letter in which I find a passage worth transcribing is of much later date, and abounds in initials. The postmark is illegible; but I can just make out the letters PO and L, the two first close together, the third after an interval; and there is internal evidence to show that the letter was written from some dull country place. Might not that place have been Spotswold? the PO and the L of the postmark would fit very well into the name of that village. Again I leave this question to the astute Sheldon. The date is March, 1749.

"M. is but porely. Sumtimes I am pain'd to believe this quiett life is not well suted to herr disposishun, having bin acustumed to so much livlinesse and nois. I hav reproched her with this, but she tolde me, with teres in her eys, to be neare mee and M. and C. was to be happie, and ye it is il helth onlie wich is ye cawse of ye sadnesse. I pray heaven M.'s helth may be on ye mending hand soone. Little M. grows more butiful everry day; and indede, my dear sisterr, if you cou'd stele another visitt this waye, and oblidge yr affectionat brother, you wou'd considerr him ye moste butifull creetur ever scene. So much enteligence with sich ingaging temper endeares him to all hartes. Mrs. J. says she adors him, and is amost afraide to be thort a Paygann for bestoeing so much affection on a erthly creetur, and this to oure good parson who cou'd find no reproche for her plesant folly.

"We hav had heavy ranes all ye week last past. Sech wether can but serve to hinderr M.'s recovery. The fysichion at G., wear I tooke her, saies she shou'd hav much fresh aire everry day—if not afoot, to be carrid in a chaire or cotche; but in this wether, and in a plaice wear neeither chaire nor cotche can be had, she must needs stop in doors. I hav begg'd her to lett me carry her to G., but she will not, and says in ye summerr she will be as strong as everr. I pray God she may be so. Butt theire are times whenn my harte is sore and heavy; and the rane beeting agenst the winder semes lik dropps of cold worter falling uponn my pore aking harte. If you cou'd stele a visitt you wou'd see wether she semes worse than whenn you sor her last ortumm; she is trieing ye tansy tea; and beggs her service to you, and greatfull thanks for y'r rememberence of her. I dare to say you here splended acounts of my doins in London—at cok fites and theaters, dansing at Vorxhall, and beeting ye wotch in Covin Garden. Does my F. stil use to speke harsh agenst me, or has he ni forgott their is sech a creetur living? If he has so, I hope you wil kepe him in sech forgetfullnesse,—and obliage,

"Yr loving brother and obediant servent."

"MATHEW HAYGARTH."

To me this letter is almost conclusive evidence of a marriage. Who can this little M. be, of whom he writes so tenderly, except a child? Who can this woman be, whose ill health causes him such anxiety, unless a wife? Of no one *but* a wife could he write so freely to his sister. The place to which he asks her to "steal a visit" must needs be a home to which a man could invite his sister. I fancy it is thus made very clear that at this period Matthew Haygarth was secretly married and living at Spotswold, where his wife and son were afterwards buried, and whence the body of the son was ultimately removed to Dewsdale to be laid in that grave which the father felt would soon be his own resting-place. That allusion to the Ullerton talk of London roisterings indicates that Matthew's father believed him to be squandering the paternal substance in the metropolis at the very time when the young man was leading a simple domestic life within fifty miles of the paternal abode. No man could do such a thing in these days of rapid locomotion, when every creature is more or less peripatetic; but in that benighted century the distance from Ullerton to Spotswold constituted a day's journey. That Matthew was living in one place while he was supposed to be in another is made sufficiently clear by several passages in his letters, all more or less in the strain of the following:—

"I was yesterday—markett-day—at G., wear I ran suddennly agenst Peter Browne's eldest ladd. The

boy openn'd his eyes wide, stearing like an owle; butt I gaive him bakk his looke with interrest, and tolde him if he was curiouse to know my name, I was Simon Lubchick, farmer, at his servise. The pore simpel ladd arsk'd my pardonn humbly for having mistook me for a gentelman of Ullerton—a frend of his father; on wich I gaive him a shillin, and we parted, vastly plesed with eche other; and this is nott the fust time the site of Ullerton fokes has putt me into a swett."

Amongst later letters are very sad ones. The little M. is dead. The father's poor aching heart proclaims its anguish in very simple words:

"*Nov*. 1751. I thank my dear sister kindly for her friendlinesse and compashin; butt, ah, he is gone, and their semes to be no plesure or comforte on this erth without him! onlie a littel childe of 6 yeres, and yett so dere a creetur to this harte that the worlde is emty and lonely without him. M. droopes sadly, and is more ailing everry day. Indede, my dere Ruth, I see nothing butt sorrow before me, and I wou'd be right gladd to lay down at peece in my littel M.'s grave."

I can find no actual announcements of death, only sad allusions here and there. I fancy the majority of Matthew's letters must have been lost, for the dates of those confided to my hands are very far apart, and there is evidence in all of them of other correspondence. After the letter alluding to little M.'s death, there is a hiatus of eight years. Then comes a letter with the post-mark London very clear, from which I transcribe an extract. "*October 4th*, 1759. The toun is very sadd; everry body, high and low, rich and pore, in morning for Gennerel Wolf: wot a nobel deth to die, and how much happier than to live, when one considers the cairs and miseries of this life; and sech has bin the oppinion of wiser fokes than y'r humble servent. Being in companie on Thersday sennite with that distingwish'd riter, Dr. Johnson,—whose admir'd story of *Raselass* I sent you new from ye press, but who I am bound to confesse is less admirable as a fine gentlemann than as an orther, his linning siled and his kravatt twisted ary, and his manners wot in a more obskure personn wou'd be thort ungenteel,—he made a remark wich impress'd me much. Some one present, being almost all gentelmenn of parts and learning, except y'r pore untuter'd brother, observed that it was a saying with the ainchents that ye happiest of men was him wich was never born; ye next happy him wich died the soonest. On wich Dr. Johnson cried out verry loud and angry, 'That was a Paggann sentyment, sir, and I am asham'd that a Xtian gentelmann shou'd repete it as a subject for admerashun. Betwene these heathen men and ye followers of Christ their is all ye differenc betwene a slave and a servent of a kind Master. Eche bears the same burden; butt ye servent knows he will recieve just wages for his work, wile ye slave hopes for nothing, and so conkludes that to escape work is to be happy!' I could but aknowlege the wisdomm and pyety of this speche; yett whenn I see ye peopel going bye in their black rayment, I envy the young Gennerel his gloreous deth, and I wish I was laying amongst the plane on the hites of Quebeck. I went to look at ye old house in J. St., but I wou'd not go in to see Mr. F. or ye old roomes; for I think I shou'd see the aparishions of those that once liv'd in them. C. thrivs at Higate, wear the aire is fresh and pewer. I go to see her offen. She is nerely as high as you. Give my servis to Mrs. Rebecka, sinse you say it will plese my father to do so, and he is now dispos'd to think more kindly of me. Butt if he thinks I shal everr arske her to be my wife he is mityly mistaken. You know wear my harte lies—in ye grave with all that made life dere. Thank my father for the Bill, and tell him I pass my time in good companie, and neether drink nor play; and will come to Ullerton to pay him my respeckts when he pleses to bid me. Butt I hav no desire to leeve London, as I am gladd to be neare C."

Who was C., whom Matthew visited at Highgate, and who was nearly as tall as Ruth Judson? Was she not most likely the same C. mentioned in conjunction with the little M. in the earlier letters? and if so, can there be any doubt that she was the daughter of Matthew Haygarth? Of whom but of a daughter would he write as in this letter? She was at Highgate, at school most likely, and he goes to see her. She is nearly as tall as Mrs. Judson. This height must have been a new thing, or he would scarcely impart it as a piece of news to his sister. And then he has no desire to leave London, as he is glad to be near C.

My life upon it, C. is a daughter.

Acting upon this conviction, I have transcribed all passages relating to C., at whatever distance of time they occur.

* * * * *

Thus, in 1763, I find—"C. has grone very hansome, and Mrs. N. tells me is much admir'd by a brother of her frend Tabitha. She never stirs abrorde but with Tabitha, and if a dutchess, cou'd be scarce wated on more cairfully. Mrs. N. loves her verry tenderly, and considers her the sweetest and most wel bredd of young women. I hav given her the new edishun of Sir Charls Grandisson, wich they read alowde in ye evenings, turn and turn about, to Mrs. N. at her spinning. C. has given me a wool comforter of her owne worke, and sum stockings wich are two thick to ware, but I hav not told her so."

Again, in 1764: "Tabitha Meynell's brother goes more than ever to Higate. He is a clark in his father's

wearhouse; very sober and estimabel, and if it be for ye hapiness of C. to mary him, I wou'd be ye laste of men to sett my orthoritty agenst her enclinashun. She is yett but ayteen yeres of age, wich is young to make a change; so I tell Mrs. N. we will waite. Meanwhile ye young peapel see eche other offen."

Again, in 1765: "Young Meynell is still constant, expressing much love and admirashun for C. in his discorse with Mrs. N., butt sattisfide to wait my plesure before spekeing oppenly to C. He semes a most exempelry young man; his father a cittizen of some repewt in Aldersgait-street, ware I have din'd since last riting to you, and at hoose tabel I was paid much considerashun. He, Tomas Meynell ye father, will give his son five hundred pound, and I prommis a thousand pound with C. and to furnish a house at Chelsee, a verry plesent and countriefide vilage; so I make no doubt there will soon be a wedding.

"I am sorrie to here my father is aleing; give him my love and servise, and will come to Ullerton immediate on receiving his commands. I am plesed to think Mrs. Rebecka Caulfeld is so dutifull and kind to him, and has comfortedd him with prairs and discorses. I thank her for this more than for any frendshipp for my undeserving self. Pray tell her that I am much at her servise.

"Our new king is lov'd and admir'd by all. His ministers not so; and wise peopel do entertain themselfs with what I think foollish jokes a-bout a *Skotch boote*. Perhapps I am not cleverr enuff to see the funn in this joke."

In this letter I detect a certain softening of feeling towards Mrs. Rebecca Caulfield. In the next year —'66—according to my notes, Matthew's father died, and I have no letters bearing the date of that year, which our Matthew no doubt spent at home. Nor have I any letters from this time until the year of Matthew's marriage with Rebecca Caulfield. In the one year of his union with Mrs. Rebecca, and the last year of his life, there are many letters, a few from London and the rest from the manor-house at Dewsdale. But in these epistles, affectionate and confidential as they are, there is little positive information.

These are the letters of the regenerate and Wesleyanised Matthew; and, like the more elaborate epistles of his wife Rebecca, deal chiefly with matters spiritual. In these letters I can perceive the workings of a weak mind, which in its decline has become a prey to religious terrors; and though I fully recognise the reforming influence which John Wesley exercised upon the people of England, I fancy poor Matthew would have been better in the hands of a woman whose piety was of a less severe type than that of Wesleyan Rebecca. There is an all-pervading tone of fear in these letters—a depression which is almost despair. In the same breath he laments and regrets the lost happiness of his youth, and regrets and laments his own iniquity in having been so ignorantly and unthinkingly happy.

Thus in one letter he says,—

"When I think of that inconsideratt foolish time with M., and how to be nere her semed the highest blisse erth cou'd bistowe or Heven prommis, I trimbel to think of my pore unawaken'd sole, and of her dome on wich the tru light never shown. If I cou'd believe she was happy my owne sorow wou'd be lesse; but I canot, sence all ye worthyest memberrs of our seck agree that to die thinking onely of erthly frends, and clingeng with a passhunate regrett to them we luv on erth is to be lesse than a tru Xtian, and for sech their is but one dome."

And again, in a still later epistle, he writes,—

"On Toosday sennite an awakning discorse fromm a verry young man, until lately a carppenter, but now imploid piusly in going from toun to toun and vilage to vilage, preching. He says, that a life of cairlesse happyness, finding plesure in ye things of this worlde, is—not being repentied of—irretrevable damnation. This is a maloncally thort! I fell to mewsing on M., with hoom I injoy'd such compleat happyness, tel Deth came like a spekter to bannish all comforte. And now I knowe that our lives wear vainity. I ashure you, dear sister, I am prodidjusly sadd when I reffleckt upon this truth—ashuredly it is a harde saying."

Anon comes that strange foreknowledge of death—that instinctive sense of the shadowy hand so soon to lay him at rest; and with that mystic prescience comes a yearning for the little child M. to be laid where his father may lay down beside him. There are many passages in the latter letters which afford a clue to that mysterious midnight burial at Dewsdale.

"Last nite I drem't of the cherchyarde at S. I satte under the olde yewe tree, as it semed in my dreme, and hurd a childes voice crying in a very piteous mannerr. The thort of this dreme has oppress'd my speritts all day, and Rebecka has enquier'd more than wunce wot ales me. If little M. but lay nere at hande, in ye graive to wich I fele I must soone be carrid, I beleive I shou'd be happyer. Reproove me for this folley if you plese. I am getting olde, and Sattan temts me with seche fooleish thorts. Wot dose it matter to my sole wear my vile bodie is laid? and yet I have a fonde fooleish desier to be berrid with

littel M."

And in these latest letters there is ample evidence of that yearning on Matthew's part to reveal a secret which Rebecca's own correspondence betrays.

"We tawked of manny things, and she was more than ordinnary kind and gentel. I had a mind to tell her about M, and aske her frendship for C; but she seemed not to cair to here my sekrets, and I think wou'd be offended if she new the trooth. So I cou'd not finde courrage to tell her. Before I die I shal speek planely for the saik of C. and M. and ye little one. I shal cum to U. erly nex weak to make my Wille, and this time shal chainge my umour no more. I have burnt ye laste, not likeing it."

This passage occurs in the last letter, amongst the packet confided to me. The letter is dated September 5, 1774. On the fourteenth of the following month Matthew died, and in all probability the will here alluded to was never executed. Certain it is that Matthew, whose end was awfully sudden at the last, died intestate, whereby his son John inherited the bulk, and ultimately the whole, of his fortune. There are many allusions to this infant son in the last few letters; but I do not think the little creature obtained any great hold on the father's heart. No doubt he was bound and swaddled out of even such small semblance to humanity as one may reasonably expect in a child of six or seven weeks old, and by no means an agreeable being. And poor weak-minded Matthew's heart was with that player-girl wife whom he never acknowledged, and the little M. And thus ends the story of Matthew Haygarth, so far as I have been able to trace it in the unfathomable gloom of the past.

It seems to me that what I have next to do will be to hunt up information respecting that young man Meynell, whose father lived in Aldersgate Street, and was a respectable and solid citizen, of that ilk; able to give a substantial dinner to the father of his son's sweetheart, and altogether a person considerable enough, I should imagine, to have left footprints of some kind or other on the sands of Time. The inscrutable Sheldon will be able to decide in what manner the hunt of the Meynells must begin. I doubt if there is anything more to be done in Ullerton.

I have sent Sheldon a fair copy of my extracts from Matthew's correspondence, and have returned the letters to Miss Judson, carefully packed in accordance with her request. I now await my Sheldon's next communication and the abatement of my influenza before making my next move in the great game of chess called Life.

What is the meaning of Horatio Paget's lengthened abode in this town? He is still here. He went past this house to-day while I was standing at my window in that abject state of mind known only to influenza and despair. I think I was suffering from a touch of both diseases, by the bye. What is that man doing here? The idea of his presence fills me with all manner of vague apprehensions. I cannot rid myself of the absurd notion that the lavender glove I saw lying in Goodge's parlour had been left there by the Captain. I know the idea *is* an absurd one, and I tell myself again and again that Paget *cannot* have any inkling of my business here, and therefore *cannot* attempt to forestall me or steal my hard-won information. But often as I reiterate this—in that silent argument which a man is always elaborating in his own mind—I am still tormented by a nervous apprehension of treachery from that man. I suppose the boundary line between influenza and idiocy is a very narrow one. And then Horatio Paget is such a thorough-paced scoundrel. He is *lié* with Philip Sheldon too—another thorough-paced scoundrel in a quiet gentlemanly way, unless my instinct deceives me.

October 12th. There is treachery somewhere. Again the Haygarthian epistles have been tampered with. Early this morning comes an indignant note from Miss Judson, reminding me that I promised the packet of letters should be restored to her yesterday at noon, and informing me that they were not returned until last night at eleven o'clock, when they were left at her back garden-gate by a dirty boy who rang the bell as loudly as if he had been giving the alarm of fire, and who thrust the packet rudely into the hand of the servant and vanished immediately. So much for the messenger. The packet itself, Miss Judson informed me, was of a dirty and disgraceful appearance, unworthy the hands of a gentlewoman, and one of the letters was missing.

Heedless of my influenza, I rushed at once to the lower regions of the inn, saw the waiter into whose hands I had confided my packet at half-past ten o'clock yesterday morning, and asked what messenger had been charged with it. The waiter could not tell me. He did not remember. I told him plainly that I considered this want of memory very extraordinary. The waiter laughed me to scorn, with that quiet insolence which a well-fed waiter feels for a customer who pays twenty shillings a week for his board and lodging. The packet had been given to a very respectable messenger, the waiter made no doubt. As to whether it was the ostler, or one of the boys, or the Boots, or a young woman in the kitchen who went on errands sometimes, the waiter wouldn't take upon himself to swear, being a man who would perish rather than inadvertently perjure himself. As to my packet having been tampered with, that was ridiculous. What on earth was there in a lump of letter-paper for any one to steal? Was there money in the parcel? I was fain to confess there was no money; on which the waiter laughed aloud.

Failing the waiter, I applied myself severally to the ostler, the boys, the Boots, and the young woman in the kitchen; and then transpired the curious fact that no one had carried my packet. The ostler was sure he had not; the Boots could take his Bible oath to the same effect; the young woman in the kitchen could not call to mind anything respecting a packet, though she was able to give me a painfully circumstantial account of the events of the morning—where she went and what she did, down to the purchase of three-pennyworth of pearl-ash and a pound of Glenfield starch for the head chambermaid, on which she dwelt with a persistent fondness.

I now felt assured that there had been treachery here, as in the Goodge business; and I asked myself to whom could I impute that treachery?

My instinctive suspicion was of Horatio Paget. And yet, was it not more probable that Theodore Judson, senr. and Theodore Judson, junr. were involved in this business, and were watching and counterchecking my actions with a view to frustrating the plans of my principal? This was one question which I asked myself as I deliberated upon this mysterious business. Had the Theodore Judsons some knowledge of a secret marriage on the part of Matthew Haygarth? and did they suspect the existence of an heir in the descendant of the issue of that marriage? These were further questions which I asked myself, and which I found it much more easy to ask than to answer. After having considered these questions, I went to the Lancaster-road, saw Miss Judson—assured her, on my word as a gentleman, that the packet had been delivered by my hands into those of the waiter at eleven o'clock on the previous day, and asked to see the envelope. There it was—my large blue wire-wove office envelope, addressed in my own writing. But in these days of adhesive envelopes there is nothing easier than to tamper with the fastening of a letter. I registered a mental vow never again to trust any important document to the protection of a morsel of gummed paper. I counted the letters, convinced myself that there was a deficiency, and then set to work to discover which of the letters had been abstracted. Here I failed utterly. For my own convenience in copying my extracts, I had numbered the letters from which I intended to transcribe passages before beginning my work. My pencilled figures in consecutive order were visible in the corner of the superscription of every document I had used. Those numbered covers I now found intact, and I could thus assure myself that the missing document was one from which I had taken no extract.

This inspired me with a new alarm. Could it be possible that I had overlooked some scrap of information more important than all that I had transcribed?

I racked my brains in the endeavour to recall the contents of that one missing letter; but although I sat in that social tomb, Miss Judson's best parlour, until I felt my blood becoming of an arctic quality, I could remember nothing that seemed worth remembering in the letters I had laid aside as valueless.

I asked Miss Judson if she had any suspicion of the person who had tampered with the packet. She looked at me with an icy smile, and answered in ironical accents, which were even more chilling than the atmosphere of her parlour,—

"Do not ask if I know who has tampered with those letters, Mr. Hawkehurst. Your affectation of surprise has been remarkably well put on; but I am not to be deceived a second time. When you came to me in the first instance, I had my suspicions; but you came furnished with a note from my brother, and as a Christian I repressed those suspicions. I know now that I have been the dupe of an impostor, and that in entrusting those letters to you I entrusted them to an emissary and tool of THEODORE JUDSON."

I protested that I had never to my knowledge set eyes upon either of the Theodore Judsons; but the prejudiced kinswoman of those gentlemen shook her head with a smile whose icy blandness was eminently exasperating.

"I am not to be deceived a second time," she said. "Who else but Theodore Judson should have employed you? Who else but Theodore Judson is interested in the Haygarth fortune? O, it was like him to employ a stranger where he knew his own efforts would be unavailing; it was like him to hoodwink me by the agency of a hireling tool."

I had been addressed as a "young man" by the reverend Jonah, and now I was spoken of as a "hireling tool" by Miss Judson. I scarcely knew which was most disagreeable, and I began to think that board and lodging in the present, and a visionary three thousand pounds in the future, would scarcely compensate me for such an amount of ignominy.

I went back to my inn utterly crestfallen—a creature so abject that even the degrading influence of influenza could scarcely sink me any lower in the social scale. I wrote a brief and succinct account of my proceedings, and despatched the same to George Sheldon, and then I sat down in my sickness and

despair, as deeply humiliated as Ajax when he found that he had been pitching into sheep instead of Greeks, as miserable as Job amongst his dust and ashes, but I am happy to say untormented by the chorus of one or the friends of the other. In that respect at least I had some advantage over both.

October 13th. This morning's post brought me a brief scrawl from Sheldon.

"Come back to town directly. I have found the registry of Matthew Haygarth's marriage."

And so I turn my back on Ullerton; with what rejoicing of spirit it is not in language to express.

BOOK THE SIXTH.

THE HEIRESS OF THE HAYGARTHS.

CHAPTER I.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

Of all places upon this earth, perhaps, there is none more obnoxious to the civilized mind than London in October; and yet to Valentine Hawkehurst, newly arrived from Ullerton per North-Western Railway, that city seemed as an enchanted and paradisiacal region. Were not the western suburbs of that murky metropolis inhabited by Charlotte Halliday, and might he not hope to see her?

He did hope for that enjoyment. He had felt something more than hope while speeding Londonwards by that delightful combination of a liberal railway management, a fast and yet cheap train. He had beguiled himself with a delicious certainty. Early the next morning—or at any rate as early as civilization permitted—he would hie him to Bayswater, and present himself at the neat iron gate of Philip Sheldon's gothic villa. *She* would be there, in the garden most likely, his divine Charlotte, so bright and radiant a creature that the dull October morning would be made glorious by her presence—she would be there, and she would welcome him with that smile which made her the most enchanting of women.

Such thoughts as these had engaged him during his homeward journey; and compared with the delight of such visions, the perusal of daily papers and the consumption of sandwiches, whereby other passengers beguiled their transit, seemed a poor amusement. But, arrived in the dingy streets, and walking towards Chelsea under a drizzling rain, the bright picture began to grow dim. Was it not more than likely that Charlotte would be absent from London at this dismal season? Was it not very probable that Philip Sheldon would give him the cold shoulder? With these gloomy contingencies before him, Mr. Hawkehurst tried to shut Miss Halliday's image altogether out of his mind, and to contemplate the more practical aspect of his affairs.

"I wonder whether that scoundrel Paget has come back to London?" he thought. "What am I to say to him if he has? If I own to having seen him in Ullerton, I shall lay myself open to being questioned by him as to my own business in that locality. Perhaps my wisest plan would be to say nothing, and hear his own account of himself. I fully believe he saw me on the platform that night when we passed each other without speaking."

Horatio Paget was at home when his *protegé* arrived. He was seated by his fireside in all the domestic respectability of a dressing-gown and slippers, with an evening paper on his knee, a slim smoke-coloured bottle at his elbow, and the mildest of cigars between his lips, when the traveller, weary and weather-stained, entered the lodging-house drawing-room.

Captain Paget received his friend very graciously, only murmuring some faint deprecation of the

young man's reeking overcoat, with just such a look of gentlemanly alarm as the lamented Brummel may have felt when ushered into the presence of a "damp stranger."

"And so you've come back at last," said the Captain, "from Dorking?" He made a little pause here, and looked at his friend with a malicious sparkle in his eye. "And how was the old aunt? Likely to cut up for any considerable amount, eh? It could only be with a view to that cutting-up process that you could consent to isolate yourself in such a place as Dorking. How did you find things?"

"O, I don't know, I'm sure," Mr. Hawkehurst answered rather impatiently, for his worst suspicions were confirmed by his patron's manner; "I only know I found it tiresome work enough."

"Ah, to be sure! elderly people always are tiresome, especially when they are unacquainted with the world. There is a perennial youth about men and women of the world. The sentimental twaddle people talk of the freshness and purity of a mind unsullied by communion with the world is the shallowest nonsense. Your Madame du Deffand at eighty and your Horace Walpole at sixty are as lively as a girl and boy. Your octogenarian Voltaire is the most agreeable creature in existence. But take Cymon and Daphne from their flocks and herds and pastoral valleys in their old age, and see what senile bores and quavering imbeciles you would find them. Yes, I have no doubt you found your Dorking aunt a nuisance. Take off your wet overcoat and put it out of the room, and then ring for more hot water. You'll find that cognac very fine. Won't you have a cigar?"

The Captain extended his russia-leather case with the blandest smile. It was a very handsome case. Captain Paget was a man who could descend into some unknown depths of the social ocean in the last stage of shabbiness, and who, while his acquaintance were congratulating themselves upon the fact of his permanent disappearance, would start up suddenly in an unexpected place, provided with every necessity and luxury of civilized life, from a wardrobe by Poole to the last fashionable absurdity in the shape of a cigar-case.

Never had Valentine Hawkehurst found his patron more agreeably disposed than he seemed to be this evening, and never had he felt more inclined to suspect him.

"And what have you been doing while I have been away?" the young man asked presently. "Any more promoting work?"

"Well, yes, a little bit of provincial business; a life-and-fire on a novel principle; a really good thing, if we can only find men with perception enough to see its merits, and pluck enough to hazard their capital. But promoting in the provinces is very dull work. I've been to two or three towns in the Midland districts—Beauport, Mudborough, and Ullerton—and have found the same stagnation everywhere."

Nothing could be more perfect than the semblance of unconscious innocence with which the Captain gave this account of himself: whether he was playing a part, or whether he was telling the entire truth, was a question which even a cleverer man than Valentine Hawkehurst might have found himself unable to answer.

The two men sat till late, smoking and talking; but to-night Valentine found the conversation of his "guide, philosopher, and friend" strangely distasteful to him. That cynical manner of looking at life, which not long ago had seemed to him the only manner compatible with wisdom and experience, now grated harshly upon those finer senses which had been awakened in the quiet contemplative existence he had of late been leading. He had been wont to enjoy Captain Paget's savage bitterness against a world which had not provided him with a house in Carlton-gardens, and a seat in the Cabinet; but to-night he was revolted by the noble Horatio's tone and manner. Those malicious sneers against respectable people and respectable prejudices, with which the Captain interlarded all his talk, seemed to have a ghastly grimness in their mirth. It was like the talk of some devil who had once been an angel, and had lost all hope of ever being restored to his angelic status.

"To believe in nothing, to respect nothing, to hope for nothing, to fear nothing, to consider life as so many years in which to scheme and lie for the sake of good dinners and well-made coats—surely there can be no state of misery more complete, no degradation more consummate," thought the young man, as he sat by the fireside smoking and listening dreamily to his companion. "Better to be Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth, narrow-minded and egotistical, but always looking beyond her narrow life to some dimly-comprehended future."

He was glad to escape at last from the Captain's society, and to retire to his own small chamber, where he slept soundly enough after the day's fatigues, and dreamed of the Haygarths and Charlotte Halliday.

He was up early the next morning; but, on descending to the sitting-room, he found his patron toasting his *Times* before a cheerful fire; while his gold hunting-watch stood open on the breakfast-

table, and a couple of new-laid eggs made a pleasant wabbling noise in a small saucepan upon the hob.

"You don't care for eggs, I know, Val," said the Captain, as he took the saucepan from the hob.

He had heard the young man object to an egg of French extraction too long severed from its native land; but he knew very well that for rural delicacies from a reliable dairyman, at twopence apiece, Mr. Hawkehurst had no particular antipathy. Even in so small a matter as a new-laid egg the Captain knew how to protect his own interest.

"There's some of that Italian sausage you're so fond of, dear boy," he said politely, pointing to a heel of some grayish horny-looking compound. "Thanks; I'll pour out the coffee; there's a knack in these things; half the clearness of coffee depends on the way in which it's poured out, you see."

And with this assurance Captain Paget filled his own large breakfast-cup with a careful hand and a tender solemnity of countenance. If he was a trifle less considerate in the pouring out of the second cup, and if some "grounds" mingled with the second portion, Valentine Hawkehurst was unconscious of the fact.

"Do try that Italian sausage," said the Captain, as he discussed his second egg, after peeling the most attractive crusts from the French rolls, and pushing the crumb to his *protégé*.

"No, thank you; it looks rather like what your shop-people call an old housekeeper; besides, there's a little too much garlic in those compositions for my taste."

"Your taste has grown fastidious," said the Captain; "one would think you were going to call upon some ladies this morning."

"There are not many ladies on my visiting-list. O, by the way, how's
Diana? Have you seen her lately?"

"No," answered the Captain, promptly. "I only returned from my provincial tour a day or two ago, and have had no time to waste dancing attendance upon her. She's well enough, I've no doubt; and she's uncommonly well off in Sheldon's house, and ought to think herself so."

Having skimmed his newspaper, Captain Paget rose and invested himself in his overcoat. He put on his hat before the glass over the mantelpiece, adjusting the brim above his brows with the thoughtful care that distinguished his performance of all those small duties which he owed to himself.

"And what may *you* be going to do with yourself to-day, Val?" he asked of the young man, who sat nursing his own knee and staring absently at the fire.

"Well, I don't quite know," Mr. Hawkehurst answered, hypocritically; "I think I may go as far as Gray's Inn, and look in upon George Sheldon."

"You'll dine out of doors, I suppose?"

This was a polite way of telling Mr. Hawkehurst that there would be no dinner for him at home.

"I suppose I shall. You know I'm not punctilious on the subject of dinner. Anything you please—from a banquet at the London Tavern to a ham-sandwich and a glass of ale at fourpence."

"Ah, to be sure; youth is reckless of its gastric juices. I shall find you at home when I come in to-night, I daresay. I think I may dine in the city. *Au plaisir*."

"I don't know about the pleasure," muttered Mr. Hawkehurst. "You're a very delightful person, my friend Horatio; but there comes a crisis in a man's existence when he begins to feel that he has had enough of you. Poor Diana! what a father!"

He did not waste much time on further consideration of his patron, but set off at once on his way to Gray's Inn. It was too early to call at the Lawn, or he would fain have gone there before seeking George Sheldon's dingy offices. Nor could he very well present himself at the gothic villa without some excuse for so doing. He went to Gray's Inn therefore; but on his way thither called at a tavern near the Strand, which was the head-quarters of a literary association known as the Ragamuffins. Here he was fortunate enough to meet with an acquaintance in the person of a Ragamuffin in the dramatic-author line, who was reading the morning's criticisms on a rival's piece produced the night before, with a keen enjoyment of every condemnatory sentence. From this gentleman Mr. Hawkehurst obtained a box-ticket for a West-end theatre; and, armed with this mystic document, he felt himself able to present a bold countenance at Mr. Sheldon's door.

"Will she be glad to see me again?" he asked himself. "Pshaw! I daresay she has forgotten me by this

time. A fortnight is an age with some women; and I should fancy Charlotte Halliday just one of those bright impressionable beings who forget easily. I wonder whether she is *really* like that 'Molly' whose miniature was found by Mrs. Haygarth in the tulip-leaf escritoire; or was the resemblance between those two faces only a silly fancy of mine?"

Mr. Hawkehurst walked the whole distance from Chelsea to Gray's Inn; and it was midday when he presented himself before George Sheldon, whom he found seated at his desk with the elephantine pedigree of the Haygarths open before him, and profoundly absorbed in the contents of a note-book. He looked up from this note-book as Valentine entered, but did not leave off chewing the end of his pencil as he mumbled a welcome to the returning wanderer. It has been seen that neither of the Sheldon brothers were demonstrative men.

After that unceremonious greeting, the lawyer continued his perusal of the note-book for some minutes, while Valentine seated himself in a clumsy leather-covered arm-chair by the fireplace.

"Well, young gentleman," Mr. Sheldon exclaimed, as he closed his book with a triumphant snap, "I think *you're* in for a good thing; and you may thank your lucky stars for having thrown you into my path."

"My stars are not remarkable for their luckiness in a general way," answered Mr. Hawkehurst, coolly, for the man had not yet been born from whom he would accept patronage. "I suppose if I'm in for a good thing, you're in for a better thing, my dear George; so you needn't come the benefactor quite so strong for my edification. How did you ferret out the certificate of gray-eyed Molly's espousals?"

George Sheldon contemplated his coadjutor with an admiring stare. "It has been my privilege to enjoy the society of cool hands, Mr. Hawkehurst; and certainly you are about the coolest of the lot—bar one, as they say in the ring. But that is *ni ci ni là*. I have found the certificate of Matthew Haygarth's marriage, and to my mind the Haygarth succession is as good as ours."

"Ah, those birds in the bush have such splendid plumage! but I'd rather have the modest sparrow in my hand. However, I'm very glad our affairs are marching. How did you discover the marriage-lines?"

"Not without hard labour, I can tell you. Of course my idea of a secret marriage was at the best only a plausible hypothesis; and I hardly dared to hug myself with the hope that it might turn up trumps. My idea was based upon two or three facts, namely, the character of the young man, his long residence in London away from the ken of respectable relatives and friends, and the extraordinary state of the marriage laws at the period in which our man lived."

"Ah, to be sure! That was a strong point."

"I should rather think it was. I took the trouble to look up the history of Mayfair marriages and Fleet marriages before you started for Ullerton, and I examined all the evidence I could get on that subject. I made myself familiar with the Rev. Alexander Keith of Mayfair, who helped to bring clandestine marriages into vogue amongst the swells, and with Dr. Gaynham—agreeably nicknamed Bishop of Hell—and more of the same calibre; and the result of my investigations convinced me that in those days a hare-brained young reprobate must have found it rather more difficult to avoid matrimony than to achieve it. He might be married when he was tipsy; he might be married when he was comatose from the effects of a stand-up fight with Mohawks; his name might be assumed by some sportive Benedick of his acquaintance given to practical joking, and he might find himself saddled with a wife he never saw; or if, on the other hand, of an artful and deceptive turn, he might procure a certificate of a marriage that had never taken place,—for there were very few friendly offices which the Fleet parsons refused to perform for their clients—for a consideration."

"But how about the legality of the Fleet marriage?"

"There's the rub. Before the New Marriage Act passed in 1753 a Fleet marriage was indissoluble. It was an illegal act, and the parties were punishable; but the Gordian knot was quite as secure as if it had been tied in the most orthodox manner. The great difficulty to my mind was the *onus probandi*. The marriage might have taken place; the marriage be to all intents and purposes a good marriage; but how produce undeniable proof of such a ceremony, when all ceremonies of the kind were performed with a manifest recklessness and disregard of law? Even if I found an apparently good certificate, how was I to prove that it was not one of those lying certificates of marriages that had never taken place? Again, what kind of registers could posterity expect from these parson-adventurers, very few of whom could spell, and most of whom lived in a chronic state of drunkenness? They married people sometimes by their Christian names alone—very often under assumed names. What consideration had they for heirs-at-law in the future, when under the soothing influence of a gin-bottle in the present? I thought of all these circumstances, and I was half inclined to despair of realising my idea of an early marriage. I took

it for granted that such a secret business would be more likely to have taken place in the precincts of the Fleet than anywhere else; and having no particular clue, I set to work, in the first place, to examine all available documents relating to such marriages."

"It must have been slow work."

"It *was* slow work," answered Mr. Sheldon with a suppressed groan, that was evoked by the memory of a bygone martyrdom. "I needn't enter into all the details of the business,—the people I had to apply to for permission to see this set of papers, and the signing and counter-signing I had to go through before I could see that set of papers, and the extent of circumlocution and idiocy I had to encounter in a general way before I could complete my investigation. The result was nil; and after working like a galley-slave I found myself no better off than before I began my search. Your extracts from Matthew's letters put me on a new track. I concluded therefrom that there had been a marriage, and that the said marriage had been a deliberate act on the part of the young man. I therefore set to work to do what I ought to have done at starting—I hunted in all the parish registers to be found within a certain radius of such and such localities. I began with Clerkenwell, in which neighbourhood our friend spent such happy years, according to that pragmatical epistle of Mrs. Rebecca's; but after hunting in all the mouldy old churches within a mile of St. John's-gate, I was no nearer arriving at any record of Matthew Haygarth's existence. So I turned my back upon Clerkenwell, and went southward to the neighbourhood of the Marshalsea, where Mistress Molly's father was at one time immured, and whence I thought it very probable Mistress Molly had started on her career as a matron. This time my guess was a lucky one. After hunting the registers of St. Olave's, St. Saviour's, and St. George's, and after the expenditure of more shillings in donations to sextons than I care to remember, I at last lighted on a document which I consider worth three thousand pounds to you—and—a very decent sum of money to me."

"I wonder what colour our hair will be when we touch that money?" said Valentine meditatively. "These sort of cases generally find their way into Chancery-lane, don't they?—that lane which, for some unhappy travellers, has no turning except the one dismal *via* which leads to dusty death. You seem in very good spirits; and I suppose I ought to be elated too. Three thousand pounds would give me a start in life, and enable me to set up in the new character of a respectable rate-paying citizen. But I've a kind of presentiment that this hand of mine will never touch the prize of the victor; or, in plainer English, that no good will ever arise to me or mine out of the reverend intestate's hundred thousand pounds."

"Why, what a dismal-minded croaker you are this morning!" exclaimed George Sheldon with unmitigated disgust; "a regular raven, by Jove! You come to a fellow's office just as matters are beginning to look like success—after ten years' plodding and ten years' disappointment—and you treat him to maudlin howls about the Court of Chancery. This is a new line you've struck out, Hawkehurst, and I can tell you it isn't a pleasant one."

"Well, no, I suppose I oughtn't to say that sort of thing," answered Valentine in an apologetic tone; "but there are some days in a man's life when there seems to be a black cloud between him and everything he looks at. I feel like that today. There's a tightening sensation about something under my waistcoat—my heart, perhaps—a sense of depression that may be either physical or mental, that I can't get rid of. If a man had walked by my side from Chelsea to Holborn whispering forebodings of evil into my ear at every step, I couldn't have felt more downhearted than I do."

"What did you eat for breakfast?" asked Mr. Sheldon impatiently. "A tough beefsteak fried by a lodging-house cook, I daresay—they *will* fry their steaks. Don't inflict the consequences of your indigestible diet upon me. To tell me that there's a black cloud between you and everything you look at, is only a sentimental way of telling me that you're bilious. Pray be practical, and let us look at things from a business point of view. Here is Appendix A.—a copy of the registry of the marriage of Matthew Haygarth, bachelor, of Clerkenwell, in the county of Middlesex, to Mary Murchison, spinster, of Southwark, in the county of Surrey. And here is Appendix B.—a copy of the registry of the marriage between William Meynell, bachelor, of Smithfield, in the county of Middlesex, to Caroline Mary Haygarth, spinster, of Highgate, in the same county."

"You have found the entry of a second Haygarthian marriage?"

"I have. The C. of Matthew's letters is the Caroline Mary here indicated, the daughter and heiress of Matthew Haygarth—doubtless christened Caroline after her gracious majesty the consort of George II., and Mary after the Molly whose picture was found in the tulip-leaf bureau. The Meynell certificate was easy enough to find, since the letters told me that Miss C.'s suitor had a father who lived in Aldersgate-street, and a father who approved his son's choice. The Aldersgate citizen had a house of his own, and a more secure social status altogether than that poor, weak, surreptitious Matthew. It was therefore only natural that the marriage should be celebrated in the Meynell mansion. Having considered this, I had only to ransack the registers of a certain number of churches round and about Aldersgate-street in

order to find what I wanted; and after about a day and a half of hard labour, I did find the invaluable document which places me one generation nearer the present, and on the high-road to the discovery of my heir-at-law. I searched the same registry for children of the aforesaid William and Caroline Mary Meynell, but could find no record of such children nor any further entry of the name of Meynell. But we must search other registries within access of Aldersgate-street before we give up the idea of finding such entries in that neighbourhood."

"And what is to be the next move?"

"The hunting-up of all descendants of this William and Caroline Mary Meynell, wheresoever such descendants are to be found. We are now altogether off the Haygarth and Judson scent, and have to beat a new covert."

"Good!" exclaimed Valentine more cheerfully. "How is the new covert to be beaten?"

"We must start from Aldersgate-street. Meynell of Aldersgate-street must have been a responsible man, and it will be hard if there is no record of him extant in all the old topographical histories of wards, without and within, which cumber the shelves of your dry-as-dust libraries. We must hunt up all available books; and when we've got all the information that books can give us, we can go in upon hearsay evidence, which is always the most valuable in these cases."

"That means another encounter with ancient mariners—I beg your pardon—oldest inhabitants," said Valentine with a despondent yawn. "Well, I suppose that sort of individual is a little less obtuse when he lives within the roar of the great city's thunder than when he vegetates in the dismal outskirts of a manufacturing town. Where am I to find my octogenarian prosers? and when am I to begin my operations upon them?"

"The sooner you begin the better," replied Mr. Sheldon. "I've taken all preliminary steps for you already, and you'll find the business tolerably smooth sailing. I've made a list of certain people who may be worth seeing."

Mr. Sheldon selected a paper from the numerous documents upon the table.

"Here they are," he said: "John Grewter, wholesale stationer, Aldersgate-street; Anthony Sparsfield, carver and gilder, in Barbican. These are, so far as I can ascertain, the two oldest men now trading in Aldersgate-street; and from these men you ought to be able to find out something about old Meynell. I don't anticipate any difficulty about the Meynells, except the possibility that we may find more of them than we want, and have some trouble in shaking them into their places."

"I'll tackle my friend the stationer to-morrow morning," said Valentine.

"You'd better drop in upon him in the afternoon, when the day's business may be pretty well over," returned the prudent Sheldon. "And now all you've got to do, Hawkehurst, is to work with a will, and work on patiently. If you do as well in London as you did at Ullerton, neither you nor I will have any cause to complain. Of course I needn't impress upon you the importance of secrecy."

"No," replied Valentine; "I'm quite alive to that."

He then proceeded to inform George Sheldon of that encounter with Captain Paget on the platform at Ullerton, and of the suspicion that had been awakened in his mind by the sight of the glove in Goodge's parlour.

The lawyer shook his head.

"That idea about the glove was rather far-fetched," he said, thoughtfully; "but I don't like the look of that meeting at the station. My brother Philip is capable of anything in the way of manoeuvring; and I'm not ashamed to confess that I'm no match for him. He was in here one day when I had the Haygarth pedigree spread out on the table, and I know he smelt a rat. We must beware of him, Hawkehurst, and we must work against time if we don't want him to anticipate us."

"I shan't let the grass grow under my feet," replied Valentine. "I was really interested in that Haygarthian history: there was a dash of romance about it, you see. I don't feel the same gusto in the Meynell chase, but I daresay I shall begin to get up an interest in it as my investigation proceeds. Shall I call the day after to-morrow and tell you my adventures?"

"I think you'd better stick to the old plan, and let me have the result of your work in the form of a diary," answered Sheldon. And with this the two men parted.

It was now half-past two o'clock; it would be half-past three before Valentine could present himself at

the Lawn—a very seasonable hour at which to call upon Mrs. Sheldon with his offering of a box for the new play.

An omnibus conveyed him to Bayswater at a snail's pace, and with more stoppages than ever mortal omnibus was subjected to before, as it seemed to that one eager passenger. At last the fading foliage of the Park appeared between the hats and bonnets of Valentine's opposite neighbours. Even those orange tawny trees reminded him of Charlotte. Beneath such umbrage had he parted from her. And now he was going to see the bright young face once more. He had been away from town about a fortnight; but taken in relation with Miss Halliday, that fortnight seemed half a century.

Chrysanthemums and china-asters beautified Mr. Sheldon's neat little garden, and the plate-glass windows of his house shone with all their wonted radiance. It was like the houses one sees framed and glazed in an auctioneer's office—the greenest imaginable grass, the bluest windows, the reddest bricks, the whitest stone. "It is a house that would set my teeth on edge, but for the one sweet creature who lives in it," Valentine thought to himself, as he waited at the florid iron gate, which was painted a vivid ultramarine and picked out with gold.

He tried in vain to catch a glimpse of some feminine figure in the small suburban garden. No flutter of scarlet petticoat or flash of scarlet plume revealed the presence of the divinity.

The prim maid-servant informed him that Mrs. Sheldon was at home, and asked if he would please to walk into the drawing-room.

Would he please? Would he not have been pleased to walk into a raging furnace if there had been a chance of meeting Charlotte Halliday amid the flames? He followed the maid-servant into Mrs. Sheldon's irreproachable apartment, where the show books upon the show table were ranged at the usual mathematically correct distances from one another, and where the speckless looking-glasses and all-pervading French polish imparted a chilly aspect to the chamber. A newly-lighted fire was smouldering in the shining steel grate, and a solitary female figure was seated by the broad Tudor window bending over some needlework.

It was the figure of Diana Paget, and she was quite alone in the room. Valentine's heart sank a little as he saw the solitary figure, and perceived that it was not the woman he loved.

Diana looked up from her work and recognised the visitor. Her face flushed, but the flush faded very quickly, and Valentine was not conscious of that flattering indication.

"How do you do, Diana?" he said. "Here I am again, you see, like the proverbial bad shilling. I have brought Mrs. Sheldon an order for the Princess's."

"You are very kind; but I don't think she'll care to go. She was complaining of a headache this afternoon."

"O, she'll forget all about her headache if she wants to go to the play. She's the sort of little woman who is always ready for a theatre or a concert. Besides, Miss Halliday may like to go, and will easily persuade her mamma. Whom could she not persuade?" added Mr. Hawkehurst within himself.

"Miss Halliday is out of town," Diana replied coldly.

The young man felt as if his heart were suddenly transformed into so much lead, so heavy did it seem to grow. What a foolish thing it seemed that he should be the victim of this fair enslaver!—he who until lately had fancied himself incapable of any earnest feeling or deep emotion.

"Out of town!" he repeated with unconcealed disappointment.

"Yes; she has gone on a visit to some relations in Yorkshire. She actually has relations; doesn't that sound strange to you and me?"

Valentine did not notice this rather cynical remark.

"She'll be away ever so long, I suppose?" he said.

"I have no idea how long she may stay there. The people idolise her, I understand. You know it is her privilege to be idolised; and of course they will persuade her to stay as long as they can. You seem disappointed at not seeing her."

"I am very much disappointed," Valentine answered frankly; "she is a sweet girl."

There was a silence after this. Miss Paget resumed her work with rapid fingers. She was picking up shining little beads one by one on the point of her needle, and transferring them to the canvas

stretched upon an embroidery frame before her. It was a kind of work exacting extreme care and precision, and the girl's hand never faltered, though a tempest of passionate feeling agitated her as she worked.

"I am very sorry not to see her," Valentine said presently, "for the sight of her is very dear to me. Why should I try to hide my feelings from you, Diana? We have endured so much misery together that there must be some bond of union between us. To me you have always seemed like a sister, and I have no wish to keep any secret from you, though you receive me so coldly that one would think I had offended you."

"You have not offended me. I thank you for being so frank with me. You would have gained little by an opposite course. I have long known your affection for Charlotte."

"You guessed my secret?"

"I saw what any one could have seen who had taken the trouble to watch you for ten minutes during your visits to this house."

"Was my unhappy state so very conspicuous?" exclaimed Valentine, laughing. "Was I so obviously spoony? *I* who have so ridiculed anything in the way of sentiment. You make me blush for my folly, Diana. What is that you are dotting with all those beads?—something very elaborate."

"It is a prie-dieu chair I am working for Mrs. Sheldon. Of course I am bound to do something for my living."

"And so you wear out your eyesight in the working of chairs. Poor girl! it seems hard that your beauty and accomplishments should not find a better market than that. I daresay you will marry some millionaire friend of Mr. Sheldon's one of these days, and I shall hear of your house in Park-lane and three-hundred guinea barouche."

"You are very kind to promise me a millionaire. The circumstances of my existence hitherto have been so peculiarly fortunate that I am justified in expecting such a suitor. My millionaire shall ask you to dinner at my house in Park-lane; and you shall play *écarté* with him, if you like—papa's kind of *écarté*."

"Don't talk of those things, Di," said Mr. Hawkehurst, with something that was almost a shudder; "let us forget that we ever led that kind of life."

"Yes," replied Diana, "let us forget it—if we can."

The bitterness of her tone struck him painfully. He sat for some minutes watching her silently, and pitying her fate. What a sad fate it seemed, and how hopeless! For him there was always some chance of redemption. He could go out into the world, and cut his way through the forest of difficulty with the axe of the conqueror. But what could a woman do who found herself in the midst of that dismal forest? She could only sit at the door of her lonesome hut, looking out with weary eyes for the prince who was to come and rescue her. And Valentine remembered how many women there are to whom the prince never comes, and who must needs die and be buried beneath that gloomy umbrage.

"O! let us have women doctors, women lawyers, women parsons, women stone-breakers—anything rather than these dependent creatures who sit in other people's houses working prie-dieu chairs and pining for freedom," he thought to himself, as he watched the pale stern face in the chill afternoon light.

"Do leave off working for a few minutes, and talk to me, Di," he said rather impatiently. "You don't know how painful it is to a man to see a woman absorbed in some piece of needlework at the very moment when he wants all her sympathy. I am afraid you are not quite happy. Do confide in me, dear, as frankly as I confide in you. Are these people kind to you? Charlotte is, of course. But the elder birds, Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon, are they kind?"

"They are very kind. Mr. Sheldon is not a demonstrative man, as you know; but I am not accustomed to have people in a rapturous state of mind about me and my affairs. He is kinder to me than my father ever was; and I don't see how I can expect more than that. Mrs. Sheldon is extremely kind in her way—which is rather a feeble way, as you know."

"And Charlotte—?"

"You answered for Charlotte yourself just now. Yes, she is very, very, very good to me; much better than I deserve. I was almost going to quote the collect, and say 'desire or deserve.'"

"Why should you not desire or deserve her goodness?" asked Valentine.

"Because I am not a loveable kind of person. I am not sympathetic. I know that Charlotte is very fascinating, very charming; but sometimes her very fascination repels me. I think the atmosphere of that horrible swampy district between Lambeth and Battersea, where my childhood was spent, must have soured my disposition."

"No, Diana; you have only learnt a bitter way of talking. I know your heart is noble and true. I have seen your suppressed indignation many a time when your father's meannesses have revolted you. Our lives have been very hard, dear; but let us hope for brighter days. I think they must come to us."

"They will never come to me," said Diana.

"You say that with an air of conviction. But why should they not come to you—brighter and better days?"

"I cannot tell you that. I can only tell you that they will not come.
And do you hope that any good will ever come of your love for Charlotte
Halliday—you, who know Mr. Sheldon?"

"I am ready to hope anything."

"You think that Mr. Sheldon would let his stepdaughter marry a penniless man?"

"I may not always be penniless. Besides, Mr. Sheldon has no actual authority over Charlotte."

"But he has moral influence over her. She is very easily influenced."

"I am ready to hope even in spite of Mr. Sheldon's opposing influence. You must not try to crush this one little floweret that has grown up in a barren waste, Diana. It is my prison-flower."

Mrs. Sheldon came into the room as he said this. She was very cordial, very eloquent upon the subject of her headache, and very much inclined to go to the theatre, notwithstanding that ailment, when she heard that Mr. Hawkehurst had been kind enough to bring her a box.

"Diana and I could go," she said, "if we can manage to be in time after our six o'clock dinner. Mr. Sheldon does not care about theatres. All the pieces tire him. He declares they are all stupid. But then, you see, if one's mind is continually wandering, the cleverest piece must seem stupid," Mrs. Sheldon added thoughtfully; "and my husband is so very absent-minded."

After some further discussion about the theatres, Valentine bade the ladies good afternoon.

"Won't you stop to see Mr. Sheldon?" asked Georgina; "he's in the library with Captain Paget. You did not know that your papa was here, did you, Diana, my dear? He came in with Mr. Sheldon an hour ago."

"I won't disturb Mr. Sheldon," said Valentine. "I will call again in a few days."

He took leave of the two ladies, and went out into the hall. As he emerged from the drawing-room, the door of the library was opened, and he heard Philip Sheldon's voice within, saying,—

"—your accuracy with regard to the name of Meynell."

It was the close of a sentence; but the name struck immediately upon Valentine's ear. Meynell!—the name which had for him so peculiar an interest.

"Is it only a coincidence," he thought to himself, "or is Horatio Paget on our track?"

And then he argued with himself that his ears might have deceived him, and that the name he had heard might not have been Meynell, but only a name of somewhat similar sound.

It was Captain Paget who had opened the door. He came into the hall and recognised his *protégé*. They left the house together, and the Captain was especially gracious.

"We will dine together somewhere at the West-end, Val," he said; but, to his surprise, Mr. Hawkehurst declined the proffered entertainment.

"I'm tired out with a hard day's work," he said, "and should be very bad company; so, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back to Omega-street and get a chop."

The Captain stared at him in amazement. He could not comprehend the man who could refuse to dine luxuriously at the expense of his fellow-man.

Valentine had of late acquired new prejudices. He no longer cared to enjoy the hospitality of Horatio

Paget. In Omega-street the household expenses were shared by the two men. It was a kind of club upon a small scale; and there was no degradation in breaking bread with the elegant Horatio.

To Omega-street Valentine returned this afternoon, there to eat a frugal meal and spend a meditative evening, uncheered by one glimmer of that radiance which more fortunate men know as the light of home.

CHAPTER II.

VALENTINE'S RECORD CONTINUED.

October 15th. I left Omega-street for the City before noon, after a hasty breakfast with my friend Horatio, who was somewhat under the dominion of his black dog this morning, and far from pleasant company. I was not to present myself to the worthy John Grewter, wholesale stationer, before the afternoon; but I had no particular reason for staying at home, and I had a fancy for strolling about the old City quarter in which Matthew Haygarth's youth had been spent. I went to look at John-street, Clerkenwell, and dawdled about the immediate neighbourhood of Smithfield, thinking of the old fair-time, and of all the rioters and merry-makers, who now were so much or so little dust and ashes in City churchyards, until the great bell of St. Paul's boomed three, and I felt that it might be a leisure time with Mr. Grewter.

I found the stationer's shop as darksome and dreary as City shops usually are, but redolent of that subtle odour of wealth which has a mystical charm for the nostrils of the penniless one. Stacks of ledgers, mountains of account-books, filled the dimly-lighted warehouse. Some clerks were at work behind a glass partition, and already the gas flared high in the green-shaded lamps above the desk at which they worked. I wondered whether it was a pleasant way of life theirs, and whether one would come to feel an interest in the barter of day-books and ledgers if they were one's daily bread. Alas for me! the only ledger I have ever known is the sainted patron of the northern racecourse. One young man came forward and asked my business, with a look that plainly told me that unless I wanted two or three gross of account-books I had no right to be there. I told him that I wished to see Mr. Grewter, and asked if that gentleman was to be seen.

The clerk said he did not know; but his tone implied that, in his opinion, I could *not* see Mr. Grewter.

"Perhaps you could go and ask," I suggested.

"Well, yes. Is it old or young Mr. Grewter you want to see?"

"Old Mr. Grewter," I replied.

"Very well, I'll go and see. You'd better send in your card, though."

I produced one of George Sheldon's cards, which the clerk looked at. He gave a little start as if an adder had stung him.

"You're not Mr. Sheldon?" he said.

"No; Mr. Sheldon is my employer."

"What do you go about giving people Sheldon's card for?" asked the clerk, with quite an aggrieved air. "I know Sheldon of Gray's Inn."

"Then I'm sure you've found him a very accommodating gentleman," I replied, politely.

"Deuce take his accommodation! He nearly accommodated me into the Bankruptcy Court. And so you're Sheldon's clerk, and you want the governor. But you don't mean to say that Grewter and Grewter are—"

This was said in an awe-stricken undertone. I hastened to reassure the stationer's clerk.

"I don't think Mr. Sheldon ever saw Mr. Grewter in his life," I said.

After this the clerk condescended to retire into the unknown antres behind the shop, to deliver my message. I began to think that George Sheldon's card was not the best possible letter of introduction.

The clerk returned presently, followed by a tall, white-bearded man, with a bent figure, and a pair of penetrating gray eyes—a very promising specimen of the octogenarian.

He asked me my business in a sharp suspicious way, that obliged me to state the nature of my errand without circumlocution. As I got farther away from the Rev. John Haygarth, intestate, I was less fettered by the necessity of secrecy. I informed my octogenarian that I was prosecuting a legal investigation connected with a late inhabitant of that street, and that I had taken the liberty to apply to him, in the hope that he might be able to afford me some information.

He looked at me all the time I spoke as if he thought I was going to entreat pecuniary relief—and I daresay I have something the air of a begging-letter writer. But when he found that I only wanted information, his hard gray eyes softened ever so little, and he asked me to walk into his parlour.

His parlour was scarcely less gruesome than his shop. The furniture looked as if its manufacture had been coeval with the time of the Meynells, and the ghastly glare of the gas seemed a kind of anachronism. After a few preliminary observations, which were not encouraged by Mr. Grewter's manner, I inquired whether he had ever heard the name of Meynell.

"Yes," he said; "there was a Meynell in this street when I was a young man—Christian Meynell, a carpet-maker by trade. The business is still carried on—and a very old business it is, for it was an old business in Meynell's time; but Meynell died before I married, and his name is pretty well forgotten in Aldersgate-street by this time."

"Had he no sons?" I asked.

"Well, yes; he had one son, Samuel, a kind of companion of mine. But he didn't take to the business, and when his father died he let things go anyhow, as you may say. He was rather wild, and died two or three years after his father."

"Did he die unmarried?"

"Yes. There was some talk of his marrying a Miss Dobberly, whose father was a cabinet-maker in Jewin-street; but Samuel was too wild for the Dobberlys, who were steady-going people, and he went abroad, where he was taken with some kind of fever and died."

"Was this son the only child?"

"No; there were two daughters. The younger of them married; the elder went to live with her—and died unmarried, I've heard say."

"Do you know whom the younger sister married?" I asked.

"No. She didn't marry in London. She went into the country to visit some friends, and she married and settled down in those parts—wherever it might be—and I never heard of her coming back to London again. The carpet business was sold directly after Samuel Meynell's death. The new people kept up the name for a good twenty years—'Taylor, late Meynell, established 1693,' that's what was painted on the board above the window—but they've dropped the name of Meynell now. People forget old names, you see, and it's no use keeping to them after they're forgotten."

Yes, the old names are forgotten, the old people fade off the face of the earth. The romance of Matthew Haygarth seemed to come to a lame and impotent conclusion in this dull record of dealers in carpeting.

"You can't remember what part of England it was that Christian
Meynell's daughter went to when she married?"

"No. It wasn't a matter I took much interest in. I don't think I ever spoke to the young woman above three times in my life, though she lived in the same street, and though her brother and I often met each other at the Cat and Salutation, where there used to be a great deal of talk about the war and Napoleon Bonaparte in those days."

"Have you any idea of the time at which she was married?" I inquired.

"Not as to the exact year. I know it was after I was married; for I remember my wife and I sitting at our window upstairs one summer Sunday evening, and seeing Samuel Meynell's sister go by to church. I can remember it as well as if it was yesterday. She was dressed in a white gown and a green silk spencer. Yes—and I didn't marry my first wife till 1814. But as to telling you exactly when Miss Meynell left Aldersgate-street, I can't."

These reminiscences of the past seemed to exercise rather a mollifying influence upon the old man's mind, commonplace as they were. He ceased to look at me with sharp, suspicious glances, and he seemed anxious to afford me all the help he could. "Was Christian Meynell's father called William?" I asked, after having paused to make some notes in my pocket-book.

"That I can't tell you; though, if Christian Meynell was living to-day, he wouldn't be ten years older than me. His father died when I was quite a boy; but there must be old books at the warehouse with his name in them, if they haven't been destroyed."

I determined to make inquiries at the carpet warehouse; but I had little hope of finding the books of nearly a century gone by. I tried another question.

"Do you know whether Christian Meynell was an only son, or the only son who attained manhood?" I asked.

My elderly friend shook his head.

"Christian Meynell never had any brothers that I heard of," he said; "but the parish register will tell you all about that, supposing that his father before him lived all his life in Aldersgate-street, as I've every reason to believe he did."

After this I asked a few questions about the neighbouring churches, thanked Mr. Grewter for his civility, and departed.

I went back to Omega-street, dined upon nothing particular, and devoted the rest of my evening to the scrawling of this journal, and a tender reverie, in which Charlotte Halliday was the central figure.

How bitter poverty and dependence have made Diana Paget! She used to be a nice girl too.

Oct. 16th. To-day's work has been confined to the investigation of parish registers—a most wearisome business at the best. My labours were happily not without result. In the fine old church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, I found registries of the baptism of Oliver Meynell, son of William and Caroline Mary Meynell, 1768; and of the burial of the same Oliver in the following year. I found the record of the baptism of a daughter to the same William and Caroline Mary Meynell, and further on the burial of the said daughter, at five years of age. I also found the records of the baptism of Christian Meynell, son of the same William and Caroline Mary Meynell, in the year 1772, and of William Meynell's decease in the year 1793. Later appeared the entry of the burial of Sarah, widow of Christian Meynell. Later still, the baptism of Samuel Meynell; then the baptism of Susan Meynell; and finally, that of Charlotte Meynell.

These were all the entries respecting the Meynell family to be found in the registry. There was no record of the burial of Caroline Mary, wife of William Meynell, nor of Christian Meynell, nor of Samuel Meynell, his son; and I knew that all these entries would be necessary to my astute Sheldon before his case would be complete. After my search of the registries, I went out into the churchyard to grope for the family vault of the Meynells, and found a grim square monument, enclosed by a railing that was almost eaten away by rust, and inscribed with the names and virtues of that departed house. The burial ground is interesting by reason of more distinguished company than the Meynells. John Milton, John Fox, author of the Martyrology, and John Speed, the chronologer, rest in this City churchyard.

In the hope of getting some clue to the missing data, I ventured to make a second call upon Mr. Grewter, whom I found rather inclined to be snappish, as considering the Meynell business unlikely to result in any profit to himself, and objecting on principle to take any trouble not likely to result in profit. I believe this is the mercantile manner of looking at things in a general way.

I asked him if he could tell me where Samuel Meynell was buried.

"I suppose he was buried in foreign parts," replied the old gentleman, with considerable grumpiness, "since he died in foreign parts."

"O, he died abroad, did he? Can you tell me where?"

"No, sir, I can't," replied Mr. Grewter, with increasing grumpiness; "I didn't trouble myself about other people's affairs then, and I don't trouble myself about them now, and I don't particularly care to be troubled about them by strangers."

I made the meekest possible apology for my intrusion, but the outraged
Grewter was not appeased.

"Your best apology will be not doing it again," he replied. "Those that know my habits know that I take half an hour's nap after dinner. My constitution requires it, or I shouldn't take it. If I didn't happen

to have a strange warehouseman on my premises, you wouldn't have been allowed to disturb me two afternoons running."

Finding Mr. Grewter unappeasable, I left him, and went to seek a more placable spirit in the shape of Anthony Sparsfield, carver and gilder, of Barbican.

I found the establishment of Sparsfield and Son, carvers and gilders. It was a low dark shop, in the window of which were exhibited two or three handsomely carved frames, very much the worse for flies, and one oil-painting, of a mysterious and Rembrandtish character. The old-established air that pervaded almost all the shops in this neighbourhood was peculiarly apparent in the Sparsfield establishment.

In the shop I found a mild-faced man of about forty engaged in conversation with a customer. I waited patiently while the customer finished a minute description of the kind of frame he wanted made for a set of proof engravings after Landseer; and when the customer had departed, I asked the mild-faced man if I could see Mr. Sparsfield.

"I am Mr. Sparsfield," he replied politely.

"Not Mr. Anthony Sparsfield?"

"Yes, my name is Anthony."

"I was given to understand that Mr. Anthony Sparsfield was a much older person."

"O, I suppose you mean my father," replied the mild-faced man. "My father is advanced in years, and does very little in the business nowadays; not but what his head is as clear as ever it was, and there are some of our old customers like to see him when they give an order."

This sounded hopeful. I told Mr. Sparsfield the younger that I was not a customer, and then proceeded to state the nature of my business. I found him as courteous as Mr. Grewter had been disobliging.

"Me and father are old-fashioned people," he said; "and we're not above living over our place of business, which most of the Barbican tradespeople are nowadays. The old gentleman is taking tea in the parlour upstairs at this present moment, and if you don't mind stepping up to him, I'm sure he'll be proud to give you any information he can. He likes talking of old times."

This was the sort of oldest inhabitant I wanted to meet with—a very different kind of individual from Mr. Grewter, who doled out every answer to my questions as grudgingly as if it had been a five-pound note.

I was conducted to a snug little sitting-room on the first-floor, where there was a cheerful fire and a comfortable odour of tea and toast. I was invited to take a cup of tea; and as I perceived that my acceptance of the invitation would be accounted a kind of favour, I said yes. The tea was very weak, and very warm, and very sweet; but Mr. Sparsfield and his son sipped it with as great an air of enjoyment as if it had been the most inspiring of beverages.

Mr. Sparsfield the elder was more or less rheumatic and asthmatic, but a cheerful old man withal, and quite ready to prate of old times, when Barbican and Aldersgate-street were pleasanter places than they are to-day, or had seemed so to this elderly citizen.

"Meynell!" he exclaimed; "I knew Sam Meynell as well as I knew my own brother, and I knew old Christian Meynell almost as well as I knew my own father. There was more sociability in those days, you see, sir. The world seems to have grown too full to leave any room for friendship. It's all push and struggle, and struggle and push, as you may say; and a man will make you a frame for five-and-twenty shillings that will look more imposing like than what I could turn out for five pound. Only the gold-leaf will all drop off after a twelvemonth's wear; and that's the way of the world nowadays. There's a deal of gilding, and things are made to look uncommon bright; but the gold all drops off 'em before long."

After allowing the old man to moralise to his heart's content, I brought him back politely to the subject in which I was interested.

"Samuel Meynell was as good a fellow as ever breathed," he said; "but he was too fond of the tavern. There were some very nice taverns round about Aldersgate-street in those days; and you see, sir, the times were stirring times, and folks liked to get together and talk over the day's news, with a pipe of tobacco and a glass of their favourite liquor, all in a sociable way. Poor Sam Meynell took a little too much of his favourite liquor; and when the young woman that he had been keeping company with—Miss Dobberly of Jewin-street—jilted him and married a wholesale butcher in Newgate Market, who

was old enough to be her father, Sam took to drinking, and neglected his business. One day he came to me and said, 'I've sold the business, Tony,'—for it was Sam and Tony with us, you see, sir,—'and I'm off to France.' This was soon after the battle of Waterloo; and many folks had a fancy for going over to France now that they'd seen the back of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was generally alluded to in those days by the name of monster or tiger, and was understood to make his chief diet off frogs. Well, sir, we were all of us very much surprised at Sam's going to foreign parts; but as he'd always been wild, it was only looked upon as a part of his wildness, and we weren't so much surprised to hear a year or two afterwards that he'd drunk himself to death upon cheap brandy—odyvee as *they* call it, poor ignorant creatures—at Calais."

"He died at Calais?"

"Yes," replied the old man; "I forget who brought the news home, but I remember hearing it. Poor Sam Meynell died and was buried amongst the Mossoos."

"You are sure he was buried at Calais?"

"Yes, as sure as I can be of anything. Travelling was no easy matter in those days, and in foreign parts there was nothing but diligences, which I've heard say were the laziest-going vehicles ever invented. There was no one to bring poor Sam's remains back to England, for his mother was dead, and his two sisters were settled somewhere down in Yorkshire."

In Yorkshire! I am afraid I looked rather sheepish when Mr. Sparsfield senior mentioned this particular county, for my thoughts took wing and were with Charlotte Halliday before the word had well escaped his lips.

"Miss Meynell settled in Yorkshire, did she?" I asked.

"Yes, she married some one in the farming way down there. Her mother was a Yorkshirewoman, and she and her sister went visiting among her mother's relations, and never came back to London. One of them married, the other died a spinster."

"Do you remember the name of the man she married?"

"No," replied Mr. Sparsfield, "I can't say that I do."

"Do you remember the name of the place she went to—the town or village, or whatever it was?"

"I might remember it if I heard it," he responded thoughtfully; "and I ought to remember it, for I've heard Sam Meynell talk of his sister Charlotte's home many a time. She was christened Charlotte, you see, after the Queen. I've a sort of notion that the name of the village was something ending in Cross, as it might be Charing Cross, or Waltham Cross."

This was vague, but it was a great deal more than I had been able to extort from Mr. Grewter. I took a second cup of the sweet warm liquid which my new friends called tea, in order to have an excuse for loitering, while I tried to obtain more light from the reminiscences of the old frame-maker.

No more light came, however. So I was fain to take my leave, reserving to myself the privilege of calling again on a future occasion.

Oct. 18th. I sent Sheldon a statement of my Aldersgate-street researches the day before yesterday morning. He went carefully through the information I had collected, and approved my labours.

"You've done uncommonly well, considering the short time you've been at the work," he said; "and you've reason to congratulate yourself upon having your ground all laid out for you, as my ground has never been laid out for me. The Meynell branch seems to be narrowing itself into the person of Christian Meynell's daughter and her descendants, and our most important business now will be to find out when, where, and whom she married, and what issue arose from such marriage. This I think you ought to be able to do."

I shook my head rather despondingly.

"I don't see any hope of finding out the name of the young woman's husband," I said, "unless I can come across another oldest inhabitant, gifted with a better memory for names and places than my obliging Sparsfield or my surly Grewter."

"There are the almshouses," said Sheldon; "you haven't tried them yet."

"No; I suppose I must go in for the almshouses," I replied, with the sublime resignation of the pauper, whose poverty must consent to anything; "though I confess that the prosiness of the almshouse intellect

is almost more than I can endure."

"And how do you know that you mayn't get the name of the place out of your friend the carver and gilder?" said George Sheldon; "he has given you some kind of clue in telling you that the name ends in Cross. He said he should know the name if he heard it; why not try him with it?"

"But in order to do that, I must know the name myself," replied I, "and in that case I shouldn't want the aid of my Sparsfield."

"You are not great in expedients," said Sheldon, tilting back his chair, and taking a shabby folio from a shelf of other shabby folios. "This is a British gazetteer," he said, turning to the index of the work before him. "We'll test the ancient Sparsfield's memory with every Cross in the three Ridings, and if the faintest echo of the name we want still lingers in his feeble old brain, we'll awaken it." My patron ran his finger-nail along one of the columns of the index.

"Just take your pencil and write down the names as I call them," he said. "Here we are—Aylsey Cross; and here we are again—Bowford Cross, Callindale Cross, Huxter's Cross, Jarnam Cross, Kingborough Cross." Then, after a careful examination of the column, he exclaimed, "Those are all the Crosses in the county of York, and it will go hard with us if you or I can't find the descendants of Christian Meynell's daughter at one of them. The daughter herself may be alive, for anything we know."

"And how about the Samuel Meynell who died at Calais? You'll have to find some record of his death, won't you? I suppose in these cases one must prove everything."

"Yes, I must prove the demise of Samuel," replied the sanguine genealogist; "that part of the business I'll see to myself, while you hunt out the female branch of the Meynells. I want an outing after a long spell of hard work; so I'll run across to Calais and search for the register of Samuel's interment. I suppose somebody took the trouble to bury him, though he was a stranger in the land."

"And if I extort the name we want from poor old Sparsfield's recollection?"

"In that case you can start at once for the place, and begin your search on the spot. It can't be above fifty years since this woman married, and there must be some inhabitant of the place old enough to remember her. O, by the bye, I suppose you'll be wanting more cash for expenses," added Mr. Sheldon, with a sigh. He took a five-pound note from his pocket-book, and gave it to me with a piteous air of self-sacrifice. I know that he is poor, and that whatever money he does contrive to earn is extorted from the necessities of his needier brethren. Some of this money he speculates upon the chances of the Haygarthian succession, as he has speculated his money on worse chances in the past. "Three thousand pounds!" he said to me, as he handed me the poor little five-pound note; "think what a prize you are working for, and work your hardest. The nearer we get to the end, the slower our progress seems to me; and yet it has been very rapid progress, considering all things."

So sentimental have I become, that I thought less of that possible three thousand pounds than of the fact that I was likely to go to Yorkshire, the county of Charlotte's birth, the county where she was now staying. I reminded myself that it was the largest shire in England, and that of all possible coincidences of time and place, there could be none more unlikely than the coincidence that would bring about a meeting between Charlotte Halliday and me.

"I know that for all practical purposes I shall be no nearer to her in Yorkshire than in London," I said to myself; "but I shall have the pleasure of fancying myself nearer to her."

Before leaving George Sheldon, I told him of the fragmentary sentences I had heard uttered by Captain Paget and Philip Sheldon at the Lawn; but he pooh-poohed my suspicions.

"I'll tell you what it is, Valentine Hawkehurst," he said, fixing those hard black eyes of his upon me as if he would fain have pierced the bony covering of my skull to discover the innermost workings of my brain; "neither Captain Paget nor my brother Phil can know anything of this business, unless you have turned traitor and sold them my secrets. And mark me, if you have, you've sold yourself and them into the bargain: my hand holds the documentary evidence, without which all your knowledge is worthless."

"I am not a traitor," I told him quietly, for I despise him far too heartily to put myself into a passion about anything he might please to say of me; "and I have never uttered a word about this business either to Captain Paget or to your brother. If you begin to distrust me, it is high time you should look out for a new coadjutor."

I had my Sheldon, morally speaking, at my feet in a moment.

"Don't be melodramatic, Hawkehurst," he said; "people sell each other every day of the week, and no

one blames the seller, provided he makes a good bargain. But this is a case in which the bargain would be a very bad one."

After this I took my leave of Mr. Sheldon. He was to start for Calais by that night's mail, and return to town directly his investigation was completed. If he found me absent on his return, he would conclude that I had obtained the information I required and started for Yorkshire. In this event he would patiently await the receipt of tidings from that county.

I went straight from Gray's Inn to Jewin-street. I had spent the greater part of the day in Sheldon's office, and when I presented myself before my complacent Sparsfield junior, Sparsfield senior's tea and toast were already in process of preparation; and I was again invited to step upstairs to the family sitting-room, and again treated with that Arcadian simplicity of confidence and friendliness which it has been my fate to encounter quite as often in the heart of this sophisticated city as in the most pastoral of villages. With people who were so frank and cordial I could but be equally frank.

"I am afraid I am making myself a nuisance to you, Mr. Sparsfield," I said; "but I know you'll forgive me when I tell you that the affair I'm engaged in is a matter of vital importance to me, and that your help may do a great deal towards bringing matters to a crisis."

Mr. Sparsfield senior declared himself always ready to assist his fellow-creatures, and was good enough further to declare that he had taken a liking to me. So weak had I of late become upon all matters of sentiment, I thanked Mr. Sparsfield for his good opinion, and then went on to tell him that I was about to test his memory.

"And it ain't a bad un," he cried, cheerily, clapping his hand upon his knee by way of emphasis. "It ain't a bad memory, is it, Tony?"

"Few better, father," answered the dutiful Anthony junior. "Your memory's better than mine, a long way."

"Ah," said the old man, with a chuckle, "folks lived different in my day. There weren't no gas, and there weren't no railroads, and London tradespeople was content to live in the same house from year's end to year's end. But now your tradesman must go on his foreign tours, like a prince of the royal family, and he must go here and go there; and when he's been everywhere, he caps it all by going through the Gazette. Folks stayed at home in my day; but they made their fortunes, and they kept their health, and their eyesight, and their memory, and their hearing, and many of 'em have lived to see the next generation make fools of themselves."

"Why, father," cried Anthony junior, aghast at this flood of eloquence, "what an oration!"

"And it ain't often I make an oration, is it, Tony?" said the old man, laughing. "I only mean to say that if my memory's pretty bright, it may be partly because I haven't frittered it away upon nonsense, as some folks have. I've stayed at home and minded my own business, and left other people to mind theirs. And now, sir, if you want the help of my memory, I'm ready to give it."

"You told me the other day that you could not recall the name of the place where Christian Meynell's daughter married, but you said you should remember it if you heard it, and you also said that the name ended in Cross."

"I'll stick to that," replied my ancient friend. "I'll stick to that."
"Very well then. It is a settled thing that the place was in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that too."

"And that the name ended in Cross?"

"It did, as sure as my name is Sparsfield."

"Then in that case, as there are only six towns or villages in the county of York the names of which end in Cross, it stands to reason that the place we want must be one of those six."

Having thus premised, I took my list from my pocket and read aloud the names of the six places, very slowly, for Mr. Sparsfield's edification.

"Aylsey Cross—Bowford Cross—Callindale Cross—Huxter's Cross—Jarnam Cross—Kingborough Cross."

"That's him!" cried my old friend suddenly.

"Which?" I asked eagerly.

"Huxter's Cross; I remember thinking at the time that it must be a place where they sold things, because of the name Huxter, you see, pronounced just the same as if it was spelt with a cks instead of an x. And I heard afterwards that there'd once been a market held at the place, but it had been done away with before our time. Huxter's Cross; yes, that's the name of the place where Christian Meynell's daughter married and settled. I've heard it many a time from poor Sam, and it comes back to me as plain as if I'd never forgotten it."

There was an air of conviction about the old man which satisfied me that he was not deceived. I thanked him heartily for his aid as I took my leave.

"You may have helped to put a good lump of money in my pocket, Mr. Sparsfield," I said; "and if you have, I'll get my picture taken, if it's only for the pleasure of bringing it here to be framed."

With this valedictory address I left my simple citizens of Barbican. My heart was very light as I wended my way across those metropolitan wilds that lay between Barbican and Omega-street. I am ashamed of myself when I remember the foolish cause of this elation of mind. I was going to Yorkshire, the county of which my Charlotte was now an inhabitant. My Charlotte! It is a pleasure even to write that delicious possessive pronoun—the pleasure of poor Alnascher, the crockery-seller, dreaming his day-dream in the eastern market-place.

Can any one know better than I that I shall be no nearer Charlotte Halliday in Yorkshire than I am in London? No one. And yet I am glad my Sheldon's business takes me to the woods and wolds of that wide northern shire.

Huxter's Cross—some Heaven-forgotten spot, no doubt. I bought a railway time-table on my way home to-night, and have carefully studied the bearings of the place amongst whose mouldy records I am to discover the history of Christian Meynell's daughter and heiress.

I find that Huxter's Cross lies off the railroad, and is to be approached by an obscure little station—as I divine from the ignominious type in which its name appears—about sixty miles northward of Hull. The station is called Hidling; and at Hidling there seems to be a coach which plies between the station and Huxter's Cross.

Figure to yourself again, my dear, the heir-at-law to a hundred thousand pounds vegetating in the unknown regions of Huxter's Cross cum Hidling, unconscious of his heritage!

Shall I find him at the plough-tail, I wonder, this mute inglorious heir-at-law? or shall I find an heiress with brawny arms meekly churning butter? or shall I discover the last of the Meynells taking his rest in some lonely churchyard, not to be awakened by earthly voice proclaiming the tidings of earthly good fortune?

I am going to Yorkshire—that is enough for me. I languish for the starting of the train which shall convey me thither. I begin to understand the nostalgia of the mountain herdsman: I pine for that northern air, those fresh pure breezes blowing over moor and wold—though I am not quite clear, by the bye, as to the exact nature of a wold. I pant, I yearn for Yorkshire. I, the cockney, the child of Temple Bar, whose cradle-song was boomed by the bells of St. Dunstan's and St. Clement's Danes.

Is not Yorkshire my Charlotte's birthplace? I want to see the land whose daughters are so lovely.

CHAPTER III.

ARCADIA.

November 1st. This is Huxter's Cross, and I live here. I have lived here a week. I should like to live here for ever. O, let me be rational for a few hours, while I write the record of this last blissful week; let me be reasonable, and business-like, and Sheldon-like for this one wet afternoon, and then I may be happy and foolish again. Be still, beating heart! as the heroines of Minerva-press romances were accustomed to say to themselves on the smallest provocation. Be still, foolish, fluttering, schoolboy heart, which has taken a new lease of youth and folly from a fair landlord called Charlotte Halliday.

Drip, drip, drip, O rain! "The day is dark and cold and dreary, and the vine still clings to the

mouldering wall; and with every gust the dead leaves fall:" but thy sweet sad verse wakes no responsive echo in my heart, O tender Transatlantic Poet, for my heart is light and glad—recklessly glad—heedless of to-morrow—forgetful of yesterday—full to the very brim with the dear delight of to-day.

And now to business. I descend from the supernal realms of fancy to the dry record of commonplace fact. This day week I arrived at Hidling, after a tedious journey, which, with stoppages at Derby and Normanton, and small delays at obscurer stations, had occupied the greater part of the day. It was dusk when I took my place in the hybrid vehicle, half coach, half omnibus, which was to convey me from Hidling to Huxter's Cross. A transient glimpse at Hidling showed me one long straggling street and a square church-tower. Our road branched off from the straggling street, and in the autumn dusk I could just discover the dim outlines of distant hills encircling a broad waste of moor.

I have been so steeped in London that this wild barren scene had a charm for me which it could scarcely possess for others. Even the gloom of that dark waste of common land was pleasant to me. I shared the public vehicle with one old woman, who snored peacefully in the remotest corner, while I looked out at the little open window and watched the darkening landscape.

Our drive occupied some hours. We passed two or three little clusters of cottages and homesteads, where the geese screamed and the cocks crowed at our approach, and where a few twinkling tapers in upper windows proclaimed the hour of bed-time. At one of these clusters of habitation, a little island of humanity in the waste of wold and moor, we changed horses, with more yo-oh-ing and come-up-ing than would have attended the operation in a civilised country. At this village I heard the native tongue for the first time in all its purity; and for any meaning which it conveyed to my ear I might as well have been listening to the *patois* of agricultural Carthage.

After changing horses, we went up hill, with perpetual groanings, and grumblings, and grindings, and whip-smacking and come-up-ing, for an indefinite period; and then we came to a cluster of cottages, suspended high up in the sharp autumn atmosphere as it seemed to me; and the driver of the vehicle came to my little peephole of a window, and told me with some slight modification of the Carthaginian *patois* that I was "theer."

I alighted, and found myself at the door of a village inn, with the red light from within shining out upon me where I stood, and a battered old sign groaning and creaking above my head. For me, who in all my life had been accustomed to find my warmest welcome at an inn, this was to be at home. I paid my fare, took up my carpet-bag, and entered the hostelry.

I found a rosy-faced landlady, clean and trim, though a trifle floury as to the arms and apron. She had emerged from a kitchen, an old-fashioned chamber with a floor of red brick; a chamber which was all in a rosy glow with the firelight, and looked like a Dutch picture, as I peeped at it through the open doorway. There were the most picturesque of cakes and loaves heaped on a wooden bench by the hearth, and the whole aspect of the place was delicious in its homely comfort.

"O," I said to myself, "how much better the northern winds blowing over these untrodden hills, and the odour of home-made loaves, than the booming bells of St. Dunstan's, and the greasy steam of tavern chops and steaks!"

My heart warmed to this Yorkshire and these Yorkshire people. Was it for Charlotte's sake, I wonder, that I was so ready to open my heart to everybody and everything in this unknown land?

A very brief parley set me quite at ease with my landlady. Even, the Carthaginian *patois* became intelligible to me after a little experience. I found that I could have a cosy, cleanly chamber, and be fed and cared for upon terms that seemed absurdly small, even to a person of my limited means. My cordial hostess brought me a meal which was positively luxurious; broiled ham and poached eggs, such as one scarcely hopes to see out of a picture of still life; crisp brown cakes fresh from that wonderful oven whose door I had seen yawning open in the Flemish interior below; strong tea and cream—the cream that one reads of in pastoral stories.

I enjoyed my banquet, and then opened my window and looked out at the still landscape, dimly visible in the faint starlight.

I was at the top of a hill—the topmost of an ascending range of hills—and to some minds that alone is rapture. To inhale the fresh night air was to drink deeply of an ethereal beverage. I had never experienced so delicious a sensation since I had stood on the grassy battlements of the Chateau d'Arques, with the orchards and gardens of sunny Normandy spread like a carpet below my feet.

But this hill was loftier than that on which the feudal castle rears its crumbling towers, and the landscape below me was wilder than verdant Normandy.

No words can tell how I rejoiced in this untrodden region—this severance from the Strand and Temple Bar. I felt as if my old life was falling away from me—like the scales of the lepers who were cleansed by the Divine Healer. I felt myself worthier to love, or even to be loved by, the bright true-hearted girl whose image fills my heart. Ah, if Heaven gave me that dear angel, I think my old life, my old recklessness, my old want of principle, would drop away from me altogether, and the leper would stand forth cleansed and whole. Could I not be happy with her here, among these forgotten hills, these widely scattered homesteads? Could I not be happy dissevered eternally from billiard-room and kursaal, race-ground and dancing-rooms? Yes, completely and unreservedly happy—happy as a village curate with seventy pounds a year and a cast-off coat, supplied by the charity of a land too poor to pay its pastors the wage of a decent butler—happy as a struggling farmer, though the clay soil of my scanty acres were never so sour and stubborn, my landlord never so hard about his rent—happy as a pedlar, with my pack of cheap tawdry wares slung behind me, and my Charlotte tramping gaily by my side.

I breakfasted next morning in a snug little parlour behind the bar, where I overheard two carters conversing in the Carthaginian *patois*, to which I became hourly more accustomed. My brisk cheery landlady came in and out while I took my meal; and whenever I could detain her long enough, I tried to engage her in conversation.

I asked her if she had ever heard the name of Meynell; and after profound consideration she replied in the negative.

"I don't mind hearing aught of folks called Meynell," she said with more or less of the *patois*, which I was beginning to understand; "but I haven't got mooch memory for nee-ams. I might have heard o' such folks, and not minded t' nee-am."

This was rather dispiriting; but I knew that if any record of Christian Meynell's daughter existed at Huxter's Cross, it was in my power to discover it.

I asked if there was any official in the way of a registrar to be found in the village; and found that there was no one more important than an old man who kept the keys of the church. The registers were kept in the vestry, my landlady believed, and the old man was called Jonas Gorles, and lived half a mile off, at the homestead of his son-in-law. But my landlady said she would send for him immediately, and pledged herself to produce him in the course of an hour. I told her that I would find my way to the churchyard in the mean time, whither Mr. Gorles could follow me as soon as convenient.

The autumnal morning was fresh and bright as spring, and Huxter's Cross seemed the most delightful place on earth to me, though it is only a cluster of cottages, relieved by one farmhouse of moderate pretensions, my hostelry of the Magpie, a general shop, which is also the post-office, and a fine old Norman church, which lies away from the village, and bears upon it the traces of better days. Near the church there is an old granite cross, around which the wild flowers and grasses grow rank and high. It marks the spot where there was once a flourishing market-place; but all mortal habitations have vanished, and the Huxter's Cross of the past has now no other memorial than this crumbling stone.

The churchyard was unutterably still and solitary. A robin was perched on the topmost bar of the old wooden gate, singing his joyous carol. As I approached, he hopped from the gate to the low moss-grown wall, and went on singing as I passed him. I was in the humour to apostrophise skylark or donkey, or to be sentimental about anything in creation, just then; so I told my robin what a pretty creature he was, and that I would sooner perish than hurt him by so much as the tip of a feather.

Being bound to remember my Sheldon even when most sentimental, I endeavoured to combine the meditative mood of a Hervey with the business-like sharpness of a lawyer's clerk; and while musing on the common lot of man in general, I did not omit to search the mouldering tombstones for some record of the Meynells in particular.

I found none; and yet, if the daughter of Christian Meynell had been buried in that churchyard, the name of her father would surely have been inscribed upon her tombstone. I had read all the epitaphs when the wooden gate creaked on its hinges, and admitted a wizen little old man—one of those ancient meanderers who seem to have been created on purpose to fill the post of sexton.

With this elderly individual I entered the church of Huxter's Cross, which had the same mouldy atmosphere as the church at Spotswold. The vestry was an icy little chamber, which had once been a family vault; but it was not much colder than Miss Judson's best parlour; and I endured the cold bravely while I searched the registries of the last sixty years.

I searched in vain. After groping amongst the names of all the nonentities who had been married at Huxter's Cross since the beginning of the century, I found myself no nearer the secret of Charlotte Meynell's marriage. And then I reflected upon all the uncertainties surrounding that marriage. Miss

Meynell had gone to Yorkshire, to visit her mother's relations, and had married in Yorkshire; and the place which Anthony Sparsfield remembered having heard of in connection with that marriage was Huxter's Cross. But it did not by any means follow that the marriage had taken place at that obscure village. Miss Meynell might have been married at Hull, or York, or Leeds, or at any of the principal places of the county. With that citizen class of people marriage was a grand event, a solemn festivity; and Miss Meynell and her friends would have been likely to prefer that so festive an occasion should be celebrated anywhere rather than at that forgotten old church among the hills. "I shall have to search every register in Yorkshire till I light upon the record I want," I thought to myself, "unless Sheldon will consent to advertise for the Meynell marriage certificate. There could scarcely be danger in such an advertisement, as the connection between the name of Meynell and the Haygarth estate is only known to ourselves."

Acting upon this idea, I wrote to George Sheldon by that afternoon's post, urging him to advertise for descendants of Miss Charlotte Meynell.

Charlotte! dear name, which is a kind of music for me. It was almost a pleasure to write that letter, because of the repetition of that delightful noun.

The next day I devoted to a drive round the neighbourhood, in a smart little dog-cart, hired on very moderate terms from mine host. I had acquainted myself with the geography of the surrounding country; and I contrived to visit every village church within a certain radius of Huxter's Cross. But my inspection of mildewed old books, and my heroic endurance of cold and damp in mouldy old churches, resulted in nothing but disappointment.

I returned to my "Magpie" after dark a little disheartened and thoroughly tired, but still very well pleased with my rustic quarters and my adopted county. My landlord's horse had shown himself a very model of equine perfection.

Candles were lighted and curtains drawn in my cosy little chamber, and the table creaked beneath one of those luxurious Yorkshire teas which might wean an alderman from the coarser delights of turtle or conger-eel soup and venison.

At noon the following day a very primitive kind of postman brought me a letter from Sheldon. That astute individual told me that he declined to advertise, or to give any kind of publicity to his requirements.

"If I were not afraid of publicity, I should not be obliged to pay you a pound a week," he remarked, with pleasing candour, "since advertisements would get me more information in a week than you may scrape together in a twelvemonth. But I happen to know the danger of publicity, and that many a good thing has been snatched out of a man's hands just as he was working it into shape. I don't say that this could be done in my case; and you know very well that it could not be done, as I hold papers which are essential to the very first move in the business."

I perfectly understand the meaning of these remarks, and I am inclined to doubt the existence of those important papers. Suspicion is a fundamental principle in the Sheldon mind. My friend George trusts me because he is obliged to trust me—and only so far as he is obliged—and is tormented, more or less, by the idea that I may at any moment attempt to steal a march upon him.

But to return to his letter:

"I should recommend you to examine the registries of every town or village within, say, thirty miles of Huxter's Cross. If you find nothing in such registries, we must fall back upon the larger towns, beginning with Hull, as being nearest to our starting-point. The work will, I fear, be slow, and very expensive for me. I need scarcely again urge upon you the necessity of confining your outlay to the minimum, as you know that my affairs are desperate. It couldn't well be lower water than it is with me, in a pecuniary sense; and I expect every day to find myself aground.

"And now for my news. I have discovered the burial-place of Samuel Meynell, after no end of trouble, the details of which I needn't bore you with, since you are now pretty well up in that sort of work. I am thankful to say I have secured the evidence that settles for Samuel, and ascertained by tradition that he died unmarried. The *onus probandi* would fall upon any one purporting to be descended from the said Samuel, and we know how uncommonly difficult said person would find it to prove anything.

"So, having disposed of Samuel, I came back to London by the next mail; Calais, in the month of November, not being one of those wildly-gay watering-places which tempt the idler. I arrived just in time to catch this afternoon's post; and now I look impatiently to your Miss Charlotte Meynell, of Huxter's Cross.—Yours, &c. G.S."

I obeyed my employer to the letter; hired my landlord's dog-cart for another day's exploration; and went further afield in search of Miss Charlotte's marriage-lines. I came home late at night—this time thoroughly worn out—studied a railway guide with a view to my departure, and decided on starting for Hull by a train that would leave Hidling station at four o'clock on the following afternoon.

I went to bed tired in body and depressed in spirit. Why was I so sorry to leave Huxter's Cross? What subtle instinct of the brain or heart made me aware that the desert region amongst the hills held earth's highest felicity for me?

The next morning was bright and clear. I heard the guns of sportsmen popping merrily in the still air as I breakfasted before an open window, while a noble sea-coal fire blazed on the hearth opposite me. There is no stint of fuel at the Magpie. Everything in Yorkshire seems to be done with a lavish hand. I have heard Yorkshiremen called mean. As if meanness could exist in the hearts of my Charlotte's countrymen! My own experience of the county is brief; but I can only say that my friends of the Magpie are liberality itself, and that a Yorkshire tea is the very acme of unsophisticated bliss in the way of eating and drinking. I have dined at Philippe's; I know every dish in the *menu* of the Maison Dorée; but if I am to make my life a burden beneath the dark sway of the demon dyspepsia, let my destruction arrive in the shape of the ham and eggs, the crisp golden-brown cakes, and undefiled honey, of this northern Arcadia.

I told my friendly hostess that I was going to leave her, and she was sorry. She was sorry for me, the wanderer. I can picture to myself the countenance of a London landlady if informed thus suddenly of her lodger's departure, and her suppressed mutterings about the ill-convenience of such a proceeding.

After breakfast I went out to take my own pleasure. I had done my duty in the matter of mouldy churches and mildewed registries; and I considered myself entitled to a holiday during the few hours that must elapse before the starting of the hybrid vehicle for Hidling.

I sauntered past the little cluster of cottages, admiring their primitive aspect, the stone-crop on the red-tiled roofs, that had sunk under the weight of years. All was unspeakably fresh and bright; the tiny panes of the casement twinkled in the autumn sunlight, birds sang, and hardy red geraniums bloomed in the cottage windows. What pleasure or distraction had the good housewives of Huxter's Cross to lure them from the domestic delights of scrubbing and polishing? I saw young faces peeping at me from between snow-white muslin curtains, and felt that I was a personage for once in my life; and it was pleasant to feel one's self of some importance even in the eyes of Huxter's Cross.

Beyond the cottages and the post-office there were three roads stretching far away over hill and moorland. With two of those roads I had made myself thoroughly familiar; but the third remained to be explored.

"So now for 'fresh fields and pastures new,'" I said to myself as I quickened my pace, and walked briskly along my unknown road.

Ah, surely there is some meaning in the fluctuations of the mental barometer. What but an instinctive consciousness of approaching happiness could have made me so light-hearted that morning? I sang as I hastened along that undiscovered road. Fragments of old Italian serenades and barcarolles came back to me as if I had heard them yesterday for the first time. The perfume of the few lingering wild-flowers, the odour of burning weeds in the distance, the fresh autumn breeze, the clear cold blue sky,—all were intensely delicious to me; and I felt as if this one lonely walk were a kind of renovating process, from which my soul would emerge cleansed of all its stains.

"I have to thank George Sheldon for a great deal," I said to myself, "since through him I have been obliged to educate myself in the school of man's best teacher, Solitude. I do not think I can ever be a thorough Bohemian again. These lonely wanderings have led me to discover a vein of seriousness in my nature which I was ignorant of until now. How thoroughly some men are the creatures of their surroundings! With Paget I have been a Paget. But a few hours *tête-à-tête* with Nature renders one averse from the society of Pagets, be they never so brilliant."

From moralising thus, I fell into a delicious day-dream. All my dreams of late had moved to the same music. How happy I could be if Fate gave me Charlotte and three hundred a year! In sober moods I asked for this much of worldly wealth, just to furnish a nest for my bird. In my wilder moments I asked Fate for nothing but Charlotte.

"Give me the bird without the nest," I cried to Fortune; "and we will take wing to some trackless forest where there are shelter and berries for nestless birds. We will imitate that delightful bride and bridegroom of Parisian Bohemia, who married and settled in an attic, and when their stock of fuel was gone fell foul of the staircase that led to their bower, and so supplied themselves merrily enough till the

staircase was all consumed, and the poor little bride, peeping out of her door one morning, found herself upon the verge of an abyss.

"And then came the furious landlord, demanding restitution. But close behind the landlord came the good fairy of all love-stories, with Pactolus in her pocket. Ah, yes, there is always a providence for true lovers."

I had passed away by this time from the barren moor to the regions of cultivation. The trimly-cut hedges on each side of the way showed me that my road now lay between farm lands. I was outside the boundary of some upland farm. I saw sheep cropping trefoil in a field on the other side of the brown hedgerow, and at a distance I saw the red-tiled roof of a farm-house.

I looked at my watch, and found that I had still half an hour to spare; so I went on towards the farm-house, bent upon seeing what sort of habitation it was. In a solitary landscape like this, every dwelling-place has a kind of attraction for the wayfarer.

I went on till I came to a white gate, against which a girlish figure was leaning.

It was a graceful figure, dressed in that semi-picturesque costume which has been adopted by women of late years. The vivid blue of a boddice was tempered by the sober gray of a skirt, and a bright-hued ribbon gleamed among rich tresses of brown hair.

The damsel's face was turned away from me, but there was something in the carriage of the head, something in the modelling of the firm full throat, which reminded me of—

But then, when a man is over head and ears in love, everything in creation reminds him more or less of his idol. Your pious Catholic gives all his goods for the adornment of a church; your true lover devotes his every thought to the dressing up of one dear image.

The damsel turned as my steps drew near, loud on the crisp gravel. She turned, and showed me the face of Charlotte Halliday.

I must entreat posterity to forgive me, if I leave a blank at this stage of my story. "There are chords in the human heart which had better not be wibrated," said Sim Tappertit. There are emotions which can only be described by the pen of a poet. I am not a poet; and if my diary is so happy as to be of some use to posterity as a picture of the manners of a repentant Bohemian, posterity must not quarrel with my shortcomings in the way of sentimental description.

CHAPTER IV.

IN PARADISE.

We stood at the white gate talking to each other, my Charlotte and I. The old red-tiled roof which I had seen in the distance sheltered the girl I love. The solitary farm-house which it had been my whim to examine was the house in which my dear love made her home. It was here, to this untrodden hillside, that my darling had come from the prim modern villa at Bayswater. Ah, what happiness to find her here, far away from all those stockbroking surroundings—here, where our hearts expanded beneath the divine influence of Nature!

I fear that I was coxcomb enough to fancy myself beloved that day we parted in Kensington-gardens. A look, a tone—too subtle for definition—thrilled me with a sudden hope so bright, that I would not trust myself to believe it could be realised.

"She is a coquette," I said to myself. "Coquetry is one of the graces which Nature bestows upon these bewitching creatures. That little conscious look, which stirred this weak heart so tumultuously, is no doubt common to her when she knows herself beloved and admired, and has no meaning that can flatter my foolish hopes." This is how I had reasoned with myself again and again during the dreary interval in which Miss Halliday and I had been separated. But, O, what a hardy perennial blossom hope must be! The tender buds were not to be crushed by the pelting hailstones of hard common sense. They had survived all my philosophical reflections, and burst into sudden flower to-day at sight of Charlotte's face. She loved me, and she was delighted to see me. That was what her radiant face told me; and could I do less than believe the sweet confession? For the first few moments we could scarcely speak to each

other, and then we began to converse in the usual commonplace strain.

She told me of her astonishment on seeing me in that remote spot. I could hardly confess to having business at Huxter's Cross, so I was fain to tell my dear love a falsehood, and declare that I was taking a holiday "up at the hills."

"And how did you come to choose Huxter's Cross for your holiday?" she asked *naïvely*.

I told her that I had heard the place spoken of by a person in the city—my simple-minded Sparsfield to wit.

"And you could not have come to a better place," she cried, "though people do call it the very dullest spot in the world. This was my dear aunt Mary's house—papa's sister, you know. Grandpapa Halliday had two farms. This was one, and Hyley the other. Hyley was much larger and better than this, you know, and was left to poor papa, who sold it just before he died."

Her face clouded as she spoke of her father's death. "I can't speak about that without pain even now," she said softly, "though I was only nine years old when it happened. But one can suffer a great deal at nine years old."

And then, after a little pause, she went on to speak of her Yorkshire home.

"My aunt and uncle Mercer are so kind to me; and yet they are neither of them really related to me. My aunt Mary died very young, when her first baby was born, and the poor little baby died too: and uncle Mercer inherited the property from his wife, you see. He married again after two years, and his second wife is the dearest, kindest creature in the world. I always call her aunt, for I don't remember poor papa's sister at all; and no aunt that ever lived could be kinder to me than aunt Dorothy. I am always so happy here," she said; "and it seems such a treat to get away from the Lawn—of course I am sorry to leave mamma, you know," she added, parenthetically—"and the stiff breakfasts, and Mr. Sheldon's newspapers that crackle, crackle, crackle so shockingly all breakfast-time; and the stiff dinners, with a prim parlor-maid staring at one all the time, and bringing one vegetables that one doesn't want if one only ventures to breathe a little louder than usual. Here it is Liberty Hall. Uncle Joe—he is aunt Dorothy's husband—is the kindest creature in the world, just the very reverse of Mr. Sheldon in everything. I don't mean that my stepfather is unkind, you know. O, no, he has always been very good to me—much kinder than I have deserved that he should be. But uncle Joe's ways are *so* different. I am sure you will like him; and I am sure he will like you, for he likes everybody, dear thing. And you must come and see us very often, please, for Newhall farm is open house, you know, and the stranger within the gates is always welcome."

Now my duty to my Sheldon demanded that I should scamper back to Huxter's Cross as fast as my legs would carry me, in order to be in time for the hybrid vehicle that was to convey me to Hidling station; and here was this dear girl inviting me to linger, and promising me a welcome to the house which was made a paradise by her presence.

I looked at my watch. It would have been impossible for me to reach Huxter's Cross in time for the vehicle. Conscience whispered that I could hire my landlord's dog-cart, and a boy to drive me to Hidling; but the whispers of conscience are very faint; and love cried aloud, "Stay with Charlotte: supreme happiness is offered to you for the first time in your life. Fool that would reject so rare a gift!"

It was to this latter counsellor I gave my ear. My Sheldon's interests went overboard; and I stayed by the white gate, talking to Charlotte, till it was quite too late to heed the reproachful grumblings of conscience about that dog-cart.

My Charlotte—yes, I boldly call her mine now—my dear is great in agriculture. She enlightened my cockney mind on the subject of upland farms, telling me how uncle and aunt Mercer's land is poor and sandy, requiring very little in the way of draining, but producing by no means luxuriant crops. It is a very picturesque place, and has a certain gentlemanlike air with it pleasing to my snobbish taste. The house lies in a tract of open grass-land, dotted here and there by trees, and altogether of a park-like appearance. True that the mild and useful sheep rather than the stately stag browses on that greensward, and few carriages roll along the winding gravel road that leads to the house.

I felt a rapturous thirst for agricultural knowledge as I listened to my Charlotte. Was there a vacancy for hind or herdsman on Newhall farm, I wondered. What is the office so humble I would not fill for her dear sake? O, how I sighed for the days of Jacob, that first distinguished usurer, so that I might serve seven years and again seven years for my darling!

I stayed by the white gate, abandoning all thought of my employer's behests, unconscious of time—unconscious of everything except that I was with Charlotte Halliday, and would not have resigned my

position to be made Lord Chancellor of England.

Anon came uncle Joe, with a pleasant rubicund visage beaming under a felt hat, to tell Lotta that dinner was ready. To him I was immediately presented.

"Mr. Mercer, my dear uncle Joseph—Mr. Hawkehurst, a friend of my stepfather's," said Charlotte.

Two or three minutes afterwards we were all three walking across the park-like sward to the hospitable farm-house; for the idea of my departing before dinner seemed utterly preposterous to this friendly farmer.

Considered apart from the glamour that for my eyes must needs shine over any dwelling inhabited by Charlotte Halliday, I will venture to say that Newhall farm-house is the dearest old place in the world. Such delightful old rooms, with the deepest window-seats, the highest mantelpieces, the widest fireplaces possible in domestic architecture; such mysterious closets and uncanny passages; such pitfalls in the way of unexpected flights of stairs; such antiquated glazed corner-cupboards for the display of old china!—everything redolent of the past.

In one corner a spinning-wheel, so old that its spindle might be the identical weapon that pierced Princess Sleeping Beauty's soft white hand; in another corner an arm-chair that must have been old-fashioned in the days of Queen Anne; and O, what ancient flowered chintzes, what capacious sofas, what darling mahogany secretaries and bureaus, with gleaming brazen adornments in the way of handles!—and about everything the odour of rose-leaves and lavender.

I have grown familiar with every corner of the dear old place within the last few days, but on this first day I had only a general impression of its antiquated aspect and homely comfort. I stayed to dine at the same unpretending board at which my Charlotte had sat years ago, elevated on a high chair, and as yet new to the use of knives and forks. Uncle Joe and aunt Dorothy told me this in their pleasant friendly way; while the young lady sat by, blushing and dimpling like a summer sea beneath the rosy flush of sunrise. No words can relate how delightful it was to me to hear them talk of my dear love's childhood; they dwelt so tenderly upon her sweetness, they dilated with such enthusiasm upon her "pretty ways." Her "pretty ways!" ah, how fatal a thing it is for mankind when Nature endows woman with those pretty ways! From the thrall of Grecian noses and Castilian eyes there may be hope of deliverance, but from the spell of that indescribable witchery there is none.

I whistled my Sheldon down the wind without remorse, and allowed myself to be as happy as if I had been the squire of valley and hillside, with ten thousand a year to offer my Charlotte with the heart that loves her so fondly. I have no idea what we had for dinner. I know only that the fare was plenteous, and the hospitality of my new friends unbounded. We were very much at ease with one another, and our laughter rang up to the stalwart beams that sustained the old ceiling. If I had possessed the smallest fragment of my heart, I should have delivered it over without hesitation to my aunt Dorothy—pardon!—my Charlotte's aunt Dorothy, who is the cheeriest, brightest, kindest matron I ever met, with a sweet unworldly spirit that beams out of her candid blue eyes.

Charlotte seems to have been tenderly attached to her father, the poor fellow who died in Philip Sheldon's house—uncomfortable for Sheldon, I should think. The Mercers talk a good deal of Thomas Halliday, for whom they appear to have entertained a very warm affection. They also spoke with considerable kindness of the two Sheldons, whom they knew as young men in the town of Barlingford; but I should not imagine either uncle Joseph or aunt Dorothy very well able to fathom the still waters of the Sheldon intellect.

After dinner uncle Joe took us round the farm. The last stack of corn had been thatched, and there was a peaceful lull in the agricultural world. We went into a quadrangle lined with poultry sheds, where I saw more of the feathered race than I had ever in my life beheld congregated together; thence to the inspection of pigs—and it was agreeable to inspect even those vulgar querulous grunters, with Charlotte by my side. Her brightness shed a light on all those common objects; and O, how I longed to be a farmer, like uncle Mercer, and devote my life to Charlotte and agriculture!

When uncle Joe had done the honours of his farm-yards and threshing-machinery, he left us to attend to his afternoon duties; and we wandered together over the breezy upland at our own sweet wills, or at *her* sweet will rather, since what could I do but follow where she pleased to lead?

We talked of many things: of the father whom she had loved so dearly, whose memory was still so mournfully dear to her; of her old home at Hyley; of her visits to these dear Mercers; of her schooldays, and her new unloved home in the smart Bayswater villa. She confided in me as she had never done before; and when we turned in the chill autumn gloaming, I had told her of my love, and had won from her the sweet confession of its return.

I have never known happiness so perfect as that which I felt as we walked home together—home—yes; that old farm-house must be my home as well as hers henceforward; for any habitation which she loved must be a kind of home for me. Sober reflection tells me how reckless and imprudent my whole conduct has been in this business; but when did ever love and prudence go hand-in-hand? We were children, Charlotte and I, on that blessed afternoon; and we told each other our love as children might have told it, without thought of the future. We have both grown wiser since that time, and are quite agreed as to our imprudence and foolishness; but, though we endeavour to contemplate the future in the most serious manner, we are too happy in the present to be able to analyse the difficulties and dangers that lie in our pathway.

Surely there must be a providence for imprudent lovers.

The November dews fell thick, and the November air was chill, as we walked back to the homestead. I was sorry that there should be that creeping dampness in the atmosphere that night. It seemed out of harmony with the new warmth in my heart. I pressed my darling's little hand closer to my breast, and had no more consciousness of any impediments to my future bliss than of the ground on which I walked —and that seemed air.

We found our chairs waiting for us at aunt Dorothy's tea-table; and I enjoyed that aldermanic banquet, a Yorkshire tea, under circumstances that elevated it to an Olympian repast.

I thought of the Comic Latin Grammar:

"Musa, musae, the gods were at tea;
Musae musam, eating raspberry jam."

I was Jove, and my love was Juno. I looked at her athwart the misty clouds that issued from the hissing urn, and saw her beautified by a heightened bloom, and with a sweet, shy conscious look in her eyes which made her indeed divine.

After tea we played whist; and I am bound to confess that my divinity played execrably, persistently disdaining to return her partner's lead, and putting mean little trumps upon her adversary's tricks, with a fatuous economy of resources which is always ruin.

I stayed till ten o'clock, reckless of the unknown country which separated me from the Magpie, and then walked home alone, under the faint starlight, though my friendly host would fain have lent me a dog-cart. The good people here lend one another dog-carts as freely as a cockney offers his umbrella. I went back to Huxter's Cross alone, and the long solitary walk was very pleasant to me.

Looking up at the stars as I tramped homeward, I could but remember an old epigram:—

Were you the earth, dear love, and I the skies,
My love should shine on you like to the sun,
And look upon you with ten thousand eyes,
Till heaven wax'd blind, and till the world were done.

I had ample leisure for reflection during that long night-walk, and found myself becoming a perfect Young—Hervey—Sturm—what you will, in the way of meditation. I could not choose but wonder at myself when I looked back to this time last year, and remembered my idle evenings in third-rate *cafés*, on the *rive gauche*, playing dominoes, talking the foul slang of Parisian bohemia, and poisoning my system with adulterated absinthe. And now I feast upon sweet cakes and honey, and think it paradisiac enjoyment to play whist—for love—in a farm-house parlour. I am younger by ten years than I was twelve months ago.

Ah, let me thank God, who has sent me my redemption.

I lifted my hat, and pronounced the thanksgiving softly under that tranquil sky. I was almost ashamed to hear the sound of my own voice. I was like some shy child who for the first time speaks his father's name.

CHAPTER V.

TOO FAIR TO LAST.

In my confidences with my dear girl I had told her neither the nature of my mission in Yorkshire, nor the fact that I was bound to leave Huxter's Cross immediately upon an exploring expedition to nowhere in particular, in search of the archives of the Meynells. How could I bring myself to tell her that I must leave her?—how much less could I bring myself to do it?

Rendered desperately unmindful of the universe by reason of my all-absorbing happiness, I determined on giving myself a holiday boldly, in defiance of Sheldon and the Sheldonian interests.

"Am I a bounden slave?" I asked myself, "that I should go here or there at any man's bidding, for the pitiful stipend of twenty shillings a week?"

It is to be observed that the rate of hire makes all the difference in these cases; and while it is ignominious for a lawyer's clerk to hasten to and fro in the earning of his weekly wage, it is in no way dishonourable for the minister of state to obey the call of his chief, and hurry hither and thither in abnegation of all his own predilections, and to the aggravation of his chronic gout.

I wrote to my Sheldon, and told him that I had met with friends in the neighbourhood of Huxter's Cross, and that I intended to give myself a brief holiday; after which I would resume my labours, and do my uttermost to make up for wasted time. I had still the remnant of my borrowed thirty pounds, and amongst these northern hills I felt myself a millionaire.

Three thousand pounds at five per cent—one hundred and fifty pounds a year. I felt that with such an income assured to us, and the fruits of my industry, Charlotte and I might be secure from all the storms of life. Ah, what happiness it would be to work for her! And I am not too old to begin life afresh; not too old for the bar; not too old to make some mark as a writer on the press; not too old to become a respectable member of society.

After having despatched my letter to Sheldon, I made off for Newhall farm with all speed. I had received a sort of general invitation from the kindest of uncles and aunts, but I contrived with becoming modesty to arrive after Mr. Mercer's dinner-hour. I found Charlotte alone in the dear old-fashioned parlour, aunt Dorothy being engaged in some domestic operations in the kitchen, and uncle Joseph making his usual after-dinner rounds amongst the pig-styes and the threshing-machines. I discovered afterwards that it was Miss Halliday's wont to accompany her kind kinsman in this afternoon investigation; but to-day she had complained of a headache and preferred to stay at home. Yet there were few symptoms of the headache when I found her standing in the bow-window, watching the path by which I came, and the face of Aurora herself could scarcely be brighter or fresher than my darling's innocent blushes when I greeted her with the privileged kiss of betrothal.

We sat in the bow-window talking till the twilight shadows crept over the greensward, and the sheep were led away to their fold, with cheerful jingling of bells and barking of watchful dog. My dearest girl told me that our secret had already been discovered by the penetrating eyes of aunt Dorothy and uncle Joseph. They had teased her unmercifully, it seemed, all that day, but were graciously pleased to smile upon my suit, like a pair of imprudent Arcadians as they are.

"They like you very much indeed," my Lotta said joyously; "but I believe they think I have known you much longer than I really have, and that you are very intimate with my stepfather. It seems almost like deceiving them to allow them to think so, but I really haven't the courage to tell the truth. How foolish and bold they would think me if they knew how very short a time I have known you!"

"Twenty times longer than Juliet had known Romeo when they met in the
Friar's cell to be married," I urged.

"Yes, but that was in a play," replied Charlotte, "where everything is obliged to be hurried; and at Hyde Lodge we all of us thought that Juliet was a very forward young person."

"The poets all believe in love at first sight, and I'll wager our dear uncle Joe fell over head and ears in love with aunt Dorothy after having danced with her two or three times at an assize ball," said I. After this we became intensely serious, and I told my darling girl that I hoped very soon to be in possession of a small fixed income, and to have begun a professional career. I told her how dear an incentive to work she had given me, and how little fear I had for the future.

I reminded her that Mr. Sheldon had no legal power to control her actions, and that, as her father's will had left her entirely to her mother's guardianship, she had only her mother's pleasure to consult.

"I believe poor mamma would let me marry a crossing-sweeper, if I cried and declared it would make me miserable not to marry him," said Charlotte; "but then, you see, mamma's wishes mean Mr. Sheldon's wishes; she is sure to think whatever he tells her to think; and if he is strongly against our marriage—"

"As I am sure he will be," I interjected.

"He will work upon poor mamma in that calm, persistent, logical way of his till he makes her as much against it as himself."

"But even your mamma has no legal power to control your actions, my love. Were you not of age on your last birthday?"

My darling replied in the affirmative.

"Then of course you are free to marry whom you please; and as I am thankful to say you don't possess a single sixpence in your own right, there need be no fuss about settlements or pin-money. We can marry any fine morning that my dear girl pleases to name, and defy all the stern stepfathers in creation."

"How I wish I had a fortune, for your sake!" she said with a sigh.

"Be glad for my sake that you have none," I answered. "You cannot imagine the miserable complications and perplexities which arise in this world from the possession of money. No slave so tightly bound as the man who has what people call 'a stake in the country' and a balance at his banker's. The true monarch of all he surveys is the penniless reprobate who walks down Fleet-street with his whole estate covered by the seedy hat upon his head."

Having thus moralized, I proceeded to ask Miss Halliday if she was prepared to accept a humbler station than that enjoyed by her at the Lawn.

"No useful landau, to be an open carriage at noon and a family coach at night," I said; "no nimble page to skip hither and thither at his fair lady's commands, if not belated on the way by the excitement of tossing halfpence with youthful adventurers of the byways and alleys; no trim parlour-maids, with irreproachable caps, dressed for the day at 11 o'clock A.M.—but instead of these, a humble six-roomed bandbox of a house, and one poor hardworking slavey, with perennial smudges from saucepan-lids upon her honest pug-nose. Consider the prospect seriously, Charlotte, and ask yourself whether you can endure such a descent in the social scale."

My Charlotte laughed, as if the prospect had been the most delightful picture ever presented to mortal vision.

"Do you think I care for the landau or the page?" she cried. "If it were not for mamma's sake, I should detest that prim villa and all its arrangements. You see me so happy here, where there is no pretence of grandeur—"

"But I am bound to warn you that I shall not be able to provide Yorkshire teas at the commencement of our domestic career," I remarked, by way of parenthesis.

"Aunt Dorothy will send us hampers of poultry and cakes, sir, and for the rest of our time we can live upon bread and water."

On this I promised my betrothed a house in Cavendish or Portman-square, and a better-built landau than Mr. Sheldon's, in the remote future. With those dear eyes for my pole-stars, I felt myself strong enough to clamber up the slippery ascent to the woolsack. The best and purest ambition must surely be that which is only a synonym for love.

After we had sat talking in the gloaming to our hearts' content, aunt Dorothy appeared, followed by a sturdy handmaid with lighted candles, and a still sturdier handmaid with a ponderous tea-tray. The two made haste to spread a snow-white cloth, and to set forth the species of banquet which it is the fashion nowadays to call high tea. Anon came uncle Joseph, bringing with him some slight perfume from the piggeries, and he and aunt Dorothy were pleased to be pleasantly facetious and congratulatory in their conversation during the social meal which followed their advent.

After tea we played whist again, aunt Dorothy and I obtaining a succession of easy victories over Charlotte and uncle Joe. I felt myself hourly more and more completely at home in that simple domestic circle, and enjoyed the proud position of an accepted lover. My Arcadian friends troubled themselves in nowise as to the approval or disapproval of Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon, or with regard either to my prospects or my antecedents. They saw me devoted to my dear girl, they saw my dearest pleased by my devotion, and they loved her so well that they were ready to open their hearts without reserve to the man who adored her and was loved by her, let him be rich or poor, noble or base-born. As they would have given her the wax-doll of her desire ten or twelve years ago without question as to price or fitness of things, so they now gave her their kindly smiles and approval for the lover of her choice. "I know Phil

Sheldon is a man who looks to the main chance," said uncle Joe, in the course of a discussion about his niece's future which dyed her cheeks with blushes in the present; "and I'll lay you'll find him rather a difficult customer to deal with, especially as poor Tom's will left all the money in Georgy's hands, which of course is tantamount to saying that Sheldon has got the disposal of it."

I assured uncle Joe that money was the very last thing which I desired.

"Then in that case I don't see why he shouldn't let you have Charlotte," replied Mr. Mercer; "and if she's cheated out of her poor dad's money, she shan't be cheated out of what her old aunt and uncle may have to leave her by-and-by."

Here were these worthy people promising me an heiress with no more compunction than if they had been offering me a cup of tea.

I walked homeward once more beneath the quiet stars. O, how happy I was! Can happiness so perfect, joy so sinless, endure? I, the friendless wanderer and penniless Bohemian, asked myself this question; and again I paused upon the lonely moorland road to lift my hat as I thanked God for having given me such bright hopes.

But George Sheldon's three thousand pounds must be mine before I can secure the humblest shelter for my sweet one; and although it would be bliss to me to tramp through the world barefoot with Charlotte by my side, the barefooted state of things is scarcely the sort of prospect a man would care to offer to the woman he loves. So once more to the chase. One more day in this delicious island of the lotus-eaters, Newhall farm; and then away!—hark forward!—tantivy!—and hey for the marriage-lines of Charlotte Meynell, great-granddaughter of Matthew Haygarth, and, if still in the flesh, rightful heiress to the one hundred thousand pounds at present likely to be absorbed by the ravening jaws of the Crown! One more day, one more delightful idle day, in the land where it is always afternoon, and then away to Hidling in the hybrid vehicle, and thence to Hull, from Hull to York, from York to Leeds, then Bradford, Huddersfield—*toute la boutique!*

The rain beats against the diamond panes of my casement as I write. The day has been hopelessly wet, so I have stayed in my snug little chamber and occupied myself in writing this record. Foul wind or weather would have little power to keep me from my darling; but even if it had been a fine day, I could not with any grace have presented myself at Newhall farm for a third afternoon. To-morrow my immediate departure will afford me an excuse for presenting myself once more before my kind uncle and aunt. It will be my farewell visit. I wonder whether Charlotte will miss me this afternoon. I wonder whether she will be sorry when I tell her that I am going to leave this part of the country. Ah, shall we ever meet again under such happy auspices? Shall I ever again find such kind friends or such a hospitable dwelling as those I shall leave amidst these northern hills?

CHAPTER VI.

FOUND IN THE BIBLE.

November 3 *d*. The most wonderful event has befallen—surely the most wonderful that ever came to pass outside the realms of fiction. Let me set down the circumstances of yesterday coolly and quietly if I can. I invoke the placid spirit of my Sheldon. I invoke all the divinities of Gray's Inn and "The Fields." Let me be legal and specific, perspicacious and logical—if this beating heart, this fevered brain, will allow me a few hours' respite.

The autumn sunshine blessed the land again yesterday. Moorland and meadow, fallow and clover-field, were all the brighter for the steady downfall of the previous day. I walked to Newhall directly after breakfast, and found my dearest standing at the white five-barred gate, dressed in her pretty blue jacket, and with ribbons in her bonny brown hair.

She was pleased to see me, though at first just a little inclined to play the *boudeuse* on account of my absence on the previous day. Of course I assured her that it had been anguish for me to remain away from her, and quoted that divine sonnet of our William's to the like effect:

"How like a winter hath my absence been!"

and again:

"O, never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seemed my flame to qualify."

Equally of course my pet pretended not to believe me. After this little misunderstanding we forgave each other, and adored each other again with just a little more than usual devotion; and then we went for a long ramble among the fields, and looked at the dear placid sheep, who stared at us wonderingly in return, as if exclaiming to themselves, "And these are a specimen couple of the creatures called lovers!"

We met uncle Joe in the course of our wanderings, and returned with him in time for the vulgar superstition of dinner, which we might have forgotten had we been left by ourselves. After dinner uncle Joe made off to his piggeries; while aunt Dorothy fell asleep in a capacious old arm-chair by the fire, after making an apologetic remark to the effect that she was tired, and had been a good deal "tewed" that morning in the dairy. "Tewed," I understand, is Yorkshire for "worried."

Aunt Dorothy having departed into the shadowy realm of dreams,
Charlotte and I were left to our own devices.

There was a backgammon board on a side-table, surmounted by an old Indian bowl of dried rose-leaves; and, *pour nous distraire*, I proposed that I should teach my dearest that diverting game. She assented, and we set to work in a very business-like manner, Miss Halliday all attention, I serious as a professional schoolmaster.

Unfortunately for my pupil's progress, the game of backgammon proved less entertaining than our own conversation, so, after a very feeble attempt on the one side to learn and on the other to teach, we closed the board and began to talk;—first of the past, then of the future, the happy future, which we were to share.

There is no need that I should set down this lovers' talk. Is it not written on my heart? The future seemed so fair and unclouded to me, as my love and I sat talking together yesterday afternoon. Now all is changed. The strangest, the most surprising complications have arisen; and I doubt, I fear.

After we had talked for a long time, Miss Halliday suddenly proposed that I should read to her.

"Diana once told me that you read very beautifully," said this flatterer; "and I should so like to hear you read—poetry of course. You will find plenty of poems in that old bookcase—Cowper, and Bloomfield, and Pope. Now I am sure that Pope is just the kind of poet whose verses you would read magnificently. Shall we explore the bookcase together?"

Now if there is any manner of beguiling an idle afternoon, which seems to me most delightful, it is by the exploration of old bookcases; and when that delight can be shared by the woman one fondly loves, the pleasure thereof must be of course multiplied to an indefinite amount.

So Charlotte and I set to work immediately to ransack the lower shelves of the old-fashioned mahogany bookcase, which contained the entire library of the Mercer household.

I am bound to admit that we did not light upon many volumes of thrilling interest. The verses of Cowper, like those of Southey, have always appeared to me to have only one fault—there are too many of them. One shrinks appalled from that thick closely-printed volume of morality cut into lengths of ten feet; and beyond the few well-worn quotations in daily use, I am fain to confess that I am almost a stranger to the bard of Olney.

Half a dozen odd volumes of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, three or four of the *Annual Register*, a neatly-bound edition of *Clarissa Harlowe* and *Sir Charles Grandison* in twelve volumes, Law's *Holy Call to a Serious Life*, *Paradise Lost*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Hervey's Meditations*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, formed the varied contents of the principal shelves. Above, there were shabbily-bound volumes and unbound pamphlets. Below, there were folios, the tops whereof were thickly covered with the dust of ages, having escaped the care of the handmaidens even in that neatly-appointed household.

I knelt down to examine these.

"You'll be covered with dust if you touch them," cried Charlotte. "I was once curious enough to examine them, but the result was very disappointing."

"And yet they look so delightfully mysterious," I said. "This one, for instance?"

"That is an old history of London, with curious plates and maps; rather interesting if one has nothing more amusing to read. But the perennial supply of novels from Mudie's spoils one for that kind of book."

"If ever I come to Newhall again, I shall dip into the old history. One is never tired of dead and gone London. But after Mr. Knight's delightful book any old history must seem very poor. What is my burly friend here?"

"O, a dreadful veterinary-surgeon's encyclopaedia—*The Farmer's Friend* I think it is called; all about the ailments of animals."

"And the next?"

"The next is an odd volume of the *Penny Magazine*. Dear aunt Dorothy is rich in odd volumes."

"And the next,—my bulky friend number two,—with a cracked leather back and a general tendency to decay?"

"O, that is the Meynell Bible."

The MEYNELL BIBLE! A hot perspiration broke out upon my face as I knelt at Charlotte Halliday's feet, with my hand resting lightly on the top of the book.

"The Meynell Bible!" I repeated; and my voice was faintly tremulous, in spite of the effort I made to control myself. "What do you mean by the Meynell Bible?"

"I mean the old family Bible that belonged to my grand-mamma. It was her father's Bible, you know; and of course he was my great-grandfather—Christian Meynell. Why, how you stare at me, Valentine! Is there anything so wonderful in my having had a great-grandfather?"

"No, darling; but the fact is that I—"

In another moment I should have told her the entire truth; but I remembered just in time that I had pledged myself to profound secrecy with regard to the nature and progress of my investigation, and I had yet to learn whether that pledge did or did not involve the observance of secrecy even with those most interested in my researches. Pending further communication with Sheldon, I was certainly bound to be silent.

"I have a kind of interest in the name of Meynell," I said, "for I was once engaged in a business matter with people of that name."

And having thus hoodwinked my beloved with a bouncer, I proceeded to extract the Bible from its shelf. The book was so tightly wedged into its place, that to remove it was like drawing a tooth. It was a noble-looking old volume, blue with the mould of ages, and redolent of a chill dampness like the atmosphere of a tomb.

"I should so like to examine the old book when the candles come in," I said.

Fortunately for the maintenance of my secret, the darkness was closing in upon us when I discovered the volume, and the room was only fitfully illuminated by the flame that brightened and faded every minute.

I carried the book to a side-table, and Charlotte and I resumed our talk until the candles came, and close behind them uncle Joe. I fear I must have seemed a very inattentive lover during that brief interval, for I could not concentrate my thoughts upon the subject of our discourse. My mind would wander to the strange discovery that I had just made, and I could not refrain from asking myself whether by any extraordinary chance my own dear love should be the rightful claimant to John Haygarth's hoarded wealth.

I hoped that it might not be so. I hoped that my darling might be penniless rather than the heir to wealth, which, in all likelihood, would create an obstacle strong enough to sever us eternally. I longed to question her about her family, but could not as yet trust myself to broach the subject. And while I doubted and hesitated, honest blustering uncle Joe burst into the room, and aunt Dorothy awoke, and was unutterably surprised to find she had slept so long.

After this came tea; and as I sat opposite my dearest girl I could not choose but remember that gray-eyed Molly, whose miniature had been found in the tulip-wood bureau, and in whose bright face I had seen the likeness of Philip Sheldon's beautiful stepdaughter. And Mr. Sheldon's lovely stepdaughter was the lineal descendant of this very Molly. Strange mystery of transmitted resemblances! Here was the sweet face that had bewitched honest, simple-minded Matthew Haygarth reproduced after the lapse of a century.

My Charlotte was descended from a poor little player girl who had smiled on the roisterous populace

of Bartholomew Fair. Some few drops of Bohemian blood mingled with the pure life-stream in her veins. It pleased me to think of this; but I derived no pleasure from the idea that Charlotte might possibly be the claimant of a great fortune.

"She may have cousins who would stand before her," I said to myself; and there was some comfort in the thought.

After tea I asked permission to inspect the old family Bible, much to the astonishment of uncle Joe, who had no sympathy with antiquarian tastes, and marvelled that I should take any interest in so mouldy a volume. I told him, with perfect truth, that such things had always more or less interest for me; and then I withdrew to my little table, where I was provided with a special pair of candles.

"You'll find the births and deaths of all poor Molly's ancestors on the first leaf," said uncle Joe. "Old Christian Meynell was a rare one for jotting down such things; but the ink has gone so pale that it's about as much as you'll do to make sense of it, I'll lay."

Charlotte looked over my shoulder as I examined the fly-leaf of the family Bible. Even with this incentive to distraction I contrived to be tolerably business-like; and this is the record which I found on the faded page:

"Samuel Matthew Meynell, son of Christian and Sarah Meynell, b. March 9, 1796, baptised at St. Giles's, Cripplegate, in this city.

"Susan Meynell, daughter of Christian and Sarah Meynell, b. June 29, 1798, also baptised in the same church.

"Charlotte Meynell, second daughter of the above Christian and Sarah, b. October 3, 1800, baptised at the above-mentioned church of St. Giles, London."

Below these entries, in blacker ink and in a different hand-writing—a bold, business-like, masculine caligraphy—came the following:

"Charlotte Meynell married to James Halliday, in the parish church of
Barngrave, Yorks. April 15, 1819.

"Thomas Halliday, son of the above James and Charlotte Halliday, b. Jan. 3d, 1821, baptised in the parish church of Barngrave, Feb. 20 in the same year.

"Mary Halliday, daughter of the above-named James and Charlotte Halliday, b. May 27th, 1823, baptised at Barngrave, July 1st in the same year."

Below this there was an entry in a woman's penmanship:

"Susan, the beloved sister of C. H., died in London, July 11, 1835.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged.

"I came to call sinners, and not the righteous, to repentance."

This record seemed to hint vaguely at some sad story: "Susan, the beloved sister;" no precise data of the death—no surname! And then those two deprecating sentences, which seemed to plead for the dead.

I had been led to understand that Christian Meynell's daughters had both died in Yorkshire—one married, the other unmarried.

The last record in the book was the decease of James Halliday, my dear girl's grandfather.

After pondering long over the strangely-worded entry of Susan Meynell's death, I reflected that, with the aid of those mysterious powers Hook and Crook, I must contrive to possess myself of an exact copy of this leaf from a family history, if not of the original document. Again my duty to my Sheldon impelled me to be false to all my new-born instincts, and boldly give utterance to another bouncer.

"I am very much interested in a county history now preparing for the press," I said to my honoured uncle, who was engaged in a hand at cribbage with his wife; "and I really think this old leaf from a family Bible would make a very interesting page in that work."

I blushed for myself as I felt how shamefully I was imposing upon my newly-found kinsman's credulity. With scarcely any one but uncle Joe could I have dared to employ so shallow an artifice.

"Would it really, now?" said that confiding innocent. "Well, I suppose old papers, and letters, and such like, are uncommonly interesting to some folks. I can't say I care much about 'em myself."

"Would you have any objection to my taking a copy of these entries?" I asked.

"My word, no, lad; not I. Take half a dozen copies, and welcome, if they can be of any use to you or other people. That's not much to ask for."

I thanked my simple host, and determined to write to a stationer at Hull for some tracing-paper by the first post next morning. There was some happiness, at least, in having found this unlooked-for end to my researches. I had a good excuse for remaining longer near Charlotte Halliday.

"It's only for my poor Mary's sake I set any value on that old volume," the farmer said, presently, in a meditative tone. "You see the names there are the names of her relations, not mine; and this place and all in it was hers. Dorothy and I are only interlopers, as you may say, at the best, though I brought my fortune to the old farm, and Dorothy brought her fortune, and between us we've made Newhall a much better place than it was in old James Halliday's time. But there's something sad in the thought that none of those that were born on the land have left chick or child to inherit it." Uncle Joseph fell for a while into a pensive reverie, and I thought of that other inheritance, well-nigh fifty times the value of Newhall farm, which is now waiting for a claimant. And again I asked myself, Could it be possible that this sweet girl, whose changeful face had saddened with those old memories, whose innocent heart knew not one sordid desire—could it be indeed she whose fair hand was to wrest the Haygarthian gold from the grip of Crown lawyers?

The sight of that old Bible seemed to have revived Mr. Mercer's memory of his first wife with unwonted freshness.

"She was a sweet young creature," he said; "the living picture of our Lottie, and sometimes I fancy it must have been that which made me take to Lottie when she was a little one. I used to see my first wife's eyes looking up at me out of Lottie's eyes. I told Tom it was a comfort to me to have the little lass with me, and that's how they let her come over so often from Hyley. Poor old Tom used to bring her over in his Whitechapel cart, and leave her behind him for a week or so at a stretch. And then, when my Dorothy, yonder, took pity upon a poor lonely widower, she made as much of the little girl as if she'd been her own, and more, perhaps; for, not having any children of her own, she thought them such out-of-the-way creatures, that you couldn't coddle them and pet them too much. There's a little baby lies buried in Barngrave churchyard with Tom Halliday's sister that would have been a noble young man, sitting where you're sitting, Mr. Hawkehurst, and looking at me as bright as you're looking, perhaps, if the Lord's will hadn't been otherwise. We've all our troubles, you see, and that was mine; and if it hadn't been for Dorothy, life would not have been worth much for me after that time—but my Dorothy is all manner of blessings rolled up in one."

The farmer looked fondly at his second wife as he said this, and she blushed and smiled upon him with responsive tenderness. I fancy a woman's blushes and smiles wear longer in these calm solitudes than amid the tumult and clamour of a great city.

Finding my host inclined to dwell upon the past, I ventured to hazard an indirect endeavour to obtain some information respecting that entry in the Bible which had excited my curiosity.

"Miss Susan Meynell died unmarried, I believe?" I said. "I see her death recorded here, but she is described by her Christian name only."

"Ah, very like," replied Mr. Mercer, with an air of indifference, which I perceived to be assumed. "Yes, my poor Molly's aunt Susan died unmarried."

"And in London? I had been given to understand that she died in Yorkshire."

I blushed for my own impertinence as I pressed this inquiry. What right had I to be given to understand anything about these honest Meynells? I saw poor uncle Joe's disconcerted face, and I felt that the hunter of an heir-at-law is apt to become a very obnoxious creature.

"Susan Meynell died in London—the poor lass died in London," replied Joseph Mercer, gravely; "and now we'll drop that subject, if you please, my lad. It isn't a pleasant one."

After this I could no longer doubt that there was some painful story involved in those two deprecating sentences of the gospel.

It was some time before uncle Joe was quite his own jovial and rather noisy self again, and on this

evening we had no whist. I bade my friends good night a little earlier than usual, and departed, after having obtained permission to take a tracing of the fly-leaf as soon as possible.

On this night the starlit sky and lonesome moor seemed to have lost their soothing power. There was a new fever in my mind. The simple plan of the future which I had mapped out for myself was suddenly shattered. The Charlotte of to-night—heiress-at-law to an enormous fortune—ward in Chancery—claimant against the Crown—was a very different person from the simple maid "whom there were none"—or only a doating simpleton in the person of the present writer—"to praise, and very few to love."

The night before last I had hoped so much; to-night hope had forsaken me. It seemed as if a Titan's hand had dug a great pit between me and the woman I loved—a pit as deep as the grave.

Philip Sheldon might have consented to give me his stepdaughter unpossessed of a sixpence; but would he give me his stepdaughter with a hundred thousand pounds for her fortune? Alas! no; I know the Sheldonian intellect too well to be fooled by any hope so wild and baseless. The one bright dream of my misused life faded from me in the hour in which I discovered my dearest girl's claim to the Haygarthian inheritance. But I am not going to throw up the sponge before the fight is over. Time enough to die when I am lying face downward in the ensanguined mire, and feel the hosts of the foemen trampling above my shattered carcass. I will live in the light of my Charlotte's smiles while I can, and for the rest—"*Il ne faut pas dire, fontaine, je ne boirai pas de ton eau*." There is no cup so bitter that a man dare say, I will not drain it to the very dregs. "What must be, shall be—that's a certain text;" and in the mean time *carpe diem*. I am all a Bohemian again.

Nov. 5th. After a day's delay I have obtained my tracing-paper, and made two tracings of the entries in the Meynell Bible. How intercourse with the Sheldonian race inclines one to the duplication of documents! I consider the copying-press of modern civilization the supreme incarnation of man's distrust of his fellow-men.

I spent this afternoon and evening with my dear love—my last evening in Yorkshire. To-morrow I shall see my Sheldon, and inform him of the very strange termination which has come to my researches. Will he communicate at once with his brother? Will he release me from my oath of secrecy? There is nothing of the masonic secretiveness in my organisation, and I am very weary of the seal that has been set upon my unwary lips. Will Charlotte be told that she is the reverend intestate's next of kin? These are questions which I ask myself as I sit in the stillness of my room at the Magpie, scribbling this wretched diary of mine, while the church clock booms three solemn strokes in the distance.

O, why did not the reverend intestate marry his housekeeper, and make a will, like other honest citizens, and leave my Charlotte to walk the obscure byways of honest poverty with me? I do believe that I could have been honest; I do believe that I could have been brave and true and steadfast for her dear sake. But it is the office of man to propose, while the Unseen disposes. Perhaps such a youth as mine admits of no redemption. I have written circulars for Horatio Paget. I have been the willing remorseless tool of a man who never eats his dinner without inflicting a wrong upon his fellow-creatures. Can a few moments of maudlin sentimentality, a vague yearning for something brighter and better, a brief impulse towards honesty, inspired by a woman's innocent eyes—can so little virtue in the present atone for so much guilt in the past? Alas! I fear not.

I had one last brief *tête-à-tête* with my dear girl while I took the tracing from the old Bible. She sat watching me, and distracting me more or less while I worked; and despite the shadow of doubt that has fallen upon me, I could not be otherwise than happy in her sweet company.

When I came to the record of Susan Meynell's death, my Charlotte's manner changed all at once from her accustomed joyousness to a pensive gravity.

"I was very sorry you spoke of Susan Meynell to uncle Joseph," she said, thoughtfully.

"But why sorry, my dear?"

I had some vague notion as to the cause of this sorrow; but the instincts of the chase impelled me to press the subject. Was I not bound to know every secret in the lives of Matthew Haygarth's descendants?

"There is a very sad story connected with my aunt Susan—she was my great-aunt, you know," said Charlotte, with a grave earnest face. "She went away from home, and there was great sorrow. I cannot talk of the story, even to you, Valentine, for there seems something sacred in these painful family secrets. My poor aunt Susan left all her friends, and died many years afterwards in London."

"She was known to have died unmarried?" I asked. This would be an important question from George

Sheldon's point of sight.

"Yes," Charlotte replied, blushing crimson.

That blush told me a great deal.

"There was some one concerned in this poor lady's sorrow," I said; "some one to blame for all her unhappiness."

"There was."

"One whom she loved and trusted, perhaps?"

"Whom she loved and trusted only too well. O, Valentine, must not that be terrible? To confide with all your heart in the person you love, and to find him base and cruel! If my poor aunt had not believed Montagu Kingdon to be true and honourable, she would have trusted her friends a little, instead of trusting so entirely in him. O, Valentine, what am I telling you? I cannot bear to cast a shadow on the dead."

"My dear love, do you think I cannot pity this injured lady? Do you think I am likely to play the Pharisee, and be eager to bespatter the grave of this poor sufferer? I can almost guess the story which you shrink from telling me—it is one of those sad histories so often acted, so often told. Your aunt loved a person called Montagu Kingdon—her superior in station, perhaps?"

I looked at Charlotte as I said this, and her face told me that I had guessed rightly.

"This Montagu Kingdon admired and loved her," I said. "He seemed eager to make her his wife, but no doubt imposed secrecy as to his intentions. She accepted his word as that of a true-hearted lover and a gentleman, and in the end had bitter reason to repent her confidence. That is an outline of the story, is it not, Charlotte?"

"I am sure that it was so. I am sure that when she left Newhall she went away to be married," cried Charlotte, eagerly; "I have seen a letter that proves it—to me, at least. And yet I have heard even mamma speak harshly of her—so long dead and gone off the face of this earth—as if she had deliberately chosen the sad fate which came to her."

"Is it not possible that Mr. Kingdon did marry Miss Meynell, after all?"

"No," replied Charlotte, very sadly; "there is no hope of that. I have seen a letter written by my poor aunt years afterwards—a letter that tells much of the cruel truth; and I have heard that Mr. Kingdon came back to Yorkshire and married a rich lady during my aunt's lifetime."

"I should like to see that letter," I said, involuntarily.

"Why, Valentine?" asked my darling, looking at me with sorrowful, wondering eyes, "To me it seems so painful to talk of these things: it is like reopening an old wound."

"But if the interests of other people require—" I began, in a very blundering manner.

"Whose interest can be served by my showing you my poor aunt's letter?
It would seem like an act of dishonour to the dead."

What could I say after this—bound hand and foot as I am by my promise to Sheldon?

After a long talk with my sweet one, I borrowed uncle Joe's dog-cart, and spun across to Barngrave, where I found the little church, beneath whose gray old roof Charlotte Meynell plighted her troth to James Halliday. I took a copy of all entries in the register concerning Mrs. Meynell Halliday and her children, and then went back to Newhall to restore the dog-cart, and to take my last Yorkshire tea at the hospitable old farm-house.

To-morrow I am off to Barlingford, fifteen miles from this village, to take more copies from registries concerning my sweet young heiress—the registries of her father's marriage, and her own birth. After that I think my case will be tolerably complete, and I can present myself to Sheldon in the guise of a conqueror.

Is it not a great conquest to have made? Is it not almost an act of chivalry for these prosaic days to go forth into the world as a private inquirer, and win a hundred thousand pounds for the lady of one's love? And yet I wish any one rather than my Charlotte were the lineal descendant of Matthew Haygarth.

Nov. 10th. Here I am in London once more, with my Sheldon in ecstatics, and our affairs progressing marvellously well, as he informs me; but with that ponderous slowness peculiar to all mortal affairs in which the authorities of the realm are in any way concerned.

My work is finished. Hawkehurst the genealogist and antiquarian sinks into Hawkehurst the private individual. I have no more to do but to mind my own business and await the fruition of time in the shape of my reward.

Can I accept three thousand pounds for giving my dearest her birthright? Can I take payment for a service done to her? Surely not: and, on the other hand, can I continue to woo my sweet one, conscious that she is the rightful claimant to a great estate? Can I take advantage of her ignorance, and may it not be said that I traded on my secret knowledge?

Before leaving Yorkshire, I stole one more day from the Sheldon business, in order to loiter just a few hours longer in that northern Arcadia called Newhall farm. What assurance have I that I shall ever re-enter that pleasant dwelling? What hold have I, a wanderer and vagabond, on the future which respectable people map out for themselves with such mathematical precision? And even the respectable people are sometimes out in their reckoning. To snatch the joys of to-day must always be the policy of the adventurer. So I took one more happy afternoon at Newhall. Nor was the afternoon entirely wasted; for, in the course of my farewell visit, I heard more of poor Susan Meynell's history from honest uncle Joseph. He told me the story during an after-dinner walk, in which he took me the round of his pig-styes and cattle-sheds for the last time, as if he would fain have had them leave their impress on my heart.

"You may see plenty of cattle in Yorkshire," he remarked, complacently, "but you won't see many beasts to beat that."

He pointed to a brown and mountainous mass of inert matter, which he gave me to understand was something in the way of cattle.

"Would you like to see him standing?" he asked, giving the mass a prod with the handle of his walking-stick, which to my cockney mind seemed rather cruel, but which, taken from an agricultural point of view, was no doubt the correct thing. "He *can* stand. Coom up, Brownie!"

I humbly entreated that the ill-used mass might be allowed to sprawl in undisturbed misery.

"Thorley!" exclaimed Mr. Mercer, laying his finger significantly against the side of his unpretending nose.

I had not the faintest comprehension of my revered uncle-in-law's meaning; but I said, "O, indeed!" with the accents of admiration.

"Thorley's Condiment," said my uncle. "You'll see some fine animate at the Cattle-show; but if you see a two-year-old ox to beat him, my name is not Joe Mercer."

After this I had to pay my respects to numerous specimens of the bovine race, all more or less prostrate under the burden of superabundant flesh, all seeming to cry aloud for the treatment of some Banting of the agricultural world.

After we had "done" the cattle-sheds, with heroic resignation on my part, and with enthusiasm on the part of Mr. Mercer, we went a long way to see some rarities in the way of mutton, which commodity was to be found cropping the short grass on a distant upland.

With very little appreciation of the zoological varieties, and with the consciousness that my dear one was sitting in the farm-house parlour, wondering at my prolonged absence, this excursion could not be otherwise than a bore to me. But it was a small thing to sacrifice my own pleasure for once in a way, when by so doing I might gratify the kindest of men and of uncles; so I plodded briskly across the fields with the friendly farmer.

I had my reward; for, in the course of this walk, Mr. Mercer gave me the history of poor Susan Meynell.

"I didn't care to talk about the story the other night before the young lass," he said, gravely; "for her heart's so full of pity and tenderness, pretty dear, that any tale such as that is like to upset her. But the story's known to almost all the folks in these parts; so there's no particular reason against my telling it to you. I've heard my poor mother talk of Susan Meynell many a time. She was a regular beauty, it seems; prettier than her sister Charlotte, and she was a pretty woman, as you may guess by looking at *our* Charlotte, who is thought the image of her grandmother. But Susan was one of those beauties that

you don't see very often—more like a picture than flesh and blood. The gentry used to turn round to look at her at Barngrave church, I've heard my mother say. She was a rare one for dress, too; for she had a few hundreds left her by her father and mother, who had both of them been very well-to-do people. The mother was daughter to William Rand, of Barngrave, a man who farmed above a thousand acres of his own land; and the father kept a carpet warehouse in Aldersgate-street."

This information I received with respectful deference, and a hypocritical assumption of ignorance respecting Miss Meynell's antecedents.

Mr. Mercer paused to take breath, and then continued the story after his own rambling fashion.

"Well, my lad, what with her fine dress, and what with her pretty looks, Susan Meynell seems to have thought a little too much of herself; so that when Montagu Kingdon, of Kingdon-place, younger brother to Lord Durnsville, fell in love with her, and courted her—not exactly openly, but with the knowledge of her sister, Mrs. Halliday—she thought it no more than natural that he should intend to make her his wife. Mr. Kingdon was ten years older than Susan, and had served in Spain, and had not borne too good a character abroad. He had been in a hard-drinking cavalry regiment, and had spent all his money, and sold out directly the war was over. There was very little of all this known down hereabouts, where Mr. Kingdon stood very high, on account of his being Lord Durnsville's brother. But it was known that he was poor, and that the Durnsville estates were heavily encumbered into the bargain."

"Then this gentleman would have been no grand match for Miss Meynell, if—"

"If he had married her? No, my lad; and it might have been the knowledge of his poverty that made Susan and her sister think less of the difference between his station and the girl's. The two women favoured him, anyhow; and they kept the secret from James Halliday, who was a regular upstraight-and-downright kind of fellow, as proud as any lord in his own way. The secret was kept safe enough for some time, and Mr. Kingdon was always dropping in at Newhall when Jim was out of the way; but folks in these parts are very inquisitive, and, lonesome as our place is, there are plenty of people go by between Monday and Saturday; so by-and-by it got to be noticed that there was very often a gentleman's horse standing at Newhall gate, with the bridle tied to one of the gate-posts; and those that knew anything, knew that the horse belonged to Montagu Kingdon. A friend of Jim Halliday's told him as much one day, and warned him that Mr. Kingdon was a scamp, and was said to have a Spanish wife somewhere beyond seas. This was quite enough for James Halliday, who flew into a roaring rage at the notion of any man, most of all Lord Durnsville's brother, going to his house and courting his sister-in-law in secret. It was at Barngrave he was told this, one market-day, as he was lounging with his friends in the old yard of the Black Bull inn, where the corn exchange used to be held in those days. He called for his horse the next minute, and left the town at a gallop. When he came to Newhall, he found Montagu Kingdon's chestnut mare tied to the gate-post, and he found Mr. Kingdon himself, dawdling about the garden with Miss Meynell."

"And then I suppose there was a scene?" I suggested, with unfeigned interest in this domestic story.

"Well, I believe there was, my lad. I've heard all about it from my poor Molly, who had the story from her mother. James Halliday didn't mince matters; he gave Mr. Kingdon a bit of his mind, in his own rough outspoken way, and told him it would be the worse for him if he ever crossed the threshold of Newhall gate again. 'If you meant well by that foolish girl, you wouldn't come sneaking here behind my back,' he said; 'but you don't mean well by her, and you've a Spanish wife hidden away somewhere in the Peninsula.' Mr. Kingdon gave the lie to this; but he said he shouldn't stoop to justify himself to an unmannerly yeoman. 'If you were a gentleman,' he said, 'you should pay dearly for your insolence.' 'I'm ready to pay any price you like,' answered James Halliday, as bold as brass; 'but as you weren't over fond of fighting abroad, where there was plenty to be got for it, I don't suppose you want to fight at home, where there's nothing to be got for it.'"

"And did Susan Meynell hear this?" I asked. I could fancy this ill-fated girl standing by and looking on aghast while hard things were said to the man she loved, while the silver veil of sweet romance was plucked so roughly from the countenance of her idol by an angry rustic's rude hand.

"Well, I don't quite know whether she heard all," answered Mr. Mercer, thoughtfully. "Of course, James Halliday told his wife all about the row afterwards. He was very kind to his sister-in-law, in spite of her having deceived him; and he talked to her very seriously, telling her all he had heard in Barngrave against Montagu Kingdon. She listened to him quietly enough, but it was quite clear that she didn't believe a word he said. 'I know you have heard all that, James,' she said; 'but the people who said it knew they were not telling the truth. Lord Durnsville and his brother are not popular in the country, and there are no falsehoods too cruel for the malice of his enemies.' She answered him with some such fine speech as that, and when the next morning came she was gone."

"She eloped with Mr. Kingdon?"

"Yes. She left a letter for her sister, full of romantic stuff about loving him all the better because people spoke ill of him; regular woman's talk, you know, bless their poor silly hearts!" murmured Mr. Mercer, with tender compassion. "She was going to London to be married to Mr. Kingdon, she wrote. They were to be married at the old church in the city where she had been christened, and she was going to stay with an old friend—a young woman who had once been her brother's sweetheart, and who was married to a butcher in Newgate-market—till the bans were given out, or the license bought. The butcher's wife had a country-house out at Edmonton, and it was there Susan was going to stay."

"All that seemed straightforward enough," said I.

"Yes," replied uncle Joe; "but if Mr. Kingdon had meant fairly by Susan Meynell, it would have been as easy for him to marry her at Barngrave as in London. He was as poor as a church mouse, but he was his own master, and there was no one to prevent him doing just what he pleased. This is about what James Halliday thought, I suppose; for he tore off to London, as fast as post-horses could carry him, in pursuit of his wife's sister and Mr. Kingdon. But though he made inquiries all along the road he could not hear that they had passed before him, and for the best of all reasons. He went to the butcher's house at Edmonton; but there he found no trace of Susan Meynell, except a letter posted in Yorkshire, on the day of the row between James and Mr. Kingdon, telling her intention of visiting her old friend within the next few days, and hinting at an approaching marriage. There was the letter announcing the visit, but the visitor had not come."

"But the existence of that letter bears witness that Miss Meynell believed in the honesty of her lover's intentions."

"To be sure it does, poor lass," answered Mr. Mercer pensively. "She believed in the word of a scoundrel, and she was made to pay dearly for her simplicity. James Halliday did all he could to find her. He searched London through, as far as any man can search such a place as London; but it was no use, and for a very good reason, as I said before. The end of it was, he was obliged to go back to Newhall no wiser than when he started."

"And was nothing further ever discovered?" I asked eagerly, for I felt that this was just one of those family complications from which all manner of legal difficulties might arise.

"Don't be in a hurry, my lad," answered uncle Joe; "wickedness is sure to come to light sooner or later. Three years after this poor young woman ran away there was a drunken groom dismissed from Lord Durnsville's stable; and what must he needs do but come straight off to James Halliday, to vent his spite against his master, and perhaps to curry favour at Newhall. 'You shouldn't have gone to London to look for the young lady, Muster Halliday,' he said; 'you should have gone the other way. I know a man as drove Mr. Kingdon and your wife's sister across country to Hull with two of my lord's own horses, stopping to bait on the way. They went aboard ship at Hull, Mr. Kingdon and the young lady—a ship that was bound for foreign parts.' This is what the groom said; but it was little good knowing it now. There'd been advertisements in the papers beseeching her to come back; and everything had been done that could be done, and all to no end. A few years after this back comes Mr. Kingdon as large as life, married to some dark-faced, frizzy-haired lady, whose father owned half the Indies, according to people's talk: but he fought very shy of James Halliday; but when they did meet one day at the covert side, Jim rode up to the honourable gentleman and asked him what he had done with Susan Meynell. Those that saw the meeting say that Montagu Kingdon turned as white as a ghost when he saw Jim Halliday riding up to him on his big, raw-boned horse; but nothing came of the quarrel. Mr. Kingdon did not live many years to enjoy the money his frizzy-haired West-Indian lady brought him. He died before his brother, Lord Durnsville, and left neither chick nor child to inherit his money, nor yet the Durnsville title, which was extinct on the death of the viscount."

"And what of the poor girl?"

"Ay, poor lass, what of her? It was fourteen years after she left her home before her sister got so much as a line to say she was in the land of the living. When a letter did come at last, it was a very melancholy one. The poor creature wrote to her sister to say she was in London, alone and penniless, and, as she thought, dying."

"And the sister went to her?"

I remembered that deprecating sentence in the family Bible, written in a woman's hand.

"That she did, good honest soul, as fast as she could travel, carrying a full purse along with her. She found poor Susan at an inn near Aldersgate-street—the old quarter, you see, that she'd known in her young days. Mrs. Halliday meant to have brought the poor soul back to Yorkshire, and had settled it all

with Jim; but it was too late for anything of that kind. She found Susan dying, wandering in her mind off and on, but just able to recognise her sister, and to ask forgiveness for having trusted to Montagu Kingdon, instead of taking counsel from those that wished her well."

"Was that all?" I asked presently.

Mr. Mercer made long pauses in the course of his narrative, during which we walked briskly on; he pondering on those past events, I languishing for further information.

"Well, lad, that was about all. Where Susan had been in all those years, or what she had been doing, was more than Mrs. Halliday could find out. Of late she had been living somewhere abroad. The clothes she had last worn were of foreign make, very poor and threadbare; and there was one little box in her room at the inn that had been made at Rouen, for the name of a Rouen trunkmaker was on the inside of the lid. There were no letters or papers of any kind in the box; so you see there was no way of finding out what the poor creature's life had been. All her sister could do was to stay with her and comfort her to the last, and to see that she was quietly laid to rest in a decent grave. She was buried in a quiet little city churchyard, somewhere where there are green trees among the smoke of the chimney-pots. Montagu Kingdon had been dead some years when that happened."

"Is that last letter still in existence?" I asked.

"Yes; my first wife kept it with the rest of her family letters and papers. Dorothy takes care of them now. We country folks set store by those sort of things, you know."

I would fain have asked Mr. Mercer to let me see this last letter written by Susan Meynell; but what excuse could I devise for so doing? I was completely fettered by my promise to George Sheldon, and could offer no reasonable pretence for my curiosity.

There was one point which I was bound to push home in the interests of my Sheldon, or, shall I not rather say, of my Charlotte? That all-important point was the question of marriage or no marriage. "You feel quite clear as to the fact that Montagu Kingdon never did marry this young woman?" I said.

"Well, yes," replied uncle Joe; "that was proved beyond doubt, I'm sorry to say. Mr. Kingdon never could have dared to come back here with his West-Indian wife in poor Susan Meynell's lifetime if he had really married her."

"And how about the lady he was said to have married in Spain?"

"I can't say anything about that. It may have been only a scandal, or, if there was a marriage, it may have been illegal. The Kingdons were Protestants, and the Spaniards are all papists, I suppose. A marriage between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic wouldn't be binding."

"Not upon such a man as this Kingdon."

It seems more than probable that the opinion arrived at by this poor soul's friends must be correct, and that Montagu Kingdon was a scoundrel. But how about Susan Meynell's after-life?—the fourteen years in which she was lost sight of? May she not have married some one else than Mr. Kingdon? and may she not have left heirs who will arise in the future to dispute my darling's claim?

Is it a good thing to have a great inheritance? The day has been when such a question as that could not by any possibility have shaped itself in my mind. Ah! what is this subtle power called love, which worketh such wondrous changes in the human heart? Surely the miracle of the cleansed leper is in some manner typical of this transformation. The emanation of divine purity encircled the leper with its supernal warmth, and the scales fell away beneath that mysterious influence. And so from the pure heart of a woman issues a celestial fire which burns the plague-spot out of the sinner's breast. Ah, how I languish to be at my darling's feet, thanking her for the cure she has wrought!

I have given my Sheldon the story of Susan Meynell's life, as I had it from uncle Joseph. He agrees with me as to the importance of Susan's last letter, but even that astute creature does not see a way to getting the document in his hands without letting Mr. Mercer more or less into our secret.

"I might tell this man Mercer some story about a little bit of money coming to his niece, and get at Susan Meynell's letter that way," he said; "but whatever I told him would be sure to get round to Philip somehow or other, and I don't want to put him on the scent."

My Sheldon's legal mind more than ever inclines to caution, now that he knows the heiress of the Haygarths is so nearly allied to his brother Philip.

"I'll tell you what it is, Hawkehurst," he said to me, after we had discussed the business in all its

bearings, "there are not many people I'm afraid of, but I don't mind owning to you that I am afraid of my brother Phil. He has always walked over my head; partly because he can wear his shirt-front all through business hours without creasing it, which I can't, and partly because he's—well—more unscrupulous than I am."

He paused meditatively, and I too was meditative; for I could not choose but wonder what it was to be more unscrupulous than George Sheldon.

"If he were to get an inkling of this affair," my patron resumed presently, "he'd take it out of our hands before you could say Jack Robinson—supposing anybody ever wanted to say Jack Robinson, which they don't—and he'd drive a bargain with us, instead of our driving a bargain with him."

My friend of Gray's Inn has a pleasant way of implying that our interests are coequal in this affair. I caught him watching me curiously once or twice during our last interview, when Charlotte's name was mentioned. Does he suspect the truth, I wonder?

Nov. 12th. I had another interview with my patron yesterday, and rather a curious interview, though not altogether unsatisfactory. George Sheldon has been making good use of his time since my return from Yorkshire.

"I don't think we need have any fear of opposition from children or grandchildren of Susan Meynell," he said; "I have found the registry of her interment in the churchyard of St. Giles's, Cripplegate. She is described in that registry by her maiden name, and there is a plain headstone in a corner of the ground, inscribed with the name of Susan Meynell, who died July 14th, 1835, much lamented; and then the text about 'the one sinner that repenteth,' and so on," said Mr. Sheldon, as if he did not care to dwell on so hackneyed a truism.

"But," I began, "she might have been married, in spite of—"

"Yes, she might," replied my Sheldon, captiously; "but then, you see, the probability is that she wasn't. If she had been married, she would have told her sister as much in that last letter, or she would have said as much when they met."

"But she was delirious."

"Not all the time. She was sensible enough to talk about her sorrow for the past, and so on; and she must have been sensible enough to have spoken of her children, if she had ever had any. Besides, if she had been married, she would scarcely have been wandering about the world in that miserable manner, unless her husband was an uncommonly bad lot. No, Hawkehurst, depend upon it, we've nothing to fear in that quarter. The person we have to fear is that precious brother of mine."

"You talked the other day about driving a bargain with him," I said; "I didn't quite understand your meaning. The fortune can only be claimed by Char—Miss Halliday, and your brother has no legal authority to dispose of her money."

"Of course not," answered my employer, with contemptuous impatience of my dulness; "but my brother Phil is not the man to wait for legal power. His ideas will be Miss Halliday's ideas in this business. When my case is ripe for action, I shall make my bargain—half the fortune to be mine from the day of its recovery. A deed containing these conditions must be executed by Charlotte Halliday before I hand over a single document relating to the case. Now, as matters stand at present," he went on, looking very fixedly at me, "her execution of that deed would rest with Philip."

"And when shall you make your overtures to Mr. Sheldon?" I asked, at a loss to understand that intent look.

"Not until the last links of the chain are put together. Not before I'm ready to make my first move on the Chancellor's chessboard. Perhaps not at all."

"How do you mean?"

"If I can tide over for a little time, I may throw Philip overboard altogether, and get some one else to manage Miss Halliday for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you, Hawkehurst," answered my patron, resting his elbows on the table by which we were sitting, and looking me through with those penetrating black eyes of his. "My brother Phil played me a shabby trick a few years ago, which I have not forgotten or forgiven. So I shouldn't mind paying him out in some of his own coin. Beyond which, I tell you again, I don't like the idea of his having a finger in this

business. Where that kind of man's finger can go, his whole hand will follow; and if once that hand fastens on John Haygarth's money, it'll be bad times for you and me. Miss Halliday counts for exactly nothing in my way of reckoning. If her stepfather told her to sign away half a million, she'd scribble her name at the bottom of the paper, and press her pretty little thumb upon the wafer, without asking a single question as to the significance of the document. And, of course, she'd be still less inclined to make objections if it was her husband who asked her to execute the deed. Aha! my young friend, how is it you grow first red and then white when I mention Miss Halliday's husband?"

I have no doubt that I did indeed blanch when that portentous word was uttered in conjunction with my darling's name. Mr. Sheldon leant a little further across the table, and his hard black eyes penetrated a little deeper into the recesses of my foolish heart.

"Valentine Hawkehurst," he said, "shall we throw my brother Phil overboard altogether? Shall you and I go shares in this fortune?"

"Upon my word and honour I don't understand you," I said, in all sincerity.

"You mean that you won't understand me," answered George Sheldon, impatiently; "but I'll make myself pretty clear presently; and as your own interest is at stake, you'll be very unlike the rest of your species if you don't find it easy enough to understand me. When first I let you in for the chance of a prize out of this business, neither you nor I had the slightest idea that circumstances would throw the rightful claimant to the Haygarth estate so completely into our way. I had failed so many times with other cases before I took up this case, that it's a wonder I had the courage to work on. But, somehow or other, I had a notion that this particular business would turn up trumps. The way seemed a little clearer than it usually is; but not clear enough to tempt Tom, Dick, and Harry. And then, again, I had learnt a good many secrets from the experience of my failures. I was well up to my work. I might have carried it on, and I ought to have carried it on, without help; but I was getting worn out and lazy, so I let you into my secret, having taken it into my head that I could venture to trust you."

"You didn't trust me further than you could help, my friend," I replied with my usual candour. "You never told me the amount left by the reverend intestate; but I heard that down at Ullerton. A half share in a hundred thousand pounds is worth trying for, Mr. Sheldon."

"They call it a hundred thousand down there, do they?" asked the lawyer, with charming innocence. "Those country people always deal in high figures. However, I don't mind owning that the sum is a handsome one, and if you and I play our cards wisely, we may push Philip out of the game altogether, and share the plunder between us."

Again I was obliged to confess myself unable to grasp my employer's meaning.

"Marry Charlotte Halliday out of hand," he said, bringing his eyes and his elbows still nearer to me, until his bushy black whiskers almost touched my face. "Marry her before Philip gets an inkling of this affair, and then, instead of being made a tool of by him, she'll be safe in your hands, and the money will be in your hands into the bargain. Why, how you stare, man! Do you think I haven't seen how the land lies between you two? Haven't I dined at Bayswater when you've been there? and could any man with his wits about him see you two sentimental young simpletons together *without* seeing how things were going on? You are in love with Charlotte, and Charlotte is in love with you. What more natural than that you two should make a match of it? Charlotte is her own mistress, and hasn't sixpence in the world that any one but you and I know of; for, of course, my brother Phil will continue to stick to every penny of poor old Tom's money. All you have to do is to follow up the young lady; it's the course that would suggest itself to any man in the same case, even if Miss Halliday were the ugliest old harridan in Christendom, instead of being a very jolly kind of girl, as girls go."

My employer said this with the tone of a man who had never considered the genus girl a very interesting part of creation. I suppose I looked at him rather indignantly; for he laughed as he resumed, —

"I'll say she's an angel, if you like," he said; "and if you think her one, so much the better. You may consider it a very lucky thing that you came in my way, and a still more lucky thing that Miss Halliday has been silly enough to fall in love with you. I've heard of men being born with silver spoons in their mouths; but I should think you must have come into the world with a whole service of plate. However, that is neither here nor there. Your policy will be to follow up your advantages; and if you can persuade the young lady to change her name for Hawkehurst on the quiet some fine morning, without stopping to ask permission of her stepfather, or any one else, so much the better for you, and so much the more agreeable to me. I'd rather do business with you than with my brother Phil; and I shan't be sorry to cry quits with that gentleman for the shabby trick he played me a few years ago."

My Sheldon's brow darkened as he said this, and the moody fit returned. That old grudge which my patron entertains against his brother must have relation to some very disagreeable business, if I may judge by George Sheldon's manner.

Here was a position for me, Valentine Hawkehurst, soldier of fortune, cosmopolitan adventurer, and child of the nomadic tribes who call Bohemia their mother country! Already blest with the sanction of my dear love's simple Yorkshire kindred, I was now assured of George Sheldon's favour; nay, urged onward in my paradisiac path by that unsentimental Mentor. The situation was almost too much for my bewildered brain. Charlotte an heiress, and George Sheldon eager to bring about my participation in the Haygarthian thousands!

And now I sit in my little room in Omega-street, pondering upon the past, and trying to face the perplexities of the future.

Is this to be? Am I, so hopeless an outsider in the race of life, to come in with a rush and win the prize which Fortune's first favourite might envy? Can I hope or believe it? Can the Fates have been playing a pleasant practical joke with me all this time, like those fairies who decree that the young prince shall pass his childhood and youth in the guise of a wild boar, only to be transformed into an Adonis at last by the hand of the woman who is disinterested enough to love him despite his formidable tusks and ungainly figure?

No! a thousand times no! The woman I love, and the fortune I have so often desired, are not for me. Every man has his own especial Fates; and the three sisters who take care of me are grim, hard-visaged, harder-hearted spinsters, not to be mollified by propitiation, or by the smooth tongue of the flatterer. The cup is very sweet, and it seems almost within my grasp; but between that chalice of delight and the lips that thirst for it, ah, what a gulf!

Nov. 13th. The above was written late at night, and under the influence of my black dog. What an ill-conditioned cur he is, and how he mouths and mangles the roses that bestrew his pathway, always bent upon finding the worm at the core!

I kicked the brute out of doors this morning, on finding a letter from my dear one lying in my plate. "Avaunt, aroint thee, foul fiend!" I cried. "Thou art the veritable poodle in whose skin Mephistopheles hides when bent on direst mischief. I will set the sign of the cross upon my threshold, and thou shalt enter no more."

This is what I said to myself as I tore open Charlotte's envelope, with its pretty little motto stamped on cream-coloured sealing-wax, "*Pensez à moi.*" Ah, love; "while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe." I saw the eyes of my friend Horatio fixed upon me as I opened my letter, and knew that my innermost sentiments were under inspection. Prudence demands all possible caution where the noble Captain is concerned. I cannot bring myself to put implicit faith in his account of his business at Ullerton. He may have been there, as he says, on some promoting spec; but our meeting in that town was, to say the least, a strange coincidence, and I am not a believer in coincidences—off the stage, where a gentleman invariably makes his appearance directly his friends begin to talk about him.

I cannot forget my conviction that Jonah Goodge was bought over by a rival investigator, and that Rebecca Haygarth's letters were tampered with; nor can I refrain from connecting that shapely but well-worn lavender glove with the person of my dandy friend, Horatio Paget. The disappearance of a letter from the packet intrusted to me by Miss Judson is another mysterious circumstance; nor can I do away with the impression that I heard the name Meynell distinctly pronounced by Philip Sheldon the last time I was at the villa.

George Sheldon tells me the secret cannot by any possibility have been betrayed, unless by me; and I have been prudence itself.

Supposing my suspicions of Mr. Goodge to be correct, the letters extracted from Mrs. Rebecca's correspondence might tell much, and might even put Horatio on the track of the Meynells. But how should he get his first inkling of the business?

Certainly not from me or from George Sheldon. But might not his attention have been attracted by that advertisement for heirs-at-law to the Haygarthian estate which appeared in the *Times*?

These are questions with which the legal intellect of my Sheldon may best grapple. For myself, I can only drift with the resistless stream called life.

I was so unfortunate as to make my appearance in our common sitting-room five minutes after my patron. There had been time enough for him to examine the superscription and postmark of my letter.

He was whistling when I went into the room. People who have been looking at things that don't belong to them always whistle.

I did not care to read Charlotte's first letter with those hawk's eyes fixed upon me. So I just glanced at the dear handwriting, as if running over an ordinary letter with the eye of indifference, and then put the document into my pocket with the best assumption of carelessness I was capable of. How I longed for the end of that tedious meal, over which Captain Paget lingered in his usual epicurean fashion!

My friend Horatio has shown himself not a little curious about my late absence from the joint domicile. I again resorted to the Dorking fiction,—my aged aunt breaking fast, and requiring much propitiation from a dutiful nephew with an eye to her testamentary arrangements. I had been compelled to endow my shadowy relative with a comfortable little bit of money, in order to account for my devotion; since the powerful mind of my Horatio would have refused to grasp the idea of disinterested affection for an ancient kinswoman.

There was an ominous twinkle in the Captain's sharp gray eyes when I gave this account of my absence, and I sorely doubt his acceptance of this second volume of the Dorking romance. Ah, what a life it is we lead in the tents of Ishmael, the cast-away! through what tortuous pathways wander the nomad tribes who call Hagar, the abandoned, their mother! what lies, what evasions, what prevarications! Horatio Paget and I watch each other like two cunning fencers, with a stereotyped smile upon our lips and an eager restlessness in our eyes, and who shall say that one or other of our rapiers is not poisoned, as in the famous duel before Claudius, usurper of Denmark? My dear one's letter is all sweetness and love. She is coming home; and much as she prefers Yorkshire to Bayswater, she is pleased to return for my sake—for my sake. She leaves the pure atmosphere of that simple country home to become the central point in a network of intrigue; and I am bound to keep the secret so closely interwoven with her fate. I love her more truly, more purely than I thought myself capable of loving; yet I can only approach her as the tool of George Sheldon, a rapacious conspirator, bent on securing the hoarded thousands of old John Haygarth.

Of all men upon this earth I should be the last to underrate the advantages of wealth,—I who have been reared in the gutter, which is Poverty's cradle. Yet I would fain Charlotte's fortune had come to her in any other fashion than as the result of my work in the character of a salaried private inquirer.

BOOK THE SEVENTH.

CHARLOTTE'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

"IN YOUR PATIENCE YE ARE STRONG."

Miss Halliday returned to the gothic villa at Bayswater with a bloom on her cheeks, and a brightness in her eyes, which surpassed her wonted bloom and brightness, fair and bright as her beauty had been from the hour in which she was created to charm mankind. She had been a creature to adore even in the first dawn of infancy, and in her christening-hood and toga of white satin had been a being to dream of. But now she seemed invested all at once with a new loveliness—more spiritual, more pensive, than the old.

Might not Valentine have cried, with the rapturous pride of a lover: "Look at the woman here with the new soul!" and anon: "This new soul is mine!"

It was love that had imparted a new charm to Miss Halliday's beauty. Diana wondered at the subtle change as her friend sat in her favourite window on the morning after her return, looking dreamily out

into the blossomless garden, where evergreens of the darkest and spikiest character stood up stern and straight against the cold gray sky. Diana had welcomed her friend in her usual reserved manner, much to Charlotte's discomfiture. The girl so yearned for a confidante. She had no idea of hiding her happiness from this chosen friend, and waited eagerly for the moment in which she could put her arms round Diana's neck and tell her what it was that had made Newhall so sweet to her during this particular visit.

She sat in the window this morning thinking of Valentine, and languishing to speak of him, but at a loss how to begin. There are some people about whose necks the arms of affection can scarce entwine themselves. Diana Paget sat at her eternal embroidery-frame, picking up beads on her needle with the precision of some self-feeding machine. The little glass beads made a hard clicking sound as they dropped from her needle,—a very frosty, unpromising sound, as it seemed to Charlotte's hyper-sensitive ear.

There had been an unwonted reserve between the girls since Charlotte's return,—a reserve which arose, on Miss Halliday's part, from the contest between girlish shyness and the eager desire for a confidante; and on the part of Miss Paget, from that gloomy discontent which had of late possessed her.

She watched Charlotte furtively as she picked up her beads—watched her wonderingly, unable to comprehend the happiness that gave such spiritual brightness to her eyes. It was no longer the childlike gaiety of heart which had made Miss Halliday's girlhood so pleasant. It was the thoughtful, serene delight of womanhood.

"She can care very little for Valentine," Diana thought, "or she could scarcely seem so happy after such a long separation. I doubt if these bewitching women who enchant all the world know what it is to feel deeply. Happiness is a habit with this girl. Valentine's attentions were very pleasant to her. The pretty little romance was very agreeable while it lasted; but at the first interruption of the story she shuts the book, and thinks of it no more. O, if my Creator had made *me* like that! If I could forget the days we spent together, and the dream I dreamt!"

That never-to-be-forgotten vision came back to Diana Paget as she sat at her work; and for a few minutes the clicking sound of the beads ceased, while she waited with clasped hands until the shadows should have passed before her eyes. The old dream came back to her like a picture, bright with colour and light. But the airy habitation which she had built for herself of old was no "palace lifting to Italian heavens its marble roof." It was only a commonplace lodging in a street running out of the Strand, with just a peep of the river from a trim little balcony. An airy second-floor sitting-room, with engraved portraits of the great writers on the newly-papered walls: on one side an office-desk, on the other a work-table. The unpretending shelter of a newspaper hack, who lives *à jour la journée*, and whose wife must achieve wonders in the way of domestic economy in order to eke out his modest earnings.

This was Diana Paget's vision of Paradise, and it seemed only the brighter now that she felt it was never to be anything more than a supernal picture painted on her brain.

After sitting silent for some little time, eager to talk, but waiting to be interrogated, Charlotte was fain to break silence.

"You don't ask me whether I enjoyed myself in Yorkshire, Di," she said, looking shyly down at the little bunch of charms and lockets which employed her restless fingers.

"Didn't I, really?" replied Diana, languidly; "I thought that was one of the stereotyped inquiries one always made."

"I hope you wouldn't make stereotyped inquiries of *me*, Diana."

"No, I ought not to do so. But I think there are times when one is artificial even with one's best friends. And you are my best friend, Charlotte. I may as well say my only friend," the girl added, with a laugh.

"Diana," cried Charlotte, reproachfully, "why do you speak so bitterly? You know how dearly I love you. I do, indeed, dear. There is scarcely anything in this world I would not do for you. But I am not your only friend. There is Mr. Hawkehurst, whom you have known so long."

Miss Halliday's face was in a flame; and although she bent very low to examine the golden absurdities hanging on her watch-chain, she could not conceal her blushes from the eyes that were so sharpened by jealousy.

"Mr. Hawkehurst!" cried Diana, with unspeakable contempt. "If I were drowning, do you think *he* would stretch out his hand to save me while you were within his sight? When he comes to this house—

he who has seen so much poverty, and misery, and shame, and—happiness with me and mine—do you think he so much as remembers my existence? Do you think he ever stops to consider whether I am that Diana Paget who was once his friend and confidante and fellow-wayfarer and companion? or only a lay figure dressed up to fill a vacant chair in your drawing-room?"

"Diana!"

"It is all very well to look at me reproachfully, Charlotte. You must know that I am speaking the truth. You talk of friendship. What is that word worth if it does not mean care and thought for another? Do you imagine that Valentine Hawkehurst ever thinks of me, or considers me?"

Charlotte was fain to keep silence. She remembered how very rarely, in those long afternoons at Newhall farm, the name of Diana Paget had been mentioned. She remembered how, when she and Valentine were mapping out the future so pleasantly, she had stopped in the midst of an eloquent bit of word-painting, descriptive of the little suburban cottage they were to live in, to dispose of Diana's fate in a sentence,—

"And dear Di can stop at the villa to take care of mamma," she had said; whereupon Mr. Hawkehurst had assented, with a careless nod, and the description of the ideal cottage had been continued.

Charlotte remembered this now with extreme contrition. She had been so supremely happy, and so selfish in her happiness.

"O, Di," she cried, "how selfish happy people are!" And then she stopped in confusion, perceiving that the remark had little relevance to Diana's last observation.

"Valentine shall be your friend, dear," she said, after a pause.

"O, you are beginning to answer for him already!" exclaimed Miss Paget, with increasing bitterness.

"Diana, why are you so unkind to me?" Charlotte cried, passionately. "Don't you see that I am longing to confide in you? What is it that makes you so bitter? You must know how truly I love you. And if Mr. Hawkehurst is not what he once was to you, you must remember how cold and distant you always are in your manner to him. I am sure, to hear you speak to him, and to see you look at him sometimes, one would think he was positively hateful to you. And I want you to like him a little for my sake."

Miss Halliday left her seat by the window as she said this, and went towards the table by which her friend was sitting. She crept close to Diana, and with a half-frightened, half-caressing movement, seated herself on the low ottoman at her feet, and, seated thus, possessed herself of Miss Paget's cold hand.

"I want you to like Mr. Hawkehurst a little, Di," she repeated, "for my sake."

"Very well, I will try to like him a little—for your sake," answered
Miss Paget, in a very unsympathetic tone.

"O, Di! tell me how it was he offended you."

"Who told you that he offended me?"

"Your own manner, dear. You could never have been so cold and distant with him—having known him so long, and endured so many troubles in his company—if you had not been deeply offended by him."

"That is your idea, Charlotte; but, you see, I am very unlike you. I am fitful and capricious. I used to like Mr. Hawkehurst, and now I dislike him. As to offence, his whole life has offended me, just as my father's life has offended me, from first to last. I am not good and amiable and loving, like you; but I hate deceptions and lies; above all, the lies that some men traffic in day after day."

"Was Valentine's—was your father's life a very bad one?" Charlotte asked, trembling palpably, and looking up at Miss Paget's face with anxious eyes.

"Yes, it was a mean false life,—a life of trick and artifice. I do not know the details of the schemes by which my father and Valentine earned their daily bread—and my daily bread; but I know they inflicted loss upon other people. Whether the wrong done was always done deliberately and consciously upon Valentine's part, I cannot say. He may have been only a tool of my father's. I hope he was, for the most part an unconscious tool."

She said all this in a dreamy way, as if uttering her own thoughts, rather than seeking to enlighten Charlotte.

"I am sure he was an unconscious tool," cried that young lady, with an air of conviction; "it is not in his nature to do anything false or dishonourable."

"Indeed! you know him very well, it seems," said Diana.

Ah, what a tempest was raging in that proud passionate heart! what a strife between the powers of good and evil! Pitying love for Charlotte; tender compassion for her rival's childlike helplessness; and unutterable sense of her own loss.

She had loved him so dearly, and he was taken from her. There had been a time when he almost loved her—almost! Yes, it was the remembrance of that which made the trial so bitter. The cup had approached her lips, only to be dashed away for ever.

"What did I ask in life except his love?" she said to herself. "Of all the pleasures and triumphs which girls of my age enjoy, is there one that I ever envied? No, I only sighed for his love. To live in a lodging-house parlour with him, to sit by and watch him at his work, to drudge for him, to bear with him—this was my brightest dream of earthly bliss; and she has broken it!"

It was thus Diana argued with herself, as she sat looking down at the bright creature who had done her this worst, last wrong which one woman can do to another. This passionate heart, which ached with such cruel pain, was prone to evil, and to-day the scorpion Jealousy was digging his sharp tooth into its very core. It was not possible for Diana Paget to feel kindly disposed towards the girl whose unconscious hand had shattered the airy castle of her dreams. Was it not a hard thing that the bright creature, whom every one was ready to adore, must needs steal away this one heart?

"It has always been like this," thought Diana. "The story of David and Nathan is a parable that is perpetually being illustrated. David is so rich—he is lord of incalculable flocks and herds; but he will not be content till he has stolen the one little ewe lamb, the poor man's pet and darling."

"Diana," said Miss Halliday very softly, "you are so difficult to talk to this morning, and I have so much to say to you."

"About your visit, or about Mr. Hawkehurst?"

"About—Yorkshire," answered Charlotte, with the air of a shy child who has made her appearance at dessert, and is asked whether she will have a pear or a peach.

"About Yorkshire!" repeated Miss Paget, with a little sigh of relief. "I shall be very glad to hear about your Yorkshire friends. Was the visit a pleasant one?"

"Very, very pleasant!" answered Charlotte, dwelling tenderly on the words.

"How sentimental you have grown, Lotta! I think you must have found a forgotten shelf of Minerva Press novels in some cupboard at your aunt's. You have lost all your vivacity."

"Have I?" murmured Charlotte; "and yet I am happier than I was when I went away. Whom do you think I met at Newhall, Di?"

"I have not the slightest idea. My notions of Yorkshire are very vague. I fancy the people amiable savages; just a little in advance of the ancient Britons whom Julius Caesar came over to conquer. Whom did you meet there? Some country squire, I suppose, who fell in love with your bright eyes, and wished you to waste the rest of your existence in those northern wilds."

Miss Paget was not a woman to bare her wounds for the scrutiny of the friendliest eyes. Let the tooth of the serpent bite never so keenly, she could meet her sorrows with a bold front. Was she not accustomed to suffer—she, the scapegoat of defrauded nurses and indignant landladies, the dependent and drudge of her kinswoman's gynæceum, the despised of her father? The flavour of these waters was very familiar to her lips. The draught was only a little more acrid, a little deeper, and habit had enabled her to drain the cup without complaining, if not in a spirit of resignation. To-day she had been betrayed into a brief outbreak of passion; but the storm had passed, and a more observant person than Charlotte might have been deceived by her manner.

"Now you are my own Di again," cried Miss Halliday; somewhat cynical at the best of times, but always candid and true.

Miss Paget winced ever so little as her friend said this.

"No, dear," continued Charlotte, with the faintest spice of coquetry; "it was not a Yorkshire squire. It was a person you know very well; a person we have been talking of this morning. O, Di, you must surely

have understood me when I said I wanted you to like him for my sake!"

"Valentine Hawkehurst!" exclaimed Diana.

"Who else, you dear obtuse Di!"

"He was in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, dear. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. He marched up to Newhall gate one morning in the course of his rambles, without having the least idea that I was to be found in the neighbourhood. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"What could have taken him to Yorkshire?"

"He came on business."

"But what business?"

"How do I know? Some business of papa's, or of George Sheldon's, perhaps. And yet that can't be. He is writing a book, I think, about geology or archaeology—yes, that's it, archaeology."

"Valentine Hawkehurst writing a book on archaeology!" cried Miss Paget.
"You must be dreaming, Charlotte."

"Why so? He does write, does he not?"

"He has been reporter for a newspaper. But he is the last person to write about archaeology. I think there must be some mistake."

"Well, dear, it may be so. I didn't pay much attention to what he said about business. It seemed so strange for him to be there, just as much at home as if he had been one of the family. O, Di, you can't imagine how kind aunt Dorothy and uncle Joe were to him! They like him so much—and they know we are engaged."

Miss Halliday said these last words almost in a whisper.

"What!" exclaimed Diana, "do you mean to say that you have promised to marry this man, of whom you know nothing but what is unfavourable?"

"What do I know in his disfavour? Ah, Diana, how unkind you are! and what a dislike you must have for poor Valentine! Of course, I know he is not what people call a good match. A good match means that one is to have a pair of horses, whose health is so uncertain that I am sure their lives must be a burden to them, if we may judge by our horses; and a great many servants, who are always conducting themselves in the most awful manner, if poor mamma's experience is any criterion; and a big expensive house, which nobody can be prevailed on to dust. No, Di! that is just the kind of life I hate. What I should like is a dear little cottage at Highgate or Wimbledon, and a tiny, tiny garden, in which Valentine and I could walk every morning before he began his day's work, and where we could drink tea together on summer evenings—a garden just large enough to grow a few rose-bushes. O. Di! do you think I want to marry a rich man?"

"No, Charlotte; but I should think you would like to marry a good man."

"Valentine is good. No one but a good man could have been so happy as he seemed at Newhall farm. That simple country life could not have been happiness for a bad man."

"And was Valentine Hawkehurst really happy at Newhall?"

"Really—really—really! Don't try to shake my faith in him, Diana; it is not to be shaken. He has told me a little about the past, though I can see that it pains him very much to speak of it. He has told me of his friendless youth, spent amongst unprincipled people, and what a mere waif and stray he was until he met me. And I am to be his pole-star, dear, to guide him in the right path. Do you know, Di, I cannot picture to myself anything sweeter than that—to be a good influence for the person one loves. Valentine says his whole nature has undergone a change since he has known me. What am I that I should work so good a change in my dear one? It is very foolish, is it not, Di?"

"Yes, Charlotte," replied the voice of reason from the lips of Miss Paget; "it is all foolishness from beginning to end, and I can foresee nothing but trouble as the result of such folly. What will your mamma say to such an engagement? or what will Mr. Sheldon say?"

"Yes, that is the question," returned Charlotte, very seriously. "Dear mamma is one of the kindest

creatures in the world, and I'm sure she would consent to anything rather than see me unhappy. And then, you know, she likes Valentine very much, because he has given her orders for the theatres, and all that kind of thing. But, whatever mamma thinks, she will be governed by what Mr. Sheldon thinks; and of course he will be against our marriage."

"Our marriage!" It was a settled matter, then—a thing that was to be sooner or later; and there remained only the question as to how and when it was to be. Diana sat like a statue, enduring her pain. So may have suffered the Christian martyrs in their death-agony; so suffers a woman when the one dear hope of her life is reft from her, and she dare not cry aloud.

"Mr. Sheldon is the last man in the world to permit such a marriage," she said presently.

"Perhaps," replied Charlotte; "but I am not going to sacrifice Valentine for Mr. Sheldon's pleasure. Mr. Sheldon has full power over mamma and her fortune, but he has no real authority where I am concerned. I am as free as air, Diana, and I have not a penny in the world. Is not that delightful?"

The girl asked this question in all good faith, looking up at her friend with a radiant countenance. What irony there was in the question for Diana Paget, whose whole existence had been poisoned by the lack of that sterling coin of the realm which seemed such sordid dross in the eyes of Charlotte!

"What do you mean, Charlotte?"

"I mean, that even his worst enemies cannot accuse Valentine of any mercenary feeling. He does not ask me to marry him for the sake of my fortune."

"Does he know your real position?"

"Most fully. And now, Diana, tell me that you will try to like him, for my sake, and that you will be kind, and will speak a good word for me to mamma by-and-by, when I have told her all."

"When do you mean to tell her?"

"Directly—or almost directly. I scarcely know how to set about it. I am sure it has been hard enough to tell you."

"My poor Charlotte! What an ungrateful wretch I must be!"

"My dear Diana, you have no reason to be grateful. I love you very dearly, and I could not live in this house without you. It is I who have reason to be grateful, when I remember how you bear with mamma's fidgety ways, and with Mr. Sheldon's gloomy temper, and all for love of me."

"Yes, Lotta, for love of you," Miss Paget answered, with a sigh; "and I will do more than that for love of you."

She had her arm round her happy rival's beautiful head, and she was looking down at the sweet upturned face with supreme tenderness. She felt no anger against this fair enslaver, who had robbed her of her little lamb. She only felt some touch of anger against the Providence which had decreed that the lamb should be so taken.

No suspicion of her friend's secret entered Charlotte Halliday's mind. In all their intercourse Diana had spoken very little of Valentine; and in the little she had said there had been always the same half-bitter, half-disdainful tone. Charlotte, in her simple candour, accepted this tone as the evidence of Miss Paget's aversion to her father's *protégé*.

"Poor Di does not like to see her father give so much of his friendship to a stranger while she is neglected," thought Miss Halliday; and having once jumped at this conclusion, she made no further effort to penetrate the mysteries of Diana's mind.

She was less than ever inclined to speculation about Diana's feelings now that she was in love, and blest with the sweet consciousness that her love was returned. Tender and affectionate as she was, she could not quite escape that taint of egotism which is the ruling vice of fortunate lovers. Her mind was not wide enough to hold much more than one image, which demanded so large a space.

CHAPTER II.

Miss Halliday had an interview with her mother that evening in Mrs. Sheldon's dressing-room, while that lady was preparing for rest, with considerable elaboration of detail in the way of hair-brushing, and putting away of neck-ribbons and collars and trinkets in smart little boxes and handy little drawers, all more or less odorous from the presence of dainty satin-covered sachets. The sachets, and the drawers, and boxes, and trinkets were Mrs. Sheldon's best anchorage in this world. Such things as these were the things that made life worth endurance for this poor weak little woman; and they were more real to her than her daughter, because more easy to realise. The beautiful light-hearted girl was a being whose existence had been always something of a problem for Georgina Sheldon. She loved her after her own feeble fashion, and would have jealously asserted her superiority over every other daughter in the universe; but the power to understand her or to sympathise with her had not been given to that narrow mind. The only way in which Mrs. Sheldon's affection showed itself was unquestioning indulgence and the bestowal of frivolous gifts, chosen with no special regard to Charlotte's requirements, but rather because they happened to catch Mrs. Sheldon's eye as they glittered or sparkled in the windows of Bayswater repositories.

Mr. Sheldon happened to be dining out on this particular evening. He was a guest at a great City feast, to which some of the richest men upon 'Change had been bidden; so Miss Halliday had an excellent opportunity for making her confession.

Poor Georgy was not a little startled by the avowal.

"My darling Lotta!" she screamed, "do you think your papa would ever consent to such a thing?"

"I think my dear father would have consented to anything likely to secure my happiness, mamma," the girl answered sadly.

She was thinking how different this crisis in her life would have seemed if the father she had loved so dearly had been spared to counsel her.

"I was not thinking of my poor dear first husband," said Georgy. This numbering of her husbands was always unpleasant to Charlotte. It seemed such a very business-like mode of description to be applied to the father she so deeply regretted.

"I was thinking of your step-papa," continued Mrs. Sheldon. "He would never consent to your marrying Mr. Hawkehurst, who really seems to have nothing to recommend him except his good looks and an obliging disposition with regard to orders for the theatres."

"I am not bound to consult my stepfather's wishes. I only want to please you, mamma."

"But, my dear, I cannot possibly consent to anything that Mr. Sheldon disapproves."

"O, mamma, dear kind mamma, do have an opinion of your own for once in a way! I daresay Mr. Sheldon is the best possible judge of everything connected with the Stock Exchange and the money-market; but don't let him choose a husband for me. Let me have your approval, mamma, and I care for no one else. I don't want to marry against your will. But I am sure you like Mr. Hawkehurst."

Mrs. Sheldon shook her head despondingly.

"It's all very well to like an agreeable young man as an occasional visitor," she said, "especially when most of one's visitors are middle-aged City people. But it is a very different thing when one's only daughter talks of marrying him. I can't imagine what can have put such an idea as marriage into your head. It is only a few months since you came home from school; and I fancied that you would have stopped with me for years before you thought of settling."

Miss Halliday made a wry face.

"Dear mamma," she said, "I don't want to 'settle.' That is what one's housemaid says, isn't it, when she talks of leaving service and marrying some young man from the baker's or the grocer's? Valentine and I are not in a hurry to be married. I am sure, for my own part, I don't care how long our engagement lasts. I only wish to be quite candid and truthful with you, mamma; and I thought it a kind of duty to tell you that he loves me, and that—I love him—very dearly."

These last words were spoken with extreme shyness.

Mrs. Sheldon laid down her hair-brushes while she contemplated her daughter's blushing face. Those blushes had become quite a chronic affection with Miss Halliday of late.

"But, good gracious me, Charlotte," she exclaimed, growing peevish in her sense of helplessness, "who is to tell Mr. Sheldon?"

"There is no necessity for Mr. Sheldon to be enlightened yet awhile, mamma. It is to you I owe duty and obedience—not to him. Pray keep my secret, kindest and most indulgent of mothers, and—and ask Valentine to come and see you now and then."

"Ask him to come and see me, Charlotte! You must know very well that I never invite any one to dinner except at Mr. Sheldon's wish. I am sure I quite tremble at the idea of a dinner. There is such trouble about the waiting, and such dreadful uncertainty about the cooking. And if one has it all done by Birch's people, one's cook gives warning next morning," added poor Georgy, with a dismal recollection of recent perplexities. "I am sure I often wish myself young again, in the dairy at Hyley farm, making matrimony cakes for a tea-party, with a ring and a fourpenny-piece hidden in the middle. I'm sure the Hyley tea-parties were pleasanter than Mr. Sheldon's dinners, with those solemn City people, who can't exist without clear turtle and red mullet."

"Ah, mother dear, our lives were altogether happier in those days. I delight in the Yorkshire tea-parties, and the matrimony cakes, and all the talk and laughter about the fourpenny-piece and the ring. I remember getting the fourpenny-piece at Newhall last year. And that means that one is to die an old maid, you know. And now I am engaged. As to the dinners, mamma, Mr. Sheldon may keep them all for himself and his City friends. Valentine is the last person in the world to care for clear turtle. If you will let him drop in sometimes of an afternoon—say once a week or so—when you, and I, and Diana are sitting at our work in the drawing-room, and if you will let him hand us our cups at our five-o'clock tea, he will be the happiest of men. He adores tea. You'll let him come, won't you, dear? O, mamma, I feel just like a servant who asks to be allowed to see her 'young man.' Will you let my 'young man' come to tea once in a way?"

"Well, Charlotte, I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Sheldon, with increasing helplessness. "It's really a very dreadful position for me to be placed in."

"Quite appalling, is it not, mamma? But then I suppose it is a position that people afflicted with daughters must come to sooner or later."

"If it were the mere civility of asking him to tea," pursued poor Georgy, heedless of this flippant interruption, "I'm sure I should be the last to make any objection. Indeed, I am under a kind of obligation to Mr. Hawkehurst, for his polite attention has enabled us to go to the theatres very often when your papa would not have thought of buying tickets. But then, you see, Lotta, the question in point is not his coming to our five-o'clock tea—which seems really a perfect mockery to any one brought up in Yorkshire—but whether you are to be engaged to him."

"Dear mamma, *that* is not a question at all, for I am already engaged to him."

"But, Charlotte—"

"I do not think I could bring myself to disobey you, dear mother," continued the girl tenderly; "and if you tell me, of your own free will, and acting on your conviction, that I am not to marry him, I must bow my head to your decision, however hard it may seem. But one thing is quite certain, mamma: I have given my promise to Valentine; and if I do not marry him, I shall never marry at all; and then the dreadful augury of the fourpenny-piece will be verified."

Miss Halliday pronounced this determination with a decision of manner that quite overawed her mother. It had been the habit of Georgy's mind to make a feeble protest against all the mutations of life, but in the end to submit very quietly to the inevitable; and since Valentine Hawkehurst's acceptance as Charlotte's future husband seemed inevitable, she was fain to submit in this instance also.

Valentine was allowed to call at the Lawn, and was received with a feeble, half-plaintive graciousness by the lady of the house. He was invited to stop for the five-o'clock tea, and availed himself rapturously of this delightful privilege. His instinct told him what gentle hand had made the meal so dainty and home-like, and for whose pleasure the phantasmal pieces of bread-and-butter usually supplied by the trim parlour-maid had given place to a salver loaded with innocent delicacies in the way of pound-cake and apricot jam.

Mr. Hawkehurst did his uttermost to deserve so much indulgence. He scoured London in search of free admissions for the theatres, hunting "Ragamuffins" and members of the Cibber Club, and other privileged creatures, at all their places of resort. He watched for the advent of novels adapted to Georgy's capacity—lively records of croquet and dressing and love-making, from smart young Amazons in the literary ranks, or deeply interesting romances of the sensation school, with at least nine deaths in

the three volumes, and a comic housemaid, or a contumacious "Buttons," to relieve the gloom by their playful waggeries. He read Tennyson or Owen Meredith, or carefully selected "bits" from the works of a younger and wilder bard, while the ladies worked industriously at their prie-dieu chairs, or Berlin brioches, or Shetland couvrepieds, as the case might be. The patroness of a fancy fair would scarcely have smiled approvingly on the novel effects in *crochet à tricoter* produced by Miss Halliday during these pleasant lectures.

"The rows will come wrong," she said piteously, "and Tennyson's poetry is so very absorbing!"

Mr. Hawkehurst showed himself to be possessed of honourable, not to say delicate, feelings in his new position. The gothic villa was his paradise, and the gates had been freely opened to admit him whensoever he chose to come. Georgy was just the sort of person from whom people take ells after having asked for inches; and once having admitted Mr. Hawkehurst as a privileged guest, she would have found it very difficult to place any restriction upon the number of his visits. Happily for this much-perplexed matron, Charlotte and her lover were strictly honourable. Mr. Hawkehurst never made his appearance at the villa more than once in the same week, though the "once a week or so" asked for by Charlotte might have been stretched to a wider significance.

When Valentine obtained orders for the theatre, he sent them by post, scrupulously refraining from making them the excuse for a visit.

"That was all very well when I was a freebooter," he said to himself, "only admitted on sufferance, and liable to have the door shut in my face any morning. But I am trusted now, and I must prove myself worthy of my future mother-in-law's confidence. Once a week! One seventh day of unspeakable happiness—bliss without alloy! The six other days are very long and dreary. But then they are only the lustreless setting in which that jewel the seventh shines so gloriously. Now, if I were Waller, what verses I would sing about my love! Alas, I am only a commonplace young man, and can find no new words in which to tell the old sweet story!"

If the orders for stalls and private boxes were not allowed to serve as an excuse for visits, they at least necessitated the writing of letters; and no human being, except a lover, would have been able to understand why such long letters must needs be written about such a very small business. The letters secured replies; and when the order sent was for a box, Mr. Hawkehurst was generally invited to occupy a seat in it. Ah, what did it matter on those happy nights how hackneyed the plot of the play, how bald the dialogue, how indifferent the acting! It was all alike delightful to those two spectators; for a light that shone neither on earth nor sky brightened everything they looked on when they sat side by side.

And during all these pleasant afternoons at the villa, or evenings at the theatre, Diana Paget had to sit by and witness the happiness which she had dreamed might some day be hers. It was a part of her duty to be present on these occasions, and she performed that duty punctiliously. She might have made excuses for absenting herself, but she was too proud to make any such excuses.

"Am I such a coward as to tell a lie in order to avoid a little pain more or less? If I say I have a headache, and stay in my own room while he is here, will the afternoon seem any more pleasant or any shorter to me? The utmost difference would be the difference between a dull pain and a sharp pain; and I think the sharper agony is easier to bear." Having argued with herself thus, Miss Paget endured her weekly martyrdom with Spartan fortitude.

"What have I lost?" she said to herself, as she stole a furtive glance now and then at the familiar face of her old companion. "What is this treasure, the loss of which makes me seem to myself such an abject wretch? Only the love of a man who at his best is not worthy of this girl's pure affection, and at his worst must have been unworthy even of mine. But then at his worst he is dearer to me than the best man who ever lived upon this earth."

CHAPTER III.

MR. HAWKEHURST AND MR. GEORGE SHELDON COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

There was no such thing as idleness for Valentine Hawkehurst during these happy days of his courtship. The world was his oyster, and that oyster was yet unopened. For some years he had been

hacking and hewing the shell thereof with the sword of the freebooter, to very little advantageous effect. He now set himself seriously to work with the pickaxe of the steady-going labourer. He was a secessionist from the great army of adventurers. He wanted to enrol himself in the ranks of the respectable, the plodders, the ratepayers, the simple citizens who love their wives and children, and go to their parish church on Sundays. He had an incentive to steady industry, which had hitherto been wanting in his life. He was beloved, and any shame that came to him would be a still more bitter humiliation for the woman who loved him.

He felt that the very first step in the difficult path of respectability would be a step that must separate him from Captain Paget; but just now separation from that gentleman seemed scarcely advisable. If there was any mischief in that Ullerton expedition, any collusion between the Captain and the Reverend Goodge, it would assuredly be well for Valentine to continue a mode of life which enabled him to be tolerably well informed as to the movements of the slippery Horatio. In all the outside positions of life expedience must ever be the governing principle, and expedience forbade any immediate break with Captain Paget.

"Whatever you do, keep your eye upon the Captain," said George Sheldon, in one of many interviews, all bearing upon the Haygarth succession. "If there is any underhand work going on between him and Philip, you must be uncommonly slow of perception if you can't ferret it out. I'm very sorry you met Charlotte Halliday in the north, for of course Phil must have heard of your appearance in Yorkshire, and that will set him wondering at any rate, especially as he will no doubt have heard the Dorking story from Paget. He pretended he saw you leave town the day you went to Ullerton, but I am half inclined to believe that was only a trap."

"I don't think Mr. Sheldon has heard of my appearance in Yorkshire yet."

"Indeed! Miss Charlotte doesn't care to make a confidant of her stepfather, I suppose. Keep her in that mind, Hawkehurst. If you play your cards well, you ought to be able to get her to marry you on the quiet."

"I don't think that would be possible. In fact, I am sure
Charlotte would not marry without her mother's consent," answered
Valentine, thoughtfully.

"And of course that means my brother Philip's consent," exclaimed George Sheldon, with contemptuous impatience. "What a slow, bungling fellow you are, Hawkehurst! Here is an immense fortune waiting for you, and a pretty girl in love with you, and you dawdle and deliberate as if you were going to the dentist's to have a tooth drawn. You've fallen into a position that any man in London might envy, and you don't seem to have the smallest capability of appreciating your good luck."

"Well, perhaps I am rather slow to realise the idea of my good fortune," answered Valentine, still very thoughtfully. "You see, in the first place, I can't get over a shadowy kind of feeling with regard to that Haygarthian fortune. It is too far away from my grasp, too large, too much of the stuff that dreams and novels are made of. And, in the second place, I love Miss Halliday so fondly and so truly that I don't like the notion of making my marriage with her any part of the bargain between you and me."

Mr. Sheldon contemplated his confederate with unmitigated disdain. "Don't try that sort of thing with me, Hawkehurst," he said; "that sentimental dodge may answer very well with some men, but I'm about the last to be taken in by it. You are playing fast-and-loose with me, and you want to throw me over—as my brother Phil would throw me over, if he got the chance."

"I am not playing fast-and-loose with you," replied Valentine, too disdainful of Mr. Sheldon for indignation. "I have worked for you faithfully, and kept your secret honourably, when I had every temptation to reveal it. You drove your bargain with me, and I have performed my share of the bargain to the letter. But if you think I am going to drive a bargain with you about my marriage with Miss Halliday, you are very much mistaken. That lady will marry me when she pleases, but she shall not be entrapped into a clandestine marriage for your convenience."

"O, that's your ultimatum, is it, Mr. Joseph Surface?" said the lawyer, biting his nails fiercely, and looking askant at his ally, with angry eyes. "I wonder you don't wind up by saying that the man who could trade upon a virtuous woman's affection for the advancement of his fortune, deserves to—get it hot, as our modern slang has it. Then I am to understand that you decline to precipitate matters?"

"I most certainly do."

"And the Haygarth business is to remain in abeyance while Miss Halliday goes through the tedious formula of a sentimental courtship?"

"I suppose so."

"Humph! that's pleasant for me."

"Why should you make the advancement of Miss Halliday's claims contingent on her marriage? Why not assert her rights at once?"

"Because I will not trust my brother Philip. The day that you show me the certificate of your marriage with Charlotte Halliday is the day on which I shall make my first move in this business. I told you the other day that I would rather make a bargain with you than with my brother."

"And what kind of bargain do you expect to make with me when Miss
Halliday is my wife?"

"I'll tell you, Valentine Hawkehurst," replied the lawyer, squaring his elbows upon his desk in his favourite attitude, and looking across the table at his coadjutor; "I like to be open and above-board when I can, and I'll be plain with you in this matter. I want a clear half of John Haygarth's fortune, and I think that I've a very fair claim to that amount. The money can only be obtained by means of the documents in my possession, and but for me that money might have remained till doomsday unclaimed and unthought of by the descendant of Matthew Haygarth. Look at it which way you will, I think you'll allow that my demand is a just one."

"I don't say that it is unjust, though it certainly seems a little extortionate," replied Valentine. "However, if Charlotte were my wife, and were willing to cede half the fortune, I'm not the man to dispute the amount of your reward. When the time comes for bargain-driving, you'll not find me a difficult person to deal with.

"And when may I expect your marriage with Miss Halliday?" asked George Sheldon, rapping his hard finger-nails upon the table with suppressed impatience. "Since you elect to conduct matters in the grand style, and must wait for mamma's consent and papa's consent, and goodness knows what else in the way of absurdity, I suppose the delay will be for an indefinite space of time."

"I don't know about that. I'm not likely to put off the hour in which I shall call that dear girl my own. I asked her to be my wife before I knew that she had the blood of Matthew Haygarth in her veins, and the knowledge of her claim to this fortune does not make her one whit the dearer to me, penniless adventurer as I am. If poetry were at all in your line, Mr. Sheldon, you might know that a man's love for a good woman is generally better than himself. He may be a knave and a scoundrel, and yet his love for that one perfect creature may be almost as pure and perfect as herself. That's a psychological mystery out of the way of Gray's Inn, isn't it?"

"If you'll oblige me by talking common sense for about five minutes, you may devote your powerful intellect to the consideration of psychological mysteries for a month at a stretch," exclaimed the aggravated lawyer.

"O, don't you see how I struggle to be hard-headed and practical!" cried Valentine; "but a man who is over head and ears in love finds it rather hard to bring all his ideas to the one infallible grindstone. You ask me when I am to marry Charlotte Halliday. To-morrow, if our Fates smile upon us. Mrs. Sheldon knows of our engagement, and consents to it, but in some manner under protest. I am not to take my dear girl away from her mother for some time to come. The engagement is to be a long one. In the mean time I am working hard to gain some kind of position in literature, for I want to be sure of an income before I marry, without reference to John Haygarth; and I am a privileged guest at the villa."

"But my brother Phil has been told nothing?"

"As yet nothing. My visits are paid while he is in the City; and as I often went to the villa before my engagement, he is not likely to suspect anything when he happens to hear my name mentioned as a visitor."

"And do you really think he is in the dark—my brother Philip, who can turn a man's brains inside out in half an hour's conversation? Mark my words, Valentine Hawkehurst, that man is only playing with you as a cat plays with a mouse. He used to see you and Charlotte together before you went to Yorkshire, and he must have seen the state of the case quite as plainly as I saw it. He has heard of your visits to the villa since your return, and has kept a close account of them, and made his own deductions, depend upon it. And some day, while you and pretty Miss Charlotte are enjoying your fool's paradise, he will pounce upon you just as puss pounces on poor mousy."

This was rather alarming, and Valentine felt that it was very likely to be correct.

"Mr. Sheldon may play the part of puss as he pleases," he replied after a brief pause for deliberation; "this is a case in which he dare not show his claws. He has no authority to control Miss Halliday's actions."

"Perhaps not, but he would find means for preventing her marriage if it was to his interest to do so. He is not *your* brother, you see, Mr. Hawkehurst; but he is mine, and I know a good deal about him. His interest may not be concerned in hindering his stepdaughter's marriage with a penniless scapegrace. He may possibly prefer such a bridegroom as less likely to make himself obnoxious by putting awkward questions about poor Tom Halliday's money, every sixpence of which he means to keep, of course. If his cards are packed for that kind of marriage, he'll welcome you to his arms as a son-in-law, and give you his benediction as well as his stepdaughter. So I think if you can contrive to inform him of your engagement, without letting him know of your visit to Yorkshire, it might be a stroke of diplomacy. He might be glad to get rid of the girl, and might hasten on the marriage of his own volition."

"He might be glad to get rid of the girl." In the ears of Valentine Hawkehurst this sounded rank blasphemy. Could there be any one upon this earth, even a Sheldon, incapable of appreciating the privilege of that divine creature's presence?

CHAPTER IV.

MR. SHELDON IS PROPITIOUS

It was not very long before Valentine Hawkehurst had reason to respect the wisdom of his legal patron. Within a few days of his interview with George Sheldon he paid his weekly visit to the villa. Things were going very well with him, and life altogether seemed brighter than he had ever hoped to find it. He had set himself steadily to work to win some kind of position in literature. He devoted his days to diligent study in the reading-room of the British Museum, his nights to writing for the magazines. His acquaintance with press-men had stood him in good stead; and already he had secured the prompt acceptance of his work in more than one direction. The young *littérateur* of the present day has not such a very hard fight for a livelihood, if his pen has only a certain lightness and dash, a rattling vivacity and airy grace. It is only the marvellous boys who come to London with epic poems, Anglo-Saxon tragedies, or metaphysical treatises in their portmanteaus, who must needs perish in their prime, or stoop to the drudgery of office or counting-house.

Valentine Hawkehurst had no vague yearnings after the fame of a Milton, no inner consciousness that he had been born to stamp out the footprints of Shakespeare on the sands of time, no unhealthy hungering after the gloomy grandeur of Byron. He had been brought up amongst people who treated literature as a trade as well as an art;—and what art is not more or less a trade? He knew the state of the market, and what kind of goods were likely to go off briskly, and it was for the market he worked. When gray shirtings were in active demand, he set his loom for gray shirtings; and when the buyers clamoured for fancy goods, he made haste to produce that class of fabrics. In this he proved himself a very low-minded and ignominious creature, no doubt; but was not one Oliver Goldsmith glad to take any order which good Mr. Newberry might give him, only writing the "Traveller" and the story of Parson Primrose *pour se distraire*?

Love lent wings to the young essayist's pen. It is to be feared that in roving among those shelves in Great Russell-street he showed himself something of a freebooter, taking his "bien" wherever it was to be found; but did not Molière frankly acknowledge the same practice? Mr. Hawkehurst wrote about anything and everything. His brain must needs be a gigantic storehouse of information, thought the respectful reader. He skipped from Pericles to Cromwell, from Cleopatra to Mary Stuart, from Sappho to Madame de Sablé; and he wrote of these departed spirits with such a charming impertinence, with such a delicious affectation of intimacy, that one would have thought he had sat by Cleopatra as she melted her pearls, and stood amongst the audience of Pericles when he pronounced his funeral oration. "With the De Sablé and the Chevreuse, Ninon and Marion, Maintenon and La Vallière, Anne of Austria and the great Mademoiselle of France, he seemed to have lived in daily companionship, so amply did he expatiate upon the smallest details of their existences, so tenderly did he dwell on their vanished beauties, their unforgotten graces."

The work was light and pleasant; and the monthly cheques from the proprietors of a couple of rival periodicals promised to amount to the income which the adventurer had sighed for as he trod the Yorkshire moorland. He had asked Destiny to give him Charlotte Halliday and three hundred a year,

and lo! while yet the wish was new, both these blessings seemed within his grasp. It could scarcely be a matter for repining it the Fates should choose to throw in an odd fifty thousand pounds or so.

But was not all this something too much of happiness for a man whose feet had trodden in evil ways? Were not the Fates mocking this travel-stained wayfarer with bright glimpses of a paradise whose gates he was never to pass?

This was the question which Valentine Hawkehurst was fain to ask himself sometimes; this doubt was the shadow which sometimes made a sudden darkness that obscured the sunshine.

Happily for Charlotte's true lover, the shadow did not often come between him and the light of those dear eyes which were his pole-stars.

The December days were shortening as the year drew to its close, and afternoon tea seemed more than ever delightful to Charlotte and her betrothed, now that it could be enjoyed in the mysterious half light; a glimmer of chill gray day looking coldly in at the unshrouded window like some ghostly watcher envying these mortals their happiness, and the red glow of the low fire reflected upon every curve and facet of the shining steel grate.

To sit by the fire at five o'clock in the afternoon, watching the changeful light upon Charlotte's face, the rosy glow that seemed to linger caressingly on broad low brow and sweet ripe lips, the deep shadows that darkened eyes and hair, was bliss unspeakable for Mr. Hawkehurst. The lovers talked the prettiest nonsense to each other, while Mrs. Sheldon dozed placidly behind the friendly shelter of a banner-screen hooked on to the chimney-piece, or conversed with Diana in a monotonous undertone, solemnly debating the relative wisdom of dyeing or turning in relation to a faded silk dress.

Upon one special evening Valentine lingered just a little longer than usual. Christmas was near at hand, and the young man had brought his liege lady tribute in the shape of a bundle of Christmas literature. Tennyson had been laid aside in favour of the genial Christmas fare, which had the one fault, that it came a fortnight before the jovial season, and in a manner fore-stalled the delights of that time-honoured period, making the season itself seem flat and dull, and turkey and plum-pudding the stalest commodities in the world when they did come. How, indeed, can a man do full justice to his aunt Tabitha's plum-pudding, or his uncle Joe's renowned rum-punch, if he has quaffed the steaming-bowl with the "Seven Poor Travellers," or eaten his Christmas dinner at the "Kiddleawink" a fortnight beforehand? Are not the chief pleasures of life joys as perishable as the bloom on a peach or the freshness of a rose?

Valentine had read the ghastliest of ghost-stories, and the most humorous of word-pictures, for the benefit of the audience in Mrs. Sheldon's drawing-room; and now, after tea, they sat by the fire talking of the ghost-story, and discussing that unanswerable question about the possibility of such spiritual appearances, which seems to have been debated ever since the world began.

"Dr. Johnson believed in ghosts," said Valentine.

"O, please spare us Dr. Johnson," cried Charlotte, with seriocomic intensity. "What is it that obliges magazine-writers to be perpetually talking about Dr. Johnson? If they must dig up persons from the past, why can't they dig up newer persons than that poor ill-used doctor?"

The door opened with a hoarse groan, and Mr. Sheldon came into the room while Miss Halliday was making her playful protest. She stopped, somewhat confused by that sudden entrance.

There is a statue of the Commandant in every house, at whose coming hearts grow cold and lips are suddenly silent. It was the first time that the master of the villa had interrupted one of these friendly afternoon teas, and Mrs. Sheldon and her daughter felt that a domestic crisis was at hand.

"How's this?" cried the stockbroker's strong hard voice; "you seem all in the dark."

He took a wax-match from a little gilt stand on the mantelpiece and lighted two flaring lamps. He was the sort of man who is always eager to light the gas when people are sitting in the gloaming, meditative and poetical. He let the broad glare of common sense in upon their foolish musings, and scared away Robin Goodfellow and the fairies by means of the Western Gaslight Company's illuminating medium.

The light of those two flaring jets of gas revealed Charlotte Halliday looking shyly at the roses on the carpet, and trifling nervously with one of the show-books on the table. The same light revealed Valentine Hawkehurst standing by the young lady's chair, and looking at Mr. Sheldon with a boldness of countenance that was almost defiance. Poor Georgy's face peered out from behind her favourite banner-screen, looking from one to the other in evident alarm. Diana sat in her accustomed corner, watchful, expectant, awaiting the domestic storm.

To the surprise of every one except Mr. Sheldon, there was no storm, not even the lightest breeze that ever blew in domestic hemispheres. The stockbroker saluted his stepdaughter with a friendly nod, and greeted her lover with a significant grin.

"How d'ye do, Hawkehurst?" he said, in his pleasantest manner. "It's an age since I've seen you. You're going in for literature, I hear; and a very good thing too, if you can make it pay. I understand there are some fellows who really do make that sort of thing pay. Seen my brother George lately? Yes, I suppose you and George are quite a Damon and What's-his-name. You're going to dine here to-night, of course? I suppose we may go in to dinner at once, eh, Georgy?—it's half-past six."

Mr. Hawkehurst made some faint pretence of having a particular engagement elsewhere; for, supposing Sheldon to be unconscious, he scorned to profit by that gentleman's ignorance. And then, having faltered his refusal, he looked at Charlotte, and Charlotte's eyes cried "Stay," as plainly as such lovely eyes can speak. So the end of it was, that he stayed and partook of the Sheldonian crimped skate, and the Sheldonian roast-beef and tapioca-pudding, and tasted some especial Moselle, which, out of the kindliness of his nature, Mr. Sheldon opened for his stepdaughter's betrothed.

After dinner there were oranges and crisp uncompromising biscuits, that made an explosive noise like the breaking of windows whenever any one ventured to tamper with them; item, a decanter of sherry in a silver stand; item, a decanter of port, which Mr. Sheldon declared to be something almost too good to be drunk, and to the merits of which Valentine was supremely indifferent. The young man would fain have followed his delight when she accompanied her mamma and Diana to the drawing-room; but Mr. Sheldon detained him.

"I want a few words with you, Hawkehurst," he said; and Charlotte's cheeks flamed red as peonies at sound of this alarming sentence. "You shall go after the ladies presently, and they shall torture that poor little piano to their hearts' delight for your edification. I won't detain you many minutes. You had really better try that port."

Valentine closed the door upon the departing ladies, and went back to his seat very submissively. If there were any battle to be fought out between him and Philip Sheldon, the sooner the trumpet sounded to arms the better.

"His remarkable civility almost inclines me to think that he does really want to get rid of that dear girl," Valentine said to himself, as he filled his glass and gravely awaited Mr. Sheldon's pleasure.

"Now then, my dear Hawkehurst," began that gentleman, squaring himself in his comfortable arm-chair, and extending his legs before the cheery fire, "let us have a little friendly chat. I am not given to beating about the bush, you know, and whatever I have to say I shall say in very plain words. In the first place, I hope you have not so poor an opinion of my perceptive faculties as to suppose that I don't see what is going on between you and Miss Lotta yonder."

"My dear Mr. Sheldon, I—"

"Hear what I have to say first, and make your protestations afterwards. You needn't be alarmed; you won't find me quite as bad as the stepmother one reads about in the story-books, who puts her stepdaughter into a pie, and all that kind of thing. I suppose stepfathers have been a very estimable class, by the way, as it is the stepmother who always drops in for it in the story-books. You'll find me very easy to deal with, Mr. Hawkehurst, always provided that you deal in a fair and honourable manner."

"I have no wish to be underhand in my dealings," Valentine said boldly. And indeed this was the truth. His inclination prompted him to candour, even with Mr. Sheldon; but that fatal necessity which is the governing principle of the adventurer's life obliged him to employ the arts of finesse.

"Good," cried Mr. Sheldon, in the cheery, pleasant tone of an easy-going man of the world, who is not too worldly to perform a generous action once in a way. "All I ask is frankness. You and Charlotte have fallen in love with one another—why, I can't imagine, except on the hypothesis that a decent-looking young woman and a decent-looking young man can't meet half a dozen times without beginning to think of Gretna-green, or St. George's, Hanover-square. Of course a marriage with you, looked at from a common-sense point of view, would be about the worst thing that could happen to my wife's daughter. She's a very fine girl" (a man of the Sheldonian type would call Aphrodité herself a fine girl), "and might marry some awfully rich City swell with vineries and pineries and succession-houses at Tulse-hill or Highgate, if I chose to put her in the way of that sort of thing. But then, you see, the worst of it is, a man seldom comes to vineries and pineries at Tulse-hill till he is on the shady side of forty; and as I am not in favour of mercenary marriages, I don't care to force any of my City connection upon poor Lotta. In the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange there is no sharper man of business than your humble

servant; but I don't care to bring business habits to Bayswater. Long before Lotta left school, I had made up my mind never to come between her and her own inclination in the matrimonial line; therefore, if she truly and honestly loves you, and if you truly and honestly love her, I am not the man to forbid the bans."

"My dear Mr. Sheldon, how shall I ever thank you for this!" cried Valentine, surprised into a belief in the purity of the stockbroker's intentions.

"Don't be in a hurry," replied that gentleman coolly; "you haven't heard me out yet. Though I may consent to take the very opposite line of conduct which I might be expected to take as a man of the world, I am not going to allow you and Charlotte to make fools of yourselves. There must be no love-in-a-cottage business, no marrying on nothing a year, with the expectation that papa and mamma will make up the difference between that and a comfortable income. In plain English, if I consent to receive you as Charlotte's future husband, you and she must consent to wait until you can, to my entire satisfaction, prove yourself in a position to keep a wife." Valentine sighed doubtfully.

"I don't think either Miss Halliday or I are in an unreasonable hurry to begin life together," he said thoughtfully; "but there must be some fixed limit to our probation. I am afraid the waiting will be a very long business, if I am to obtain a position that will satisfy you before I ask my dear girl to share my fate."

"Are your prospects so very black?"

"No; to my mind they seem wonderfully bright. But the earnings of a magazine-writer will scarcely come up to your idea of an independence. Just now I am getting about ten pounds a month. With industry, I may stretch that ten to twenty; and with luck I might make the twenty into thirty—forty—fifty. A man has only to achieve something like a reputation in order to make a handsome living by his pen."

"I am very glad to hear that," said Mr. Sheldon; "and when you can fairly demonstrate to me that you are earning thirty pounds a month, you shall have my consent to your marriage with Charlotte, and I will do what I can to give you a fair start in life. I suppose you know that she hasn't a sixpence in the world, that she can call her own?"

This was a trying question for Valentine Hawkehurst, and Mr. Sheldon looked at him with a sharp scrutinising glance as he awaited a reply. The young man flushed crimson, and grew pale again before he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I have long been aware that Miss Halliday has no legal claim on her father's fortune."

"There you have hit the mark," cried Mr. Sheldon. "She has no claim to a sixpence in law; but to an honourable man that is not the question. Poor Halliday's money amounted in all to something like eighteen thousand pounds. That sum passed into my possession when I married my poor friend's widow, who had too much respect for me to hamper my position as a man of business by any legal restraints that would have hindered my making the wisest use of her money. I have used that money, and I need scarcely tell you that I have employed it with considerable advantage to myself and Georgy. I therefore can afford to be generous, and I mean to be so; but the manner in which I do things must be of my own choosing. My own children are dead, and there is no one belonging to me that stands in Miss Halliday's way. When I die she will inherit a handsome fortune. And if she marries with my approval, I shall present her with a very comfortable dowry. I think you will allow that this is fair enough."

"Nothing could be fairer or more generous," replied Valentine with enthusiasm.

Mr. Sheldon's agreeable candour had entirely subjugated him. Despite of all that George had said to his brother's prejudice, he was ready to believe implicitly in Philip's fair dealing.

"And in return for this I ask something on your part," said Mr. Sheldon. "I want you to give me your promise that you will take no serious step without my knowledge. You won't steal a march upon me. You won't walk off with Charlotte some fine morning and marry her at a registry-office, or anything of that kind, eh?"

"I will not," answered Valentine resolutely, with a very unpleasant recollection of his dealings with George Sheldon.

"Give me your hand upon that," cried the stockbroker.

Upon this the two men shook hands, and Valentine's fingers were almost crushed in the cold hard grip of Mr. Sheldon's muscular hand. And now there came upon Valentine's ear the sound of one of

Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, tenderly played by the gentle hands he knew so well. And the lover began to feel that he could no longer sit sipping the stockbroker's port with a hypocritical pretence of appreciation, and roasting himself before the blazing fire, the heat whereof was multiplied to an insufferable degree by grate and fender of reflecting steel.

Mr. Sheldon was not slow to perceive his guest's impatience, and having made exactly the impression he wanted to make, was quite willing that the interview should come to an end.

"You had better be off to the drawing-room," he said, good naturedly; "I see you are in that stage of the fever in which masculine society is only a bore. You can go and hear Charlotte play, while I read the evening papers and write a few letters. You can let her know that you and I understand each other. Of course we shall see you very often. You'll eat your Christmas turkey with us, and so on; and I shall trust to your honour for the safe keeping of that promise you made me just now," said Mr. Sheldon.

"And I shall keep an uncommonly close watch upon you and the young lady, my friend," added that gentleman, communing with his own thoughts as he crossed the smart little hall, where two Birmingham iron knights in chain armour bestrode their gallant chargers, on two small tables of sham malachite.

Mr. Sheldon's library was not a very inspiring apartment. His ideas of a *sanctum sanctorum* did not soar above the commonplace. A decent square room, furnished with plenty of pigeon-holes, a neat brass scale for the weighing of letters, a copying-press, a waste-paper basket, a stout brass-mounted office inkstand capable of holding a quart or so of ink, and a Post-office Directory, were all he asked for his hours of leisure and meditation. In a handsome glazed bookcase, opposite his writing-table, appeared a richly-bound edition of the *Waverley Novels*, Knight's *Shakespeare*, Hume and Smollett, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Gibbon; but, except when Georgy dusted the sacred volumes with her own fair hands, the glass doors of the bookcase were never opened.

Mr. Sheldon turned on the gas, seated himself at his comfortable writing-table, and took up his pen. A quire of office note-paper, with his City address upon it, lay ready beneath his hand; but he did not begin to write immediately. He sat for some time with his elbows on the table, and his chin in his hands, meditating with dark fixed brows.

"Can I trust her?" he asked himself. "Is it safe to have her near me—after—after what she said to me in Fitzgeorge-street? Yes, I think I can trust her, up to a certain point; but beyond that I must be on my guard. She might be more dangerous than a stranger. One thing is quite clear—she must be provided for somehow or other. The question is, whether she is to be provided for in this house or out of it; and whether I can make her serve me as I want to be served?"

This was the gist of Mr. Sheldon's meditations; but they lasted for some time. The question which he had to settle was an important one, and he was too wise a man not to contemplate a subject from every possible point of sight before arriving at his decision. He took a letter-clip from one side of his table, and turned over several open letters in search of some particular document.

He came at last to the letter he wanted. It was written on very common note-paper, with brown-looking ink, and the penmanship was evidently that of an uneducated person; but Mr. Sheldon studied its contents with the air of a man who is dealing with no unimportant missive.

This was the letter which so deeply interested the stockbroker:—

"HONORED SIR—This coms hopping that You and Your Honored ladie are well has it leevs me tho nott so strong has i coud wish wich his nott too bee expect at my time off life my pore neffew was tooke with the tyfus last tewsday weak was giv over on thirsday and we hav berried him at kensil grean Honored Mr. Sheldon I hav now no home my pore neece must go hout into survis. Luckly there har no Childring and the pore gurl can gett hur living as housmade wich she were in survis hat hi gate befor she marrid my pore Joseff Honored sir i ham trewly sorry too trubbel you butt i think for hold times you will forgiv the libertey off this letter i would nott hintrewd on you iff i had enny frend to help me in my old aig,

"Your obeddient survent."

"17 Litle Tottles-yarde lambeft."

AN WOOLPER

"No friend to help her in her old age," muttered Mr. Sheldon; "that means that she intends to throw herself upon me for the rest of her life, and to put me to the expense of burying her when she is so

obliging as to die. Very pleasant, upon my word! A man has a servant in the days of his poverty, pays her every fraction he owes her in the shape of wages, and wishes her good speed when she goes to settle down among her relations; and one fine morning, when he has got into a decent position, she writes to inform him that her nephew is dead, and that she expects him to provide for her forthwith. That is the gist of Mrs. Woolper's letter; and if it were not for one or two considerations, I should be very much inclined to take a business-like view of the case, and refer the lady to her parish. What are poor-rates intended for, I should like to know, if a man who pays four-and-twopence in the pound is to be pestered in this sort of way?"

And then Mr. Sheldon, having given vent to his vexation by such reflections as these, set himself to examine the matter in another light.

"I must manage to keep sweet with Nancy Woolper somehow or other, that's very clear; for a chattering old woman is about as dangerous an enemy as a man can have. I might provide for her decently enough out of doors for something like a pound a week; and that would be a cheap enough way of paying off all old scores. But I'm not quite clear that it would be a safe way. A life of idleness might develop Mrs. Woolper's latent propensity for gossip—and gossip is what I want to avoid. No, that plan won't do."

For some moments Mr. Sheldon meditated silently, with his brows fixed even more sternly than before. Then he struck his hand suddenly on the morocco-covered table, and uttered his thoughts aloud.

"I'll risk it," he said; "she shall come into the house and serve my interests by keeping a sharp watch upon Charlotte Halliday. There shall be no secret marriage between those two. No, my friend Valentine, you may be a very clever fellow, but you are not quite clever enough to steal a march upon me."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Mr. Sheldon wrote a few lines to
Nancy Woolper, telling her to call upon him at the Lawn.

CHAPTER V.

MR. SHELDON IS BENEVOLENT.

Nancy Woolper had lost little of her activity during the ten years that had gone by since she received her wages from Mr. Sheldon, on his breaking up his establishment in Fitzgeorge-street. Her master had given her the opportunity of remaining in his service, had she so pleased; but Mrs. Woolper was a person of independent, not to say haughty, spirit, and she had preferred to join her small fortunes with those of a nephew who was about to begin business as a chandler and general dealer in a very small way, rather than to submit herself to the sway of that lady whom she insisted on calling Miss Georgy.

"It's so long since I've been used to a missus," she said, when announcing her decision to Mr. Sheldon, "I doubt if I could do with Miss Georgy's finnickin ways. I should feel tewed like, if she came into the kitchen, worritin' and asking questions. I've been used to my own ways, and I don't suppose I could do with hers."

So Nancy departed, to enter on a career of unpaid drudgery in the household of her kinsman, and to lose the last shilling of her small savings in the futile endeavour to sustain the fortunes of the general dealer. His death, following very speedily upon his insolvency, left the poor soul quite adrift; and in this extremity she had been fain to make her appeal to Mr. Sheldon. His reply came in due course, but not without upwards of a week's delay; during which time Nancy Woolper's spirits sank very low, while a dreary vision of a living grave—called a workhouse—loomed more and more darkly upon her poor old eyes. She had well-nigh given up all hope of succour from her old master when the letter came, and she was the more inclined to be grateful for very small help after this interval of suspense. It was not without strong emotion that Mrs. Woolper obeyed her old master's summons. She had nursed the hard, cold man of the world whom she was going to see once more, after ten years of severance; and though it was more difficult for her to imagine that Philip Sheldon, the stockbroker, was the same Philip she had carried in her stout arms, and hushed upon her breast forty years ago, than it would have been to fancy the dead who had lived in those days restored to life and walking by her side, still, she could not forget that such things had been, and could not refrain from looking at her master with more loving

eyes because of that memory.

A strange dark cloud had arisen between her and her master's image during the latter part of her service in Fitzgeorge-street; but, little by little, the cloud had melted away, leaving the familiar image clear and unshadowed as of old. She had suffered her mind to be filled by a suspicion so monstrous, that for a time it held her as by some fatal spell; but with reflection came the assurance that this thing could not be. Day by day she saw the man whom she had suspected going about the common business of life, coldly serene of aspect, untroubled of manner, confronting fortune with his head erect, living quietly in the house where he had been wont to live, haunted by no dismal shadows, subject to no dark hours of remorse, no sudden access of despair, always equable, business-like, and untroubled; and she told herself that such a man could not be guilty of the unutterable horror she had imagined.

For a year things had gone on thus, and then came the marriage with Mrs. Halliday. Mr. Sheldon went down to Barlingford for the performance of that interesting ceremony; and Nancy Woolper bade farewell to the house in Fitzgeorge-street, and handed the key to the agent, who was to deliver it in due course to Mr. Sheldon's successor.

To-day, after a lapse of more than ten years, Mrs. Woolper sat in the stockbroker's study, facing the scrutinising gaze of those bright black eyes, which had been familiar to her of old, and which had lost none of their cold glitter in the wear and tear of life.

"Then you think you can be of some use in the house, as a kind of overlooker of the other servants, eh, Nancy—to prevent waste, and gadding out of doors, and so on?" said Mr. Sheldon, interrogatively.

"Ay, sure, that I can, Mr. Philip," answered the old woman promptly; "and if I don't save you more money than I cost you, the sooner you turn me out o' doors the better. I know what London servants are, and I know their ways; and if Miss Georgy doesn't take to the housekeeping, I know as how things must be hugger-mugger-like below stairs, however smart and tidy things may be above."

"Mrs. Sheldon knows about as much of housekeeping as a baby," replied Philip, with supreme contempt. "She'll not interfere with you; and if you serve me faithfully—"

"That I allers did, Mr. Philip."

"Yes, yes; I daresay you did. But I want faithful service in the future as well as in the past. Of course you know that I have a stepdaughter?"

"Tom Halliday's little girl, as went to school at Scarborough."

"The same. But poor Tom's little girl is now a fine young woman, and a source of considerable anxiety to me. I am bound to say she is an excellent girl—amiable, obedient, and all that kind of thing; but she is a girl, and I freely confess that I am not learned in the ways of girls; and I'm very much inclined to be afraid of them."

"As how, sir?"

"Well, you see, Nancy, they come home from school with their silly heads full of romantic stuff, fit for nothing but to read novels and strum upon the piano; and before you know where you are, they fall over head and ears in love with the first decent-looking young man who pays them a compliment. At least, that's my experience."

"Meaning Miss Halliday, sir?" asked Nancy, simply. "Has she fallen in love with some young chap?"

"She has, and with a young chap who is not yet in a position to support a wife. Now, if this girl were my own child, I should decidedly set my face against this marriage; but as she is only my stepdaughter, I wash my hands of all responsibility in the matter. 'Marry the man you have chosen, my dear,' say I; 'all I ask is, that you don't marry him until he can give you a comfortable home.' 'Very well, papa,' says my young lady in her most dutiful manner, and 'Very well, sir,' says my young gentleman; and they both declare themselves agreeable to any amount of delay, provided the marriage comes off some time between this and doomsday."

"Well, sir?" asked Nancy, rather at a loss to understand why Philip Sheldon, the closest and most reserved of men, should happen to be so confidential to-day.

"Well, Nancy, what I want to prevent is any underhand work. I know what very limited notions of honour young men are apt to entertain nowadays, and how intensely foolish a boarding-school miss can be on occasion. I don't want these young people to run off to Gretna-green some fine morning, or to steal a march upon me by getting married on the sly at some out-of-the-way church, after having invested their united fortunes in the purchase of a special license. In plain words, I distrust Miss

Halliday's lover, and I distrust Miss Halliday's common sense; and I want to have a sensible, sharp-eyed person in the house always on the look-out for any kind of danger, and able to protect my stepdaughter's interests as well as my own."

"But the young lady's mamma, sir—she would look after her daughter, I suppose?"

"Her mamma is foolishly indulgent, and about as capable of taking care of her daughter as of sitting in Parliament. You remember pretty Georgy Cradock, and you must know what she was—and what she is. Mrs. Sheldon is the same woman as Georgy Cradock—a little older, and a little more plump and rosy; but just as pretty, and just as useless."

The interview was prolonged for some little time after this, and it ended in a thorough understanding between Mr. Sheldon and his old servant. Nancy Woolper was to re-enter that gentleman's service, and over and above all ordinary duties, she was to undertake the duty of keeping a close watch upon all the movements of Charlotte Halliday. In plain words, she was to be a spy, a private detective, so far as this young lady was concerned; but Mr. Sheldon was too wise to put his requirements into plain words, knowing that even in the hour of her extremity Nancy Woolper would have refused to fill such an office had she clearly understood the measure of its infamy.

Upon the day that followed his interview with Mrs. Woolper, the stockbroker came home from the City an hour or two earlier than his custom, and startled Miss Halliday by appearing in the garden where she was walking alone, looking her brightest and prettiest in her dark winter hat and jacket, and pacing briskly to and fro among the bare frost-bound patches of earth that had once been flower-beds.

"I wan't a few minutes' quiet talk with you, Lotta," said Mr. Sheldon. "You'd better come into my study, where we're pretty sure not to be interrupted."

The girl blushed crimson as she acceded to this request, being assured that Mr. Sheldon was going to discuss her matrimonial engagement. Valentine had told her of that very satisfactory interview in the dining-room, and from that time she had been trying to find an opportunity for the acknowledgment of her stepfather's generosity. As yet the occasion had not arisen. She did not know how to frame her thanksgiving, and she shrank shyly from telling Mr. Sheldon how grateful she was to him for the liberality of mind which had distinguished his conduct in this affair.

"I really ought to thank him," she said to herself more than once. "I was quite prepared for his doing his uttermost to prevent my marriage with Valentine; and instead of that, he volunteers his consent, and even promises to give us a fortune. 'I am bound to thank him for such generous kindness."

Perhaps there is no task more difficult than to offer grateful tribute to a person whom one has been apt to think of with a feeling very near akin to dislike. Ever since her mother's second marriage Charlotte had striven against an instinctive distaste for Mr. Sheldon's society, and an innate distrust of Mr. Sheldon's affectionate regard for herself; but now that he had proved his sincerity in this most important crisis of her life, she awoke all at once to the sense of the wrong she had done.

"I am always reading the Sermon on the Mount, and yet in my thoughts about Mr. Sheldon I have never been able to remember those words, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' His kindness touches me to the very heart, and I feel it all the more keenly because of my injustice."

She followed her stepfather into the prim little study. There was no fire, and the room was colder than a vault on this bleak December day. Charlotte shivered, and drew her jacket more tightly across her chest as she perched herself on one of Mr. Sheldon's shining red morocco chairs. "The room strikes cold," she said; "very, very cold."

After this there was a brief pause, during which Mr. Sheldon took some papers from the pocket of his overcoat, and arranged them on his desk with an absent manner, as if he were rather deliberating upon what he was going to say than thinking of what he was doing. While he loitered thus Charlotte found courage to speak.

"I wish to thank you, Mr. Sheldon—papa," she said, pronouncing the "papa" with some slight appearance of effort, in spite of her desire to be grateful: "I—I have been wishing to thank you for the last day or two; only it seems so difficult sometimes to express one's self about these things."

"I do not deserve or wish for your thanks, my dear. I have only done my duty."

"But, indeed, you do deserve my thanks, and you have them in all sincerity, papa. You have been very, very good to me—about—about Valentine. I thought you would be sure to oppose our marriage on the ground of imprudence, you know, and——"

"I do oppose your marriage in the present on the ground of imprudence, and I am only consentient to it in the future on the condition that Mr. Hawkehurst shall have secured a comfortable income by his literary labours. He seems to be clever, and he promises fairly——"

"O yes indeed, dear papa," cried the girl, pleased by this meed of praise for her lover; "he is more than clever. I am sure you would say so if you had time to read his article on Madame de Sévigné in the *Cheapside*."

"I daresay it's very good, my dear; but I don't care for Madame de Sévigné——"

"Or his sketch of Bossuet's career in the *Charing Cross*."

"My dear child, I do not even know who Bossuet was. All I require from Mr. Hawkehurst is, that he shall earn a good income before he takes you away from this house. You have been accustomed to a certain style of living, and I cannot allow you to encounter a life of poverty."

"But, dear papa, I am not in the least afraid of poverty."

"I daresay not, my dear. You have never been poor," replied Mr. Sheldon, coolly. "I don't suppose I am as much afraid of a rattlesnake as the poor wretches who are accustomed to see one swinging by his tail from the branch of a tree any day in the course of their travels. I have only a vague idea that a cobra de capello is an unpleasant customer; but depend upon it, those foreign fellows feel their blood stagnate and turn to ice at sight of the cold slimy-looking monster. Poverty and I travelled the same road once, and I know what the gentleman is. I don't want to meet him again." Mr. Sheldon lapsed into silence after this. His last words had been spoken to himself rather than to Charlotte, and the thoughts that accompanied them seemed far from pleasant to him.

Charlotte sat opposite her stepfather, patiently awaiting his pleasure. She looked at the gaudily-bound books behind the glass doors, and wondered whether any one had ever opened any of the volumes.

"I should like to read dear Sir Walter's stories once more," she thought; "there never, never was so sweet a romance as the 'Bride of Lammermoor,' and I cannot imagine that one could ever grow weary of reading it. But to ask Mr. Sheldon for the key of that bookcase would be quite impossible. I think his books must be copies of special editions, not meant to be read. I wonder whether they are real books, or only upholsterer's dummies?"

And then her fancies went vagabondising off to that little archetype of a cottage on the heights of Wimbledon-common, in which she and Valentine were to live when they were married. She was always furnishing and refurnishing this cottage, building it up and pulling it down, as the caprice of the moment dictated. Now it had bow-windows and white stuccoed walls—now it was Elizabethan—now the simplest, quaintest, rose-embowered cottager's dwelling, with diamond-paned casements, and deep thatch on the old gray roof. This afternoon she amused herself by collecting a small library for Valentine, while waiting Mr. Sheldon's next observation. He was to have all her favourite books, of course; and they were to be bound in the prettiest, most girlish bindings. She could see the dainty volumes, primly ranged on the little carved oak bookcase, which Valentine was to "pick up" in Wardour-street. She fancied herself walking down that mart of bric-a-brac arm-in-arm with her lover, intent on "picking up." Ah, what happiness! what dear delight in the thought! And O, of all the bright dreams we dream, how few are realised upon this earth! Do they find their fulfilment in heaven, those visions of perfect bliss?

Mr. Sheldon looked up from his desk at last. Miss Halliday remarked to herself that his face was pale and haggard in the chill wintry sunlight; but she knew how hard and self-denying a life he led in his stern devotion to business, and she was in no manner surprised to see him looking ill.

"I want to say a few words to you on a matter of business, Lotta," he began, "and I must ask you to give me all your attention."

"I will do so with pleasure, papa, but I am awfully stupid about business."

"I shall do my best to make matters simple. I suppose you know what money your father left, including the sums his life had been insured for?"

"Yes, I have heard mamma say it was eighteen thousand pounds. I do so hate the idea of those insurances. It seems like the price of a man's life, doesn't it? I daresay that is a very unbusiness-like way of considering the question, but I cannot bear to think that we got money by dear papa's death."

These remarks were too trivial for Mr. Sheldon's notice. He went on with what he had to say in the cold hard voice that was familiar to his clerks and to the buyers and sellers of shares and stock who had dealings with him.

"Your father left eighteen thousand pounds; that amount was left to your mother without reservation. When she married me, without any settlement, that money became mine, in point of law—mine to squander or make away with as I pleased. You know that I have made good use of that money, and that your mother has had no reason to repent her confidence in my honour and honesty. The time has now come in which that honour will be put to a sharper test. You have no legal claim on so much as a shilling of your father's fortune."

"I know that, Mr. Sheldon," cried Charlotte, eagerly, "and Valentine knows also; and, believe me, I do not expect——"

"I have to settle matters with my own conscience as well as with your expectations, my dear Lotta," Mr. Sheldon said, solemnly. "Your father left you unprovided for; but as a man of honour I feel myself bound to take care that you shall not suffer by his want of caution. I have therefore prepared a deed of gift, by which I transfer to you five thousand pounds, now invested in Unitas Bank shares."

"You are going to give me five thousand pounds!" cried Charlotte, astounded.

"Without reservation."

"You mean to say that you will give me this fortune when I marry, papa?" said Charlotte, interrogatively.

"I shall give it to you immediately," replied Mr. Sheldon. "I wish you to be thoroughly independent of me and my pleasure. You will then understand, that if I insist upon the prudence of delay, I do so in your interest and not in my own. I wish you to feel that if I am a hindrance to your immediate marriage, it is not because I wish to delay the disbursement of your dowry."

"O, Mr. Sheldon, O, papa, you are more than generous—you are noble! It is not that I care for the money. O, believe me, there is no one in the world who could care less for that than I do. But your thoughtful kindness, your generosity, touches me to the very heart. O, please let me kiss you, just as if you were my own dear father come back to life to protect and guide me. I have thought you cold and worldly. I have done you so much wrong."

She ran to him, and wound her arms about his neck before he could put her off, and lifted up her pretty rosy mouth to his dry hot lips. Her heart was overflowing with generous emotion, her face beamed with a happy smile. She was so pleased to find her mother's husband better than she had thought him. But, to her supreme astonishment, he thrust her from him roughly, almost violently, and looking up at his face she saw it darkened by a blacker shadow than she had ever seen upon it before. Anger, terror, pain, remorse, she knew not what, but an expression so horrible that she shrunk from him with a sense of alarm, and went back to her chair, bewildered and trembling.

"You frightened me, Mr. Sheldon," she said faintly.

"Not more than you frightened me," answered the stockbroker, walking to the window and taking his stand there, with his face hidden from Charlotte. "I did not know there was so much feeling in me. For God's sake, let us have no sentiment!"

"Were you angry with me just now?" asked the girl, falteringly, utterly at a loss to comprehend the change in her stepfather's manner.

"No, I was not angry. I am not accustomed to these strong emotions," replied Mr. Sheldon, huskily; "I cannot stand them. Pray let us avoid all sentimental discussion. I am anxious to do my duty in a straightforward, business-like way. I don't want gratitude—or fuss. The five thousand pounds are yours, and I am pleased to find you consider the amount sufficient. And now I have only one small favour to ask of you in return."

"I should be very ungrateful if I refused to do anything you may ask," said Charlotte, who could not help feeling a little chilled and disappointed by Mr. Sheldon's stony rejection of her gratitude.

"The matter is very simple. You are young, and have, in the usual course of things, a long life before you. But—you know there is always a 'but' in these cases—a railway accident—a little carelessness in passing your drawing-room fire some evening when you are dressed in flimsy gauze or muslin—a fever —a cold—any one of the many dangers that lie in wait for all of us, and our best calculations are falsified. If you were to marry and die childless, that money would go to your husband, and neither your

mother nor I would ever touch a sixpence of it. Now as the money, practically, belongs to your mother, I consider that this contingency should be provided against—in her interests as well as in mine. In plain words, I want you to make a will leaving that money to me."

"I am quite ready to do so," replied Charlotte.

"Very good, my dear. I felt assured that you would take a sensible view of the matter. If you marry your dear Mr. Hawkehurst, have a family by-and-by, we will throw the old will into the fire and make a new one; but in the mean time it's just as well to be on the safe side. You shall go into the City with me to-morrow morning, and shall execute the will at my office. It will be the simplest document possible—as simple as the will made by old Serjeant Crane, in which he disposed of half a million of money in half a dozen lines—at the rate of five thousand pounds per word. After we've settled that little matter, we can arrange the transfer of the shares. The whole affair won't occupy an hour."

"I will do whatever you wish," said Charlotte, meekly. She was not at all elated by the idea of coming suddenly into possession of five thousand pounds; but she was very much impressed by the new view of Mr. Sheldon's character afforded her by his conduct of to-day. And then her thoughts, constant to one point as the needle to the pole, reverted to her lover, and she began to think of the effect her fortune might have upon his prospects. He might go to the bar, he might work and study in pleasant Temple chambers, with wide area windows overlooking the river, and read law-books in the evening at the Wimbledon cottage for a few delightful years, at the end of which he would of course become Lord Chancellor. That he should devote such intellect and consecrate such genius as his to the service of his country's law-courts, and *not* ultimately seat himself on the Woolsack, was a contingency not to be imagined by Miss Halliday. Ah, what would not five thousand pounds buy for him! The cottage expanded into a mansion, the little case of books developed into a library second only to that of the Duc d'Aumale, a noble steed waited at the glass door of the vestibule to convey Mr. Hawkehurst to the Temple, before the minute-hand of Mr. Sheldon's stern skeleton clock had passed from one figure to another: so great an adept was this young lady in the art of castle-building.

"Am I to tell mamma about this conversation?" asked Charlotte, presently.

"Well, no, I think not," replied Mr. Sheldon, thoughtfully. "These family arrangements cannot be kept too quiet. Your mamma is a talking person, you know, Charlotte; and as we don't want every one in this part of Bayswater to know the precise amount of your fortune, we may as well let matters rest as they are. Of course you would not wish Mr. Hawkehurst to be enlightened?"

"Why not, papa?"

"For several reasons. First and foremost, it must be pleasant to you to be sure that he is thoroughly disinterested. I have told him that you will get something as a gift from me; but he may have implied that the something would be little more than a couple of hundreds to furnish a house. Secondly, it must be remembered, that he has been brought up in a bad school, and the best way to make him self-reliant and industrious is to let him think he has nothing but his own industry to depend upon. I have set him a task. When he has accomplished that, he shall have you and your five thousand pounds to boot. Till then I should strongly advise you to keep this business a secret.

"Yes," answered Charlotte, meditatively; "I think you are right. It would have been very nice to tell him of your kindness; but I want to be quite sure that he loves me for myself alone—from first to last—without one thought of money."

"That is wise," said Mr. Sheldon, decisively; and thus ended the interview.

Charlotte accompanied her stepfather to the city early next morning, and filled in the blanks in a lithographed form, prepared for the convenience of such testators as, being about to dispose of their property, do not care to employ the services of a legal adviser.

The will seemed to Charlotte the simplest possible affair. She bequeathed all her property, real and personal, to Philip Sheldon, without reserve. But as her entire fortune consisted of the five thousand pounds just given her by that gentleman, and as her personal property was comprised in a few pretty dresses and trinkets, and desks and workboxes, she could not very well object to such an arrangement.

"Of course, mamma would have all my books and caskets, and boxes and things," she said thoughtfully; "and I should like Diana Paget to have some of my jewellery, please, Mr. Sheldon. Mamma has plenty, you know."

"There is no occasion to talk of that, Charlotte," replied the stockbroker. "This will is only a matter of form."

Mr. Sheldon omitted to inform his stepdaughter that the instrument just executed would, upon her wedding-day, become so much waste paper, an omission that was not in harmony with the practical and careful habits of that gentleman.

"Yes, I know that it is only a form," replied Charlotte; "but, after making a will, one feels as if one was going to die. At least I do. It seems a kind of preparation for death. I don't wonder people rather dislike doing it.

"It is only foolish people who dislike doing it," said Mr. Sheldon, who was in his most practical mood to-day. "And now we will go and arrange a more agreeable business—the transfer of the shares."

After this, there was a little commercial juggling, in the form of signing and countersigning, which, was quite beyond Charlotte's comprehension: which operation being completed, she was told that she was owner of five thousand pounds in Unitas Bank shares, and that the dividends accruing from time to time on those shares would be hers to dispose of as she pleased.

"The income arising from your capital will be more than you can spend so long as you remain under my roof," said Mr. Sheldon. "I should therefore strongly recommend you to invest your dividends as they arise, and thus increase your capital."

"You are so kind and thoughtful," murmured Charlotte; "I shall always be pleased to take your advice." She was strongly impressed by the kindness of the man her thoughts had wronged.

"How difficult it is to understand these reserved, matter-of-fact people!" she said to herself. Because my stepfather does not talk sentiment, I have fancied him hard and worldly; and yet he has proved himself as capable of doing a noble action as if he were the most poetical of mankind.

Mrs. Sheldon had been told that Charlotte was going into the City to choose a new watch, wherewith to replace the ill-used little Geneva toy that had been her delight as a schoolgirl; and as Charlotte brought home a neat little English-made chronometer from a renowned emporium on Ludgate-hill, the simple matron accepted this explanation in all good faith.

"I'm sure, Lotta, you must confess your stepfather is kindness itself in most matters," said Georgy, after an admiring examination of the new watch. "When I think how kindly he has taken this business about Mr. Hawkehurst, and how disinterested he has proved himself in his ideas about your marriage, I really am inclined to think him the best of men."

Georgy said this with an air of triumph. She could not forget that there were people in Barlingford who had said hard things about Philip Sheldon, and had prophesied unutterable miseries for herself and her daughter as the bitter consequence of the imprudence she had been guilty of in her second marriage.

"He has indeed been very good, mamma," Charlotte replied gravely, "and, believe me, I am truly grateful. He does not like fuss or sentiment; but I hope he knows that I appreciate his kindness."

CHAPTER VI.

RIDING THE HIGH HORSE.

Never, in his brightest dreams, had Valentine Hawkehurst imagined the stream of life so fair and sunny a river as it seemed to him now. Fortune had treated him so scurvily for seven-and-twenty years of his life, only to relent of a sudden and fling all her choicest gifts into his lap.

"I must be the prince in the fairy tale who begins life as a revolting animal of the rhinoceros family, and ends by marrying the prettiest princess in Elfindom," he said to himself gaily, is he paced the broad walks of Kensington-gardens, where the bare trees swung their big black branches in the wintry blast, and the rooks cawed their loudest at close of the brief day.

What, indeed, could this young adventurer demand from benignant Fortune above and beyond the blessings she had given him?? The favoured suitor of the fairest and brightest woman he had ever looked upon, received by her kindred, admitted to her presence, and only bidden to serve a due apprenticeship before he claimed her as his own for ever. What more could he wish? what further boon could he implore from the Fates?

Yes, there was one thing more—one thing for which Mr. Hawkehurst pined, while most thankful for his many blessings. He wanted a decent excuse for separating himself most completely from Horatio Paget. He wanted to shake himself free from all the associations of his previous existence. He wanted to pass through the waters of Jordan, and to emerge purified, regenerate, leaving his garments on the furthermost side of the river; and, with all other things appertaining to the past, he would fain have rid himself of Captain Paget.

"'Be sure your sin will find you out,'" mused the young man; "and having found you, be sure that it will stick to you like a leech, if your sin takes the shape of an unprincipled acquaintance, as it does in my case. I may try my hardest to cut the past, but will Horatio Paget let me alone in the future? I doubt it. The bent of that man's genius shows itself in his faculty for living upon other people. He knows that I am beginning to earn money regularly, and has begun to borrow of me already. When I can earn more, he will want to borrow more; and although it is very sweet to work for Charlotte Halliday, it would not be by any means agreeable to slave for my friend Paget. Shall I offer him a pound a week, and ask him to retire into the depths of Wales or Cornwall, amend his ways, and live the life of a repentant hermit? I think I could bring myself to sacrifice the weekly sovereign, if there were any hope that Horatio Paget could cease to be—Horatio Paget, on this side the grave. No, I have the misfortune to be intimately acquainted with the gentleman. When he is in the swim, as he calls it, and is earning money on his own account, he will give himself cosy little dinners and four-and-sixpenny primrose gloves; and when he is down on his luck, he will come whining to me."

This was by no means a pleasant idea to Mr. Hawkehurst. In the old days he had been distinguished by all the Bohemian's recklessness, and even more than the Bohemian's generosity in his dealings with friend or companion. But now all was changed. He was no longer reckless. A certain result was demanded from him as the price of Charlotte Halliday's hand, and he set himself to accomplish his allotted task with all due forethought and earnestness of purpose. He had need even to exercise restraint over himself, lest, in his eagerness, he should do too much, and so lay himself prostrate from the ill effects of overwork; so anxious was he to push on upon the road whose goal was so fair a temple, so light seemed that labour of love which was performed for the sake of Charlotte.

He communed with himself very often on the subject of that troublesome question about Captain Paget. How was he to sever his frail skiff from that rakish privateer? What excuse could he find for renouncing his share in the Omega-street lodgings, and setting up a new home elsewhere?

"Policy might prompt me to keep my worthy friend under my eye," he said to himself, "in order that I may be sure there is no underhand work going on between him and Philip Sheldon. But I can scarcely believe that Philip Sheldon has any inkling about the Haygarthian fortune. If he had, he would surely not receive me as Charlotte's suitor. What possible motive could he have for doing so?"

This was a question which Mr. Hawkehurst had frequently put to himself; for his confidence in Mr. Sheldon was not of that kind which asks no questions. Even while most anxious to believe in that gentleman's honesty of purpose, he was troubled by occasional twinges of unbelief.

During the period which had elapsed since his return from Yorkshire, he had been able to discover nothing of any sinister import from the proceedings of Captain Paget. That gentleman appeared to be still engaged upon the promoting business, although by no means so profitably as heretofore. He went into the City every day, and came home in the evening toilworn and out of spirits. He talked freely of his occupation—how he had done much or done nothing, during the day; and Valentine was at a loss to perceive any further ground for the suspicion that had arisen in his mind after the meeting at the Ullerton station, and the shuffling of the sanctimonious Goodge with regard to Mrs. Rebecca Haygarth's letters.

Mr. Hawkehurst therefore determined upon boldly cutting the knot that tied him to the familiar companion of his wanderings.

"I am tired of watching and suspecting," he said to himself. "If my dear love has a right to this fortune, it will surely come to her; or if it should never come, we can live very happily without it. Indeed, for my own part, I am inclined to believe that I should be prouder and happier as the husband of a dowerless wife, than as prince-consort to the heiress of the Haygarths. We have built up such a dear, cheery, unpretentious home for ourselves in our talk of the future, that I doubt if we should care to change it for the stateliest mansion in Kensington Palace-gardens or Belgrave-square. My darling could not be my housekeeper, and make lemon cheese-cakes in her own pretty little kitchen, if we lived in Belgrave-square; and how could she stand at one of those great Birmingham ironwork gates in the Palace-gardens to watch me ride away to my work?"

To a man as deeply in love as Mr. Hawkehurst, the sordid dross which other people prize so highly is

apt to become daily more indifferent; a kind of colour-blindness comes over the vision of the true lover, and the glittering yellow ore seems only so much vulgar earth, too mean a thing to be regarded by any but the mean of soul. Thus it was that Mr. Hawkehurst relaxed his suspicion of Captain Paget, and neglected his patron and ally of Gray's Inn, much to the annoyance of that gentleman, who tormented the young man with little notes demanding interviews.

These interviews had of late been far from agreeable to either of the allies. George Sheldon urged the necessity of an immediate marriage; Valentine declined to act in an underhand manner, after the stockbroker's unexpected generosity.

"Generosity!" echoed George Sheldon, when Valentine had given him this point-blank refusal at the close of a stormy argument. "Generosity! My brother Phil's generosity! Egad, that is about the best thing I've heard for the last ten years. If I pleased, Mr. Valentine Hawkehurst, I could tell you something about my brother which would enable you to estimate his generosity at its true value. But I don't please; and if you choose to run counter to me and my interests, you must pay the price of your folly. You may think yourself uncommonly lucky if the price isn't a stiff one."

"I am prepared to abide by my decision," answered Valentine. "Miss Halliday without a shilling is so dear to me, that I don't care to commit a dishonourable action in order to secure my share of the fortune she may claim. I turned over a new leaf on the day when I first knew myself possessed of her affection. I don't want to go back to the old leaves."

George Sheldon gave himself an impatient shrug. "I have heard of a great many fools," he said, "but I never heard of a fool who would play fast-and-loose with a hundred thousand pounds, and until to-day I couldn't have believed there was such an animal."

Mr. Hawkehurst did not deign to notice this remark.

"Do be reasonable, Sheldon," he said. "You ask me to do what my sense of right will not permit me to do, and you ask me that which I fully believe to be impossible. I cannot for a moment imagine that any persuasion of mine would induce Charlotte to consent to a secret marriage, after your brother's fair and liberal conduct."

"Of course not," cried George, with savage impatience; "that's my brother Phil all over. He is so honourable, so plain and straightforward in all his dealings, that he would get the best of Lucifer himself in a bargain. I tell you, Hawkehurst, you don't know how deep he is—as deep as the bottomless pit, by Jove! His very generosity makes me all the more afraid of him. I don't understand his game. If he consented to your marriage in order to get rid of Charlotte, he would let you marry her off-hand; but instead of doing that, he makes conditions which must delay your marriage for years. There is the point that bothers me."

"You had better pursue your own course, without reference to me or my marriage with Miss Halliday," said Valentine.

"That is exactly what I must do. I can't leave the Haygarth estate to the mercy of Tom, Dick, and Harry, while you try to earn thirty pounds a month by scribbling for the magazines. I must make my bargain with Philip instead of with you, and I can tell you that you'll be the loser by the transaction."

"I don't quite see that."

"Perhaps not. You see, you don't quite understand my brother Phil. If this money gets into his hands, be sure some of it will stick to them."

"Why should the money get into his hand?"

"Because, so long as Charlotte Halliday is under his roof, she is, to a certain extent, under his authority. And then, I tell you again, there is no calculating the depth of that man. He has thrown dust in your eyes already. He will make that poor girl believe him the most disinterested of mankind."

"You can warn her."

"Yes; as I have warned you. To what purpose? You are inclined to believe in Phil rather than to believe in me, and you will be so inclined to the end of the chapter. You remember that man Palmer, at Rugely, who used to go to church, and take the sacrament?"

"Yes; of course I remember that case. What of him?"

"Why, people believed in him, you know, and thought him a jolly good fellow, up to the time when they discovered that he had poisoned a few of his friends in a quiet gentlemanly way."

Mr. Hawkehurst smiled at the irrelevance of this remark. He could not perceive the connection of ideas between Palmer the Rugely poisoner, and Philip Sheldon the stockbroker.

"That was an extreme case," he said.

"Yes; of course that was an extreme case," answered George, carelessly. "Only it goes far to prove that a man may be gifted with a remarkable genius for throwing dust in the eyes of his fellow-creatures."

There was no further disputation between the lawyer and Valentine. George Sheldon began to understand that a secret marriage was not to be accomplished in the present position of affairs.

"I am half inclined to suspect that Phil knows something about that money," he said presently, "and is playing some artful game of his own."

"In that case your better policy would be to take the initiative," answered Valentine.

"I have no other course."

"And will Charlotte know—will she know that I have been concerned in this business?" asked Valentine, growing very pale all of sudden. He was thinking how mean he must appear in Miss Halliday's eyes, if she came to understand that he had known her to be John Haygarth's heiress at the time he won from her the sweet confession of her love. "Will she ever believe how pure and true my love has been, if she comes to know this?" he asked himself despairingly, while George Sheldon deliberated in silence for a few moments.

"She need know nothing until the business comes to a head," replied George at last. "You see, there may be no resistance on the part of the Crown lawyers; and, in that case, Miss Halliday will get her rights after a moderate amount of delay. But if they choose to dispute her claim, it will be quite another thing—Halliday *versus* the Queen, and so on—with no end of swell Q.C.'s against us. In the latter case you'll have to put all your adventures at Ullerton and Huxter's Cross into an affidavit, and Miss H. must know everything."

"Yes; and then she will think—ah, no; I do not believe she can misunderstand me, come what may."

"All doubt and difficulty might be avoided if you would manage a marriage on the quiet off-hand," said George.

"I tell you again that I cannot do that; and that, even if it were possible, I would not attempt it."

"So be it. You elect to ride the high horse; take care that magnificent animal doesn't give you an ugly tumble."

"I can take my chance."

"And I must take my chance against that brother of mine. The winning cards are all in my own hand this time, and it will be uncommonly hard if he gets the best of me."

On this the two gentlemen parted. Valentine went to look at a bachelor's lodging in the neighbourhood of the Edgeware-road, which he had seen advertised in that morning's Times; and George Sheldon started for Bayswater, where he was always sure of a dinner and a liberal allowance of good wine from the hospitality of his prosperous kinsman.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. SHELDON IS PRUDENT.

Valentine found the apartments near the Edgeware-road in every manner eligible. The situation was midway between his reading-room in Great Russell-street and the abode of his delight—a half-way house on the road between business and pleasure. The terms were very moderate, the rooms airy and pleasant; so he engaged them forthwith, his tenancy to commence at the end of the following week; and having settled this matter, he went back to Omega-street, bent on dissolving partnership with the Captain in a civil but decided manner.

A surprise, and a very agreeable one, awaited him at Chelsea. He found the sitting-room strewn with Captain Paget's personal property, and the Captain on his knees before a portmanteau, packing.

"You're just in time to give me a hand, Val," he said in his most agreeable manner. "I begin to find out my age when I put my poor old bones into abnormal attitudes. I daresay packing a trunk or two will be only child's-play to you."

"I'll pack half a dozen trunks if you like," replied Valentine. "But what is the meaning of this sudden move? I did not know you were going to leave town."

"Neither did I when you and I breakfasted together. I got an unexpected offer of a very decent position abroad this morning; a kind of agency, that will be much better than the hand-to-mouth business I've been doing lately."

"What kind of agency, and where?"

"Well, so far as I can make out at present, it is something in the steam navigation way. My head-quarters will be at Rouen."

"Rouen! Well, it's a pleasant lively old city enough, and as mediæval as one of Sir Walter's novels, provided they haven't Haussmanised it by this time. I am very glad to hear you have secured a comfortable berth."

"And I am not sorry to leave England, Yal," answered the Captain, in rather a mournful tone.

"Why not?"

"Because I think it's time you and I parted company. Our association begins to be rather disadvantageous to you, Val. We've had our ups and downs together, and we've got on very pleasantly, take it for all in all. But now that you're settling down as a literary man, engaged to that young woman, hand-in-glove with Philip Sheldon, and so on, I think it's time for me to take myself off. I'm not wanted; and sooner or later I should begin to feel myself in the way."

The Captain grew quite pathetic as he said this; and little pangs of remorse shot through Valentine's heart as he remembered how eager he had been to rid himself of this Old Man of the Mountain. And here was the poor old creature offering to take himself out of the way of his own accord.

Influenced by this touch of remorse, Mr. Hawkehurst held out his hand, and grasped that of his comrade and patron.

"I hope you may do well, in some—comfortable kind of business," he said heartily. That adjective "comfortable" was a hasty substitute for the adjective "honest," which had been almost on his lips as he uttered his friendly wish. He was too well disposed to all the world not to feel profound pity for this white-headed old man, who for so many years had eaten the bread of rogues and scoundrels.

"Come," he cried cheerily, "I'll take all the packing off your hands, Captain; and we'll eat our last dinner and drink our last bottle of sparkling together at my expense, at any place you please to name."

"Say Blanchard's," replied Horatio Paget. "I like a corner-window, looking out upon the glare and bustle of Regent-street. It reminds one just a little of the Maison Dorée and the boulevard. We'll drink Charlotte Halliday's health, Val, in bumpers. She's a charming young person, and I only wish she were an heiress, for your sake."

The eyes of the two men met as the Captain said this; and there was a twinkle in the cold gray orbs of that gentleman which had a very unpleasant effect upon Valentine.

"What treachery is he engaged in now?" he asked himself. "I know that look in my Horatio's eyes; and I know it always means mischief."

George Sheldon made his appearance at the Lawn five minutes after his brother came home from the City. He entered the domestic circle in his usual free-and-easy manner, knowing himself to be endured, rather than liked, by the two ladies, and to be only tolerated as a necessary evil by the master of the house.

"I've dropped in to eat a chop with you, Phil," he said, "in order to get an hour's comfortable talk after dinner. There's no saying half a dozen consecutive words to you in the City, where your clerks seem to spend their lives in bouncing in upon you when you don't want them."

There was very little talk during dinner. Charlotte and her stepfather were thoughtful. Diana was chiefly employed in listening to the *sotto voce* inanities of Mrs. Sheldon, for whom the girl showed

herself admirably patient. Her forbearance and gentleness towards Georgy constituted a kind of penitential sacrifice, by which she hoped to atone for the dark thoughts and bitter feelings that possessed her mind during those miserable hours in which she was obliged to witness the happiness of Charlotte and her lover.

George Sheldon devoted himself chiefly to his dinner and a certain dry sherry, which he particularly affected. He was a man who would have dined and enjoyed himself at the table of Judas Iscariot, knowing the banquet to be provided out of the thirty pieces of silver.

"That's as good a pheasant as I ever ate, Phil," he said, after winding up with the second leg of the bird in question. "No, Georgy; no macaroni, thanks. I don't care about kickshaws after a good dinner. Has Hawkehurst dined with you lately, by the way, Phil?"

Charlotte blushed red as the holly-berries that decorated the chandelier. It was Christmas-eve, and her own fair hands had helped to bedeck the rooms with festal garlands of evergreen and holly.

"He dines with us to-morrow," replied the stockbroker. "You'll come, I suppose, as usual, George?"

"Well, I shall be very glad, if I'm not in the way."

Mrs. Sheldon murmured some conventional protestation of the unfailing delight afforded to her by George's society.

"Of course we're always glad to see you," said Philip in his most genial manner; "and now, if you've anything to say to me about business, the sooner you begin the better.—You and the girls needn't stay for dessert, Georgy. Almonds and raisins can't be much of a novelty to you; and as none of you take any wine, there's not much to stop for. George and I will come in to tea."

The ladies departed, by no means sorry to return to their Berlin-wool and piano. Diana took up her work with that saintly patience with which she performed all the duties of her position; and Charlotte seated herself before the piano, and began to play little bits of waltzes, and odds and ends of polkas, in a dreamy mood, and with a slurring over of dominant bass notes, which would have been torture to a musician's ear.

She was wondering whether Valentine would call that evening, Christmas-eve—a sort of occasion for congratulation of some kind from her lover, she fancied. It was the first Christmas-eve on which she had been "engaged." She looked back to the same period last year, and remembered herself sitting in that very room strumming on that very piano, and unconscious that there was such a creature as Valentine Hawkehurst upon this earth. And, strange to say, even in that benighted state, she had been tolerably happy.

"Now, George," said Mr. Sheldon, when the brothers had filled their glasses and planted their chairs on the opposite sides of the hearth-rug, "what's the nature of this business that you want to talk about?"

"Well, it is a business of considerable importance, in which you are only indirectly concerned. The actual principal in the affair is your stepdaughter, Miss Halliday."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You know how you have always ridiculed my fancy for hunting up heirs-at-law and all that kind of thing, and you know how I have held on, hoping against hope, starting on a new scent when the old scent failed, and so on."

"And you have got a chance at last, eh?"

"I believe that I have, and a tolerably good one; and I think you will own that it is rather extraordinary that my first lucky hit should bring luck your way."

"That is to say, to my stepdaughter?" remarked Mr. Sheldon, without any appearance of astonishment.

"Precisely," said George, somewhat disconcerted by his brother's coolness. "I have lately discovered that Miss Halliday is entitled to a certain sum of money, and I pledge myself to put her in possession of that money—on one condition."

"And that is—"

"That she executes a deed promising to give me half of the amount she may recover by my agency."

"Suppose she can recover it without your agency?"

"That I defy her to do. She does not even know that she has any claim to the amount in question."

"Don't be too sure of that. Or even supposing she knows nothing, do you think her friends are as ignorant as she is? Do you think me such a very bad man of business as to remain all this time unaware of the fact that my stepdaughter, Charlotte Halliday, is next of kin to the Rev. John Haygarth, who died intestate, at Tilford Haven, in Kent, about a year ago?"

This was a cannon-shot that almost knocked George Sheldon off his chair; but after that first movement of surprise, he gave a sigh, or almost a groan, expressive of resignation.

"Egad, Phil Sheldon," he said, "I ought not to be astonished at this. Knowing you as well as I do, I must have been a confounded fool not to expect some kind of underhand work from you."

"What do you mean by underhand work?" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon. "The same newspapers that were open to you were open to me, and I had better opportunities for tracking my stepdaughter's direct descent from John Haygarth's father."

"How did you discover Miss Halliday's descent from Matthew Haygarth?" asked George, very meekly. He was quite crestfallen. He began to feel that his brother would have the upper hand of him in this business as in all other business of this world.

"That is my secret," replied Mr. Sheldon, with agreeable tranquillity of manner. "You have kept your secrets, and I shall keep mine. Your policy has been the policy of distrust. Mine shall be the same. When you were starting this affair, I offered to go into it with you—to advance whatever money you needed, in a friendly manner. You declined my offer, and chose to go in for the business on your own hook. You have made a very good thing for yourself, no doubt; but you are not quite clever enough to keep me altogether in the dark in a matter which concerns a member of my own family."

"Yes," said George, with a sigh, "that's where you hold the winning cards. Miss Halliday is your ace of trumps."

"Depend upon it, I shall know how to hold my strength in reserve, and when to play my leading trump."

"And how to collar my king," muttered George between his set teeth.

"Come," exclaimed Philip presently, "we may as well discuss this matter in a friendly spirit. What do you mean to propose?"

"I have only one proposition to make," answered the lawyer, with decision. "I hold every link of the chain of evidence, without which Miss Halliday might as well be a native of the Fiji islands for any claim she can assert to John Haygarth's estate. I am prepared to carry this matter through; but I will only do it on the condition that I receive half the fortune recovered from the Crown by Miss Halliday."

"A very moderate demand, upon my word!"

"I daresay I shall be able to make my bargain with Miss Halliday." "Very likely," replied Mr. Sheldon; "and I shall be able to get that bargain set aside as illegal."

"I doubt that. I have a deed of agreement drawn up here which would hold water in any court of equity."

And hereupon Mr. Sheldon the younger produced and read aloud one of those dry as dust documents by which the legal business of life is carried on. It was a deed to be executed by Charlotte Halliday, spinster, of Bayswater, on the one part, and George Sheldon, solicitor, of Gray's Inn, on the other part; and it gave to the said George Sheldon, as securely as any deed can give anything, one half of any property, not now in her possession or control, which the said Charlotte Halliday might obtain by the agency of the above-mentioned George Sheldon.

"And pray, who is to find the costs for this business?" asked the stockbroker. "I don't feel by any means disposed to stake my money on such a hazardous game. Who knows what other descendants of Matthew Haygarth may be playing at hide-and-seek in the remotest corners of the earth, ready to spring out upon us when we've wasted a small fortune upon law-proceedings."

"I shan't ask you to risk your money," replied George, with sullen dignity. "I have friends who will back me when they see that agreement executed."

"Very well, then, all you have to do is to alter your half share to one-fifth, and I will undertake that Miss Halliday shall sign the agreement before the week is out."

"One-fifth?"

"Yes, my dear George. Twenty thousand pounds will pay you very handsomely for your trouble. I cannot consent to Miss Halliday ceding more than a fifth."

"A fig for your consent! The girl is of age, and can act upon her own hook. I shall go to Miss Halliday herself," exclaimed the indignant lawyer.

"O no, you won't. You must know the danger of running counter to me in this business. That agreement is all very well; but there is no kind of document more easy to upset if one only goes about it in the right way. Play your own game, and I will upset that agreement, as surely as I turn this wine-glass bowl downwards."

Mr. Sheldon's action and Mr. Sheldon's look expressed a determination which George knew how to estimate by the light of past experience.

"It is a hard thing to find you against me, after the manner in which I have toiled and slaved for your stepdaughter's interests."

"I am bound to hold my stepdaughter's interests paramount over every consideration."

"Yes, paramount over brotherly feeling and all that sort of thing.
I say that it is more than hard that you should be against me,
considering the special circumstances and the manner in which
I have kept my own counsel——"

"You will take a fifth share, or nothing, George," said Mr. Sheldon, with a threatening contraction of his black brows. "If I have any difficulty in arranging matters with you, I will go into this affair myself, and carry it through without your help."

"That I defy you to do."

"You had better not defy me."

"Pray how much do you expect to get out of Miss Halliday's fortune?" demanded the aggravated George.

"That is my business," answered Philip. "And now we had better go into the drawing-room for our tea. O, by the bye, George," he added, carelessly, "as Miss Halliday is quite a child in all business matters, she had better be treated like a child. I shall tell her that she has a claim to a certain sum of money; but I shall not tell her what sum. Her disappointment will be less in the event of a failure, if her expectations are not large."

"You are always so considerate, my dear Phil," said George, with a malignant grin. "May I ask how it is you have taken it into your head to play the benevolent father in the matter of Valentine Hawkehurst and Miss Halliday?"

"What can it signify to me whom my stepdaughter marries?" asked Philip, coolly. "Of course I wish her well; but I will not have the responsibility of controlling her choice. If this young man suits her, let her marry him."

"Especially when he happens to suit *you* so remarkably well. I think I can understand your tactics, Phil."

"You must understand or misunderstand me, just as you please. And now come to tea."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS PEACE.

Valentine Hawkehurst did not make his appearance at the Lawn on Christmas-eve. He devoted that evening to the service of his old ally. He performed all friendly offices for the departing Captain, dined with him very pleasantly in Regent-street, and accompanied him to the London-bridge terminus, where he beheld the voyager comfortably seated in a second-class carriage of the night-train for Newhaven.

Mr. Hawkehurst had seen the Captain take a through ticket for Rouen, and he saw the train leave the terminus. This he held to be ocular demonstration of the fact that Captain Paget was really going to the Gallic Manchester.

"That sort of customer is so uncommonly slippery," the young man said to himself as he left the station; "nothing but the evidence of my own eyes would have convinced me of my friend's departure. How pure and fresh the London atmosphere seems now that the perfume of Horatio Paget is out of it! I wonder what he is going to do at Rouen? Very little good, I daresay. But why should I wonder about him, or trouble myself about him? He is gone, and I have set myself free from the trammels of the past."

* * * * *

The next day was Christmas-day. Mr. Hawkehurst recited scraps of Milton's glorious hymn as he made his morning toilet. He was very happy. It was the first Christmas morning on which he had ever awakened with this sense of supreme happiness, or with the consciousness that the day was brighter, or grander, or more holy than other days. It seemed to him to-day, more than ever, that he was indeed a regenerate creature, purified by the influence of a good woman's love.

He looked back at his past existence, and the vision of many Christmas-days arose before him: a Christmas in Paris, amidst unutterable rain and mud; a Christmas-night spent in roaming the Boulevards, and in the consumption of cognac and tobacco at a third-rate café; a Christmas in Germany; more than one Christmas in the Queen's Bench; one especially dreary Christmas in a long bare ward at Whitecross-street,—how many varied scenes and changing faces arose before his mental vision associated with that festive time! And yet among them all there was not one on which there shone the faintest glimmer of that holy light which makes the common holiday a sacred season.

It was a pleasant thing to breakfast without the society of the brilliant Horatio, whose brilliancy was apt to appear somewhat ghastly at that early period of the morning. It was pleasant to loiter over the meal, now meditating on the happy future, now dipping into a tattered copy of Southey's "Doctor;" with the consciousness that the winds and waves had by this time wafted Captain Paget to a foreign land.

Valentine was to spend the whole of Christmas-day with Charlotte and her kindred. He was to accompany them to a fashionable church in the morning, to walk with them after church, to dine and tell ghost-stories in the evening. It was to be his first day as a recognised member of that pleasant family at Bayswater; and in the fulness of his heart he felt affectionately disposed to all his adopted relations; even to Mr. Sheldon, whose very noble conduct had impressed him strongly, in spite of the bitter sneers and covert slanders of George. Charlotte had told her lover that her stepfather was a very generous and disinterested person, and that there was a secret which she would have been glad to tell him, had she not been pledged to hold it inviolate, that would have gone far to place Mr. Sheldon in a very exalted light before the eyes of his future son-in-law.

And then Miss Halliday had nodded and smiled, and had informed her lover, with a joyous little laugh, that he should have a horse to ride, and an edition of Grote's "Greece" bound in dark-brown calf with bevelled edges, when they were married; this work being one which the young author had of late languished to possess.

"Dear foolish Lotta, I fear there will be a new history of Greece, based on new theories, before that time comes," said the lover.

"O no, indeed; that time will come very soon. See how industriously you work, and how well you succeed. The magazine people will soon give you thirty pounds a month. Or who knows that you may not write some book that will make you suddenly famous, like Byron, or the good-natured fat little printer who wrote those long, long, long novels that no one reads nowadays?"

Influenced by Charlotte's hints about her stepfather, Mr. Hawkehurst's friendly feeling for that gentleman grew stronger, and the sneers and innuendoes of the lawyer ceased to have the smallest power over him.

"The man is such a thorough-going schemer himself, that he cannot bring himself to believe in another man's honesty," thought Mr. Hawkehurst, while meditating upon his experience of the two brothers. "So far as I have had any dealings with Philip Sheldon, I have found him straightforward enough. I can imagine no hidden motive for his conduct in relation to Charlotte. The test of his honesty will be the manner in which he is acted upon by Charlotte's position as claimant of a great fortune. Will he throw me overboard, I wonder? or will my dear one believe me an adventurer and fortune-hunter? Ah, no, no, no; I do not think in all the complications of life there could come about a state of events which would cause my Charlotte to doubt me. There is no clairvoyance so unerring as true love."

Mr. Hawkehurst had need of such philosophy as this to sustain him in the present crisis of his life. He

was blest with a pure delight which excelled his wildest dreams of happiness; but he was not blest with any sense of security as to the endurance of that exalted state of bliss.

Mr. Sheldon would learn Charlotte's position, would doubtless extort from his brother the history of those researches in which Valentine had been engaged; and then, what then? Alas! hereupon arose incalculable dangers and perplexities.

Might not the stockbroker, as a man of the world, take a sordid view of the whole transaction, and consider Valentine in the light of a shameless adventurer, who had traded on his secret knowledge in the hope of securing a rich wife? Might he not reveal all to Charlotte, and attempt to place her lover before her in this most odious aspect? She would not believe him base; her faith would be unshaken, her love unchanged; but it was odious, it was horrible, to think that her ears should be sullied, her tender heart fluttered, by the mere suggestion of such baseness.

It was during the Christmas-morning sermon that Mr. Hawkehurst permitted his mind to be disturbed by these reflections. He was sitting next his betrothed, and had the pleasure of contemplating her fair girlish face, with the rosy lips half parted in reverent attention as she looked upward to her pastor. After church there was the walk home to the Lawn: and during this rapturous promenade Valentine put away from him all shadow of doubt and fear, in order to bask in the full sunshine of his Charlotte's presence. Her pretty gloved hand rested confidingly on his arm, and the supreme privilege of carrying a dainty blue-silk umbrella and an ivory-bound church-service was awarded him. With what pride he accepted the duty of convoying his promised wife over the muddy crossings! Those brief journeys seemed to him in a manner typical of their future lives. She was to travel dry-shod over the miry ways of this world, supported by his strong arm. How fondly he surveyed her toilet! and what a sudden interest he felt in the fashions, that had until lately seemed so vulgar and frivolous!

"I will never denounce the absurdity of those little bonnets again, Lotta," he cried; "that conglomeration of black velvet and maiden's-hair fern is divine. Do you know that in some places they call that fern Maria's hair, and hold it sacred to the mother of Him who was born to-day? so you see there is an artistic fitness in your head-dress. Yes, your bonnet is delicious, darling; and though the diminutive size of that velvet jacket would lead me to suppose you had borrowed it from some juvenile sister, it seems the very garment of all garments best calculated to render you just one hair's-breadth nearer perfection than you were made by Nature."

"Valentine, don't be ridiculous!" giggled the young lady.

"How can I help being ridiculous? Your presence acts upon my nerves like laughing-gas. Ah, you do not know what cares and perplexities I have to make me serious. Charlotte," exclaimed the young man, with sudden energy, "do you think you could ever come to distrust me?"

"Valentine! Do I think I shall ever be Queen of England? One thing is quite as likely as the other."

"My dear angel, if you will only believe in me always, there is no power upon earth that can make us unhappy. Suppose you found yourself suddenly possessed of a great fortune, Charlotte; what would you do with it?"

"I would buy you a library as good as that in the British Museum; and then you would not want to spend the whole of your existence in Great Russell-street."

"But if you had a great fortune, Lotta, don't you think you would be very much disposed to leave me to plod on at my desk in Great Russell-street? Possessed of wealth, you would begin to languish for position; and you would allow Mr. Sheldon to bring you some suitor who could give you a name and a rank in society worthy of an angelic creature with a hundred thousand pounds or so."

"I should do nothing of the kind. I do not care for money. Indeed, I should be almost sorry to be very rich."

"Why, dearest?"

"Because, if I were very rich, we could not live in the cottage at
Wimbledon, and I could not make lemon cheese-cakes for your dinner."

"My own true-hearted darling!" cried Valentine; "the taint of worldliness can never touch your pure spirit."

They were at the gates of Mr. Sheldon's domain by this time. Diana and Georgy had walked behind the lovers, and had talked a little about the sermon, and a good deal about the bonnets; poor Diana doing her very uttermost to feign an interest in the finery that had attracted Mrs. Sheldon's wandering

gaze.

"Well, I should have thought you couldn't fail to see it," said the elder lady, as they approached the gate; "a leghorn, very small, with holly-berries and black ribbon—quite French, you know, and *so* stylish. I was thinking, if I had my Tuscan cleaned and altered, it might——" And here the conversation became general, as the family party entered the drawing-room, where Mr. Sheldon was reading his paper by a roaring fire.

"Talking about the bonnets, as per usual," said the stockbroker. "What an enormous amount of spiritual benefit you women must derive from church-going!—Consols have fallen another eighth since Tuesday afternoon, George," added Mr. Sheldon, addressing himself to his brother, who was standing on the hearth-rug, with his elbow on the chimney-piece.

"Consols are your 'bonnets,' papa," cried Charlotte, gaily; "I don't think there is a day upon which you do not talk about their having gone up, or gone down, or gone somewhere."

After luncheon the lovers went for a walk in Kensington-gardens, with Diana Paget to play propriety. "You will come with us, won't you, dear Di?" pleaded Charlotte. "You have been looking pale and ill lately, and I am sure a walk will do you good."

Valentine seconded his liege lady's request; and the three spent a couple of hours pacing briskly to and fro in the lonelier parts of the gardens, leaving the broad walks for the cockneys, who mustered strong upon this seasonable Christmas afternoon.

For two out of those three that wintry walk was rapture only too fleeting. For the third it was passive endurance. The agonies that had but lately rent Diana's breast when she had seen those two together no longer tortured her. The scorpion sting was beginning to lose its venomous power. She suffered still, but her suffering was softened by resignation. There is a limit to the capacity for pain in every mind. Diana had borne her share of grief; she had, in Homeric phrase, satiated herself with anguish and tears; and to those sharp throes and bitter torments there had succeeded a passive sense of sorrow that was almost peace.

"I have lost him," she said to herself. "Life can never bring me much joy; but I should be worse than weak if I spent my existence in the indulgence of my sorrow. I should be one of the vilest wretches upon this earth if I could not teach myself to witness the happiness of my friend without repining."

Miss Paget had not arrived at this frame of mind without severe struggles. Many times, in the long wakeful nights, in the slow, joyless days, she had said to herself, "Peace, peace, when there was no peace." But at last the real peace, the true balm of Gilead, was given in answer to her prayers, and the weary soul tasted the sweetness of repose. She had wrestled with, and had vanquished, the demon.

To-day, as she walked beside the lovers, and listened to their happy frivolous talk, she felt like a mother who had seen the man she loved won from her by her own daughter, and who had resigned herself to the ruin of all her hopes for love of her child.

There was more genial laughter and pleasant converse at Mr. Sheldon's dinner-table that evening than was usual at that hospitable board; but the stockbroker himself contributed little to the merriment of the party. He was quiet, and even thoughtful, and let the talk and laughter go by him without any attempt to take part in it. After dinner he went to his own room; while Valentine and the ladies sat round the fire in the orthodox Christmas manner, and after a good deal of discursive conversation, subsided into the telling of ghost-stories.

George Sheldon sat apart from the circle, turning over the books upon the table, or peering into a stereoscope with an evident sense of weariness. This kind of domestic evening was a manner of life which Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn denounced as "slow;" and he submitted himself to the endurance of it this evening only because he did not know where else to bestow his presence.

"I don't think papa cares much about ghost-stories, does he, uncle George?" Charlotte asked, by way of saying something to the gentleman, who seemed so very dreary as he sat yawning over the books and stereoscopes.

"I don't suppose he does, my dear."

"And do you think he believes in ghosts?" the young lady demanded, laughingly.

"No, I am sure he doesn't," replied George, very seriously.

"Why, how seriously you say that!" cried Charlotte, a little startled by George Sheldon's manner, in

which there had been an earnestness not quite warranted by the occasion.

"I was thinking of your father—not my brother Phil. He died in Philip's house, you know; and if Phil believed in ghosts, he would scarcely have liked living in that house afterwards, you see, and so on. But he went on living there for a twelvemonth longer. It seemed just as good as any other house to him, I suppose."

Hereupon Georgy dissolved into tears, and told the company how she had fled, heartbroken, from the house in which her first husband had died, immediately after the funeral.

"And I'm sure the gentlemanly manner in which your step-papa behaved during all that dreadful time, Charlotte, is beyond all praise," continued the lady, turning to her daughter; "so thoughtful, so kind, so patient. What I should have done if poor Tom's illness had happened in a strange house, I don't know. And I have no doubt that the new doctor, Mr. Burkham, did his duty, though his manner was not as decided as I should have wished."

"Mr. Burkham!" cried Valentine. "What Burkham is that? We've a member of the Ragamuffins called Burkham, a surgeon, who does a little in the literary line."

"The Mr. Burkham who attended my poor dear husband was a very young man," answered Georgy; "a fair man, with a fresh colour and a hesitating manner. I should have been so much better satisfied if he had been older."

"That is the man," said Valentine. "The Burkham I know is fresh-coloured and fair, and cannot be much over thirty."

"Are you and he particularly intimate?" asked George Sheldon, carelessly.

"O dear no, not at all. We speak to each other when we happen to meet—that's all. He seems a nice fellow enough; and he evidently hasn't much practice, or he couldn't afford to be a Ragamuffin, and to write farces. He looks to me exactly the kind of modest deserving man who ought to succeed, and who so seldom does."

This was all that was said about Mr. Burkham; but there was no more talk of ghost-stories, and a temporary depression fell upon the little assembly. The memory of her father had always a saddening influence on Charlotte; and it needed many tender *sotto-voce* speeches from Valentine to bring back the smiles to her fair young face.

The big electro-plated tea-tray and massive silver teapot made their appearance presently, and immediately after came Mr. Sheldon.

"I want to have a little talk with you after tea, Hawkehurst," he said, as he took his own cup from Georgy's hand, and proceeded to imbibe the beverage standing. "If you will come out into the garden and have a cigar, I can say all I have to say in a very few minutes; and then we can come in here for a rubber. Georgy is a very decent player; and my brother George plays as good a hand at whist as any man at the Conservative or the Reform."

Valentine's heart sank within him. What could Mr. Sheldon want with a few minutes' talk, if not to revoke his gracious permission of some days before—the permission that had been accorded in ignorance of Charlotte's pecuniary advantages? The young man looked very pale as he went to smoke his cigar in Mr. Sheldon's garden. Charlotte followed him with anxious eyes, and wondered at the sudden gravity of his manner. George Sheldon also was puzzled by his brother's desire for a tête-à-tête.

"What new move is Phil going to make?" he asked himself. The two men lit their cigars, and got them well under weigh before Mr. Sheldon began to talk.

"When I gave my consent to receive you as Miss Halliday's suitor, my dear Hawkehurst," he said, at last, "I told you that I was acting as very few men of the world would act, and I only told you the truth. Since giving you that consent I have made a very startling discovery, and one that places me in quite a new position in regard to this matter."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Mr. Hawkehurst, I have become aware of the fact that Miss Halliday, the girl whom I thought entirely dependent upon my generosity, is heir-at-law to a large fortune. You will, of course, perceive how entirely this alters the position of affairs."

"I do perceive," Valentine answered earnestly; "but I trust you will believe that I had not the faintest idea of Miss Halliday's position when I asked her to be my wife. As to my love for her, I can scarcely tell

you when that began; but I think it must have dated from the first hour in which I saw her, for I can remember no period at which I did *not* love her."

"If I did not believe you superior to any mercenary motives, you would not have been under my roof to-day, Mr. Hawkehurst," said the stockbroker, with extreme gravity. "The discovery of my stepdaughter's position gives me no pleasure. Her claim to this wealth only increases my responsibility with regard to her, and responsibility is what I would willingly avoid. After all due deliberation, therefore, I have decided that this discovery need make no alteration in your position as Charlotte's future husband. If you were worthy of her when she was without a fortune, you are not less worthy now."

"Mr. Sheldon," cried Valentine, with considerable emotion, "I did not expect so much generosity at your hands!"

"No," replied the stockbroker, "the popular idea of a business man is not particularly agreeable. I do not, however, pretend to anything like generosity; I wish to take a common-sense view of the affair, but not an illiberal one."

"You have shown so much generosity of feeling, that I can no longer sail under false colours," said Valentine, after a brief pause. "Until a day or two ago I was bound to secrecy by a promise made to your brother. But his communication of Miss Halliday's rights to you sets me at liberty, and I must tell you that which may possibly cause you to withdraw your confidence."

Hereupon Mr. Hawkehurst revealed his share in the researches that had resulted in the discovery of Miss Halliday's claim to a large fortune. He entered into no details. He told Mr. Sheldon only that he had been the chief instrument in the bringing about of this important discovery.

"I can only repeat what I said just now," he added, in conclusion. "I have loved Charlotte Halliday from the beginning of our acquaintance, and I declared myself some days before I discovered her position. I trust this confession will in nowise alter your estimate of me."

"It would be a poor return for your candour if I were to doubt your voluntary statement, Hawkehurst," answered the stockbroker. "No; I shall not withdraw my confidence. And if your researches should ultimately lead to the advancement of my stepdaughter, there will be only poetical justice in your profiting more or less by that advancement. In the mean time we cannot take matters too quietly. I am not a sanguine person, and I know how many hearts have been broken by the High Court of Chancery. This grand discovery of yours may result in nothing but disappointment and waste of money, or it may end as pleasantly as my brother and you seem to expect. All I ask is, that poor Charlotte's innocent heart may not be tortured by a small lifetime of suspense. Let her be told nothing that can create hope in the present or disappointment in the future. She appears to be perfectly happy in her present position, and it would be worse than folly to disturb her by vague expectations that may never be realised. She will have to make affidavits, and so on, by-and-by, I daresay; and when that time comes she must be told there is some kind of suit pending in which she is concerned. But she need not be told how nearly that suit concerns her, or the extent of her alleged claim. You see, my dear sir, I have seen so much of this sort of thing, and the misery involved in it, that I may be forgiven if I am cautious."

This was putting the whole affair in a new light. Until this moment Valentine had fancied that, the chain of evidence once established, Charlotte's claim had only to be asserted in order to place her in immediate possession of the Haygarth estate. But Mr. Sheldon's cool and matter-of-fact discussion of the subject implied all manner of doubt and difficulty, and the Haygarthian thousands seemed carried away to the most remote and shadowy regions of Chanceryland, as by the waves of some legal ocean.

"And you really think it would be better not to tell Charlotte?"

"I am sure of it. If you wish to preserve her from all manner of worry and annoyance, you will take care to keep her in the dark until the affair is settled—supposing it ever should be settled. I have known such an affair to outlast the person interested."

"You take a very despondent view of the matter."

"I take a practical view of it. My brother George is a monomaniac on the next-of-kin subject."

"I cannot quite reconcile myself to the idea of concealing the truth from Charlotte."

"That is because you do not know the world as well as I do," answered Mr. Sheldon, coolly.

"I cannot imagine that the idea of this claim would have any disturbing influence upon her," Valentine argued, thoughtfully. "She is the last person in the world to care about money."

"Perhaps so. But there is a kind of intoxication in the idea of a large fortune—an intoxication that no woman of Charlotte's age could stand against. Tell her that she has a claim to considerable wealth, and from that moment she will count upon the possession of that wealth, and shape all her plans for the future upon that basis. 'When I get my fortune, I will do this, that, and the other.' *That* is what she will be continually saying to herself; and by-and-by, when the affair results in failure, as it very likely will, there will remain a sense of disappointment which will last for a lifetime, and go far to embitter all the ordinary pleasures of her existence."

"I am inclined to think you are right," said Valentine, after some little deliberation. "My darling girl is perfectly happy as it is. It may be wisest to tell her nothing."

"I am quite sure of that," replied Mr. Sheldon. "Of course her being enlightened or not can be in no way material to me. It is a subject upon which I can afford to be entirely disinterested."

"I will take your advice, Mr. Sheldon."

"So be it. In that case matters will remain *in statu quo*. You will be received in this house as my stepdaughter's future husband, and it is an understood thing that your marriage is not to take place without due consultation with me. I am to have a voice in the business."

"Most decidedly. It is only right that you should be deferred to."

This brought the interview to a close very pleasantly. The gentlemen went back to the house, and Valentine found himself presently seated at a whist-table with the brothers Sheldon, and Georgy, who played very well, in a feeble kind of way, holding religiously by all the precepts of Hoyle, and in evident fear of her husband and brother-in-law. Charlotte and Diana played duets while the whist progressed, with orthodox silence and solemnity on the part of the four players. Valentine's eyes wandered very often to the piano, and he was in nowise sorry when the termination of a conquering rubber set him at liberty. He contrived to secure a brief *tête-à-tête* with Charlotte while he helped her in the arrangement of the books on the music-stand, and then the shrill chime of the clock on the mantelpiece, and an audible yawn from Philip Sheldon, told him that he must go.

"Providence has been very good to us," he said, in an undertone, as he bade Miss Halliday good night. "Your stepfather's conduct is all that is kind and thoughtful, and there is not a cloud upon our future. Good night, and God bless you, my dearest! I think I shall always consider this my first Christmas-day. I never knew till to-day how sweet and holy this anniversary can be."

He walked to Cumberland-gate in company with George Sheldon, who preserved a sulky gravity, which was by no means agreeable.

"You have chosen your own course," he said at parting, "and I only hope the result may prove your wisdom. But, as I think I may have remarked before, you don't know my brother Phil as well as I do."

"Your brother has behaved with such extreme candour and good feeling towards me, that I would really rather not hear any of your unpleasant innuendoes against him. I hate that 'I could an if I would' style of talk, and while I occupy my present position in your brother's house I cannot consent to hear anything to his discredit."

"That's a very tall animal you've taken to riding lately, my friend Hawkehurst," said George, "and when a man rides the high horse with me I always let him have the benefit of his *monture*. You have served yourself without consideration for me, and I shall not trouble myself in the future with any regard for you or your interests. But if harm ever comes to you or yours, through my brother Philip, remember that I warned you. Good night."

* * * * *

In Charlotte's room the cheery little fire burned late upon that frosty night, while the girl sat in her dressing-gown dreamily brushing her soft brown hair, and meditating upon the superhuman merits and graces in her lover.

It was more than an hour after the family had retired, when there came a cautious tapping at Charlotte's door. "It is only I, dear," said a low voice; and before Charlotte could answer, the door was opened, and Diana came in, and went straight to the hearth, by which her friend was sitting.

"I am so wakeful to-night, Lotta," she said; "and the light under your door tempted me to come in for a few minutes' chat."

"My dearest Di, you know how glad I always am to see you."

"Yes, dear, I know that you are only too good to me—and I have been so wayward, so ungracious. O, Charlotte, I know my coldness has wounded you during the last few months."

"I have been just a little hurt now and then, dear, when you have seemed not to care for me, or to sympathise with me in all my joys and sorrows; but then it has been selfish of me to expect so much sympathy, and I know that, if your manner is cold, your heart is noble."

"No, Lotta, it is not noble. It is a wicked heart."

"Diana!"

"Yes," said Miss Paget, kneeling by her friend's chair, and speaking with suppressed energy; "it has been a wicked heart—wicked because your happiness has been torture to it."

"Diana!"

"O, my dearest one, do not look at me with those innocent, wondering eyes. You will hate me, perhaps, when you know all. O, no, no, no, you will not hate—you will pity and forgive me. I loved him, dear; he was my companion, my only friend; and there was a time—long ago—before he had ever seen your face, when I fancied that he cared for me, and would get to love me—as I loved him—unasked, uncared for. O, Charlotte, you can never know what I have suffered. It is not in your nature to comprehend what such a woman as I can suffer. I loved him so dearly, I clung so wickedly, so madly to my old hopes, my old dreams, long after they had become the falsest hopes, the wildest dreams that ever had power over a distracted mind. But, my darling, it is past, and I come to you on this Christmas night to tell you that I have conquered my stubborn heart, and that from this time forward there shall be no cloud between you and me."

"Diana, my dear friend, my poor girl!" cried Charlotte, quite overcome, "you loved him, you—as well as I—and I have robbed you of his heart!"

"No, Charlotte, it was never mine."

"You loved him—all the time you spoke so harshly of him!"

"When I seemed most harsh, I loved him most. But do not look at me with such distress in your sweet face, my dear. I tell you that the worst pain is past and gone. The rest is very easy to bear, and to outlive. These things do not last for ever, Charlotte, whatever the poets and novelists may tell us. If I had not lived through the worst, I should not be here to-night, with your arm round my neck and his name upon my lips. I have never wished you joy until to-night, Charlotte, and now for the first time I can wish you all good things, in honesty and truth. I have conquered myself. I do not say that to me Valentine Hawkehurst can ever be quite what other men are. I think that to the end of my life there will be a look in his face, a tone of his voice, that will touch me more deeply than any other look or tone upon earth; but my love for you has overcome my love for him, and there is no hidden thought in my mind to-night, as I sit here at your feet, and pray for God's blessing on your choice."

"My darling Diana, I know not how to thank you, how to express my faith and my love."

"I doubt if I am worthy of your love, dear; but, with God's help, I will be worthy of your trust; and if ever there should come a day in which my love can succour or my devotion serve you, there shall be no lack of either. Listen, dear; there are the waits playing the sweet Christmas hymn. Do you remember what Shakespeare says about the 'bird of dawning' singing all night long, and how no evil spirit roams abroad at this dear season,—

'So hallowed and so gracious is the time?'

"I have conquered my evil spirit, Lotta, and there shall be peace and true love between us for evermore, shall there not, dearest friend?"

And thus ends the story of Diana Paget's girlish love—the love that had grown up in secret, to be put away from her heart in silence, and buried with the dead dreams and fancies that had fostered it. For her to-night the romance of life closed for ever. For Charlotte the sweet story was newly begun, and the opening chapters were very pleasant—the mystic volume seemed all delight. Blessed with her lover's devotion, her mother's approval, and even Mr. Sheldon's benign approbation, what more could she ask from Providence—what lurking dangers could she fear—what storm-cloud could she perceive upon the sunlit heavens?

There was a cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, but the harbinger of tempest and terror. It yet

remains to be shown what form that cloud assumed, and from what quarter the tempest came. The history of Charlotte Halliday has grown upon the writer; and the completion of that history, with the fate of John Haygarth's fortune, will be found under the title of, CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE.

THE END.

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