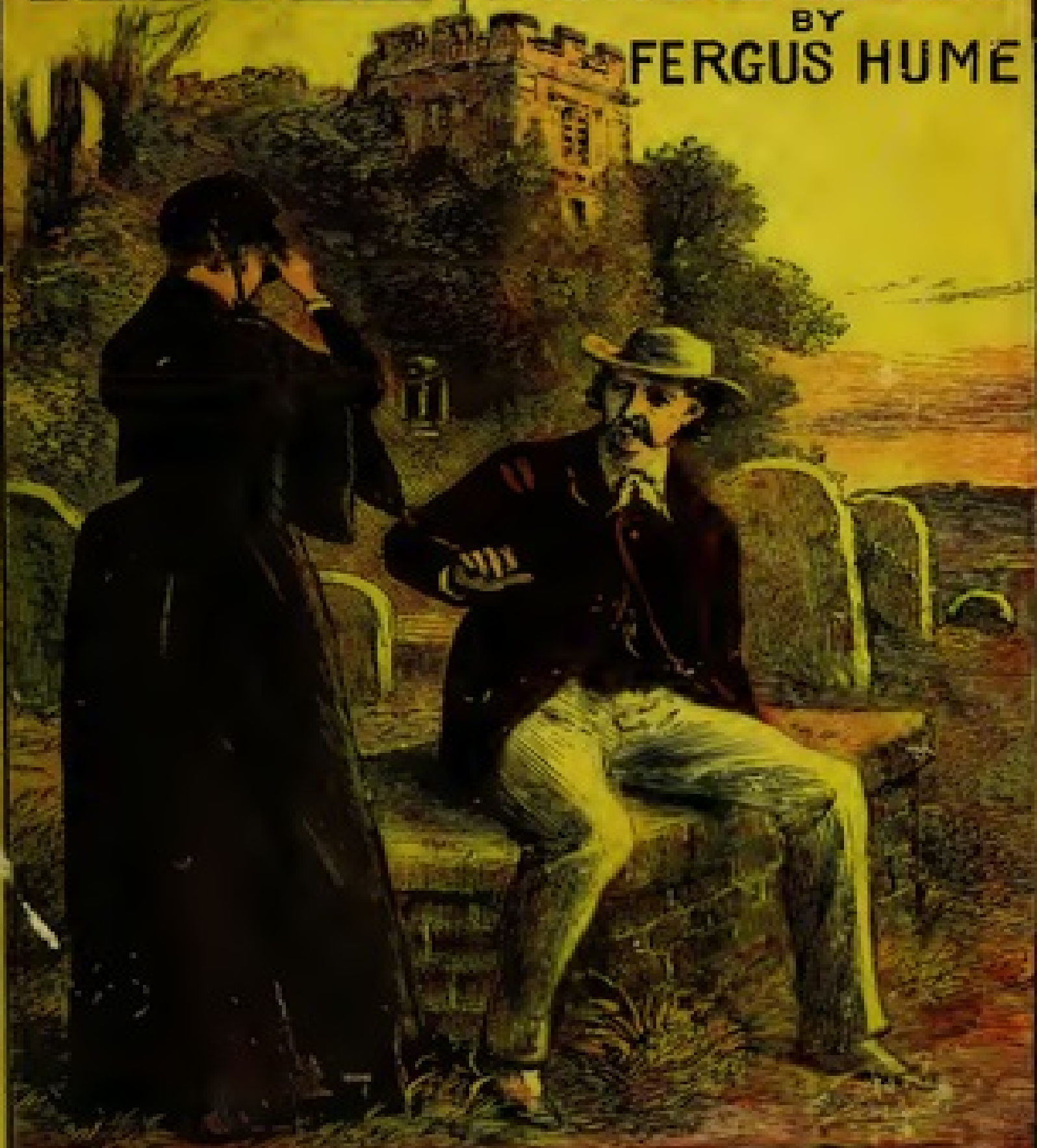


THE MAN WITH A SECRET

BY
FERGUS HUME



LONDON: F. V. WHITE & CO., 31, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND

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THE MAN WITH A SECRET.

A Novel.

BY

FERGUS HUME

Author of

**"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "MADAME MIDAS,"
"THE GIRL FROM MALTA," "THE PICCADILLY
PUZZLE," ETC., ETC.**

There are those in this world whose egotism is so profound, that they look upon creation as designed for their sole benefit, and take advantage of all opportunities furnished by Fate, to gain unto themselves exceeding riches and honour, although prosperity to one may mean ruin to many.

THIRD EDITION.

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TO

MY DEAR FATHER,

JAMES HUME,

THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

BY HIS SON,

FERGUS.

The mocking fiend who near us stands
Entices us to evil deeds;
He binds our souls in sensual bands
The mocking fiend who near us stands;
But some good woman-angel pleads
For mercy at Almighty hands;
With such for guide what mortal heeds
The mocking fiend who near us stands?

THE MAN WITH A SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"With anxious dread have I avoided thee, Thou haunting evil of my early days, Yet by some trick of Fate we meet again; I pray thee, sir, let me go far away. And place the roaring seas between us twain, There is but sorrow in our comradeship."

It was the high road to the village of Garsworth, wide, deeply rutted, and somewhat grass-grown, with a tall hedge of yellow-blossomed gorse on the one side, and on the other a ragged, broken fence, over which leaned a man absorbed in meditation, his eyes fixed upon the setting sun.

The fence, rotten and moss-tufted, ran along the edge of a little hill, the slope of which had been lately reaped, and was now covered with bristly yellow stubble, variegated by bare-looking patches of brownish earth.

At the bottom of the hill flowed the narrow river Gar, with its sluggish waters rolling lazily along between the low mud banks, bordered by rows of pollard willows and lush rank grasses which hid the burrows of the water-rats. Beyond, towards the distant hills, stretched the damp, melancholy fen-lands, with their long lines of slimy ditches, still pools of black water, and scattered clumps of stunted trees. Still further away appeared a scanty fringe of forest, above which

could be seen the square, grey tower of a church, and over all glared an angry red sky barred with thin lines of heavy clouds, looming intensely black against the accentuating crimson light behind.

An evil-looking scene it was, for over the brooding loneliness and desolation of the fen-lands flared the fierce scarlet of the sunset, turning the slender line of the river and the sombre pools of water to the tint of blood, as though they had been smitten with the Egyptian plague.

A chill wind, heavy with the unwholesome miasma of the fens was blowing over the moist earth, and across the plain floated a vaporous white mist, making the stunted trees look weird and spectral behind its shadowy veil.

The man, leaning over the fence, took a cigarette out of his mouth and shivered slightly.

"Ugh!" he muttered, with an uneasy shudder, "it's like the Valley of the Shadow of Death." Then, replacing the cigarette, he continued contemplating the uncanny-looking landscape to which the term was singularly applicable.

It was a curious face upon which shone the red sunlight, being long and narrow, with lantern jaws and a thin, hawk-like nose. Thread-like black eyebrows in a straight line above piercing dark eyes and a scanty black moustache twisted jauntily at the ends over tightly-closed lips. Curly hair, the colour of ebony, worn longer than usual, and touched at the temples with grey, appeared from under his soft wideawake, around which was twisted a blue handkerchief with white spots. A livid, cadaverous-looking face, with the haggard expression of one who had lived a fast life; nevertheless it appeared full of animation and nervous energy.

He was tall, being much above the average height, with sloping shoulders and a slender, well-knit figure, clad in a rough suit of grey homespun, which he wore with a certain natural grace. His feet were well-shaped and neatly shod in tan-coloured boots, and his hands, long and slender, were those of an artist.

Not strictly handsome, perhaps, but with a certain insolent dash of recklessness about him which suited his Spanish-looking face, and stamped him at once as a Bohemian. A man who cared for no one so long as his personal desires were gratified, a man who would stop at nothing to gratify those desires, in short, a man who had lived forty-five years in the world without making a single friend; which fact speaks for itself. A thorough scamp, ever on the edge of an abyss, yet

by some miracle never losing his balance, Basil Beaumont had fascinated many men and women, but they always found his friendship too expensive to maintain; therefore the result was ever the same, they retired, sooner or later, on some pretext or another, leaving him solitary and alone.

Mr. Beaumont was smoking a cigarette--he was always smoking cigarettes--morn, noon, and night those deadly little rolls of paper were between his thin lips, and though doctors warned him of the danger to his nerves, he laughed at their croakings.

"Nerves, my dear sir," he said lightly; "men in my position can't afford to have nerves; they are a luxury for the rich and foolish. Why should I have nerves? I don't drink; I don't run away with other men's wives; I don't fret over the unavoidable--bah! smoking is my one redeeming vice."

He had a number of other vices, however, as many young men found to their cost. True, he himself did not drink, but he led others to do so, nor did he covet his neighbour's wife, yet he was by no means averse to playing the part of Sir Pandarus of Troy, provided it was to his own interest to do so. Moreover, he gambled.

It was in this terrible passion--rarely, if ever conquered--that he found his greatest delight. The green cloth-covered table, the painted hieroglyphics of the cards, the hopes, the fears, the gains, the losses, were all to him but a representation of his daily life on a small scale. He gambled with men as he gambled with cards, meeting varied fortunes in both, and risking his luck as recklessly in the game of Life as in the game of baccarat. He was a scamp, a scoundrel, a blackleg of the deepest dye, bankrupt in pocket and in illusions; yet he always kept within the limits of the law, and, moreover, sinned in an eminently gentlemanly manner, which robbed the sordid, feverish life he was leading of its most repulsive features.

Why this artificial man, who lived only in the glare of the gas-lamps, and, owl-like, shunned the searching light of the day, had come to such an out-of-the-way village as Garsworth was a puzzle, but nevertheless a puzzle easy of solution. His object was two-fold. In the first place, he had left London to escape the demands of persistent creditors, and in the second, being a native of the dull little hamlet, he had returned to visit the scenes of his youth not seen by him for three-and-twenty years.

It was not a sentimental longing--no, Mr. Beaumont and sentiment had long since parted company; but Garsworth was a dead and alive place where no one would think of looking for him, so he could stay there in safety until he saw a chance of arranging his pecuniary affairs and leaving the Arcadia he detested for the London he loved.

An artist by profession, though he had not touched a brush for years, he found it necessary to resume his old employment as a reason for his sojourn in Garsworth, for the honest rustics were somewhat suspicious of Basil Beaumont, his character having been none of the best when he left his native place to seek his fortune. So he lived quietly at the principal inn of the village, dawdled about the fields, sketched picturesque landscapes in a desultory manner, and in the meantime corresponded with a dear brother hawk in Town as to his chances of return to the metropolis.

His cigarette burnt down rapidly as he leaned over the fence thinking of his future, so throwing away the stump, he took out his tobacco-pouch and a little book of rice paper, in order to manufacture another, talking to himself meanwhile as is the fashion of solitary men.

"Two weeks," he said musingly, while he deftly rolled the tobacco in his slender fingers, "two weeks in this blessed place--well, there's one good thing, the rest will do me good, and I'll go back to Town as steady as a rock; the medicine is disagreeable, but the result will be excellent. What bad luck I've had lately--everything seems against me. I'll have to make a big effort to get some cash, or I'll end my days in a workhouse--ugh!" shivering again, "not that--God, how I dread poverty! Never mind," he went on gaily, shrugging his shoulders, "there are plenty of fools in this world, and as everything was created for a special purpose, I presume *le bon Dieu* made fools to feather clever men's nests."

He laughed softly at this cynicism, then, lighting the cigarette, placed it in his mouth and resumed his soliloquy.

"Forty-five and still living on my wits. Ah, Basil, my friend, you've been an awful fool, and yet, if I had to live my life over again, I don't know that I would act differently. Circumstances have been too strong for me. With a certain income I might have been an honest man, but Fate--pish!--why do I blame that unhappy deity whom men always make a scapegoat for their own shortcomings? It's myself, and none other, I should curse. Well, well, rich or poor, honest man

or scoundrel, I'll go with all the rest of my species through the valley of the shadow."

He raised his eyes once more to the melancholy scene before him, when suddenly his quick ear caught the sound of footsteps coming briskly along the road, and he smiled to himself as the invisible pedestrian began to whistle "Garryowen."

"Plenty of spirits," he muttered, flicking the ash off his cigarette, "or perhaps not enough, seeing he has to cheer himself with Irish melodies."

The footsteps came nearer, and shortly afterwards a man paused in the centre of the road as he saw the still figure leaning indolently against the fence. A fair-haired ruddy-faced man, of medium height, arrayed in a walking suit, with a knapsack on his shoulder, and a heavy stick in his hand.

"Hullo!" he cried, tapping his stick on the ground, "how far is it to the village?"

Basil Beaumont started slightly when he heard the voice, then an evil smile crossed his face as he turned lazily round to answer the question.

"About one mile, Nestley," he replied distinctly.

As he spoke the pedestrian gave a cry, and with a muttered oath sprang forward to where the other stood.

"Beaumont!" he whispered, recoiling at the sight of that mocking, Mephistophelean countenance smiling at his emotion.

"At your service," said Beaumont, carelessly putting his hands in his pockets. "And what are you doing in this part of the country, Doctor Duncan Nestley?"

Nestley did not answer, but stared fixedly at the artist as if he were turned into stone, but the other met his gaze steadily and seemed rather amused at the scrutiny.

"You take a long time to recognise an old friend," he observed at length, blowing a thin wreath of smoke.

"Friend," echoed Nestley, with a deep sigh, recovering himself. "Yes, you were

my friend, Basil Beaumont."

"Why 'were'?" asked the artist coolly.

"Because it was you who so nearly ruined my life," replied Nestley in a deep voice.

Beaumont smiled in a saturnine manner.

"I," he said in a gibing tone. "My good fellow you do me too much honour. I would never dare to ruin so celebrated an individual as Duncan Nestley, F.R.C.S., and deuce knows what other letters of the alphabet."

The pedestrian turned on him fiercely, and, stepping forward, confronted him with clenched fists. The artist never blenched, but eyed his angry antagonist steadily. So Nestley, with all the wrath dying out of his face, fell back into his former position with a dreary laugh.

"You have the one virtue of a scoundrel, I see," he said bitterly. "Courage."

"Man of one virtue and ten thousand crimes," quoted Beaumont, easily. "Faith, it's something to have even one virtue in this degenerate age. Where are you going?" he added, as Nestley turned away.

"Going?" echoed the doctor, fiercely. "Anywhere, so long as it is away from you."

Beaumont raised his eyebrows in affected surprise, then, shrugging his shoulders, took out his watch.

"It is now between five and six o'clock," he said, putting it back again, "and it will be dark by the time we reach Garsworth, which is the nearest village. I am staying there, but if you choose to go back again in order to avoid the moral leper, I daresay you'll reach Shunton by twelve o'clock."

"I'm not going with you," reiterated Nestley, resolutely, as the artist stepped into the road.

"'Nobody axed you, sir,' she said," retorted Beaumont, with a sneer, sauntering on. "Good-bye; a pleasant journey."

Nestley looked at the sky, out of which the red light was rapidly dying. A few stars glimmered in the pale flush of colour, and the chill breeze was growing colder while the mists lay over the fen lands like a thick white veil. He was cold and hungry, so the prospect of getting something to eat and a night's rest instead of trudging back wearily to Shunton, decided him. He shook himself impatiently, made a few steps forward, then paused irresolutely.

"Bah! Why should I mind?" he said angrily to himself. "Beaumont can do me no harm now. After five years I hardly see how his influence can affect me. I'll chance it, anyhow."

Away in the distance he could see the tall form of the artist strolling easily along, so, having paused a moment to light his pipe, he strode rapidly after him. Even as he did so there flashed across his mind, with the rapidity of lightning, the phrase, "Lead us not into temptation," and a shiver, not caused by the chill wind, passed over his body, but he dismissed the warning with an uneasy laugh and walked on quickly in the track of his evil genius.

CHAPTER II.

HIS EVIL GENIUS.

"Much sorrow didst thou bring to me of old,
Tainted my life by poisonous words and deeds,
Turned holy thoughts to evil--made me dread
To face the fearless looks of honest men,
Lest they should spy my quick learnt devilries,
And cry, 'Off, off; this fellow is a knave.'"

Garsworth was one of those queer, old-fashioned villages which, owing to their isolated positions, yet retain the primitive simplicity of earlier ages. The nearest railway station, Duxby Junction, to which steam and electricity continually carried the news of the world, was fully twenty miles distant, so that in this out-of-the-way village the rustics heard but little of the doings of the nations, being

content to remain in a state of Arcadian ignorance as their forefathers had done before them.

There was not even a stage-coach to Duxby, and the only means of communication was by the carriers' carts, which went weekly along the dusty high road, drawn lazily by their sleek horses. The nearest market town was Shunton, almost as quiet and primitive as Garsworth, and the sturdy farmers going there on market days sold their cattle and wheat, picked up such small items of news as had drifted thither from Duxby, then returned to their homes perfectly satisfied with life and with themselves. Well-to-do folks were these yeomen, for many rich farms lay hidden in the wide fen lands--farms which had descended from father to son through many generations, and as neither agrarian agitation nor vexed questions of rents had penetrated to this remote spot, they tilled their lands, looked up to their landlords, and pursued their monotonous lives in peace.

The village, built on a primitive plan, consisted of one long, wide street, with a similar one running crosswise to it, so that the little town was divided into four almost equal sections. Where the four roads met appeared a large open space doing duty as the village green, in the centre of which stood an antique stone cross with elaborate carvings thereon, much worn by time, said to have been erected by one Geoffrey Garsworth on his return from the third crusade. As a proof of this, there could be seen amid the carvings, representations of palm branches and scallop shells, both symbolical of eastern vegetation and pilgrim wanderings; but Dr. Larcher, the vicar of Garsworth--an ardent archaeologist--maintained that the cross had been placed there by the Cistercian monks, who once occupied a monastery near the village. The worthy vicar, being of a somewhat polemical nature, was wont to wax warm on the subject, and held strong opinions as to the cross and the church, which opinions he was willing enough to impart to any curious stranger who might chance to have antiquarian leanings.

And a beautiful old church it was, of irregular architecture, with heavy stone pillars supporting both round and pointed arches of the Norman Romanesque style, remarkably fine stained glass windows, and a high, elaborately carved roof of dark oak. Standing at the end of the village, near the bridge, the graveyard in which it was placed sloped down to the river's edge, and at times the mighty shadow of the square tower fell across the stream.

A little further down was the vicarage, built of grey stone in the quaint Tudor fashion, enclosing a green square on three sides, while the fourth was open to the Gar. From its grounds could be seen the graceful span of the bridge, a somewhat modern structure, which led on to a wide common overgrown with golden gorse, and far away in the distance amid a thick forest of beech and elm and oak, arose the towers of Garsworth Grange, wherein lived the Lord of the Manor.

The village possessed only one inn, quaintly entitled "The House of Good Living," an ancient building as fantastic as its name. Standing somewhat back from the street it was built of grey stone, with heavy beams set into the walls in the old-fashioned style, and the upper storey projected over the lower one in a cumbersome manner, apparently threatening every moment to overbalance itself. There were wide, diamond-paned casements, with rows of flower-pots containing bright, scarlet geraniums standing on the broad ledges, and on the left a tall gable jutted out some distance from the main building, while in the corner, thus formed, was the huge porch, with its cumbersome benches for the convenience of village cronies. The space in front was of cobbled stones down to the street, and there stood the tall pole with the swinging sign, whereon was bravely painted a baron of beef and a tankard of beer as an earnest of the good cheer within. The roof was of thatch, grey and weatherworn, neatly trimmed round the windows and eaves, while above towered the great stacks of twisted, red-tinged chimneys. Altogether, a typical English inn of the stage coach period, severely respectable and intensely conservative.

It was quite dark when Dr. Nestley reached this haven of rest, but the generous light within gushed from the windows in ruddy streams with a most inviting air of comfort. The door stood wide open, letting out a flood of mellow light into the chilly darkness, and the new comer could hear the murmur of men's voices, with every now and then a coarse laugh, while the smell of stale tobacco permeated the atmosphere. Evidently the village gossips were holding high festival, and as Nestley passed into the porch he saw dimly through the smoke-clouded air a number of them seated in the taproom, puffing steadily at their pipes and draining their tankards with great contentment.

Job Kossiter, the landlord of this house of entertainment, soon made his appearance in answer to Nestley's imperative summons, and stood waiting orders in stolid silence. A large, fat man was Mr. Kossiter, with a large, fat face ruddy with health, a brain of bovine slowness, and a habit of repeating all questions asked in a meditative manner, in order to give himself time to consider his

answer.

"I want a bed for to-night, landlord," said Nestley, leaning against the wall and surveying the rotund proportions of mine host, "and at present, something to eat."

Mr. Kossiter fixed his ox-like eyes on the stranger and repeated the words slowly like a child learning its lesson.

"He wants," observed Job stolidly, "a bed for to-night and summat to eat; sir, you can have 'em both."

"Right you are," replied the doctor cheerfully. "Get something ready at once and show me to a bedroom. I want to wash my hands."

"He wants," repeated Kossiter mechanically, "to wash his hands. Margery!"

In answer to this call, a bright, brisk-looking young woman, in a neat print gown, stepped forward and confronted Nestley.

"He wants," said Job looking from Margery to Nestley, "a bed, summat to eat, a room and a wash;" then, having given all the requisite information he rolled slowly away to attend to the wants of the rustics in the taproom, while, Margery in a voice as sharp as her appearance, invited Nestley to follow her to his room.

"Lor, sir," she said shrilly, tripping lightly up the stairs, "if I'd only knowed as you was comin', I'd have got things a bit straight, but father never does tell, father don't."

"He didn't know I was coming," replied Nestley as he entered the bedroom and took off his knapsack. "I'm a bird of passage--bring me some hot water."

"Yes, sir," replied Margery, pausing with her hand on the handle of the door, "and anything to eat, sir?"

"Of course--cold beef, pickles--whatever there is. I'm too hungry to be dainty."

"You won't have supper with the other gentleman, sir, will you?" asked Margery, "Mr. Beaumont, sir."

"No, no," replied Nestley harshly, a dark shadow crossing his face. "I want to be alone."

"Very good, sir," said Margery, rather alarmed at his tone of voice. "I'll bring the hot water, sir--yes, sir."

She closed the door after her, and Nestley, sitting down on the bed, gnawed his moustache savagely.

"Under the same roof," he growled viciously. "I don't know if I'm wise--pshaw, it doesn't matter, he won't do me any more harm, I've got no money, and Beaumont doesn't care about doing anything for nothing--my poverty is my best shield against him."

At this moment Margaret knocked at the door and handed in his hot water, so he postponed his ideas on the subject of Mr. Beaumont while he made himself respectable. Having washed the dust of the road from his face and hands, he brushed his clothes, arranged his hair, and then descended to the parlour of the inn, where he found a plentifully-spread supper-table awaiting him and Margery lighting the lamp.

The parlour was a quaint, low-ceilinged room, all angles, with queer cupboards and unnecessary alcoves in unexpected places, heavy, black oak furniture, baskets of wax fruits and paper flowers, a small harmonium in one corner and a general air of intense cleanliness and comfort. Dismissing Margery, Dr. Nestley made an excellent supper from a round of corned beef, but pushing away the tankard of ale which stood near him, he filled a glass with water and drank it off. His meal being ended he lighted his pipe, and drawing his chair up to the fire, with a sigh of gratitude, gave himself up to his reflections. The lamp shone with a dim, yellow light, but the ruddy glare of the fire lighted up the room and gleamed on the polished furniture and plaster ceiling. Truly a pleasant place to dream in, but judging by the frown upon Nestley's face his thoughts were anything but agreeable, for as a matter of fact he was thinking about Basil Beaumont. Whether a sympathetic feeling or a vein of animal magnetism drew the subject of his reflections towards him it is hard to say, but in a very short time the door was pushed silently open and Mr. Beaumont, cool and complacent, sauntered into the room.

This unwelcomed intruder walked across to the fireplace and, leaning against the

mantelpiece, looked down at the indignant Nestley with a bland smile.

"Enjoyed your supper?" he asked coolly, removing his cigarette.

"None the better for seeing you," growled the doctor, drawing hard at his pipe.

"Our excellent Duncan," observed Mr. Beaumont, airily, "is rather cross."

At which impertinent observation Nestley began to show anger.

"What right have you to come into this room?" he asked savagely.

"The best right in the world," retorted Basil, smoothly. "It is a public room; I am one of the public--ergo, I use it."

Dr. Nestley frowned again, and his rather weak mouth quivered nervously as he looked at the placid countenance of the man leaning against the mantelpiece. On his part, Beaumont slipped his hands into his pockets, crossed his long legs and, after glancing curiously at the figure cowering in the arm-chair began to talk in a delicately-modulated voice, which was one of his greatest charms.

"We were friends five years ago, Nestley, yet now we meet as enemies. I am not, as a rule, curious; but I confess I would like to know the reason."

"You know well enough," said Nestley, sulkily.

"Ah! Let me see. I think in the road to-night you accused me of ruining your life. Pray tell me how--I don't think," observed Mr. Beaumont, reflectively, "I really don't think I borrowed money from you."

Dr. Nestley removed his pipe, and put his hand up to hide the nervous quivering of his mouth. The artist went on smoking placidly, waiting for the other to speak, so seeing this, Nestley, with a great effort, sat up in his chair and looked steadily at him.

"Listen to me, Basil Beaumont," he said, slowly. "Five years ago, when I met you, I was only a boy----"

"Yes, an awful cub," replied Beaumont, insolently. "I taught you all you know."

"You did," retorted Nestley, bitterly, rising to his feet. "You taught me things of which I had better have remained ignorant. I had a little money----"

"Fairly won by me at cards," murmured Beaumont, coolly.

"I didn't mind that," said Nestley, who was walking up and down the room in a state of uncontrollable agitation, "you had that, and welcome--one must pay for one's experience, I suppose. No; it was not the money, but I did blame you for teaching me to drink wine to excess."

"I!" said Basil, in surprise, "why, I never drink wine to excess, so how could I teach you?"

"Ah!" replied the other, significantly, stopping in his walk, "your head is too strong--mine is not. I was a clever boy, and likely to do well in my profession. You met me when I came up to London--liked me for some inexplicable reason, and undertook to show me what you called life. With my weak constitution and highly-strung organization drink was like poison to me--it turned me into a maniac. I did not care for it--I had no hereditary love for alcohol, but you were always at my elbow, tempting me to have another glass. My weaker will was overcome by your stronger one. I took drink, and it made me mad, causing me to commit a thousand follies for which I was no more responsible than a child. I got into the habit of taking drinks all day. You encouraged me--God knows why, except for your own selfish ends. Had I remained with you, I would have been in a lunatic asylum or in the gutter but, thank God, my better angel prevailed, and I broke the spell you held over me. Leaving you and the mad life I was then leading, I became a total abstainer, at what cost I need not tell you--no one can ever understand the struggles and agonies I underwent, but I conquered in the end. For five years I have not touched a drop of liquor, and now--now that I have subdued the devil that once possessed me I meet you once more--you who so nearly ruined me, body and soul."

Beaumont did not move during this long speech, delivered with intense emotion by Nestley, but at its conclusion shrugged his shoulders and addressed himself to the task of making another cigarette.

"A very excellent lecture," he said, scoffingly, "very excellent, indeed, but quite wrong. I did meet you in London, and out of kindness introduced you into decent society, but I certainly did not teach you to make a beast of yourself, as you did!"

"You were always urging me to drink."

"Hospitality only. I asked you to drink when I did, yet I did not make a fool of myself."

"True! You only made a fool of me. What you could take and I could take were two very different things. What was drunkenness in me was sobriety in you."

Beaumont laughed and lighted the cigarette he had just made.

"You were an idiot," he said, politely. "When you found drink did you harm you should have left it off."

"Ah! you think that an easy task?"

"It would be--to me."

"To you!" cried Nestley, vehemently, "yes, a practised man of the world like you has his nerves and passions well under control. I was young, inexperienced, enthusiastic, you were cool, calculating and cynical. You drank three times as much as I ever did, but the effect on our natures was different. You were looked upon as a sober man, I--God help me!--as a drunkard!"

The artist smiled sarcastically.

"Well," he said, coolly, "all this was five years ago--why are you so disagreeable now?"

"I cannot forget how you tried to ruin me."

"Humph!" observed Beaumont, walking to the door, "there's nothing like putting our sins on other people's shoulders; it saves such a lot of unnecessary trouble. However, I don't wish to argue any longer. You reject my friendship, so I've nothing more to say. I daresay you'll be gone by the time I rise in the morning, so, as we're not likely to meet one another again in this life, I'll say good-bye."

He opened the door just as Nestley was about to answer him, when suddenly there was a noise--the voices of men laughing uproariously, then the sharp bark of a dog, and in another moment a large black cat, with her fur all on end, darted into the room, followed by an eager fox-terrier in a state of great excitement.

CHAPTER III.

VILLAGE GOSSIP.

It's very odd the pride we take In finding out our neighbours' lives, Tho' idle words a heart may break, It's very odd the pride we take In saying this one is a rake, And that one's luck thro' evil thrives It's very odd the pride we take In finding out our neighbour's lives.

Snarling and spitting, with blazing eyes and bushy tail, the cat flew round the room rapidly, did a steeplechase over several chairs, and finally took refuge on the mantelpiece, where she stood with arched back, spitting freely, while the fox-terrier, yelping sharply, tried, unsuccessfully, to leap up.

"What a beast of a dog," said Beaumont, tranquilly; "it's Muffins, of course."

"Rather," cried a laughing voice at the door, "did you ever know Muffins when he wasn't worrying a cat or killing a rat or doing something disreputable?"

The owner of the voice was a tall young fellow of twenty years of age, with curly fair hair, a fresh complexion and merry blue eyes. He was positively bubbling over with good nature and excitement, and appeared the embodiment of robust health and animal spirits. Suddenly he caught sight of Nestley, who stood near the fireplace looking on at the scene with an amused smile.

"Awfully sorry about my dog, sir," he said, taking off his cap with a gay laugh and striding across the room to where Muffins was performing leaps worthy of an acrobat, "but he believes his mission in life is to kill cats, so at present----"

"He is performing his mission with great zeal," finished Nestley with a smile.

"By the way," interposed Beaumont, raising his voice, "I'd better introduce you

two men, Mr. Richard Pemberton--Dr. Duncan Nestley."

Nestley bowed somewhat stiffly, as he thought Beaumont was taking an unwarrantable liberty in acting as he was doing, but Pemberton, with the ingenuousness of youth, caught the doctor's hand and shook it heartily.

"Glad to see you," he said looking at Nestley, "you will be a perfect God-send in this dull place."

His manner was so cordial that without being positively rude Nestley could not refuse to be gracious so seeing that he had attained his object of introducing Nestley as his friend, Mr. Beaumont sauntered out of the room with a cynical smile on his thin lips.

"You'll measure swords with me, will you?" he said to himself with a short laugh. "I wouldn't advise you to try that game, my friend."

Meanwhile Pemberton caught hold of Muffins, who was making frantic attempts to seize his feline enemy, whereupon the cat, seeing the coast clear, sprang down and dashed out of the room, but the wary Muffins, wriggling himself free, raced after her, nose on ground, with an occasional sharp yelp.

"There," said Pemberton gaily, "Muffins is provided with an amusing evening, for he'll never leave the cat till he runs her down."

"I'm sorry for the cat."

"You'll be sorry for Muffins when you see him return scratched all over," retorted the lad, whereupon they both laughed.

"Staying here long?" asked Pemberton eyeing the doctor in a friendly manner.

"Only to-night--I'm on a walking tour," replied Nestley carelessly.

"Lucky devil," said the other, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "I've got to stay here."

"Is it your home?"

"In a sort of way, yes--pupil at the vicarage and all that shoot, don't you know--"

it's a five-act funeral of a place, but we manage to get some tra-la-la out of it."

"Who are we?" asked the doctor, mightily amused at Mr. Pemberton's colloquialisms.

"Oh! I forgot you're a stranger here--why, Reggy Blake, myself, and Priggs."

"Priggs?"

"One of the pupils," explained the communicative Richard, "a jolly ass--writes poetry--lines to Chloe, and all that sort of thing--hasn't got an idea beyond the Muses as he calls 'em--beastly old frumps--Reggy's a good sort of chappie--he's in the taproom now--come and see the fun--we often stand beer to the rustics and they sing us songs--twenty verses long and no stops."

"Do you know Beaumont well?" asked Nestley, following his youthful guide to the taproom.

"Not very, he's only been here a fortnight, but the vicar knows him; he's a native of these parts, not a bad sort of chap but awfully stand off the grass; gets up on his hind legs pretty freely. Do you know him?"

"To my cost," replied the doctor bitterly.

Pemberton stared and was about to ask the meaning of this strange remark, when a burst of laughter sounded from the taproom, so postponing his inquiry until a more favourable period, he opened the door and entered, followed by Duncan Nestley.

The doctor's eyes smarted somewhat with the pungent tobacco-smoke, but when he became more accustomed to the cloudy atmosphere, he found himself in a long low-ceilinged room round which about fifteen men were seated on benches, smoking vigorously. On a long, deal table in the centre stood a number of pewter tankards containing beer and a large jug filled with the same generous beverage stood at the end. A kerosine lamp hung from the ceiling, diffusing a dull yellow light, and the floor was covered with saw-dust, with spittoons placed about.

On the end of the table sat Reginald Blake, who was as dark as Pemberton was fair. A somewhat mournful countenance when in repose, but now sparkling with life and animation. Decidedly handsome, with an olive complexion, closely-

cropped black hair and a small moustache of the same colour. As he sat there swinging his legs and showing his white teeth with every laugh, Nestley thought he was a very striking figure, although somewhat out of place in that homely room.

"Looks like an Italian," he thought, looking at the tall, lithe figure as Reginald Blake slipped off the table to greet him. "Must have been born in the South, or perhaps he's a Greek born in England, like Keats."

Dick Pemberton lost no time, but then and there introduced Nestley to his friend.

"This is Dr. Nestley, Reggy--stranger here--got the blues, so I brought him here to see the fun."

"Rather homely fun I'm afraid," said Blake holding out his hand with a frank smile. "I'm very pleased to see you, Dr. Nestley. You'll find this noisy but it's amusing."

"What would the vicar say if he knew two of his pupils were here?" asked Nestley mischievously.

Both the young men laughed heartily.

"Oh, the dear old boy wouldn't mind," said Pemberton producing a cigar case, "he trusts us, besides, we work hard all the week and only get off the chain on Saturday nights."

"Then," observed Reggy, helping himself to a cigar from his friend's case, "we study mankind----"

"As seen in the public-house," finished the doctor smiling.

"As seen in the public-house," assented Mr. Blake gravely, lighting his cigar. "Dick and myself are students of human nature."

"It's great fun," observed Dick confidentially. "If we were in Town I've no doubt we'd go to a music hall, but here we amuse ourselves with rustic simplicity."

"Said simplicity being mythical," said Blake satirically, "but the singing is amusing--I say Jarx," he added, raising his voice, "sing us that ditty of yours."

Jarx, a huge, good-tempered giant, excused himself bashfully, but on being pressed, took a long drink of beer, wiped his large mouth with his sleeve and fixing his eyes on the ceiling began to sing. First he started too low so that his voice sounded as if it came from his boots, then, apologising in a sheepish manner to the company, he began again in a high key. This being the other extreme was found equally unsatisfactory, but on making a third attempt he struck the happy medium and started off into a rustic ditty the chorus of which was solemnly sung by the company while they rocked slowly to and fro:

"There's the hog tub and the pig tub
And the tub behind the do-o-r
She's gone away with t'other chap
And she'll never come back no more."

Full chorus after long pause. "She won't--"

This song averaged about ten verses which the singer conscientiously delivered with the chorus to each verse, first as a solo, afterwards with the full strength of the company, who sang impartially in different keys, so that the result was anything but harmonious. By this simple means the song lasted about a quarter-of-an hour, much to Nestley's amusement and that of the young men, who joined in the chorus with great gusto, Dick gravely conducting with his cigar.

Mr. Jarx having finished his melody, resumed his seat, his pipe and his beer, amid great applause, and in response to a general demand, a local favourite with a shrill voice sang a ditty about "Four Irish girls who came from the Isle of Wight," which also had the additional attraction of a dance, the music of which was provided by the performer whistling, he being his own orchestra. This double display of genius was received with great rapture and, at its conclusion Nestley, turning to the young men, asked if either of them sang.

"Reggy does," said Dick promptly; "he's got a voice like a nightingale."

"Bosh!" retorted Reggy, reddening under his dark skin. "Why I never had a lesson in my life."

"No, self-taught genius," said the incorrigible Dick. "Come, old man, out with

it."

Thus adjured by his friend and being pressed by the doctor, Blake consented and sang "You'll remember me," that old-fashioned song which contains such a world of pathos.

A tenor voice, pure, rich and silvery as a bell, not cultured in the least, but with rare natural power and an intensity of dramatic expression. One of those sympathetic voices which find their way straight to the heart, and as Blake sang the appealing words of the song, with their haunting, pathetic tenderness, Nestley felt strangely stirred. Even the rustics, dull as they were, fell under the spell of those resonant notes, and when the last word died away like a long-drawn sigh, sat silently pondering, not daring to break the charm with applause.

"You have a great gift," said Nestley, when the singer ceased. "A wonderful voice."

Blake flushed with pleasure at this word of praise from a stranger, and Dick delighted with the eulogy of his friend's talent chimed in delightedly.

"'Tis--isn't it jolly? and he sings comic songs--give us one old chap."

Blake would have consented, particularly as the rustics seemed anxious to hear something more suited to their comprehension than the preceding ballad, but Nestley hastily intervened.

"No, no," he said quickly, unwilling to spoil his first impression of that charming voice by hearing it lowered to the level of music hall singing, "don't do that, it will spoil everything."

The young man looked at him in surprise.

"I don't care much about them myself," said Reginald frankly, "but people down here like them better than sentimental ditties."

At this moment, Job Kossiter announced to the assembled company that it was time to close the bar, so in a few moments the room was empty of all save Nestley and his two companions. Dick asked him to have a glass of ale but he refused.

"I never drink," he said bluntly, "I'm teetotal."

They both opened their eyes at this, but were too polite to make any comments, so in order to relieve the awkwardness of the situation, Dr. Nestley began to speak.

"I suppose you've got some queer characters down here," he said, filling a fresh pipe of tobacco.

"Rather," said Dick, promptly, "old Garsworth for instance."

"Is that the squire you're talking of?" said a drawling voice at the door, and on looking towards it, the trio saw Mr. Basil Beaumont strolling into the room. Nestley grew a shade stiffer in his manner as his enemy came towards them, but Dick Pemberton turned his merry face to the new comer and nodded an answer.

"Do you know him?" he asked.

Beaumont took up his favourite position in front of the fire and smoked complacently.

"Yes. When I left this place twenty-three years ago, I heard a lot about him."

"He's a miser," said Blake meditatively.

"He was when I left, and I presume he still is," replied Beaumont, "but from all I've heard, he used to be pretty gay in his youth."

"Youth," echoed Dick scornfully, "was he ever a youth?"

"I believe he was, somewhere about the Flood. Why he must be ninety now."

"Over seventy," said Blake.

"Thank you for the correction," answered Beaumont, casting a sidelong look at him; "over seventy, yes, I should say seventy-three or four, as he was about fifty when I left; he had lived a riotous life up to the age of forty, then he suddenly took to saving money, why, nobody knows."

"Oh yes, they do," said Reginald, taking his cigar out of his mouth. "It's common

gossip now."

"Tell us all about it," said Nestley, settling himself in his chair.

"It's a curious story," said Blake leisurely. "Squire Garsworth led a fast life, as Beaumont says, till he was forty, then he stumbled on some books about the transmigration of the soul."

"Pythagoras?" asked Beaumont.

"Yes, and Allan Kardec, spiritualism and re-incarnation; he learned from those books to believe that his soul would be incarnated in another body; from long study of this theory he became a monomaniac."

"In one word--mad," said Beaumont.

Nestley did not want to speak either directly or indirectly to Beaumont, but this observation appealed to his professional pride, therefore he spoke.

"Monomania does not necessarily mean madness, though it may become so; but so far as I can understand Mr. Blake, it seems to me that Squire Garsworth has made a hobby of this study, and from long concentration upon it, his hobby has become a mania; and again, the disease, as I may call it, has now assumed a more dangerous form and become monomania, which really means madness on a particular subject."

"Then it is madness," insisted Beaumont.

"In a sort of a way yes," assented Nestley; "but in a general sense I would not call him mad from simply concentrating his mental power on a single subject."

"You'll call him mad when you hear all about him," said Dick grimly; "fire away Reggy."

"Mr. Garsworth," said Blake, "accepted the doctrine of re-incarnation with certain modifications. Kardec, Pythagoras and Co. believe that a newly incarnated soul is in ignorance of its previous existences, but the squire thinks that it knows all about them, consequently he believes that when his soul--at present incarnated in the Garsworth body--leaves said body, it will become re-incarnated in another body of the same sex, and remember the time when it was

the guiding intelligence of Squire Garsworth. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear," replied Nestley, "but if the squire believes that the soul does not lose its memory, what about his previous existences?"

"He's got a whole stock of 'em," broke in Dick quickly, "ranging from the Pharaohs down to the middle ages, but I think the Garsworth body is the first time his soul has used any fleshly envelope in our modern days."

"Curious mania," said Nestley reflectively, "if he isn't mad he's very near it."

"But what has all this incarnation humbug to do with his miserly habits," said Beaumont impatiently, "he doesn't want to pass his existences in being miserable."

"That's the very thing," explained Reginald calmly, "it appears that in some of his previous existences he suffered from poverty, so in order to arrest such a calamity, he is saving up all his money in this existence to spend during his next incarnation."

"Oh, he's quite mad," said Nestley decisively.

"But how does he propose to get hold of the money?" observed Beaumont disbelievingly; "he'll be in another body, 'and won't have any claim to the Garsworth estate."

"That's his secret," said Dick Pemberton, "nobody knows; queer yarn, isn't it?"

"Very," said Nestley, deeply interested. "I should like to study the case. Does he live by himself?"

"No, his cousin, Una Challoner, lives with him," interposed Blake hurriedly, the colour flushing in his face.

"Ah," thought Beaumont, noting this, "case of love, I see. I suppose Miss Challoner does not believe in his mad theories?" he added aloud.

"Hardly," said Dick contemptuously, "she's too sensible."

At this moment Job Kossiter entered the room, and, after slowly surveying the

group, addressed himself to Reginald:

"If I may make so bold, Mr. Blake, sir," he said, in his thick voice, "would you ask the vicar to go to the old squire?"

"What's up?" asked Blake, rising.

"He's very ill, sir, as Munks says," said Kossiter, scratching his head, "and Doctor Bland, sir, he's ill, too, sir, and can't go, so as there ain't a doctor to see him, I thought the vicar----"

"Not a doctor?" interposed Beaumont, quickly. "Nonsense! This gentleman," indicating Nestley, "is a doctor, so he can go at once."

"Oh, I'll go," said Nestley, rising, rather glad of the opportunity to study the case.

"Then, sir, Munks is waiting outside with the cart," observed Kossiter, moving to the door.

"Who on earth is Munks?" asked Nestley, following the landlord.

"The squire's servant," cried Dick, "and a cross-grained old ass he is."

"I don't suppose as you need tell the vicar now, sir," said Mr. Kossiter to Reginald.

"No, of course not," replied Blake, "this gentleman will do more good; it's the doctor he needs--not the clergyman."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Reggy," said Dick, as they all went out. "He needs a little spiritual consolation."

"I think a strait waistcoat would be best," said Beaumont quietly, as they stood at the door, "judging from your story."

The two lads said good-night, and went homeward, while Mr. Beaumont retired into the inn, and Nestley, stepping up into the high dog-cart, drove off into the darkness of the night on his unexpected mission.

CHAPTER IV.

AN EXTRAORDINARY PATIENT.

Mad?

Not what the world calls madness--he is quiet
Raves not about strange matters--curbs his tongue
With wond'rous wisdom--ponders ere he speaks,
And yet I tell you he is mad, my liege;
The moon was regnant at his birth and all
The planets bowed to her strong influence.

If Dr. Nestley had been imaginative he might have thought that he was being driven by one of the statues out of the old church, so grim and stiff was the figure beside him. Munks had a hard-featured face, and an equally hard manner, and in his suit of rough grey cloth he looked like Don Juan's Commandantore out for an airing. He devoted himself exclusively to the raw-boned animal he was driving, and replied to Dr. Nestley's questions in what might be called a chippy manner, his answers being remarkably monosyllabic.

Was the squire ill?--very! What made him ill?--Did not know! How many people lived at the Grange?--Six! What were their names?--The squire, Miss Una, Miss Cassandra, Patience Allerby, Jellicks and himself.

As Nestley did not find this style of conversation particularly exhilarating, he relapsed into silence, and the stony Munks devoted his attention once more to the raw-boned horse.

The dog-cart spun rapidly through the sleeping village with the dark-windowed houses on either side--over the narrow, vibrating bridge under which swept the sullen, grey river--across the wide common, where the gorse bushes looked fantastic and unreal in the moonlight, with only the silent sky overhead and the silent earth below--tall trees on either side, some gaudy with the yellow and red of their autumnal foliage, and others gaunt and bare, their leafless branches ready for the winter snows. So still, so silent, with every now and then the sad cry of some night bird from the lonely marshes, and the steady beat of the horse's hoofs on the hard, white road. The scenery, grey and colourless under the pale light of the moon, changed with the rapidity of a kaleidoscope. First the tangled, odorous hedges that separated the road from the closely-reaped fields, afterwards a grove of beeches, casting fantastic shadows on the ground, and then, suddenly starting out of the earth as if by magic, the thick, dark wood which surrounded Garsworth Grange, as though it were the enchanted palace of the sleeping

beauty. The rusty iron gates were wide open, and they drove into the park between the tall white posts with the leopards sejant thereon--up the broad, winding avenue with the trees tossing their leafless branches in the chill wind--while here and there at intervals the cloudy white forms of statues appeared indistinctly. The wheels crunched the dead leaves that thickly carpeted the path--a wide sweep of the avenue, and then a low, broad terrace of white stone, to which a flight of shallow steps led up through urns and statues to Garsworth Grange.

Nestley had no time to take any note of the architectural beauties of the place; for, hastily alighting, he ran up the steps, while Munks, still grimly silent, drove off, presumably in the direction of the stables. So here, Nestley found himself alone in this ghostly white world, with the keen wind whistling shrilly in his ears, and before him a monstrous, many-pillared porch with a massive door scrolled grotesquely with ironwork, like the entrance to a family mausoleum. Whilst he was searching for a bell to ring or a knocker to knock with, the door slowly swung open with a surly creak, and a tall, slim figure, holding a flickering candle, appeared.

Was it one of the cold, white statues in the lonely garden that had by some miracle awoke to life?--this sudden vision of lovely, breathing womanhood standing out from the darkness amid a faint halo of tremulous light, the rose-flushed face with its perfectly-chiselled features delicately distinct under the coronet of pale, golden hair, one slender arm raised aloft, holding the faintly-glimmering candle, one eloquent finger placed warningly upon the full red lips, while the supple body, clad in a loose white dress, was bent forward in a graceful poise. Not Aphrodite, this midnight goddess, for the face was too pure and childlike for that of the divine coquette, not Hera in the imperial voluptuousness of undying beauty, but Hebe, bright, girlish Hebe, with the smile of eternal youth on her lips, and the vague innocence of maidenhood shining in her dreamy eyes.

The goddess evidently expected to see the familiar face of the village doctor; for she started back in astonishment when she beheld a stranger, and seemed to demand an explanation of his visit. This he speedily furnished.

"Doctor Bland is ill, I understand," he said, politely, "but I am a medical man staying at the inn, and as the case seemed urgent, I came in his place."

The goddess smiled, and her frigid manner thawed rapidly.

"It's very kind of you, Doctor--Doctor----"

"Nestley," said that gentleman, "Doctor Nestley."

"It's very kind of you, Doctor Nestley," she said, in a musical voice, "and, indeed, the case *is* very urgent--please come in."

Nestley stepped inside, and the young lady, closing the heavy door, secured the innumerable fastenings. Catching Nestley's eye, as he looked on, rather puzzled, at the multiplicity of bolts and chains, she laughed quietly.

"My cousin is very much afraid of thieves," she remarked, as she turned round, "he wouldn't rest in his bed if he didn't think the front door was locked--by the way, I must introduce myself--Una Challoner!"

"I have heard of you, Miss Challoner," said Nestley, looking at her in admiration.

"From whom?" she asked quickly.

"Mr. Blake and Mr. Pemberton."

She flushed a little, and bowed with some hauteur.

"Will you come upstairs with me, Doctor," she said, turning away from him.

Dr. Nestley was about to follow, when his attention was arrested by the unexpected apparition of a small, stout lady, by no means young, who was, nevertheless, arrayed in a juvenile-looking gown of pink with the remarkable addition of a tea-cosy perched on her head which gave her the appearance of being half extinguished. She also held a candle and stood in front of the doctor, smirking and smiling coquettishly.

"Introduce me, Una, dearest," she cried, in a thin, piping voice which seemed ridiculous, coming from such a stout person. "I'm so fond of doctors. Most people aren't--but then I'm odd."

She certainly was, both in appearance and manner; but, Una being used to her

eccentricities, evinced no surprise, but, looking down on the grotesque figure from her tall height, smiled gravely.

"Doctor Nestley, this is my aunt, Miss Cassandra Challoner," she said, in a soft voice.

Miss Cassandra shook her girlish head and made an odd little bow, to which the doctor politely responded, then suddenly recollecting the tea-cosy, snatched it off with an apologetic giggle, thereby displaying a head of frizzy yellow hair.

"Draughty house," she said, in explanation of her peculiar head-dress. "I get neuralgia pains down the side of my nose and in my left eye. I'm sure it's the left, doctor. Very odd, isn't it? I wear the tea-cosy to keep the heat in my head. Heat is good for the nerves, but you know all about that, being a doctor. How very odd. I mean, it isn't odd, is it?"

How long she would have rambled on in this aimless fashion it is impossible to say, but, fortunately, a third woman, bearing a candle, appeared descending the stairs, which put an end to Miss Cassandra's chatter.

"It's Jellicks," said Miss Challoner quickly, "the squire must be worse."

Jellicks was an ugly old woman of about sixty, with a withered, wrinkled face, rough, greyish hair, and a peculiar kind of wriggling movement, something like that of a dog who has done wrong and wants to curry favour with his angry master. She wriggled down the stairs, writhed up to Una, and, with a final wriggle, delivered her message in one word and a whisper.

"Wuss!" she hissed out in a low, sibillant manner.

Dr. Nestley was beginning to feel bewildered with the strangeness of his position. This cold, vault-like hall with its high roof, tessellated black and white diamond pavement, massive figures in suits of armour on either side, seemed to chill his blood, and the three candles held by the three women danced before his eyes like will-o'-the-wisps. A musty odour permeated the atmosphere, and the flickering lights, which only served to show the darkness, assumed to his distorted imagination the semblance of corpse candles. Shaking off this feeling with an effort, he turned to Miss Challoner.

"I think I had better go up at once," he said in a loud, cheerful voice. "Every

moment is precious."

Miss Challoner bowed in silence, and preceded him up the stairs, followed by the wriggling Jellicks and the girlish Miss Cassandra, who declined to be left behind.

"No; positively no," she whimpered, shaking her candle and replacing the cosy on her head. "It's like a tomb--the 'Mistletoe Bough,' you know--very odd--he might die--his spirit and all that sort of thing--nerves, doctor, nothing else--chronic; mother's side--dear, dear. I feel like a haunted person in what's-his-name's book? Dickens. Charming, isn't he? So odd."

And, indeed, there was a ghostly flavour about the whole place as they walked slowly up the wide stairs, with the darkness closing densely around them. Every footfall seemed to awake an echo, and the painted faces of the old Garsworths frowned and smiled grotesquely on them from the walls as they moved silently along.

A wide corridor, another short flight of stairs, and then a heavy door, underneath which could be seen a thin streak of light. Pausing here, Una opened it, and the four passed into Squire Garsworth's bedroom, which struck the doctor as being almost as chill and ghostly as the hall.

It was a large room with no carpet on the polished floor, hardly any furniture and no lights, save at the further end, where a candle, standing on a small round table, feebly illuminated a huge curtained bed set on a small square of carpet on which were also the round table aforesaid and two heavy chairs, the whole forming a kind of dismal oasis in the desert of bare floor.

On the bed lay the squire, an attenuated old man with a face looking as though it were carved out of old ivory, fierce black eyes and scanty white hair flowing from under a black velvet skull cap. A multiplicity of clothes were heaped on the bed to keep him warm, and his thin arms and claw-like hands were outside the blankets plucking restlessly at the counterpane. Beside him stood a woman in a slate-coloured dress, with an expressionless white face and smooth black hair, drawn back over her finely shaped head. She kept her eyes on the floor and her hands folded in front of her, but, on hearing a strange footstep, turned to look at the doctor. A strangely mournful face it was, as if the shadow of a great sorrow had fallen across it and would never more be lifted. Nestley guessed this to be

Patience Allerby, so the number of the extraordinary individuals who occupied Garsworth Grange was now complete.

Hearing the doctor enter, Squire Garsworth, with the suspicious celerity of a sick man, raised himself on his elbow and peered malevolently into the darkness, looking like some evil magician of old time.

"Who is there?" he asked in a querulous voice, "someone to rob me; thieves and rogues--all--all rogues and thieves."

"It is the doctor," said Una, coming close to him.

"What does he bring? what does he bring?" asked the sick man, eagerly, "life or death? Tell me, quick."

"I cannot tell you till I ask a few questions," said Nestley, stepping into the radius of light.

"Ha!" cried Garsworth, with sudden suspicion, "not Bland. No; a stranger. What do you want? Where is Bland?"

"He is ill," said Nestley distinctly, coming close to him, "and cannot come, but I am a doctor and will do as well."

The old man looked at him anxiously, seeming to devour him with the fierce intensity of his gaze.

"Weak," he muttered, after a pause, "very weak, still there is intellect in the face."

Then he suddenly put out his hand and grasped that of Nestley in his thin, claw-like fingers.

"I will trust you," he said rapidly. "You are weak, but honest. Save my life and I will pay you well."

"I will do what I can," replied Nestley simply.

The squire, with an effort, sat up in bed, and waved his hand imperatively.

"Turn them all out," he said sharply, pointing to the women. "I must tell you what I wo'nt tell them. A physician is more of a confessor than a priest. Go away and leave me with my confessor."

Nestley was about to remonstrate, but Una placed her finger on her lips, and all three women noiselessly withdrew, bearing their candles. When the door closed after them the immense room was quite in darkness, save for the feeble glimmer of the taper by the bed, which shed its light on the pallid countenance of the old man now lying back exhausted on his pillows. It was certainly a very strange situation, and Nestley, modern physician though he was, felt little thrills of superstitious awe running through him. He was about to speak when the squire, turning on his side, looked at him earnestly and commenced to talk.

"I do not want you to diagnose my case," he said, in a low, feverish voice. "I can tell you all about it. Your task is to supply remedies. I am an old man, seventy-five years of age. It's a long life, but not long enough for what I want. The sword has worn out the scabbard--my soul is encased in a worn-out body and I want you to sustain the vital forces of the body. I can look after the soul; you mind the body."

"I understand perfectly," observed Nestley, feeling his pulse. "Nerve exhaustion."

"Aha! yes, that is it. I have been working too hard and overtaxed my nerves. You must restore them to their normal state. Tonics, electricity, rest--what you will, but give me back my vital powers in their pristine vigour."

"It is impossible to do that," said Nestley, quickly, "you are not young, remember, but I will give you some medicine that will replace the wasted tissues and afford you relief, if not health; but you will never be strong again."

"Not in this body," exclaimed Garsworth, raising himself on his elbow, "no, but in my next incarnation I shall be--ah, you look surprised, but you, no doubt, have heard of the mad squire. Mad! Poor fools, my madness is their sanity. I shall be young and vigorous in my next body, and I shall be rich. All this life I have been working for the next, but I have not gained enough money. No, not half enough. Make me well again, that I can complete my work, then I will gladly leave this worn-out body for a new one. I will pay you--oh yes--I will pay you."

He fell back exhausted on the pillows, worn out by the rapidity of his speech,

and Nestley called out loudly for assistance. Patience Allerby entered the room, and, by the doctor's orders brought some wine in a glass. This Nestley held to the sick man's lips, while the housekeeper, at the other side of the bed, held the candle for him to see by. The wine infused a fictitious life into the old man, and seeing he was easier, Nestley determined to go back to Garsworth in order to get some medicine.

He put the clothes over the squire and bent down to speak.

"You must lie quiet," he said, in a slow voice, "and take some wine whenever you feel exhausted. I will send you a sedative to-night, and to-morrow morning will call and see you."

The sick man, too exhausted to speak, made a motion with his hand to show he understood, and lay back white and still, in complete contrast to his former restlessness. Nestley saw that the effort had fatigued him greatly, and was the more anxious to give him some soothing draught, as every paroxysm of excitement exhausted the nerves and rendered him weaker. But even in his anxiety, as he looked at him lying so still with the candles on either side of the bed, he could not help comparing him, in his own mind, to a corpse laid out preparatory to burial. The thought was a horrible one, but the atmosphere of the house seemed to engender horrible thoughts, so he hurried to the door, anxious to leave this nightmare castle.

Patience Allerby, soft-footed and silent, lighted him downstairs, and having seen him safe in the hall turned back without a word.

"A strange woman," thought Nestley, looking after her, "and a strange house;" then he turned to Una and Miss Cassey, who were anxiously waiting his report.

"I have given him a little wine," he said, putting on his gloves. "Keep him as quiet as possible and I'll send some opiate from Garsworth; he is in a very exhausted condition and must be kept quiet. How can I send the medicine?"

"Munks will bring it when he drives you in," said Una quickly. "You will come again?"

"Yes, to-morrow morning," he replied as she opened the door, and was about to depart when Miss Cassey arrested him.

"I'll take some of the medicine myself, doctor," she said. "I'm so easily upset--nerves again--it's in the family; come and prescribe for me to-morrow--I'm so odd, I think it's the house--lonely, you know--bromide is good, isn't it? Yes, Doctor Pecks, in London, told me so. Do you know him?--No--how odd--clever on nerves--my nerves--don't forget to-morrow--good-night--charming moon--yes--so odd."

After hearing this incoherent speech, Dr. Nestley managed to get away, and saying good-night to Una, went down the steps. The dog-cart was waiting for him, and Munks, the Mute, drove him back grimly the whole way. It was quite a relief getting into the cool fresh air, and Nestley half thought the lonely house and its fantastic occupants were phantoms, so unreal did they seem.

CHAPTER V.

THE FAMILY CIRCLE.

But turning from these scenes of beauty rare
The family circle next demands our care,
That fireside kingdom where the father bland
His sceptre sways with firm and gentle hand.
Obedient children clust'ring round his knees
Perform with pleasure all his mild decrees,
With willing hearts upon his orders wait
Thus show example to the parent state.

Dr. Larcher, the vicar of Garsworth, was a fine type of what is called muscular Christianity. Tall, broad-shouldered and burly, he looked more like a cavalry officer than a parson, and he preached his sermons, which were generally plain and outspoken, in a loud assertive tone of voice. Being fond of archaeology and long walks he knew every inch of the country for miles round, and was as well acquainted with the poorest cottagers as with the lords of the soil. Simple, large-

mindful gentleman that he was, he admirably suited his position in life, and if the rustics of Garsworth had not a sound belief in the tenets of the Church of England, it was by no means the fault of the worthy vicar, who thundered out practical Christianity in ponderous Johnsonian sentences, with the zeal of a Savonarola and the eloquence of a Bossuet. He was also a great Latinist and plentifully seasoned his discourse with quotations from Horace, for which bard he professed great admiration.

On the morning after the visit of Nestley to the Grange, Dr. Larcher was seated at the breakfast-table talking eagerly about a bronze sword which had just been brought to him, having been disinterred from some ancient British tumulus. His present congregation consisted of Dick Pemberton, who was rather disposed to laugh at the important discovery, Reginald Blake, looking somewhat preoccupied, Ferdinand Priggs, the poet, a sallow youth with dreamy eyes and a deep voice, and Miss Eleonora Gwendoline Vera Bianca Larcher, the sole child of the vicar and his wife.

These names, decidedly alarming ones, had been given to her by Mrs. Larcher, who had selected them from the "Family Herald," her favourite journal, but Dr. Larcher, who had no fancy for high-sounding titles, called his daughter Pumpkin. This unhappy cognomen had been bestowed on the child by the nurse, in despair at being unable to master the legitimate names, and the vicar was so pleased with the oddity of the title that he there and then adopted it. Mrs. Larcher, however, obstinately refused to accept this innovation, and called her daughter Eleonora Gwendoline, but generally Miss Larcher answered to the name of Pumpkin, her aristocratic names being only brought out on company occasions.

She was a pretty, plump girl, with dark eyes and a rosy face. Endowed with a large amount of common sense, her tastes lay in the direction of making puddings and mending clothes, whilst she evinced a great contempt for poetry and such-like things. Mrs. Larcher, being an invalid, left the management of the house entirely to Pumpkin, who ruled the servants with a rod of iron, looked after the creature comforts of her father and his pupils, and was besides a bright, lively girl whom everyone adored.

As to Mrs. Larcher, she was always ill, but why she should be so was a mystery to everyone save herself. It was either her nerves or her liver or her spine or her laziness, most probably the latter, as she mostly passed her life alternating

between the sofa and her bed. Occasionally she strolled out, but always came back feeling weak and bad, to be strengthened with strong tea and hot muffins, after which she would bewail her delicate constitution in a subdued whimper. Her unknown malady was known to all as "The Affliction," that being a generic name for all kinds of diseases, and Mrs. Larcher herself alluded to her ill health by this title as being a happy one and necessitating no special mention of any one infirmity. Pumpkin looked after everything and was the good fairy of the vicarage, while Mrs. Larcher lay all day on her sofa reading novels and drinking tea, or gossiping with any visitors who might drop in.

At present Mrs. Larcher was safe in bed upstairs and Pumpkin presided at the breakfast-table, which was now covered with an array of empty dishes, as the male portion of the vicarage inmates, with the exception of the poet, had large appetites. Dr. Larcher, however, had been too excited to eat much, and had his eyes intently fixed upon his newly-discovered bronze implement.

"It's a wonderful example of what the ancient Britons could do," he said grandiloquently, "and to my mind, it proves no mean standard of civilisation."

"Even in that age of barbarism," observed the poet enthusiastically, "they cultivated a love for the beautiful."

"Oh, bosh," said Dick irreverently, "they wanted something to knock the stuffing out of an enemy."

"Well, I think that sword could do it," remarked Pumpkin with a smile. "Suppose we try it on you, Dick."

"No, thanks," retorted that young gentleman, grimacing, "I'll agree without practical proof."

"I shall write an article on this," said Dr. Larcher, delicately balancing the sword in his hand. "Such a discovery will be a distinct gain to our knowledge of the aborigines of that dead and buried time of so long ago--*Eheu fugaces Postume labuntur anni.*"

"It breathes the very spirit of the age," cried Ferdinand with an inspired air:

The age of Bronze, the age of Bronze
Where Boadicea----

"Loved and sung," finished Dick. "I say old chap, you're cribbing from the Isles of Greece."

Whereupon Ferdinand entered into a lively discussion with Dick to prove that he had not plagiarised from Byron while Dick in reply mercilessly chaffed the unhappy poet with such success that he fled from the room, pursued by his laughing antagonist.

"What is the matter, Reggy?" asked Pumpkin, seeing how quiet Blake had remained, "anything wrong?"

"Oh no," he replied hastily, "but I was wondering how the Squire is this morning."

"You'd better go over and see, Blake," said the vicar, looking up. "I hope that strange doctor did him some good. By the way who is this doctor?"

"I don't know, sir," answered Blake, turning towards Dr. Larcher, "he said he was on a walking tour, and I fancy is a friend of Beaumont's."

The vicar frowned.

"Birds of a feather," he said decisively. "I don't think much of Beaumont, Blake, and if this Dr. Nestley is his friend, I'm afraid he's not much good."

"That is severe, papa," said Pumpkin.

"My dear," replied her father emphatically. "I hope I am the last man in the world to speak ill of my fellow creatures, but I am afraid that Basil Beaumont is not a good man--you can hardly call him *'integer vitæ'*,--I knew him before he left the parish, and even then his nature was not all that could be desired, but now his worst traits of character have become developed in the pernicious atmosphere of London life, and as I am the guardian of three youths whose minds are naturally open to seductive influences it is but right that I should take a severe view of the matter; if Basil Beaumont became the companion of my pupils I should tremble for the result--*ille dies utramque ducet ruinam*."

"But Dr. Nestley, papa?"

"As to Doctor Nestley," said the vicar majestically, "I do not yet know him--when I do, I will be in a position to judge of his character--but like draws to like and I fear--I fear sadly," finished Dr. Larcher shaking his head sagaciously, "that no one of strictly upright principles can be an intimate friend of Basil Beaumont's."

"I don't think they are very intimate friends," said Reggy thoughtfully, "rather the opposite."

"Ah, indeed," replied Dr. Larcher, "well, well, we shall see; however--*non hæc jocosæ conveniunt lyræ*--you can go over to the Grange, Blake, and inquire after the Squire's health."

At this moment a tapping was heard on the floor above which signified that Mrs. Larcher required some little attention, whereupon Pumpkin left the room with alacrity in order to see what "The Affliction" wanted. Left alone with the vicar Reggy was about to retire, when Dr. Larcher stopped him.

"By the way, Blake," he said gravely, "I wish to speak to you on a serious subject."

Reggy flushed red and bowed without saying a word, as he intuitively guessed what was coming.

"I am aware," observed the vicar in his ponderous manner, "that I may be about to interfere in your affairs in what you may consider a most unjustifiable manner."

"Not at all, sir," answered Reginald warmly, "no one has such a right to speak to me as you have--my second father--I may say my only father."

Dr. Larcher smiled in a gratified manner and looked at the tall young man standing near him with approval.

"I am glad to have your good opinion," he said, politely bending his head, "but in order that you may understand me clearly you must permit me to recapitulate as shortly as possible the story of your life--this is a very critical period of your

career--remember Horace, *Tu nisi ventis debis ludibrium cave.*"

Blake turned pale, then, with a forced smile resumed his seat and waited for the vicar to proceed, which that worthy gentleman did, not without some embarrassment.

"Of course you understand," he said clearing his throat, "that I am quite unaware of your parentage--whether your father and mother are alive I do not know--about two-and-twenty years ago you were brought to me by Patience Allerby, your nurse, who had just then returned from London, where she had been in service. She told me that you were the son of a poor literary man and his wife, whose servant she had been, they went away to France and--I understand--died there. She was left with you on her hands so brought you down here and delivered you to my charge; since then you have been an inmate of my house."

"The only home I ever knew," interposed Blake with emotion.

"I will not deny," said Dr. Larcher, "that I have received through your nurse certain sums of money for your education which leads me to believe--in spite of her denial--that your parents may be still alive. This is well enough in the past, but now you are twenty-two years of age and I wish to make some arrangements about your future career--you will of course choose your own vocation in life--but meantime I wish you to ask Patience Allerby about your birth and obtain from her all information regarding your parents which may be of use to me--you can do so when you go over to the Grange to-day--and then let me know the result; afterwards we can discuss ways and means regarding your future."

"It's very kind of you, sir to talk like this," said Blake in a low voice, "and I feel deeply grateful to you. I will see Patience and get her to tell me all she knows, but I'm afraid I can expect nothing from my parents, even though they are alive--a father and mother who could leave their child to the mercy of strangers all these years cannot have much humanity."

"Do not judge them too harshly," said the vicar hastily, "there may be reasons."

"I've no doubt of that," replied Blake bitterly, "reasons which mean shame."

"Not necessarily--a secret marriage----"

"Would have been declared long before the lapse of twenty years," said Reggy

quickly. "I'm afraid there is worse than that and my birth was my mother's shame."

There was a cloud on the good vicar's brow as the young man spoke, but he delicately refrained from saying anything. Going over to Blake he patted him gently on the shoulder, a mark of kindness which touched the young man deeply.

"Come! come, Blake," he said cheerfully, "you must not cherish these morbid fancies. You are young and clever, with the world before you, who knows but what you may achieve success, and then your unknown parents, if they live, will acknowledge you only too gladly. Do not be so easily cast down. What is the manly advice of the Venusinian?"

'Rebus angustis animosus atque
Fortis appare.'"

"I don't think Horace was ever called upon to bear trouble undaunted," said Blake rather sadly, "but if my belief is true it will cast a shadow on my life."

"Morbid! morbid!" replied the vicar gaily, "do not go out in a coach and four to meet your troubles, my lad--see Patience first--if your thoughts prove true there will be time enough to lament them, but with youth and brains on your side you should not turn recreant in the battle of life."

"Nor will I," said Reggy, grasping the kind hand held out towards him. "Whatever comes or goes I have at least one man who has been to me father and mother both."

Then, overcome by his emotion, he hastily left the room, while the vicar, taking up the bronze sword, prepared to follow.

"Ah!" said the worthy gentleman with a sigh. "I trust his forebodings may not prove true, but Patience Allerby knows more than she tells, and I fear for the worst; however, *Non si male nunc et olim sic erit*, and the boy has at least had a few happy years--what says glorious John?"

'Not heaven itself over the past hath power
For what hath been hath been,
And I have had my hour.'

And with this somewhat pagan sentiment Dr. Larcher went away to discuss the Bronze period, illustrated by the newly-found sword, with a certain old crony who always differed from him and constantly said "No," to the vicar's "Yes."

CHAPTER VI.

A MORNING WALK.

A snake you were in other days
Ere you attained the human state;
Still in your veins the snake blood plays
Which leads you now to gloze and hate,
The magic of the serpent gaze
Lurks in your eyes to fascinate.

As it was a holiday the pupils were left to their own devices, and on going outside, Blake found Dick Pemberton amusing himself with Muffins and a fishing rod. Ferdinand having been worsted by the volatile Dick, had long since departed to work at a tragedy he was composing, and Mr. Pemberton was evidently getting ready for a fishing excursion in company with Muffins.

"Now what do you think you are doing?" asked Reggy pausing at the door.

"None so blind as those who won't see," retorted Dick coolly. "I'm goin' fishin'."

"Fishing?" repeated Reggy with emphasis.

"With the accent on the 'G'," replied Richard gaily. "Don't be a pedant, old chap--fishin' means the same thing as fishing, and not so much trouble to say. I suppose I ought to call Muffins 'Muffings.'"

"Oh, bosh!" retorted Reggy politely, walking down to the gate.

"Quite right--it is bosh, oh King. Where are you off to?"

"Grange?"

Dick arched his eyebrows, shook his head, and whistled, at which Reginald flushed a little.

"What do you mean?" he asked, turning round.

"Nothin', nothin'," said Dick demurely; "you're 'goin' a-courtin', sir, she said,' I suppose."

"What nonsense, Dick," said Blake angrily, "as if Una----"

"Oh! ho!" replied Pemberton; "sits the wind in that quarter? I never mentioned the lady's name. You ought to get our one and only poet to write you some verses--"

'Oh, I could spoon a
Girl like dear Una
Aileen Aroona,'

--bad poetry, but beautiful sentiment."

"I wish you'd be serious, Dick," said Reginald in a vexed tone; "I am only going over to the Grange to ask after the Squire's health."

"All right," replied Dick good-naturedly; "give old Cassy my love, and tell her I'm going to propose to her--odd, isn't it?--so very odd." And with a capital imitation of Miss Cassandra's fidgety manner, he walked away followed by Muffins, while Reginald went out of the gate on to the village street.

The interview with Dr. Larcher had touched him more nearly than he liked to confess even to himself, and his frivolous conversation with Dick had been somewhat of a relief to him, but now, being alone, he relapsed into sombre thoughts. He was dissatisfied with his position, and longed to know more about himself--who were his parents?--were they dead or alive?--why was he thrust into the world as an outcast? The only person who could explain the mystery of his life was Patience Allerby; he determined therefore to apply to her for the explanation.

Filled with these dismal thoughts, he sauntered slowly up the street as far as the bridge. Here he paused, and leaning over the parapet, began to think again. It was a curious thing that this young man, brought up in a quiet, Christian household, should let his thoughts run on such a morbid idea as the possibility of his being a natural son. He had no experience of vice, and should therefore have accepted the marriage of his unknown parents as a fact, especially when his nurse asserted that they had been married. But the strangeness of his position led him to believe that there must be some motive for concealment, and this motive, he determined in his own mind, was the want of a marriage certificate.

The real cause, however, which led to this morbid analysis of the possible relations between his parents, lay in a discovery which he had lately made--a discovery which changed the simple manly life he was leading into a raging hell of doubts and self-torturings.

He was in love--and Una Challoner was the woman he loved. It was not that sickly evanescent affection common to adolescence, known by the name of calf love--no; but that strong overwhelming passion of the soul which has no limits and which dominates and sways the whole nature. Drawn in the first place towards Una by simple admiration of her beauty, he learned later on to discard this passion without soul, and found in the kindred sympathy of her spirit with his own that ideal union which so rarely exists. She, on her part, had been attracted to him by the same qualities which he found in her, and this perfect agreement developed in each a pure and spiritual adoration.

His love thus being pure, he would not dare to offer her anything but purity, and anxiously began to examine his life in order to discover all flaws which marred its whiteness. He was not an ideal young man, still he discovered nothing in his life which could embarrass him to explain, so felt quite easy in himself, but now this shadow of possible illegitimacy seemed to threaten disaster. He would not dare to offer to the woman he loved and respected a name which was not legally his own.

However, it was no use indulging in self-torture when it could be ended by getting a proper explanation of the circumstances of his birth from Patience Allerby. Hitherto he had shrunk from doing this with the vague hesitation of a man who dreads to hear the truth, but now it was imperative he should learn all, be it good or evil, and shape his course accordingly. At this moment of his life he stood at the junction of two roads, and the explanation of Patience Allerby would decide which one he was to take. Having come to this logical conclusion, he resolutely banished all dismal thoughts from his heart, and walked rapidly across the common in the direction of Garsworth Grange. It was the quest, not for El Dorado or the Holy Grail, but for the secret which would make or mar his whole life.

Dull and heavy was the day, with a cold grey sky overhead, a humid wind blowing chill with the moisture of the fens, and a sense of decay in the atmosphere. The gaunt, bare trees with their slender branches and twigs outlined with delicate distinctness against the sad grey sky--the withered leaves with their vivid reds and yellows which carpeted the ground--the absence of song of bird or cheerful lowing of kine--all weighed down and depressed his spirits. The uniform tints of the landscape with their absence of colour and life seemed like a type of his own existence at present; but lo, when he raised his eyes a golden shaft of sunlight was above the distant towers of the Grange, where he hoped to find the talisman which would change the grey monotony of an uneventful past to the glory and joy of a happy future. It was an omen of success, and his eyes brightened, his step grew springy and he clutched his stick with determination as he strode towards the glory of the sun, leaving the grey mists and desolate landscape behind him.

As he walked on he saw a short distance ahead the tall figure of a man, and on coming abreast of him, he recognised Basil Beaumont, who was listlessly strolling along, thinking deeply. Remembering the vicar's dislike to the character of Beaumont, he was about to pass on with a conventional nod, when the artist

spoke, and he could not with courtesy refuse to answer.

"Good morning, Blake," he said in a friendly tone. "Taking a constitutional?"

"Not exactly," replied Reginald, falling into the leisurely walk of the artist; "the vicar wants to know how Squire Garsworth is?"

"Had I met you earlier I could have saved you the walk," said Beaumont indolently; "he is much better--they sent to Nestley this morning to tell him about it."

"Where is Dr. Nestley now?" asked Blake.

Beaumont pointed to the Grange with his stick.

"Over there," he answered, "seeing his patient. I expect he'll have to remain down here for some time--the Squire has taken a great fancy to him--rich men's likings are poor men's fortunes."

"Good. I wish someone would take a liking to me," said Blake with a sigh. "I need a fortune."

"You've got one."

"Indeed! Where?"

"In your throat!"

Reginald laughed and shook his head.

"I hardly think that," he answered gaily.

"Don't be so mock modest, my dear boy," said Beaumont with a shrug. "I assure you I'm not one to praise unnecessarily. You need training, severe training, to bring your voice to perfection; but you've got a wonderful organ to work on--not that voice is everything, mind you; I've known people with good voices to whom such a gift is absolutely worthless."

"Why?"

"Because they've got no talent. To make a singer needs more than voice--it needs

great perseverance, powerful dramatic instinct, an educated mind, and a strong individuality."

"I don't think I've got all that," said Reggy rather disconsolately.

"Let me see," observed Beaumont deliberately, "you've a good voice and dramatic instinct, as I know from the way you sang that song last night--you are educated, of course, and I can see for myself you have an individuality of your own--there only remains perseverance. Have you perseverance?"

"I think so."

"Ah! doubtful. I'll put the question in another way. Are you ambitious? If you are, you must have perseverance--one is the natural outcome of the other."

"How so?"

"Logically in this way--an ambitious man wants to succeed--he can't succeed without perseverance--ergo, he perseveres to succeed in his ambition. Now then, are you persevering or ambitious?"

"I'm not sure."

"No!" Beaumont did not seem disappointed at this reply, but went on talking. "Then you have no incentive; you are in the chrysalis stage; get an incentive, and you will change to a butterfly."

"What incentive can I obtain."

"That depends upon your temperament--the desire to leave the dull village--the desire to have money, and above all, the desire to be loved by some woman."

"Ah," said Blake, whom this last remark stung sharply, "at least I have that incentive."

Beaumont laughed.

"Then the result must follow, you will persevere and succeed."

Blake was much impressed with Beaumont's remarks, for a vision rose before

him of a bright future and a famous name with Una for his wife. Then the recollection of the dark secret of his birth came back to him; if what he surmised were true, he would have nothing to work for as there would be an insuperable bar between him and the girl he loved. The roseate scenes he had conjured up vanished, and in their place he only saw the sorrow of a lonely life. He sighed involuntarily, and shook his head.

"It all depends on one thing," he said sadly.

"And that one thing?" asked Beaumont keenly.

"It is at present a secret," replied Blake curtly, whereupon Beaumont laughed lightly in no wise offended, and they walked on for a short distance in silence.

They were now nearing the Grange, and Beaumont was going to turn back when he saw Nestley coming down the road.

"Here is Nestley," he said carelessly, "so you can learn all about the Squire from him, and need not go to the Grange."

"I must go to the Grange," replied Blake.

Beaumont smiled and whistled the air of "Love's Young Dream," for he had heard rumours in the village which led him to believe that Blake was in love with the Squire's beautiful cousin.

Reginald understood him, and was about to make some angry remark, when Nestley came up to them and put an end to the conversation.

"Well, doctor," said Beaumont lightly, "and how is your patient?"

Nestley's face wore a frown as he recognised Beaumont, but he evidently determined not to give his enemy the pleasure of seeing his annoyance, so, smoothing his features to a bland smile, he replied in the same conversational manner:

"Better--much better--he'll be all right soon--less excitable--but the body is worn out."

"And the brain?" asked the artist.

"Oh, that's all right--he's got a wonderful brain."

"Slightly cracked," interposed Blake, nodding to Nestley.

"Just slightly," replied Nestley, coolly. "But his madness has a good deal of method in it. He's got queer ideas about the re-incarnation of the soul--but we've all queer ideas more or less."

"Particularly more," observed Beaumont, indolently. "Are you coming back, Nestley? I'll be glad of a companion."

Nestley hesitated. He did not like Beaumont, and mistrusted him. Still, there was a wonderful fascination about the man which few could resist, and in spite of his dislike Nestley rapidly found himself falling once more under the old spell of that suave, cynical manner.

"I don't mind," he said, carelessly, "particularly as I want to give you a message from the Squire."

"To me?" said Beaumont in surprise. "What about?"

"A picture. The squire wants his portrait taken, and----"

"You thought of me," said Beaumont, with a cold smile; "how charming you are, my dear Nestley. I'll be delighted to paint the Squire, he's a Rembrandtian study, full of light and shade and wrinkles."

"Where are you going to, Mr. Blake?" asked Nestley, abruptly turning to the young man and eyeing him keenly.

"To the Grange," replied Blake carelessly, "to see the Squire. Good morning, gentlemen," and with a cool nod, the young man strolled away in the direction of Garsworth Grange.

Nestley stood looking after him oddly.

"To see the Squire," he repeated. "Yes and Una Challoner."

"Ah," said Beaumont cynically. "You've seen that, my dear fellow."

"Yes. Do you know Una Challoner loves him?"

"Not exactly. I know he loves Una Challoner."

"She returns it," said Nestley gloomily. "I found that out from her manner this morning."

Beaumont smiled and looked strangely at the downcast face of the doctor.

"I understand," he said, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Understand what?" asked Nestley angrily.

"That you also love Una Challoner."

"Absurd, I've only seen her twice."

"Nevertheless----"

"What?"

"Oh nothing, nothing," replied Beaumont airily. "I'll tell you all about it in a week."

Nestley did not reply, but stood silently looking at the ground, on seeing which, Beaumont drew his arm within his own, with a gay laugh.

"Come along," he said cheerfully, "we'll walk back to Garsworth, and you can tell me all about the Squire and his picture."

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOUSEKEEPER.

Like a lone mountain white with virgin snow,
Which holds within its breast eternal fire
This woman cold and pale with face of woe
Yet feels at heart an unappeased desire.

Reginald Blake walked briskly up the avenue. It had an excessively dreary appearance, for the black looking trees with their angular branches seemed starved and attenuated while the leaves underfoot were sodden with rain. The marble statues which were standing here and there, wore a disconsolate look, as if they longed for the sunny skies of their native Italy, and mutely protested against this misty climate which discoloured and marred their beauty.

When he arrived at the terrace, the long white façade of the house seemed grim and uninviting. No smoke ascended from the slender chimneys, no face appeared at the bare staring windows, and the terrace, which should have been thronged with gay company, was silent and deserted, chilling the very soul with its mute sense of desolation.

The young man rang the bell in the monstrous porch, and before the harsh jangling had ceased to echo through the dreary house, the door was opened by Jellicks. On recognising Blake, she wriggled a welcome and admitted him into the vault-like hall which still retained the musty smell observed by Nestley. Outside the grey sky, inside the grey twilight, it seemed as though the sun had not warmed this dismal place with his cheerful beams for centuries.

"I want to see Miss Challoner," said Reginald, when the heavy door was once more closed, "is she at home?"

Jellicks replied that she was, in a serpent-like hiss, and then, still more like a serpent, she wriggled along the dark corridor on the ground floor followed by Blake, who felt depressed by the surrounding atmosphere of decay.

At length she stopped midway in the passage and on knocking at a door was bidden by a thin voice, seemingly that of Miss Cassy, to enter.

Reginald did so, and Jellicks having twisted herself apologetically out of the room, he stepped forward to greet Una and Cassandra, who were seated in the wide window looking out on to the white terrace and dreary landscape.

Una, flushed with life and beauty, seemed somewhat out of place in this charnel house though, truth to tell, the room had a more homelike appearance than the rest of the Grange. Not very large, panelled with carved oak, dark and solemn-looking, it was hung round with pictures in tarnished gilt frames, the floor being covered with a comfortable-looking carpet of reddish tint. In the huge fireplace burned a goodly fire, which somewhat warmed the chill atmosphere. The furniture was quaint and old-fashioned, of all dates, ranging from heavy oak tables of Tudor days to spindle-legged Chippendale chairs and curiously inlaid cabinets of more modern construction. There was only one window in the room, a deep oriel with benches set in its depths and its diamond panes rich with brightly tinted escutcheons of the Garsworth family. A quaint room of ancient and incongruous appearance, yet having withal a quiet beauty of its own, a tone of intense restfulness, which was not without charm.

"Good morning, Miss Challoner," said Reginald politely, mindful of the presence of Miss Cassy. "I have called by the desire of Dr. Larcher to see how the squire is."

"Oh, better, much better," interposed Miss Cassy before Una could speak. "I said it was nerves all along--so very odd--quite excitable he was, but the dear doctor's medicine you know--so soothing, really very soothing--I don't know what the dear squire will do without the dear doctor."

"He's not going to do without him, aunt," said Una with a smile; "my cousin is afraid of getting ill again, so has asked Dr. Nestley to stay down here for a few weeks to complete the cure."

"What about his own practice?" asked Reginald.

"Oh, he says that will be all right, as he has left it in charge of his partner. Have you met Dr. Nestley?"

"Yes, at the gates; he has gone back to Garsworth with Mr. Beaumont."

"Beaumont," said Miss Cassy with vivacity, "that is the painter, very odd, isn't it? he's going to paint the dear squire's picture--how nice."

"Why does the squire want his picture painted?" inquired Blake.

Una laughed.

"Not for his beauty, at all events," she said mischievously, "but, you know, there is only one picture of him in the gallery--as a young man. I presume this will be for the sake of contrast. Do you know Mr. Beaumont?"

"Slightly. He's a stranger here," replied Blake, a little coldly. "I should say he was a very clever man--but he is hardly the style I care about."

"He looks wicked," said Miss Cassy, nodding her head sagely; "worn, you know--oh, shocking!--but very handsome--just the kind of man I would like for a son."

"Oh, aunt!" said Una, slightly shocked.

"Well, I would, Una. You know I should like to have been married--I'm sure I don't know why I haven't been married," said the poor lady, pathetically. "I'm sure anyone can see I'm not made for a spinster--it's so odd, isn't it?"

Blake, being directly appealed to, suppressed a smile, and, and assented politely; whereupon Miss Cassy resumed:

"It's so hard for an unmarried girl to know when to leave off being a girl--I'm sure I don't know--ivy, you know, I feel like it; I'm made to cling to a manly oak--no, I mean an oakly man--no! not that--mixed, you see! I mean a man like an oak--yes, that's it, and then I might have had twelve stalwart sons--all oaks! Odd, isn't it?--most peculiar."

"My dear aunt, what curious things you say!" said Una, looking reproachfully at Reggy, who was trying to smother his laughter.

"Yes, I know, dear," replied Miss Cassy, complacently, "we're all odd--nerves--quite chronic; anyone can see that it comes of being an ivy--I mean a woman--so very nice--yes, I always say so--don't you, Mr. Blake?"

Reginald could not exactly say he did, as he was in doubt as to what Miss Cassy meant, but made some confused answer, and then asked to see Patience Allerby.

"She's in the housekeeper's room, I think," said Una. "Auntie will take you there, and when you are done with her I'll go to Garsworth with you."

"Will you, really? I'm so glad!" said Reginald, eagerly.

"I want to see Cecilia in the church," replied Miss Challoner, "about the concert."

"What concert?"

"Don't you know? Oh, we're going to have a concert in the school-room shortly. You are to be asked to sing."

"Delighted."

"Cecilia will play a piece--she doesn't like the piano as much as the organ, but we can hardly get that out of the church."

"I'm going to sing also," said Miss Cassy, shaking her curls, "so nice--quite operatic. I'll sing a duet with you, Mr. Blake, if you like."

Blake hastily excused himself, as he had great dread of Miss Cassy's vocal performances, which were, to say the least, somewhat screechy. The lady accepted his apology graciously, and then led him out of the room to find the housekeeper, leaving Una to get ready for the walk.

Miss Cassy, being delighted to have a charming young man for audience, chattered all the way in a disconnected fashion.

"So damp, isn't it--quite chilly. I never did like the weather. Very watery--rheumatic, you know. I mean the weather, of course--not myself! I think Patience is in her room--so kind of you to see your old nurse--quite delightful! Light of what's his name, you know--Moore--exactly; Irish melodies--so pretty! This is the door. Oh, Patience--you are in--so glad--here is Mr. Blake to see you! The squire's easier--yes, nerves, of course--I knew it. I'll go back to Una, Mr. Blake, and see you later on--very pleased, indeed--quite a treat to see a male. Sounds like the post--very odd, isn't it?--yes!"

And Miss Cassy, closing the door after her, departed leaving Reginald alone with his old nurse.

The tall, placid woman, standing near the fireplace, made a step forward, as if to embrace Reginald, but restrained herself, as though doubtful how to proceed. Blake, however, crossed over to her and kissed her affectionately, which seemed to awaken a feeling of emotion in her breast, for she flushed a little at the caress,

and smiled lovingly at him. In her demure, slate-coloured dress, with the white apron and pale, rigid face, she looked like a woman who had never known what it was to love or be loved; but every now and then a flash in the sombre depths of her eloquent eyes betrayed the fiery nature hidden beneath that calm exterior. The young man's kiss seemed to warm her frozen soul to life, and, as she resumed her seat, her face was rose-flushed, her eyes soft, and the hard lines about her mouth disappeared under the magic of Reginald Blake's presence. He, dark and handsome, leaned against the mantelpiece, looking down at her curiously, as if puzzled how to begin the conversation.

"I am so glad to see you, Master Reginald," she said, the hard voice in which she habitually spoke becoming soft and tender. "I have not seen you for a long time."

"A whole week, Patience, that's all," he replied, carelessly. "You see I'm busy with my studies."

"That's right, dear!" she said, eagerly. "Work--work hard, and make a name in the world."

"For whose sake?" he asked, a little bitterly.

"For mine!"

There was a world of tenderness in the way in which she spoke the words, and her eyes seemed to devour him as she gazed. He moved restlessly, and with a supreme effort plunged straight into the object of his visit.

"Why not for my parents' sake?"

The woman's face lost its look of tenderness, and became hard and rigid as she pressed the arms of her chair convulsively, and looked up into his face.

"Who has been speaking to you about them," she asked fiercely.

"Doctor Larcher."

"And the reason?"

"Simply this: I am two-and-twenty years of age, so it's time I had some aim in life. Before I do this I want to know all about my parentage. Are my parents

alive or dead?--who are they?--why was I placed in your charge?--can they, or their relations, assist me to get on in the world? I cannot move until I know who and what I am."

He spoke vehemently, and as he did so the woman seemed to shrink back into her chair with a nameless dread in her eyes. There was no sound for a moment. At last she broke the silence.

"Your parents were my master and mistress," she said at length, in a low, harsh voice, "married against their parents' wish."

"They were married, then?"

"Who said they were not?" she demanded, fiercely.

"No one. But the mystery of my birth led me to think there might be----"

"Shame!" she interrupted, vehemently. "You are wrong. There was no shame--they kept the marriage secret, for if known they would have lost their property. When you were born, they went over to France for the sake of your father's health, leaving you in my charge. I was to keep you till they could acknowledge you as their son; but before they could do so they died."

"Died!"

"Yes. Your father died of phthisis at Cannes six months after he left England, and your mother very soon followed him to the grave."

"She died of what?"

"A broken heart," replied Patience, in a low voice, "a broken heart, poor soul."

"Good God!"

"I heard of it shortly afterwards," she went on, rapidly, "and as your birth had never been acknowledged I determined to bring you up without letting anyone know the truth. After staying some time in London, I brought you to Doctor Larcher, and he has had charge of you since."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because it is my native place. I only intended to stay for a time, and then return to service in London, but Squire Garsworth wanted a housekeeper, so I took the situation in order to remain near you."

"Why did you not tell me this before."

"There was no need to," she answered, coldly, "and even now it is useless. Your parents are dead, and the property has gone to distant heirs."

"But I am the heir."

She shook her head.

"No, the property was not entailed--it was left by will, and you have no claim on the present holder."

"Who was my father?"

"He had been in the army, but sold out when he married, and became a writer."

"What was his name?"

"Reginald Blake--the same as your own."

"It's my real name, then?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"Of course! Why should you not take your father's name? There was no reason."

"So I am alone in the world?"

"Yes, except for me."

He stepped over to her, and placed his arm caressingly on her shoulder.

"Ah, you have been a mother to me," he said quickly, "and I shall never forget it. No one could have acted with more kindness and fidelity."

Patience winced and shrank away from his caress while he walked up and down the room, talking cheerfully.

"Now my mind is at rest," he said, with a sigh of relief. "I thought the mystery of my birth involved some stain, but since I have the right to bear my father's name, why! I feel quite happy. I can make my way in the world by myself, can ask the girl I love to be my wife."

"The girl you love," she repeated jealously.

"Yes, I will tell you her name, though no one else knows it--Una."

"Miss Challoner," said the woman, starting up; "impossible!"

"Why impossible?" he retorted gaily. "You think I am not rich enough. Never mind; I carry a fortune in my throat, and will soon be able to keep her in comfort. She loves me and I love her, so we shall be quite happy."

"I hope so," she said fervently. "May God's blessing rest on your efforts. Yes, marry Una Challoner if she loves you, and make your own way without troubling about the dead."

"I never knew my parents," said Reginald, sighing, "so I can hardly regret them, but with Una to work for I will forget the past and look forward to the future. I have nothing to offer her now but a stainless name. Never mind; ambition can perform miracles. Now, good-bye, nurse; I must get back to Garsworth."

"Good-bye," she said, kissing him eagerly. "Come again soon, my dear boy; and although Una Challoner loves you, do not forget your old nurse."

"Of course not," he replied gaily, and walked away humming an air. Patience Allerby waited till the door was closed and the sound of his voice had died away, then fell on her knees, beating her breast with her hands and weeping bitterly.

"God! God!" she cried, amid convulsive sobs, "pardon my sin. It was for his sake, for his dear sake, not for my own. Let the dead past be forgotten. Let him never know anything but what I have told him, and bless him, oh God, in his future life."

There was a crucifix of black ebony against the wall, and from it, with pitying eyes, looked down the face of the Lord at the stricken woman kneeling before him. The ineffable sorrow of the sacred face seemed to calm her spirit, for she ceased to weep and her lips moved in a prayer which seemed to come from her

heart.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLIND ORGANIST.

"Naught have I seen of the earth, for mine eyes have been darkened
Since I was born to this life, with its toils and vexations,
Yet hath the Maker, in mercy, bestowed compensation,
Music, and love of sweet singing to lighten the burden.
Here, at the loud-swelling organ, my soul is responsive
To passion and grandeur of music, and sighings melodious,
It bursts from its prison of gloom, soaring upward rejoicing,
Borne on the stormy, majestic breath of the organ."

As a rule, the conversations of lovers are hardly worth recording, consisting, as they mostly do, of incoherent rhapsodies of love and devotion, with very little of that useful quality called common sense. But Reginald and Una were the most sedate of sweethearts, and talked of other things besides the ardour of their passion. In this instance they were discussing their future and the chances of their marriage.

It would have been difficult to find a handsomer pair as they walked along; she fair and slender, with a charming smile on her face; he tall and dark, with a touch of haughtiness in his manly dignity. They looked like two lovers who had strayed from the enchanted garden of Boccaccio, with nothing to talk about but the pains and passions of Eros, but, alas, such thoughts are impossible, save under the magic influence of twilight; and this youthful pair, who seemed the incarnation of romance, were talking in a most prosaic fashion.

"You see, dear," said Reginald, after he had explained everything to Una, "it is

not the slightest use my depending on my relations, even if I were to find them out."

"I don't think it's much use in any case," replied Una decisively. "It's far better for you to depend upon yourself. But how do you intend to proceed?"

"It's rather difficult to say. I have no money and no chance of obtaining any. Patience had a certain sum which she paid to Doctor Larcher for my education. I believe," said the young man, somewhat bitterly, "that I've been mostly brought up by the vicar out of charity."

"Doctor Larcher has never said so."

"No, he is too kind-hearted and generous for that, but I feel sure that such is the case. Never mind; should it ever lie in my power I will repay his charity a thousand fold."

"Do you think he will like you becoming a singer?" asked Una apprehensively.

"I don't fancy he'll approve of it--at first," said Reginald bluntly, "but what else can I do? The law, the church and medicine all require money to make a start, and even then it is a difficult game to play. I know a good deal about music, and, according to Beaumont, who is certainly no flatterer, I have an excellent voice. So it is my only chance."

"If the vicar approves, what will you do?"

"I'll ask him to lend me some money. I shall then go to London and place myself under a good master, and if my voice is good, with hard work I'll soon be able to do something."

"It seems very risky," said Una, with a sigh. "Many fail."

"And many succeed. If a man be sober, industrious and observant, he can hardly help succeeding. Beggars must not be choosers, and if I don't use the only talent I've got, what else is there for me to do? I cannot remain here all my life on the bounty of Dr. Larcher. If I did, there would be small chance of our marriage."

"I have a little money," she began timidly.

"Yes, I know," he answered hastily, "but I'm not the man to live on my wife. It is your dear self I want, not your money; though, as the squire's heiress, you are far above me."

Una laughed.

"I'm very doubtful about my being an heiress," she said gaily. "It is true I am the squire's next-of-kin, and should inherit, but you know how eccentric he is. The property is not entailed, so he can do as he likes."

"You mean he is going to leave it to his other self. Nonsense! That is the phantasy of a madman's brain. No court of law would uphold such a will. How he is going to leave it to himself when his *alter ego* is not in existence, I don't know."

"Nor I," replied Una frankly. "I know, of course, he is mad, quite mad, and that any will made on the principle of his hallucination would be set aside, but lately he has dropped hints about a son."

"A son? Why he was never married."

"No; but he says he has a son who is somewhere about, and he intends to leave the property to him."

"Indeed. Then what becomes of his great scheme of enjoying the money in his re-incarnated body?"

"It's a mystery," said Miss Challoner, laughing.

"I should think it was, and whatever will he makes now, leaving the property away from you, would not hold good, for he certainly is not in his right senses. You could claim as next-of-kin."

"And I certainly should do so," replied Una, with decision. "But it is my opinion he'll live for a good long time yet."

"Humph! He's very ill."

"Creaking doors hang longest. But do not let us speculate on his death. I would rather we made our own fortune."

The use of the plural member had a delicious sound for Reginald, and he felt strongly tempted to there and then kiss his lady-love, but as they were now crossing the bridge and several people were about, he restrained himself until a more convenient season.

"Never mind the Squire and his money, dear," he said fondly, "for your sake I am going to be the Mario of the future."

"I'm sure you will," replied Una with the trustfulness of love, "you know I lived a long time in Germany and heard a number of good singers--your voice is quite as good as any, if not better."

"Flatterer!"

"Well, we'll see, Signor Reginald Mario," she said gaily, as they entered the churchyard, "when you are enchanting London audiences you will remember my prediction. You should cross the poor gipsy's hand with silver."

"Can't, mum," he retorted laughing; "I'm stone broke. However, there's no one about, so I'll do better--cross the gipsy's lips with kisses," and before she could draw back, this audacious young man put his words into action.

"Oh, Reginald!"

"Oh, Una," he mimicked lightly, "don't say a word or I'll take another. Come along, here's the church, and by Jove," as the sound of music broke on their ears, "there's Cecilia at the organ."

"And she's playing the Wedding March," cried Una blushing.

"It's a good omen, dear," he whispered, as they walked up the aisle, "this is like a rehearsal of marriage, isn't it?"

They both laughed gaily, and as their young voices rang through the empty church the organist turned round on her seat rapidly to the direction from whence the sound proceeded.

Cecilia Mosser was one of those light-coloured women who bear the same relation to a full-coloured blonde as a fireless opal does to the same stone with the red spark glowing under its opaque whiteness. While Una had all the

characteristics of a true blonde, flushed with the roseate hue of a strong vitality, these same characteristics were reproduced in Cecilia with a distinct want of colour and of life. She had the same pale complexion, the same golden hair and the same blue eyes, but the complexion was a dead white, and lacked the opalescent transparency of Una's, the golden hair was dull in appearance, without any lustre, and the azure eyes were coldly blue, though in this latter case, being sightless, they naturally did not reflect the soul within, having therefore a lifeless appearance. A sad, patient face it was, stamped with that expression of mute appeal so common to the faces of the blind. She was dressed in a dark gown, with a collar and cuffs of white linen, her bleached-looking hair being coiled smoothly at the back of her head.

"How are you, Cecilia?" asked Una, ascending the chancel steps. "I have come to see about the concert."

"Yes, I was expecting you, Miss," answered the blind girl in a soft, fluty voice which, though low, was distinct and clear. "Is Mr. Blake with you? I thought I heard his step."

"Oh, I'm here," said Blake, advancing towards the organ. "What is the matter--eh?"

"I want you to sing at the concert," replied Cecilia, lightly touching the yellow keys of the organ; "Miss Una, of course, also."

"Let us sing a duet," suggested Una; "'Oh, that we two were Maying,' or something of Mendelssohn's."

"The first is the best," said Reginald quickly. "I think every one will like that. Who else is going to perform, Cecilia?"

"Miss Cassandra and Mr. Priggs," she replied, touching off the names on her fingers. "Mr.----"

"What! Is Priggs going to sing?" interrupted Blake laughing.

"No; recite a piece of his own."

"I hope it will be intelligible."

"How severe you are," said Una smiling.

"Ah! you don't know Ferdinand's poetry," replied Reginald pathetically; "I do. It's a mixture of Keats, Thompson, Browning, Shakespeare----"

"And Priggs," finished Una.

"No, by Jove--that's the only thing it doesn't contain, unless you call halting verse and interminable poems Priggian," said the young man gaily. "Well, go on with the list, Cecilia."

"Dr. Larcher is going to give us a reading," said Cecilia, who had been listening to the analysis with a quiet smile, "and Mr. Pemberton sings a sea song; I think that's all, except Miss Busky and Simon Ruller."

"Last, but not least," remarked Una lightly. "The programme is excellent--let us hope the performers will be as good. It's next week, isn't it?"

"No; on Thursday fortnight," answered Cecilia. "Oh, I forgot, the choir sings a glee."

"And you play a piece, of course," said Reginald gravely. "This is capital. Well, now we've finished business, let us go in for pleasure. I want you to play me the 'Cujus animam.'"

"What for?" asked Una.

"I'm anxious to try my voice," said Blake to her in a low tone, while Miss Mosser turned to the organ. "You know why--you must give me your candid opinion about it--so go down to the end of the church and tell me what you think."

"I'll be a very severe critic," observed Una, as she went away.

"The more so the better," called out Blake; "don't spare me--imagine you're the *Musical Times*."

Una laughed, and ensconced herself in a comfortable pew at the far end of the church just near the white marble font.

The quaint old church, with its high oaken roof and narrow, stained-glass windows with their vivid tints, was filled with great masses of shadow, which produced a faint, misty twilight, eminently suited to the sacred character of the place. At intervals on either side of the wide nave arose the heavy, grey stone pillars, their elaborately carved entablatures being hardly apparent in the semi-gloom overhead.

The flags of the centre aisle, worn by the feet of pious generations, made a broad path of whitish tint leading up to the chancel, ending at a flight of long, shallow steps, in the centre of which stood the brass lectern, in the form of an eagle. Between the nave and the chancel was a lance-shaped arch, on which gleamed a slender ribbon of gold, inscribed with a biblical text in vermillion. The sombre appearance of the choir seats, with their overhanging canopies, was somewhat relieved by the white glimmer of the communion table carved out of pure marble, on which stood a large crucifix of ebony, looking black and sharply defined against the great painted window at the back. Through the fantastically painted windows, with their bizarre figures of red, yellow and green, crept the grey light of the day, but suddenly a shaft of sunshine burst into the church, touching the tomb of a crusader with rainbow tints, while from the tall organ-pipes flashed gleams of golden fire. All was faint and shadowy, like the confusion of a dream, and the dusky atmosphere seemed to be filled with the subtle perfume of the incense which had curled up from silver censers in the old Romish days.

Through the sombre shadows stole the rich, swelling notes of the organ which woke to life under the skilful fingers of the blind girl. A few great notes pealed from the mighty mouths of the pipes--Cecilia played the majestic melody, which floated grandly through the church--and then the volume of melodious sound sank downward to a low-breathed whisper as Blake began the "Cujus animam" with one resonant note which rang out like the sound of a silver trumpet.

"Cujus animam gementem
Contristantur et dolentem
Pertransivit gladius."

The voice of the singer seemed to float high in the air like that of some unseen

angel hidden in the golden clouds, while far below the roll and thunder of the organ seemed to rise and fall like sullen surges beating upon a lonely shore. Una closed her eyes as that superb voice with its penetrating sweetness rang out the mournful words with an intensity of dramatic feeling which went to her very soul with its strong religious fervour. As the last note died away Una heard a voice behind her say "Bravo," and on turning her head saw Dr. Nestley standing close to her accompanied by a tall dark man whom she recognized at once as Basil Beaumont.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VIEWS OF A CYNIC.

To rule mankind is all I crave
And at my feet to see them curled,
For if you make the world your slave
You'll ne'er be slave unto the world.

Evidently Dr. Nestley had become friendly with his quondam enemy, for both gentlemen now seemed to be on the best of terms with one another. Either the doctor had succumbed to the wonderful personal fascinations of Beaumont, or the artist had convinced Nestley that he was wrong in regarding him in a hostile manner.

On recognizing Miss Challoner, the young physician came forward to greet her, while Beaumont remained in the background lost in admiration at the wonderful beauty of her face, which appealed strongly to his artistic nature.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Miss Challoner," said Nestley eagerly; "my friend and I heard the singing and came in to listen; by the way, will you permit me to introduce Mr. Beaumont?"

Una bowed a little coldly, for she remembered what Reginald had said about the artist, but, hearing his name mentioned, Beaumont came forward and was formally presented. In spite of her distrust, Una could not but admire the handsome, tired-looking face she beheld and was still further impressed by the peculiar *timbre* of his voice when he began to talk. Beaumont certainly possessed in no small degree that wonderful fascination of manner attributed to the ill-fated Stewarts of Scotland which atoned so much for their fickleness, treachery and ingratitude.

"It is Mr. Blake who is singing, I think," observed Basil idly, "he has a wonderful voice."

"Yes," answered Una with a pleased smile. "I have never heard a finer--not even in Germany."

"Ah! you have been in Germany, Miss Challoner?"

"For some years--I stayed at Munich."

"A charming city which affords great opportunities for studying art both in music and painting."

"Did you study either, Miss Challoner?" asked Nestley, who seemed rather annoyed at the impression Beaumont had made.

"A little of both," she answered. "I was educated in Munich, but I'm afraid my learning was rather desultory--I sing a little--paint a little--and do both badly."

"That would be impossible," said Nestley desirous of paying a compliment, but Una frowned at the remark.

"Don't, please," she said coldly, "I dislike insincerity."

Nestley reddened a little at the tone of her voice and the obvious rebuke, on seeing which Una held out her hand to him with a charming smile.

"You must not mind what I say, Dr. Nestley," she observed, bending forward, "I'm afraid I'm dreadfully rude."

"And wonderfully charming," thought Beaumont, who, however, kept his

opinion to himself, warned by the fate of his friend.

The young doctor, meanwhile, had hastily assured Una that he did not mind her severity, in fact rather liked it, and would doubtless in all sincerity have committed himself again only that Blake commenced to sing "Come, Marguerite come," from Sullivan's "Martyr of Antioch," and they all listened attentively.

Cecilia played the graceful accompaniment of *arpeggi* lightly, while above this constant sweep of dissevered chords, rising and falling with the voice, the high, penetrating notes of the singer flowed smoothly onward and, as the organist played softly, the full purity of the voice could be heard with marvellous effect. Owing to want of training, Blake's voice lacked in a great measure the power to give a perfect rendering to the melody, but the richness and mellowness of his notes were undeniable.

When he had finished Beaumont's face betrayed the pleasure he felt, and Una, who was watching him closely, asked his opinion.

"A wonderful voice," he said critically, as the three walked up the aisle, "but of course it requires a great deal of cultivation."

"I think it's charming," interposed Nestley, eager to curry favour with Una by praising one whom she evidently regarded as a brother.

"Of course you would think so," replied Beaumont a little contemptuously, "because you know nothing about the subject; to an uncultivated ear Blake's voice sounds well because he has a wonderfully fine organ, but to a musician there is a crudeness of style, a want of colouring, and a lack of refinement which makes him regret that such a great natural gift is not trained to its full capabilities."

"But you're not a musician?" said Nestley, nettled at the superior tone adopted by his friend.

"No," answered Basil complacently, "but I have heard a great deal, and as most of my life has been passed among musicians I have picked up a general knowledge of the technicality of the art. Shakespeare never committed a murder, yet he wrote Macbeth and Hamlet. Balzac did not fall in love till somewhere about the forties, but, he wrote 'Modeste Mignon,' and 'La Lys dans la vallee,' before that age--one does not need to be an artist to possess the critical faculty."

By this time they had arrived at the chancel, and Reginald came forward to meet them, blushing a little with modesty on discovering three listeners instead of one.

"I must congratulate you on your voice once more," said Beaumont looking at him, "my advice is to go to London at once and study."

"London!" echoed Blake disbelievingly, "why not Italy?"

"A tradition only," replied the artist calmly, "because Italy is the land of song every singer thinks he or she must study there, but I assure you it's a mistake--London and Paris have as good teachers as Milan and Rome--I may say better, for everyone goes to the place where the largest income is to be made."

"How cynical," said Una playfully.

"And how true--this is not the golden age, Miss Challoner, but the age of gold--there is a vast difference between Arcady and Philistia, I assure you."

"I think I'll take your advice," observed Blake gaily, "perhaps I've got a fortune in my throat, who knows?"

"Who, indeed?" said the artist gravely, "they pay nightingales well now-a-days."

"All the better for Mr. Blake," said Una lightly, "but how rude I am, I must introduce you two gentlemen to the organist--Miss Mosser--Dr. Nestley and Mr. Beaumont."

Beaumont, not knowing Cecilia was blind, merely bowed, but Nestley took the fragile hand of the girl and grasped it warmly.

"I enjoyed your playing so much," he said heartily, "where did you learn?"

On hearing his voice the pale face of the blind girl coloured, and a painfully eager look crossed her features, as if she were trying to see the speaker's countenance in spite of her infirmity.

"What a beautiful voice," she murmured softly, and Nestley had to repeat his question before she answered:

"At the school for the blind at Hampstead," she said turning towards him, which

reply gave Nestley a painful shock as he realized her misfortune. With delicate tact, however, he passed the answer off lightly in a conversational manner.

"I don't know much about music myself," he said easily, "it seems such a complicated affair--are you fond of it?"

"Very," answered the blind girl quickly. "You see it is the only pleasure I have. When I go out on to the common and feel the fresh wind and smell the perfume of the gorse, I come back here and try and put it all into music. I often thank God for being able to play the organ."

It was deeply pathetic to hear her talk in this strain; shut out by her affliction from all the beauties of Nature, she could yet thank God for the one gift which enabled her in some measure to understand and appreciate what she had never beheld. Doctors, as a rule, are not very soft-hearted, but Nestley could hardly help feeling moved at the thrill of sadness which ran through her speech. This she perceived, and with a light laugh, hastened to dispel the illusion she had created.

"You must not think I am sad," she said cheerfully, "on the contrary, I never was so happy in my life as I am here. I was brought up all my life in London, and when I was appointed organist here, you can have no idea of the pleasure I felt. I have the common and the organ, while everyone is kind to me, so what have I to wish for? Now, Doctor Nestley, I must ask you to go, as I am about to practise. I think Miss Challoner and your friends have gone."

They were waiting for the doctor at the lower end of the church, so after saying good-bye to Cecilia, he hurried away into the dusky atmosphere, and as he reached Beaumont, the organ rolled out the opening chords of a mass by Pergolesi. Reginald went outside with Nestley as he wished to speak to him about the Squire, and Una was left standing with Beaumont in the grey old church. They listened in silence to the deep thunder of the bass notes echoing in the high roof, when suddenly in the middle of a crashing chord the sonorous tones died away and a sweet, pure melody thrilled through the silence, which seemed almost oppressive after the tempest of sound.

"After the fire there came a still small voice," quoted Basil dreamily. "Do you remember how perfectly Mendelssohn has expressed that idea in music?"

"Yes, I heard the Elijah at the Albert Hall," replied Una in a matter-of-fact way,

being a healthy English girl and not moved by the subtle meaning of the sacred music which touched so quickly the highly-strung nerves of this man.

"The Albert Hall," he repeated with a shrug. "Oh yes, very fine I've no doubt, but to my mind it secularizes sacred music to hear it there--one hears a volume of sound--an immense number of voices in chorus and solos by the best artistes; but where is the soul of the work? one only finds that in a church. The Messiah was first heard in England in Westminster Abbey, and it was there, following the example set by the king, that the whole audience arose at the Hallelujah Chorus, but it was not the music alone, grand as it is, that produced this sudden burst of emotion, it was the august fane grey with centuries of tradition, the presence of the mighty dead sleeping around, and to crown all the dramatic grandeur of the chorus. All these together wrought on the feelings of those present and they did homage to the sublimity of the music--such a thing would be impossible in the Albert Hall."

"Don't you think you're giving all the praise to the surroundings and nothing to the musician," said Una quickly; "a true composer could impress his ideas on his hearers without any other aid."

"I've no doubt he could," replied Beaumont carelessly, "and no doubt plenty of people have felt emotion at Handel's music in the Albert Hall, but even Handel's genius would never have created such an effect as I have described anywhere but in a church; of course I haven't mentioned the memorable shaft of sunlight which deserves praise for its share in the affair."

Something in the flippancy of this remark jarred upon Una's feelings, so she made no reply but walked outside into the cool fresh air, followed by Beaumont.

He accompanied her as far as the lichgate and then raised his hat.

"I won't go any further, Miss Challoner," he said. "I'm in a meditative mood and will take a look round this old place. I hope to see you again soon at the Grange."

"The Grange?" she questioned, looking at him inquiringly.

"Yes, I'm coming to see the Squire about painting his portrait you know."

"Of course," she replied quickly. "I remember Patience told me."

"Patience," he asked in a startled tone, "did you say Patience?"

"Yes, Patience Allerby, the housekeeper," said Una gaily. "How pale you look, just as if you had seen a ghost--I dare say it's the effect of the church and music; good-bye, at present," and she walked quickly away.

He raised his hat mechanically and stood staring at the ground, looking pale and haggard.

"Patience Allerby," he said in a low voice. "After all these years--Patience Allerby."

CHAPTER X.

THE GHOST OF A DEAD LOVE.

Is this the face I loved of yore,
Ere years had run;
Alas! I care for it no more
Old love is done;
We soon forget what we adore
At twenty-one.

It was now about four o'clock in the afternoon and the short autumnal day was rapidly closing in, the grey veil of the sky was rent here and there showing a patch of pale cold blue, while the setting sun was tinting the ragged clouds in the west with iridescent hues.

Beaumont stood in the long, rank grass of the graveyard, thinking deeply, his eyes fixed dreamily on the ancient tombstones around with their half-obliterated inscriptions and weed-grown mounds of earth. Behind him was the old church, its grey walls covered with close-clinging ivy from out which peered the grotesque faces of the gargoyles, leering demoniacally at the silent figure. The great square tower, built of rough stone, stood out massively against the dull grey sky, and round it every now and then flashed the pigeons who lived therein, gleaming white in the faint light of the sun. He could hear the hoarse murmur of the river flowing past, the shrill voices of the children in the street, and at intervals the rising and falling of the organ music within. All this touched his artistic sensibilities and he fell into a strain of half-melancholy, half regretful reflection which, for the moment, gave him a better nature than the bitter cynicism of his usual thoughts.

This man was not altogether bad; he had originally started in life with the best intentions, but his nature had been warped and twisted by misfortunes and temptations into its present state. It was true that he was to all appearances thoroughly bad, and that many had cause to regret his friendship, yet occasionally he would do a kind action or help a poor struggler, which showed that some of his early belief in humanity yet remained in his world-worn heart.

He was thinking now,--thinking of a woman--a woman he had loved and left many years before, and the thoughts evoked were anything but pleasant. With an involuntary sigh he walked down to the Gar and, seating himself on a flat tombstone which set forth the virtues of Susan Peller, deceased, he let his chin sink on his hand, and gave himself up to dead memories--the memories of youth, of love, and of disappointment.

A sudden flash of the dying sunlight gleamed over the river, turning its sullen, grey waters to a sheet of gold, and the sight brought back to his mind an hour when he was young, and he leaned over the parapet of a balcony, with a woman by his side, both looking at the shimmering Thames, golden in the sunset. He could recall it vividly, even after the lapse of these many years--the shining river, the confused mass of houses huddled under the dusky cloud of London smoke, and far away the swelling dome of St. Paul's looking aerial and fairy-like against the twilight sky, while above the great mass gleamed the golden cross shining in the firmament like the visionary symbol of Constantine. They were poor, not very well housed or fed, but the glamour of youth and hope was about them, and they saw in the shining river sweeping under the golden cross an omen of a happy future. Then the dream-picture grew faint and blurred, clouds swept across the golden heavens, and from amid the sombre gloom there looked forth a tearful woman's face with pitiful, appealing eyes.

With an impatient sigh Beaumont roused himself from his day dream to find himself seated on a cold stone under a sky from whence the glory of the sunset had departed; and beside him silently stood a veiled woman. He jumped to his feet in surprise, feeling somewhat cramped, and was about to speak when the woman threw back her heavy veil, showing him the pitiful face of his dream.

"Patience Allerby!" he gasped, recoiling a step.

"Patience Allerby," she replied, sternly, folding her hands in front of her black dress, "the very woman, Basil Beaumont, whom you loved, ruined and deserted in London more than twenty years ago."

Beaumont, with an effort, threw off the glamour of past thoughts which had haunted him all the afternoon, and, with a sneering laugh, relapsed once more into the bitter-tongued, cynical man of the world. He rapidly rolled a cigarette and, having lighted it, began to smoke, gazing critically meanwhile at the stern white face looking at him from out the shadowy twilight.

"More than twenty years ago!" he repeated, thoughtfully. "Humph! it's a long time--and now we meet again! You've altered, Patience--yes, altered a great deal--for the worse."

She laughed bitterly.

"I hardly think the life I have led since you left me was the kind to enable me to

retain my good looks."

"No?" he said, interrogatively, "and why not? you are housekeeper to Squire Garsworth, I understand--not a very wearying position! Trouble tells more on woman's beauty than years; so, as you have had no trouble----"

"Had no trouble!" echoed Patience, in a low, harsh voice. "Man, man! do you think one needs to live in the world to know what trouble is? You are wrong. Down in this secluded village I have passed many a bitter hour thinking of you."

"And why?" he asked, cynically.

"I think you can guess the reason. When I left Garsworth to go to service in London you said you loved me, and I thought the son of a gentleman was to be my husband."

"You always did expect too much."

"You came to London shortly afterwards and met me there by appointment. I left my situation and lived with you."

"As my mistress, yes; not my wife."

"No! You were too cowardly to do justice to the woman you ruined. A child was born--a boy whom I idolized. But, instead of that being a bond to draw us closer together, you left me--left me to starve with my child in the streets of London."

"I left you because I saw a chance of making money," he said, complacently. "You were a drag on me, and I could not endure poverty, even with you, my dear. As to starving, I left you what money I could spare."

"Five pounds!" she said, coldly. "The price of a woman's heart, according to your calculation; it enabled me to pay the landlady and bring myself and the child to Garsworth."

"Why did you not stay in London?"

"Because I did not want to sink deeper than I had done. I was brought up by pious parents, Basil Beaumont, and the sin I committed with you seemed to cut me off for ever from all hope of mercy. I resolved to sin no more--to expiate, if I

could, by prayer and charity the evil life I had led in London. When I came down here, my parents were dead, and I was alone in the world."

"You had the child."

"Yes, I had the child--your child and mine--but no one ever knew I was his mother; no, I did not wish our sin to be visited on his head. I did not want him to be pointed at as a nameless outcast."

"Very creditable of you, I'm sure," said Beaumont, with a sneer, "and what did you do?"

"I invented a story that I had been in the service of the child's parents, who had afterwards gone to France and died there. I said I was the child's nurse, and placed him in the care of Doctor Larcher to be brought up. What little money I could spare out of my salary as housekeeper was given to the vicar as money left to the child by his father, and to this day the vicar does not suspect the truth."

"Quite a romance," said Beaumont, lightly. "I had no idea you had such inventive powers. But there is one thing I would like to know--the child's name."

"In order to claim him?" she asked, bitterly.

"My faith! no; I've got enough to do in looking after myself, without troubling about a hulking boy. You need never be afraid of that, Patience. Come, tell me the boy's name."

"Reginald Blake."

The cigarette dropped out of Beaumont's nerveless fingers, and his white face grew a shade whiter.

"Reginald Blake," he whispered under his breath; "the young fellow who sings?"

"The same."

Beaumont remained silent for a few moments, thinking deeply.

"I have certainly no reason to be ashamed of my son," he said, coolly, looking at Patience. "You deserve credit for the way you have brought him up."

"I have done so as some expiation for my sin."

"Bah! Don't be melodramatic!" he said, coarsely. "You brought him up because he was your son--not because of any expiation rubbish!--he doesn't know who he is?"

"No. I have spared him that knowledge of shame; let us bear our sin alone."

"Humbug! our sin, as you call it, doesn't trouble me in the slightest. In fact, I'm rather pleased than otherwise."

"What do you mean?" she asked in alarm.

"Mean--that he's got an uncommonly fine tenor voice, and I don't see why money shouldn't be made out of it."

Patience sprang towards him like an enraged tigress, her eyes flashing fire.

"Not by you," she hissed, with her mouth so close to his face that he could feel her hot breath upon his cheek. "Not by you--I've brought him up all these years by myself without troubling you for money--he thinks his birth is honourable and has every chance of making a career for himself, so you are not going to mar it for your own vile ends."

"Don't lose your temper," he said coolly, "I'll do what I please."

"I have your promise not to claim him," she panted with a look of despair in her eyes, "your sacred promise."

The artist laughed in a gibing manner.

"Bah! That for my promise," he said, snapping his fingers in the air. "I'm not going to lose the chance of making money out of him for any sentimental rubbish."

"You will tell him you are his father?"

"I will."

"And that you deserted us both in London?"

Beaumont winced at the sting of her words.

"I'll tell him what I think fit," he said angrily, "and make him do what I please. I am his father."

"Will you, indeed?" she observed jeeringly, though her face worked in convulsive rage. "You are the father who deserted him when a child and now want to make money out of him; you would disgrace him in his own eyes by telling him the real story of his birth. I tell you no, Basil Beaumont, you'll do no such thing."

"Who will stop me?"

"I will."

"A very laudable intention, but how do you propose to carry it out?"

"I will tell him the whole story of my sin," she said deliberately. "How I loved you and was betrayed, how you left both him and me to starve in the streets of London and only claim him as a son to make money out of his one gift. I'll tell him all this, and then we'll see if he respects and obeys you."

"He is my son."

"Over whom you have no authority; he is of age and you cannot make him your slave. As to the rest, I'll take care that everyone in the village knows the story and you'll be drummed out of the place as the scoundrel you are."

Clever as he was, Beaumont saw Patience held the trump card, so suddenly forsook his dictatorial manner and spoke blandly.

"Very well, I'll say nothing to him at all just now."

"You'll never say anything to him," she said sternly. "Stay in this village if you like, but do not dare to reveal my secret to Reginald Blake--if you do it will be the worse for you; I'm not going to have him ruined for life by your treachery."

"But, Patience--my own son."

"Bah!" she snarled, turning on him viciously, "don't talk like that to me--a

scoundrel you were and a scoundrel you are--don't touch me, don't come near me, but breathe one word of my secret and as sure as there's a God above us I'll do what I say."

Beaumont made a step forward as if to seize her, but with a gesture of loathing she drew her dress around her and fled away into the darkness leaving him standing alone by the river. He remained silent for a few moments then his brow cleared and he resumed his nonchalant manner, though his face still remained pale and haggard.

"My son Reginald," he said, lightly rolling a cigarette, "I had no idea of such luck. Ah, you she cat, I'll cut your claws yet; I'll make money out of the voice yet, in spite of your threats my fine madame."

Suddenly a thought struck him as he lighted his cigarette and he laughed softly.

"Good heavens!" he said with a shrug. "I admire Miss Challoner, so does he--it appears," continued Mr. Beaumont sauntering away; "then I'm the rival of my own son."

CHAPTER XI.

MR. BEAUMONT MAKES A DISCOVERY.

When one is playing in the game of life
'Tis wrong to throw away a single card,
Lest by some odd mistake of circumstance
The card despised--if played with dext'rous hand--
Should gain an unexpected victory.

When Basil Beaumont came to think over things, it struck him as somewhat strange that Patience should have voluntarily told him a secret, for the

concealment of which she had several excellent reasons. Firstly, she must have had a great struggle with her pride before bringing herself to address the man to whom she owed her ruin. Secondly, on informing Beaumont that Reginald was his son, she must have known there were great chances of him revealing the whole story to the young fellow out of sheer devilry; and thirdly, knowing that Reginald was clever, she must have expected his penniless father would try and make money out of his talents.

Beaumont was too astute a reader of character to blind himself to the fact that Patience must have been aware of these three things, hence his wonder at her telling him what she did not want known. But the artist, clever as he was, still lacked discernment to recognise the full subtlety of a woman's instincts, else he would have readily seen that Patience feared his ignorance of the real state of affairs more than his knowledge.

She heard that he was in the village and acquainted with Reginald Blake, and she was also aware that he was coming to the Grange to paint Squire Garsworth's portrait. Had he seen her there he would have made inquiries concerning her position, and among other things would doubtless have ascertained that she was Reginald's nurse. Knowing that she had left London with her own son, such a weak story as she told about Blake's parentage would not have imposed upon him for a moment, and by putting two and two together he would have discovered everything, with the natural result that he would have recognised Blake as his own child, sought him out and told him the whole story of his birth.

In order to avert such a calamity, she determined to boldly take the bull by the horns and tell Beaumont everything, at the same time warning him that she would embitter Reginald's mind against him should he dare to speak out. The result of her interview in the churchyard was as she expected. Beaumont was too cunning to risk the dislike of his own son, and thereby lose any chance of influencing him for his own ends, so he quietly acquiesced in the line of conduct she laid down. Patience returned to the Grange thoroughly satisfied that she had disarmed Beaumont by pointing out how she could turn Reginald against him, so the astute man of the world, abandoning his desire to play the part of a long-lost father, determined to wait for a few weeks and see how things turned out. Then he intended to let his plans be guided to a large extent by circumstances, and had no doubt that he would then be able to out-man[oe]uvre Patience by a little dexterous generalship.

A few days after his curious meeting with Patience in the churchyard, Beaumont set out for a long walk in the morning, as he wanted to think over the aspect of things, and pedestrianism always stimulated his brain. It was a bright, fresh morning, with a deeply blue sky, a cheerful sun shining and a keen, fresh wind blowing across the common on to which he strolled. The gorse was in bloom, and every breath of wind brought the odour of its peach-like scent to his nostrils. How often, in his Bohemian life had that odour recalled the wide, bare common with its miles of gorse-covered ground, and made him long half regretfully for the quiet country village where his youth had been passed.

But now that the common was actually before him, by some curious contradiction of nature he did not feel the least regret or longing for his youth, but on the contrary strolled over the waste ground, hatching all kinds of plots and plans in his busy brain.

All at once, as he stood on the edge of a gentle slope, where the ground was hollowed out like a cup and surrounded by the dark green of the gorse with its golden blossoms, he saw a woman seated on a grassy bank, apparently basking in the sun. Her hands were lying idly in her lap, and with her face turned upward to the bright sunshine, she was drinking in the sweet, keen air which swept over the wild moorland. Beaumont saw that it was Cecilia Mosser who sat there, and for a moment half envied the blind girl in spite of her great sorrow, for her pleasant enjoyment of nature.

"She looks like the Goddess of Desolation," murmured Beaumont, as he descended the slope, "or some eyeless Destiny that sees nothing, yet governs all!"

Lightly as he walked over the soft, green grass, the blind girl heard the sound of his muffled footsteps, and turned her face in the direction from whence she heard them come, with a questioning look on her placid face.

"How do you do, Miss Mosser?" said Beaumont, tranquilly. "I was taking a stroll on the common, and saw you sitting here alone, like the Genius of Solitude."

"I often come here," observed Cecilia, placidly, folding her hands. "This is a favourite spot of mine--I know every inch of the way."

"You are not afraid of losing yourself?"

"I was at first," said the blind girl, with a quiet laugh, "but I soon got to know my way about. I could find my way here on the darkest night."

"Like Bulwer Lytton's Nydia," remarked Beaumont, idly casting himself down on the grass.

"Yes. Like her, it is always darkest night with me," replied Cecilia, with a sigh. "Still, I have my compensations, for I can hear many sounds that very likely escape the notice of you fortunate people who can see."

"What kind of sounds?" asked the artist, more for the sake of making a remark than because he cared to know.

"The flowing of the river, the whispering of the wind, the humming of the bees and the rustle of the gorse--they all seem to me to have human voices and tell me stories. I can well understand those old legends where mortals heard voices everywhere, and understood the sayings of the waves and the melancholy voice of the night winds."

"As Siegfried understood the language of birds," said Beaumont. "You require no dragon's blood to teach you that, I suppose?"

"I don't know what you mean, exactly," replied Cecilia, in a puzzled tone, for she had never heard of the Niebelung's Ring, "but the birds do speak to me--that is, I fancy they do--I love to hear the cuckoo and the throstle, then the lark--ah! the lark is the most charming of all!"

"So the poets think. There is no bird who has inspired more poetry than the lark--from Shakespeare down to Tennyson--and I suppose you put all your fancies into music?"

"Yes, I often try to do so, but I don't think anyone understands the meaning but myself," answered Cecilia, with a faint smile. "You know the English are not a music loving nation."

"That depends on how you define music," said the artist, cynically. "The great B. P. like something with a tune in it, but when they hear anything they can't understand, such as Bach and Spohr, they admire it all the same. I'm afraid the B. P.'s a humbug."

"You are terribly severe," said Cecilia, laughing. "I hope you won't criticise our concert?"

"No. I assure you I am the most lenient of critics; I will come to admire beauties, not to find out faults. Besides, Blake is going to sing--and his voice is charming."

"Yes, it is," replied the blind girl, cordially, "and Miss Challoner sings very well, also. She is going to sing a duet with Mr. Blake, if she can get away for one night from the squire."

"Oh, that will be easily arranged, I've no doubt," said Beaumont, carelessly. "Doctor Nestley will attend to that."

As he uttered this name a vivid flush passed over the pale face of the girl, and Beaumont noticed it with secret amazement.

"Hullo!" he said to himself, "I wonder what this means? I must find out."

It was curious that he should trouble himself about such a trivial matter; but Beaumont was a wise man, who never overlooked the smallest thing he thought might prove useful to him. At present an idea had suddenly shot into his scheming brain--it was only an embryo idea, still it might help him in some way. He was completely in a mist as to what he was going to do, but Cecilia's blush had given him a clue to something tangible, and he immediately began to artfully question the blind girl so as to obtain some possible result.

"You know Doctor Nestley, of course?" he said, looking keenly at her face, from whence the red flush had died away.

"Yes, I met him a few days ago; he was in the church when Mr. Blake was singing," observed Cecilia, in a low tone. "I heard him speak--what a beautiful voice."

"Ah! I know the reason of the blush, now," thought Beaumont; "she loves him. Good Heavens! what a hopeless passion! She loves Nestley, and he loves Una Challoner. How tricky Dan Cupid is, to be sure."

As he had made no answer, the blind girl went on speaking.

"As I cannot see a face, I always guess what it is like by the voice. Doctor Nestley has a beautiful speaking voice--is his face handsome?"

"Rather handsome," said Beaumont, now seized with a cruel desire to fan the flame of hopeless love which burned in this blind woman's heart. "Yes, I suppose a woman would call his face handsome--but it's rather sad."

"Sad!" echoed Cecilia, in a startled tone; "why is his face sad?"

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders.

"Ouf!" he replied, coolly, "how should I know?--because his soul is sad, I presume. The face is the index of the mind, you know. I daresay it runs this way--his face is sad because his soul is sad, and the soul-sadness is caused by a sad life."

"Is he unhappy, then?" asked Cecilia, breathlessly.

"I should say not--now," said Beaumont, with emphasis, "but when I knew him in London a few years ago he had met with many reverses of fortune."

"Poor Doctor Nestley," sighed the blind girl, seized with a sudden desire to comfort this unhappy man, of whom she knew absolutely nothing save that he had a beautiful speaking voice. "Do you know his story."

Whereupon Beaumont, who knew from Shakespeare that "pity is akin to love" set himself to work to awaken Cecilia Mosser's pity, and told a marvellously pathetic story of Nestley's early life in which truth and fiction were so dexterously blended that the hero himself would have been puzzled to say which was real and which false. He attained his object, however, for he saw by the varied emotions that passed over the blind girl's expressive face how moved she was by the story.

"Poor Doctor Nestley," she said again, "poor, poor Doctor Nestley."

"Oh, but all his misery is past now," said Beaumont, lightly, "he has weathered the storm, and will, no doubt, some day marry a woman who will make him happy."

The blind woman laid her hand on her heart, as if she felt there a cruel pain, then

spoke to Beaumont in a strangled kind of voice.

"You must think me a curious creature, Mr. Beaumont," she said, rapidly, "to take such an interest in a man of whom I know nothing, but remember I am blind, and be kind to my failing. I can only judge people by their voices, and Doctor Nestley's voice has affected me more than any one else's. Why, I do not know. Of course I am precluded by my misfortune from many things, but--but--you understand--ah, you must understand how difficult it is for me to conceal my feelings. He is a stranger, I am a blind woman, but his voice rouses in me a strange feeling I cannot explain even to myself. I know I am foolish talking like this, so forget what I have said. You will forget, will you not?"

"Miss Mosser," said Beaumont gravely, rising to his feet, "you may be sure I will respect what I have heard as a sacred confidence."

"Thank you, thank you, very much," cried the poor woman, while the tears ran down her cheeks. "I know I am foolish. You must despise me for the way I've spoken. Still, I'm blind--blind."

Beaumont felt a pang of pity in his hard heart at the anguish of this unhappy woman, shut out from all love as between man and woman by her misfortune, and he was about to speak when Cecilia lifted her head.

"Will you go now, Mr. Beaumont?" she said, in a low voice. "Please leave me. I will be all right soon, and can then go home. But you will not forget your promise?"

"My promise is sacred," said the artist slowly, and turning away he left the blind woman seated in the hollow with her hands clasped on her lap, and her sightless eyes looking up to the blue sky.

"Strange," he thought, as he lighted a cigarette, "that girl has fallen in love with a voice, and does not even know she is in love, although she half guesses it. She knows nothing of Nestley and yet she loves him. Why? because he has a charming voice. I suppose we must call it a woman's instinct--ah if she only knew how hopeless her love is--Nestley is too much bewitched by Una to waste a thought on her."

This discovery, slight as it was, gratified Beaumont's keen sense of intrigue, as it gave him another card to play in the game against Patience. If he could do

nothing with Reginald because he was embittered against him by his mother, still he could separate him from Una by circulating a few skilful falsehoods. If Cecilia ever learned that Nestley loved Una, she was too much of a woman to keep silent in the matter, and through her Una would hear of Nestley's infatuation; and, again, to secure Nestley to herself, Cecilia, knowing Reginald adored Una, would tell him of this new complication, with the result that Nestley and Reginald would quarrel over Miss Challoner, and, perhaps, in the end, such a quarrel would part Una and her lover for ever. It was all very vague and intangible as yet, still Beaumont felt in some mysterious way that the knowledge of the blind girl's love for Nestley might prove useful to him in weaving his nets around his son so as to secure him entirely to himself.

"Reginald and Nestley both love Una," he mused, as he sauntered home. "Cecilia Mosser loves Nestley. Yes, the materials for a complication are there. How, I don't see at present--still the more cards I have to play against Patience Allerby the sooner I'll win the game."

CHAPTER XII.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER.

"The sower scattereth his seeds
In rich or barren ground,
And soon the earth in place of weeds
With golden corn is crowned."

Meanwhile the old squire was much better in health, owing to the skill of Dr. Nestley, but dreading a relapse he insisted upon the young doctor staying with him for a time, and, though miserly as a rule, yet paid him a handsome sum for his services, so great was his dread of death. As Nestley's practice was not a very large one he looked upon this whim of the squire's as an unexpected piece of

good luck, so made a hurried visit to the country town where he lived and, having arranged with his partner about the carrying on of their joint business, returned to Garsworth and took up his abode at the Grange as the medical attendant of the old man.

The village doctor did not give in to this arrangement without a struggle, but Squire Garsworth, who consulted no man's feelings or interests when they clashed with his own desires, soon reduced the local Sangrado to silence.

Mr. Beaumont came daily to the Grange in order to paint the portrait of its master, and was now deeply interested in the picture, which was beginning to have a wonderful fascination for him. In truth the squire was no commonplace model, for his keen, ascetic face with the burning eyes and his spare figure wrapped in a faded black velvet dressing-gown made a wonderfully picturesque study. Besides, Basil liked to hear the wild extravagant talk of the old man, who talked in a desultory sort of manner, mingling gay stories of his hot youth, with mystical revelations of mediæval alchemists and whimsical theories of spiritual existence. That he was mad, Beaumont never for a moment doubted; nevertheless, his madness was productive of a certain fantasy of thought that proved most alluring to the poetic nature of the artist, weary of the commonplace things of the work-a-day world.

With regard to Reginald the artist treated him in his usual manner, and neither by word nor deed betrayed the relationship which existed between them, but nevertheless used all his powers of fascination to attain a mastery over the young man's mind.

In this he was partially successful, for nothing is so flattering to the vanity of an unformed youth as the notice bestowed upon him by a cultured man of the world. The artist told him stories of London and Parisian life, described the famous men he had met, the beautiful women he had known, and the keen excitements of Bohemian life, thus investing an unknown world with a magic and glamour which could not fail to attract a nature so clever, ardent and impressionable as that of this unsophisticated lad.

Patience Allerby, living in a state of almost monastic seclusion, congratulated herself upon her foresight in defeating Beaumont's possible plans, little dreaming that he was now enmeshing her son in subtle toils which would render him the willing slave of his heartless father. It was true that Una, with a woman's keen

instinct, distrusted the brilliant adventurer, and ventured to warn Reginald against him, but the young man received such a warning with somewhat ill grace and talked about the need of experience. Beaumont, with his keen power of penetration, soon discovered that Una distrusted him, and as it was his aim to gain her over to his side he soon hit upon a plan by which he hoped to achieve his end.

One morning, after he had been working at the squire's portrait, he was strolling out on the terrace when he met Una leaning over the balustrade, looking at the still pool of water, encircled by a marble rim, in the centre of which was a group of Naiads and Tritons which should have spouted water in wreaths of foam from their conch shells, but as the source of the fountain was dried up there only remained the stagnant waters in the basin, reflecting their enforced idleness.

Una was thinking about Beaumont when he appeared, and in no very generous strain, as she was afraid of his rapidly increasing influence over the plastic mind of her lover--therefore when the artist paused beside her she was by no means prepared to receive him with that suave courtesy with which she generally greeted everyone.

"I'm glad to see you, Miss Challoner," observed Beaumont lifting his hat, "as I want to speak to you about Blake."

"About Mr. Blake," said Una rather coldly, "yes?"

"Of course you know how I admire his voice," remarked Beaumont leisurely, "and thinking it a pity he should waste its sweetness on the desert air of Garsworth I wrote up to a friend of mine in London."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Beaumont," said Una in a more cordial tone, "and what does your friend say?"

"He wants Blake to go up to London, and will take him to Marlowe, who is a very celebrated teacher of singing; if Marlowe is satisfied, Blake can study under him, and when he is considered fit can make his appearance."

"It will take a lot of money," observed Una thoughtfully.

"Oh! I've no doubt that can be arranged," said Beaumont quietly. "Blake and myself will come to some agreement about things, but I am anxious that Blake

should benefit by his talents."

"What do you mean?" asked Miss Challoner in a puzzled tone, "I do not understand."

"Of course you do not," answered the artist smoothly. "You do not understand the world--I do--and at the cost of expenditure of money, and sacrifice of illusions. Blake has an exceptionally fine organ and great musical talent; if he went up to London unprovided with money--of which I understand he has not any great store--he would very likely be picked up by some hanger-on of musical circles who would do him more harm than good, perhaps force him to sing before he was matured and thus run the very probable risk of a failure--or if he was taught by a good master and made a great success, unless he was very careful, some impresario would entice him into some agreement to last for years which would be eminently disadvantageous to him in the end."

"But surely no men are so base?"

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear lady, they don't call it baseness but business--the only difference is in the name however--and how would leeches live if there is no one for them to live on? The Genius very often has no business capabilities and no money, the Leech, as a rule, has both, and as poor Genius cannot get himself or his works before the public without the help of Mr. Middleman Leech, of course that gentleman expects to be well-paid for his trouble, and generally pays himself so well that Genius gets the worst of it--the Middleman gets the money, the public get the pleasure, and the Genius--well, he gets next to nothing, except the delightful thought that his works have enriched one man and pleased another. Genius is a fine thing, no doubt, but the capability of being a leech is finer."

"And yet you propose to be the middleman between Mr. Blake and the public," said Una, looking at him keenly.

"Only to save him from others," observed Beaumont quickly. "For all I know, Blake may be an exceedingly clever business man and quite capable of holding his own against the tribe of Leech and Middleman, still he has no money wherewith to bring his voice to that perfection which will make it a saleable article. I can supply that money, and as the labourer is worthy of his hire, I expect a fair remuneration for my trouble, but I will act honestly towards him,

and neither force him into singing before he is fit, nor bind him for any term of years; if he makes a financial and artistic success through my help, I am willing to receive what is my just due, but if he goes to London with no influence--no friends--no money--with nothing but that fine voice, well then, unless he is as I said before a clever business man, there will be some fine pickings for Mr. Leech."

"It's a dreadfully wicked world," sighed Una.

"It is as God made it," rejoined Beaumont cynically, "I don't think mankind have improved it much, but I daresay we're no worse now than we ever were, the only change I can see is the art of concealment--it was fashionable to be wicked in Borgian Rome, so accordingly everyone proclaimed his or her darling sins from the housetops, now it is considered the correct thing to be decent, so we sin in private and preach in public; the wickedness is with us all the same, but we hide it carefully and prate about the morality of nineteenth century England compared with sixteenth century Rome."

"You are rather pessimistic."

"My misfortune, not my fault, I assure you," returned the artist carelessly. "Very likely if I had gone through life wrapped up in the cotton wool of position and money I would have found human nature all that is honest and true. Unfortunately Poverty is a deity who takes a pleasure in destroying the illusions of youth, therefore I see the world in a real and not in an ideal sense--it's unpleasant but useful."

"I hope Reginald will never cherish such harsh thoughts," murmured Una.

"That depends upon the great god Circumstance, but if he comes to London I'm afraid he will be disenchanted. Arcady may be found in this isolated village I've no doubt, but London soon disillusionises the most generous and confiding nature, however, let us hope for the best--but what do you say about my offer, Miss Challoner?"

"Well really," said Una with a laugh, "what can I say? it is Mr. Blake's business and not mine."

"Still, you take an interest in him," observed Beaumont keenly.

"As a very clever man I do," replied Una serenely, for she was determined not to betray her love to this cold-eyed man of the world. "I think it is a pity he should be condemned to stay down here."

"I think so also," said Beaumont cordially, for he was too crafty to press a question he saw might prove distasteful to the proud woman before him, "so I'll speak to Blake."

"And how are you getting on with my cousin's picture?" asked Una, dexterously turning the conversation as they walked down the terrace.

"Oh, very well indeed--it will make an excellent picture, and I enjoy talking to the Squire, his ideas are so very strange."

"The effect of solitude I've no doubt," replied Una absently, "a solitary existence generally engenders strange thoughts."

"Exactly. I'd rather talk to a recluse than to a man or woman of the world, for although the ideas of a hermit may be old fashioned they are infinitely fresh."

"Don't you like Society then?"

"Sometimes I do--man is a gregarious animal you know--but Society people as a rule are fearful humbugs. I suppose a certain amount of deception is necessary to make things go smooth. A tells B lies and B knows they are lies, still he believes them, because to preserve a necessary friendship with A it won't do to tell him he's a liar; if all our friends were put in the Palace of Truth it would be a mighty unpleasant world, I assure you."

"But you don't think it is necessary to tell lies to make things go smoothly?" said Una rather shocked.

"I daresay that's the plain, brutal truth," retorted Beaumont coolly; "lies are the oil which diplomacy pours on the troubled waters of Society. Lord, what a world of humbugs we are to be sure."

"Well, good-bye just now," said Una laughing, as she turned away, "don't forget to tell Mr. Blake about London."

"Oh no, I won't forget," replied Beaumont, and taking off his hat, he strolled

away down the avenue, very well satisfied with the result of his conversation.

"I think I've succeeded in pacifying her," he murmured to himself, "now she sees how anxious I am to help her lover she won't distrust me any more--it's the parable of the sower over again--a little seed sown in fruitful ground bears a goodly crop--now I am sowing the seed--when I get Reginald in London I will reap the harvest."

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK'S OPINION.

"I like him not--his subtle smile
Conceals beneath some purpose vile,
Tho' bland his gaze and fair his speech
Oh trust him not, I do beseech;
For as a seeming simple flower
May hide a scent of evil power,
Which lures with its envenomed
The trusting wearer to his death;
So tho' his tongue may kindly prate,
He oathes thee with undying hate."

Now that Basil Beaumont had succeeded in gaining Una's gratitude, if not her friendship, he determined to next win over Dr. Larcher to his side. He had already managed to gain a certain influence over Reginald Blake, but he saw plainly that the worthy vicar was not prepossessed in his favour, and, as he would prove an invaluable ally should Patience prove dangerous, Beaumont was anxious to impress him with a good estimate of his character.

The cynical man of the world seemed to have changed altogether since his interview with Patience Allerby, and no one seeing the interest he took in the

simple pleasures of village life would dream that behind all this apparent simplicity he concealed a subtle design. His acting was in the highest degree artificial, yet so thoroughly true to nature that everyone was deceived and never saw the ravenous wolf hidden under the innocent skin of the lamb.

Of course, Patience Allerby had too minute a knowledge of his real nature to be deceived by the mask of innocence and gaiety he now chose to assume, and as Basil Beaumont knew this only too well, he was anxious to lose no time in raising up to himself an army of well-wishers against the honest indignation of the woman he had deserted should she interfere with his schemes. Mrs. Larcher, Miss Cassy, Una and Reginald had now all an excellent opinion of him, so he was anxious to secure the good wishes of Dr. Larcher, thus leaving Patience to fight her battle single-handed against the crowd of friends he had so dexterously secured.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the season it was a very pleasant day, with a certain warmth and brightness in the air despite the keen wind which was blowing, and on his arrival at the vicarage Beaumont found the young people playing lawn-tennis; Pumpkin and Ferdinand Priggs holding their own in a somewhat erratic fashion against Reginald and Dick Pemberton.

Beaumont sauntered on to the lawn with his everlasting cigarette between his lips, but threw it away as he was hailed joyously by Reginald and the four players, who paused for a moment in the game.

"How do you do, Miss Larcher?" said Beaumont, lazily raising his hat, "this is a comprehensive greeting, and includes everybody. I've called to see the vicar."

"Papa's out just now," observed Pumpkin, "but he will be back soon. Will you wait, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Thank you--I will," answered Beaumont, sitting down on a garden bench.

"Have a game?" cried Reginald, flinging his racquet into the air and catching it dexterously in his hand.

"Too much like hard work."

"Then have some tea," suggested Pumpkin persuasively.

"Ah, that is better, Miss Larcher," replied Beaumont gaily; "yes, I should like some tea."

"Bring it out here," said Dick, who had thrown himself down on the soft green grass, "it will be jolly having a spread outside."

"How you do misuse the Queen's English," murmured Mr. Priggs as Miss Larcher went inside to order the tea.

"Only in prose," retorted Dick coolly, "think how you mutilate it in poetry."

"I'm afraid you're rather severe on Priggs," said Beaumont, who was anxious to conciliate everyone, even the poet, for whom he had a profound contempt.

"You wouldn't say so if you saw his poetry," replied Pemberton laughing.

"Oh, come now, Dick," said Reginald lightly, "that's rather hard--some of Ferdinand's poetry is beautiful."

"And gruesome."

"Dick cares for nothing but music-hall songs," explained the poetic Ferdinand loftily.

"Oh yes, I do--for cake and tea, among other things, and here it comes. Make a rhyme on it, Ferdy."

"Don't call me Ferdy," said Priggs sharply.

"Then Birdie," observed Dick, in a teasing tone, "though you're more like an owl than any other bird."

"Now don't fight," said Pumpkin, who was now seated in front of a rustic table on which the tea-things were set out. "Milk and sugar, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Both, thank you," said Beaumont, bending forward. "By-the-way, I saw Miss Challoner to-day--we were talking about you, Blake."

"Were you indeed?" observed Reginald, rather irritated at the free and easy manner of the speaker.

"Yes--about your voice. I got a letter from a friend of mine in Town, of which I will tell you later on."

"I suppose Reggy will be leaving us all for London soon," said Dick enviously.

"Lucky Reginald," sighed Ferdinand, "I wish I were going to London."

"What, with a bundle of poems in your pocket?" said Reginald laughing. "I'm afraid you wouldn't set the Thames on fire--poetry doesn't pay."

"Nor literature of any sort," observed Dick, "at least, so I understand."

"Then you understand wrong," said Beaumont coolly, "you go by Scott's saying, I presume--that literature is a good staff but a bad crutch--all that is altered now."

"Not as regards poetry."

"No--not as regards poetry certainly, but success in literature greatly depends on the tact of a writer; if a young man goes to London with a translation of Horace or Lucian in his pocket he will find his goods are not wanted; if Milton went to Paternoster Row at the present time, with the MS. of 'Paradise Lost' in his hand, I don't believe he would find a publisher. We talk a great deal of noble poems and beautiful thoughts, but it's curious what unsaleable articles even the best of them are."

"Then what does sell?" asked Ferdinand.

"Anything that pleases the public--a sensational novel--a sparkling Society poem--a brilliant magazine article--a witty play--you'll get plenty of chances to make money with these things; you see people live so rapidly now that they have no time to study in their play hours, therefore they want the very froth and foam of the time served up to them for their reading, so as to take their thoughts off their work. We praise 'Tom Jones' and 'Clarissa' immensely, but who reads them when they can skim the last three volume novel or the latest pungent article on the state of Europe?--no one wants to be instructed now-a-days, but they do want to be amused."

"How do people live in London?" asked Pumpkin, who, being an unsophisticated country maiden, was absolutely ignorant of anything connected with the great metropolis.

"They live with a hansom cab at the door and their watch in their hand," retorted Beaumont cynically; "they give two minutes to one thing, five minutes to another, and think they are enjoying themselves--get a smattering of all things and a thorough knowledge of nothing--the last play, the last book, the last scandal, the latest political complication--they know all these things well enough to chatter about them, but alas for the deep thinker who puts his views before the restless world of London--he will have a very small circle of readers indeed, because no one has any time to ponder over his thoughtful prose."

"Still the power of the stage as a teacher," began Ferdinand, "is really----"

"Is really nothing," interrupted Beaumont sharply; "the stage of the present day is meant to amuse, not teach--no one cares to go to school after school hours; we are not even original in our dramas--we either translate from the French stage, or reproduce Shakespeare with fine scenery and tea-cup and saucer actors."

"Well, you cannot object to Shakespeare," observed Reginald, who was much interested in Beaumont's remarks.

"Certainly not. Shakespeare, like other things, is excellent--in moderation. I quite agree that we should have a national theatre, where the Elizabethan drama should be regularly acted, but our so-called National Theatre devotes itself to gingerbread melodramas, and tries to hide its poverty of thought under a brilliant *mise-en-scene*; but when you have Shakespeare's plays at three or four theatres and French adaptations at a dozen others, where does the local playwright come in?"

"But from what I hear there are so few good local playwrights," said Dick quickly.

"And whose fault is that?" asked Beaumont acidly, "but the fault of the English nation. France has a strong dramatic school because she produced her own drama to the exclusion of foreign writers; if the English people, who pride themselves on their patriotism, were to refuse to countenance French and German adaptations, the managers would be forced to produce English plays written by English playwrights, and though, very likely, for a time we would have bad workmanship and crude ideas, yet in a few years a dramatic school would be formed; but such an event will never happen while one of our leading playwrights adapts Gallic comedies wholesale and another dramatises old books

of the Georgian period. England has not lost her creative power but she's doing her best to stamp it out."

"How terribly severe," said Ferdinand.

"But how terribly true," retorted Beaumont carelessly. "However, I will not preach any more as I'm sure you must all be tired of my chatter--and see, there is Doctor Larcher coming."

He arose to his feet as he spoke, for the vicar came striding across the little lawn like a colossus.

"Tea and scandal, I suppose," he roared in his hearty voice as he shook hands with the artist.

"Hic innocentis pocula Lesbii
Duces sub umbra."

"Certainly innocent enough sir," observed Reginald lightly, "but the fact is we have been listening to Mr. Beaumont."

"And the discourse?" asked the vicar, taking a cup of tea from Pumpkin.

"The decadence of Literature and the Drama in England," replied Beaumont with a smile.

"Ah, indeed. I'm afraid, Mr. Beaumont, I know nothing of the drama, except the Bard of Avon----"

"Whom Mr. Beaumont likes, in moderation," interrupted Pumpkin mischievously.

"Certainly," assented Beaumont gravely. "I like all things in moderation."

"Even Horace," whispered Dick to Reginald, who laughed loudly and then apologised for his untimely mirth.

"As to literature," said Dr. Larcher ponderously, "I'm afraid there is rather a falling off--we are frivolous--yes, decidedly frivolous."

"I wish we were anything half so pleasant," remarked Beaumont, "I'm afraid we're decidedly dull."

"The wave of genius which began with this present century," said the vicar pompously, "has now spent its force and to a great extent died away--soon it will gather again and sweep onward."

"If it would only sweep away a few hundred of our present writers, I don't think anyone would mind," said the artist laughing.

"*Sed omnes una manet nox*," observed Dr. Larcher with a grim smile.

"What, all our present day scribblers? What a delightful thing for the twentieth century."

Dr. Larcher smiled blandly as he set down his cup, for he liked his Horatian allusions to be promptly taken up, and began to think Beaumont rather good company. He nodded kindly to the whole party, and was about to turn away when a sudden thought struck him.

"Do you want to see me, Mr. Beaumont?" he asked looking at the artist.

"Yes, I do," replied that gentleman, rising leisurely to his feet. "I wish to speak to you about Blake, and also I wish Blake to be present."

"Oh, I'll come," cried Reginald, springing forward with alacrity, for he guessed what the conversation would be about.

"Come then to my study," said Dr. Larcher. "Pumpkin, my child, you had better come inside, as the night is coming on."

As the three gentlemen walked towards the house, Pumpkin commenced putting the tea-things together in order to take them inside. Dick, who had risen to his feet, was staring after Beaumont with something like a frown on his fresh, young face.

"What's the matter, Dick?" asked Pumpkin, pausing for a moment.

"Eh?" said Dick, starting a little, "oh, nothing, only I don't like him."

"Whom?"

"Mr. Beaumont," said Pemberton thoughtfully. "I think he's a humbug."

"I'm sure he's a most delightful man," observed Ferdinand loftily.

"Oh, you'd think anyone delightful who praised your poetry," retorted Dick rudely, "but I do not like Beaumont; he's very clever and talks well, no doubt, but he's an outsider all the same."

"What makes you think so?" said Pumpkin, looking at him with the tray in her hands.

"Oh, I can size a man up in two minutes," observed Dick in his usual slangy manner, "and if I was Reggy I wouldn't give that chap the slant to round on me; he says a lot he doesn't mean, and if he's going to run Reggie's show the apple-cart will soon be upset."

Owing to Dick's lavish use of slang, Pumpkin was quite in the dark regarding his meaning, so with a quiet smile walked indoors with the tray.

"Reggy can look after himself all right," observed the poet in a placid tone.

"And a jolly good thing too," cried Dick, eyeing the poetic youth in a savage manner, "but prevention's better than cure, and I wouldn't let Beaumont have a finger in my pie if I were Reggy."

"Ah, you see you're not Reggy."

"I'm uncommonly glad I'm not you," retorted Dick politely. "It must be an awful disagreeable thing for you to know what an arrant idiot you are."

"I'm not an idiot," said Priggs haughtily.

"Not an idiot!" echoed Dick derisively, "why you are such an idiot you don't even know you are one."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DIPLOMACY OF BASIL BEAUMONT.

Astute is he who mere brute force despises
And gains by subtle craft all worldly prizes.

When the three gentlemen were comfortably seated in the vicar's study, Beaumont, without further preamble, explained his errand.

"You know, sir," he said to genial Dr. Larcher, "that Blake has a very fine voice--a phenomenal tenor voice, which, when properly trained, will make his fortune. Blake tells me he has not decided what line of life to take up, so I propose he should be a singer."

"Oh, I should like it above all things," cried Reginald with the usual thoughtless impulse of youth.

"Wait a moment," observed the vicar cautiously. "I am not much in favour of a theatrical career for you, Reginald, and, this is too important a matter to be decided lightly, so I would like to hear Mr. Beaumont's views on the subject."

"Oh, my views are easily explained," said Beaumont coolly. "I know very well your objections to a theatrical career, Doctor Larcher, and no doubt it is full of temptations to a young man, still, Blake need not sing on the stage, but make his appearance on the concert-platform--good tenors are rare, so he will soon have plenty of work and make an excellent income."

"And what do you propose to do?" asked the vicar thoughtfully.

"That is the point I am coming to," explained Beaumont quickly. "I am not a rich man myself, but I know many people in Town who are wealthy; if Blake will come up to Town with me, I will undertake to find sufficient money to give him a first class training as a singer; when he makes a success--and I have very little doubt he will do so--he can pay me back the money advanced and a certain percentage for the loan and risk: then of course he will have an excellent profession and be able to earn his own living."

"London is full of temptation to a young man," observed Dr. Larcher doubtfully.

"A young man must take his chance about that," replied Beaumont satirically. "Of course Blake will be with me and for my own sake I will do my best to keep

him out of harm's way; but you surely don't want him to stay in this village all his life, wrapped up in cotton wool?"

"I'm not in the habit of being wrapped up in cotton wool," cried Reginald, piqued at the artist's tone, "and I daresay if I was in London I could look after myself without anybody's help."

"I've no doubt you could," replied Beaumont cordially, "all I offer you is assistance. Now what do you say, Dr. Larcher?"

"At present, I can say nothing," answered the vicar slowly. "Reginald is as dear to me as if he was my own son, and the choice of a career is not lightly to be decided upon. I had hoped he would become a curate, and then there would have been no necessity for his leaving me."

"I don't think I would have made a good curate," said Blake shaking his head, "and though I love this dear old village very much, yet I want to see a little of the world--my voice is my only talent, so the sooner I make use of it the better."

"*Quod adest memento componere aquas,*" quoted the vicar significantly.

"*Dum loquimur, fugerit invida ætas,*" replied Reginald quickly.

"Fairly answered," said the vicar with a half sigh. "Yes, I suppose you must take advantage of flying time and it is no use for you to waste your life in idleness. Would you like to be a singer?"

"I think so," said Blake after a pause. "Of course I am anxious to make my own way in the world, and unless I make use of my one talent I do not see how I am to do so."

"I wish I had your one talent," observed Beaumont, rather enviously; "I would not rail against fate--well Doctor Larcher, and what is your decision?"

"I cannot give it to you now," said the old man rising, "it is too important a matter to be dismissed lightly. I will let you have an answer in a few days. Still, Mr. Beaumont, I must thank you for your kind intentions regarding Reginald."

"Only too glad to be of service," replied Beaumont, with a bow.

"Meantime," said the vicar genially, "you must stop and have some dinner with us."

"Delighted," responded Beaumont, and went away with Reginald, very well satisfied with the result of the interview.

After dinner, hearing that a visitor was in the house Mrs. Larcher, who had been lying down all day under the influence of "The Affliction," made her appearance and greeted Beaumont with great cordiality.

"So pleased to see you," she said graciously, when she was established on the sofa amid a multiplicity of wraps and pillows; "quite a treat to have some one to talk to."

"Come, come, my dear, this is rather hard upon us," said the vicar good-humouredly.

"I mean some one new," explained Mrs. Larcher graciously. "I am so fond of company, but owing to my affliction see very, very few people; it's a great deprivation to me I assure you."

"No doubt," assented Beaumont, rather bored by the constant flow of Mrs. Larcher's conversation, "but I hope you will soon quite recover from your illness and then you can mix with the world."

"Never, ah never," murmured Mrs. Larcher, looking up to the ceiling. "I'm a wreck--positively a wreck--I will never, never be what I was--I suffer from so many things, do I not, Eleanor Gwendoline?"

"You do, mama," replied that damsel who was seated at the piano. "But you would not object to a little music, would you, dear?"

"If it's soft, no," answered the invalid wearily, "but dear Reginald, do not sing loud songs, they are so bad for my nerves."

"All right," replied Reginald, and forthwith sang a sentimental ditty called "Loneliness," which had dreary words and equally dreary music.

"I do wish song writers and their poets would invent something new," observed Beaumont when this lachrymose ballad came to an end, "one gets so weary of

broken hearts and all that rubbish."

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Beaumont," said Dr. Larcher emphatically. "I observe in the songs of the present day a tendency to effeminate bewailings which I infinitely deplore. We have, I am afraid, lost in a great measure, the manliness of Dibdin and the joyous ideas of the Jacobean lyricists."

"What about the sea songs?" asked Dick, "they are jolly enough."

"No doubt," replied Beaumont, "'Nancy Lee' and the 'Three Jolly Sailor Boys,' have a breezy ring about them, but this sugar and water sentimentality now so much in vogue is simply horrible--it's a great pity a reaction does not set in, then we would have a more healthy tone."

"Still there is a fascination about sorrow which neither poet nor musician can resist," observed Ferdinand Priggs, who was anxious to read one of his poems to the company.

"I dare say," said Beaumont quickly; "but there is a great tendency to morbidness, too much use of broken hearts and minor keys, in fact the whole tendency of the age is pessimistic--we are always regretting the past, deploring the present, and dreading the future."

"I think that has been the case in all ages of the world," observed the vicar; "man has invariably talked of the prosperity of the past, and the decadence of the present."

"The past is past, and the dead are dead," murmured the poet thoughtfully.

"A quotation?" asked Beaumont, struck with the remark.

"From a poem of my own," said Ferdinand quickly, "which I would like to read."

"By all means, my boy," asserted the vicar heartily. "Read on."

All the company glanced at one another and Dick groaned audibly, while Mrs. Larcher settled herself in her pillows with a sigh of resignation. But the poet rejoiced that he had succeeded in gaining a hearing, and producing from his pocket a carefully written manuscript read the following poem in a carefully modulated voice:--

A BALLADE OF DEAD DAYS.

I.

Oh, I am weary of idle songs
Of lords and ladies and olden time,
All their mirth to the past belongs,
Sorrow sounds in our present rhyme.
Joy-bells change to the death-bell's chime,
Age is bitter and youth hath fled,
Gone is the season of hope sublime,
The past is past, and the dead are dead.

II.

Ladies I loved in those far-off days,
Where are ye now with your golden hair?
My locks are white neath a crown of bays,
But youth's rose-crown was to me more fair.
My heart was captured in many a snare
Enmeshed in ringlets of gold outspread,
Now in my heart lurks a bleak despair.
The past is past, and the dead are dead.

III.

Many the goblets of wine I quaffed
To health of dames who were fair and frail,
A kiss of the hand and a plumed hat doffed.
Then away to the wars in a coat of mail.
But, ah, that armour could not prevail
Against your eyes and your lips so red,
Nay, but such thoughts are a twice-told tale,
The past is past, and the dead are dead.

ENVOI.

Time, wilt thou never let me forget
Those perished days till I'm cased in lead?
Folly to dream with such vague regret,
The past is past, and the dead are dead.

"The style is Villon, I see," observed Beaumont, when the poet ended.

"It's more than the genius is," muttered Dick, who cherished a deadly hatred of Ferdinand's poetry.

"I like your refrain, my dear Ferdinand," observed the vicar graciously; "it has a certain pleasant lilt about it, but I'm afraid your verses are somewhat gruesome. Still, they have merit. Oh, yes, they have merit."

"I'm glad you think so," said the modest poet humbly, to whom praise was as rain on thirsty flowers. "I hope to do better soon."

"I've no doubt you will," said Beaumont, rather sorry for the poor youth, who was blushing painfully. "Your verses are, to a certain extent, an echo of Villon, still you have a musical ear, and that is a great thing. If I may be permitted to give an opinion I rather think your views are a trifle pessimistic."

"Just what we were talking about," cried Reginald gaily. "A regret for the past and a lament for the present."

"It is the spirit of the age," sighed Ferdinand, putting the poem in his pocket. "It is hard to escape its influence."

"If any one had a chance of escaping it you ought to be the individual," said Beaumont, with a smile. "In London, where the latest ideas are floating in the air, it is difficult to be original, but out here, where the work is standing still, you ought to have struck out a new line. I'm afraid your poetry comes from books, not from Nature."

"Why so?" demanded Ferdinand, rather nettled.

"By the very fact that you used in that ballade an exotic form of rhyme, and the ideas therein are the dreary, hopeless sorrows of a worn-out world. Sing, like Herrick of the things around you,

'Of brooks, of blossoms, birds and bowers,
Of April, May, of June and July flowers,'

then you will probably strike a new note."

"I don't think much of Herrick," muttered Ferdinand proudly.

"Too cheerful, perhaps?" said Beaumont sarcastically. "That's a pity, as I see you are in danger of joining the dyspeptic school of poets, of whom we have been talking. Don't have too much gaslight about your muse, my dear boy, but let her be the buxom nymph of that charming old pagan, Robert Herrick."

"Your remarks are very sensible," observed the vicar heartily, as Beaumont rose to go. "If poetry must be written, let it be natural poetry. There is too much of the dissecting-table and charnel-house about our modern rhymists."

"It's the dead world of the past which presses on the dying world of the present," said Ferdinand, gloomily.

"Oh, bosh!" cried Dick, in disgust. "Your liver's out of order, my dear chap, that's what's the matter with you."

The outraged poet withdrew in haughty dignity, while Beaumont took his leave of this kindly family circle, who pressed him to come again, so much had they enjoyed his company.

"Come again," muttered Beaumont to himself, as he strolled back to the inn, with a cigarette between his lips. "I should rather think so. I've won the vicar's heart by my disinterested affection for his *protégé*. It's wonderful, the effect of a little diplomacy--so much better than outward defiance. I think, my dear Patience, that should you take it into your foolish head to malign me, you will find it a more difficult task than you think. Diplomacy is the only weapon I can use against a woman like you, and it's an uncommonly useful weapon when properly used."

CHAPTER XV

A FANTASTIC THEORIST.

"He is a man
Full of strange thoughts, and fancies whimsical,
Who dreams of dreams that make his life a dream.
And had he powers supernal at command,
Would tumble heaven itself about our ears
In his mad searchings for--I wot not what."

The room which Beaumont had turned into a studio while painting Squire Garsworth's portrait, overlooked the terrace on to which the French windows opened. It was the drawing-room of the Grange, and was magnificently furnished in the ponderous style of the Georgian period, though now, being but rarely used, an air of desertion and decay seemed to linger about it. The windows, however, being large and curtainless, there was an excellent light to paint by, so Basil established his easel near the centre window, and placed the squire at one further along, in order that the full light should fall on his withered face, showing the multitudinous wrinkles and stern expression that made it a study worthy of Rembrandt. Beaumont often glanced at the attenuated form lying listlessly back in the great arm-chair, and wondered what curious event had changed this man from an idle reveller into an industrious scholar.

Above was the painted ceiling of the apartment, whereon gods and goddesses, in faded tints, disported themselves among dingy blue clouds, surrounded by cupids, sea-horses, rising suns and waning moons, while, below, a threadbare carpet covered the polished floor but imperfectly. A huge marble fireplace, cold and black-looking, heavy, cumbersome chairs, solid-looking tables, a quaint old spinet with thin legs and several comfortable-looking sofas, filled up the room. There were also grim-looking faces frowning from the walls, cabinets filled with grotesque china, now worth its weight in gold, bizarre ornaments from India and China, and many other quaint things, which made the apartment look like a

curiosity-shop to the refined taste of the artist. But in spite of the old-time magnificence of the place, spiders spun their webs in the corners, grey dust lay thickly around, and a chill, tomb-like feeling pervaded the room. Even the cheerful sunlight could not lift the heavy shadow which seemed to brood over it, and it seemed, in its loneliness, to be a chamber of some enchanted palace, such as we read of in eastern tales.

Nor was the proprietor out of place in this decayed realm of former grandeur, for he looked old and weird enough to have been coeval with the pristine splendours of the Grange. The worn face, the sudden gleams of insane fire from the deeply-set eyes, the snowy, sparse hair that fell from under the black skull-cap, and the sombre robe, all seemed to be the semblance of some hoary necromancer rich in malignant spells of magic.

Had Randal Garsworth mixed with the world he would have been a different creature. Had he gone abroad among his fellow men and taken an interest in their ideas concerning politics, literature, and music, he would have retained a healthy mind by such generalization of his intellect. But, shutting himself up, as he had done, in a lonely house, and concentrating his mind upon himself, he lapsed into a morbid state which prepared him for the reception of any fantastical idea. While thus lingering in this unhealthy life, he chanced upon the curious doctrine of metempsychosis, and it speedily took possession of his diseased mind, already strongly inclined towards strange searchings. The weirdness of the Pythagorean theory appealed to his love of the whimsical, and he became a monomaniac on the subject. Under the influence of a lonely life, ardent studies of the philosophers who supported the theory of transmigration, and his selfish application of these wild doctrines to his own soul, the monomania under which he laboured deepened into madness.

To all appearances he conducted himself in a rational manner, though slightly eccentric, but with his firm belief in metempsychosis, and his preparations for his future incarnation he could hardly be called sane. Yet he conducted all business matters with admirable skill, and in spite of the dilapidated state of the Grange, his farms were well managed, and his tenants found no cause to complain of neglect on the part of their landlord. Like all madmen, he was a profound egotist, and absorbed in his belief of a re-incarnation on this earth, he paid no heed to the claims of relatives or friends, neglecting all social duties in order to devote himself entirely to his favourite delusions. Such was the man who sat before Basil Beaumont, by whose skilful brush and genuine talent the

strange face of the recluse was rapidly being transferred to the canvas in the most life-like manner.

"I hope this portrait will please you," said Beaumont, breaking the silence which had lasted some minutes, "it's the best thing I have ever done."

"Is it?" replied Garsworth, vaguely, his mind being far away, occupied with some abstruse thought. "Yes, of course. What did you say?"

"I hope you'll like the picture," repeated Beaumont, slowly.

"Of course I will," said the squire, quickly. "I want to see myself in the future as I am now. Some people look back on their portraits taken in youth, and see a faint semblance of their old age in the unwrinkled faces, but I will see this picture when in a new body which will have no resemblance in its form to the withered shape I now bear."

"A strange doctrine."

"As you say--a strange doctrine," said Garsworth, warming with his subject, "but a very true one. My body is old and worn out. Physically, I am an irreparable wreck, but my soul is as lusty, fresh and eager as it was in the days of my youth. Why, then, should not my true entity shed this worn-out, fleshly envelope as a snake does its skin, and enter into a new one replete with the vigour of youth?"

"A difficult question to answer," replied Beaumont, calmly, "very, very difficult. We have no proof that such a thing can happen."

"You are a materialist?"

"Pardon me, no. A materialist, as I understand the word, denies the independent existence of spirit; I do not. I believe our spirits or souls to be immortal: but, as to this re-incarnation theory--it is a dream of Pythagoras."

"It was a dream of many before Pythagoras, and has been the dream of many since," rejoined Garsworth, coldly. "The Egyptians, the Hindoos and the Buddhists all accepted the doctrine, although each treated it according to their different religions. In our modern days Lessing believed in it; and if you have read the writings of Kardec you will find that re-incarnation is the very soul of the spiritist belief."

Beaumont sneered.

"I can't say I have much faith in the maunderings of spiritualists. Table-turning and spirit-rapping may be very pleasant as an amusement; but as a religion--bah!"

"You talk like that because you don't understand the subject. The things you mention are only the outward manifestation of spiritualism. If you read Kardec's books you would find that the true theory of spiritualism is transmigration. Spirits are incarnated in human bodies in order to work out their own advancement. If they resist temptation while in the flesh, they enter into a higher sphere, in order to advance another step. If they fail to lead a pure life, they again become re-incarnated in the flesh to make another effort; but they never retrograde."

"And you believe in this doctrine?" asked Beaumont, incredulously.

"With certain reservations--yes."

"And those reservations?"

"I need not mention all, but I will tell you one as an example. The spiritists deny that we remember former existences--I believe we do."

"Oh! and you think in your next body you will remember your incarnation as Squire Garsworth?"

"I do."

"Do you remember your former existences?"

"Some of them."

"Why not all?"

"Because some of the lives I then lived were base in the extreme, and not worthy of remembrance, so I forgot them--in the same way as you forget disagreeable things and only have thoughts of agreeable events."

"Will you tell me some of your former existences?"

"It would be hardly worth while," replied the squire, irritably, "as you would only look upon my narration as a fairy-tale. But I can tell you what I was--an Egyptian prince, a Roman soldier, a Spanish Moor, and an English pauper in the reign of Elizabeth."

Beaumont looked in astonishment at the old man, glibly running off this fantastic list.

"And since the pauper stage?" he asked, smothering a smile.

"I have been re-incarnated in this present form," responded the squire, gravely; "it is because I experienced poverty in my last existence that I am saving money now."

"I don't understand."

"To keep myself during my next incarnation."

The artist was becoming quite bewildered at hearing this farrago of nonsense uttered in such a serious tone. However the conversation was so extraordinary that he could not forbear humouring the madman.

"A very laudable intention," he said, quietly, "but as you will be someone else in your next incarnation, how are you going to claim Squire Garsworth's money?"

"Ah!" responded the squire, with a cunning smile, "that is my secret; I have arranged all that in a most admirable way. I can claim my own money without any trouble."

"But suppose you are born a savage?"

"I will not be born a savage--that would be retrogression, and spirits never retrograde."

"Well," said Beaumont, rising to his feet, and putting his brushes away, "your conversation is getting too deep for me, Mr. Garsworth. I understand your metempsychosis theory all right, though I don't agree with it; but I fail to see how you are going to arrange about getting your own money."

"No, no!" replied Garsworth, raising his form, tall and gaunt, against the bright

light outside, "of course not; that is my secret. No one will know--not one! Is your sitting finished?"

"Yes, for to-day."

"Come to-morrow--come to-morrow!" said the old man, coming round to look at the picture, "no time to be lost, I may die before it's done, and then I won't be able to see myself as I was: but Nestley will keep me alive--good doctor--very good doctor--paid him handsomely--yes, handsomely! Good-bye for to-day, Mr. Beaumont. Don't forget to-morrow; I may die--no time to lose--good-bye!"

The old man shuffled tremulously out of the room, and Beaumont stood looking after him with a puzzled smile on his lips. He began to put his paraphernalia away slowly and talked softly to himself meanwhile.

"I wonder if there's any sense in the old fool's ravings--I don't believe in this incarnation rubbish--but he's got some scheme in his head about that money--I'd like to find it out--there might be something in it by which I could benefit--he's a madman sure enough but still there is method in his madness--however, I'll try to discover his secret somehow."

He lighted a cigarette and sauntered out on to the terrace, thinking over the chances of finding out the Squire's secret with a view to turning it to his own account. Apparently his cogitations led to some result, for after standing for a few minutes at the end of the terrace in a brown study, he removed his cigarette from his mouth and uttered one word:

"Hypnotism."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE VILLAGE CONCERT.

The viols sound in festal hall
Where come the merry mummers all,
The minstrels sing their roundelay
Of doughty knights and ladies gay,
And as the carol music swells
The jester shakes his cap and bells,
While lords and dames of high degree
Approve the Christ-tide revelry
And happy in the pleasant din
Amazed the foolish rustics grin.

The school-room was a long, old-fashioned apartment, with plain oak walls and a high roof. The wide windows were set low down, and when seated at their desks the scholars could look out and see the old stone cross of the market-place and the heavily foliaged elms that waved their green leaves in front of the queer red-tiled houses. The walls were hung round with maps of the five divisions of the world, and above the teacher's desk, which was set on a raised dais, appeared a map of the world itself. On this occasion the ink-splashed desk of the teacher was removed and in its place stood a small cottage piano. Dark red curtains hung down from brass rods on either side so that the dais was transformed into a very fair stage, while at the back decorative effect was obtained by a Union Jack being gracefully festooned over the Royal arms, painted by the village artist.

The desks of the scholars being immovable were left in their places, and the audience--which comprised nearly the whole population of the village--sat like rows of elderly pupils ready to be instructed. Forms and desks were ranged in the centre of the room and there was a narrow walk on either side leading down to the wide door at the end of the building which was continually opening and shutting to admit late arrivals and exclude a view of the festive preparations from the penniless crowd outside who could not afford the necessary coppers for entrance fee. Illumination was provided by six oil lamps, three on each side, set in metal brackets, and from the centre of the roof over the stage hung a larger lamp, while the piano was further adorned with two weakly-looking tallow candles for the convenience of the musician.

The school-mistress, Miss Busky, a dried-up prim-looking little woman, who resembled a cork fairy more than anything else, had further ornamented the bare room by wreathing round the maps and lamps strings of coloured paper flowers manufactured by artistically inclined pupils, and even the legs of the piano were

swathed in these tissue paper decorations. Over the stage there was also a large placard bearing the word "Welcome" wreathed with artificial flowers, so that Miss Busky on surveying her handiwork felt quite content with the general effect of luxury produced by herself and her satellites. The programme was neatly written out by the best writers in the school, and handed only to favoured visitors as these efforts of penmanship were few in number. The visitors themselves, red, lusty country folk, had come from far and near to the concert, and the little school-room was uncomfortably full, but owing to the fierce efforts of Miss Busky, who bounced about like an india-rubber ball, everyone was at last comfortably settled.

Mrs. Larcher and Pumpkin taking no part in the performance were accommodated with front seats, together with many of the country gentry, who always patronised these entertainments at the urgent request of the vicar, who greatly believed in good feeling and friendliness existing between the lords of the soil and their tenants.

And now amid a great clapping of hands and stamping of heavily shod feet the popular vicar himself appeared on the stage as chairman, and took his seat beside a small table adorned with a jug of water, a glass and a programme.

Dr. Larcher made a short speech, ending with a quotation from his favourite poet:

"Et thure et fidibus juvat
Placare,"

which hardly anyone understood, and then the serious business of the evening commenced.

The concert was opened by the indefatigable Miss Busky and Cecilia, who played a duet by a popular composer on popular airs, in which said airs were almost smothered in variations, and blended one with the other in a most surprising manner, for just as the audience recognized "Rule Britannia" and had settled themselves down for an intellectual treat the players broke off into "The Last Rose of Summer," and thence bursting into "Auld Lang Syne," melting,

amid a perfect fire-work of runs, into "The British Grenadiers," which latter being played with full force by four hands, the loud pedal pressed down, brought the overture to an end in a noisy manner which delighted the audience.

Reginald then sang "Come into the garden, Maud," but this number evidently did not please them very much as they could not make out what it was all about and, preferring noise to delicacy, did not appreciate the beauty of the singer's voice. Beaumont, however, who was present, admired the item greatly, and said as much to Mrs. Larcher who, armed with a fan and a smelling bottle, sat next to him fighting with "The Affliction."

"Oh yes," sighed Mrs. Larcher when she had got "The Affliction" well under and did not feel inclined to faint, scream, or kick, or give way to any other eccentricities which "The Affliction" was fond of doing at unseasonable hours, "his voice is beautiful, no doubt, but so loud, it goes through my head and rattles my nerves. I love soft songs that soothe me--something cradle-like--a Berceuse, you understand. I'm afraid you find me rather hard to please, but it's my affliction and not myself. I assure you, Mr. Beaumont, that a loud voice often prostrates me for days and leaves me a perfect object, does it not, Eleanora Gwendoline?"

Eleanora Gwendoline, alias Pumpkin, assented with alacrity to this remark, upon which Beaumont observed that he never should have thought it to look at her, thereby inciting Mrs. Larcher to a weakly spasm of coquetry for she tapped Basil feebly with her fan and said he was a naughty man, then settled herself to listen to a glee by the choir.

The choirmaster, Simon Ruller, a long, thin individual, in a frantic state of excitement, having reduced his chorus to a state of abject nervousness started them off in the glee "Glorious Apollo," and after two or three false starts they managed to begin. Having begun, their great aim was to get over the ground as rapidly as possible, and they rushed it through at lightning speed, Mr. Ruller imploring them in fierce whispers to observe the *rallentando*, which advice, however, they did not take. On disappearing from the stage, chased off by the excited Ruller, they were succeeded by Miss Cassy, attired in a startling costume of blue and yellow.

This lady's contribution to the proceedings was a milk and water ballad of a semi-jocular kind, called "Almost a Case," and the way in which she leered and

smirked at the audience from behind her music in order to point the meaning of the verses, was quite alarming. She paid no attention to time, and poor Cecilia was obliged to stop one minute and play furiously the next in order to follow Miss Cassy's spasmodic idea of rendering the song.

"So flippant," commented Mrs. Larcher when the fair songstress had retired, "a great want of decorum--she makes my nerves jump."

"It's the style of song, mama," said Pumpkin generously.

"Then why doesn't she choose less hoppy music?" retorted the matron fanning herself vigorously, "it makes me twitch to hear her. Ah, if she only had my affliction she wouldn't sing at all."

Beaumont privately thought this would be an excellent thing for everyone, but did not say so, knowing Mrs. Larcher to be a great friend of Miss Cassy's.

Dick Pemberton gave a sea song with great vigour, and received genuine applause, then Una and Reginald sang "Oh, that we two were Maying," which the audience did not care about. The vicar then read Poe's poem of "The Bells" in a ponderous manner, which crushed the airy lines, and after another song from Reginald, Mr. Ferdinand Priggs appeared to recite an original poem "My Ladye Fayre."

Mr. Priggs was ushered in by a melancholy strain from the piano, and placing one hand in his breast and tossing back his long hair with the other he burst into a series of questions about the fayre lady.

"Was it a dream of sadness
That reeled my brain to madness,
Or how
Did I see her brow
With its crown of golden gladness?"

After asking these questions Mr. Priggs proved conclusively that it was no dream, but

"A wild, weird, wandering, warning dame
Who set the ears of all aflame
With loud acclaim."

The poet treated his audience to about twenty verses of this gruesome production, and having ended with a long sigh stood on the stage for fully a minute. Everyone waited to hear what he was going to say next, but the poetic Ferdinand doubled up his limp body into what he called a bow, and slowly drifted out of sight, his legs apparently taking him wherever they chose to go.

On the conclusion of this dismal poem the full company sang "God save the Queen," and the concert ended amid the congratulations of all concerned, as they decided it was a great success.

The vicar heartily congratulated the performers on the receipts, as after paying all expenses there remained fully five pounds for the almshouse fund, to aid which the concert had been got up.

"Where is Doctor Nestley, to-night?" asked Beaumont as they went out.

"He had to stay with the squire," replied Una, who was leaning on Reginald's arm, "he's not at all well."

"Nerves?" asked Mrs. Larcher anxiously, taking a medical interest in the case.

"Oh, dear no," said Miss Cassy lightly, "though he has got nerves--so very odd, isn't it? but this time the dear doctor says it's lungs--something gone wrong--a kind of what's-his-name thing, you know--if he doesn't take care he'll get that disease--so odd--something about a moan."

"Oh, pneumonia," observed Beaumont gravely. "I hope not, it's very dangerous, and to an old man like the squire, doubly so."

"I have had it," said Mrs. Larcher, who by her own showing possessed every disease under the sun. "Acute inflammation of the lungs, it left me a wreck--a prostrate wreck--did it not, Eleanora Gwendoline?"

"It did, mama," replied the dutiful Pumpkin.

"It might come on again," said Mrs. Larcher, opening her smelling-bottle. "I'll have a cup of hot tea when I go home, and a hot bottle to my feet."

"I wonder she doesn't have a mustard plaster and a fly blister," whispered Dick to Una, "might draw some of the bosh out of her."

Una laughed, and the great lumbering barouche of the Grange having arrived, driven by the stony Munks, she preferred to enter it, followed by the chattering Cassy.

"So cold, isn't it?" said that lady, "quite like the North Pole. Captain what's-his-name, you know, Parry, puts me in mind of Paris--French style--so odd. I'll see you to-morrow, Mr. Beaumont, and oh, Mrs. Larcher, will you come to tea next week--Thursday--what do you say, Una? Friday, oh yes--Friday."

"If my affliction permits me," said Mrs. Larcher in a stately tone, "I will try."

"So glad," replied the volatile Cassy, "and you come also Mr. Blake, and of course Mr. Pemberton, not forgetting Mr. Beaumont; so very nice to see one's friends. Oh, yes, Munks, we're quite ready, good-night--so pleased--delightful concert--odd--very odd."

Further talk on the part of Miss Cassandra was checked by the sudden start of the barouche, and what with the uneven road and the worn-out springs of the coach, Miss Cassy had enough to do to look after herself without talking.

Mrs. Larcher, leaning on the vicar's arm, walked home, followed by Pumpkin and the three pupils, Dick chaffing Ferdinand over his poem till that poetic soul was nearly out of his mind with anger.

Beaumont, left alone at the school-room door, lit a cigarette, and was about to go when he heard a faint sigh behind him, and on turning saw Cecilia and the lively Busky.

"I enjoyed the concert very much, Miss Mosser," he said gracefully as they passed him.

"I'm glad of that, sir," said Cecilia, who looked tired, "it went off very well.

Was--was Doctor Nestley here?"

"No, he had to stay with Squire Garsworth."

The blind girl sighed again, and after saying good-night, went away followed by Miss Busky, who bounded along in the moonlight like a marionette.

"Poor girl," said Beaumont thoughtfully, "she loves Nestley, and won't have the slightest chance with him, he's too much in love with Una Challoner. By-the-way, I must see Nestley; if I want to find out the squire's secret, I'll have to arrange matters with him--I hate watch-dogs."

CHAPTER XVII.

ANTEROS.

Strong god thou art the enemy of gods,
A hater of blind Eros and his joys,
Thy rule is bitter as the stinging rods
That scourge at Dian's feast the Spartan boys;
Evil his soul who asks thine evil aid,
And in revenge such evil aid employs,
In sundering the hearts of youth and maid.

The Garsworth family was never a very prolific one, but the estates had always descended in a direct line from father to son. Many a time the race seemed to be on the point of extinction owing to the representative being an only child, yet though the line dwindled down to depending on one life alone for its continuity it never absolutely died out. In the event of such a thing taking place it would have been difficult to say who would have succeeded to the estates, as the Garsworth family seemed to be averse to matrimony and their connection with the county families was, to say the least, doubtful. Besides, as there was no

entail, the estates were completely at the disposal of the head of the family for the time being, and he could will them to whomsoever he pleased. As hitherto son had always succeeded father, there had been no necessity for the exercise of such a power, but now the sole representative of the race being unmarried he was at liberty to use his own judgment in disposing of the estates.

In the opinion of right-minded people there could be very little doubt as to who should succeed the Squire, for Una was the next of kin. She was the only living representative of the younger branch of the family, being the grand-daughter of the Squire's aunt, and therefore his second cousin. Miss Cassandra, although she constantly alluded to Randal Garsworth as "my cousin," was as a matter of fact only a relation by marriage, being Una's paternal aunt.

Una's parents had died while she was a child and she had been brought up by the kind-hearted though eccentric Miss Cassy, who sent her to Germany in order to complete her education. Miss Cassandra, having an income of three hundred a year, dwelt in London, where she was known among a select society of well-born fossils who looked upon her as a mere child. Una, having finished her education, came back to England and took up her abode with Miss Cassy, and having an income of some two hundred a year joined it to that of her aunt, and thus the two women managed to live very comfortably in a small way.

On seeing Una's beauty, however, Miss Cassandra had no intention that she should live a dismal life in a smoky London suburb, without at least one chance of seeing the gay world and marrying as befitted her birth and loveliness, so she wrote to Squire Garsworth on the subject. The old man sent in reply a gracious message that Una could come down and stay at the Grange, and that he would not forget her in his will. Miss Cassy, not knowing the idiosyncrasies of the recluse, saw in her mind's eye a hospitable country house full of joyous company, so persuaded Una to accept the invitation, saying she herself would go also. After some demur Squire Garsworth agreed to Miss Cassy coming, and in due time, having broken up their London home, the two ladies arrived at the Grange.

Their dismay was great at finding the sordid way in which the Squire lived, and Miss Cassy would have promptly returned to London, only Una, being touched by the loneliness of her kinsman, determined to remain, persuading Miss Cassy to do likewise. So they lived quietly at the Grange on the somewhat begrudged hospitality of the old man, their own incomes obtaining for them any luxuries

they might require, as they certainly received nothing but the bare necessities of life from their host.

In the mad pursuit of his delusion, Garsworth, in contrast to the lavishness of his youth, had become absolutely penurious in his mode of life. The large staff of servants necessary for such an immense house as the Grange had been long ago dispensed with, and Patience Allerby, assisted by Jellicks looked after the household, while the stony Munks exercised a grim sovereignty over the exterior arrangements. The Squire mostly lived in his own study, and Una, aided by Miss Cassy, managed to make one room habitable for themselves, but the rest of the house was given over to the rats and spiders, becoming at last so lonely and eerie that Miss Cassy frequently declared it was haunted.

Una having fallen in love with Reginald, was quite content in her dreary exile, but Miss Cassy, used to the lively entertainments of the fossilized society in London, longed to get away from the place, and looked forward to the Squire dying with a certain ghastly eagerness, as she thought Una would then come in for all the estates and they could once more live London.

On the morning after the concert Miss Cassy and Una seated at a late breakfast, were talking seriously about the unsettled health of the Squire, who was now obviously breaking up.

"He's about seventy-three now," said Miss Cassy thoughtfully, "I'm sure he can't live long.

"My dear Aunty!" replied Una in a shocked tone, "how can you talk so?"

"Why not?" retorted Miss Cassy indignantly. "He's not much use alive. I'm sure he'd be more use dead."

"Why?"

"Because you'd get his money and we could go back to dear London."

"I don't want his money," said Una with great spirit, "and certainly don't care about speculating on cousin Garsworth's death to gain it. I wonder at your doing so, Aunt."

"Well, I'm sure, Una," whimpered Miss Cassy, producing her handkerchief, "you

are so odd--I only meant to say I'm tired of this place--it is dull--now isn't it? I need excitement, you know I need excitement--and after me bringing you up. I always dressed you beautifully--real lace--and kept you so clean. I always had your nerves attended to--you blame me now--I want to see you rich--it isn't odd--wishing to see you rich, and I'm so dull here; really Una, you are unkind--quite crushing--I'm only an ivy--oh, why wasn't I married? there's nothing for one to cling to--you don't want me to cling."

"My dear Auntie," said Una with a smile, "you are so sensitive."

"Ivy," sobbed Miss Cassy, "nerves--mother's side--you've got none--so very odd."

"I don't want you to think of the Squire dying, it won't benefit me at all."

Miss Cassy removed her handkerchief and gasped:

"Quite ten thousand a year--he can't take it away--you're his only relative--no one could be so odd as to leave it to a what's-it's-name asylum or a cats'-home."

"I don't know whom he'll leave the money to," said Una deliberately. "I certainly ought to get it, but you know the Squire's delusion about re-incarnation--you may depend his will is mixed up with the idea, how I don't know--but there will be some trouble at his death."

"Such an idiot he is," groaned Miss Cassy, "quite eccentric--hereditary--I've seen it in you--bad blood you know--it's in all old families--our family was always sane."

To prove which sanity Miss Cassy arose from the table to go to her room, and placed the tea cosy on her head to protect her from cold. The eccentric lady walked to the door talking in a broken fashion all the time.

"I'm sure I don't want his money--small income but sure--yes--but it's so dull--I love London--I can't blossom here--I'm like a cabbage--in Town I expand--such nice amusements--Madame Tussaud's and the Crystal Palace--so exciting--it's food--food--oh, dear me, Dr. Nestley is this you? how is my cousin? better?--so glad--it's very odd, isn't it? I mean it's not odd I'm glad--no--quite so--oh, you want to see Miss Challoner--yes--good-bye just now," and Miss Cassy, with the tea cosy perched on her head, disappeared, leaving Nestley alone with Una.

The young man was not looking well, as his ruddy colour had given place to an unhealthy paleness, his skin had a flaccid appearance and his countenance wore an anxious, haggard expression. His eyes glanced restlessly round the room looking at everything except Una, and he moved his hands nervously. Even in his voice there was a change, for in place of his former bold confident tones he now spoke in a low hesitating manner.

"I just came to tell you the squire is better, Miss Challoner," he said in an agitated voice, keeping his eyes on the ground.

"It's very good of you, doctor," she replied courteously. "I hope he will become quite strong again."

"I'm afraid not, his body is worn out and has not strength enough to resist disease--of course, now he has only a slight cold, but any chance exposure may affect his lungs seriously and if pneumonia sets in I'm afraid he will have no chance."

"What is to be done?" she asked anxiously.

"I cannot do more than I have done, he must be kept quiet and warm. I've persuaded him to take some strong soup which will do him good--in fact I think his ascetic manner of living has had as much to do with his ill-health as anything else."

"I hope he will get well," said Una earnestly, "if he would only change his mode of life I'm sure he would get well."

"Yes," the young man answered absently, "of course, exactly," he hesitated a moment then burst out in despair, "Then I would have to go away."

Una looked at him surprised at his evident emotion.

"Of course we would be very sorry to lose you," she said quietly, "but you, no doubt, would be glad to get back to your home."

"No--I would not," he said passionately, coming a step nearer, "because you would not be there."

"I?"

Una Challoner rose to her feet in amazement at his words.

"I?" she repeated in a puzzled tone. "What have I to do with your movements?"

"Everything," said the unhappy young man with a gesture of despair. "When I came here a short time since I was perfectly happy--I had conquered all the evils and sorrow of my youth, and my life was a pleasant one, but since I saw you all is changed. I can think of nothing but you--morn, noon, and night, I see you before me--morn, noon, and night, I only hear your voice."

He looked at her defiantly and saw her standing silent and indignant before him.

"Can't you understand?" he burst out again rapidly. "I love you--I love you! from the first moment I saw you I loved you--I want you to be my wife, will you be my wife Una."

Miss Challoner felt perplexed--this man had only known her a fortnight, she had spoken very little to him, yet here he was asking her to marry him in a vehement, masterful manner which roused within her all the pride of womanhood.

"What you ask is impossible, Doctor Nestley," she said coldly and deliberately. "I have only known you a fortnight and--beyond this I am ignorant of your life in every way. I never dreamed that you would speak to me in this manner."

"Then you don't love me?" he cried in despair, "You cold perfection of womanhood, you don't love me?"

Una would have replied indignantly, but she began to see the nervous excitable temperament of the young man and recognised that, being under the influence of a strong emotion, he was not answerable for the way in which he spoke.

"No," she replied gently, "I cannot love you, Doctor Nestley--even if I did, I could hardly respond to your passion after so short an acquaintance; come, doctor, you have been worn out by your nightly attendance on my cousin, you are not well and speak without thinking, forget the words you have spoken and let things be as they were."

It was a gracious thing of her to say, for, in spite of his evident earnestness, she felt indignant at the manner in which he had spoken to her.

"Things can never be as they were," he replied dully. "I have seen you and that has changed my whole life--is there no chance?"

"There is no chance," she replied coldly, and turned away to intimate the interview was over. Even as she did so, he sprang forward with a fierce light in his eyes.

"You love another," he hissed out between his clenched teeth.

Una turned on him in a dignified way with her eyes blazing with anger.

"How dare you speak to me in this manner?" she said wrathfully. "Do not try my patience too far--I have given you an answer to the mad words you spoke--now go."

She pointed to the door with a commanding gesture and the young man drooping his head on his breast, moved towards it.

"You don't know what you are doing," he said in a dreary voice. "You are destroying my life; whatever evils now drag me down, it will be your fault."

"A cowardly speech," she said in a clear, scornful voice; "because you cannot get the toy you long for you speak like a child. I have nothing to do with your life, if you yield to evil it will be through your own weak will, not through any fault of mine--not a word," she went on as he was about to speak; "leave me at once and I will try and forget what you have said."

He tried to look her in the face, but seeing her standing tall and straight as a young Greek maiden, with nothing but scorn and condemnation in her eyes, he turned away with a sigh, and letting his head fall on his breast walked slowly out of the room, careless of what happened to him now that he had placed all his chances on the casting of a die--and lost.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FALL OF MAN.

Who stands so high that he may never fall,
Who lies so low that he may never rise?
The lowliest may one day win life's prize,
The highest thro' temptation lose his all.

Beaumont was a man who neglected no chance, however small, by which he could benefit himself; consequently thinking if he discovered Squire Garsworth's secret it might prove of use to him, he determined to find out all about it. He knew perfectly well that no power of persuasion would lead the madman to divulge his thoughts, so the only chance of discovering anything was to reduce him to a mere automaton, perfectly powerless in his hands. This he hoped to do by means of hypnotism, of which curious process he knew a good deal.

While in Germany, some years before, he had by accident come across Heidenheim's book on animal magnetism, which interested him so much that he pursued the subject. After reading the opinions of Grützner, Berger and Baumler on hypnosis, he turned his attention to French authorities, eagerly following the history of animal magnetism from Mesmer and Puységur downward, and led by such studies to try his hand on subjects, he became quite an adept in this strange psychological science. Taking it up at first merely as an amusement, on going deeper into the subject he soon saw that such hypnotic power would be a terrible weapon in the hands of an unscrupulous man, as, by reducing the hypnotised person to the condition of a mere instrument, it enabled him to do acts through such instrument for which he himself could not be held legally responsible.

In a book on the subject by MM. Demarquay and Giraud Teulon, entitled "Recherches sur L'Hypnotism," he had come across a case in which a lady in a condition of hypnotic hallucination began to tell aloud secrets which compromised her exceedingly. Taking this case as an illustration of what could be done during hypnosis, Beaumont determined to throw the Squire into a cataleptic trance, and by questions or suggestions lead him to reveal his secret. This being done, he could restore him to his normal condition, absolutely ignorant of his revelation, and he thought if the secret were worth anything, he could then do what he pleased.

Having thus definitely settled his plan of action, the next step to take was to guard against the possibility of Nestley surprising him in any of his hypnotic experiments, with which, as medical attendant of the Squire, he would have a

perfect right to interfere. Although Nestley had become much more friendly with Beaumont, he still regarded him with a certain amount of suspicion, so the artist's aim was now to reduce him to the state of subjection in which he had been in London five years before.

He knew Nestley was a very clever man, but remarkably weak, and likely to be led astray. In London, under the influence of drink, he had been a slave to Beaumont, and here in Garsworth the artist determined to reduce him to a similar state of slavery. Never for a moment did he think of the clever brain he would destroy, or the life he would wreck--all he wanted was the assistance of the young doctor in certain plans beneficial to himself, and, at whatever cost, he determined to carry them out. Beaumont, as a matter of fact, had in him a great deal of the Italian Despot nature as described by Machiavelli, and with cold, relentless subtlety, set himself to work to ruin the unhappy Duncan Nestley body and soul for his own ends.

Nestley was doubtless weak to allow himself to be so dominated, but unhappily it was his nature. If Nature endows a man largely in one way, she generally deprives him of something else in equal proportion, and while Nestley was a brilliant, clever man, who, if left to himself, would have lived an honest and creditable life, yet his morally weak nature placed him at the mercy of any unscrupulous scoundrel who thought fit to play upon his feelings.

Unhappily, circumstances aided Beaumont's nefarious plan, for after leaving Una the young doctor walked across the common to the village, hoping to pull himself together by a brisk walk.

At the bridge he found Beaumont leaning over it, looking at the water swirling below, and on hearing footsteps, the artist looked up with a gratified smile as he recognised his victim.

"What's the matter, Nestley?" he asked after the first greetings; "you don't look well."

"I'm not well," retorted Nestley abruptly; "I'm nearly worn out by that old man--morn, noon and night I've got to be beside him--if he's paid me handsomely he's taking his full value out of me."

"Yes, I think he is," replied Beaumont deliberately, "you look quite thin--not the man of three weeks ago. He must be a kind of mediæval succubus living on the

blood of young men. It would be wise for you to leave him."

Nestley leaned his chin on his folded arms, which were resting on the parapet of the bridge, and sighed deeply.

"No--I can't do that."

"Oh! I understand," said Beaumont with a sneer, beginning to smoke one of his eternal cigarettes.

"What do you understand?"

"Why you won't leave the Grange."

"There's no difficulty in guessing that," retorted Nestley angrily, "my medical---- What the deuce are you grinning at?"

"You, my friend," said Basil smiling, "your medical--what!--honour--knowledge--interest--what you like."

"Don't talk rubbish."

"As you please."

"Look here," said Nestley, turning round with a resolute frown on his haggard face, "what is the reason I don't leave the Grange?"

"Not being in your confidence I can't say, but if I may guess, I should think Una Challoner."

Nestley made a gesture of assent, and turned once more to gaze moodily at the grey waters of the river.

"If I only had the courage," he muttered harshly, "I would throw myself into the water and end everything."

"More fool you," remarked Beaumont cynically; "men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love. Don't give Rosalind's remark the lie."

"I've no doubt she loves someone else," said Nestley bitterly.

"I've no doubt she does," replied Beaumont tranquilly, "but you seem quite worn out between love and sickness, so come with me to the inn and have something to eat."

"I don't mind," said Nestley listlessly, "but I can't eat a thing."

"Don't give way so easily, my dear fellow," said Beaumont scornfully, as they walked along; "be a man, not a baby."

"You're not in love."

"True, oh king; but I've had the disease badly enough--it's all dead and done with now. I've left Venus for Plutus, and I think Mercury, the god of tricksters, has some of my worship."

Dr. Nestley made no remark, being occupied with his own sad thoughts, so Beaumont said nothing more, and they walked along to the inn silently. On arriving there they went into the parlour, and Nestley took his seat near the window, staring idly out at the dusty road, while Beaumont ordered a slight luncheon, and a bottle of champagne.

Job Kossiter's idea of wine was a very vague one, as he himself habitually drank beer, but in deference to Beaumont's wishes, he sent over to Duxby and obtained a few dozen cases of champagne, whose excellence satisfied even the fastidious artist. The table being laid and the luncheon brought in, Beaumont filled two tumblers with champagne, one for himself, and the other he placed by Nestley's plate. The young doctor, being wrapped up in gloomy thought, did not perceive this, and, when he took his seat at the table, had no idea that the glass at his elbow contained wine instead of water. He tried to eat two or three mouthfuls of food, but not succeeding, took up the glass to drink, and so preoccupied was he that it was not until he had swallowed a mouthful that he perceived what it was. Replacing the glass on the table immediately, he glared angrily at Beaumont, who, feigning not to observe his annoyance, went on eating his luncheon with great enjoyment.

"Why did you give me champagne?" asked Nestley harshly. "You know I only drink water."

"I know you're an idiot," retorted Beaumont coolly, "and don't know what's good for you. In your present state of health a glass of champagne will do you no

harm."

"You forget the harm drink has done me already."

"Five years ago," said the artist mockingly. "You've been a teetotaler for five years, so I think you are entitled to a little indulgence now. Go on, drink it up like a man."

"No," replied Nestley resolutely, and he turned his head away. "I will not drink."

"Very well," said Beaumont indifferently. "Please yourself."

His unhappy friend looked again at the amber-coloured wine in the glass, and felt half inclined to yield. After all, he had not touched liquor of any sort for five long years, and did not feel as a rule inclined to take it, but now the nights of watching by the bedside of the old squire had worn him out physically, and the disdain of Una had made him wretched mentally, so he half determined to take this one glass to cheer him up. His good angel, however, came to his aid at this critical moment, and turning his head away with a shudder, he went on making a pretence of eating. Beaumont, who had watched him narrowly all this time, saw the struggle that was going on in the young man's mind, but with true craftiness, pretended to take no notice, satisfied that his victim was gradually being lured into the snare so artfully laid.

"So you love Miss Challoner," he said genially. "Well, I can hardly wonder at that. To tell you the truth, I fell in love with her myself--merely in an artistic sense, I assure you," added the astute artist with a laugh as he saw the anger in Nestley's face. "She has a lovely face which seems to wear the calm of those old Greek statues. I should like to paint her as Artemis--the inviolate Artemis before she loved Endymion--with the serene light of chastity on her face and the sweetness of night in her eyes. It would be a wonderful picture."

"I wonder you don't ask her to be your model," growled Nestley, sulkily.

"Hardly worth while, for two reasons," replied Beaumont lightly, yet with a suspicion of regret in his tone. "In the first place she would refuse, and in the second, my hand has lost its cunning. One needs to be young and enthusiastic to paint a classical picture. I am of too earthy a nature to have such hopeless visions. Well, are you going to play the part of young Endymion to this moon goddess?"

"No," answered Nestley bitterly, "she won't have anything to do with me."

"Poor Endymion!"

"Don't be a fool, talking such classical stuff! I tell you I'm madly in love with her, and she won't have anything to do with me. Everything is against me. I'm poor, unloved and obscure. Life isn't worth living under such conditions."

He looked again at the sparkling wine, which seemed to invite him to try it as an anodyne for his pain. Everything seemed to his distorted imagination to be dull and dark. Wine would at least give him a few hours' respite from these torturing thoughts. He was master of himself now. He would drink one glass and no more. After all, seeing that everything was lost, what did it matter if he did fall once more? He had nothing to live for now. A wild despair took possession of his heart, and with a reckless laugh he seized the glass and finished the wine to the last drop.

"*Evohé Bacchus*," said Beaumont, draining his glass. "There's nothing like wine to cure a broken heart."

The insidious wine mounted rapidly to the excitable brain of the young man, and he no longer felt regret at breaking the pledge he had made five years before. The humdrum past of struggle and respectability was done with. Wine would solace him. Drink! Who cared for such a thing? Anacreon was the head of a glorious band of poets, and praised the wine. Wise Anacreon, he knew the true virtues of the grape. The past is dead, the future is uncertain. Live--live only in the present, with wine to make us as gods--*Evohé Bacchus*.

The stimulating wine had performed its work excellently, and the world hitherto so gloomy now appeared of a roseate tint.

"A broken heart!" he repeated, with a gay laugh. "Pish! hearts don't break so easily. A woman's no means yes. I'll ask again."

"Nothing like perseverance," said Basil, observing with infinite joy the flushed face and bright eyes of the young man. "Have some more wine?"

"Rather!" replied Nestley, holding out his glass, which Beaumont filled. "I was a fool to give up this for water. I'm sick of total abstainers--thin-blooded croakers. Here's confusion to them!" and he drank off the second glass.

Beaumont now saw that his victim was in that obstinate stage of recklessness which could not brook contradiction, so knew well how to proceed.

"Well, we've finished the bottle," he said brightly. "Suppose we go out for a walk."

"No--no walk," returned Nestley, with an imbecile grin. "You've stood me a bottle. Now it's my turn."

"I don't want any more," said Beaumont indifferently, "and I think you've had enough also."

"I haven't," retorted Nestley defiantly. "I'm as straight as a die. I suppose you won't drink with me?"

"Oh yes, I will, if you insist upon it."

"I do insist," cried the doctor, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang. "You must drink to show there is no ill-will. We were once friends, Basil."

"And are so still, I trust," said the artist, cordially.

"Your hand," said Nestley, with an outburst of maudlin affection. "Give me your hand."

Beaumont suffered his hand to be shaken violently by the doctor, and then that gentleman, now in a hilarious state of excitement, walked to the bell, ringing it with unnecessary violence.

Margery appeared in answer, and seemed somewhat astonished at Nestley's state, as he had always been so reserved and quiet in his demeanour.

"Another bottle of champagne," said Nestley in a thick voice, coming close to her. "You are a pretty girl."

He tried to embrace her, but Margery, who was used to seeing the rustics in a similar state, pushed him away with a hearty laugh, and went off to get the wine.

Nestley resumed his seat at the table, talking rapidly to Beaumont about all sorts of things, and then began to boast about himself.

"I can do anything--anything, I tell you," he said, looking at Beaumont, who was smoking. "My brain's worth a dozen of any other fellows' Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, yes, I believe you," replied Beaumont, as Margery returned with another bottle of champagne; "but, if I were you, I'd take no more wine."

"Won't I!" said Nestley in a defiant manner. "You'll see."

Margery retreated, laughing at the maudlin condition of the young man, and filling his tumbler up to the brim with wine, he drank it off with an air of drunken bravado. Beaumont, with a sneer on his thin lips, sat calmly watching the grotesque antics of the man he had brought so low, and only took a little of the second bottle. Dr. Nestley sang and laughed and boasted till his legs began to get shaky, and then he sat down and finished the rest of the bottle, thereby reducing himself to a state of hopeless intoxication.

Finally he fell asleep with his head on the table, whereupon Beaumont, not without some difficulty, woke him up and half led, half dragged him to the sofa. With noisy protests that he was all right, the unhappy young man lay down, and in a few moments fell into a drunken slumber, while Beaumont, feeling no compunction at having reduced a human being to the level of the beast, stood over him with a sneer.

"I don't think you'll give me much trouble," he said serenely. "You've started on the downward path once more, and this time I expect you'll never get back again."

He went out, calmly smoking his cigarette, and asked Margery to let no one disturb his friend.

"He's taken more than is good for him," he said apologetically.

"Oh bless you, sir, that's nothing," returned Margery stolidly. "A sleep will put him all right."

"Will it?" said Beaumont to himself when he was standing in the bright sunshine. "A sleep will never put you all right again in this life, Duncan Nestley."

CHAPTER XIX.

JAM, JAM EFFICACI DO MANUS SCIENTIAE.

I use no charms,
Ephesian letters, philtres, spells or runes,
Nor aught of necromantic devilries
Yet thro' the power of new-found sciences
Before my searching gaze I bare your soul
And read the secret longings writ thereon.

Owing to Nestley's skilful treatment the squire soon recovered from his illness, but the fact of twice being laid upon a bed of sickness within a few weeks, showed how susceptible his constitution had become to the slightest ailment, and how rapidly any such ailment might terminate with fatal results.

To a young and vigorous frame such slight indispositions would be comparatively unimportant, but the weak body of the old man, with its worn-out-organization, was able to develop these disorders in a most alarming tanner. The flame of life was very feeble, and it was only by the utmost watchfulness that it could be kept alive at all.

In spite of his settled conviction regarding incarnation in a new body, the squire seemed remarkably loth to leave his old one, and obeyed the doctor's orders in a most slavish manner, dreading lest by some chance his soul should slip away into the next world. He had accumulated a large fortune, which according to his delusion he hoped to enjoy when his soul had become incarnate in a new body, so he had no trouble on that score. His great desire was now to get his portrait finished, and to this end, in spite of his ill-health, he insisted upon leaving his bed and sitting to Beaumont according to his regular custom.

Basil having once more brought Nestley under his dominating will, determined

to proceed at once in his hypnotic experiment, and at this final sitting judged it an admirable time to carry out his idea. All he wanted was an opportunity to introduce the subject without rousing the squire's suspicions, and the old man, during their conversation, speedily afforded him an opportunity of doing so.

They were in the drawing-room as usual, and the squire, looking more wrinkled and worn than ever, was seated in his arm-chair, while the artist dexterously put a line here and there on the painted face before him.

"You don't seem well this morning, Mr. Garsworth," said Beaumont, as the old man moved wearily in his chair.

"No, sir, I don't," retorted the squire in his harsh voice. "I don't expect I'll leave my bed again when I once go back to it."

"Oh, things are surely not so bad as that."

"I'm afraid they are," replied Garsworth, shaking his head. "I am anxious to go into a new body and leave this worn-out frame with its incessant pain."

"Are you in pain now?" asked Beaumont, sympathetically.

"Yes--I have a bad attack of neuralgia--the east wind always affects me more or less that way."

"I think I could do you some good."

"Nonsense--you're not a doctor?"

"I am not the rose, but I've lived near it, my dear sir," said Beaumont equably, "and I know something of therapeutics."

"A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," replied the old man sneeringly.

"I can reply with another proverb," said Basil smiling. "A drowning man will clutch at a straw--so take me as your straw and see what I can do--I cannot cure you of your neuralgia, but I can give you some relief."

"In what way?"

"By hypnosis."

"Bah!--Mesmer and charlatanism."

"Not at all--I have studied the subject, and I assure you there is more truth in it than you imagine. Mesmer was not altogether a charlatan remember--he was wiser than Cagliostro."

"Well--well--what do you propose to do?"

"Hypnotise you."

"And then?"

"Well--the neuralgia will go away after you've been in the trance some time, then I'll wake you and you can retire."

"But the portrait?"

"It won't affect the portrait in the least--I-can go on painting and you will be free from pain."

The squire hated pain, and was moreover very curious to test Beaumont's knowledge, so he consented to the idea.

"Go on, sir," he said grimly. "I don't object."

Beaumont nodded carelessly, delighted thus to have gained his end, and producing from his pocket a faceted piece of glass, he arose from his seat and walked over to the old man.

Taking up his position at one side of the chair he held the glittering object just above the squire's forehead.

"Look steadily at this," he said in a quiet tone, and on Garsworth doing so he waited silently for the result, which soon took place. The eyes became humid and brilliant, the gaze fixed and the pupils dilated, until the old man fell into a cataleptic state. As the glass facet was still held in front of his eyes he soon passed into a lethargic condition and fell backward in his chair with a sigh.

Beaumont took the glass away with a feeling of relief, as he doubted being able to produce the hypnotic sleep so easily. He had now at his command a will-less automaton who would do what ever he was told. But this was not what Beaumont desired, as he was unable to suggest the secret to the helpless man before him, and without suggestion the automaton would not do anything. He wanted to change this lethargic sleep into a somnambulistic state, so that he could have the memory, the intelligence, and the imagination of the squire at his command. This he achieved by slightly rubbing his hand to and fro for a few minutes across the top of the head, and in obedience to the feeling produced by this Garsworth rapidly passed into a state of active somnambulism.

He arose from his chair, looked quickly from right to left, while Beaumont spoke to him, and during the conversation that followed, was in a state of perpetual movement. All that Beaumont had now to do was to suggest things to the somnambulist which would engender trains of thought, and these trains of thought would be speedily acted upon by volition.

The tall figure in black swayed rapidly to and fro while Beaumont spoke in a clear, deliberate manner, suggesting the questions he wanted to be answered.

"You have a secret?"

"I have a secret," assented the somnambulist, in the same slow manner.

"You have arranged a certain affair so that you will be able to enjoy your present fortune during your next incarnation?"

"Yes."

"You think you have arranged everything necessary to carry out this idea?"

"I think so."

"State to yourself the whole scheme so that you can see you have forgotten nothing."

Garsworth remained silent for a moment, then began to talk rapidly.

"I have arranged everything in a proper manner. I am sure I have forgotten nothing. My will has been made some years, and in it I have left all my property

to my natural son. Such natural son does not exist--at present he is a fictitious person. When I am re-incarnated he will become a reality. I will be my own natural son, and the property will pass to myself in the new body by the action of my will in this present body. It will be necessary for me in my new form to prove myself the person mentioned in the will. I do this in such new body by producing a certain paper and my seal ring, which I have safely hidden away. Retaining my memory during my next incarnation I go to the hiding-place, find the paper and the ring, produce them to the lawyer who holds my will, and having proved my identity as natural son, can become possessed of the property. Yes, everything is all right."

He ceased speaking and Beaumont, having listened attentively, was much struck with the ingenuity of the idea expressed in the delusion. This, then, was the way in which he hoped to carry out his scheme. Was ever madman so whimsical? The artist did not see much chance of benefiting by the discovery so far, still if he saw the papers mentioned by the squire, there might be something in them which would prove useful. Yes; he would get the squire to show him the hiding-place of the papers.

"Your scheme is perfect," he said slowly, "but some one may find the hiding-place and steal the paper?"

"No, no," replied the somnambulist, in an exulting tone. "No chance of that. I've hidden it too well."

"Go and see if it is safe."

"Safe! safe! is that paper safe?" muttered the old man, with a frown. "I must see. I must see. But how can I go? I am too weak."

Beaumont instantly exerted his power by suggestion.

"You are very strong. Go at once and examine the paper."

Ordinarily the Squire used a crutch to walk with, but on hearing the remark about his strength from his hypnotiser, he at once became imbued with the hallucination that he was physically a vigorous man, and walked towards the door of the drawing-room with rapid, springy steps, followed by Beaumont.

The somnambulist lead the way up the stairs, paused for a moment on the first

landing, then, turning round, walked towards the front of the house on the first floor. At this moment Patience Allerby came out of one of the rooms, and seeing the squire walking in such a rapid manner, and Beaumont following, looked at them both in alarm.

"Where are going sir?" she cried, as Garsworth brushed past her, and, putting out her hand, tried to grasp him. The slight touch she gave him appeared to cause the somnambulist suffering and break the hypnotic spell, for he paused at once. Alarmed lest the old man should awake, Beaumont gripped Patience by the wrist and dragged her back quickly.

"You are going for your papers?" he said to Garsworth.

"I am going for my papers," repeated the squire slowly, and then, in obedience to the impulse engendered, went on again. Patience would have spoken, but a devilish look on Beaumont's face seemed to freeze her blood.

"Be silent," he said in a harsh whisper, shaking her wrist. "I will tell you all soon, but now be silent for your son's sake."

She wrenched herself free and shrank back into the shadow with a cry, while Beaumont, taking no further notice, quickly followed the squire who was now some distance ahead.

Garsworth opened a large folding-door that stood a short distance away from the stairs and which led into the ball-room of the Grange. Followed by the artist he went into the long, bare room, which stretched nearly the whole length of the front wing of the house, being lighted by eight large windows, looking out on to the park.

The room was chill and bleak, every footfall awaking a responsive echo and leaving a mark on the grey dust that had accumulated on the floor for many years. The wall opposite the door was adorned with delicately-painted panels, representing the nine muses, each female figure being twice life-size and rising from the floor to the arched roof, between each of the eight windows. At one end of the room the panels represented the three Graces, at the other the three Fates, while the remaining wall displayed nine goddesses of heathen mythology. The arched roof was painted a deep blue, silvered with stars, but nowhere appeared any male form--nothing but the gracious female figures of Hellas were to be seen around.

The squire went straight to the extreme corner of the room, on the left hand of the door, and knelt down where there was a panel representing Clotho spinning the thread of life. He evidently touched a spring concealed in the gold-embossed frame of the panel, for it silently slid back, displaying a wall of rough stone. The upper blocks of stone appeared heavy and cumbersome, but the lower ones were much smaller, and as Beaumont looked he saw Garsworth drag from its place a smallish stone in the lower centre of the wall, displaying only the rough place where it lay, but no cavity where anything could be hid. The squire, however, soon showed how ingenious was the hiding-place he had chosen, for on turning round the stone which he had taken out, there appeared a small hole hollowed out and from this the old man took a paper and a ring. He laid them down for a moment to lift the stone off his lap, but at this moment Beaumont, exerting his hypnotic power, said abruptly:

"You are looking at the paper."

Under the influence of the hallucination produced, the squire looked earnestly at the stone on his lap, while Beaumont, picking up the real paper, glanced over it rapidly, examined the ring, then laid them both down again by the somnambulist.

"You should put them back," he suggested distinctly. Garsworth picked up the paper, and replacing it in the stone, put it once more in its former position, and then dragged the panel along till it clicked on the spring, thus resuming its former appearance. No one, to look at it, would think that such a large picture could be moved in any way, and even if the secret of the panel were discovered, Beaumont felt sure no one would think of examining the interior of the stone in the wall. Having now ascertained all he wanted to know, Beaumont's next care was to get the squire back to his former position and wake him, so that he would be unconscious of what he had done during his hypnotic sleep. To this end he bent forward to the kneeling figure on the floor.

"Mr. Beaumont is waiting to finish your picture."

"Yes, yes. I must have the picture done," said Garsworth, and, rising to his feet, he left the room, followed by Beaumont, who saw the white face of Patience peering from the shadow and frowning at him in a menacing manner.

Placing his finger on his lips to enforce silence, he glided past her down the wide

stairs, across the hall and into the drawing-room, where he found the squire had once more re-established himself in his chair.

"Well," said Beaumont to himself, "there seems to be some chance of making use of this secret, but I can't do it without the help of Patience, so I must see her. Meanwhile, I'll wake the squire."

He crossed over to the squire and touched his face with his own cold hands, upon which the old man started violently.

He then spoke loudly into his ear:

"Mr. Garsworth!"

The somnambulist opened his eyes, and a confused expression appeared on his face as he looked at Beaumont.

"Do you feel better?" asked the artist, gently.

"Yes," answered the squire, slowly passing his hand over his forehead. "The pain is gone, but I feel very tired."

"It's always the case in hypnotism."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About a quarter-of-an-hour," replied Beaumont, glancing at his watch. "Were you dreaming at all? Hypnotism usually produces dreams."

"Aha!" said Garsworth, cunningly, "I was dreaming of my secret. I did not speak in my sleep, did I?" he asked, in sudden terror.

"No, you were perfectly quiet," answered the artist, going back to his seat.

"I feel too tired to sit any more," observed Garsworth, rising with a great effort. "I must lie down. Hypnotism seems to exhaust the body very much."

"It does, of course; it acts physically."

The squire, with the aid of his stick, moved painfully to the door, leaving Beaumont smiling at the picture before him.

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN IN DOUBT, PLAY TRUMPS.

Life is a game
The keenest wins.
Repute or shame.
Life is a game;
We give or claim
For virtues, sins;
Life is a game
The keenest wins

Beaumont was perfectly satisfied with the result of his experiment, as he had discovered the squire's secret, and had yet succeeded in keeping him in ignorance of his having done so. With the keen intellect of a man accustomed to live by his wits, he had, during his rapid survey of the papers, seen the chances of turning the secret to his own advantage. But to do so he required the co-operation of Patience, and this he was doubtful of obtaining.

She held studiously aloof from him, and since the interview in the churchyard had given no sign that she was aware of his existence. Many men would have been discouraged by this contemptuous silence; but not so Beaumont, who never saw discourtesy in anyone of whom he wanted to make use. Hitherto Patience had been a mere cipher in his eyes; but now, since his discovery of the existence of her son, and since he had learned the jealously-guarded secret of the squire, she suddenly became an important person; for it was through her he hoped to secure his ends--ends calculated to benefit himself alone.

The only way by which he could hope to gain her ear was through her love for their son, hence his explanation on the stairs. Now, after putting away his painting utensils, he lighted a cigarette, and strolled easily along to the

housekeeper's room in order to arrange matters with her. Of the result he had no fear, as he intended to appeal to her motherhood, which appeal, he well knew, would not be neglected by this woman, whose whole life was devoted to her son. Mr. Beaumont was an expert whist-player, and, moreover, admired the game very much. So, in this case, being somewhat doubtful of Patience, yet holding a strong hand, he took an illustration from his favourite game, and said:

"When in doubt, play trumps."

"It will be a charming game," he murmured, as he knocked at the door of the housekeeper's room, "she is no mean adversary, and hates me like poison--all the more credit to me if I win--as I mean to."

Patience Allerby, in her quiet, grey dress, was sitting silent and statuesque by the window, staring out at the rapidly darkening landscape. When Beaumont entered, she looked coldly at him, but neither rose to receive him nor invited him to sit down. Her visitor, however, was not troubled by any sensitive feeling, so threw himself into a comfortable chair that was near the fire, and coolly went on smoking.

"I hope you don't mind my cigarette," he said, languidly, "but I can't exist without smoking."

"You can't exist without all sorts of luxuries," replied Patience, bitterly, "you're not the man to deny yourself anything."

"I had to deny myself a good many things when we were starving in London," said Mr. Beaumont, leisurely. "By the way, I want to speak to you about London."

"And I want to speak to you about the squire," she retorted, quickly. "What were you doing following him upstairs?"

"Don't distress yourself, my good soul," said the artist, in a coolly aggravating manner. "I'll tell you that later on; meantime, we will talk of Chelsea."

"No."

"Pardon me--yes. Do you remember how we lived there, you and I, and the visions we used to indulge in? I haven't forgotten it, I assure you, and then Fanny

Blake--poor Fanny! she is dead now. I see you gave the boy her surname."

"And what if I did?" she flashed out fiercely, with a deep frown on her face. "Could I give him yours--the father who had deserted him? Could I give him mine--the mother to whom his birth was a disgrace?"

"A disgrace! I thought you loved him?"

"So I do--I love him more than my life; but his birth was a disgrace, and I wish to keep the knowledge from him, please God."

"Was the boy you call Reginald Blake ever christened?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I could not tell the truth about his birth, and I refused to tell a lie. He was neither christened, nor was his birth registered."

"Then he has no right to the name he bears."

"I know that. Whose fault is it, Basil Beaumont--yours or mine? Why didn't you make an honest woman of me?"

"Because I did not choose to," he replied, coolly; "by the way, has our son been confirmed?"

"No."

"Oh," he said, sneering, "I'm sorry he's not got some religious flavour about him. I wonder, Patience, when you called him Blake, you did not pass him off as Fanny's son."

She arose from her seat in a fury.

"Do you think I was going to place my sin on Fanny's shoulders?"

"I don't see why not--Fanny and yourself both came up to London at the same time--the child was born six months after you arrived there--why not call it Fanny's child?"

"There was no reason."

"Not then; but there is now, and a very excellent reason--ten thousand a year."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this, that Reginald Blake, from this time forward, is the son of Fanny Blake and Randal Garsworth."

Patience looked at him in surprise, and involuntarily drew back a step, thinking him mad. Beaumont saw this, and laughed mockingly.

"Don't be afraid--there's method in my madness."

"There's some villainy in it," she said, with a hard smile, sitting down near him; "tell me what you mean, Basil Beaumont, if you intend touching a hair of my son's head I'll punish you."

"I intend to give him ten thousand a year, if you won't be a fool."

She smiled coldly, and folded her hands upon her lap.

"I'm no fool, but I know you--go on, Ananias."

Beaumont flung the burnt-out cigarette into the fire with an irritable gesture, and turned his face towards the frigid woman seated before him.

"Listen to what I've got to say," he said slowly, "and then you can do as you please--if you assist me it means money and happiness for our son; if you don't, I'll tell him everything, and then leave the village for ever."

Patience shivered slightly under the steely glitter of his eyes, and then resumed her cold impassive manner.

"Brag's a good dog," she said mockingly, "but he does not bite--go on, I'm all attention."

The artist glanced at the door to make sure that it was closed, then drawing his chair closer to that of Patience Allerby, began to talk rapidly, in a low tone of voice.

"Of course you know the squire is mad--quite mad--he has an idea that his soul will be re-incarnated in another body, and as he is afraid he may be born poor, he has invented a silly scheme by which to become repossessed of his present wealth. I have discovered this scheme--how it does not matter--all I need tell you is, that I have found out all about it--his idea is to pass himself off as his own son."

"But he has no son."

"Of course not, you fool," said Beaumont impatiently, "he couldn't carry out his idea if he had; it's this way, he has made his will, leaving the property to his natural son, who will at some future time--date not fixed, as he cannot tell when he'll be re-incarnated--go to the lawyers who hold the will and produce, as a proof of his claim to the estate, a letter written to him by his supposed father, also the squire's seal ring--when he does so, under the terms of the will, he inherits the Garsworth estate."

"I understand, so far; but how does the squire, in a new body, expect to get these papers?"

"Oh! he thinks he'll remember about the affair when he is born again, so he has hidden the papers where he'll be able to find them--in his new body he'll simply go and look them up, produce them to the lawyers, and there you are."

"What a foolish idea."

"What a foolish remark, you mean," said Beaumont; "of course it's foolish, the man is mad. When he dies the papers will remain undisturbed till doomsday--if I choose."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this--as he does not know when or where he'll be re-incarnated, he has left a number of blanks in the letter."

"Have you seen the letter?"

"Of course I have. I know where the paper is hidden--didn't I tell you I'd discovered his secret. Well, all I've got to do is to fill up these blanks--the name of the mother, the place of the supposed son's birth, and all the rest of it."

"I see. But what have I to do with this?"

Beaumont arose to his feet and walked angrily to and fro.

"What an idiot you are, Patience," he said irritably. "Can't you see? I'm going to fill up the mother's name as Fanny Blake, and the son's as Reginald."

"Our son?"

"Precisely. Now do you see why I want your help?"

"I do, but you shan't have it."

"Indeed; why not?"

"I'm not going to have such a sin on my conscience."

"There's no sin, you Puritan," he said quickly, "the re-incarnation idea is rubbish; no one will appear to claim the property, so why not give the ten thousand a year to Reginald?"

"It would dispossess Miss Una."

"It would do nothing of the sort--under the will Miss Una cannot claim--the lawyers don't know anything about the re-incarnation theory; all they know is that Squire Garsworth has a son who will appear and prove his claim by the possession of certain papers and a seal ring--until that son appears no one can claim the estate."

"Miss Una could dispute the will on the ground of madness."

"I dare say she could, but she won't--if Reginald becomes master of Garsworth Grange she will marry him, and will enjoy the property just the same as if she were sole heiress--on the other hand, if he does not become master she'll have to wait till this non-existent son appears or upsets the will, one of which things will be impossible and the other troublesome."

Patience thought for a moment or two and then looked up.

"How do you know Reginald will marry Una?"

"Because I've got eyes in my head. The boy is madly in love with her. I'm sure you must see that your helping me to place Reginald in possession of this property will hurt no one and be for the benefit of both Una and your own son."

"I see that, but I fail to see what benefit you obtain from it, and I don't think you're the man to work for nothing."

"You're perfectly right," he replied calmly, "but I'm going to make myself Reginald's right hand, and when he comes in for the property I can help him to look after the estate."

"And ruin him."

"I won't ruin him. Why should I want to ruin my own son?"

"Bah! don't talk like that to me."

"Oh well, if you disbelieve in interest, I'll put it another way. Why should I kill the goose with the golden eggs?"

"Yes, that's more like it," she said with a sneer, "I think your plan is an admirable one, but there's one obstacle."

"What is it?"

"Reginald is an honourable man, and won't accept any property gained by fraud."

Beaumont sighed in a resigned manner, apparently hopeless of explaining matters clearly to this painfully obstinate woman.

"He'll never know the property is obtained by fraud, because you will tell him he is the son of Fanny Blake and the squire; he will believe you, and regard himself as the lawful heir."

"Still, he thinks he's been born in lawful wedlock, and to undeceive him----"

"Gives him ten thousand a year," interrupted Beaumont coolly. "Well, what do you say, will you help me?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow."

"Why not to-day?"

"Because I don't trust you, I want to go over the affair in my own mind."

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders, put on his hat and lighted another cigarette.

"Just as you please," he said, pausing a moment at the door. "I'll call and see you to-morrow; but if you don't help me in this, I'll do what I say and tell Reginald everything."

When he was gone Patience sat for a long time looking into the fire, evidently pondering deeply. At length she sighed and muttered:

"I don't know what to do, I must ask counsel of the Lord."

She arose, and having lighted a candle opened the Bible.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

Man is but a whimsical animal at best, for there is no life but what may some day act in discord with its theory.

Patience Allerby occupied a very peculiar position, and knew that she did so, much to her perplexity. Ever since her lapse from virtue she had lived a self-denying existence as an expiation for her sin, and she had cause to be satisfied with the past twenty years of her life, seeing that she had done nothing wrong all the time. True, living in almost monastic existence, she had no temptations to

fight against, and the absence of temptation rendered it comparatively easy to lead a virtuous life. Not being tempted she lived an ascetic life, being absolutely certain that she was strong enough to withstand any temptation, however powerful. Vain hope, for now the devil in the person of her old betrayer assaulted her on her weakest side. Had he tried to make her rob her master or return to her old life of sin, he would have failed dismally, but an appeal through her motherhood was perilous to her strength, and Beaumont knew this when he used her love for Reginald as a weapon against her. In spite of her prayers, her tears, her comforting texts, she knew that if Beaumont wished her to commit any crime to benefit her son she would do so in defiance of her religious belief, however strong.

God alone knew the night of anguish this woman passed, wrestling with the subtle temptation placed before her in such an attractive shape. Those old saints, who, according to pious legends, fought with the visible powers of evil, had no such terrible enemies to cope with, in contrast to a soul racked with doubt fighting against spiritual promptings.

In vain this poor soul, who wished to do right, closed her ears to the infernal whisperings of evil spirits, in vain she read with frenzied ardour the terrible prophecies of Isaiah or the comforting promises of the Gospels, in vain she knelt weeping bitterly before the crucifix, praying to be guarded from falling into sin. It was all useless. Either spiritual weapons had lost their efficacy, or her intense maternal passion blunted her sense of religious duty, and after a terrible struggle with her invisible enemies, which left her completely prostrate, she began to calmly consider Beaumont's scheme. From that moment she was lost; for, on reviewing the whole matter she began to pacify her conscience with arguments concerning the rectitude of the affair.

She would be doing no wrong to anyone--nay, she would be conferring a benefit on Una, seeing that by her marriage with Reginald she would be put in possession of the property at once, whereas should the will be carried out strictly she would have to wait everlastingly for the appearance of a non-existing person. Suppose she agreed to Beaumont's plan, and said Fanny Blake and the squire were the parents of her son, he would become rich and honoured, bearing a renowned name and no longer be an unknown waif, heavily handicapped in the battle of life.

On the other hand he would learn the shame of his birth, and that would cast an

everlasting shadow on his young spirit. What wealth--what position could compensate in his own eyes for the moral stigma thus cast upon him. He might succeed to the property, marry Una, and thus do no harm to anyone, still, if he became a father, how deeply would he feel for the sins of his parents being visited on his offspring. No, she could not place him in such a position; better for him to remain unknown and obscure, with a full belief in his honourable birth, than go through life haunted by the spectre of an intolerable disgrace.

While thus hesitating between these two views of the case, a sudden idea came to her, which inclined her to refuse to help Beaumont and let the boy make his own life, ignorant of the stain on his name. The squire, in spite of his miserly habits, had a kind heart. She would ask him to give Reginald fifty or a hundred pounds to help him, then the lad could go to London and make a position by his vocal talents. Thus, he would benefit in no way through money unjustly obtained, and Una, being in possession of the property, he could marry her and enjoy it just the same as if the scheme were carried out. Yes, it would be the best way; he would at least never know who or what he was, and she would thus assist him in life without committing a crime. The more she thought of the plan the better she liked it, and falling on her knees in the dark she thanked God long and fervently for the solution he had shown her of the difficulty.

Next morning she proceeded to carry her ideas into effect, for after Miss Cassy and Una had paid their usual morning visit, she found herself alone with the squire and in a position to make her request.

Garsworth was lying in bed, propped up by pillows, and looked very feeble indeed, so that Patience saw the end could not be far off, in spite of Nestley's care and attention.

After his recovery from his debauch, Nestley had felt bitter shame at his fall, but having lost his self-respect by thus reverting to his old ways, he tried to drown remorse by drinking, and alcohol was rapidly regaining all its old influence over him. Still he did not let it interfere with his attendance on the Squire, and if the old man saw that Nestley's hand was shaky, and his eyes becoming bleared, he said nothing, and the unhappy young man performed his duties in a mechanical way, drinking deeply whenever an opportunity offered.

Nestley, looking haggard and unsteady after his drinking of the previous night, had just left the room, leaving Patience alone with the Squire, when the old man

spoke sharply:

"Patience, what is the matter with the doctor?"

"Drink!" she answered laconically.

"Drink!" repeated the Squire, raising himself on his elbow. "Nonsense, woman, you must be mistaken, he drinks neither wine nor spirits."

"He never did until a week ago," answered Patience coolly, "he used to be a total abstainer, but now--well, you can see for yourself."

The long connection that had existed between this strange couple as master and servant, had developed between them a certain amount of familiarity.

"I remember," said Garsworth musingly, "that in my last incarnation, I drank ale very much--it was in the reign of Elizabeth, and we drank confusion to the King of Spain--it resulted in confusion to myself. If I had not been a drunkard, I would not have been a pauper; it's a pity this young man should follow the same downward path."

"It's his own fault," replied Patience in a stony manner, "he ought to stop when he finds it does him harm."

"No doubt," returned the old man acidly, "but did you ever know a man deny himself anything if it did him harm?"

"You did."

"Yes, because I had an object to gain. The life I led in Town was very pleasant, but it would have left me a pauper for my next incarnation."

It was no use trying to argue the old man out of his delusion, so Patience said nothing, but stood beside him in grim silence with folded arms.

"I'll enjoy myself when I'm born again," pursued Garsworth exultingly. "I will have plenty of money and a new body. I will have youth once again. Oh, youth! youth! how short are your golden hours. Young men never know the treasure they possess in youth, and waste it in idleness and folly; there's that child you brought up, Reginald Blake----"

"I did not bring him up."

"Well, well," rejoined Garsworth testily. "You know what I mean, you were his nurse--but he has youth, good looks, health and talents--why doesn't he go to London with such advantages, instead of wasting his life in a dull village?"

"He's got no money," retorted Patience icily; "all you mention go for nothing without money."

"No doubt, no doubt," muttered Garsworth, his eyes gleaming; "money is a necessity--still he has talents, I hear."

"What can talents do?"

"Everything; a clever brain commands the world."

"I dare say," retorted Patience ironically, "if it gets money to give it a start. Master Reginald has it in him to make a great name by his voice, but he needs help--the help of money--who will give him that help?"

She eyed the old man keenly as she spoke.

"Ah, who indeed?" he replied carelessly, "who indeed?"

"Why not yourself?" said the housekeeper eagerly.

"I?" he ejaculated in surprise.

"Yes, you," she retorted vehemently. "I was as you say the nurse of that boy. I have loved him far more than his dead parents ever did; they left him to me, and I stood in his mother's place: it is my dearest wish that he should succeed--with money he can do so. I have served you long and faithfully and asked no favour, but now that you have mentioned his name, I ask this first and last favour of you, give him money and help him to succeed."

"Do you think I'm mad?" cried the old man shrilly. "Why should I help him? What is he to me? I have gathered all my wealth by years of self-denial. I want to enjoy it in my next existence, not squander it in this by helping a pauper."

"And yet you talk of the golden hours of youth," she replied bitterly. "It's easy

saying, but hard doing. What is a hundred pounds to you?--a drop in the ocean. What is it to him?--everything."

"I can't part with my money," he said doggedly, turning his face away.

Her voice took a tender tone as she pleaded for her son.

"He has no claim upon you, I know, but think of his youth, his talents, wasted in this dull village. You say you will remember in your next body what you have done in this; for years you have never done a kind action to a human being, do one now by helping this lad, and your next existence will be none the worse for having helped an unknown man."

The old man made no reply, but was clearly moved by her argument.

"And again," said Patience, still in the same anxious voice, "with your help he will make a position in the world. What position will you occupy? with all your money, you may be born a prince or a ploughboy--you do not know--but in whatever station you are born, his influence, his friendship, may be a help to you, and it will be all the more precious when you know it is your work."

The woman's voice died away in a soft manner, and she anxiously watched the old man's wrinkled face to see if he would do what she asked. Evidently her words appealed either to his selfishness or good nature, for, turning towards her, a smile spread over his crabbled face.

"I'll do it, Patience," he said quickly. "I'll do it--perhaps he will be of help to me in my next life--get me my cheque book, and I'll write a cheque for fifty pounds--no more--no more. I can't afford it."

"Fifty is no use--say one hundred," she urged eagerly.

"Well, well! one hundred," he said peevishly, "it's a large sum, still it may do good to me. I'll write a letter with it, and tell him he must do what I ask in my next life. Will he do that?"

"Yes! Yes!" she replied impatiently, in nowise affronted by his selfish motives. "He is not the man to forget a kind action."

"You don't thank me," he said angrily, as she went over to the escritoire and got

his cheque book. "Grasping! ungrateful!"

"I'm not ungrateful," she retorted, bringing the pen and ink to him with the cheque book, and a block of blotting paper to write on, "but I do thank you. I was never one for lip service."

"Bah! women are all alike," he said viciously, sitting up in bed, and seizing the pen. "Go and bring me some letter paper and an envelope."

She did so, and returned to his bedside by the time he had written the cheque.

"I've post-dated this cheque," he said cunningly, "because I won't send it to him till just before I die."

"What do you mean by post-dated?"

"This is the twelfth," he replied, smoothing out the letter paper, "I have dated it the thirtieth."

"How do you know you'll die then?"

"I don't know if I will, you fool," he retorted angrily, "but I think so--if I don't I'll write another cheque."

"Yes, and change your mind."

"No--no--a promise is a promise--if he helps me in the future I'll help him now--be quiet, you cat, I want to write."

She remained silent, and very slowly and painfully the old man wrote a letter, then he directed the envelope to Reginald Blake at the Vicarage and placed the letter and cheque therein. After doing this he closed the letter and told her to bring sealing-wax and his seal.

"What for?" she asked, going over to his desk.

"Because I'm not going to let anyone but himself see what I have written--you needn't be afraid--I will do what I say, look at the cheque, you fool."

She had brought a candle to the bedside so that he could melt the wax for the

seal, and as he held the cheque out to her she read it in the dim light.

"It's all right," she said with a sigh of relief, "I thank you very much."

"You needn't," he retorted cynically, sealing the letter with the Garsworth arms. "I do it for my own sake not his; now put this letter in the desk and let me see you do it."

He handed her his keys, so taking them and the letter over to the desk, she deposited it in the place indicated by his lean, outstretched finger, and having locked it safely up, blew out the candle and brought the keys back to him.

The Squire placed them under his pillow, then lay down again with a sigh of exhaustion.

"There, I've done what you asked," he said in a dull voice, "now go away. I'll sleep a little."

Patience carefully tucked all the clothes round him and then left the room with a look of triumph on her face.

"Now, Basil Beaumont," she said when she was outside the door. "I think I can laugh at you and your threats about my son."

CHAPTER XXII.

PHANTASMAGORIA.

Shadows of what are shadows--living once
Now naught but ghosts among a world of ghosts.
Who knows--we may but shadows be on earth
And act the other life's realities.

Miss Cassy was greatly excited over the afternoon tea to which she had bidden Mrs. Larcher and the rest of the vicarage inmates. It was a long time since she had taken part in a little social festivity such as she had been accustomed to in London, so both herself and Una determined it should be a success. In the dreary dismal life they led this was a little mild excitement, consequently, it was to them as great an event as the ball of the season to a Town belle.

Reginald and Pumpkin walked over to the Grange, but Mrs. Larcher was driven over in state by Dick Pemberton, who drove at such a speed that he nearly rattled the vicar's wife into hysterics. Consequently on arriving at her destination, Mrs. Larcher was severely under the sway of "The Affliction" and had to be at once comforted with strong tea. Cecilia had also been invited, and arrived at the Grange under the guardianship of Miss Busky, who bounced the blind girl so rapidly along the road that she entered the Park in a state of exhaustion.

The party all assembled in Una's private room, where they were shortly afterwards joined by bluff Dr. Larcher and Beaumont. Jellicks, having wriggled in with the tea-cake and muffins, was dismissed altogether, as Mrs. Larcher, under the influence of "The Affliction," declared the old woman made her feel creepy.

"She's so twisty, my dear," she observed to Una, "like a sea-serpent you know--even the vicar has noticed her."

"*Qui siccis oculis monstra natantia*," roared the vicar, quoting from his favourite poet, "though to be sure, I speak of her in the singular."

"Of course," said Dick sllily, "she's singular in any case:"

"So very odd," giggled Miss Cassy, who was making the tea, "I don't mean Jellicks, but what you say--puns you know--like what's his name, Byron, had in his burlesques--not the Don Juan one you know, but the other--so odd, wasn't he?"

"Not half so odd as Miss Cassy," whispered Dick to Reginald, but the latter young gentleman, being engaged with Una, did not reply.

"I don't know if I ought to eat muffins," said Mrs. Larcher darkly, as Miss Busky bounced up to her with a plate of those edibles. "So very buttery--make me bilious--I've been bilious often, have I not Eleanora Gwendoline?"

"Yes, often, Mama," assented the obedient Pumpkin.

"I hope you're better now?" observed Beaumont politely, seeing the lady's eyes fixed upon him.

"Ah, yes, now," sighed Mrs. Larcher, stirring her tea, "but will it last? the question is will it endure? my affliction is so capricious--I'm very weak--quite a Hindoo."

"Why a Hindoo, my dear?" asked the vicar, rather puzzled.

"Because they are weak--die if you look at them," explained Mrs. Larcher, "rice of course--they live on it and there's no nourishment in it."

"By the way, Miss Challoner, how is the Squire?" asked Beaumont, who was leaning up against the mantelpiece looking rather bored.

"He's not at all strong," replied Miss Cassy, taking the remark to herself, "quite like a candle you know--so odd--might go out at any moment--but Dr. Nestley is doing him good; but I don't think the dear doctor is well himself."

Beaumont smiled slightly at this, guessing the cause of the doctor's illness, and glancing at Cecilia, saw the blind girl was trembling violently.

"I hope he is not very ill," she said in her low, clear voice.

"Oh no--he'll be all right soon--I think it's overwork," said Una hastily, anxious to avoid any discussion of the doctor's complaint, the cause of which she, with her feminine shrewdness, half guessed. "Cecilia, will you play something?"

The blind girl assented, and was led by Una to the quaint old spinet which stood in the corner. With the true feelings of an artist Cecilia did not play anything noisy on the delicate instrument, but a dainty old gavotte which sounded faint

and clear like the sound of a silver bell. All the company were charmed with the delicacy of the music except Miss Cassy and Mrs. Larcher who were conversing about dress.

"I hope you like mine," observed Miss Cassy, looking at the gown she wore, which was of white muslin dotted with pink bows. "I was afraid I'd make it dabby--I'm afraid I have made it dabby--do you think so?"

Mrs. Larcher eyed the production of Miss Cassy's artistic nature with a critical eye, and pronounced her opinion that it was dabby, thus reducing poor Miss Cassy to the verge of tears. When Cecilia finished the gavotte all present urged her to play something else.

"It's like fairy music," said Beaumont. "I love to hear those old airs of Purcell and Arne played upon such an instrument. It's so thoroughly in keeping with the idea. The lyrics in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' set to the old-fashioned music and played on a spinet, gives one a charming idea of the court of Oberon and Titania."

"And Miss Mosser plays so charmingly," said Reginald, gaily.

"O testudinis aureæ
Dulcem quæ strepitum Pieri temperas,"

quoted the vicar, in his rolling bass.

"I prefer the sweet harmony of the spinet to the lyre," said Beaumont, smiling.

"Dear me, vicar," observed Mrs. Larcher angrily. "I wish you wouldn't be always talking Latin. No one understands it."

"That's hardly a compliment to the gentlemen present, my dear," said Dr. Larcher in his most stately manner, "but, as Horace says, 'Oh, mater pulchra'----I beg your pardon, I will refrain from the bard."

"Now, Mr. Blake, I want you to sing something," said Una, crossing over to Pumpkin.

"Certainly--some old English melody, I suppose, to match the spinet. 'Phyllida flouts me,' or 'Mistress mine where are you roaming?'"

"Let us have them both," said Beaumont, lazily. "Very likely the ghosts of the old Elizabethan lyrists will come and listen."

"You'll see a real ghost shortly," said Una mysteriously, as she and Pumpkin, after a whispered consultation, moved to the door.

"The ghost of whom?" asked Reginald, who was standing by the spinet.

"Lady Betty Modish or Sophia Western--which ever you like--town or country," replied Una, laughing, and thereupon vanished with Miss Larcher.

"What does she mean?" demanded the vicar in astonishment.

"Something very odd," said Miss Cassy, shaking her girlish head. "Yes, quite like a play. The School for what's-it's-name. Sheridan, you know--quite lovely."

And now Reginald began to sing the quaint old song "Phyllida flouts me," while Cecilia, who knew the music off by heart, played the accompaniment. The night was beginning to close in, and the room was full of shadows, lighted in a fantastic manner by the red glare of the fire, which flashed on the tarnished gilded frames of the pictures and the sombre faces looking from the walls. Beaumont, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, listened quietly, while opposite to him the vicar, ensconced in a great arm-chair, crossed his legs and kept time to the music with his spectacles.

So gay and charming the old song sounded. Nothing of the sickly sentimentality of the modern drawing-room ballad--nothing of the florid passion of the Italian school--but all fresh and wholesome, like a gentle wind blowing freely over an English meadow, white with daisies. Reginald sang the complaint of the unhappy lover charmingly, and ended amid a subdued murmur of satisfaction, even Mrs. Larcher being pleased.

"So simple," she said, nodding her head. "Quite soothing, like a cradle. Ah, there are no songs now-a-days like the old ones."

"My dear, we are past the age of Corydon and Chloe," replied the vicar. "Virgil and Horace would find no Arcady to sing about now."

"Well, I don't suppose that Imperial Rome was more Arcadian than London," said Beaumont, lazily, "but I'm afraid we've lost the charm of simplicity."

"Ah, you've never heard 'Lady Bell,'" said Dick wisely.

"No. I must confess my ignorance," replied the artist. "Who or what is Lady Bell?"

"It's a song--simplicity, if you like. Reggy found it among some old music at the vicarage."

"Did he indeed?" observed the vicar placidly. "No doubt it belonged to my grandfather. I thought that music was all burnt. *Damnosa quid non imminuit dies?*"

"He spared this, sir, at all events," said Reginald gaily. "Miss Mosser, you can play 'Lady Bell'?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Cecilia, striking a chord. "It haunted me when I first heard it. Sing it now, Mr. Blake."

Whereupon she played a prelude of silvery-sounding chords, and Reginald sang the old ballad of "Lady Bell." How, despising all the beaux, she gave her heart to a plain young country squire, and left the delights of Ranelagh for the quiet of a village. So dainty and crisp rang the music to the simple story with its Arcadian end.

"My Lady Bell in gold brocade,
Looked not so fair or trim a maid
As when in linsey woollen gown,
She left for love the noisy town."

And then the door opened as Reginald ended the delightful old song, and surely on the threshold stood my Lady Bell as she appeared at Ranelagh, in powdered hair, in shimmer of gold brocade, with wide hoops and patches on her arch-looking face, with dainty red-heeled shoes and skilfully manipulated fan. It was surely Lady Bell that stepped so stately into the room in the red glare of the fire

to the melodious clearness of the gavotte played by Cecilia, who, being whispered to by Reginald, at once seized the spirit of the jest. Or perchance one of the old Garsworth dames had stepped down from her gilt frame, and, attracted by the familiar tinkle of the spinet, come to look at what gay company were assembled in the oak parlour; but no, it was to their eyes Lady Bell, fair and dainty as of old, who swept into the firelight with tapping of high heels and sweep of stiff brocade.

"We must have lights to see this," cried Dick, jumping up from his chair.

"No, no, I protest!" said Beaumont, lifting up his hand. "It will spoil all. This is not Miss Challoner, but Lady Bell--a ghost from the days of powder and patches come to visit us. She moves in mysterious shadows--a light will cause her to melt away."

"I'm too substantial for that, I'm afraid," laughed Una, waving her fan. "But isn't this a charming dress? I found it the other day, and thought I would give you all a fright."

"I don't think you could give any one a fright," whispered Reginald, whereupon she flashed a saucy look at him out of the shadows. The sweet, clear music was still stealing through the room, and Beaumont, in his low, languid voice, talked idly.

"Lady Bell, I admire you vastly. How have you left London and the modish company at Soho? Surely no highwayman stayed you on the way hither in your coach and six? And what of my Lord Mohun? Is there any news at Will's coffee-house, and do the belles admire the new opera of Mr. Handel? Come, tell us the news."

"I would need to be a gazette to do so."

"And you are not--only a fair dead woman from the perished past, come to show us what wit and beauty went out with powder and patches. Ah, my dear Lady Bell----"

At this moment he was interrupted, for a wild shriek rang through the house, and all present sprang to their feet, looking at one another in wild surmise.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END OF ALL THINGS.

We may have died in being born to earth
Perchance our dying is another birth.

The shriek was uttered by Patience Allerby, and when the whole party, recovering from their surprise, went upstairs they found her leaning against the door of the squire's room, with pale face and terrified-looking eyes. Beyond, half seen in the dim candlelight which illuminated the room, lay a dark shapeless object on the floor.

There was no need to say what had happened, for in the air there was that indescribable feeling which tells of the presence of the great destroyer. Leaving Patience to the care of Beaumont, to whom she clung with convulsive terror, Dr. Larcher reverently entered as he thought the chamber of death. He bent down to the form lying so still on the floor, and turned the face to the light with tender hand. It was ghastly pale, and from the thin lips there flowed a thin stream of blood; still the vicar saw at a glance that life yet remained, so calling softly to Reginald and Dick, the three men lifted the body up gently and placed it on the bed.

Beaumont had succeeded in somewhat pacifying Patience, and induced the women to go downstairs while he sent for the doctor to examine the sick man. They all re-assembled in the oak parlour, and terrified faces and subdued whispers took the place of merry looks and jocund laughter.

Attracted by the housekeeper's shriek, Dr. Nestley now entered the room, and proceeded to see what he could do towards reviving the squire. Beaumont glanced keenly at him as he passed, but though his face was pale and heavy-looking, still he was perfectly sober. He caught the artist scrutinising him, and

drawing himself up with an angry frown, passed him by without a word.

"What is the matter, doctor?" asked the vicar anxiously, when the young man had concluded his examination.

"Aneurism," he replied briefly. "The body is thoroughly debilitated--he has burst a main artery."

"Is it his heart?" asked Reginald.

"If he had burst any artery in the vicinity of the heart, he would have died at once--even now he cannot live very long--I expected this?"

"What produced the rupture?"

"Some sudden emotion, I presume, or violent exercise--here comes the housekeeper; she will tell us all about it."

Patience, looking pale but composed, and in answer to the interrogatories of the doctor, told the following story:

"The squire was quietly sleeping in bed," she exclaimed calmly, "and I fell asleep in the chair by the side of the bed--he must have arisen and gone to his desk, for I was awakened by a fall, and saw him lying on the floor. I was so startled that I cried out and you came up--I know nothing more."

Owing to the remedies which Dr. Nestley was applying, the sick man now revived, and moaned feebly. Shortly afterwards, opening his eyes he stared wildly at the figures surrounding his bed, and tried to speak, but seemed unable to make any sound beyond an indistinct murmur.

Dr. Larcher came close to the bed, and bending down spoke distinctly and slowly to the dying man.

"You are very ill," he said in a pitying voice. "I hope you have made your peace with heaven."

With a superhuman effort Garsworth raised himself on his elbow, and stretching out his hand pointed to the desk.

"In there," he gasped. "Blake--there."

The effort was too much for him, for with a choking cry he fell back on the bed a corpse.

Nestley, starting to his feet, bent over the bed, and tearing open the squire's shirt, put his hand on his heart--it had ceased to beat.

"He is dead," he said, in a coldly professional manner, "that last effort killed him."

"Dead!" echoed Patience, who was leaning against the curtains with staring eyes and a white terrified face.

"Yes--dead," repeated Dr. Larcher gravely. "We can do no good now," and followed by Reginald and Dick he left the room, wondering in his own heart what the old man had meant by pointing at the desk while pronouncing Blake's name.

The melancholy news was conveyed to the terrified women downstairs, and shortly afterwards everyone departed, leaving the inmates of the Grange alone with its dead master. Una and Miss Cassy, stunned by the suddenness of the event, retired early to bed, and Jellicks, with the help of Patience, laid the corpse out on the bed ready for the undertaker. Nestley went to his own room and solaced himself with brandy; Patience remained by the side of the corpse to watch it during the night, and over all the house there hung a shadow of fear and dread which invested the place with awesome terror.

And that which once held the soul of Randal Garsworth lay on the bed under the heavily-draped canopy--a still white-faced form with the dead hands crossed on the dead breast, and on the white lips a terrible smile. Candles burned on each side of the body with a sickly light, and a woman with her face buried in her hands knelt praying for the dead man's soul.

"Oh God who art the Judge of all have mercy upon the soul of this wretched man."

Not a breath of air in the vastness of the room, no sound, no blaze of light--only the pale glimmer of the candles hollowing out a gulf of luminous light in the sombre blackness of the brooding night.

"Oh God who art all powerful and just, let not the soul of this man suffer for the sins of his life, for the mind which should have ruled the soul was a wreck and incapable of so ruling."

Was there not a sneer upon the still features of the dead man at this prayer for his misspent, useless life--he that despised prayer and only looked upon his soul as useful to inhabit a new body so that he could make it an instrument by which to enjoy the sensual things of this earth.

Midnight, and the wind is rising--with querulous voice it sweeps through the leafless trees and whistles through the chinks and crannies of the old house, making the dim light of the candles flicker and flare in the dense darkness. No prayer now sounds from the thin lips of the watcher, for a sudden thought has darted through her brain.

"The letter for my son--I must get it from the desk."

She rises softly from her knees, and putting her hand under the pillow whereon rests the head of the corpse, draws forth the keys of the dead man, holding her breath meantime, fearful lest he should arise and lay cold hands upon her. The keys chink musically in the silence, then with stealthy stride and sound of sweeping dress, she crosses to the desk, bent on obtaining the letter written by the squire to Reginald Blake.

The minutes slowly pass, and the wind is still rising; now howling furiously round the house, shaking the shutters and fluttering the curtains as though wroth at witnessing the sacrilegious theft it is powerless to prevent.

With the letter in her hand, the woman who has committed this crime against the dead for the sake of her son, softly crosses the room toward the bed, replaces the keys in their old place under the pillow, and slipping the letter into her bosom, falls once more upon her knees with tearful eyes and outstretched hands.

"God! God! if I have sinned in this I pray for pardon, it is for my son's sake, oh God, not for my own."

Fearfully she looks at the frozen face, cold and still in the glimmering light of the candles; the dead has not seen, the dead has not heard--her crime is unknown to anyone on earth, but involuntarily she looks upward as though dreading to see the all-seeing eye of God burning menacingly through the gloom. Then with an effort she betakes herself once more to prayer.

"Oh God, pardon me for my sins, and pardon those of this poor soul who has of late gone into Thy presence."

One sinner fresh from the committal of a crime praying for the soul of another sinner.

Oh, the irony--the irony of the prayer.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR. BEAUMONT WINS HIS CASE.

In truth he had a silver tongue
Whose mild persuasive accents rung
 Like music in her ear;
Despite her dread, despite her hate.
She ever let him rule her fate
And change her heart from joy elate
 To one that ached with fear.

The shadows of solitude and dreariness had ever hung like ill-omened clouds over Garsworth Grange, but now the shadows were deepened by the presence of death. To the eerie atmosphere of the old house had been added a new element of fear, and every lonely room, every shadowy corner and every echoing corridor seemed to be filled with a weird feeling of the supernatural. Jellicks and Munks were not by any means imaginative folk, but even they felt the influence of the spell of horror which seemed to brood over the lonely mansion, and conversed together in low whispers with furtive looks around as if expecting a whole host of goblins and spirits to start forth from the brooding shadows. Miss Cassy and Una both kept to their rooms, mutually trying to cheer one another, and the only person who seemed to move about at all was Patience Allerby, who glided through the bare rooms and dusky passages like an unquiet ghost. And not unlike a ghost did she look with her haggard face, burning eyes, and slim figure, carrying with her the paper she had stolen from the sanctity of the dead man's chamber, the paper which hidden in her bosom seemed to her excited fancy to feel bitterly cold as if its dead owner had grasped it with his chill hand to drag it forth from its hiding-place. True, the paper would benefit her son, and it was legally his, still the memory of that stealthy theft in the dark night, while yet the corpse lay stiffly on the bed, seemed to haunt her conscious-stricken soul like a crime.

And amid all this horror and dreariness which clung round the place, the dead man lay in his coffin in the dismal room he had occupied during life. No flowers were placed on the bed or on the coffin, no relatives wept over the white set face to melt its frozen apathy with hot tears, no voice of lamentation was heard bewailing a good man's fate; lonely in death as he had been in life, Randal Garsworth, who had sacrificed the pleasures of this earth to a delusion, lay unloved and uncared for in the silent room as if he had lain for generations in the vault of his ancestors.

Sometimes when Munks or Jellicks had taken their turns in watching the body,

Patience would come for a time and, kneeling down, pray for the dead man's soul; but the sneering look on the still countenance seemed to mock her prayers and she fled away in horror at the thoughts that gibing smile provoked.

On the second day after the death of the squire, a visitor came to see Patience, one whom she half expected, and the housekeeper was not at all astonished at beholding Beaumont standing at the door of her room, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Why do you come here?" she asked half in anger, half in dread.

"Because I want to speak to you," replied Beaumont, leisurely closing the door and taking a seat. "I know it is not quite the thing to pay visits so soon after a death, but Miss Challoner and her aunt are, I believe shut up in their rooms, Munks and that serpent you call Jellicks are safe in the kitchen, so I came in at the back of the house quite unperceived to see you."

"What about?" she asked stolidly.

"I think you can pretty well guess," he replied coolly, "about the conversation I had with you the other day--I want your answer."

"The answer is--no."

"Is it, indeed--ah! we'd better chat over it for a time. I may persuade you to change your mind."

"You'll never do that," she said with a kind of gloomy triumph, "never."

"Indeed--we'll see," he retorted calmly; "by-the-way I hope you don't mind me smoking, but it is so deucedly shivery in this tomb of a house that it gives me the creeps."

"You can smoke," she said curtly.

"Thanks--you know I love my creature comforts."

He rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it, and then blowing a thin cloud of blue smoke, crossed his legs and looked complacently at her.

"So you say no?" he observed with a smile. "Of course you know the consequences?"

"I do."

"And you are prepared to abide by them?"

"I am."

"Noble mother! May I ask your reasons?"

"Yes--and I will tell you my reasons," she said deliberately. "I half intended to agree to your scheme the other day, as I thought it would benefit my son--but now I have found a way to benefit him without participation in your villainy."

"The deuce you have," said Beaumont curiously. "How clever you are--come tell me all about it."

She smiled coldly at his evident uneasiness and went on speaking calmly with a certain malignant satisfaction which was not by any means acceptable to Mr. Beaumont.

"I asked the squire before he died to help Reginald Blake, telling him I was the boy's nurse and anxious to see him settled in life, he refused at first but by working on his delusion about re-incarnation I got him to give Reginald a cheque for one hundred pounds."

"Oh, and you think Reginald would prefer one hundred pounds down to ten thousand a year?" he said with an ugly look.

"Reginald doesn't know anything about it; the squire signed the cheque and wrote a letter, enclosed them both in an envelope and sealed it with his arms, then I, by his directions, locked it up in his desk."

"Where it is still?"

"No, I have got it. I have it here," she said, producing the letter from her bosom and holding it up to him.

"How did you get it?" he asked craftily.

"I watched by the body the first night after death, and remembering where he had put the letter, I took his keys from under his pillow and obtained it, then I locked up the desk and replaced the keys."

"Ah, perhaps you don't know that you have been guilty of a felony?"

"I don't care," she retorted defiantly. "You won't tell?"

"Won't I? that depends; at all events I'd like to look at that letter," he said, stretching out his hand.

She put the letter quickly behind her back.

"No, you won't see it."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't trust you."

"Very well," he said deliberately, "if you don't let me see the contents of the letter, I'll go straight to the lawyers when they arrive and tell them you stole it."

"You would not be such a villain?" she cried in despair.

"I don't see why I shouldn't--you always thought me bad, so why should I give the lie to your estimate of my character by proving myself good?--come, choose--the letter, or the exposure!"

Patience looked at him in despair, as she knew by her fatal admission she was in his power--so, with a sudden gesture of anger, she held the letter out to him.

"Take it."

Beaumont laughed softly, and took the letter daintily between his thumb and forefinger.

"I thought you'd have known," he said sneeringly. "Now get me a light."

"To do what?"

"Melt the wax--I want to see what's inside this envelope."

"But you mustn't do that--it's sealed with the Garsworth Arms--the lawyers won't pay the cheque if they find the seal has been tampered with."

"I can re-seal it with the Garsworth Arms," he replied coolly, "don't be alarmed. I know what I'm about."

She looked at him irresolutely, then apparently recognizing the futility of resistance, she lighted a candle and brought it to him.

With a dexterity only acquired by long practice Mr. Beaumont deftly melted the wax of the seal and speedily opened the letter. First he took out the short note, written by the Squire, which he read aloud to Patience, the contents being as follows:

"I give you this money to help you in your life. When I am born again in another body, and come to you for help or friendship, you must help me, if I ask, on my reminding you of this money I now give you--for no one but ourselves will know of this transaction, so you can be certain that he who speaks to you of it will be myself in a new body."

"RANDAL GARSWORTH."

"As mad as ever, I see," said Beaumont, with a sneer, putting down the note. "Now for the cheque."

He glanced at it quickly--saw that it was for one hundred pounds, payable to Reginald Blake, and dated the thirtieth of the month--whereupon he gave a low whistle.

"What's the matter?" asked Patience, quickly.

"To-day, I believe, is the fourteenth?"

"Yes--I know what you're going to say--the cheque is dated the thirtieth--I understand that."

"Yes, and you, doubtless, understand that the Squire died on the twelfth, and that this cheque is waste paper?"

"Waste paper?"

"Exactly--it's dated after the Squire's death, so to all intents and purposes, the Squire was not legally in existence when he signed it."

"What nonsense!" she said impatiently. "I saw him sign it myself."

"Of course you did," he replied smoothly. "You don't seem to understand me--a cheque is generally supposed to be signed on the day it is dated; and as this is dated the thirtieth, and the Squire died on the twelfth--well--it's so much waste paper."

"The lawyers will pay it when I explain the circumstances."

"The lawyers have nothing to do with it--the executors might, certainly, recognize it as a claim against the estate, but it is entirely optional with them; if you brought an action, you would, no doubt, recover on the cheque, but I'm afraid the costs would swallow up the amount claimed."

It was in order to get her to consent to join in his scheme that Beaumont thus argued in such a subtle manner, and he certainly succeeded in his plan; for, by taking away her last chance, he reduced her to despair.

"Then I can do nothing to help my son?" she cried, with a terrible expression of anguish on her face.

"Yes, you can--help me to get Reginald the property."

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asked, with supreme contempt, "the law?"

"No!--I'm not afraid of the law--but I am afraid of the curse this money will be to Reginald, if it's unlawfully obtained."

"Oh, if that is all your objection, I think you can set your mind at rest," replied the artist, with a sneer. "I'll help him to spend the money, and take my share of

the curse. Don't talk rubbish--by putting Reginald in possession of ten thousand a year you will be harming no one--the money which should rightfully become Una Challoner's will still become hers by marriage, and two people will be made happy--if you will not help me, I'll tell Reginald all about his birth, and he will remain a pauper--if you help me, he will retain all--if you decline, he will lose everything."

"I do not see what chance I have against you," she cried in despair.

"No more do I!"

"You villain!" she said, furiously. "Why do you come and tempt me to sin like this?"

"I'm not tempting you to sin--don't I tell you, it will harm no one. Come, give me your answer--yes or no?"

"Yes," she said, faintly, "I agree."

"You will say that Reginald is the son of Fanny Blake and the Squire?"

"I will--for his sake."

"I don't care for whose sake you do it," he retorted, brutally, rising to his feet. "You've agreed to help me, so that's all I care about--now I'm going to get the papers."

"Where are they?"

"That's my business," said Beaumont, coolly sauntering to the door. "I'll fix up the necessary proofs, all you've got to do is, to tell a consistent story--I'll instruct you. By the way, you are quite sure Una Challoner, and that fool of an aunt, are out of the way?"

"Quite sure--they are in the oak parlour."

"No chance of their coming out?"

"None."

"Very good--then I can get what I want, without suspicion. Have you got the keys of the Squire's desk?"

"No, Dr. Nestley took them yesterday from the room, to give them to Miss Una."

"Confound it--has he done so?"

"I do not know."

"That's a nuisance," said Beaumont, reflectively; "I want to put the papers in the squire's desk and lock them up so that they may be found there in a natural manner. I must get those keys. Humph! never mind--I'll hit on some plan; when do the lawyers arrive?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, I'll arrange the papers to-night, and bring them to you to-morrow morning; they must be put in the desk secretly. Now, good-bye at present, and mind, I have your promise."

Patience nodded silently, and turned away with a calm but determined face, while Beaumont went away to carry out the details of his nefarious scheme.

"I have done all I could to resist temptation," she said to herself, bitterly, "I can do no more. If I do sin it is for my son's sake, not my own."

CHAPTER XXV

A DEXTEROUS ARRANGEMENT.

Attention to details makes a perfect whole.

When Mr. Beaumont arrived at "The House of Good Living" about six o'clock, he proposed first to have his dinner, and then to go in for a good night's work in arranging all the details of his scheme to place Reginald Blake in the possession of the Garsworth estate.

Though he had told Patience that he would not admit Reginald into his confidence in order to spare the moral nature of the young man, this was hardly the true reason, as, in the first place, he was afraid, from what he had seen of his son, that the young man would not consent to be a party to the swindle, and, in the second, he wished to keep the true facts of the case to himself, lest Reginald should prove difficult to deal with, in which case, by threatening to dispossess him of the estate, he could keep a firm hand over the unconscious victim of his scheme. Thus, by a little dexterous lying, he benefited in two ways, appearing kindly-disposed in the eyes of Patience, and yet keeping his own secret as a useful weapon in time of need.

As soon as he discovered the squire's secret, he foresaw that he would have to imitate the old man's penmanship in order to fill up the blank spaces in the document addressed by Garsworth to his supposed son, and therefore, having obtained a specimen of the dead man's handwriting he practised assiduously, in order to commit the forgery as dexterously as possible. This was to him a comparatively easy matter, as he had a pretty talent for imitating handwriting, which he had exercised before, though not in any fashion likely to bring him within reach of the law. Luckily, he had not to sign any name, as the squire had already attested his signature to the paper, and all he had to do was to fill up the blanks left in the body of the letter. It had evidently not been written very long, and, the ink not having faded, he had to make no preparation to imitate the colour, but merely allow the words he inserted to grow black like the rest of the contents of the document.

He therefore intended to fill up the blanks with the necessary details, re-seal the envelope directed by the squire to Reginald Blake which had contained the cheque, with the seal-ring in his possession, and then, after placing the letter and ring inside the envelope, re-seal it in such a way as to avert all suspicion.

To this end he shut himself up in his bedroom on finishing his dinner, and spread out before him the document which he had abstracted from its hiding-place in the ball-room. The letter addressed by the old man to his supposed son was as follows:

"MY DEAR SON,

"You will, doubtless, be surprised at receiving a letter from me, but I have the strongest claim to write to you, as I am your father. I know that you are under the impression that you have a father and mother already: but they are not your real parents. I, Randal Garsworth, am your true father, and of was your mother, and you were born in Your true parentage was concealed for reasons of my own. I now make the only reparation in my power, which is to put you in possession of my property; for, though you are not my lawful son, you are certainly my lawful heir. Take this letter and the seal-ring enclosed (bearing my crest), which will be found among my papers after my decease, and see my lawyers, Messrs. Binks & Bolby, of Glutcher's Lane in the City of London, and they will be sufficient to prove your identity as my son. I have made my will in your favour, saying you will produce the ring and this letter as a proof of your identity. The will is, of course, in the possession of my lawyers as above mentioned, and I hope you will carry out the instructions regarding legacies, etc., mentioned in my said will. As we have been strangers, it would be folly for me to express any regret, and all I can say is, that I hope the amount of the estate I leave you will compensate for the moral stain on your name.

"I remain,

"Your affectionate father,

"RANDAL GARSWORTH."

After reading this extraordinary document Beaumont laid it down and laughed heartily. Of course, Garsworth was quite mad, therefore his folly was excusable; but that he should think to claim his property on such flimsy evidence was really the strongest proof of his insanity.

"Luckily," observed Mr. Beaumont to himself, "I can supply all the missing links by bringing forward Patience to prove the birth of Reginald as Fanny Blake's child in London, explain the absence of registration and baptismal certificates,

and give a much more definite birthplace than he was likely to give."

He thereupon applied himself to his work and, after practising the names he wished to fill in on pieces of waste-paper, he inserted them in the original document, the clause which gave him all the work reading as follows:

"I, Randal Garsworth, am your true father, and Fanny Blake, of Garsworth, was your mother, and you were born in Chelsea, London."

Having finished this with infinite pains, Mr. Beaumont eyed his work in a very complacent manner.

"When that ink is dry," he said, thoughtfully, "it will turn as black as the rest of the writing. I'll wait till to-morrow morning before I put it into the envelope, just to see how the names look by daylight."

He took the letter written by the squire to Reginald and also the cheque, and placed them carefully away in one compartment of his pocket-book, then he placed the envelope, the seal-ring and the original document, wide open, in a small despatch-box, so that the ink would dry properly. Having locked the box, he put the key in his pocket, lighted a cigarette, and considered his next move.

"I must get the letter locked up in the squire's desk," he said to himself. "But how? Very likely Nestley has given the keys to Una Challoner, then there will be no chance. If I can't get the keys to lock it up I'll slip it among some loose papers in the desk to-morrow--but it would look better locked up. I think I'll walk over to the Grange and find out if Nestley has the keys still."

On going down stairs, however, he discovered that there was no need for him to walk to the Grange, as he found Nestley seated in the parlour, apparently in very low spirits, drinking hot whisky and water. When he saw Beaumont his face flushed, and he looked away, for the unhappy man, having lost his self-respect, felt his moral degradation keenly. Beaumont, however, pretended not to notice his action, but advancing towards him shook hands warmly, and asked after his health in the friendliest manner possible. Nestley was cold and short in his replies at first, but under the quiet warmth of Beaumont's fascinating manner

began to talk more amiably.

"Excuse me drinking this hot whisky. It's so very cold, to-night," he said, in a deprecating tone, "and I've had a long walk from the Grange."

"Yes, and you'll have a cold walk back," said Beaumont, in a sympathetic manner.

"I'm not going back," replied Nestley sadly, looking down at the table.

"Not going back," echoed the artist; "why not?"

"I've finished my business at the Grange, and it is no use my staying there; besides, Miss Challoner dislikes me so much that it was painful for me to live in the same house with her."

"How do you know she dislikes you?"

"It's easily seen; her manner is quite sufficient--besides, by persuading me to give way to this again," he added vehemently, touching his glass, "you have caused me to lose all hope and self-respect; every person who looks at me seems to be pitying my downfall."

"Well then, give up the drink."

"What's the good?" said Nestley despairingly. "I left it off for five years, yet such is my weak nature that I yielded to your persuasions, and now it has got complete mastery of me again."

"You seem determined to regard me as your evil genius," said the artist deliberately. "Why I do not know. I suggested a little wine on that evening, in order to cheer you up--that is all."

"All! and quite enough too. You knew, in the old days, when I took one glass it meant more."

"I am not to blame for your weakness."

"No doubt--but knowing that weakness you might have left me alone."

"Well, well," said Beaumont impatiently, "my back is broad enough to bear your sins as well as my own. What are you going to do now?"

"Stay here for two or three days, and then go away," replied Nestley. "I've risked my all on the cast of a die--and lost, so I'm going back to my own town, and live out the remainder of my life as best I can."

"Have you said good-bye to Miss Challoner?"

"No, nor do I intend to; she knows my degradation. I can see it in her eyes, in her manner, in the way she shrinks from me. I have lost the best part of myself--my self-respect."

Beaumont was hard and callous as a rule, but he could not help feeling a pang of pity for the abject misery of the man whom he had brought so low.

"Come, come, Nestley," he said cheerily, patting the doctor on the back, "I'm truly sorry I ever persuaded you to touch the wine, but you'd better leave this place at once. When you are back again, in your own home, you will once more take up your old life of temperance and hard work."

"It is too late--the evil is done."

"Rubbish! it's never too late to mend; leave Garsworth without delay."

"And leave you to make love to Miss Challoner!"

"I," said Beaumont, with an enigmatic smile, "nonsense--I'm past the age of love--you can make your mind easy on that score; but, as I will probably see Miss Challoner, shall I make your adieux to her?"

"If you like," returned Nestley gloomily, "and give her these keys--they belonged to the Squire, and I forgot to give them into her possession."

Here was a wonderful piece of luck; the very keys he was in search of, delivered into his hands without any difficulty whatsoever. Beaumont did not believe in astrology, but surely at that moment he must have thought his lucky star was in the ascendant. With his habitual craftiness, however, he suppressed all outward manifestations of joy, and took the keys from Nestley with an assenting smile.

"I won't forget," he said calmly, slipping them into his pocket, "and you will take my advice about leaving the village."

"Why are you so anxious for me to go?" asked Nestley suspiciously.

"For your own good."

"And for your own ends too, I've no doubt," retorted the doctor bitterly. "You never did anything in your life without a motive."

"Very well," said Beaumont, strolling to the door, "if you don't choose to take my advice, stay here and drink yourself to death, as you will surely do--please yourself, my friend."

"Please myself," echoed Nestley, when the door closed on Beaumont. "I intend to, Basil Beaumont--you've got some plan to carry out, or you would not remain so placidly in this dull village--so I'll stay and see the game out; and, if I can thwart you I will, if it's only to punish you for the evil you have done to me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNA MAKES A CONFESSION.

He may be poor, and quite unknown,
In rank there may be men above him;
But my heart beats for him alone,
You ask the reason; this--I love him!

The next morning Beaumont examined the important document, upon which hung the fate of his scheme, in order to see by the searching light of day if a close scrutiny would reveal in any palpable degree his alterations. According to his expectations, it appeared eminently satisfactory, for the words he had inserted had turned quite black, and assumed the ebon tint of the rest of the handwriting, so to an ordinary observer the entire document appeared to have been written by one person. True, if it were submitted to experts in a court of law, the forgery might be detected; but Beaumont was quite satisfied in his own mind that the paper would never have to stand such a test. The directions in the will, the production of the paper and seal-ring mentioned therein, and the evidence of Patience Allerby as to the birth of Reginald, would be quite strong enough evidence to put him in possession of the property, even if Una should contest the affair, which he knew she would not do when she found that the heir who ousted her from her rightful position was Reginald Blake.

Being therefore perfectly satisfied, Mr. Beaumont took the envelope, directed by the Squire to Reginald Blake, at the Vicarage, and having placed some new wax on the closing fold, he stamped it with the Garsworth arms by means of the seal ring. Then placing the document he had so carefully prepared inside, together with the ring, he melted the under portion of the wax till it became soft and firmly closed the letter so that no one, from its appearance, could detect the fraud.

This being done, he placed the important letter, together with the keys given to him by Nestley, in his breast coat pocket, and set off gaily to the Grange, in order to place it where it could be easily found.

He had invented some trivial explanation to give to Una and Miss Cassy should he meet them before carrying out his plan, and, of course, on having done so, the mission of delivering the keys to Una would be ample excuse for his intrusion on their grief. Fate, however, stood his friend, for by going round to a side door he was enabled to enter the house, and go to the housekeeper's room, unseen by anyone, save Jellicks, who admitted him.

Patience, looking pale and worn, arose to receive him, and he half dreaded to glance at her lest she had altered her mind. Her first remark, however, reassured him at once.

"Have you arranged everything?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes! Here is the precious document," he replied, producing the envelope, "and here are the keys of the Squire's desk."

"Where did you get them?"

"From Nestley; he gave them to me to return to Miss Challoner, as I intend to do after placing this letter in the Squire's desk. There's no time to be lost, Patience--take me up to the room at once."

"Wait a moment," she replied cautiously, growing a shade paler. "I'd better go and see that Miss Cassy and Miss Una are safe in the oak parlour first. Wait here."

She glided out of the room like a ghost, and after an absence of ten minutes returned to Beaumont with a more composed expression on her face.

"They are at breakfast," she said in a whisper, "no chance of being disturbed by them. Come along, but make no noise. Every sound echoes through this old place."

Silently and stealthily they stole along the dark passages, which, owing to the light filtering through grimy windows, had a dusky appearance. Softly over the echoing pavement of the gloomy hall, up the wide staircase with the old Garsworths frowning on them from the walls, as if they knew their wicked errand, along the chill length of the upper corridor, and then the slow turning of the key in the lock, the gentle opening of the door, and they stood in the presence of the dead.

So still, so lonely, so cold, with the heavy curtains drawn over the wide windows, only admitting faint streaks of light which stole whitely through the heavy atmosphere of the room. On the bed was the black coffin, with the dead man laid therein. On either side tall candles were burning with a sickly light, and the heavy draperies of the bed hung motionless as if frozen with horror. In the dim shadows of the far end of the room, where the faint daylight and the faint

candlelight produced an unnatural twilight, stood the desk, and towards it Beaumont stepped with a stealthy activity, suggestive of the sinuosity of a tiger. After him, soft-footed and pale, stole the woman up.

"In which recess did you lock up the letter?" he asked in a low whisper.

She indicated the place with outstretched finger and shuddered as she heard the click of the key turning in the lock. A subdued rustle of papers, a soft, shutting sound, another click as the key turned again, and the first part of the scheme was achieved.

In the shadowy light of the room their faces looked pale and haggard, as they sped silently and rapidly towards the door, as though they feared lest the dead man should arise from his coffin and call upon them to stop. Did no frown pass over that marble face? Did no sound hint to them that a disembodied spirit stood near the bed wailing over the failure of its cherished scheme through the treachery of humanity? No, all was still as the grave as the two companions glided out of the room, along the corridor, down the stairs, and found themselves once more in the housekeeper's room.

"Faugh!" said Beaumont, on whose pale face the beads of perspiration were standing, "what unpleasant work. Give me some brandy."

The housekeeper silently left the room and shortly returned with a liqueur glass of the liquor, which he tossed off rapidly, and the effect was soon seen in the glow which came over his face.

"You ought to have some yourself," he suggested, handing her back the glass.

"I don't require it," she replied coldly. "I'm used to the atmosphere of this house. You are not."

"It's like a charnel-house," he said, with a look of disgust. "Well, I've done my part of the affair. Now, all you've got to do is to swear Reginald is Fanny Blake's son. I'll leave it to your ingenuity to tell a good story."

"You can be certain of that," she replied coldly. "I've done with all scruples, and since it is to enrich my son, you may be sure I will do my best. And now I suppose in order to avert all suspicion, you'd better see Miss Una."

"Yes, of course. I want to return her these keys," he replied, jingling the bunch. "If any questions are asked, of course you can swear I have not been out of the room. But I don't think you need be afraid, everything will go quite smooth. There is a strong motive."

"And the motive?"

"Una's love for Reginald. Now go and tell her I am here."

When Patience left the room on her errand he dusted his boots with his handkerchief, pulled down his shirt-cuffs and settled his tie and hair in the mirror over the fireplace. By the time Patience returned he had quite recovered his nonchalant manner, and was humming a tune when she entered.

"Well?" he asked, facing round.

"It's all right. She will see you," replied the housekeeper, and, catching up his hat and stick, Beaumont followed her along the passage to the oak parlour.

Una and Miss Cassy, both in deep mourning, were seated at the breakfast-table when he entered, and as the door closed on Patience, he apologised for disturbing them.

"Of course I would not have thought of intruding on your grief," he said, in a courtly manner, "but the fact is, Miss Challoner, I have a message for you from Doctor Nestley."

"Ah, poor, dear doctor," whimpered Miss Cassy, dabbing her red eye-lids with a pocket handkerchief. "He's gone away--so very odd."

"I don't think so, aunt," observed Una quietly. "He had done all he could for my poor cousin, and now it would be merely wasting his time for him to remain. What is the message, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Just to give you these keys," he said, handing the bunch to her. "They belonged to the squire, and Nestley picked them up after the death, intending to give them to you, only he forgot all about them till it was too late, so asked me to bring them to you."

Una took the keys with a grave bow.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Beaumont," she said, putting them in her pocket. "It was very kind of you to bring them. I trust Doctor Nestley is well?"

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders, the meaning of which action she understood with feminine quickness.

"Let us hope he will be quite well when he returns home," she said with emphasis, her colour rising. "I am truly sorry for him. Where did he contract this unfortunate habit?"

"Oh, in London, I believe," said Beaumont carelessly. "I knew him there five or six years ago. He was very fast in those days. Then he pulled up and reformed altogether. I am sorry to see him resuming his old habits."

Mr. Beaumont did not think it necessary to explain how he had tempted the unhappy young man, so poor Nestley was blamed severely by both ladies for his evident tendency to fast living.

"So dreadful," piped Miss Cassy, lifting up her hands. "I really cannot understand it, and the dear doctor was so nice. Really, it's very odd. Oh, are you going, Mr. Beaumont? So sorry--good-bye."

Beaumont bowed to both the ladies and then left the room, quite satisfied with his interview.

"I think I have fixed up everything satisfactorily," he muttered to himself, as he lighted a cigarette outside on the terrace. "If Patience only carries out her part of the affair as well as I have done mine, we'll soon put Reginald in possession of the property, and then--it's my turn."

Miss Cassy watched him cross the terrace, and turned to Una with a look of admiration in her eyes.

"What a handsome man Mr. Beaumont is--so distinguished?" she said volubly. "Quite like a Spanish what's-his-name, you know."

"He's not bad-looking," replied Una absently, "but I prefer Reginald."

"Mr. Blake?" said Miss Cassy, rather astonished to hear her niece speak of him in such a familiar way.

Una saw that she had betrayed herself, so, going over to the elder lady, put her arms round her waist caressingly.

"Auntie, you must have seen it all the time."

"Seen what?" asked Miss Cassy, opening her eyes widely.

"That I love Reginald."

"Love Reginald Blake! Oh, my dear--how very odd."

"I don't see it's odd at all," replied Una blushing, "we love one another very dearly."

"But, my dear, he's nobody."

"He's everybody--in my eyes," said Una fondly.

"What would the Squire have said?" observed Miss Cassy in dismay.

"Forbidden the marriage, I've no doubt," replied Una, "so that is why we kept our engagement quiet--but now we are free to marry."

"Oh, Una, how heartless you are--so odd, and the poor Squire just dead."

"My dear auntie," said Una gravely, "I am the last person in the world to speak ill of the dead, but I cannot feign a regret which I do not feel; the Squire asked us down here for his own gratification--not ours; we have lived on our own money, and not his; he has taken no notice of us at all--so neither you nor I can pretend to weep over the death of a man whom we hardly ever saw, and who certainly did nothing to deserve tears."

"But still, he may have left you his fortune," urged Miss Cassy in a tearful voice.

"I doubt it," replied Una with a sigh, "but fortune or no fortune, I cannot pretend to a grief I do not feel."

"And you are quite determined to marry Reginald Blake?"

"Quite--we love each other devotedly."

"I'm sure I hope so," said poor Miss Cassy whimpering, "it's just like a romance of what's-his-name--so very odd; he is good-looking, I know--but money--he's got no money."

"I don't want money--I want him."

"He's got no name."

"He'll make one with his voice."

"I'm sure," cried Miss Cassy in despair, "I can't see what you see in him."

Una closed the argument in a most decisive manner.

"I love him."

This remark was unanswerable, so Miss Cassy dissolved in tears.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SQUIRE'S WILL.

"How strange a testament is this, my lord?
The outcome of a most fantastic brain.
'Tis but a mirror that reflects his life,
With all its twists and turns and madcap arguments."

Mr. Bolby, the junior partner in the legal firm who had control of the Squire's business, was a little, red-faced man, with a round head set upon an equally round body, which, in its turn, was supported by two short, sturdy legs. His face was clean shaven, save for two little tufts of white hair, which stood out on each cheek in startling contrast to the crimson of his complexion, and his baldish head

was sparsely scattered over with similar tufts. He dressed in a somewhat gay manner, and had a loud, cheerful voice of a chirpy nature, also a curious habit of using the same words twice over in different ways.

On arriving from London at the Grange he was handed the Squire's keys by Una, and at once proceeded to look over all the private papers of the dead man. Evidently he had some object in doing so, for he never rested until he had looked through every document in the desk, and having made himself master of the precise state of affairs, rested quietly until the day of the funeral, varying the monotony of this somewhat dreary life by paying frequent visits to the vicarage, where he had several lively arguments with Dr. Larcher on archæological subjects.

At last the day of the funeral arrived, and the dead man was borne with great pomp to the ancestral vault in Garsworth Church, where numerous generations of the family had already mouldered for many centuries. Some of the county families came to the funeral, but most of them sent their carriages to represent them, as Randal Garsworth, owing to his secluded life, had been by no means popular, and they only came themselves or sent their representatives from a sense of courtesy.

So the long procession, headed by the ponderous hearse with its stately black horses and nodding plumes, left the coldness of Garsworth Grange for the similar coldness of the family vault, and on arriving at the lichgate of the graveyard, were met by Dr. Larcher and his curate. The coffin was taken into the church, and the vicar read the funeral service in his most impressive manner, after which Cecilia played the "Dead March" from "Saul," and the remains of Randal Garsworth were conveyed to their last resting-place in the dismal vault. This being done, the heavy doors were once more closed until the death of some other member of the family would require them to be opened, and the greater part of the mourners went their different ways, while Dr. Larcher, accompanied by Reginald and Dick, returned to the Grange in company with Mr. Bolby, to hear the will read.

Dr. Larcher was obliged to be present, as he was co-executor with Mr. Bolby, and he took his two pupils with him for the sake of company, Reginald being nothing loth, as he had not seen Una since the death of the Squire.

So charming she looked in her black dress as she stood amid the faded splendour

of the drawing-room, receiving the visitors with graceful courtesy. Her manner was calm and self-possessed, and she did not give way to any manifestations of grief on the death of her cousin, a contrast to Miss Cassy, who loudly bewailed the Squire's decease, as if he had been her dearest and most intimate friend.

"Such a gentleman as he was," she whimpered, wiping her eyes, "quite one of the old school--a regular what's-his-name of the Regency--very odd, isn't it?"

Dr. Larcher himself thought that Miss Cassy's ostentatious grief was very odd, seeing it was for a person of whom she had seen very little, but he said nothing beyond a few words of sympathy, as he quite understood Miss Cassy to be one of those demonstrative people who weep alike at funeral or wedding, and display their feelings openly on the least occasion.

After partaking of some cake and wine, Mr. Bolby seated himself in a stately manner in order to read the will, and everyone prepared to listen. Dr. Larcher looked pityingly at Una, for he knew the contents of the will and what a blow it would be for her to lose the property, but as he had expostulated with the Squire at the time of executing it he could do no more, so things had to take their course.

"This will, gentlemen and ladies," chirped Mr. Bolby, putting on his spectacles, "ladies and gentlemen, this will was made five or six years back by my client deceased--my deceased client being then, as I have no reason to doubt, in full possession of his senses, that is, he had his senses in full. I will now read the will, and of course you will please listen attentively to the will read by me."

It was not a very long document, as, after leaving small legacies to Patience, Jellicks and Munks, the Squire had bestowed upon Una an income of a thousand a year, and all the rest of his property was left to Dr. Larcher and Simon Bolby in trust for the natural son of the deceased, who would prove his claim in due time by producing a letter written by his father, and also the seal ring of the family.

There was a considerable sensation at the conclusion of Mr. Bolby's reading, as no one thought the Squire had any offspring, and, in spite of her presentiment that she would never get the property, Una could not help feeling disappointed, as it seemed to be a bar to her marriage with Reginald. However, she had a thousand a year, and they could live on that, so after a moment's reflection, she

did not grudge this unknown son his good fortune. Miss Cassy, however, was not so easily satisfied, and loudly expressed her anger at the Squire's duplicity, which sounded rather comical considering how she had been previously praising up his virtues.

"So dreadful!" she said indignantly, "a son we never heard of--how very odd!--who is his mother?--where was he born?--what is his name?--is most peculiar."

"It is very peculiar," assented Mr. Bolby drily, "particularly when I tell you I don't know any of the three things you have stated--that is, the three things stated by you."

"Do you tell me, sir," asked the vicar in his ponderous manner, "that you don't know the name of this son?"

"No."

"Nor the name of his mother?"

"No."

"Nor his birthplace?"

"I give you my word of honour," said Mr. Bolby solemnly, "that I am absolutely ignorant of all these--of all these, my dear sir, I am ignorant absolutely."

All present looked at one another in blank astonishment, and it was some time before anyone could speak. Una was the first to recover, and at once addressed herself to the lawyer.

"If this is the case," she said slowly, "how is this unknown son to claim the estate?"

"Did you not hear the will read, my dear lady?" replied Mr. Bolby equably. "Did you not hear me read the will? The son must produce a letter written to him by his father, and also the seal ring of the family."

"But you surely would not give an unknown man the estate on such slight evidence?"

"What can I or Dr. Larcher do," said the lawyer with a deprecating shrug, "Dr. Larcher and myself; what can we do? If he has the papers and the ring, he is undoubtedly the heir if he produces the ring and the papers."

"It's the will of a lunatic," cried Miss Cassy angrily.

"I assure you he was in his right mind when it was written," chirped Mr. Bolby placidly, "my dear lady, in his right mind I assure you."

"I will contest this will," said Una firmly.

"Better wait, my dear young lady," said the lawyer, "my dear young lady, better wait--till the heir appears."

"But suppose he never appears?" suggested Dr. Larcher.

"Oh, he'll turn up all right," said Bolby calmly, "people don't give up ten thousand a year so easily--no--ten thousand is not so easily given up by people."

"But Mr. Bolby," said Una in despair, "is there no note or certificate among my cousin's papers which can lead to the identification of this unknown person?"

Mr. Bolby produced a letter from his breast coat pocket. "Now we are coming to it," he said with great glee. "I thought such a thing might be possible; so as it was possible such a thing might be, I searched and found this letter--it is sealed with the arms of the family, and was found by me locked up in his private desk, so everything so far is in order--I'm sure you will agree there is order in everything so far; it certainly has a ring inside it, for a ring is inside certainly, as I can feel it. To my mind this envelope contains the letter and ring mentioned in the will."

The curiosity of everyone was now roused to the highest point, and Una asked the next question amid a breathless silence.

"To whom is the letter addressed?"

A profound silence ensued, during which the proverbial pin might have been heard to drop, as the lawyer replied solemnly and slowly,

"The letter is addressed to 'Mr. Reginald Blake, Vicarage, Garsworth.'"

"Addressed to me?" cried Reginald in an astonished voice, springing to his feet. "Impossible!"

"See for yourself," replied Bolby, handing him the letter.

Reginald took it in silence and stood holding it irresolutely for a few moments, during which time he glanced round at the astonished faces present. At last with an effort he tore open the envelope, but overcome with emotion seemed unable to proceed further, and crossing the room, gave the opened envelope to the vicar. Dr. Larcher arose from his seat as he took the letter and looked steadily at the young man.

"Do you wish me to read it?" he asked slowly.

Reginald bowed silently, and sat down in the vicar's chair.

Whereupon Dr. Larcher took the letter out of the envelope, leaving the ring still inside, and having opened it, read the contents in a slow, deliberate manner. Everyone listened in amazement to the extraordinary disclosure, and every eye was fixed on Reginald, who sat in his chair with his face buried in his hands.

"This then," said the vicar folding up the letter, "proves that you Reginald are the son of Randal Garsworth and Fanny Blake, for here is the letter, and here is the ring."

He stepped up to the lawyer and solemnly delivered both to him, then returning to his seat laid his hand kindly on Blake's shoulder.

"You hear what I have read," he observed sonorously. "What do you say?"

"Say?" cried the young man, springing to his feet with a pale, haggard-looking face, "that it's a lie--you know yourself, sir, that I am not the squire's son--Patience knows all about my birth--it is honourable--honourable. I--I am not the son of that man," and the poor young fellow fairly broke down.

On hearing Reginald was the heir to the property a great joy appeared in Una's face, but it gave place to a look of pity and sorrow as she saw how keenly he felt the ignoble circumstances of his birth.

"There is only one thing to be done in order to make sure," she said, rising. "Call

Patience Allerby."

Dick Pemberton went out of the room to fetch her, and during the dead silence which now prevailed Una walked across the room to Reginald and took his hand.

"This makes no difference to me," she whispered fondly. "Do not think that your birth will stand in the way of our marriage, I love you too well for that."

"God bless you," he muttered brokenly, and clasped her hand convulsively.

The housekeeper entered the room looking pale and worn, with a hard, defiant expression on her face, as if she was determined to face the affair out to the bitter end, as indeed she was. On hearing her footstep Reginald arose unsteadily to his feet and looked at her anxiously. On seeing the anguish in his face she seemed to falter for a moment, but soon recovered, and veiled her agony under stolid composure.

"Patience," said Reginald in a broken voice, "I have learned by a letter from Squire Garsworth that I am his son, and that Fanny Blake was my mother--is it true?"

She bowed her head and replied slowly.

"Perfectly true."

Reginald flung up his hands with a cry of anguish and fell back in his chair--it was true--the possession of ten thousand a year could never cleanse away the stain which rested on his birth.

"Why did you deceive the lad?" asked Dr. Larcher sternly.

"By order of his father," she replied doggedly. "If you remember, sir, I went to London with Fanny Blake over twenty-two years ago; she told me the squire had ruined her, and that was why she left the village; six months afterwards her child was born and she died. I brought the baby down to the village to the squire, he refused to recognize his own offspring, but said he would pay for the boy's keep, so to save the good name of the child, I invented the story of the parents dying in France, and placed it in your care, and he has grown up all these years under the name of Reginald Blake."

"And Reginald Blake is the squire's son?"

"Yes. I hope he has done the boy justice at last."

"He has. By his will Reginald Blake is acknowledged as master of Garsworth Grange."

Patience gave a cry of delight, and with a face beaming with tenderness approached the young man. He arose slowly from his chair as she came near him fixing his wild eyes in horror on her face. She saw the look and half recoiled, but offered her congratulations timidly.

"You are now rich--" she began, when he interrupted her furiously.

"Rich!--rich! Who cares for riches? I am dishonoured for the rest of my life. I have no right to the name I bear. You have deceived and tricked me with your lies, leading me to believe that my birth at least was without dishonour, and now--now, I find my life has been one long lie. Do you think money will ever repay me for the stain on my birth. I declare to God that I would willingly become the pauper I was if I could only regain my self-respect with my poverty. Look at me all of you. I am rich! young, and a bastard."

With a cry of passionate anger he rushed from the room, and with an answering cry of anguish Patience Allerby fell fainting on the floor.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH.

We call Death cruel, but death ends all strife,
Dishonour turns to gall the sweetest life.

To say that those who had assembled in the drawing-room of the Grange to hear the will read were astonished at the extraordinary disclosures they had heard, would give but a faint idea of the amazement they felt. That the squire should have left his large fortune to a son of whom no one had ever heard was most remarkable, but that the son in question should turn out to be Reginald Blake was almost beyond belief.

Still, after examining all the evidences of the fact, Mr. Bolby came to the conclusion that there could be no doubt as to the identity of the young man.

According to the story told by Patience Allerby, who was well known to be the nurse of the boy, he had been born at Chelsea, London, six months after Fanny Blake's arrival there, and had been called by his mother's name. On bringing him down to the village, Randal Garsworth, no doubt dreading the scandal, refused to recognise his son, but agreed to pay for his keep. Patience, therefore, had done the best she could under the circumstances, and had placed the boy with Dr. Larcher, telling him that his parents were dead, thus giving him at least the fiction of an honourable birth. It had been a lie, no doubt, still it was a lie the nobility of which there was no denying, and one which would hardly be set down by the Recording Angel.

As to the strange discovery that had been made, everyone saw at once that the squire had tried to make tardy reparation for his sin by leaving his property to his unfortunate son; and the evidence of the will itself, the evidence of the letter found in the squire's desk, and the evidence of the seal ring, all showed plainly that the young man was really and truly the mysterious son alluded to in the will. Besides, according to Dr. Larcher, the squire had mentioned Reginald's name on his death-bed, and pointed towards the desk, intimating, no doubt, that the document which would give the young man his just right was hidden there, as indeed it was. Altogether, on reviewing the whole case through, Mr. Bolby declared it to be the most extraordinary one that had ever come under his notice. There could be no doubt but that justice had been done, and Reginald was formally recognised by everyone as the master of Garsworth Grange.

Of course, the absence of registration and baptismal certificates would doubtless have proved a stumbling-block in a court of law, but, as Beaumont had foreseen, there was no hesitation upon Una's part to surrender the property to one whom she believed to be the rightful heir, and moreover, when Mr. Bolby discovered that the two claimants were engaged to be married, he declared that it was a very

neat solution of the difficulty, although, as a matter of fact, owing to the clearness of the case on the one side and the refusal to test its truth by legal process on the other, no such difficulty had ever arisen.

Beaumont was now extremely satisfied with the way in which his conspiracy had succeeded, as he had placed his son in possession of a fine estate, worth ten thousand a year. Now his next object was to gain control of this large income through the young man himself. Thanks to his ingratiating manner, he completely succeeded in fascinating Reginald, who admired him greatly, and Beaumont only wanted to have the young man in his company for a few months to become indispensable to him. He proposed to become Reginald's right-hand man, at a fixed salary, and with authority to look after the estate, out of which he foresaw he could make some nice pickings. To do this, however, he would have to get Reginald away from the village, as Patience jealously watched her son, and if she thought for one moment that Beaumont was trying to take advantage of his lack of worldly experience, was quite capable of exposing the whole swindle.

Fate, however, once more played into his hands, for Mr. Bolby, having recognised Reginald as the heir, insisted upon his coming up to London to see his partner, and be put in formal possession of the estate. Beaumont therefore determined also to go to London first, so as not to arouse the suspicious nature of Patience Allerby, and then call on Reginald when he arrived later on. Once he had an interview with him in London he was quite satisfied that he could do what he liked with the plastic nature of the young man.

On his part Blake, or, as he was now called, Garsworth, was anxious to leave the village for a time till the nine days' wonder was over, for in spite of the consolatory feeling of having ten thousand a year, he felt his position bitterly. Having been brought up in an English gentleman's household, he had imbibed rigorous principles all his life, therefore it seemed to him a terrible disgrace to have such a stigma on his name. He was a nobody--a nameless outcast, unrecognized by the law of England--and much as he wanted to marry Una, he shrank from giving her a name to which he had no legal claim. He dreaded lest there should be children of such a marriage, in which case they would have to bear the stigma attached to their father's birth, and he spoke seriously to Dr. Larcher about releasing Una from her engagement and restoring to her the property to which he felt she was justly entitled. Thus were the fruits of Beaumont's crime placed in jeopardy by the honour and upright feeling of the

young man whom such crime had benefited, but luckily for Mr. Beaumont, Una came to the rescue.

She plainly told Reginald that she did not care for the circumstances of his birth, which he could not help in any way, and as to her being rightfully entitled to the property, if she married him the property would be just as much hers as if it had been duly left to her by the squire. So after a great deal of persuasion from Una and Dr. Larcher, Reginald came to accept his somewhat improved position with equanimity.

"I cannot stay here, however," he said bitterly. "Everyone stares at me as if I were a wild beast. I will go up to town with Mr. Bolby, and return in a few months, when I get more used to the position."

Una fully approved of this, and agreed to stay on at the Grange with Miss Cassy until he returned, then they would be married, and go abroad for a year, during which time the old house would be redecorated, and they would then return to live in it, when all the circumstances of his succession to the property had to some extent been forgotten.

Beaumont, having heard this decision, determined to go up to Town in advance and there await Reginald's arrival. So, after taking an effusive farewell of everyone, he departed, carrying with him the good wishes of all with whom he had come in contact. Only Patience did not wish him God speed, but surveyed him grimly when he came to say good-bye to her.

"I'm glad to see you go," she said coldly. "Our son is now provided for, and you have at least done something towards repairing your villainy. I hope I'll never set eyes upon you again, but if ever I hear of you meddling with Reginald in any way it will be the worse for you."

"Say the worse for both of us," retorted Beaumont airily. "We're in the same box over this affair, and punishment to me means the same for you."

So he took his departure, leaving an excellent impression behind him, and everyone hoped he would come back again some day, which he laughingly promised to do if his engagements would permit him.

"I'll see you in London, Reginald," he said to the young man, "and anything I can do for you there, of course, you may command me."

Reginald thanked him for his kindness, little thinking how treacherous that kindness was, and then addressed himself to the work of preparing for his own departure.

He had a long interview with Patience, in which she informed him that the story told by her to Dr. Larcher had been told with the best intentions to spare him the truth, and on consideration he saw for himself that she had acted for the best, so he forgave her for the falsehood. Patience stayed on at the Grange, living her old life, and felt quite satisfied now that the future of the human being she loved best on earth was secured.

Reginald asked Dr. Larcher to let him take Dick to Town, which request the worthy vicar granted, only admonishing Mr. Bolby to look carefully after the pair.

"I love them as my own sons," said the good man gravely, "and I dread lest they should be led into evil ways in the great city--they are young and untried--let them not drink, for what says Horace? '*Non ego sanius, Bacchabor Edonis.*'"

"They won't get any bad example from me," said Mr. Bolby, "from me there's no bad example to be got. I'll take them to the theatres and several amusements, but that's all."

So the vicar, full of anxiety for his dear boys, allowed them to go, and the last to bid Reginald farewell was Una.

"Don't forget me among all the beauties of London," she whispered archly; "or I'll come to Town to look for you."

"Don't be afraid," he replied with an affectation of lightness he was far from feeling. "I will come back to you heart-whole, and then if you'll have me we'll be married."

So the poor lad departed, having learned already thus early in life that wealth alone does not bring happiness.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FROM DR. NESTLEY'S POINT OF VIEW.

So low--so low--yes I am low indeed
But he thy lover tho' of high estate
Will fall to this--I tell thee dainty dame
The devil even now is at his ear
Breathing temptations in most subtle guise
Which soon will lose him all he holds most dear.

The autumn was now nearly over, and it was that bleak, chill season just before winter when the trees, denuded of foliage, seemed to wait for the snow to cover the bare branches which shivered complainingly in the chill wind. Under foot the ground was dark and sodden, overhead the sky dull and lowering, while piercingly cold blasts blew across the lonely marshes and whistled shrilly over the waste moorland.

Dreary and desolate as it had looked in summer time, Garsworth Grange appeared even more dreary and desolate under the sombre-coloured sky. The damp had discoloured the white marble of the statues, which seemed lost amid the surrounding desert of bare trees and dead leaves. It was everlastingly raining, and Una, looking out of the antique windows at the gloomy landscape seen through the driving mists of rain, felt dull and depressed. All day long the winds whistled through the dismal rooms, and the rain ceaselessly dripped from the eaves, so it was hardly to be wondered that both Una and Miss Cassy felt anything but cheerful.

It was now about two months since Reginald had gone up to town, and Una had received frequent letters from him about the way in which everything was being arranged by the lawyers. Of late these letters had become feverish in tone, as if the writer were trying to invest his correspondence with a kind of fictitious gaiety he was far from feeling, and this sudden change of style gave her serious uneasiness. She knew how sensitive Reginald was, and how deeply he had felt the discovery of his real birth, so dreaded lest to banish the spectres which haunted him he should plunge into dissipation. In one of his letters also he had mentioned that he had met Beaumont in town, and as Una learned from the vicar

that Dick Pemberton had gone to Folkestone to see his uncle, she felt doubtful as to the wisdom of an inexperienced youth like Reginald being left alone in London with a reckless, man of the world like Beaumont.

She had mistrusted Beaumont when she first met him, but by his fascinating manner he had succeeded in overcoming her repugnance, but now that he was away the influence of his strong personality died out, and she began to dread his power over her lover's honourable, guileless nature.

"I wish Reginald would come back at once," she said to Miss Cassy, "and then we could be married, and he would have some one to look after him."

"I'm sure I'll be glad when you are married," whimpered Miss Cassy, whose spirits the lonely life she was leading sadly depressed. "I'll go melancholy mad if I stay here--I know I shall. I'm sure that isn't odd, is it? I feel like what's-her-name in the Moated Grange, you know--the weary, weary dead thing I mean, and the gloomy flats--not half so nice as the flat we had in town. If we could only go to it again--I feel so shivery."

And so Miss Cassy rambled on in a disconnected fashion, one thought suggesting another, while Una sat staring out of the window, with Reginald's last letter in her hand, wondering what was best to be done.

"I don't trust Mr. Beaumont," she said at length. "He is not a good companion for Reginald."

"Oh, my dear," said Miss Cassy, picking up the tea-cosy, which she kept by her to put on her head when she felt cold, "such a charming man--quite a Lord what's-his-name in his manners."

"His manners are all right, I've no doubt," returned Una drily, "but what about his morals?"

Miss Cassy gave a little girlish scream and extinguished herself with the tea-cosy.

"What dreadful things you do say, Una," she observed in a shocked tone. "So very odd--quite like Zola, so very French."

"My dear aunty, I know you are one of those people who think that unmarried

girls should be absolutely ignorant of such things. I don't agree with you. There's no need of them to parade their knowledge of evil, but they cannot help hearing about it, however carefully brought up. I know London is not a good place for a young man with plenty of money, especially when he is so inexperienced as Reginald--besides, Mr. Beaumont is a man of the world, whom I really believe lives by his wits--and if it be a case of his wits against Reginald's, my dear aunt, I'm afraid poor Reginald will come off worst."

"What's to be done then?" said Miss Cassy blankly. "Do you think if I sent dear Reginald some tracts----"

"I don't think that would be much use," interrupted Una laughing. "No, I'll go over to Garsworth to see the vicar--he will know what is best to be done. I will show him Reginald's letter, and I'm sure he will agree with me that it will be wise to withdraw him from Mr. Beaumont's influence."

"Why doesn't Mr. Bolby look after him?" said Miss Cassy indignantly.

"I daresay Mr. Bolby has got his own business to look after," replied Una with a faint sigh; "besides, he only regards Reginald from a monetary point of view, nothing more--will you come to the vicarage with me, aunt?"

"Oh yes, dear," cried Miss Cassy with great alacrity, "the walk will do me good, and I'm so dull--I'll talk to dear Mrs. Larcher, you know, she's so odd, but still she's better than one's own company, isn't she, dear?--let us get ready at once--the rain has gone off I see."

"Then let us follow the example of the rain," said Una with a laugh, and the two ladies went away to prepare themselves for their walk.

When they sallied forth with heavy cloaks and thick boots, they found that for once the sun had shown his face and was looking through the watery clouds in a somewhat feeble fashion. The ground under foot was wet and spongy, still it was better than being immured in the dreary Grange, and as they walked rapidly along their spirits rose in spite of the depressing influence of the weather.

When they arrived at the bridge after a sharp walk they saw a man leaning over the parapet looking at the cold grey water swirling below.

"Dear me, Una, how very odd," exclaimed Miss Cassy, "there is Dr. Nestley."

"Dr. Nestley," echoed Una rather startled. "I thought he had gone away last week?"

"He was going, but for some reason did not," answered Miss Cassy, who by some mysterious means heard all the gossip of the village. "I hear he is still staying at Kossiter's--drinking, my dear--oh dreadful--so very odd."

By this time they were directly in the centre of the bridge, and hearing footsteps Nestley turned round, showing a wan haggard face with dull bleared eyes filled with mute misery. So ill and desolate did the young man look that Una's heart smote her as she thought the change was brought about through her refusal to marry him, and though she despised him for his weakness of character in thus being influenced, yet she still felt pity for the helplessness of the poor fellow. Nestley flushed as he recognized the two ladies, then raised his hat and without saying a word turned once more to look at the river. Una felt uneasy as he did so, for a sudden doubt arose in her heart as to whether he did not intend to put an end to his life, so taking a sudden resolution she whispered to Miss Cassy to walk on by herself to the vicarage.

"I will join you soon," she said in a low voice, "but first I want to speak to Dr. Nestley."

"But it's so odd," objected Miss Cassy, "really so very--very odd."

Nevertheless she made no further objection and trotted away through the village street, leaving Una alone on the bridge with Dr. Nestley. Though the unhappy young man knew that she was still behind him he did not turn round but kept staring dully at the foam-streaked waters of the Gar.

"Dr. Nestley," she said, softly touching him on the shoulder, "I want to speak to you."

He turned sullenly round, though the touch of her gloved hand sent a thrill through his frame, and Una recoiled with an exclamation of pity as she saw what a wreck he was. His face, formerly so fresh-coloured, was now grey and thin, his eyes bleared with dark circles under them, while his nervous lips and shaking hands showed how deeply he had been drinking. Even in his clothes she saw a change, for they were carelessly put on, his linen was dirty and his tie arranged in a slovenly manner--altogether he looked like a man who had entirely lost his self-respect and cared neither for his health nor appearance.

Nestley saw the expression on her face and laughed, a hollow mirthless laugh, which seemed quite in keeping with his wretched appearance.

"You are looking at your work, Miss Challoner," he said bitterly, "well, I hope you are satisfied."

Una's pride was up in arms at once.

"You have no right to speak to me in such a manner, sir," she said haughtily, looking at him with a proud cold face. "Do not ascribe your own folly to any fault of mine--that is both weak and unmanly."

The wretched creature before her drooped his head before the severe gaze of her eyes.

"You would not marry me," he said weakly, "you would not save me from myself."

"Am I to go through the world saving men from their own passions?" she returned scornfully. "Shame upon you, Dr. Nestley, to take refuge behind such a weak defence. Surely because a woman refuses to marry a man he ought not to lower himself as you have done, and then lay the blame on her instead of himself--you ought to make an end of this folly."

"Just what I was thinking," he muttered, glancing at the river. She instinctively guessed what the glance meant, and looked at him, saying:

"Would you add suicide to the rest of your follies?--that is a coward's refuge and one not worthy of a clever man like you. Come, Doctor Nestley," she continued, laying a kind hand on his shoulder, "be advised by me. Give up this mad love of drink which is lowering you to the level of the brutes, and go back to your home--then amid your old companions you will soon forget that I ever existed."

"Never! Never!" he said in a broken voice.

"Oh yes you will," she replied cheerfully. "Time is a wonderful consoler--besides, Doctor Nestley, I could never have married you, for though you did not know then you know now--I am going to marry Mr. Blake."

"And what difference will that make to you?" he asked mockingly, lifting his

dull eyes to her earnest face.

"I do not understand you," she said coldly, drawing back.

"Then I can easily explain," replied the young man quickly, "the only difference will be this--you love him, you do not love me--for the rest both Reginald Blake--or shall I call him Garsworth?--and myself will be equal in all else."

"You are talking wildly," said Una in an icy tone, "so I shall leave you--permit me to pass if you please?"

"Not till I have had my say," he retorted, his eyes growing bright. "I can wring your proud heart now as you wrung mine then. I saw your look of horror when you looked at me and saw how low I had fallen through drink--in the same way you will look upon your lover when he returns from the guardianship of Basil Beaumont."

Una gave a cry of alarm and reeled against the stone parapet of the bridge for support, while a cold hand seemed to clutch at her heart.

"You have heard of those devils of old who tempted mankind," went on Nestley rapidly. "Yes, you have heard such stories and thought them pious fictions of Catholicism--but it is true, quite true. There are devils of like sort in our midst even now, and Basil Beaumont is one. I knew him in London five years ago when I was a young man just starting in life. I had no vices, I had great talents, I was devoted to my profession and all seemed to promise a fair life. But Beaumont came, devil that he is, in the guise of an angel of light, and ruined me. He beguiled me with his wheedling tongue and specious manners into believing in him. Having gained my confidence he led me to gamble and drink until I sank so low that even he forsook me--yes, forsook the man he had ruined. It was when his fatal influence was withdrawn that I began to recover. I took the pledge, left London and its fascinations and plunged into hard work. For five years I never touched alcohol and things seemed going well with me once more--but I came down here and met him again. I resisted his persuasions for a long time, but on the night you rejected me I was worn out with watching by the bedside of the Squire, and sick with disappointment; he persuaded me to take a glass of wine--it was followed by another--and then--I need not go on, but next morning I found I had lost my self-respect. I gave way to despair, there seemed no hope for me, and now see what I am, and all through Basil Beaumont--I have

lost my good name--my money--my position--everything--everything in the world."

Sick with horror Una tried to speak, but could only look at him with white lips and a terrified face. Seeing her alarm he resumed his discourse but in a somewhat milder fashion.

"Your lover has gone to London, and Beaumont is with him. He is the possessor of money. Beaumont will want to handle that money; to do so he will reduce Reginald Blake to a mere cypher. Do you know how he will do it? I will tell you. By fast living--he will reduce your lover to the abject condition I was in, and through him squander the Garsworth money. It does not matter how high Reginald Blake's principles may be, how pure he desires to live, how temperate he may have been, he is in the power of Basil Beaumont, and, little by little, will be dragged down to the lowest depths of degradation and despair."

"No, no!" she cried, wildly, "it cannot be!"

"It will be, I tell you--I know Beaumont, you do not--if you would save your lover, get him out of the clutches of that devil, or he will become an object of horror to you as I am."

He turned away with a look of despair, and crossing the bridge on to the common, slouched along the muddy road without casting a glance back, while Una, with pale face and tightly-clenched hands, gazed after him with mute agony in her eyes.

"Oh, great Heaven!" she moaned, lifting up her wan face to the grey sky, "if this should be true--it must be true--I can see he is speaking the truth! Reginald to sink to that--no, no! I'll go and see the vicar. I will tell him all--all! We must save him before it is too late!"

With feverish impatience she began to walk down the street on her way to the vicarage, intent only on finding some means of saving the man she loved.

And the man who had no woman to save him slouched wearily along the road--a lonely, desolate figure, with only the grey sky above and the grey earth below, with no hope, no peace, no love awaiting him, but only the blank, black shadow of approaching sorrow brooding over his life with sombre wings.

CHAPTER XXX.

A MOTHER'S AFFECTION.

Niobe. From cruel Ph[oe]bus all my children fly.

Chorus. Fly then, oh Queen, else will they bring thee harm.

Niobe. What evil counsel is upon thy tongue?

Chorus. The counsel that would save thee from thyself.

Niobe. A mother's love should thus protect her child.

Chorus. From such protection cometh death to thee.

Niobe. Death will be welcome if it cometh thus

For naught thou knowest of true motherhood

Thinking that fear of death will drive me hence

To leave mine offspring to Ph[oe]bean darts.

The next day was Sunday, and during the night there was a heavy fall of snow, so the Garsworth folk were not a little astonished, upon rising in the morning, to find the ground white, and the sky of a dull, leaden colour. Una had seen the vicar, and, in consequence of the interview she had with him, had written a letter to Reginald, which she was enclosing in an envelope when Patience Allerby entered in order to clear away the breakfast-things. She saw that Una had been writing to Reginald, and a gleam of interest crossed her stolid face as she looked eagerly at her mistress. Una guessed her thoughts, and, knowing the woman's deep interest in Reginald, arising, as she thought, from the fact of Patience being his nurse, spoke to her on the subject.

"I am writing to Mr. Blake," she said, closing the envelope, "as I am anxious for him to return to Garsworth."

"He is all right, is he not, Miss Una?" asked Patience, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I think so," replied Una, doubtfully, "but I have been talking with the vicar, and he agrees with me that it is dangerous for Reginald to be in London."

"Danger--from whom?"

"Mr. Beaumont."

"Mr. Beaumont!" echoed Patience, in a harsh voice. "What has he been doing to my boy?"

Una looked at her in astonishment, for the whole face of the woman seemed transformed, and instead of wearing its usual calm expression it was convulsed with stormy passions. For once the mask had fallen off, and Una recognized the

terrible force of character hidden under this woman's placid exterior. The housekeeper also felt that she had betrayed herself and strove to recover her lost ground by an explanation.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Una, if I speak angrily," she said feverishly, "but remember I was Mr. Blake's nurse, and he is the only being I care about in this world--if harm happened to him I would never forgive myself."

"I hope there is no chance of harm happening to him," replied Una gently, "but he is in London with Mr. Beaumont, and from what Dr. Nestley told me about that gentleman I don't think he is a good companion for Reginald."

"Dr. Nestley," said Patience thoughtfully, "I was not aware Dr. Nestley had met Mr. Beaumont before."

"Yes, I believe he met him in London," replied Una, and proceeded to direct the envelope, while Patience thinking over what she had heard left the room.

When she had finished all her work for the day she retired to her room in order to think over the conversation. Judging from what Miss Challoner had told her Beaumont was trying to ruin Reginald, and she guessed his motive for doing so. Patience was well enough acquainted with the artist to know that he did nothing without an object, and as he had placed Blake in receipt of ten thousand a year, she foresaw that his next step would be to handle it. As he could only do this through Reginald he was trying to get the boy completely into his power in order to do what he pleased. As to Dr. Nestley's remarks, he evidently knew something about Beaumont's former life, and Patience after some thought came to the decision that she would call upon Dr. Nestley that afternoon and find out all he knew about him.

Having taken this resolution she put on her things and went out, after telling Jellicks she would come back again in about two or three hours.

Outside the snow had ceased to fall, and all the cold tints and wretched appearance of the landscape were hidden under a pure white covering. The bare branches of the trees were all laden with powdery snow, which was shaken down in white flakes at every breath of wind. The long lines of thorny hedges ran along the white surface in black lines, and here and there tall, gaunt trees stood up in startling contrast of colour. Patience, however, saw none of the beauties of winter, but trudged slowly along the half-obliterated road and thought of the

perils to which Reginald was being exposed by his own father.

Then she crossed the bridge, and, glancing over the side, saw the leaden-coloured water sweeping drearily between the white banks, the sloping roof of the church covered with whiteness like an altar covered by the sacramental cloth; the heavy grey stones of the tower, and beyond the tall red chimneys of the vicarage, making a cheerful spot of bright colour against the bluish sky.

She knew that Nestley was stopping at "The House of Good Living," so went straight there and asked for him, whereupon she was shown into the parlour, before the fire of which was seated the unhappy young man, looking more worn out and haggard than ever. He started to his feet when he saw Patience and stared anxiously at her, speaking the thought that was uppermost in his mind:

"Is Miss Una ill?" he asked, thinking she had come for his professional services.

"No, sir," replied Patience sitting down and throwing back her veil, "Miss Una is quite well--I have come to see you on my own business."

"Are you ill?" he asked wearily, resuming his seat and leaning his head upon his hand, "what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all," she answered coldly. "My health is all right, but I wish to speak to you about Mr. Beaumont."

Dr. Nestley looked at her in surprise, with a bitter smile on his lips.

"What, you too?" he said derisively, "are you another of his victims?"

"No--I am not his victim--but, as you know, I am the nurse of Mr. Blake, who lately succeeded to the property, and as he is now in London with Mr. Beaumont I want to hear from your own lips what danger you think there is in such companionship."

"What can I say?"

"Everything; you told Miss Una your story yesterday and she said something about it to me----"

"Betrayed my confidence?"

"Nothing of the sort, sir, she merely said you did not consider Mr. Beaumont a good companion for a young man, nothing more--is it true?"

"Perfectly true. I know what Beaumont is from my own experience of him--he will drag Reginald Blake down to the lowest depths of degradation."

The woman tightened her thin lips ominously.

"I don't think so if I can help it," she said grimly.

"Then if you can help it--if you have any power over him--take Blake away from his influence or he will ruin him."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure," he repeated bitterly, "I know it only too well to my own cost, God help me! Basil Beaumont is a devil, and never rests till he makes his friends as base as himself. Blake has got money, Beaumont wants that money, and will let nothing stand in his way to procure it."

"He had better not set himself up against me."

"What do you know about him?"

"More than he cares the world to know."

"Then use that knowledge to keep him away from Garsworth."

"I don't care if he comes to Garsworth as long as he leaves my--my boy alone."

"Your boy?"

"Reginald Blake--I was his nurse--I will get him to return here, and if he marries Miss Una I don't think Mr. Beaumont will be able to do much."

"He'll do this much," cried Nestley quickly, "he'll try and prevent the marriage."

"Why?" she asked curtly. "For what reason?"

"The best of all reasons--he loves Una Challoner himself."

Patience arose to her feet with a cry, her face turned to a ghastly pallor.

"You--you--are mad," she gasped, placing her hand on her heart, "it cannot be true."

"It is true, I tell you," said Nestley in a harsh whisper, coming close to her. "Una Challoner would not listen to me because she loves Reginald Blake. Beaumont also loves her and sees Blake is an obstacle in his path, he will remove that obstacle by fair means or foul--but remove it he will--he'll obtain such power over Blake that he will get him to make a will in his favour, then--then--you can guess what will follow."

"Oh! but it's horrible--horrible--this man would never do such a thing."

"I know Basil Beaumont--you don't."

"Don't I!" she cried viciously, turning round. "I know him only too well--I was a good woman once!"

"Ah! I thought you were another victim," said Nestley cynically. "And what do you propose to do?"

"Do!" she said fiercely. "I will write him a letter and warn him once and for all--if he refuses to accept the warning I will show him no mercy--he must give up all thought of Una Challoner--she shall marry Reginald Blake and none other."

"She will never do that while Beaumont lives--I know she loves Blake, but Beaumont loves her, and what are those two innocents against his devilish craftiness?"

"He has got to deal with me as well as with them," she said grandly. "Sooner than Beaumont shall harm a hair of their heads I will end his life and his villainies at the same time."

"You would not kill him?"

"I will do what I say--if he does not accept the warning I send him, his life is in his own hands not mine."

Nestley stood silent with astonishment, while without another word, Patience

swept out of the room, and then only did he recover his power of speech.

"Ugh!" he said with a shiver. "I believe she will--but no--Beaumont is a man nothing can harm--devils are sent upon the earth for some purpose, and he is one."

He crouched down over the fire, the red light of which glared upon his face, bringing out all the lines and hollows now stamped on it and making him look very old and grey. Outside, the night was closing in and he shivered again as the deep voice of the church bell rang through the keen air.

"It's Sunday," he whispered. "Sunday night--I ought to go to church. Church!" he repeated with a dreary laugh, "there's no church for me--between myself and God stands the devil of Drink."

CHAPTER XXXI.

PSALM CVII. 19.

Some chance word

May strike upon an inattentive ear
And rouse the soul from selfish slumberings,
To wrestle with a thousand subtle foes
That would destroy its hope of Paradise.

Outside the snow fell fast and thick from the dull impenetrable sky, but within the church all was warmth and light. Owing to the primitive civilization of the village the holy edifice was only illuminated by a few oil lamps, which just sufficed to fill it with shadows. The great arched roof above was completely in darkness, and hanging low down, almost on a level with the pews, the lamps burned with a dull yellow light in the heavy atmosphere. On the communion

table four tapers shone like amber-coloured stars, touching the white limbs of the Christ hanging on the ebony cross with fitful lights. A lamp enclosed in a red globe swung from the centre of the chancel arch, naming fiercely crimson like a red eye glaring out of the semi-darkness, and on each side of the pulpit two candles threw a doubtful glimmer on the open bible. Amid all this fantasy of shadow and light knelt the simple villagers with bowed heads, following, with murmuring voices, the Lord's Prayer, recited by the vicar. The confused sound buzzed among the multitudinous arches, losing itself in faint echoes amid the great oaken beams, and then the thunder of the organ rolled out a melodious amen which died away in a whisper as, with a rustle, the congregation arose to their feet to make the responses.

During the singing of the psalms, the door at the lower end of the church opened and, heralded by a blast of cold air which made all the lamps flicker, a man stole stealthily to a dark seat and knelt down. This was Duncan Nestley, who, tortured by maddening thoughts and overpowering mental anguish had come to religion for consolation, now kneeling, with hot dry eyes and clasped hands, amid the shadows.

The evening psalm was that magnificent chant wherein David describes Jehovah as coming forth in all his glory, and the choir, really being an excellent one, the rolling verse of the Hebrew poet was well rendered. The thin treble of the boys rang out piercingly shrill through the mystic twilight.

"He rode upon the cherubims and did fly: he came flying upon the wings of the wind."

Then, without pause, the deeper voices of the men thundered out the sublime words:

"He made darkness his secret place his pavilion round about him with dark water and thick clouds to cover him."

No wonder, as the great volume of sound rang through the church, the heart of the unhappy man was filled with fear.

This terrible Deity who came forth in such appalling splendour was his enemy, this awful Jehovah of the Hebrews, in whose hand flashed the sword of vengeance, was his merciless judge, and kneeling there with tightly clenched hands he felt crushed to the earth by the fierce denunciations thundered forth by the choir. But then a change came over the terrible vehemence of the music, and sweet as a silver trumpet rang out the proclamation:

"The Lord liveth, and blessed be my strong helper and praised be the God of my salvation."

There was mercy then--this unknown Splendour whose terrors had been shadowed forth with such grandeur had pity as well as vengeance; a dull feeling of exhaustion stole over him as the psalm ended with the promise of mercy, and his dry lips moved mutely as though to join in the final "Glory be to the Father."

He did not rise from his knees, but still in a posture of abject supplication heard, as in a dream, the reading of the lessons and the sweet kindly music of the hymns. It was only when the vicar, tall and stately in his white surplice, mounted the pulpit and gave out the text, that he stirred. With a weary sigh he arose and sat down in the pew, utterly exhausted by the conflicting emotions roused within him by the music, but the words of the text given out by the resonant voice of Dr. Larcher seemed to convey some comfort to his despairing soul.

"Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble and he saveth them out of their distresses."

He listened to the sermon idly at first, but soon found, to his surprise, that he was following the words of the preacher with close attention. Dr. Larcher was no golden-mouthed Chrysostom by any manner of means, but he preached a plain,

homely sermon, eminently adapted to the simple congregation of which he was pastor. Never for a moment did he lose himself amid abstruse theological arguments which they would not have understood, but told them practical truths in vigorous Saxon, the meaning of which no one could fail to grasp.

"For, my brethren, when a man is at the lowest depths of despair it is then that he first calls upon the name of the Lord. In time of peace and plenty, when our friends are around us and our coffers are full, we are alas too apt to forget that all these benefits come from the Almighty, and thus at times neglect to thank him for His many mercies. But when the clouds of adversity gather around us, when the loved ones sink into the grave, when our worldly wealth disappears like snow, when our name becomes a by word of scorn and reproach, it is then that we turn to God for that help which is denied to us by man. And does he ever refuse to aid us?--No!--In the words of the Psalmist, 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain thee'--to the heart that is truly contrite He gives peace and help in time of need; none so low but what He will not hear and grant their prayers if made from the heart. It is not to the terrible Jehovah of the Jewish nation, with pomp and pride of sacrifices and blowing of silver trumpets, that we of later generation appeal. No, since the coming of our dear Lord, who forms the link between most high heaven and lowly earth we offer up humble prayers to Him in solitude and He, the mild and merciful Father of us all dries the tears from our eyes and takes the sorrows from our hearts. If a man is weak and would commit sin let him call upon the Lord and he will be strengthened--if the temptations to which he has been exposed have been too heavy for his bearing and he has succumbed, let him implore mercy of the Almighty and he shall surely find it. Alas! how often do we find unforgiveness in men Forgetting the words of Christ, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,' they turn their faces away and leave us abased in the dust, but Christ lifts us from that position of humiliation with comforting words, 'Arise poor sinner and thy sins be forgiven thee, for to this end did I come into the world.' If there is any one of you present who has sinned let him repent this night and he will find the peace of God which passeth all understanding. If he is weak, God will give him strength to conquer; if he is in despair, God will give him hope of pardon. Pray--pray unceasingly, for it is by prayer alone that our weak voices can reach the ear of the eternal Father."

Nestley waited to hear no more, but with a stifled cry of anguish fled from the church into the cold, white world outside. Stumbling over the tombstones, through the blinding snow--now falling in thick flakes--he soon found himself in the open street, and urged by some mad impulse, he knew not what, he sped wildly onward through the market-place, over the bridge and on to the trackless common. With clenched teeth and wild, staring eyes he made head against the storm that was sweeping along. His feet made no sound on the yielding snow and he glided along like an unquiet ghost, the burning words of the sermon ringing in his ears.

He was in the lowest depths of despair and all men had turned their faces from him; he would call upon the Lord to help him--but would God attend?--surely He would--What were the words of the text?

"Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble and he saveth them out of their distresses."

He also would cry and the Lord would save him from the terrible agony he was enduring. He would kneel down there and then in the snow and call upon this unseen God, pavilioned in the terrible splendour of encircling clouds, to aid him.

"God! Help me!"

No answer save the whistling of the wind and the soft sound of the snow sweeping past, caressing his cold face with delicate touch.

"God! show me how to be saved."

Nothing, nothing, only the black sky above, the white earth below, and himself, between the two, a reckless, despairing man holding up his helpless hands.

"Our Father which art in heaven----"

How sweet those words sounded; he had surely heard them at his mother's knee--then he was an innocent child, but now! Oh God, the evil life he had lived since then!

"God! God!--pity and save!"

It was getting quite warm now and he felt drowsy; if he slept for a while he would then awake and ask God once more to save him; but no, if he fell asleep in the snow he would never awake again, for this treacherous snow would slay him with cold embraces. He would die--die. Ah! he could not die, even though lulled to sleep by the siren voice, and soft caressing of the snow queen; life was sweet, so he would fight to retain it.

A long struggle and he was on his feet; the road! where was the road? he could not see it. Never mind, the snow and wind were at his back, he would walk on till he came to the bridge, then he would be in safety. Oh, the weary, weary miles--half dazed, half mad, he staggered on, reeling like a drunken man. Would the road never come to an end? Oh this incessant whirl of snow-flakes that he was in, it was the dance of death and he was the dancer.

Quicker and quicker fell the flakes on the white common and over to the dark surface of the Gar but no figure was struggling along now; no, it was lying upon the bridge, a disordered heap of black clothing, which the snow was rapidly hiding beneath its soft white mantle.

Over the bridge comes the horse and gig of a sturdy farmer who has to cross the wild white waste beyond to reach home, and the sturdy farmer himself with his

buxom wife beside him drives the wise old horse. Suddenly the old horse shies at the figure lying in the snow--a start on the part of the farmer and his wife--then exclamations and calls for help, black figures come gliding over the snow like shadows, and kindly hands raise Duncan Nestley from his deadly resting-place.

Take him to the inn, place him before a roaring fire, force some hot brandy between his blue lips, and rub his frozen limbs to bring back the circulation of the chill blood.

Dead! no, not dead! he opens his eyes. In them there is no intelligence, only a vacant stare--he babbles a few words and then falls back in a faint.

Delirious, yes, and delirious for many a long day, poor soul.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LONDON.

London is the candle which, ever attracting country moths by its feverish glare destroys them remorselessly in its cruel flame.

Reginald Blake was not enjoying himself very much in Town owing to his disturbed state of mind. For years he had pictured to himself the marvellous city and his life therein; how he would one day find himself a denizen of the great metropolis, eager to win fame and fortune by the magic of his voice, how he would delight in leading the ambitious, half Bohemian, wholly delightful existence of a singer, and how he would be able to wander about the streets and see the brilliant life of the mighty city with its restless activity and ardent strivings after wealth, fame and novelty. Grey Westminster Abbey, noble St. Paul's, the enormous pile of the Parliament House, the golden-topped column of

the Monument, he would see all these, with their wealth of historical, religious and artistic associations. He would tread the very streets over whose stones wandered proud poverty-stricken Chatterton, courtly Addison and ponderous Dr. Johnson; he would find the picturesque alleys, houses and roads described in the fascinating pages of Dickens, and he would stray about the sacred purlieus of Drury Lane, haunted by the stately shades of Wilkes, of Siddons, of Bracegirdle, and David Garrick. Good heavens, what innumerable fantastic castles did he not build in Cloud Cuckoo Land about the unseen glories of London, where every street and stone was redolent of the glorious history of England from Plantagenet to Guelph.

Oh, beautiful castles of Cloudland, how rapidly did their gorgeousness disappear from his fancy before the disenchanting touch of chilling reality. He was indeed in London, but alas it was not the magic London of his dreams, this enormous assemblage of houses through which flowed a melancholy grey river and over which hung a dismal dark cloud of smoke and fog. The London of romance and the London of reality were two very different things, yet the disenchantment of this dreaming youth was not wholly due to the prosaic appearance of the city itself but rather to the gloom and depression of his spirits.

The recollection of how his wealth had come to him weighed heavily on his mind, causing him to view all things in a most dismal manner, and tortured his sensitive disposition with irritating thoughts and maddening delusions. In vain he tried hard to shake off this gloomy feeling and enjoy the many-coloured life of the great city; in vain he told himself that the accident of his birth was no fault of his own and in vain he strove to take pleasure in the society of the men and women to whom he had been introduced by Basil Beaumont. It was all useless, for a dark cloud of bitterness and distrust seemed to settle upon the joyousness of his life which led him to view everything with jaundiced eyes. He felt that he had lost the adolescent zest for life as Donatello must have done after he had stained his hands with blood, and although he had youth, talent, good looks, and wealth, yet all these delightful gifts of the fairies were neutralized by the fatal gift of dishonour bestowed upon him by the malignant beldame who had proved herself the evil genius of his life.

As soon as the business connected with the Garsworth estate was properly completed and he had been fully recognized as the heir of the old Squire, Bolby considering that he had done his duty, left the young man and his friend Dick pretty well to their own devices. Dick enjoyed everything with the inexhaustible

appetite of youth, but Reginald took his pleasures, such as they were, in a listless manner, which showed how completely he had lost all capabilities of enjoyment.

Mr. Pemberton had been rather irritated by the prosaic life they led when in the leading strings of Mr. Bolby, whose ideas of amusement were of the most primitive nature, rarely extending beyond an afternoon at the Zoo or a night at Madame Tussaud's or the Egyptian Hall. The only thing Dick saw in Mr. Bolby's ideas of life, which he considered at all meritorious were the excellent dinners which the little lawyer gave them, but Dick in his flying visits to Town had tasted of the Tree of Knowledge beneath whose shade were the music halls and the burlesque theatres, so he was anxious to go to such like places for his amusement.

When they left Mr. Bolby, therefore, and were comfortably established in a quiet hotel in Jermyn Street, Dick, seeing that Reginald was absolutely indifferent as to where he went, or what he did, took the whole arrangement of their London life into his own hands and succeeded in going to a good many places which would have terribly shocked the vicar had he known. Not that such forbidden pleasures did them much harm, for both lads were extremely sensible for their age, still Dick finding himself able, through Reginald's generosity, to spend a good deal of money, took his friend and himself to sundry shady places of which they might just as well have been ignorant. But Nemesis soon came down upon the unhappy Richard, and just as he was developing into a fair specimen of a man about Town his bachelor uncle at Folkestone wrote him a letter asking him to come down on a visit and as Dick was supposed to be his bachelor uncle's heir, he had to leave Town, much to his own disgust and to the regret of Reginald, who missed his lively friend every hour of the day.

He still stayed in Town, however, but as he knew no one, his existence was to say the least extremely dull. Reginald was essentially of a social nature and wanted someone to whom he could talk, therefore he was not sorry when one day Basil Beaumont, who had been waiting for the departure of Dick, called upon him and henceforth constituted himself his bear leader. As they had seen nothing of the artist since their arrival in Town, Dick had never thought of telling Reginald his mistrust of the fascinating Beaumont, so the young man, remembering the artist's kindness about his probable career as a singer, felt very friendly towards him and was quite prepared to accept his offer of companionship as the outcome of a kindly disposition and not the result of a carefully calculated scheme.

A more dangerous companion for a young man in a depressed state of mind than Beaumont could hardly be imagined, for he led Reginald to plunge into riotous pleasures for the sake of distraction, from which he would have otherwise recoiled. Having an eminently refined mind, and a delight in cultured company, had he been thoroughly healthy he would never have been drawn by this modern Mephistopheles into the vortex of frenzied pleasure in which his days and nights were now engulfed. But, being in a morbid state of mind, he brooded eternally over the presumed stigma attached to his name until it became a perfect nightmare to him. He thought that everyone knew his miserable story and despised him for the anomalous position he now occupied, so, in a mad spirit of bravado, he became quite reckless, and determined to defy the world which his sensitive spirit imagined to be sneering at him as a bastard. Terrible to relate, in spite of the relationship existing between them, Beaumont, who should have prevented the young man from falling into such an unhealthy state of mind, rather encouraged his gloomy fits than otherwise, as he thought it would give him a greater hold than ever over his son, so deliberately led the unhappy young man on to ruin--ruin, not of his fortune or position, but of his physical and moral nature.

In his best days, the circle of Beaumont's acquaintances had not been a very large or reputable one, but now it was smaller and worse than ever; nevertheless, he introduced the young master of Garsworth Grange to his friends, whose manners, generally speaking, were as polished as their morals were bad. Broken down professional men, played-out lords, ruined gentlemen of fortune, shady hangers-on of society; these were the daily associates of Reginald Blake, until his mind, eminently calculated to receive impressions, began to grow corrupted. The society of hawks is rather a dangerous thing for doves, and this poor unsophisticated dove was of far too guileless a nature to mistrust the birds of prey by which he found himself surrounded, though, to be sure, his natural instincts of right and wrong saved him from many a pitfall.

Not that the hawks around him did any harm to his pecuniary position, for Beaumont was too selfish to allow anyone to have the plucking of this well-feathered pigeon save himself, and there being an unwritten code of honour even among hawks, the young man was left entirely to the tender mercies of his evil-minded Mentor. Nevertheless, the long nights of play, the wiles of women whose beauty did not redeem their frailty, and the constant life of excitement passed under the feverish glare of the gaslight, soon destroyed the fresh healthy feeling of youth Reginald Blake had possessed during the quiet years of his

country life.

When at times his better feelings prevailed, and he would have fled this unhealthy life of bitter-tasting pleasures, Beaumont was always at his elbow with some new device wherewith to beguile him to destruction. Blake was not a weak-minded man by any means, still he was young and impressionable, and the sudden change from the poverty and quiet living of Garsworth, to the opulent, brilliant life of London, threw him off his moral balance.

No doubt he should have bravely resisted the allurements of sin, and the shallow frivolities to which he yielded with the apathy of despair, but, in the Armida-like gardens of London, the keenest eyes are blinded, the acutest senses are bewildered and dazed by the hubbub and brilliance around him, the victim falls only too easily into the snares hidden below the splendid pageant.

One thing, however, Reginald stoutly resisted, and that was the temptation to drink--he played nap and baccarat, losing comparatively large sums thereat, mixed in the society of women who lured him onward to destruction with siren voices, but in spite of Beaumont's insidious enticements he never took more wine than was good for him, and this temperance was in a certain measure a guard against the fatal influence of his otherwise foolish life. However, Beaumont was not impatient, as he knew from experience the effect of time in wearing away good resolutions, and waited calmly until some lucky chance should enable him to put a finishing stroke to the ruin of his unhappy son. It seems almost incredible that such a man as Basil Beaumont, from whom not even his own flesh and blood was safe, could exist; but, unhappily, he is only one of the many men in whom all natural love and affection is entirely destroyed by the vicious, feverish life which they lead.

Behold, therefore, this unhappy country moth lured to destruction by the garish glitter of the lights of London beneath which sat the fatal Circe of pleasure, with rose-crowned hair and wine-filled cup. Around her moved the splendid throng of pleasure seekers, dancing, singing, eating and drinking, taking no heed of the morrow in the evil joy of the present; but, below this glittering maelstrom of vice and rascality, were the rose-hidden pitfalls into which every moment sank some gay reveller, his dying cry of despair drowned in the riotous crowd dancing gaily over his unseen grave.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CIRCE'S CUP.

In her cup the red wine glows,
Fragrant as the blushing rose;
Cure of sorrows, cure of woes,
 From it thou wilt win.
Ah! but Circe's cup deceives,
Evil spell its magic weaves,
To the fool who drinks--it leaves
 The bitterness of sin.

One night Reginald and Beaumont were comfortably seated over their cigarettes and coffee in the smoking-room of the hotel, talking in a desultory kind of way about the news of the day, when Blake suddenly made a remark quite foreign to the conversation.

"I often wonder why you have never married, Beaumont," he said idly.

The artist shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not difficult to answer," he replied lightly. "I have never met any woman I particularly cared about."

"Wouldn't you like to be married?" asked Reginald.

"Humph! that depends. I'm afraid I'm past the age of cultivating the domestic virtues. I am a cosmopolitan--a wanderer--no home would be pleasant to me for any length of time."

"But why don't you settle down?"

"Because the age of miracles is past. I'm one of those men who never know in what land they will lay their bones. No, no! I'm sadly afraid the domestic tea-urn and family circle are not for me."

It was curious to hear this man talk in such a cynical strain to his own son, but then Beaumont had been so long apart from his offspring that he almost regarded him as a stranger, and therefore spoke to him as such.

"I think you would be much happier married," observed Reginald.

"No doubt. You judge me by yourself. When you get married to Miss Challoner and settle down, your life will be a paradise, because long training has rendered you admirably suited to a domestic life. But I--ouf!--I would weary of the best woman in the world."

"What a curious man you are, Beaumont," said Blake, looking at him in a puzzled manner. "This life of yours in Town appears to me so unsatisfying. Everyone is on the move. Never a moment for rest or reflection, a constant striving after pleasure, and when that pleasure is gained, what is it but Dead Sea fruit? Now, on the other hand, I cannot imagine a more delightful life than one in the country. When I marry Una I will live at Garsworth Grange, bring up my children, if I am happy enough to become a father, take an interest in the dear old village, and enjoy my whole existence in a leisurely, pleasant manner, which will give me far more enduring enjoyment than this rapid frivolous Town life."

"Your instincts are quite those of a patriarchal age," said Beaumont, with a scarcely concealed sneer, "but of course I can hardly wonder at that. Many years of a highly artificial civilization have given me a distaste for your beau ideal of life, while the simplicity of your training has unfitted you for the gas and glitter of London. A man brought up on roast beef does not care for truffles, though, to be sure, roast beef is the more healthy of the two."

Reginald laughed at this extraordinary manner of arguing, but did not pursue the subject, and shortly afterwards the pair were whirling along in a hansom to the Totahoop Music Hall.

This establishment, which took its extraordinary name from an eminent comedian who first opened it as a place of entertainment, was one of the largest, handsomest, and most patronised music halls in town. It stood at one side of a large square and had a palatial appearance with its flight of marble steps, its

enormous folding-doors and the view they afforded when open of tropical trees, nude white statues and gorgeous hangings of blue plush, all of which looked brilliant under the powerful radiance of the electric lights.

When the two gentlemen arrived the promenade was quite full of men and women, some talking loudly, others attending to the performance, and many crowding around the marble-topped counters of the various bars from which smiling barmaids dispensed cooling beverages. The house was quite full and comparatively quiet, for the ballet of *The Lorelei* was now being danced, and the stage was filled with multitudes of pretty girls in costumes of pale green glittering with silver scales, who were swaying to and fro to a swinging waltz melody played by the orchestra.

"This is a very good ballet," observed Beaumont, as they took their seats in a private box, "both the scenery and the dances being excellent. Have a drink?"

"No, thank you," replied Blake listlessly, taking off his cloak, "I prefer watching the ballet."

He leaned out of the box and was soon deeply interested in the pantomimic action on the stage, while Beaumont swept the glittering horseshoe with his opera-glass to see if he could espy a friend. Very shortly he saw a man with whom he was well acquainted, and left the box with a muttered apology, while Reginald, absorbed in the ballet, took no notice of his departure.

Veils of pale green gauze were falling like a curtain in front of the stage, which was flooded with an emerald light, and away at the back could be seen the Sea Palace of the Lorelei, above which undulated the blue waves of the ocean. The daring young knight in silver armour was standing like a statue in the centre of the stage and round him the nymphs, linked hand in hand, were wreathing in mysterious evolutions, growing slower and slower till they all paused, grouped in graceful attitudes like living statues. A strange low chord from the orchestra and then there stole forth a weird subtle melody that seemed to possess a snake-like fascination as it arose and fell with shrill sounds of clarinet and violin. A sudden ripple as of silver bells and the fatal Rhine nymph glided on to the stage from a huge shell placed far back in the restless green water. Then there was a dance of fascination in which the knight resisted the allurements of the Lorelei, but the sleeping nymphs also awoke and re-commenced their dreamy dance, while through the swing and beat of the band there stole the strange wild piping

of the *Lorelei motif*. At last the knight yielded, there was a storm of somewhat discordant music and all the evil things of ocean came trooping on to the stage, dashing at length into a mad galop as they surged and rolled round the knight, now captive in the arms of the siren. A thick darkness spread over the scene and when the light broke again, the ocean halls had vanished and a merry crowd of peasants were dancing on a fair lawn to the piping of a shepherd.

Reginald did not like this latter scene so much, as it lacked the mysterious enticement of the former, and felt rather disappointed, but he was quite repaid by the last scene of the ballet, which represented the fatal Lorelei rock amid turbid waters under the pale light of the moon.

On the shore wandered the spell-enchained knight, and Blake thought of Heine's ballad with its foreboding beginning,

"Ich weiss nicht was soil is bedeuten,"

as the mysterious melody of the Lorelei began to once more steal from amid the sombre music of the orchestra. Lonely is the knight, for he loves naught on earth while the water witch has power over him. Shriller and shriller arose the melody and suddenly a white blaze of electric light envelopes the rock, upon which stands the siren, combing her marvellous locks of gold.

With mystic gestures she beckons the knight, he launches a boat and the waves rise white and threatening amid a storm of music from the orchestra, while overhead the thunder rolls and the lightning flashes. The boat reaches the rock, strikes, and in a moment the knight is struggling in the water with hands stretched out imploringly to the Water Witch. Darkness once more, then again the emerald light shines, showing the Halls of the Lorelei, who stands over the dead body of the knight, while around swing the river nymphs with floating hair and waving hands, then the shrill piping of the Lorelei *motif* sounds once more and the curtain falls.

"Well, what do you think of the ballet?" asked Beaumont, who had returned to the box and was watching with keen interest the dreamy look upon the young man's face.

"I think it is charming," replied Reginald, in whose head the mysterious melody of the Lorelei was still ringing, "but what a fool that knight was."

"Ah, do you think so?" rejoined the artist, lightly. "There I do not agree with you. Many a man has had his life wrecked by listening to the music of the Sea Witch. The legend of the Lorelei is simply an allegory of life."

"So is the legend of the Sirens, I suppose," said Blake listlessly.

"Of course the man who is drawn away from Nature by the alluring voice of the world always loses his happiness and genius."

"I don't think much of your world's singing," retorted Blake, a trifle cynically. "It would never allure me."

"It's alluring you now," thought Beaumont, although he did not say so, but merely remarked, "Too much of modern sentimentality about it, perhaps, or you think the world's voice pipes too vulgar a ditty. There I agree with you, but, unfortunately, in this age we vulgarise everything; we drag forth the lovely mysterious dreams of mediævalism from their enchanted twilights into the broad blaze of day and then reject them in disgust because we are disillusionized. Ah, bah' the world of to-day, which reduces everything to plain figures, always puts me in mind of a child spoiling a drum to find out what's inside."

"Unpleasant, but true."

"The truth is always unpleasant my friend, that is why people so seldom tell it," said Beaumont, "but listen to this recitation, it's the best thing of the evening."

The reciter was a celebrated actress who had been induced to appear upon the music-hall platform by way of an experiment, to see if the ordinary audience of such a place would take to the higher form of art as exemplified by the recitation.

Simply dressed, with no scenic effect, but only her wonderful voice and strong dramatic instinct to rely on, the lady recited a touching little piece about a dying woman, and it was truly wonderful the effect it had upon the pleasure-loving audience. In spite of the attractions of comic songs, of pretty girls, of grotesque tumblers, and of daring gymnasts, the whole body of men and women yielded to the spell of the recitation. The poem was full of human nature, and the intensity

of the reciter's voice carried the pathos of the pitiful little story home to everyone. The intense humanity of the tale, declaimed in a most dramatic way by an artist, came like a breath of cool mountain air into the perfumed close atmosphere of a ball-room, and the storm of applause which broke forth at the conclusion of the recitation showed how powerful genius is to move even the most *blasé* of humanity.

"That is a step in the right direction," said Beaumont as he left the music-hall with Reginald, "everyone prophesied failure for such an experiment, but you see the voice of the heart can always reach the heart. There is more culture even among music-hall audiences than we give them credit for."

"I don't think it's a question of culture at all," replied Blake bluntly; "that simple story declaimed in such a way would appeal to the lowest audience in Whitechapel.

"I daresay you are right," answered Beaumont idly, "a touch of nature makes the whole world akin. I think it was Shakespeare who made that remark--wonderfully wise man--I should like to have seen him write a drama on the complex civilization of to-day."

"Our dramatists of to-day do their best."

"No doubt, but they write on such frivolous subjects. If they took up a broad question of the time and placed it before us in the form of a play they might evolve a new style of drama fitted to be handed down to posterity but when they concern themselves only with the drama of little things their ideas are as ephemeral as their plays. No, this is only the age of scientific discovery, not the time of poetic imaginings."

Thus talking, they strolled along the crowded streets, and turned into a supper-room, where they had a comfortable meal. Beaumont tried to induce Reginald to come with him to his club, and have a game of cards, but the young man, haunted by the subtle melody of the Lorelei did not feel inclined for the green table, so bidding the artist good-night, stepped into a hansom, and was driven back to his hotel.

All through his sleep that night, the shrill music rang in his brain, and he dreamed constantly of the woman with the fatal beauty, who, sitting on her rock, lured men to destruction.

Did no warning voice whisper the meaning of his dreams, how London, with siren music, was enticing him onward to her cruel pitfalls hidden by roses? No! Apparently his good genius had forsaken him, and he was now in the jaws of danger, without a single hand being stretched out to save him from the cruel rocks concealed under the whirling foam, above which the Lorelei sang her evil song.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WORD IN SEASON.

I weary of dances, of songs of the south
Of sounds of the viol and lute,
Ah, bitter to find that all things in my mouth
Taste only of bitter sea fruit.

It was now two months since Reginald had come to London, and he was beginning to get very wearied of the exhausting life he was leading. He half determined to leave Town and return home again, but was still undecided, when he received a letter from Una which confirmed his resolution.

Outside the fog was thick and yellow, enveloping the shivering houses in a solid dingy mist, which made everything look ineffably dreary. Along the streets and in the houses gas was burning with an unwilling look, as if it knew it had no right to be lighted during the day. Day!--good heavens, was this semi-twilight the day, with the heavy fog lowering down on the streets, through which the cabs and busses crept along in a cautious and stealthy manner? Was that dull red ball, which appeared to give neither light nor heat, the glorious sun? And the atmosphere; a chilling clammy air, which insinuated itself everywhere, making the flesh creep as though at the touch of a repulsive serpent. Assuredly this siren London, who was so enticing at night, under the glare of countless lamps, was not a pleasant spectacle in the morning, and the smiling rose-wreathed Circe of the evening was changed to a haggard unkempt hag with worn face and dreary eyes.

Reginald was seated at the breakfast table, but the food before him was untouched, as he now felt no appetite, but sat listlessly back in his chair, reading Una's letter, which had just arrived. She was anxious for him to return to Garsworth, and it was this portion of the letter which touched Blake with a certain amount of remorse.

"You can have no idea how I miss you, Reginald, and every day you are absent seems to part us further from one another. The business which took you up to London must surely be completed by this time, so if you love me, as I know you do, come back at once to Garsworth, and we will be married as soon as is compatible with decorum after the death of your father. Then we can travel on the Continent for a time, and I being by your side will no longer feel this terrible

anxiety for your welfare which now constantly haunts me. Although I know your own instincts will always lead you to do what is right and just, both towards yourself and your friends, yet I dread the influence of that dangerous London, against whose temptations even the strongest nature cannot prevail. This is the first request I have ever made to you, dear Reginald, and I feel sure you will grant it. So come back at once to me, and remember I shall count every moment of time until I see you once more by my side."

When he came to this part of the letter, Reginald laid it aside and began to think over the words Una had written.

Yes!--she was quite right--it was better for him in every way to go back to Garsworth, and leave this feverish, unreal existence which he was now leading. He would return once more to the old familiar life, with its gentle simplicity and pleasant delights--the rising in the early grey of the morning, the matutinal run with the dogs across the breezy common--then, later on in the day, he would meet Una, and stroll with her through the quiet village streets, where everyone knew and loved them both, from the ancient grandmother basking in the sunshine to the prattling child tottering after them for notice with unsteady gait. No fog--no dreary rattle of cabs--no hoarse cries of news-boy and fish-vendor--but the bright beautiful, blue sky, with the golden sun shining, and a moist keen wind blowing from the distant fen-lands, filled with strange cold odours stolen from hidden herbs. And in the evening he would sing to her--sing those charming old ballads of Phyllis and Daphne, and Lady Bell--which he had not sung for so many days--or perhaps they would listen to the ponderous conversation of Dr. Larcher, with its classical flavouring of Horace.

The time would pass by in such innocent pleasures upon rapid wings, until their wedding-day came, with the budding leaves in tree and hedge, and the timid out-peeping of delicate spring flowers. Then the genial old vicar would make them man and wife, in the sacred gloom of the familiar church, while the wedding march pealed forth from the organ, and the joy-bells clashed in the ancient Norman tower. Afterwards they would go abroad for some months, and wander through old-world cities, among the treasures of dead ages--returning when they were weary, to lead quiet and useful lives under their own roof-tree, and among the friends of their early days. Yes!--he would go back to Garsworth, and try to realize these delightful dreams, but--Beaumont----

At this moment--as if in answer to his thoughts--a knock came to the door, and Beaumont entered--scattering at once the cloud-built castles in which Reginald's dreamy fancy had been indulging. His quick eye at once saw that the young man had eaten no breakfast--and he laughed gaily as he removed his hat and sat down near the fire.

"Don't feel well this morning?" he said lightly. "What a humbug you are, Blake--a little dissipation should be nothing for a healthy young country fellow like you."

"That's just it," replied Reginald, with some animation, slipping Una's letter into his pocket. "I am a country fellow, accustomed to lead a quiet simple life--and not an artificial existence."

"Oh, you'll soon get used to it."

"No doubt, but I'm not going to make the attempt."

"Oh, indeed!" observed Beaumont, concealing his annoyance. "So you intend to return to that dead-and-alive hole of a Garsworth?"

"Hole, as you think it," replied the young man, with some warmth, "it has been my home for many a long year, and I have grown to love it; besides, you forget--I go back to be married."

"But surely not yet?" objected Beaumont, earnestly. "Your father has not been dead very long? Besides, you must have a fling as a bachelor before you become Benedict, the married man."

"I've had enough 'fling,' as you call it," said Reginald, coldly, "and I don't like it--this incessant high-pressure style of life is not to my taste, so I am going away from it."

"I'm afraid I cannot leave Town, just now," said the artist, with a frown, feeling his prey was slipping through his fingers.

Blake looked at him in surprise.

"I do not want you to leave Town," he observed, in a dignified manner. "There is no necessity for you to accompany me by any manner of means--you have your

own life and your own friends, I have mine, so there is nothing in common between us in any way. You have certainly been very kind, in offering to assist me as a singer, but, as I do not require your assistance now, of course I will not trouble you. No doubt I have taken up a considerable portion of your time since I have been in London, but I am willing to repay any loss you may have sustained, in whatever way you suggest."

He looked straight at Beaumont as he spoke; and that gentleman, feeling rather nonplussed by the calm dignity of the young man, had the grace to blush a little, while he rapidly calculated on his next move. His financial affairs were not by any means in a flourishing condition at present, and he would have liked to ask Blake to give him some money; but, not judging the time ripe enough to prefer such a request, he temporised in a crafty manner.

"You misunderstand me," he said smoothly. "What I have done, is out of pure kindness, and I want no return for it. If you feel inclined to return to Garsworth, of course you are your own master, and can do so. Some day, I may run down to see you, and if I can be of any assistance to you, in connection with the management of your estates, of course I will only be too happy to do what I can."

"Thank you, I will not forget your offer," replied Reginald, still rather coldly, for he did not like the masterful tone adopted by the artist. "And now, if you will excuse me, I'll go and pack up my portmanteau."

"Oh, I'll come and see you off, at Paddington," said Beaumont, cheerily; "what train are you going by?"

"The mid-day train," answered Blake, glancing at his watch.

"Then I'll see you on the platform," observed Beaumont, rising to his feet and taking up his hat. "By-the-way, what about your engagements for this week?"

"I'll have to break them--none are very important, and most rather expensive."

Beaumont, biting his lips at this home-thrust, made no reply beyond a careless laugh; and, putting on his hat, left the room with a jaunty air. Once outside, however, his face changed to an expression of deep anger; for his success with Blake, hitherto, had not led him to expect such a calm resistance to his wishes.

"You'll defy me, will you?" he muttered between his teeth, as he walked rapidly along the street. "I'll see about that, my boy--as I put you in possession of the property, I can also take it off you again; and I'll do it, unless you're guided by me. I'll wait till you go back to Garsworth, and follow shortly afterwards. Once you know the truth, and I don't think you'll be so anxious to get rid of your best friend. I can leave you rich--or make you a pauper; so the whole of your future life is in my hands, and I'll mould it as I please."

Though he was annoyed at the unexpected display of firmness made by Blake, he was not alarmed, knowing he held the strongest hand in the game, and that Reginald would be forced to yield everything up to him, if he wanted to remain rich. Still, it was most irritating, for no one likes the worm to turn, as it is plainly the duty of the worm to be trodden upon; and for such a miserable thing as the worm to resent its fate, is going in direct opposition to the laws of Nature. However, there is an exception to every rule; and in this case Mr. Beaumont's worm was a more daring animal than he had any idea of; and, in spite of being the strongest party, he might well doubt with whom the victory would ultimately rest.

However, Beaumont's habitual self-command came to his aid, and prevented him showing any irritation, when he stood on the Paddington platform at the window of a smoking carriage, wishing Reginald good-bye.

"I hope you have enjoyed your stay in London," he said heartily.

"So-so," answered Reginald wearily. "I cannot enjoy anything very much, knowing the circumstances of my birth."

"Nonsense! You'll soon forget all about that."

"I don't think so, unfortunately for myself I have not your happy facility for forgetting."

"Pshaw! You are rich, and gold hides everything."

"From the eyes of the world, yes; but not from a man's own sight--nobody knows but the wearer where the shoe pinches."

"If that is the case, let the wearer smile blandly and the world will never guess his shoe doesn't fit him--it's your fools, who wear their hearts on their sleeves,

that get the worst word of everyone."

"And the wise man who conceals a vicious life gets the praise," said Blake bitterly. "What a delightful world."

"It's the best of all possible worlds," retorted Beaumont cynically. "I agree with M. Voltaire--besides, the world always takes you at your own valuation; smile, and it smiles; frown, and it looks grim; each man is a mirror to another, and gives back the reflection he receives."

"What cold-blooded philosophy."

"No doubt, but a very necessary philosophy," retorted Beaumont in a good-humoured tone; "it's ridiculous to bring the simplicity of Arcady to Rome. France tried it under the Fourteenth Louis, and the experiment ended in the guillotine and the Carmagnole."

The train was now moving off, so he shook hands with the young man through the open window of the carriage.

"Good-bye," said Reginald heartily, "when you come to Garsworth, I'll be glad to see you, my friend."

"Friend," echoed Beaumont with an evil smile, as the long train steamed away, "next time you see me it will be as your master."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST.

Only a woman's heart--indeed;
A sacred thing to you, you say,
To me, a toy, with which to play.

Ah, well, let each hold fast his creed.

What matter should it chance to bleed,
Is it a man's cut finger?--nay,
Only a woman's heart.

On ancient tales your fancies feed,
When woman ruled in saintly way,
But we have changed such things to-day.
For, after all, what use to heed?
Only a woman's heart.

Seeing that Reginald had thus escaped him for a time, Mr. Beaumont's temper was none of the sweetest when he arrived back at his chambers. Like most clever men the artist was very proud of his tact and delicacy in dealing with ingenuous youth, and he felt annoyed with himself lest by failing to skilfully angle for this trout, he should have lost his prize by failing in his diplomacy, and thereby shown too plainly the real reasons he had for his apparently disinterested friendship. So, on arrival at his chambers, Mr. Beaumont lighted a cigarette, threw himself moodily into a big arm-chair, and proceeded to mentally review all his conduct towards Reginald since the lad's arrival in town.

Hard as he tried to find some flaw in his own conduct which might have put Blake on his guard, Beaumont was quite unsuccessful in doing so, for his demeanour towards his proposed victim had been all that the most delicate tactician could have desired.

"I can't have frightened him away," he said aloud to himself, "for I acted the disinterested friend to perfection. Hang it! I wonder what took him back to Garsworth. I saw a letter in his hand, so I expect Una Challoner's been writing to him: but that would not do me any harm, for she likes me, and I should think would be rather glad if I looked after the boy in Town. I wonder it that confounded Patience has been talking? I made things all straight before I left Garsworth, but one never knows what may happen, and if Patience got an inkling of my design, she'd move heaven and earth to get the boy back again to her side--humph! I hardly know what to think--that's the worst of dealing with women; they're so crooked, you never know what they're going to do next."

He arose from his seat and walked impatiently up and down the room, seeking some solution of the problem thus presented to him. While doing so, he

happened to glance at the mantelpiece, and saw thereon a letter.

"I wish that man of mine wouldn't put the letters there," he grumbled, taking the letter, "I can never find them--but let me see who this is from; Garsworth postmark--don't know the writing--wonder if Una Challoner is--by Jove!" he ejaculated, as he took out the letter and glanced at the signature, "it's from Patience Allerby. I knew she had been up to some mischief. Well! I'll read the letter, and see if I can't foil you, my lady."

Resuming his seat in the arm-chair, he smoothed out the letter carefully as he prepared to read it. The contents, which were as follows, considerably astonished him, and his lips curled with a cynical smile as he glanced down the closely-written page.

"BASIL BEAUMONT,--

"Is it true what Dr. Nestley has told me--that you are in love with Una Challoner? If it is, I will make an end of everything between us, and denounce you, even at the cost of my own liberty. You have ruined my life, but you are not going to ruin that of my son by taking from him the woman he loves.

"Reginald Blake is now in London, and I hear you are constantly by his side. Act honourably by him, or I swear I will punish you for any harm you do to him. By our mutual sin he is now in possession of the Garsworth Estate, and is going to marry the lawful mistress of it. As this is the case, and his marriage to Miss Challoner is the one atonement both of us can make for depriving her of her inheritance, you must let things take their course. You have a desperate woman to deal with in me, and if you harm either Reginald or his promised wife in any way, I swear by all that I hold most sacred that you will stand in the prisoner's dock for conspiracy, even though I have to stand by your side as an accomplice.

"PATIENCE ALLERBY."

Beaumont laughed sardonically as he finished this letter, and twirling it in his fingers, looked thoughtfully at the carpet.

"I wonder," he said at length, in a low voice, "I wonder if this letter means love of her son, or jealousy of Una; both I expect, for though she hates me like poison, and everything sentimental between us is dead and buried years ago she gets mad as soon as she thinks I admire another woman--strange thing a female heart--whatever ashes of dead loves may remain in it, there is always some live ember hidden beneath--humph! queer thing that the love of twenty years ago should suddenly spring up again to life."

He arose from his seat, and commenced once more to walk up and down the room, soliloquising in a low voice, while outside the fog was growing quite black and a sombre twilight spread through the apartment.

"So it's Nestley I've got to thank for rousing her suspicions. He's been giving Patience his view of my character, which no doubt will coincide with her own--amiable creatures both! She has told Una that there is danger to Reginald in my companionship, so either herself or Una have written to town and frightened my shy bird into taking flight. Bother these women, how dreadfully they do upset one's plans; however, I do not mind, my hold upon Reginald Blake is just as firm at Garsworth as it is in London. As to Patience denouncing me--pish!--melodramatic rubbish--it's too late now to talk such nonsense--if she tells the truth her son loses the property, and she's too fond of him to risk that. As to Blake himself, when he knows I'm his father he'll be glad enough to make terms or lose the property and Una Challoner."

He paused a moment, lighted a cigarette, and going to the window gazed absently out into the black mist which clung around the roofs and chimney-pots of the houses, and hid the brilliantly lighted street below from his gaze.

"Una Challoner," he murmured thoughtfully. "Patience thinks I am in love with her. Curious that I am not: she has everything a woman can have to attract and allure a man, and yet I don't care a bit about her. Had I been in love with her I would not have troubled my head about Reginald but let Una inherit the property, and then it would have been a tug of war between father and son as to who married the heiress! That I have secured the property for our son ought to easily convince Patience that I love money more than Una Challoner, but of course she doesn't see because she is blinded by jealousy--rather complimentary to me I must say, seeing how hard I tried to break her heart in the past."

Turning away from the window with a sigh he lighted the gas, then going over to

the mirror placed over the fireplace he looked at himself long and critically.

"You're growing old, my friend," he murmured, "the wine of life is running to the lees with you, and I'm afraid you'll never fall in love again--still it's wonderful how I keep my good looks--my face is my fortune--ah, bah! and what fortune has it brought me? two dismal rooms, a precarious existence, and not a friend in the world."

He laughed drearily at the dismal prospect he had conjured up and pursued his meditation.

"I'll make one more bid for fortune, and I think I hold strong cards. If I win--as I can't help doing--I'll turn over a new leaf and become respectable. But if I lose, and there are always the possibilities of losing, I'll throw up the sponge in England and try my luck in America. If I don't succeed there, perhaps a friendly cowboy will put an end to my wasted life; at present, *carpe diem*, as our friend the vicar would say, so I'll dine at the club and scribble a letter to Patience Allerby."

He dressed himself slowly, still in a dismal mood, and as he was rattling along in a hansom he gave himself an impatient shake.

"Bah," he muttered with a shiver, "I've got a fit of the blue devils with this weather. Never mind, a good dinner and a bottle of wine will soon put me right."

He had both, and felt so much better that he began to view things in a more rosy light, and wrote a letter to Patience Allerby which entirely satisfied him.

"There," he said gaily, as he dropped it into the box, "I think that will show my lady pretty plainly how I intend to proceed, so now as there's nothing better to do I'll go to the theatre."

And to the theatre he went, trying by every means in his power to shake off by means of this fictitious gaiety the gloomy thoughts which always beset him when he found himself alone.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

After great troubles our lives rearrange themselves in new forms, which last only until some later evil arises therefrom to alter them once more, and these latter in their turn are subject to further changes, so that from cradle to tomb our fortunes alter in divers ways every moment of our existence.

So the prodigal son had returned after his perilous wanderings in far lands, and his home circle killed the fatted calf and made merry in token of rejoicing. When Una saw how haggard the young man was in appearance and how depressed in mind, she felt deeply grateful to Providence that the chance words of Nestley had led her to write the letter which had induced her lover to return. Now that he was once more by her side she determined that nothing should ever part them again, and longed eagerly for the marriage to take place which should give her the right to go through life by his side. Doubtless many people would consider such longing hardly compatible with maiden modesty, but Una was too pure and sensible a woman to look at things in such a false light. She ardently loved Reginald and he returned that love, why then should she, for the sake of conventional appearance, risk her life's happiness by delay, seeing that everything was now at stake? No! she was determined to get married to Reginald as soon as possible, so that he would not be lured to destruction by evil counsel and wicked companions. It was not that she mistrusted her lover, for she well knew his straightforward, honourable nature, but it was better to leave nothing to chance, as even the strongest of men is not proof against temptation.

A week after Reginald arrived they were seated in Dr. Larcher's study talking over the question of the marriage, and the vicar was inclined to agree with their desire that it should be soon, although he was unwilling they should be blamed for undue haste.

"The world, my dear Una, is censorious," he said, wisely, "and as the Squire has only been dead two months it will be as well to wait a little longer."

"I suppose so," replied Una with a sigh, "although I do not see it would mean any disrespect to his memory if we got married at once."

"No doubt, no doubt--still, *medio tutissimus ibis*, and I think it will be wiser for you both to put off the marriage for at least three months."

"Three months," said Reginald, with a groan, "that's as bad as three years, but I suppose we must--I will stay at Garsworth in the meantime."

"Of course, my dear boy, of course," answered the vicar, crossing his legs and placing his thumbs and forefingers together, "you can take up your old life again."

"Ah, never! never again," said the young man, shaking his head sadly, "the old life is dead and done with. I have eaten of the tree of knowledge, and the fruit is bitter."

"My dear Reginald," said Una, crossing over to him and putting her kind arms round his neck, "you must not be so despondent--it is not your fault."

"The sins of the father are visited on the children," he replied gloomily, "if it had been anything else I would not have minded--but to be what I am--a nobody--entitled to bear no name--it is bitter, very bitter indeed. I've no doubt I should be above such petty pride, still I am but mortal, and disgrace is hard to bear."

"If it is disgrace I will bear it with you," whispered Una, smoothing his hair, "we will be married and go away for a time; you will soon forget the past when we go abroad."

"With your help I hope to," he said, looking affectionately into her clear eyes shining down on him with ineffable love in their azure depths.

"I think," remarked the vicar, touched by the deep sorrow of the young man, "that taking all things into consideration it would be wiser to do as you wish."

"And marry?" cried Reginald eagerly.

"And marry," assented the vicar, nodding good-naturedly; "what says Horace? '*carpe diem quam minimum credula postero.*' So taking that advice it will be best for you both to be married quietly next week and go abroad for a time:--when you return Reginald will doubtless find his position easier."

"I hope so," said Blake mournfully, as they arose to go, "but I'm afraid it's

hopeless--this discovery has killed all the pleasures of life--my youth is dead."

"The soul is immortal," said Dr. Larcher solemnly, "and on the ruins of your joyous youth, which you regard as dead, you can raise the structure of a nobler and wiser life--it will be hard, but with Una to help you, not impossible--*nil mortalibus arduum est.*"

And they went away from the presence of the old man--he with resignation in his breast, and she with whispering words of comfort on her lips, infinite pity in her eyes, and enduring affection in her heart.

Patience Allerby was delighted when she heard how soon the marriage was to take place, as she dreaded lest through the machinations of Beaumont it should be broken off. Once Reginald was married to Una he would be safe both as regards fortune and position, for nothing Beaumont could reveal concerning the conspiracy would alter the state of affairs and her one aim in life to secure happiness for her son, would thus be accomplished.

At present, however, she dreaded every day either to see Beaumont or hear from him, especially after the warning letter she had written, nor was she disappointed, for a week after Reginald's return she received a letter from her quondam lover informing her that he was coming down in order to have a proper understanding with his son.

"The young rascal has more firmness of purpose than I gave him credit for," he wrote in a cynical vein, "and took less eagerly to the dissipations of London than I should have expected. I am afraid he inherits your cold blood and not the hot temperament of his father, otherwise he would hardly have left the only city fit to live in for a dull hole like Garsworth. However, I see plainly he is a clod and lacks the divine zest necessary to enjoy life, so I suppose he has returned in perfect contentment to marry Una Challoner and live the bovine life of a country squire. So be it! I certainly do not mind, but first he must settle with me. I have placed him in a good position and given him a large income, so for these services I must be recompensed, and am coming down to have an interview with him on the subject. If he is wise he will seek to know no more than he does, but if he inherits your obstinate nature and wants to know all, I am afraid he will have to learn the truth. Even then it will not be too late, for I will hold my tongue as

to his real birth, and leave him in full possession of his wealth provided I am well paid for such silence. Now that you understand the situation you had better prepare him to receive me as one who desires to be friendly--if he treats me as an enemy he will find me a bitter one, so he had better be sensible and come to terms. As to my love for Una Challoner, you ought to know by this time I love no one but

"Yours truly,

"BASIL BEAUMONT."

This brutal letter fell like a lump of ice on the heart of the unhappy Patience as she saw the net gradually closing round her. She knew only too well that Beaumont would do what he said unless some arrangement could be made--and then, as Nestley said he loved Una, he would doubtless want to marry her as well as gain an income, and their son would be left miserable. No, she would not have it, this devil would not be permitted to sin any more and ruin lives with impunity as he had hitherto done. She made up her mind to see him before his interview with Reginald, and make one last appeal to his feelings as a father; if he refused to grant her prayers and keep the boy ignorant of his real birth she would reveal all herself and bear the shame sooner than he should tempt Reginald to a sin. When all was told she would implore Una to still marry her son, and then depart to bury herself in solitude, and expiate her sins by years of repentance.

Events were still in the future, and she knew not how they would turn out, but of one thing she was determined, that Beaumont should not blight and ruin her son's life as he had blighted and ruined her own.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A RUINED LIFE.

"Is this the end of all the years
That thou hast lived, my friend?
Of merry smiles and bitter tears,
Is this the end?
Tho' sad and dark the past appears,
God to thy soul will courage send,
And Christ will whisper in thine ears
The word which hearts desponding cheers;
So rise and to thy work attend.
Nor let the wicked ask with jeers
Is this the end?"

A few days after a decision had been arrived at concerning the marriage Basil Beaumont made his reappearance in Garsworth, and took up his old quarters at "The House of Good Living," in order to come to a final understanding with Reginald Blake.

The artist was in an excellent humour, for, according to his own judgment, he was master of the situation. He had only to threaten Reginald with the loss of his newly acquired wealth, and, judging the young man's nature by his own, he felt satisfied that, sooner than surrender Garsworth Grange, the false heir would pay him a handsome income to hold his tongue. With such income he would retire to the Continent and amuse himself for the rest of his life, while, as for Patience, seeing that he had no further use for her, she could make what arrangement she liked with Reginald, and please herself in her manner of living. With all this astute calculation, however, Beaumont made no allowance for the different nature of his son, and did not for a moment think that the young man's nobility of soul would induce him rather to resign everything, at whatever cost, than keep possession of what he knew was not rightfully his own.

He learnt from Kossiter that Reginald and Una were going to be married the next week, and smiled cynically to himself as he thought how easily he could stop the ceremony.

"If Una Challoner only knew the truth," he thought, "I think even her love would recoil from such a trial. Reginald Blake, the wealthy bastard, is one thing; but Reginald Blake, the pauper bastard, is another. Yes, I think I hold the best hand in this game; as to Patience! bah! my cards are somewhat too strong for her to

beat."

Mr. Beaumont had only arrived a short time, and was seated before the fire smoking in the dull light of the winter afternoon, preparatory to writing a letter to Reginald. Margery, bright and alert, was clearing away the luncheon, so Mr. Beaumont, wishing to be quite sure of his ground, began to question her concerning the events which had taken place during his absence.

"I hear Miss Challoner is going to be married to Mr. Blake," he said genially; "it's a good match for her."

"And for him, too, sir," retorted Margery indignantly. "Miss Una is as sweet a young lady as you will find anywhere."

"No doubt," answered Beaumont blandly. "They are a charming couple, and certainly deserve the good opinion of everybody; but tell me, Margery, what about Dr. Nestley? I suppose he has gone long ago?"

"No," said Margery, shaking her head, "he is still here."

"In this place?"

"Yes sir, very--very ill."

"Humph!" thought Beaumont, "got the jumps, I expect. What is the matter with him?" he asked aloud.

"He lost his way in the snow storm last week," explained Margery deliberately, "and nearly died, but Farmer Sanders found him on the bridge and brought him here."

"Oh! and is he here still?"

"He is, sir. He was quite delirious, sir--raved awful. Dr. Blank's been attending him, and Miss Mosser."

"The blind organist--why has she turned nurse?"

Margery smiled in a mysterious manner.

"Well, folks say one thing and some folks say another," she replied, folding the table-cloth, "but I think she's in love with him; anyhow, as soon as she heard he was ill she came here like a mad woman, with Miss Busky, and both of 'em have been nursing him ever since."

"How good of them," said Beaumont ironically, "and is he better?"

"He's sensible," answered Margery cautiously, "but very weak. I don't know as he'll live."

"I'd like to see him. You know I'm a friend of his--do you think I could go up to his room?"

"I don't know, sir," returned Margery stolidly. "I'll ask Miss Mosser."

"Do, that's a good girl, he replied, and Margery departed.

"Poor Nestley," muttered Beaumont to himself, lighting another cigarette, "it was rather a shame of me to have led him on like I did, but if I hadn't he would have interfered with my plans concerning old Garsworth, so I had to--self-preservation is the first law of nature. Come in," he called out, as a knock came to the door. "Come in, Margery."

It was not Margery, however, but Cecilia Mosser, who entered, with a pale sad face and a painfully-strained look in her sightless eyes.

"Mr. Beaumont," she said, in her low sweet voice.

"I am here, Miss Mosser," he replied, rising from his seat. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," she replied, groping her way to the table and standing beside it. "Are you alone?"

"Quite alone," returned Beaumont politely.

"You wish to see Dr. Nestley?"

"If I may be permitted."

"You will not be permitted," answered Cecilia slowly; "he is still very weak, and the sight of you would make him ill again."

"And why?" asked Beaumont, rather annoyed at the firmness of her tone; "surely a friend----"

"A friend," she interrupted, in a low vibrating tone. "Yes, a friend who is one in name only."

"I don't understand you," said Basil politely. "What do you know of the friendship existing between myself and Dr. Nestley?"

"I know everything--yes everything--in his delirium he revealed more than he would have done----"

"Delirium--pshaw!"

"What he said then was confirmed by his own lips afterwards when he was sensible," she answered in a perfectly cool manner, "and I know how much your friendship has cost him--how you tried to drag him down to the lowest depths of iniquity. God knows for what end----"

Beaumont laughed in a sneering way, and leaned his shoulders comfortably against the mantelpiece.

"You seem to be in the confidence of our mutual friend," he said, in an easy tone. "May I ask why?"

"Because I am going to be his wife," replied Cecilia, while a flood of crimson rushed over the pure white of her face.

"His wife--a blind girl?"

"Blind as I am he loves me," she said indignantly, "and I can protect him against you, Mr. Beaumont."

"Me? I do not wish to harm him."

"No. You could not even if you did wish; he is going to marry me, and I hope to undo all the harm you have done him."

"I wish you joy of your task," he replied with a sneer. "But Dr. Nestley seems to be able to transfer his affections very easily--perhaps you do not know he was in love with Miss Challoner."

"Yes I do," she answered in a low tone, "he told me everything; and we understand one another perfectly. You have done your worst, Mr. Beaumont, and can do no more--he is going to become my husband, and, blind as I am, I hope to be his guardian angel from such men as you."

"These domestic details don't interest me in the slightest," he answered contemptuously, waving his hand. "Will you be kind enough to go, Miss Mosser? I have some letters to write."

"I am going," answered the blind girl, quietly feeling her way to the door. "I only came to tell you that you will never see him again--never!"

"Neither will you," he returned brutally.

The poor girl burst into tears at the unmanly taunt, but hastily dried them, and answered him back proudly.

"I can see him in my own mind, sir," she said indignantly, "and that is all I wish for--his faults have been of your making, and not of his own. I say good-bye to you, sir, and only wish you a better heart, that you may not make a jest of the misfortunes of others."

As she closed the door after her, Beaumont felt rather ashamed of himself, but soon recovered from the feeling, and sat down at the table to write a note to Reginald.

"Bah!" he said, as his pen travelled swiftly over the paper. "What do I care? if he likes to encumber himself with that woman he can do so. I don't suppose I'll ever see him again in this life, nor do I wish to--my business now is with my dear son. I'll get what I want out of him, and then the whole lot of them can go to the devil."

Meanwhile, Cecilia had returned to the sick room, where Miss Busky, still faithful to her blind friend, sat watching by the bedside of the invalid. A pale, sickly light filtered in through the white-curtained windows, mixing with the red glow of the fire, and in this curiously blended twilight could be seen the glimmer

of the medicine bottles on the round table by the bed, the deep arm-chair close at hand wherein Miss Busky sat the milky whiteness of the disordered bed-clothes and the subdued shine upon the surface of the furniture. Throughout the room was a complete stillness, unbroken even by the tick of a clock, and nothing was heard but the heavy breathing of the sick man.

As Cecilia entered, Miss Busky arose lightly to her feet and crossed over to her friend, speaking in a subdued whisper.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

"Yes--he will not come up, thank Heaven!--Dr. Nestley suspects nothing?"

"Nothing!--he is asleep--let me place you in the chair--I'm going out for a few minutes."

She led Cecilia forward, and the blind girl-sank into the arm-chair; then, hastily putting on her hat, Miss Busky glided rapidly out of the room, leaving Cecilia seated by the bed, listening to the breathing of the invalid.

So still, so quiet--it might almost have been the silence of the tomb. Then there came the light patter of rain-drops on the windows. The fire had sunk to a dull red glow, and a piece of burning coal dropped, with a singularly distinct noise, on to the fender. Nestley sighed in his sleep--moved uneasily, and then awoke--a fact which the blind girl was aware of immediately, by her acute sense of hearing.

"Cecilia," said the sick man, in a weak voice.

"I am here, dear," she replied softly. "Do you want anything?"

He put out his hand and clasped one of hers in his feeble grasp.

"Only you--only you--I thought you had left me."

"Hush!--you must not speak much," she said, arranging the bed-clothes.

"I have had a dream," whispered the invalid fearfully, "a strange dream--that I was in the coils of a serpent, being crushed to death. But a woman suddenly appeared, and at her touch the serpent vanished and I was free. The woman had

your face, Cecilia."

"Hush!--do not speak more--you are too weak--you are in safety now, and no serpent shall touch you while I am by your side."

"You will be my wife?"

"I will be your wife," she replied softly. "I have loved you from the first day I met you, but never thought you would be burdened with such a useless thing as I."

"Not useless, dear. How could I have been so foolish as not to have understood your love before? Thank God for this illness, that has opened my eyes. You have saved my life--my soul."

He stopped, through exhaustion, and lay silently upon his pillow, watching the red flare of the fire glimmer on the pale face of the blind girl. A great feeling of joy and thankfulness came over him, as he felt that all the stormy, tempestuous life of the past was over at last--and beside him sat the one woman who could save his weak nature from yielding to the temptations of the world.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MATER DOLOROSA.

"Madonna, who hath ever stood
As type of holy motherhood,
I pray thee, for thy Son's dear sake,
This sorrow from my bosom take.
For there are those, with anger wild,
Who wound the mother thro' the child.
I know that thou wilt pity me,
For thy Son hung upon the tree.
And as He died to save and bless,
Oh, help me, thou, in my distress."

After he had finished a very nice little dinner, with a small bottle of champagne to add zest to it, Mr. Beaumont lighted a cigarette, and sat down comfortably before the fire, in order to wait for Reginald Blake. He had written to the young man, announcing his arrival and asking him to call, so he had no doubt but that he would be favoured with a visit. Having, therefore, arranged his plan of action, he lay back indolently in his chair, making plans for the future, and building air-castles amid the blue spirals of smoke which curled upward from his lips.

About seven o'clock he heard a knock at the door, and in answer to his invitation to enter, a woman made her appearance. Beaumont, who had merely turned his head to greet Reginald, was rather astonished at this unexpected guest, and arose to his feet in order to see who it was. His visitor closed the door carefully after her and stepped forward so that she came within the circle of light cast by the lamp on the table, then, throwing back her veil, looked steadily at the artist.

"Patience!"

"Yes, Patience," she replied, sitting down on a chair near the table. "You did not expect to see me?"

"Well, no," answered Beaumont, indolently leaning against the mantelpiece. "I must confess I did not--but if you want to speak with me, I can spare you very little time, as I am waiting----"

"For Reginald?" she interrupted quickly. "Yes, I know that."

"The deuce you do! What a wonderful woman you are! How did you find out I was here?"

"I left instructions that I was to be informed of your arrival, as I wished to speak with you before you saw our son."

"Indeed! And what do you want to speak to me about?"

"Your letter."

"I think my letter was too clear to require further explanation," he said impatiently. "I told you my intentions."

"You did--and I have come to tell you they will not be carried out."

"Is that so?" said Beaumont, with a sneer. "Well, we'll see. Who will prevent me doing what I like?"

"I will."

"Really--I'm afraid you over-rate your powers, my dear Patience. You are a clever woman, no doubt--a very clever woman--but there are limits."

"As you observe, very truly, there are limits," she retorted fiercely, "and those limits you have overstepped. Do you think I am going to stand by and see you wring money out of my son?"

"Our son," he corrected gently. "You forget I am his father. As to wringing money out of him, that's a very unpleasant way of putting it. I simply propose to appeal to his common sense."

"Sit down," said Patience, suddenly. "I wish to speak to you."

Beaumont shrugged his shoulders, then, pushing the arm-chair to one side, sat down in it so that he faced her fairly, keeping, however, with habitual caution, his face well in the shade.

"By all means," he said amiably. "I always humour a woman when there is nothing to be gained by doing otherwise. Go on, my dear friend, I'm all attention."

The housekeeper was leaning forward, resting her elbows on the table, and he could see her finely-cut, bloodless face--looking as if carved out of marble, in the yellow rays of the lamp-light--with her nostrils dilated, her lips firmly closed, and her black eyes sparkling with suppressed anger.

"I see it's going to be a duel to the death," he said, in a mocking tone, leaning his head against the cushion of the chair. "Well, I do not mind--I'm fond of duels."

"You are a fiend!" she burst out angrily.

"Really! Did you come all this way to impart that information? If so, you have wasted your time. I've heard the same remark so often."

His brutally cool manner had a wonderfully calming effect upon her, for after this one outburst of anger, she appeared to crush down her wrath by a strong effort of will, smiled disdainfully, and went on to speak in a cold, clear voice.

"Listen to me, Basil Beaumont: years ago you did me the worst harm a man can do a woman--you destroyed my life, but thanks to my own cleverness I managed to preserve at least the outward semblance of a pure woman without sacrificing our son in any way, but do you think that has cost me nothing--do you think I did not feel bitter pangs at having to deny my own son, and to veil my maternal longings under the guise of a servant? I did so, not so much to preserve my own good name as to benefit the boy. I wanted him to think he had no heritage of shame, so that he could feel at least pride and self-respect. When I obtained the reward of my sacrifice--when I saw that my son was satisfied with his lot and had talents to make his way in the world you came down for the second time to ruin not my life, but his--the life of an innocent being, who had never done you any harm. I entered into your vile conspiracy because I thought it would benefit my son, and now I repent bitterly that I ever did so. Owing to the foul lie you compelled me to tell, he has gained a fortune, but lost his self-respect. You do not understand the feeling, because your heart these many years has been steeped in wickedness, but think what it has done to our unhappy child--cast a blight upon his life which no money, no position can ever remove--his youth died from the moment I told him that lie, and whose work is it--mine or yours, Basil Beaumont? Mine or yours?"

She paused a moment, moistened her dry lips with her tongue, and then went on speaking rapidly with vehemence.

"And now when the worst is over--when he is firmly settled in possession of that wealth it has cost him his youthful happiness to gain--when he is going to marry the woman he loves, who will be able to comfort him in some measure--you once more return to work ruin for the third time--you demand money to hush up a disgraceful secret--you would not only tell him that he is still a nameless outcast, but you would take all his money from him, yes, and take also the girl who is to be his wife--you would leave him a pauper--an outcast--a miserable being with neither self-respect, nor riches, nor consolation. I implore you for my sake--for his sake--for your own sake, not to do this--our crime has shadowed his young life too much already--tell him no more--go away from this place, and let him have at least one chance of happiness."

She arose to her feet at the last words, and stretched out her arms appealingly towards Beaumont with humid eyes and an imploring expression on her face. The artist sat silent, smiling cynically, with a savage glitter in his eyes, and when she had finished, broke into a hard laugh as he also arose to his feet, flinging his cigarette viciously into the fire.

"A very pretty thing to ask me to do," he said mockingly, "and a very useless request to make. Do you think I care for his feelings or yours?--not the snap of a finger. I put Reginald in possession of the Garsworth estate not for his own sake, but for mine. Had he been wise and allowed me to guide him, he would have known no more than he does now. If he gives me the money I ask, it is even now not too late, but I am not going to spare him, either for his own sake or yours. He will be here soon, and I will tell him everything, so if he does not give me what I ask, I'll ruin him body and soul."

Patience flung herself at his feet, and burst into tears.

"For God's sake, Basil, spare him."

"No."

"He is your child."

"The more reason for him to help me."

"Have you no mercy?"

"None--if it means getting no money."

"For my sake, spare him."

"For your sake least of all."

"You intend to tell him?"

"I do. You can save yourself the trouble of making this melodramatic exhibition. I'm not going to move one hair's breath from the position I have taken up. I want money, and I mean to have it."

Patience sprang to her feet in an access of mad fury and stood before him with

clenched hands and blazing eyes.

"Are you not afraid I'll kill you?"

"Not a bit."

"You defy me."

"I do."

She drew a long breath, and snatched up her gloves from the table, her passion subsiding under his cool brutality as a stormy sea subsides when oil is cast upon the waters.

"Very well," she said coolly. "I'll tell everything to Doctor Larcher, and get him to prosecute both of us for conspiracy. I will stand in the dock and you beside me."

Beaumont laughed sneeringly.

"I've no doubt you will stand in the dock," he said with emphasis, "but not me. I have done nothing in the matter, you everything. Who is to prove I hypnotised the old man, and forged the papers making Reginald the heir?--no one. Who is to prove that you falsely passed off your son as the heir?--everyone. You are the sole representative of the conspiracy, and I shall simply deny the whole affair. It will be my word against yours, and with such strong evidence as can be brought against you I fancy you'll get the worst of it."

An expression of terror passed over the face of the unhappy woman as she saw what a gulf was open at her feet. It was true what he said--she was the only one who had spoken--to all outward appearances he had in nowise been implicated in the conspiracy. With a cry of despair, she reeled back against the wall, covering her face with her hands. At that moment Reginald's voice was heard outside, and with a rapid movement, Beaumont sprang forward and caught one of her wrists in his grip.

"Here is Reginald," he said in a harsh whisper, "hold your tongue or it will be the worse for you. I don't want him to see you--hide in here and keep silent. What I intend to do will depend upon the result of this interview."

Patience said nothing, as all power of will seemed to have deserted her, but allowed herself to be dragged towards a door in the wall which communicated with a staircase leading to the upper part of the house. Pushing her in here, Beaumont closed the door, then rapidly returned to the fireplace and flung himself into his chair.

"Act I. has been rather stormy," he said to himself with a sneer. "I wonder what Act II. will be like."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FATHER AND SON.

Father!--art thou my father?--pause, good sir,
Ere thou profanest thus that holy name.
A father should protect and guide his child
Through the harsh tumult of this noisy life,
But thou hast stood apart these many years
And left me to the mercy of the world,
With all its snares and madd'ning influence,
Yet now thou say'st "I am thy father"--nay,
No name is that for such a one as thou.

Looking at that quiet room illuminated by the mellow light of the lamp, no one could have imagined the scene of terror and despair which had lately taken place, yet when Reginald entered, his face wore a somewhat puzzled expression.

"How do you do, Beaumont?" he said as the artist arose with a frank smile and took his hand. "I thought I heard a scream."

"Did you?" replied Beaumont, assisting his visitor to remove his great coat. "Then I'm afraid I must have been asleep, as I heard nothing, not even your knock; the opening of the door aroused me."

"I didn't knock at all," said Reginald, sitting down by the fire and drawing his chair closer to the burning coals. "I should have done so, but I forgot and walked straight in--you don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all, my boy, you are perfectly welcome," answered the artist heartily. "Will you smoke?"

"Thank you, I've got my pipe."

He lighted his pipe and lay back in the chair watching the fire, while Beaumont, bending forward with his face in the shadow puffed at his cigarette, watching Reginald, and crouching on the dark staircase with her eye to the keyhole, a silent woman watched both. It was a curious situation and not without a touch of grim comedy, though, as a matter of fact, the play which the trio were about to act had more in it of the tragic than the comic element.

Reginald, looking sad and weary, watched the fire for some moments, till Beaumont, feeling the silence oppressive, broke it with a laugh.

"How fearfully dull you are, Blake," he said gaily, "is anything wrong?"

Blake withdrew his sad eyes from the fire and looked at the speaker with a singular smile.

"Not what many people would call wrong," he said at length. "I have a large income, I am young, and I marry the girl I love next week."

"Well, as you can't call any of those blessings wrong, my friend, you ought to be perfectly happy."

"No doubt--but perfect happiness is given to no mortal."

"You are very young to moralize," said Beaumont with a faint sneer.

"Yes, it appears absurd, doesn't it, but I can't help it; ever since I discovered the real story of my birth a shadow seems to have fallen on my life."

"And why--who cares for the bar sinister now-a-days?"

"Not many people I suppose, but I do--I daresay I have been brought up in an old-fashioned manner, but I feel the loss of my good name keenly--wealth can gild shame, not hide it."

"Rubbish! you are morbidly sensitive on the subject."

"No doubt I am--as I said before it's the fault of my bringing up--but come," he continued in a livelier tone, "I did not call to inflict my dismal mood upon you, let us talk of other things."

"Such as your marriage?"

"Certainly--marriage is a pleasant subject," said the young man with a quiet smile. "As I told you, I marry Miss Challoner next week and then we go abroad for a year or two."

"And what about your property in the meantime?" asked Beaumont.

"Oh, I'll leave it to my solicitors to attend to."

"Why not appoint me your agent?"

Blake coloured a little at this direct request and smiled in an embarrassed manner.

"Well, I hardly see how I can do that," he said frankly, "I've only known you about three months, and besides, I have perfect confidence in my solicitors to manage the property, so, with all due respect to you, Beaumont, I must decline to appoint you my agent."

He spoke with some haughtiness, as he was irritated at the cool way in which Beaumont spoke, but that gentleman seemed in nowise offended and smiled blandly as he answered:

"If then, you will not help me in that way, will you give me some money--say five hundred pounds?"

"Certainly not!" retorted Blake hotly, pushing back his chair, "why should I do such a thing? As I said before, I have only known you three months--you were kind enough to introduce me to some friends of yours in Town, beyond this our friendship does not extend--I have yet to learn that gentlemen go about requesting sums of money from comparative strangers."

"You have yet to learn a good many things," said Beaumont coolly, irritated by the independent tone of the young man, "and one is that you must give me the money I ask."

Blake jumped to his feet in amazement at the peremptory tone of the artist and looked at him indignantly.

"Must!" he repeated angrily, "I don't understand the word--what right have you to speak to me in such a manner?--if you think you've got a fool to deal with you are very much mistaken--I decline to lend or give you a sixpence, and furthermore I also decline your acquaintance from this moment."

He snatched up his overcoat and put it on, but Beaumont, still cool and unruffled, sat smiling in his chair.

"Wait a moment," he said slowly, "you had better understand the situation before you leave this room."

Reginald Blake, who had turned his back on the artist, swung round with a

dangerous expression in his dark eyes.

"I understand the situation perfectly, sir; you thought I was a young fool, who, having come into money, was simple enough to play the part of pigeon to your hawk."

Beaumont arose slowly from his chair at this insulting speech, and frowned ominously, while the woman hidden behind the door watched the pair in a cat-like manner, ready to intervene if she saw cause.

"You had better take care, my boy," said Beaumont deliberately. "I am your friend now, beware lest you make me your enemy."

"Do you think I care two straws for either your friendship or enmity?" replied Blake with supreme contempt, looking the artist up and down. "If so, you are mistaken--what can you do to harm me I should like to know?"

"Then you shall know--I can dispossess you of your wealth and leave you a pauper."

"Hardly--seeing I now know your true character and touch neither dice-box nor cards."

"It will require neither dice-box nor cards," replied Beaumont, wincing at this home thrust, "I can dispense with those aids--and I can reduce you to your former position of a pauper and stop your marriage."

"Indeed! Then do so."

Beaumont was stung to sudden fury by the young man's coolness, and lost his temper.

"You defy me!" he hissed, advancing towards Blake. "You dare to defy me, you pauper--you outcast--you bastard!"

"Liar!"

In another moment Reginald had his hand upon Beaumont's throat, his face convulsed with rage, when suddenly Patience sprang forth from her hiding-place.

"Stop! He is your father."

Blake's grip relaxed, and his arm fell by his side while Beaumont, staggering back, fell into the arm-chair and began mechanically to arrange his disordered necktie.

"My father!"

It was Reginald who spoke in a dull, slow voice, with his face ghastly pale and his eyes fixed upon the cowering form of the woman before him.

"My father! Is this true?"

Patience tried to speak, but her tongue could not form the words, so Beaumont, with a devilish light in his eyes, answered for her.

"Quite true. Your mother has told you."

"My mother! You?"

The young man looked from one to the other in a dazed manner, then, with a gasping cry, staggered forward and seized Patience by the arm.

"Do you hear what this man says?" he said in a strained, unnatural voice. "That he is my father--that you are my mother! Is it true--tell me--is it true?"

"It is true."

A look of horror overspread his face, and flinging her away from him, with a cry of anguish he fell against the wall with white face and outstretched arms.

"My God! it is true."

His mother looked apprehensively at him for a moment, then fell on her knees weeping bitterly.

"Spurn me--curse me--despise me!" she cried in a broken voice. "You have every right to do so. I am your unhappy mother and he is your father. I lied when I said Fanny Blake and the Squire were your parents. I lied at your father's instigation in order to gain you a fortune. He designed the conspiracy--I carried

it out."

"And I have been the dupe of both," interrupted Reginald fiercely, stepping forward with uplifted hand as if to strike her. "I don't believe this--it is a lie! You are my nurse."

"I am your mother."

The calm manner in which she made this assertion left no room for doubt, and Reginald Blake recoiled from that kneeling figure as if it had been a snake.

"My mother!" he muttered convulsively. "Great Heavens! my mother!"

Patience saw how he shrank from her, and a great wave of despair swept over her soul as she struggled forward on her knees, flinging out her arms towards him with a bitter cry.

"Oh, forgive me--forgive me!" she wailed. "I did it for the best; I did, indeed. I denied you were my child in order to save your good name, and I only swore the lie about Fanny Blake in order to make you rich. Do not shrink from me, my son, I implore you. Think how I have suffered all these years--how I have sacrificed my life for your sake. Have pity, Reginald, as you hope for mercy. Have mercy!"

Reginald Blake stood quiet for a moment, then, controlling himself by a powerful effort, raised her to her feet. As he did so she looked timidly at his face, but saw therein no pity, no tenderness; only the look of a man suffering agony. He placed her in a chair and, without looking at her, advanced towards the table.

"Before I can believe this story," he said in a hard voice, "I require some proof of it. By the Squire's will the property was left to the person who produced a certain paper, written by him, and a ring. They were both found in his desk, directed to me. If I am not the Squire's son how did this happen?"

"I can explain that very easily," replied Beaumont, taking some papers out of his breast coat pocket. "When I came down here a few months ago, I heard of the Squire's madness regarding his re-incarnation, and by means of a hypnotic sleep I found out from his own lips that he intended to leave all his property to a fictitious son, who was to be himself in a new body. Being under my control in

the hypnotic state, he showed me where the paper and ring were hidden. I took them from their hiding place and filled up the paper with your name and that of Fanny Blake. I then enclosed the ring and paper in an envelope which the Squire had directed to you, resealed it, and, getting the keys of his desk, placed them therein, where they were found. You understand?"

"I understand; but why did the Squire direct an envelope to me?"

"Because he wanted to help you, and wrote this letter and this cheque, which he enclosed in an envelope to be given to you by your mother. I used the envelope as I explained, and kept the letter and cheque by me. Here they are as a proof of the truth."

Reginald took up the papers the artist placed upon the table and glanced over them, then placed them in his pocket, and turning away took up his hat.

"Where are you going?" asked Beaumont, alarmed at his action.

"I am going to see Dr. Larcher and tell him all," answered his son sternly. "What other course is there for me to take?"

"To hold your tongue," said the artist eagerly. "Surely you're not such a fool as to give up possession of an estate like this for a mere feeling of honour. Pay me a stated income and I will hold my tongue. Your mother will be silent for her own sake, so no one will know the truth."

Reginald looked at him with unutterable contempt.

"After bringing me so low as you have done do you think I am going to sink lower of my own free will?" he said in a scornful tone. "No! a thousand times no. I would not keep this property another day if it were ten million a year. I see what your plan has been--to threaten me with exposure if I did not bribe you to silence. You have mistaken me. I am not so base as that. This property shall go back to its rightful owner, and you will not receive one penny either from her or from me."

"I am your father."

"You are my father--yes, God help me! If I am to believe this story you are my father--a father I despise and loathe. One question more I only ask--are you my

mother's husband?"

"No," said Beaumont sullenly, "I am not."

Reginald turned a shade paler and laughed bitterly.

"What have I done to be punished like this?" he said, raising his face in agony. "You have taken away the wealth I wrongfully possessed, you have deprived me of my good name, of my self-respect, but, as God is above us, you shall not make me vile in my own sight by doing your wicked will."

Another moment and the door closed, so that Patience and Beaumont were alone. Rising from her seat she took off her bonnet.

"What are you going to do?" asked Beaumont savagely, all his innate brutality showing itself now that the mask was dropped.

"I am going to stay here, to-night," she said, unsteadily walking to the door, "and to-morrow I will go to London, never to return."

"What about the Grange?"

"I shall never go back to the Grange," answered the woman slowly, "there is no home for me there; you have done your worst, Basil Beaumont--done your worst--and failed."

Again the door closed and Beaumont was left alone--alone with his ruined hopes and his despair.

"Failed," he muttered savagely, looking into the fire. "Yes, I have failed to get the money, but I shall not fail to ruin Reginald Blake for all that; he thinks he will still marry the heiress of the Grange; he can set his mind at rest--he will never marry Una Challoner."

CHAPTER XL.

BEAUMONT PLAYS HIS LAST CARD.

Though he seems to thee an angel
Let him not thy heart beguile,
He's a devil from a strange hell,
Evil lurks beneath his smile.

Round the old Grange the winds were howling dismally, and now that the thaw had set in the sadness of the place was increased by the incessant dripping of the melted snow. The dead leaves in the park were sodden and heavy, so heavy, indeed, that they could not be moved by the keen wind, which, in revenge, shook the bare boughs of the trees, or whistled dismally through the cracks and crannies of the old building.

Una sat at the window of the parlour looking out at the heavy, grey sky, to which the bleak trees lifted up their gaunt arms, and listening to the monotonous dripping on the terrace. But, in spite of the dreariness and solitude of the place, surely her heart should have been lighter and her face gayer than it was, seeing that in a few days she was going to be united to the man she loved. But the shadow on the dismal landscape also rested upon her face, and even the lively chatter of Miss Cassy about the wedding could not bring a smile into her mournful eyes.

"I'm sure, Una dear, I'm glad you're going to be married," said Miss Cassy, who had put the tea cosy on her head preparatory to leaving the room, "but really I don't know what's coming over things; you look so sad--quite like a mourner, you know--the Mourning Bride of what's-his-name--and then for Patience to stay away all night! Why does she do it?--why!--why!--she never did it before, and then those letters you got this morning, what are they about?--it's all so odd, I really don't know what things are coming to."

"Things are going very well, aunt," said Una with a faint smile. "Patience stayed all night in the village because of the storm last night, and as to those letters, I'll tell you all about them later on."

"Yes, do, let me share your confidence, at least. I brought you up from pinafores, you know, quite like my own child. Oh, I wish I had one. Why haven't I a child?"

Now, I know what you're going to say--marriage, of course--but I've never had the chance, nobody wanted to marry me--so odd--I would have made a loving wife--quite like an ivy--really a clinging ivy. Oh, if I could only find my oak."

The little lady fluttered tearfully out of the room, leaving Una sitting alone with the letters on her lap, looking out at the dreary scene. She sighed sadly, and gathering the letters together arose from her chair, when just at that moment a ring came to the front-door bell. Una started apprehensively and her pale face grew yet paler, but she said nothing, only stood like a statue by the window with an expectant look upon her face. Hardly had the harsh jingle of the bell ceased to echo through the house when Jellicks entered, and wriggling up to Una, announced in a hissing whisper that Mr. Beaumont desired to see her.

"Mr. Beaumont," murmured Una, starting suddenly, "what does he want, I wonder? I'd better see him, it may do some good--some good. Yes!" she said aloud, "I will see him; Jellicks, show Mr. Beaumont into this room."

She resumed her seat by the window as Jellicks vanished, and shortly afterwards the door opened and Basil Beaumont, looking haggard and fierce, stood before her. He bowed, but did not attempt any warmer greeting, and she, on her part, simply pointed to a chair near her, upon which he took his seat.

"I suppose you are astonished to see me, Miss Challoner?" he said, after a pause.

"I confess I am a little," she replied calmly, "I thought you were up in London."

"So I was, but I came down to Garsworth yesterday."

"Indeed? Our quiet little village must have great attractions to draw you away from London."

"I did not come down without an object, Miss Challoner," he said gravely, "I have a duty to fulfil."

"Towards whom?"

"Yourself. Yes, I came down from London especially to see you."

"It's very kind of you to take so much trouble upon my account," she said coldly, looking keenly at him. "May I ask what this duty is to which you allude?"

"It is the duty of an honest man towards a wronged woman," said Beaumont quietly.

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning yourself," he asserted solemnly.

"You speak in riddles, Mr. Beaumont," said Una, folding her hands. "I will be very glad if you will explain them."

"Certainly. Two months ago your cousin died and left all his property to a supposed son, who turned out to be Reginald Blake; I have now to inform you that Reginald Blake is no connection whatever of Squire Garsworth, consequently his assumption of the property is a fraud."

"What do you mean, sir?" said Una quickly. "I understood Mr. Blake's identity was fully established----"

"Yes, by Patience Allerby," interrupted Beaumont quickly. "She said he was the son of Fanny Blake and the Squire, knowing such a statement to be false."

"Then who are Mr. Blake's parents?"

"Patience Allerby and myself."

Una arose from her seat with an angry colour in her cheeks.

"You--you Reginald's father--impossible!"

"It's perfectly true," he replied calmly. "Patience Allerby came up to London many years ago with me, and when Reginald was born she left me and came down here, bringing up our son under another name. I, as you know, came to Garsworth some time ago, and saw her again, but she asked me to say nothing, so I obeyed her, but now that I find she has committed a fraud, of which you are the victim, I naturally hasten to put it right."

"Did Mr. Blake know he was not the heir?"

"He did from the first," asserted Beaumont audaciously. "I have no doubt his mother told him his true birth, and knowing the Squire's mania about re-

incarnation they made this conspiracy up together in order to defraud you of the property."

"So Mr. Blake has deceived me?" said Una, in an unnaturally quiet tone.

"Yes, he has deceived you all along. I have no doubt he prepared all the forged documents which proved his identity with the supposed son, and counted on your love for him not to prosecute should anything be discovered. I'm glad I have been able to warn you in time. You will never marry him now."

"But the property; do you think he will keep the property?"

"He will try to I've no doubt," said Beaumont gravely, "but if you intrust your case to experienced hands, I have no doubt he will be made to disgorge his plunder."

"But to whom can I turn?" said Una helplessly. "I have no friend."

Beaumont arose to his feet, and came close to her.

"Yes, you have one--myself."

"You?" she cried, recoiling with a shudder.

"Yes. I love you passionately, Una, and if you will be my wife, I will recover your property for you."

"But--your own son?"

"I despise a son who could act as Reginald has done. I came down here expecting to find an honourable man, but instead I discover a scoundrel, a forger, and a thief."

"Is it all true what you have said?" murmured Una, looking straight at him.

"All true," he answered solemnly, "I swear it."

"You liar!"

He started back in amazement, for she was facing him like an enraged tigress, with crimson cheeks and blazing eyes.

"What do you mean?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Mean?" she repeated scornfully. "That I know all, Basil Beaumont. Do you see this letter? I received it from your unhappy son this morning, giving me back the property and revealing the whole of your nefarious scheme. I know who forged the documents--you! I know who hoped to enjoy the money through Reginald--you! I know who comes with lies on his lips to part me from the only man I love--you! Yes--you! you! you!"

The baffled schemer stood nervously fingering his hat, with a white sullen face, all his courage having left him. So mean, so cowardly, so despicable he looked, shrinking back against the wall before this young girl, who towered over him like an inspired Pythoness.

"You tell me Reginald Blake knew of this base conspiracy," she said with contempt. "Does this letter look like it? You say he will refuse to give up the property--this letter says he surrenders it of his own free will--and you have the insolence to speak of love to me. You--who so shamefully tricked and betrayed Patience Allerby--you contemptible hound!"

He tried to smile defiantly, and made an effort to form a word with his white quivering lips, but both attempts were a failure, and without glancing at her he slunk towards the door, looking like a beaten hound.

"Yes, slink away like the craven you are," she cried disdainfully, "and leave Garsworth at once, or I will prosecute you for your scoundrelly conduct. Yes, though you were twenty times Reginald's father."

"I've spoilt his chance anyhow," he hissed venomously.

"You have spoilt nothing of the sort," she retorted superbly. "Do you think I believe the words of a vile thing like you against this letter? I am going to Reginald Blake, to day, and will place myself and my fortune in his hands--in spite of your falsehoods I will marry him, and he will still be master of Garsworth Grange--but, as for you, leave the village at once, or I will have you hounded out of it, as you deserve to be--you cur!"

He was white with anger and shame, tried to speak, but with an imperious gesture she stopped him with one word:

"Go!"

He slunk out of the door at once, a ruined and disgraced man.

CHAPTER XLI.

A WOMAN'S HEART.

When Dame Fortune frowns severest,
Then I love thee best of all,
I will cling to thee, my dearest,
Though the world in ruins fall.

Dr. Larcher was in his study talking to Reginald Blake, who sat near the writing table, leaning his head upon his hand with his arm resting on the desk. The face of the good Vicar was somewhat clouded, as he felt deeply for the unhappy young man, and he was trying to speak words of comfort to him, although he felt how difficult it was to converse cheerfully under present circumstances. Reginald, however, had taken this second discovery more easily than he had done the first, perhaps because he had suffered so much already that he could not suffer more. At all events, his face, though pale, was perfectly composed, and there was a look of determination about his lips and a serene light in his eyes which gave great satisfaction to Dr. Larcher.

"I must say, my dear boy," he said kindly, "that you have great cause for sorrow, but you must bear adversity like a man, and I feel sure the result will be beneficial to your future life--sooner or later we all feel what Goethe calls 'world sorrow,' and it is that which changes us from careless youth to thoughtful manhood--your trial has come earlier and has been a more bitter one than that of most men, but believe me, out of this apparent evil good will come; remember the saying of the old Roman lyricist, *Perrupit Acheronta Hercules labor--time*

will bring you relief, and, if you resist manfully, you also will be able to break through this Acheron of sorrow and pain."

Reginald listened attentively to this long discourse, and, at its conclusion, lifted his head proudly.

"I agree with all you say, sir," he replied steadily, "and hope to profit by your advice, but you must not think me a mere weakling who gives in without a struggle when trials come. No, I think your training has taught me more than that. I feel bitterly the circumstances of my birth, and in having parents I can neither honour nor respect, but the cruellest blow of all is that I must renounce all hope of the woman I love--it is very hard, indeed, to almost gain the prize and then lose it through no fault of my own."

"I think you misjudge Una," said the vicar quietly, "she is not the woman to act in such a way--in fact, now that you have met with misfortune, I think she will love you more than before."

"I hope so, yet I doubt it," replied the young man gloomily; "but now that all my past is ended in ruin I must look to the future and try and win a respected name--which I have not got now. But first, what am I to do about my parents?"

"Regarding your father," said the vicar thoughtfully, "I don't think you will see any more of him, as he will probably leave the village to-day--now that he can gain nothing from you he will probably leave you alone--but as to your mother, your place is certainly by her side."

"But look how she has deceived me."

"If she has erred it is through love of you," replied Dr. Larcher gravely, "and after all she is bound to you by the ties of nature. Yes, you must look after her; but what about yourself?"

"I will go to London and make a fortune by my voice."

"Your last sojourn in London was not productive of any good result," said the vicar in gentle rebuke.

"Perhaps not, but if I erred it was with my head not my heart. I was miserable, and tried to drown my sorrows in dissipation, but now I go to town under widely

different circumstances--a pauper where I once was wealthy--so my only dissipation now will be hard work."

"That is right," said the vicar, approvingly. "I am glad to see you accept the inevitable in such spirit--*levius fit patientia Quidquid corrigere est nefas.*"

"It's the only spirit in which I can accept the future," answered Reginald sadly, "seeing that I am to pass the rest of my life without Una."

"As I said before, you wrong her; she is too noble a woman to leave you now you are in trouble."

"I wish I was as certain as you are," said Blake, rising to his feet and walking to and fro, "but after what has passed I am afraid to hope."

At this moment a knock came to the door, and immediately afterwards Una Challoner entered. She looked pale in her dark mourning garments, but there was a soft light in her eyes as they rested on Reginald which comforted the vicar greatly.

"Welcome, my dear," he said heartily, rising and taking her hand, "you could not have come at a happier time. Reginald has great need of you, so I will leave you both together, and I hope you will prove the David to his Saul, in order to chase away the evil shadow that is on him."

When the vicar had departed and closed the door after him Una stood in silence, looking at Reginald, who had sat down again. So sad, so despondent was his attitude, that all the love of her heart went out towards him, and walking gently up to her lover she touched his shoulder.

"Reginald."

"Yes," he said, lifting his heavy eyes to her face. "What is it? Have you come to reproach me?"

"Reproach you with what, my poor boy?" she asked, tenderly, kneeling beside him. "What have you done that I should come to you with harsh words?"

"You are a good woman, Una," said Blake sadly, putting his hand caressingly upon her head, "but I think there is a limit even to your forbearance."

"What nonsense you talk," she said lightly. "I understand everything--you are not responsible for the sins of your parents."

"I cannot marry you now," he replied in a low voice. "I can offer you nothing except poverty and a dishonoured name."

"You can offer me yourself," said Una with a smile, "and that is all I want. As to your dishonoured name, you forget you have given that up--your name now is Reginald Garsworth."

"It was, but I surrender it with the property."

"I hardly see that, seeing there is no question of surrender. Yes," she went on, seeing the astonishment depicted on his face, "things are going to remain exactly as they are. You will still be titular lord of the manor, and we will look upon this conspiracy of your unhappy parents as if it had never existed."

"Impossible," he muttered. "I cannot rob you of your property."

"Don't I tell you there is no robbery?" she replied rapidly. "As man and wife we will share the property in common, so there is no necessity for you to surrender what will soon come back to you by marriage."

"I had given up all hope of the marriage!"

"Ah! you don't know how determined I am when I take a thing into my head," she said playfully. "We will be married next week, and you will retain the property just as if nothing had occurred. No one knows the truth of the affair except your parents, and they will not speak."

"My father will, I know his vindictive nature."

"Your father!" she repeated contemptuously. "Don't speak of Basil Beaumont by that name. He has been no father to you, and as for speaking you can set your mind at rest. He called upon me this morning, and I soon settled everything."

"He called on you?"

"Yes, with a lot of lies in his mouth, but I threatened to prosecute him if he did not leave the village, so by this time I think he is out of the neighbourhood. Don't

trouble, my dear, Beaumont will hold his tongue for his own sake."

"And my mother?"

"I called at Kossiter's as I passed," she answered, "and found your mother had gone up to London this morning. We must find her out and give her some money to live on, for after all, whatever part she has taken in this conspiracy it was for love of you."

"Just what Dr. Larcher said."

"So you see everything is settled," she said joyously, rising from her knees, "we will be married next week and you will be master of Garsworth Grange."

Reginald was deeply affected by her noble conduct, and rising to his feet embraced her fondly.

"You are a noble woman," he said, with tears in his eyes, "but can I accept this sacrifice?"

"Why will you use such a word?--there is no sacrifice in what I do for the man I love."

"Remember I bring you nothing."

"You bring me yourself, that is all I want. Let the past be forgotten. When we are married you will forget all the troubles you have had."

He kissed her, smiling.

"You are my good angel," he said simply.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE DAWN OF A NEW LIFE.

On mount and mere the moonlight lies
Dim shadows veil the western skies,
On every stream the starlight gleams,
And all is mystery and dreams.
But now Night folds her sombre wings.
The lark his morning carol sings,
A rosy, light glows o'er the lawn,
And lo! in splendour breaks the dawn.

It was about a year since the marriage of Una with Reginald, and they were standing on the terrace of their hotel at Salerno, which overlooked the sea. Far below lay the blue ocean with its fringe of white waves breaking on a shore that extended in a curve round the base of the lofty mountains, the summits of which were clearly defined against the opaline sky. And what a wonderful sky it was, for the setting sun had irradiated the pure ether with most gorgeous colours. Great golden clouds in the west, forming a canopy over the intolerable brilliance of the sinking sun, melted into a delicate rose colour, which, rising towards the zenith, imperceptibly dissolved into a cold, clear blue, out of which peered a few stars. There were some boats on the sea with their broad sails, and the young couple on the terrace could hear every now and then the shrill voice of a minstrel singing a popular Italian air to the sharp notes of the mandolin.

It was a wonderfully picturesque scene, and one which would have enchanted the eye of an artist, but Mr. and Mrs. Garsworth, leaning over the terrace, were not looking at the splendours of sea and sky, being engaged one in reading and the other in listening to a letter which appeared to interest them deeply.

They had been wandering about the Continent in a desultory kind of fashion for many months, exploring all kinds of old-fashioned cities, with their treasures of bygone ages. They had gazed at the splendours of the Alhambra at Granada, enjoyed the brilliant glitter of Parisian life, wandered in quiet Swiss valleys under the white crest of Mont Blanc, seen the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth, and dreamed of mediæval ages in the narrow streets of Nuremberg and Frankfort. Then coming south they had beheld with delighted eyes the white miracle of Milan Cathedral, passed enchanted moonlit hours in the palace-sided canals of Venice, idled amid the awesome ruins of the Eternal City, and after seeing the smoking crest of Vesuvius rise over the marvellous bay of Naples, had come to

pass a few days at Salerno, that wonderfully picturesque town, which recalls to the student of Longfellow memories of Elsa and her princely lover.

Reginald was perfectly happy. He had, it is true, lost all the gay carelessness of youth, but in its place he had found the deeper joy which arises out of a great sorrow. There never was a more devoted wife than Una, nor a more attached husband than Reginald, and the bitter sorrow which had shown them both how truly they loved one another had borne good fruit, for they had learnt to trust, love, and honour each other so implicitly that no shadow ever arose between them to darken their married life. At Salerno, however, they had found a letter from Miss Cassy, who had been left in charge of Garsworth Grange, giving all the news and urging them to return home again. Nor was the request unwelcome, for, now that his heart wound was to a certain extent cured, Reginald began to tire of the glowing landscapes of southern Europe, and to long for that cold northern land so fresh and green under its mists and rain.

Una was reading the letter and Reginald, leaning his arms on the balustrade of the balcony, gazed idly at the fantastic splendours of the scene before him, listening eagerly to the news which brought so vividly before him the long marshes, the dreary Grange, and the quiet village life of Garsworth.

"I do wish you would come back, Una," wrote Miss Cassy, who, by the way, wrote exactly as she spoke, "it seems so odd the long time you've been away. According to your instructions the Grange has been done up beautiful, and I'm sure you will see how my taste has improved it. It's not a bit dreary now, but bright and homelike, and I'm sure you and dear Reginald will love it when you see it again. I do so long to hear about your travels--Rome and Santa Lucia, you know--it's a song, isn't it----?"

Curiously enough, as Una was reading this the unseen minstrel below broke into the well-known air with its charming refrain. Reginald and Una looked at one another and laughed.

"What a wonderful coincidence," said Reginald, peering over the balcony to see the musician; "if we told that to Miss Cassy she wouldn't believe it; but never mind, go on with the letter."

"I got a letter from Dr. Nestley, the other day," read Una. "Of course, you know he married Cecilia Mosser, and went home to his own place, at some town in the

North--I forget its name. He is quite reformed now, and makes an excellent husband. I hear he is making a good deal of money, and Cecilia is organist at a church up there. You remember how beautifully she played?"

"I'm glad they are happy," interrupted Reginald, heartily. "Poor Nestley's life was nearly ruined by that scampish father of mine."

"I see Aunty says something about him," said Una, quickly. "She writes: 'In the letter I received from Dr. Nestley, he says he heard that Mr. Beaumont--you remember, Una?--who stayed at Garsworth--a charming man--is in America, and has married a very rich lady.'"

"I wish her joy of the bargain," said Reginald, grimly. "I suppose he has quite forgotten my poor mother."

"Never mind, dear," answered Una. "I'm sure your mother is much happier now."

"As a Sister of Mercy," said Reginald, in a musing tone, "poking about among the slums of London. It's a curious life for her to take up."

"I think she always had a leaning that way," replied Una, with a sigh; "and it will make her forget the past."

"I wish she would accept some money, to make her comfortable."

"I don't think she will," said Mrs. Garsworth, folding up the letter; "but when we go back again, perhaps she'll give up London, and come back to Garsworth."

"I'm afraid not," replied Reginald, gravely. "My mother is a woman of strong will, and she thinks she has a sin to expiate, so she'll stay and labour there till she dies. Well, what else does Miss Cassy say?"

"Nothing particular," answered Una, putting the letter in her pocket. "Mrs. Larcher still labours under 'The Affliction.' Dr. Larcher has been to London, to attend some archæological meeting. Dick Pemberton has come in for his money and, Aunty thinks, has some idea of asking Pumpkin to be his wife."

"Pumpkin?" echoed Reginald, in a shocked tone. "No, Una, you forget--Eleanora Gwendoline."

They both laughed, and Una went on giving the news.

"Jelicks and Munks are both well, and Ferdinand Priggs is going to bring out a new volume of poems."

"Is he, really?" said Reginald, lightly. "Don't I pity the unhappy public! But all this news makes me home-sick, Una."

"I feel exactly the same," she replied, rising to her feet, and slipping her arm into that of her husband. "Let us go home again."

"Yes, I think we will," said Reginald, after a pause, "I don't mind living at Garsworth, now you are with me, Una."

"And what about your voice?" she said, playfully. "Your wonderful voice, that was going to make your fortune?"

"Ah, that is a dream of the past," he said, half sadly. "I will settle down into a regular country squire, Una, and the only use I'll make of my voice will be to sing Lady Bell to you."

Then, putting his arm round her, he sang the last verse of the quaint old ballad:

"My Lady Bell, in gold brocade,
Looked not so fair and sweet a maid,
As when, in linsey woollen gown,
She left for love the noisy town."

His voice sounded rich and full in the mellow twilight, while the minstrel below stopped playing, as he heard the song floating through the shadowy air. The sun had sunk into the sea, and the stars were shining brilliantly. One long bar of vivid light stretched along the verge of the horizon, and the air was full of shadows and the perfume of unseen flowers.

"See!" said Reginald, pointing towards the band of light, "it is like the dawn."

"Yes!--the dawn of a new life for you and for me, dear," she whispered; and then

they wandered along the terrace, through the shadows, with the hoarse murmur of the distant sea in their ears, but in their hearts the new-born feelings of joy and contentment.

THE END.

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