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NEVA'S CHOICE

By MRS. HARRIET LEWIS

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A sequel to "Neva's three lovers"

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SYNOPSIS OF “NEVA’S THREE LOVERS.”

A beautiful young widow, Mrs. Octavia Hathaway, with the connivance of her admirer, Craven Black, succeeded in marrying the wealthy widower, Sir Harold Wynde, who had a daughter, Neva, at school in France, and a son, George, with his regiment in India. A hurried call to the deathbed of his son frustrated the design of the two adventurers to poison the baronet, who, after his son died, was reported to have been killed by a tiger in India, instead of which he was kept prisoner by a treacherous native servant. After fifteen months of outward mourning Lady Wynde married Craven Black, and in order to secure the large fortune of her stepdaughter, she determined that Neva should marry Black’s son, Rufus. The latter, however, although in fear of his father, was not unscrupulous. He had married a young girl named Lalla Bird, but as both were under age he was persuaded that the marriage was illegal. Lalla was reported to have thrown herself into the river on learning this, but the body recovered was not hers. She found employment as governess to the children of a Mrs. Blight. Rufus, believing her dead, proposed to Neva, but was refused, and the young heiress became betrothed to Lord Towyn.

Neva’s Choice

NEVA’S CHOICE.

CHAPTER I.
NEVA'S ANSWER TO LORD TOWYN.

Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, summoning the indispensable Mrs. Artress to a private conference, passed some hours in their own room in anxious deliberation upon their future course in regard to Neva. It was necessary to the full success of the daring game they were playing, that Neva should marry Rufus Black; but she had rejected him, completely and finally, in obedience to her instincts of duty to God and to herself, and her enemies began to believe that they would have serious trouble in forcing her into the marriage.

In accordance with the conclusion to which they finally arrived, Mrs. Artress went away from Hawkhurst that very afternoon in the family brougham, and two trunks belonging to her were conveyed to Canterbury in a spring wagon. It was given out that she was going to London to visit a friend. She really went up to London, but to what point she then directed her wanderings no one knew.

Rufus Black wandered disconsolately all day in the park, and came in an hour before dinner. His father encountered him in the upper hall, and went into his room with him.

"That's a fine face, Rufus," said Craven Black, sneeringly, "to win the heart of a girl like Miss Wynde. You look as if you were traveling straight to the dogs."

"So I am, sir," said Rufus, recklessly.

"You dare to answer me in that manner?"

"To whom should I tell the truth, if not to you?" cried Rufus desperately. "You have made me what I am. I married a pure and innocent young girl, who but for me was utterly friendless in the wide world. You tore me from her. You persuaded me that my marriage was illegal—"

"And wasn't it?"

"I suppose it was, but it was not null and void. It could have been set aside by due process of law, because I was a minor, and because I perjured myself in declaring that I was of age; but I refuse to believe that it was null and void, no marriage at all. I never wronged my poor Lally as you pretend."

"Why this spasm of virtue?" demanded Craven Black, with a cynical smile. "The girl's dead, isn't she?"

“Yes, she’s dead! God help me!”

“What a tragic groan! This morning you were in despair because Miss Wynde rejected you. To-night you are mourning after your corn-chandler’s daughter. I’d like to understand you—I would indeed. Which are you wailing after, Miss Wynde or Lalla Rookh?”

“Which?” cried Rufus, with wild eyes. “For the girl you and I murdered! It is she whom I mourn! I think of her stark form and open eyes and dead bruised face, as she must have looked when they brought her up out of the river, and my heart is like to break within me. She haunts me day and night. In my bed I waken from my dreams to clasp her closer to me, but my arms close on the empty air. I seem to feel the touch of her hands on my face—oh, Heaven! I shall never feel them there again! I was a poor pitiful coward. Yet what could I do? And yet you and I are Lally’s murderers!”

Craven Black shivered involuntarily.

“You act as if you had a touch of the D. T.” he said. “Have you been spending the day in a Canterbury pot-house?”

“No; I have been wandering in the park, trying to forget. You need not fear that I shall get drunk again.”

“Your reflections were rather singular for a rejected lover of Miss Wynde,” sneered Craven Black. “I thought you loved the heiress?”

“So I do, but not as I loved Lally. If Miss Wynde does not take pity on me, I am lost. The love of a good woman would save me from madness and utter despair. In time I might grow to love her as I loved Lally, and in any case I would worship her from very gratitude.”

“I am blessed if I can understand you,” said Craven Black, his lips curling. “You love a dead woman and a living woman, and mourn one while you want to marry the other. It is very curious. It’s a pity you are not a Mahommedan, so that you could have had both.”

“Stop!” cried Rufus, in a tone of command. “Don’t speak such words in connection with the names of Lally and Miss Wynde. I want to marry Neva to save myself from going mad—”

“After another woman? Exactly. No wonder Miss Wynde declined the honor, with thanks.”

“I shall leave here to-morrow,” said Rufus.

“You won’t do any such thing. You will stay at Hawkhurst for the remainder of the week, and play the lover to Miss Wynde, and sigh like any donkey in her ears, and spout poetry, and touch her heart. ‘Faint heart never won fair lady,’ says the proverb. Girls often refuse a man the first time he offers, for fear of being held too cheap. Pursue the girl gently, but keep pursuing.”

“She says her father wrote her a letter saying he knew me,” said Rufus doggedly. “She asked me about him, and I told her I didn’t know Sir Harold from a butcher.”

“You did?” gasped Craven Black. “The devil!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you have put your foot in it. I knew you were a fool, but I didn’t suppose you had arrived at such a low state of idiocy as it appears you have. Didn’t I tell you what to tell the girl if she ever spoke of her father?”

“I believe you did, but I couldn’t stand there with her eyes on me and deliberately lie to her. I understood about the letter. *You* wrote it.”

“Hush! I’ve a good mind to leave you to yourself, and let you fetch up in some union,” declared Craven Black angrily. “Such a dolt as you are isn’t fit to live. How do you expect the girl to marry you when you yourself put obstacles in the way?”

“See here,” said Rufus. “What are you going to make out of my marriage with Neva Wynde?”

“Ten thousand pounds a year, which you are to formally agree to pay me out of her income.”

“I thought you had some motive in the matter besides love to me. But I’d pay it if she’d marry me. But she won’t.”

“She will, if you choose to be a little bolder. We leave here, my wife, Neva and myself, next Monday for Wynde Heights. Mrs. Black will use all her influence with Neva during our absence to induce her to accept you, and I am sure she will succeed. You are to hold yourself in readiness to come to us at any moment on receiving my summons.”

“Where is Wynde Heights?”

“In Yorkshire.”

“Very well. I will come when you notify me. But I don’t think going will do any

good. Miss Wynde is no coquette, and not likely to change her mind. Besides, she is likely to marry Lord Towyn."

"I think not," said Craven Black significantly. "She is a minor, and I don't believe she would marry against the wishes of her step-mother?"

"The question is if your wife *is* her step-mother," remarked Rufus, still recklessly. "The probability is that the relationship is worn out by this time, and the sense of duty that Miss Wynde may have felt toward her father's widow will fall short when it comes to be directed toward Craven Black's wife."

"We won't go into details," said his father coolly. "If you want to marry the girl, keep telling her so. There's nothing like persistence."

"Ye-s; but about that ten thousand pounds a year?" said Rufus thoughtfully. "I don't think it would be right to take any such sum out of her income, and besides, it might be impossible."

"Leave that to me. As to the right and wrong of it, a perjurer is not qualified to judge. Confine yourself to what you can understand. It is time to get ready for dinner, and I advise you to come down with a cheerful face."

With this advice, Craven Black went away to his own rooms.

Rufus resolved to act upon his father's advice, and when he went down to dinner with a pale, melancholy face, and haggard eyes, he wore an air of assumed cheerfulness which touched Neva's heart.

That evening he sang with her while she played upon the piano. He quoted poetry to her in the third drawing-room, where they were alone, and afterward induced her to walk with him in the moonlight upon the terrace.

The next day he was full of delicate attentions to Miss Wynde. She found a bouquet of wood violets at her plate at breakfast, with the dew still upon them, and knew who had procured them for her. He asked to be allowed to accompany her on her morning ride, and Neva assented. After the ride, they played chess, gathered bouquets in the conservatory, and, later, walked in the park. Neva was gently courteous to him all the while, but there was a quiet reserve in her manner that forbade him to speak again of love or marriage to her.

The day after Lord Towyn called at Hawkhurst, and Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black received him with all courtesy, and were so politely attentive to him that he could not exchange a word with Neva unheard by them.

The young earl went away, as may be supposed, troubled and annoyed.

On Friday he rode over again from his marine villa, and was similarly entertained, and again could not see Neva alone.

On Saturday he came to Hawkhurst in the early morning, and learned at the lodge gate that Miss Wynde, attended by her groom, was gone for a ride, and that she had gone by the Dingle Farm. His heart bounded within him, and he spurred away in eager pursuit.

He traversed the wood and crossed the wide common, and skirted the dangerous chalk pit, and rode up to the old farm gate just as Neva, remounting her horse, came riding out on her return.

The young earl's warm blue eyes flashed a tender radiance upon her, and he raised his hat, his golden hair gleaming in the sunshine while his noble face glowed with a laughing delight. An answering radiance flashed from Neva's red-brown orbs, and she blushed as she bade him a careless good-morning.

"I came out to meet you," said Lord Towyn, as he wheeled his horse and rode at her side.

"I have much to say to you."

He glanced over his shoulder, but the discreet groom was hanging back, and with a mental blessing upon the fellow, Lord Towyn saw that the field was clear, and that the time had arrived in which to learn his fate.

They rode on for a little while in silence, until they were past the chalk pit and out upon the breezy common. The groom was out of earshot, and the young earl said gently:

"Neva, I have been twice to Hawkhurst to receive the answer you promised me, but I could not speak to you alone. I may not find another opportunity than this, as you go with the Blacks to Wynde Heights on Monday. And so, although this does not seem a fitting place, I ask you again if you will be my wife. I love you, Neva, with all my heart and soul. If you will trust your happiness to me, you will find in me a true lover to the end of our days. Do you think you could be happy with me?"

Neva's pure proud face flushed hotly, and she bent her head low toward her saddle-bow. Lord Towyn waited for her answer in an almost breathless suspense, but she did not speak until they were in the wood path and out of sight of even the lagging groom.

Then she lifted her head shyly, and turned upon her lover a face as divinely fair

and roseate as a June morning, and although she spoke no word he read assent in the drooping eyes, the reddening cheeks, and the proud, tremulous mouth.

He pressed toward her in rapture, and seized one little gauntleted hand, pressing it in his own.

“It is Yes, Neva?” he whispered, as if fearing the very birds might hear him. “Oh, my darling, how shall I deserve this great joy?”

He raised her hand to his lips, and the contact thrilled his very soul. He looked back. No one was in sight. He stooped in his saddle and bent toward her, and his kiss, warm, tender and passionate, fell upon her scarlet mouth, and thus they were betrothed.

The next instant he was again erect in his saddle, and the ecstasy of his glowing face and the unrepressed rapture of his manner, and the tender caressing in his very gaze, proclaimed his great and solemn joy.

“I have a ring, it was my mother’s, Neva, and I ask you to wear it as a sign of our engagement to each other,” he said. “When I see my mother’s ring on your finger, I shall feel that you are indeed mine.”

He took from his little finger a gold ring set with a single brilliant of great size and splendor. Neva tremblingly removed her gauntlet, and the young earl placed the ring upon that finger which custom has dedicated to the purpose.

“That is the seal of our betrothal,” he whispered.

Neva slowly put on her glove.

“Arthur,” she said suddenly, “do you think papa would have approved my marriage with you?”

“I know he would, my darling. It was his wish, as it was my father’s, that we should marry.”

“If I could only think that he never changed his mind!” sighed the young girl. “I have a letter he wrote me the night before he perished in India, Arthur, and in this letter he says that he desires me to marry Rufus Black.”

The young earl looked surprised, incredulous.

“I have the letter with me,” said Neva. “You can read it. In it papa says he desires me to marry this young man, whom he esteems and loves. I have struggled to obey papa’s last wishes, but I cannot—I cannot! And he was such a good father, Arthur, that I reproach myself continually for my disobedience. I

never disobeyed him before, and I seem to see his eyes full of reproach fixed upon me, and to hear his voice—Oh, Arthur! Arthur!"

"Let me see the letter, darling."

Neva extricated it from the folds of her dress, and gave it to him. They halted while he read it. A look of surprise, wonder and incredulity mantled Lord Towyn's face as he read. It was followed by a sternness that well became his fair and haughty face.

"I pronounce the letter a forgery!" he declared. "May I keep it, Neva, for the present? I desire to show it to Mr. Atkins, who shall give us his opinion on the handwriting."

"Yes; keep it," assented Neva.

Lord Towyn carefully put it in his pocket.

"I pronounce the letter a forgery," he repeated sternly. "How did it come to you, darling?"

"Lady Wynde gave it to me on my return from France. Papa desired her to retain it for a year. Who would forge such a letter, Arthur?"

"I don't know. I am puzzled. One cannot suspect Lady Wynde, and yet—and yet—I don't know what to think, Neva. I don't believe Sir Harold ever saw Rufus Black."

"Rufus says he never saw papa, or that he never spoke to him," said Neva. "And that remark made me doubt the letter. But Rufus never forged it, Arthur. Rufus is a kind-hearted, but weak-willed boy—he is no more. If he had more 'backbone' in his character, he would be even noble. I like him, Arthur, and I know he never wrote that letter. Lady Wynde did not. She is too good for that. It might have been written by Craven Black. I do not like him, and think him quite capable of the forgery, only so many of the words are papa's own that it seems wicked to doubt its authenticity."

"I will prove it a forgery!" cried the young earl. "Sir Harold was incapable of binding your fate in this manner to a man you never saw before it was written. There is some foul conspiracy against you, Neva, but we have outwitted your enemies. I am impatient to have you under my own guardianship. The possibility that you have enemies makes me afraid to trust you from me. Give up this visit to Wynde Heights, darling."

"It is too late, Arthur. We shall stay there but a fortnight, and I have promised to

go. Papa bade me love his wife and obey her, and though she no longer bears his name, and I no longer owe her obedience, yet I have given my word to go up to Yorkshire with her, and must keep my promise."

"But when you return, Neva, you will marry me? Do not condemn me to a long probation. Let us be married quietly some morning at Wyndham church, after due intimation to our friends. Shall it not be so?"

Neva yielded a shy assent.

"We will be married a month hence, Neva?" whispered the ardent young lover.

"Two months," said Neva, smiling. "I must not be too lightly won, Lord Towyn. And, besides, I must have the orthodox trousseau. I will tell Mrs. Black of our engagement when I am with her at Wynde Heights. Rufus is not going with us, nor is Artress."

They had threaded the wood and come out upon the highway long since while they were talking, and were now within sight of Hawkhurst. Rufus Black was riding out of the great gates, on his way to meet Neva. The *tete-a-tete* of the young pair was over for the morning, and recognizing the fact, and not wishing to proclaim his happy secret to his defeated rival, Lord Towyn made his adieus to Neva, begging her to write him daily from Yorkshire, which she promised to do, and, then raising his hat to Rufus Black, the young earl spurred his horse and rode swiftly on toward Wyndham.

Neva returned home with Rufus.

On Monday morning, Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, accompanied by Miss Wynde, departed for Wynde Heights.

On Wednesday, Lord Towyn looked for a letter from his young betrothed. None came. Thursday, Friday and Saturday went by, and still there came no letter from Neva, announcing her safe arrival in Yorkshire.

The young earl wrote every day, his uneasiness increasing as the time passed. He communicated his alarm to Sir John Freise and Mr. Atkins, and they telegraphed to the clergyman of the little town in whose vicinity Wynde Heights was situated, begging him to call and see if Miss Wynde was in good health.

The answer to this dispatch came promptly, and also by telegraph. It was to this effect:

> "Sir John Freise and Mr. Atkins: Wynde Heights is untenanted, save by the housekeeper. Miss Wynde has not been here, nor have Mr.

and Mrs. Black.”

On receipt of this astounding message, the young earl posted up to town, as did Sir John Freise and Mr. Atkins. They searched for the missing heiress and her guardians, but their search was futile. Not a trace of her could be found. She had come up to London with her enemies, but no further clue to her could be found. She had completely disappeared, and her fate was shrouded in dark and horrible mystery!

CHAPTER II.

THE PUZZLE OF NEVA'S WHEREABOUTS.

On going up to town with Sir John Freise and Mr. Atkins to engage in the search for Neva Wynde, who had so strangely and mysteriously disappeared, Lord Towyn had left orders with the steward of his marine villa to forward to him in London without delay any and all letters that might arrive to the address of the young earl. And so, while he prosecuted his researches with desperate energy, Lord Towyn half expected by every post some news from his young betrothed.

The three guardians of Neva's estate were sadly puzzled and thoroughly alarmed, but for Neva's own sake they kept the mystery to themselves. Mr. Atkins urged that no detectives be taken into their confidence, and that no newspapers be permitted to publish the strange story.

"We shall do as well as any detectives," said the attorney, "and if there is any game afoot, we will not set the villains who are at work in it upon their guard."

"Villains?" echoed Sir John Freise disapprovingly. "The thing is mysterious, Mr. Atkins, but it is susceptible of explanation. Had it not been for Miss Wynde's promise to write daily to Lord Towyn, and her failure to comply with that promise, we should have suspected no harm. 'Villains' is a strong word to apply to Miss Wynde's companions. Miss Wynde may have fallen ill on the way to Wynde Heights, or the plan of the tour may have been changed. In fact, one of these alternatives doubtless contains the truth. But 'villains,' Mr. Atkins—the word troubles me. To whom do you apply it? Certainly not to the beautiful lady who was the wife of our friend Sir Harold Wynde, and who was so loved and trusted by him that he constituted her the sole personal guardian of his beloved daughter?"

"And who so appreciated her husband's love and noble qualities," said Mr. Atkins dryly, "that in one year from his tragic death she was receiving the loving attentions of a Craven Black, and in fifteen months after Sir Harold's death became the wife of a Craven Black! Bah! I was never deceived in Lady Wynde, not even when Sir Harold brought her home to Hawkhurst. She is a bold, designing, unscrupulous creature, and it is as well that Sir Harold died before she broke his heart."

"Mr. Atkins, your harsh judgment amazes me—"

“I imagine, Sir John Freise,” said the attorney, “that in your secret soul your opinion of Mrs. Craven Black is much higher than mine. Have you been blind to the insatiable vanity, and the vulgarity and ill-taste of the widow of Sir Harold Wynde, who, fifteen months after losing the noblest husband the sun ever shone on, converts that husband’s house into a ball-room, and sets his church bells ringing and his tenantry dancing at her marriage with a gambler and adventurer, unworthy even to breathe the same air with Sir Harold’s pure young daughter? You look shocked, Sir John. If it were necessary, I could give you my further opinion concerning Mrs. Craven Black, but you are sufficiently shocked already.”

“You said, Mr. Atkins,” said Lord Towyn, “that you thought Mrs. Black unscrupulous. I cannot believe her as base as you think, but I have a question to submit to you and Sir John. When I asked Miss Wynde to become my wife, she told me that it had been her father’s last wish that she should marry Rufus Black __”

“Impossible!” cried Sir John and Mr. Atkins, in a breath.

“Miss Wynde showed me a letter purporting to have been written by Sir Harold the night before his sudden death,” said Lord Towyn. “I have the letter with me, and a study of it may throw light upon a matter that certainly looks dark to me. I could almost make oath that the deceased baronet never wrote this letter. It deceived Neva completely, if it prove, as I have declared it, a forgery.”

He produced the letter, and gave it into the hands of Mr. Atkins. The attorney read it aloud, weighing each phrase and turn of sentence.

“Sir Harold wrote it,” declared Sir John Freise, without hesitation. “I have heard him express himself in those quaint, oddly turned sentences a hundred times. Those pet names for his daughter, so tender and poetical, were surely written by him. Miss Wynde accepted the letter as genuine, and I do the same without question.”

“And you, my lord?” inquired Atkins.

“It seems to me a forgery,” said Lord Towyn. “Rufus Black confessed to Neva that he had had no personal acquaintance with Sir Harold Wynde.”

“That is odd,” declared Sir John, puzzled. “Perhaps Sir Harold was not quite in his right mind when he wrote the letter. His presentiment of approaching death may have unsettled his judgment; but that is preposterous. I can’t explain the incongruities, but I persist in my opinion that Sir Harold Wynde wrote the

letter."

"What is your opinion, Mr. Atkins?" demanded Lord Towyn.

"Where is Rufus Black?" asked the lawyer abruptly.

"Down at Hawkhurst. He remains there during the absence of the bridal party," answered the young earl in surprise.

"And Rufus Black has confessed to Miss Wynde that he was not personally acquainted with Sir Harold Wynde?" mused the attorney. "My opinion about young Black is, that he is a well-meaning but weak-souled lad, just the person to be made a dupe or instrument in the hands of more unscrupulous and daring souls. I don't dislike the boy. If he were his own master, or had a different father, he'd be a decent fellow."

"What do you think of his father, Atkins?" inquired Sir John.

"I think he's a villain."

"And what do you think of this letter, Atkins?" asked Lord Towyn.

"I think," said Atkins quietly, "that it is a forgery. More, I know that it is a forgery. Sir Harold Wynde was too tender a father to attempt to control his daughter's choice of a husband in a manner so singular. The truth is, Craven Black has begun some sort of game against the Wyndes, and if it don't date further back than Sir Harold's death, I am mistaken. I see you look distressed, Sir John, so I will keep my ideas to myself until I can prove their value. Lord Towyn, will you allow me to retain this letter for the present, to study at my leisure?"

The young earl assented, and Atkins secured the letter on his person.

"And now what are we to do?" asked Sir John.

"I shall take a turn up into Yorkshire, and have a look at Wynde Heights for myself," said Atkins. "You had better remain here, Sir John, and not expose yourself to useless fatigue."

"I shall go with you, Atkins," declared the young earl.

Sir John Freise was anxious to accompany them, but he was scarcely able to bear the fatigue of so hurried a journey, and permitted himself to be overruled. He agreed to remain at their hotel, the Langham, until the return of his friends from the north, and that very evening Lord Towyn and Mr. Atkins departed for Yorkshire.

They arrived in due time at Wynde Heights, a lofty hill, crowned with a beautiful, wide spreading villa, built after the Italian style, and having long colonades. There were ample grounds attached to the villa, a hundred acres or more in extent. Lord Towyn and Mr. Atkins drove out to the place in a cab, and alighting at the carriage porch rang loudly for admittance.

An old housekeeper, a Yorkshire woman, with a broad face and quiet manners, and with but little of the usual Yorkshire burr in her speech, opened the door cautiously after a long delay, and peeped out at them with apparent timidity.

“How do you do, ma’am?” said the lawyer, raising his hat to her respectfully. “We have called to see Miss Wynde and Mrs. Craven Black.”

“The leddies are not here, sir,” answered the housekeeper.

“Not here!” exclaimed Atkins. “But Mrs. Black said they were coming here.”

“Her leddyship wrote to me to have the house ready for her, after her new marriage,” said the housekeeper, “and to engage servants, which I did. And about two weeks ago I got a letter from her leddyship, telling me to dismiss the servants and shut up the house, as her leddyship had decided not to come to the Heights, and I obeyed orders.”

“Will you show us that letter?” demanded the lawyer. “We are the guardians of Miss Wynde’s estate, and find it necessary to see the young lady at the earliest possible moment. We expected to find her here, but the letter may afford us some clue to her whereabouts. This gentleman is Lord Towyn, and I am William Atkins, the attorney of the Wynde family.”

The housekeeper threw wide open the door of the house. Both names were familiar to her, and she welcomed the visitors as those having a right to the hospitalities of the place.

“Come in, my lord; come in, sir,” she exclaimed. “I will get the letter for you.”

The visitors followed her into a cool, unused parlor, and seated themselves, while the woman hurried away in quest of the letter of which she had spoken.

“I had an idea that the Blacks might be stopping here secretly,” said Atkins, in a low voice; “but I’ve changed my mind, my lord. They have not been here. The housekeeper’s face is honesty itself. We’ll have to look elsewhere. I’m sorry we’ve wasted time on the wrong tack.”

The housekeeper reappeared with the letter. Lord Towyn and Mr. Atkins read it. It had been written by Mrs. Craven Black, and was to the effect that she had

changed her mind, and that the bridal party would not come north that season, and ordering the newly engaged servants to be dismissed, and the house to be again closed.

Atkins sighed, as he restored the letter to the housekeeper.

“We are much obliged to you ma’am,” he said, “and now we must hasten back to London. If you hear from your mistress, be kind enough to drop me a line at my address. There’s my card. But it’s not likely you will hear from Mrs. Black before we do.”

The visitors bade the housekeeper good morning, and hurried back to the railway station in their cab, catching the down train, and speeding on their way to London.

“I don’t believe our party is in England,” said Atkins musingly, as they steamed swiftly down the line to the southward. “It would be like the Blacks, if they had any game afoot, to make for the Continent. Our next point is to make inquiries at the docks, or at the railway stations.”

They arrived in London in the morning, and hastened to the Langham hotel, where they had an interview with Sir John Freise, who was looking worn and ill under all this suspense and anxiety. The three gentlemen devoted the day to visiting the various railway stations and offices of the Continental boats. They visited also the foreign packet-boats lying in dock, and toward evening learned from the steward of an Ostend boat, that a party such as was described, consisting of two ladies and one gentleman, had crossed the Channel to Ostend at about the time indicated by Atkins.

“Thank Heaven! We are on the track!” breathed Sir John.

“Atkins and I will start for Ostend by way of Dover this very night,” said Lord Towyn, all ardor and impatience.

Atkins drew out a golden sovereign, which he held tantalizingly before the eyes of the steward.

“Answer a few more questions,” said the attorney, “and this is yours, my good fellow. Describe the gentleman who accompanied the two ladies.”

The steward hesitated, eyeing the coin with greedy eyes.

“He was tall and fair, with mustaches,” he said slowly, as if fearing the description would not suit his interlocutor, “and he was dressed in black.”

“That would describe Craven Black well enough,” murmured Sir John.

“And the ladies?” questioned Atkins. “How did they look?”

“One was some years older than the other, and was dark, with black eyes. The young lady had lighter hair. They were going on to Brussels, and I took it that the elder lady and gentleman were newly married,” said the steward, “they were that sickish, begging your pardon.”

“There’s no doubt we are on the right track,” cried Sir John, in a tone of relief.

Atkins paid the steward the promised sovereign, and led the way ashore and to the waiting cab.

“To the hotel,” he ordered.

The gentlemen entered the vehicle and hastened back to the Langham. Atkins was very thoughtful and silent during the journey, but as they drove up to the hotel he said:

“We are tired Lord Towyn, and must have rest. I propose that we sleep here to-night, and go on to Dover and Ostend in the morning. I know how anxious and impatient you are, but we must not overtask our strength. You look quite worn out.”

“It is with anxiety then,” said the young earl. “I am eager to go on, Mr. Atkins, but will wait till morning as you counsel.”

The three gentlemen ascended to their private parlor which they shared in common. As they entered the room, a man who was standing at one of the windows, looking out, turned and came forward to meet them.

He was the steward of Lord Towyn’s marine place.

“You here, Sewel?” exclaimed the young earl. “Is anything the matter?”

The steward, an elderly man, with a rugged countenance, as gnarled as an old oak, yet full of kindly warmth, shook his head as he answered:

“There’s nothing wrong, my lord; but you ordered any letters to be sent to you, and knowing how anxious you were, I feared the letter might miscarry, and here it is. I brought it myself.”

“A letter!” cried the three gentlemen in chorus, having no thought of any letter save the one they so much desired.

“It’s in a lady’s hand, and that’s why I brought it,” said the steward.

He took out his pocket-book and drew from it a small square envelope, daintily addressed and sealed.

Lord Towyn uttered a cry of joy, recognizing the handwriting at once.

“It is from Neva!” he ejaculated.

He hurried with it to a window, turning his back on his friends, and tore open the envelope, disclosing a four-page letter, signed with the name of Neva Wynde.

“Ah!” he cried aloud. “It is dated Brussels.”

“We were on the right track then,” said Atkins exultantly.

The young earl perused his letter with a glad heart.

It was very tender and very sweet, full of delicate allusions to their betrothal, and was indeed such a letter as only a woman could write, yet the young lover was not satisfied. The letter lacked the straightforward simplicity that distinguished Neva, and it seemed to Lord Towyn to lack also sincerity. It had been written from the head rather than from the heart, and his first great joy and gladness gave way to a sudden and terrible sense of disappointment.

The steward, seeing that he was not wanted, went quietly from the room, intent upon securing his dinner.

Mr. Atkins and Sir John Freise approached our hero, and the baronet laid a kindly hand upon the young earl’s shoulder.

“Forgive us for interrupting your happy reverie, Lord Towyn,” he said, “but we are very anxious. Miss Wynde writes from Brussels, and in good spirits? We have been troubling ourselves for nothing?”

The young earl did not look around, nor did he speak. He only clutched the letter tighter in his fingers.

“We have got into a panic for nothing,” said Atkins, smiling. “We will keep the joke to ourselves. I would not have Mr. Black curling his cynical lips over our folly, not for worlds. No doubt Miss Wynde satisfactorily explains her previous silence, my lord, and we are free to return home again, wiser if not better men?”

The young earl turned to his companions now, and they started when they saw how deadly pale he was, and what a look of terror and anguish gleamed from his warm blue eyes.

“Miss Wynde is not ill?” cried Sir John.

Lord Towyn raised his arm, waving the letter in the air.

“This letter is in Neva’s handwriting, and signed with her name,” he said, in a strained voice. “It purports to come from her, but, before God, I believe it to be a forgery! My instinct tells me that Neva never wrote it. We are upon the wrong track. Neva is not at Brussels. Perhaps she is not out of England. She is in the hands of her enemies, who have formed some foul conspiracy against her, and we, O God! are powerless to save her!”

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVERTISEMENT QUICKLY ANSWERED.

As the hour drew near for the arrival of the expected guest at Sandy Lands, a suppressed excitement pervaded the pert little villa from basement to attic. The servants had all received orders to wait upon Mrs. Wroat with the utmost alacrity, and some notion of her wealth and eccentricity had been conveyed to them, together with the idea that Mr. and Mrs. Blight entertained “expectations” of inheriting the old lady’s fortune at her death.

Mr. Blight had remained at home upon this day, in order that his aunt-in-law might not conceive herself neglected by him. He was dressed in his Sunday garments, and was practising a smile of welcome, which had somewhat a sickly look, contrasted as it was with his anxious eyes, and uneasy, apprehensive manner.

“Everything hangs upon this visit,” he muttered to himself, as he stood at the parlor window, watching the road. “The old creature is a bundle of whims and caprices, and if she should leave her money to a charity we are undone. Our expenses are so heavy that I can no longer meet them. The old woman *must* make her will in my favor!”

Mrs. Blight had attired herself in a tightly fitting gown of red silk, through which her rotund figure threatened to burst at any moment, and she wore a massive gold chain, a necklace, bracelets and brooch, so that she might have personated at a fancy ball the character of an animated jeweller’s shop.

“What have you got on all that jewelry for?” demanded Mr. Blight, glancing at his wife, as she complacently surveyed the reflection of her stout person and flushed face in the long mirror.

“Why?” said Mrs. Blight, with a degree of worldly wisdom for which her husband, it is to be feared, had never given her credit, “there’s nothing like making the old woman think we are prosperous. Money brings money. If Aunt Wroat sees us haggling about the butcher’s bills and the school bills, she may think her money is going into a bottomless bucket. But if she sees us apparently rich, and without money cares, she will be more anxious to leave her money to us.”

“That’s so,” said Mr. Blight. “I wish she’d come. Upon my soul, I do. Why

didn’t my uncle leave me his money, and give his wife an annuity? In that case, I shouldn’t have cared what became of her, and I certainly would not have been dancing attendance upon her. All our care,” he added sourly, “and all our flattery will go for nothing if the children are not kept out of the way. And there the young savages come pellmell down the stairs.”

“The ‘young savages!’” moaned Mrs. Blight, in terrible reproach. “Have you the soul of a father? Can you call your own offspring savages, as if they were the children of a red Indian, or of cannibals? I’ll send the poor dears back to the school-room. Between you and your horrible old aunt, the poor darlings are in terror of their lives.”

Mrs. Blight hastened out into the hall, but it was now empty. The young governess and the nurse had captured all of the refractory brood save Leopold, and had conveyed them back to the school-room. Leopold had made good his escape into the garden, and was now careering about like a young colt, shouting at the top of his voice.

Mrs. Blight, hearing the noise made by her offspring, was full of terror lest her guest should arrive, and encounter the terrible infant at the gate of Sandy Lands. She rang the bell violently, and ordered Miss Bird to take charge of her pupil immediately. Lally descended to the garden to obey this command, and at the very moment when he chose to yield to her persuasions and be led away captive, a heavily laden cab drove up to the garden door, and the garden bell was rung violently.

The smart housemaid hastened to give admittance to the visitor, and the youthful Leopold, greatly excited at the prospect of seeing Mrs. Wroat, whom he detested, but cordially loved to annoy, struggled in Lally’s grasp. The young girl drew her charge into the shadow of a clump of trees, and stood there, panting and flushed, just as the visitor’s luggage was brought in in advance of the visitor herself.

First came three large trunks, a bandbox in a green cotton bag, a parrot in a cage, who croaked and chattered and muttered hoarse threats, and a blue silk family umbrella.

And then followed the queerest old lady Lally had ever seen. She leaned upon the arm of a tall, angular, hatchet-faced woman, her maid and constant attendant, who spoke to her mistress with a loving gentleness a mother might exhibit toward her child, but which sounded strangely from her thin, compressed lips, and who guided the faltering steps of her mistress with the tenderest care.

It was the old lady, however, upon whom Lally's gaze was fixed with strange intensity. She was thin and withered and bent, a mere wreck of a woman who had been in her day handsome, graceful and spirited. She was nearly eighty years of age, and her hands, incased in black knitted mittens, through whose open meshes her bony fingers showed, clasped a gold-headed staff, which partially supported her, the maid giving her an arm.

The old lady wore an old-fashioned brocade gown, a big traveling cloak, a white frilled cap, and a huge scuttle-shaped bonnet, such as had been worn in her early prime. But her eyes were black and keen and penetrating, full of sparkle and brightness; her hooked nose was prominent like an eagle's beak; and her mouth was curled habitually in a strangely cynical smile or sneer.

The old lady gave a quizzical glance up at the doorway, in which stood Mr. and Mrs. Blight with outstretched arms, and then looked toward Lally. The young girl shrank back, and hurried in at the rear porch and up stairs with her young charge, just as Mrs. Wroat came in at the front door and was received by her connections with loud exclamations of welcome.

The visitor was installed in her own apartments, and she did not emerge from them for the remainder of the day. Mr. Blight went to his office. A supernatural stillness reigned throughout the villa. Mrs. Wroat chose to appear at dinner, which was served at Sandy Lands at seven o'clock; and Mr. Blight was then at home to give her his arm into the dining-room, and to pay her all necessary attentions.

She looked, as Mrs. Blight privately remarked to her husband, "like a witch of Endor," in her dinner costume of black velvet, with a scarlet velvet circular cloak thrown about her thin bent figure, and with her keen black eyes peering sharply out of her sallow face. She only needed a scarlet hood over her gray, wild looking hair, to complete her resemblance to one of the witches who are fabled to meet in lonely wood at midnight, to stir devilish messes in boiling caldrons. But then she wore a set of very fine diamonds, and even a "witch of Endor," with diamonds, would have been handsomely treated by Mrs. Blight.

The old lady was not as courteous as a female Chesterfield. In fact she snapped out spiteful remarks with the utmost unconsciousness of the rising anger of host or hostess, taking a malicious pleasure in stirring up their evil passions, knowing that they dared not give vent to them. It may be that she comprehended their time-serving, speculating natures, and realized that they paid court to her only for her money.

“Miserable wine!” she commented, with a wry face, as she set down her glass. “Gladstone, isn’t it, Charles? It comes at four and six the dozen bottles, I believe. I never buy it myself. I prefer to take wormwood and vitriol undiluted.”

The lawyer flushed. He prided himself on being a connoisseur of wines, and having the choicest cellar in Canterbury.

“That’s real port, Aunt Wroat,” he exclaimed—“of the vintage of ’42.”

“Oh, they told you that, did they?” asked the old lady. “These cheap wine dealers are up to all sorts of tricks. I am surprised that you should have been taken in so, nephew Charles. At your time of life a man should have some judgment of his own.”

Mr. Blight bit his lips furiously, and his wife fancied she heard the old lady chuckle softly to herself, but a glance at her did not confirm the impression.

Presently the old lady opened an attack upon the lawyer’s wife. She looked at her though a quizzing-glass, and exclaimed suddenly, with apparent astonishment:

“Laura, do you think it good taste to wear all that Brummagem? If I could not get real gold, I wouldn’t put on servant’s ornaments; I wouldn’t indeed.”

“But these are real gold, Aunt Wroat,” said Mrs. Blight, her voice trembling with annoyance.

“Tut, tut,” said the old lady severely. “Don’t contradict me. I have been used to good jewelry all my life, and ought to know it when I see it. Good gold! Ha, ha! If you don’t know good gold, ask your cook.”

Mrs. Blight nearly choked with rage, and sulked during the remainder of the dinner, or until her husband threw her a warning glance that reminded her that she could not afford to quarrel with their eccentric relative.

Several times during the repast the host and hostess were stirred to anger they dared not exhibit, and several times Mrs. Blight fancied she heard the old lady chuckle to herself, but of this she could not be quite sure. The Blights fawned upon their wealthy guest, swallowed her insults, and smiled distractedly at her deadliest thrusts. But both drew a sigh of relief when the old lady had been carried back into the drawing-room.

“May be she’ll go to her room now?” whispered Mrs. Blight to her husband, as the old lady fanned herself vigorously, and appeared oblivious of their existence.

“No such good luck,” returned the lawyer ill-naturedly. “She ought to be shut up in a lunatic asylum, the old nuisance. If it wasn’t for her money, she might die in an alms-house before I’d give her shelter.”

The whisper was not low, but then Mrs. Wroat was supposed to be “as deaf as a post,” and of course she could not hear a sound so faint and indistinct. Mr. and Mrs. Blight had frequently vented their opinions much more loudly before her. But there was an odd snap in her eyes on this occasion, as they thus whispered to each other, and again Mrs. Blight fancied she heard a malicious chuckle, but the old lady fell to coughing in a frightful manner, and the lawyer’s wife had no time for fancies, believing the old lady likely to die on the spot.

When the paroxysm was over, and Mrs. Wroat began to breathe freely, Mrs. Blight said, not without nervousness:

“You have a terrible cold, Aunt Wroat. Don’t you do anything for it?”

“It’s a cold that’ll last me my days,” said Mrs. Wroat. “It’s consumption.”

“Do you employ a doctor for it?” asked the lawyer.

“Death is the best doctor,” answered the old lady, with grim facetiousness. “He’ll cure it for nothing. This is my last visit to you, Charles. I sha’n’t last much longer.”

“Oh, I hope you will live twenty years yet, and visit us every year!” cried Mrs. Blight. “Dear Aunt Wroat, we love to have you with us.”

“Yes, I know it,” said Mrs. Wroat, with another odd snap in her witch-like eyes. “I know it, my dear. It’s time to settle my affairs. I am thinking of making my will soon.”

The Blights tried to look unconcerned, but failed. Their curiosity and anxiety displayed themselves in their features.

“Shall you leave your money to a charity, dear Aunt Wroat?” inquired Mrs. Blight caressingly.

“No, no! I shall leave it to—But don’t ask me. You’ll know in good time.”

The lawyer looked significantly at his wife.

“She means to leave it to us!” he whispered. “The old nuisance will pay us for our trouble at last.”

It was singular that just then another fit of coughing attacked the old lady. When

it was over, she said sharply:

“I’ll go to my room. I want to be composed, or I sha’n’t sleep a wink to-night. We’ll visit to-morrow, but I am tired after my journey. I should like some one to play a little music for me in my room, but I don’t want any sentimental songs from your girls, Laura.”

“The governess will sing and play for you, dear Aunt Wroat,” said Mrs. Blight. “She has orders to obey you during your visit, and you can command her at any or all hours.”

“Then send her to me in half an hour. Charles, you can carry me up stairs.”

The lawyer obeyed the intimation, carrying the old lady up to her own room and depositing her in her armchair. The maid was in attendance, and the lawyer and his wife bade their guest an affecting good-night, and retreated to the drawing-room to speculate upon their prospects and the state of Mrs. Wroat’s health.

“Shut the door, Peters,” said the old lady. “And you might open the windows and air the room after those people’s presence.”

Peters obeyed. She was wont to humor all the whims of her mistress.

“Did you find them the same as usual, ma’am?” she asked.

“Just the same, Peters,” and the old lady sighed. “They call me ‘an old cat’ and ‘a nuisance’ in whispers, and ‘dear Aunt Wroat’ out aloud. Miserable hypocrites! I wanted to give them a last chance, but they have ruined their prospects with me. Bah! A pair of fawning, treacherous cats! They will never get a penny of my money beyond a guinea to buy a mourning ring.”

“What shall you do, ma’am? Leave your money to a charity?”

“No, I won’t do that. I won’t have it scattered and doled out in sixpennies and shillings, when the whole sum might go to enrich some deserving person. I’ll leave you an annuity, Peters. You’re the only true friend I have on earth.”

The woman caressed the withered hand of her old mistress with genuine affection.

“Have you given up all hope of finding your own relatives, ma’am?” she asked. “You tracked your niece until after her marriage with a corn-chandler, and have discovered that she died, leaving one child, a daughter, and that her husband died also. The girl may live, ma’am. She’s the last of your blood, and surely it’s better to give to your own kin than to undeserving connections or to strangers.”

“But I can’t find the girl,” sighed the old lady. “I’d adopt her and leave her my money, if she was deserving of it; but I’ve set detectives to look for her, and they have failed to discover anything except that her moonstruck parents named her the ‘The Vailed Prophet,’ or ‘Lalla Rookh,’ or some such nonsense. They did find out that she had been educated like a lady—her mother was a lady—and that she had taught music, or drawing, or something. But she may be dead by this time.”

“We might advertise for her,” cried the maid all enthusiasm. “We could say, if Miss So and So would call at such a place, she would hear of something to her advantage. I do wish you would leave your money to some nice young lady, instead of these people below. I’ll write the advertisement immediately. What is the name of your great-niece, Mrs. Wroat?”

“It’s Kubla Khan, or Lalla Rookh Bird,” answered the old lady. “There was a crack in my niece’s brain, as was shown by her marriage with a corn-chandler, and by the naming of her child. I wonder what kind of a bird the corn-chandler was,” and Mrs. Wroat laughed queerly. “He left his daughter not one penny to bless herself with. Write the advertisement, Peters, at once. What geese we were not to have thought of an advertisement before. If I can find and cage my Bird, Peters, and it turns out a good and worthy Bird, I’ll leave her the whole of my fifty thousand pounds, and you shall have an annuity, Peters, and live with her and take care of her. She’s only a child—not over seventeen.”

Peters brought out her mistress’ portable writing-desk, and sat down before it to pen the required advertisement. Being unused to composition, she spoiled a dozen sheets of paper before she produced the following, which she read aloud to her mistress:

> “If Miss Lalla Bird will apply to the undersigned she will hear of something to her advantage. M. W., Mount street, London, W.”

“That will do,” cried Mrs. Wroat delighted. “M. W.—Maria Wroat. Very good. We’ll have it in all the London papers. Make a dozen copies of it, and address them to a dozen different papers. You shall get the post-office orders to put with them in the morning. But let us see if the advertisement wants any improving. Read it again.”

The maid did so. As she concluded, and before she could speak, the advertisement was answered, for a low knock was heard at the door, and the young governess, in her black dress and with her young face pitiful in its sadness, entered the room, and said shyly and with a low courtesy:

“If you please, ma’am, I’m the governess, and Mrs. Blight sent me in to play to you. My name is Miss Bird.”

CHAPTER IV.
LALLY AND MRS. WROAT.

The simple and business-like announcement of her name by Mrs. Blight's young governess to Mrs. Blight's eccentric guest, produced a sensation as startling as unexpected to Lally. Mrs. Wroat uttered a strange exclamation, and leaned forward on her staff, her black eyes staring at the young girl in a piercing gaze, her hooked nose and her chin almost meeting, and her shrivelled lips mumbling excitedly an inaudible whisper. The old lady's eagerness and agitation was shared by her maid, who stared at Lally with a wondering and incredulous gaze.

"Who—who did you say you were?" demanded Mrs. Wroat, as soon as she could speak, in cracked, hoarse tones—"*Who?*"

"I am Mrs. Blight's governess, ma'am," replied Lally wonderingly, and concluding that Mrs. Wroat's eccentricities verged upon madness.

"Yes, yes, I know," cried the old lady impatiently, "but who are you?"

"Nobody, ma'am—only Lally Bird, the governess."

"Ah-h!" said the old lady, in an odd, choked voice. "Lal-Lally Bird! Lord bless my soul, Peters!"

Mrs. Wroat looked at the young governess with such a queer snap in her eyes, and such a glow on her sallow, withered face, that Lally involuntarily retreated a step toward the door.

"It's the young lady, ma'am," whispered Peters, full of amazement. "Whatever does it mean? It's like magic or sorcery."

"It means that our advertisement is already answered," returned Mrs. Wroat grimly. "Saved the post-office orders, Peters. I believe in advertising, Peters. We've just seen the benefit of it."

Lally retreated another step toward the door.

"If you please, ma'am," she said, in a little fluttering voice, "I will come and play for you later—"

"No you won't!" interrupted Mrs. Wroat. "Now you are here, you'll stay here till I am through with you. Do you know who I am?"

Lally brought to her support a pretty, girlish dignity which sat well upon her

round gipsy face.

“Yes, madam,” she answered; “you are Mrs. Wroat, the aunt of Mr. Blight.”

“Wrong. I am only his uncle’s widow. Come under the chandelier.”

Lally came forward hesitatingly, and stood under the great chandelier where a dozen wax candles burned mellowly from a forest of tall unlighted ones. The soft glow fell upon Lally’s face and figure. She was thin, and there was a tremulous anxiety on her features; but in her mourning dress, with a red flush on her dark cheeks, and a bright light in her velvety black eyes, she was very pretty, with a dark gipsy beauty that seemed to startle Mrs. Wroat.

“The very image of poor Clara,” muttered the old lady, “and the very image of what I was at her age. There, Peters, if you want to see how I looked in my youth, look at that girl.”

However Mrs. Wroat might have looked in her far-past youth, she looked now like a malignant old fairy in her gown of black velvet, and with her cloak of scarlet velvet drawn around her shoulders. Her diamonds were not brighter than her eyes, whose keen and piercing glances tried to read Lally’s soul.

“Peters,” said the old lady, abruptly, “give the girl that copy of the advertisement.”

The maid silently handed the slip of paper to Lally, who read it in deepening amazement.

“Is this an advertisement for me, madam?” she demanded. “I am Lally Bird. Are —are you ‘M. W.?’”

“Of ‘Mount street, London?’” finished the old lady. “Yes, I am ‘M. W.’—Maria Wroat.”

“And you were about to advertise for *me*, madam? I—I don’t understand. Or, is there some other Lally Bird?”

“No danger of that,” said Mrs. Wroat. “There were never two women in this world so silly and moonstruck as your mother—never two women who named their girls Lalla Rookh. Pah! What a name! But for fear your mother was not the only goose in the world who married a Bird, just answer me a few questions. What was your father’s name, and what was his business?”

“He was a corn-chandler in the city, and his name was John Bird,” answered Lally, quite bewildered.

“And what was your mother’s name before her marriage?”

“Clara Mulford Percy—”

Mrs. Wroat gave a queer little gasp, and her hands trembled, and she looked at her faithful attendant in a sort of triumph.

“Do you hear that, Peters?” she whispered. “Do you hear it, I say?” Then she added aloud, “Go on, girl. Who was your mother?”

“She was the daughter of a country gentleman who owned an estate in Hampshire. There were several children besides my mother, but they all died young and unmarried. The estate was entailed, and went to a distant relative. My mother married my father against the wishes of her friends, and was disowned by them for her misalliance.”

“And very properly too, I should say. If a girl chooses to descend from her proper rank in society as a gentleman’s petted daughter, and take to living in a back room behind a corn-chandler’s shop, she can’t expect her friends to follow her,” said Mrs. Wroat, with some energy. “And you were her only child?”

“Yes madam.”

“Any relatives living?”

“No, madam. My mother died young. My father lived to give me a good education, and then died insolvent, leaving me dependent upon my own exertions when I was less than sixteen years old. My father was a tradesman, humbly born, madam, but he was a gentleman at heart—”

“So poor Clara said. Humph! So you’ve no relatives living, eh?”

“None whom I know, madam. The present holder of my grandfather’s estate in Hampshire is my distant relative, but he knows as little of me as I know of him. And—and,” added Lally, suddenly trembling, as if a suspicion of the truth were dawning upon her soul, “I have a great-aunt living in London—she was my mother’s aunt—who married a banker, and is now a widow, if she still lives. She must be very old.”

“About my age!” said Mrs. Wroat, her eyes snapping. “Just about my age. What was her name?”

“Her name was Maria Percy, when a girl. She was married many years before my mother was born, and she was my mother’s god-mother. I don’t know her married name. If I ever heard it, I have forgotten it.”

“Then I’ll tell it to you,” said the old lady. “Her present name is Maria Wroat. Her home is in Mount street, London. And at this moment she sits before you, taking stock of you.”

Lally grew pale, and her black eyes opened to their widest extent.

“You—you my aunt?” she ejaculated.

“So it seems, my dear. I’ve been searching for you for some time. And so you are Clara’s child? You may kiss me if you want to, my dear.”

Lally approached the old lady with some hesitation, and bestowed a kiss upon the proffered wrinkled cheek. Then she shrank back in a sort of affright, wondering at her own temerity.

“Sit down,” said the old lady kindly. “I have a few questions to ask you, and on your answers depend more than you know of. Peters, don’t stare the poor child out of countenance. Girl, how old are you?”

“Seventeen years, ma’am.”

“And I’m eighty—one of us at the beginning, the other at the end of life! Heigh-ho! And so you’re governess here?”

Lally replied in the affirmative.

“No wonder you look sorrowful and pale and woe-begone!” muttered Mrs. Wroat. “To be governess of the young Blights is a horrible martyrdom. Don’t you think so? And isn’t it martyrdom to be under the orders of that odious, vulgar, garrulous Mrs. Blight? Hey?”

“When I came here,” said Lally agitatedly, “I had no home on earth. I was out of money, out of clothes, and utterly friendless. And so, madam, I am very grateful to Mrs. Blight for shelter and a home, and I cannot consider any service that gives me these a martyrdom.”

“Grateful, eh? What have you to be grateful for?” asked the old lady cynically. “You have shelter and food, but you earn them, I’ll be bound. You work early and late for the pitiful sum of forty pounds a year. That is what you get, is it not?”

“No, ma’am. I am young and inexperienced, and I needed the place so much, so I get but twenty pounds a year.”

“Bless my soul!” cried the old lady. “Because you needed the place so much, you get only half price! That is just like Laura Blight. How came you to be so

friendless?”

“After my father’s death,” said Lally, “I taught music in the school in which I had been educated. The school broke up, the proprietors being advanced in life and being able to retire from labor, and I was thrown adrift. I was obliged to do anything I could get to do. I lived for some weeks or months with an old woman who was seamstress to a boys’ school, and when she died I was out of work again, and came down into Kent and worked in the hop-fields. I was so hungry __”

“Do you hear that, Peters?” interrupted the old lady, turning savagely upon her attendant, her bright black eyes beaded with tears. “Do you hear it, and sit there unmoved? She was hungry, while my servants flung away the dainties from my table, and I grumbled because they could not contrive newer delicacies to tempt my appetite. Hungry? Homeless? Friendless? Heaven be merciful to me! Hungry! Ah-h!”

“That is all past now, madam,” said Lally softly.

“To begin again when Laura Blight chooses to send you packing! She’s full of caprices, is Laura. You’re not sure of a place here over night, unless her interest bids her keep you. How much money have you laid up?”

“Mrs. Blight advanced me five pounds, my first quarter’s salary, and I have eighteen shillings remaining,” answered Lally.

“Humph. Eighteen shillings between you and the union. Look me in the eye, Lally.”

The young girl obeyed, looking into Mrs. Wroat’s piercing eyes with a steady, honest, unflinching gaze, although the color fluttered in and out of her cheeks, as a bird flutters in and out of its cage.

“Have you ever done anything in your life of which you are ashamed?” asked the old lady, in a low, sternly anxious voice.

“No, ma’am,” answered the girl truthfully, “I never have.”

“What do you think of her, Peters?” demanded Mrs. Wroat, turning to her maid and confidant.

The woman was crying behind her handkerchief. She had hard features, but her heart was warm and soft. She answered sobbingly:

“I think, ma’am, as you’d ought to take her and adopt her, and make her your

heiress—that's what I think, poor, pretty dear!"

"Shows your sense, Peters," said Mrs. Wroat. "You're a woman of a thousand, Peters, and I'll double the annuity I'm going to give you. Girl, come and sit here on the stool at my feet."

Lally came forward and sat down as directed.

"I am alone in the world, except for my good old Peters," said Mrs. Wroat, with a quiver of her pointed, up-turned chin. "These people here think only of what they can make out of me—of the fortune they hope to inherit at my death. I am old, and very near my end. I should like to leave my money to one of my own kindred, and to one who would really mourn a little for me when I am gone. I'm a queer old woman, Lally, full of notions, and so cross that any one but Peters would have given me up long ago; but, strange as it may seem, the good soul actually loves me. She's been in my service five and thirty years, and she's more a friend to me than a servant. Now, Lally, do you think you could ever love me? It's odd, I own, but even a dried-up old woman like me sometimes yearns to be loved."

Her voice trembled, and tears brimmed over the bright black eyes, and her sharp features were convulsed in sudden emotion. She looked at Lally with a strange wistfulness and yearning, and Lally's desolate, frozen soul thawed within her, and with a great sob she sprang up and threw her arms around her aged kinswoman, and kissed her fervently and tenderly.

"I have no one to love," whispered the girl, sobbing. "I would love you if you would let me."

A paroxysm of coughing seized upon the old lady, and Lally shrank back affrighted into her seat. Peters patted her mistress gently on her back and gave her water to drink, and she soon recovered, sinking back upon her cushions, tired and panting.

"I am near the end, my dear," she said, when she could command her voice. "I may live weeks, or it may be months; but the time is short. I like you, Lally, and I am going to adopt you and make you my heiress. You shall change your name to mine, and be known as Lally Wroat, and at my death you shall inherit my fifty thousand pounds. And all I ask of you, Lally, is to love me a little, and try to be a daughter to me. I never had a daughter of my own."

Lally raised the old lady's hand reverently to her lips.

"I am afraid all this happiness is not for me, madam," she said bravely. "I am not

what you think me, and you may not deem me fit to inherit your wealth. I—I have been married!”

“Peters, the girl’s head is turned.”

“No, madam, I speak the truth. I am pure in the sight of God, but I am a disowned wife.”

“A wife—at seventeen?”

“Yes, madam. After I lost my situation as music teacher I was married to a young gentleman, just from Oxford, where he had been educated. He was only twenty years old, and we were married by license. He worked to support us, having talent as an artist, and we struggled along together until his father discovered our marriage and separated us, declaring the marriage null and void, his son being under twenty-one years of age. We were married in good faith; we loved each other; and Rufus was good, although he made oath that he was of age in order to secure the marriage license. His father threatened to prosecute him for perjury if he did not give me up; and he gave me up.”

“And who is this precious youth?” asked Mrs. Wroat.

Lally replied by telling her story precisely as it had occurred, excusing the conduct of her young husband as well as she could, and displaying in every look and word how passionately she still loved him.

“So the young man is poor, but of good birth and connections, and university bred?” commented Mrs. Wroat. “Well, Lally, my opinion is that your husband is not free from you, but that he will have to have recourse to law to secure his freedom. We’ll consult my London lawyer when we get up to town, and we’ll see about the young man. I’m afraid he’s a poor stick; but we’ll see—we’ll see. I haven’t changed my mind about adopting you, and I shall immediately assume a guardianship over you. You will quit Mrs. Blight’s service to-morrow. Peters, how soon can we go back to town?”

“At the end of the week, ma’am, if you like,” responded Peters, brightening.

“So be it then. Pack your trunk, Lally. You will finish your stay in this house as my adopted daughter and future heiress, and to-morrow you and Peters shall go out shopping—”

Mrs. Wroat paused, as a knock was heard at the door.

“Open the door, Peters,” commanded the old lady. “It’s Laura Blight.”

Before Peters could obey, the door opened from without, and Mrs. Blight, her chains tinkling and her red silk gown rustling, came into the room as airily as the rotund proportions of her figure would permit.

Her glances fell upon Lally, who was still sitting at the feet of her great-aunt, and Mrs. Blight's face showed her surprise and displeasure.

"I didn't hear the piano, dear Aunt Wroat," she exclaimed, "and I feared my governess might not have obeyed my order and come in to you. Miss Bird, I fear you forget your place. You are not a guest in this house—you are merely a hired servant. If you try, like a treacherous viper, to creep into the good graces of my poor unsuspecting relative, I shall dismiss you in the morning. You are to play upon the piano, and then go to your room."

The old lady's yellow and bony hand was stretched out and laid caressingly on Lally's black hair.

"I was talking to the child, Laura," she said. "I have been hearing her history. Don't you remember that I've been trying for years to find my niece, Clara Bird, or her children? Well, this girl is Clara's child—"

A look of fear and anger disfigured Mrs. Blight's face. The girl became, upon the instant, a terror to her.

"Aunt Wroat," said the lawyer's wife hastily, "this girl is a mere imposter that I took in out of charity. She has deceived you. Miss Bird, go to your room at once. To-morrow morning you leave my house."

"Peters," said Mrs. Wroat quietly, "give me my purse."

Peters brought a plethoric pocket-book from her mistress' traveling-bag, and the old lady took out a five-pound Bank of England note.

"Give that to Mrs. Blight, Peters," continued the old lady calmly. "Mrs. Blight, that is the amount you advanced to my great-niece when she entered your service. I do not wish her to be indebted to you. And here are twenty pounds to reimburse you for any expense I may have put you to. I am sorry, Laura, to disappoint you," added Mrs. Wroat, putting her wallet in her pocket, "but you and your husband need the lesson. I am not so deaf but that I heard every whisper you and your husband exchanged in the drawing-room to-night. I am aware that you consider me 'an old cat,' and 'an old nuisance,' and that you 'would send me to an alms-house, if it were not for my money.' I have now only to say to you that your heartlessness has met with its appropriate reward. This young lady is my adopted daughter and future heiress, and when you order a cab

for her in the morning, you may let the boy come up for my luggage also. I shall go with my adopted daughter.”

CHAPTER V.
NEVA AND HER ENEMIES.

Neva Wynde had arrived in London, by the morning express train from Canterbury, in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, and from the moment in which she had emerged with them from the railway station, all clue to her movements was suddenly and mysteriously lost.

What had become of her? How had she so singularly disappeared?

These questions, which filled the souls of Neva's lover and guardians with such unspeakable terror and anxiety and which they so signally failed in their efforts to solve, we now purpose answering for the benefit of the reader.

On alighting from the crowded morning train, Craven Black hurried his bride, her maid and Neva into a waiting cab, superintended the mounting of the luggage to the stout cab roof, and gave the order to be driven to Gravesend, adding more explicit directions in an undertone. He then entered the vehicle, and the vehicle rolled from the station.

"Where are we going, Mrs. Black?" asked Neva, looking from the cab windows. "I fancied Mr. Black said Gravesend."

"So he did, my dear," said Mrs. Craven Black placidly. "Didn't I tell you that we are going to Yorkshire by water? September is such a lovely month, and this is such lovely weather, and it's quite the thing to take a sea trip for a bridal tour, and I prevailed upon Craven to charter—is not that the word—a beautiful little yacht, which we are to have three months if we want it. We shall have a glorious voyage down the Thames and up the Channel, and through the great German ocean. The very idea stirs all my love of romance. Doesn't it affect you in the same manner!"

"But Wynde Heights is not near the sea," objected Neva, in surprise.

"It's not two hours distant by rail, and it will be delightful to get up yachting parties by ourselves, and go off for a two-days' excursion; don't you think so? Don't throw cold water upon my little plans for happiness, I beg of you, my dear Neva," cried Mrs. Craven Black imploringly. "There is no reason why we shouldn't be perfectly happy, if you won't interpose objections, Neva."

Thus adjured, Neva took care to "interpose" no more objections. She had no liking for nor trust in Craven Black, but Mrs. Craven Black had been her father's

beloved and honored wife, and Neva still believed in her. That the pair could mean her harm never once occurred to her. Neither did she realize how completely she was in their power. She had left her maid at home, at Mrs. Black's solicitation, the latter declaring that one maid would suffice for both, and that she especially disliked Meggy West, the girl who attended upon Neva. Thus the young heiress of Hawkhurst was absolutely friendless and helpless, in the hands of her enemies.

They had a long drive to Gravesend. On arriving at their destination, they alighted at a pier at which a small boat with two oarsmen was lying. These men were dressed in blue sailor custom, each having an arrow embroidered on the breast of his jacket. Mr. Black went up to them, accosting them familiarly.

"What boat do you belong to?" he demanded.

"To the *Arrow*, sir, lying out yonder," said one of the men, pointing to a graceful yacht lying in the stream, her sails unfurled, and looking ready for flight. "We are waiting for Mr. Craven Black."

"I am he. It's all right, my men. Octavia, my love, let me assist you into the boat. Miss Wynde, this way."

The maid was left to scramble in by herself. The luggage was deposited in the boat; Mr. Black took his seat, and the rowers pulled off for the yacht.

The process of transferring passengers and luggage to the deck of the *Arrow* was speedily and safely accomplished. Mrs. Black was ecstatic in her commendations of the arrangements of the little vessel, and occupied the attention of Neva while Mr. Black conversed with the sailors and their captain, and the vessel was gotten under way.

The *Arrow* was no means a new vessel but she had been recently painted and fitted with new sails, and presented a very trim appearance. She was of about twenty tons burden. She had belonged to a member of the Royal Yacht Club, but had been advertised to be sold for a comparatively small sum, her owner having had built for him a vessel of greater size and speed. Craven Black had seen, a week before, the advertisment offering the *Arrow* for sale, and warranting her ready to put to sea at an hour's notice; and a part of the business of Mrs. Artress in town had been to purchase the vessel.

Among his friends of high and low degree, Craven Black possessed one who was thoroughly disreputable, but who had proved useful to him at too many periods of his life to be thrown aside. This person had formerly been a lawyer,

but had been stricken from the rolls for illegal or dishonorable practice, and was a needy hanger-on and parasite of Craven Black. This person had been called upon to assist Mrs. Artress in the examination of the yacht, and had purchased the boat in his own name, paying therefor a sum of money provided by Mrs. Craven Black out of the jointure acquired by her marriage with Sir Harold Wynde. This ex-lawyer had also engaged three experienced sailors, one of whom had been a mate on an India vessel, and whom he hired as captain of the *Arrow*, and these three men were now in charge of the little yacht.

These sailors, we may as well mention here, had been chosen for other qualifications than good seamanship. The ex-lawyer, in the days when he had been qualified to practice his profession, had been called upon to defend the three against a charge of mutiny, preferred against them by their captain. The charge had been proved, they had been convicted, and were now fresh from two years' imprisonment. The ex-lawyer had come upon them at a drinking shop, after their release, and only a few days before, and knowing their reckless character, had engaged them for a cruise of the *Arrow*.

Such was the character of the seamen in charge of the yacht; and in such manner had the yacht itself been acquired by Craven Black.

As the vessel moved forward down the stream, the sails filling, Mrs. Black said to her young charge:

"Let us go below, Neva, and take a look at our quarters. The luggage and my maid have gone down."

Neva assented, and the two went into the cabin, which was found to be newly fitted up, and smelling unpleasantly of fresh paint. The cabin was small, affording room only for the table and divans around it, but there were three neat little state-rooms, newly carpeted and newly furnished with mattresses, blankets, bed-linen, towels, camp chairs, and all toilet appurtenances. One of these state-rooms was appropriated by Mr. and Mrs. Black, the second by Neva, and the third was assigned to the maid, a French woman completely won to the interests of her mistress.

"We shall be very comfortable here, Neva," said Mrs. Black, with gayety. "The sea air will bring the roses to your cheeks. I think you've not been looking well lately."

"I wish you had told me that we were to go to Yorkshire by sea," said Neva gravely.

“How could I suppose, my dear child, that you cared whether you went by train or by boat?” demanded Mrs. Black, in seeming surprise. “Your dear papa told me once that you were a fine sailor, and I planned this voyage as a little surprise to you—that’s the truth, Neva.”

“You are very kind,” said the young girl, “but I would have preferred to know it beforehand. My friends will be anxious about me if I do not write as soon as I promised.”

“Your friends?” and Mrs. Black arched her brows. “Are we not your friends?”

“You are, madam, I trust, but you are not my only friend. I leave those behind me who are dear to me, and who have a right to know my movements.”

Mrs. Black looked significantly down upon the great diamond that sparkled in limpid splendor upon Neva’s finger. She had noticed the jewel before, but had refrained from alluding to it.

“Is that ring the gift of one who has a right to know your movements?” she asked, smiling.

Neva blushed, but gravely assented.

“It is from Rufus Black?” asked the elder lady, well knowing to the contrary.

“No, madam,” said Neva bravely, “it is the gift of Lord Towyn, and is the emblem of our betrothal.”

Mrs. Black bit her lips fiercely, but made no response. There was a hardness in her glittering eyes, and a cruel compression of her lips, that boded ill for the engagement thus proclaimed to her.

One of the seamen was an excellent cook and steward, and presently a luncheon was spread in the cabin which proved very tempting to appetites sharpened by sea air. Mrs. Artress had provided such an abundance of delicate stores that a cook was scarcely required. There were tin boxes of assorted biscuits, jars of pickles, boxes of fruits of every kind attainable in Covent Garden market, dried and crystalized fruits, smoked salmon, jerked beef and venison, pickled reindeers’ tongues, and cheeses, cakes and fancy breads in every variety.

After the luncheon, the ladies went on deck, Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black paced to and fro, arm in arm, and Neva leaned idly upon the rail, watching the fleeting shores and the frequent sails and steamers, and tried to shake off the shadow of distrust and gloom that would creep over her soul.

At six o’clock, dinner was served in the cabin. This second meal resembled the one that had preceded, but there were also roast beef, roast fowls, and vegetables, and wines. The swinging lamp was lighted in the cabin, which looked as comfortable as a yacht cabin can be made to look. There is, at best, a dreariness about a ship’s cabin or state-room which no art can conquer. And this cabin was no exception to the rule. Neva was glad to throw a shawl around her and go out again upon the deck.

The moon was shining when she sat down at one side of the boat in her folding deck chair, and the pale flood of silvery light illumined the white-capped waves, and the dark abysses of the waters, the sails of vessels making into port, and the dusky little steamers, making the whole scene a picture full of glorious lights and shadows, but a scene that seemed a picture rather than a reality.

The yacht was out in the North Sea now, battling with the short, chopping waves, but impelled onward by a fine breeze. She was well ballasted, seaworthy, and a swift sailer. What more could be desired by the guilty pair whose hearts beat exultantly at their evil success, as they regarded the unconscious victim of their machinations.

“She has no suspicion,” murmured Craven Black, as he promenaded the deck, his wife leaning on his arm.

“None whatever. She is too guileless herself to suspect guile in others. And she trusts me implicitly,” laughed Octavia Black softly.

“That old dotard, her father, did you and me a good turn when he so frequently urged his daughter to obey me and love me, and try to win my love. I declare, Craven, it’s enough to make the old fellow come out of his grave, to confront us; isn’t it now?”

“If I were superstitions, I might think so,” said Black.

“If he did come out of his grave, he’d be slightly astonished at finding how I had cajoled and hoodwinked him, eh, Craven?” said the woman mockingly. “I’d like him to find out the truth where he is; I would, indeed. I hated the man; and to think you were jealous of him even when you urged me to marry him! Oh, Craven? Do you know, dear, speaking of jealousy, I was once jealous of Neva Wynde?”

“I did not know it.”

“No? Well, I was. It was absurd, of course. I fancied you fell in love with her the first time you saw her.”

Craven Black's heart stirred guiltily, and his fair cheek flushed. His love for Neva Wynde was not altogether dead yet. It smouldered in his breast, and although at times he believed that he felt an absolute hatred for her, yet all the while a spark of the old passion remained that circumstances might again fan into a flame.

"We're likely to have more trouble than we looked for," said Mrs. Black, changing the subject, without awaiting a reply to her previous remark. "Neva owned to me since we came on board that she is engaged to Lord Towyn."

"I suspected it when I saw that new ring she wears. But go to her now, Octavia. She will suspect us of plotting against her if we whisper together longer."

Mrs. Black relinquished her husband's arm, and went to Neva's side, drawing a deck chair beside her.

"Enjoying the moonlight, Neva?" she asked. "And thinking of the earl, of course? I have not yet wished you joy of your future husband, and I suppose I ought to do so now. But first I would like to ask you if you have irrevocably chosen to obey your own wishes in regard to your marriage, rather than to regard the last wishes of your father?"

"I am not certain what were my father's wishes," said Neva, with a strange gravity, looking afar over the waters with her eyes of red gloom.

"Not certain? My dear child, you puzzle me. Did I not give into your own hands your father's last letter to you, received by me from India in the same mail that brought me the awful news of his death?"

"You gave me a letter purporting to be from my father, Mrs. Black," said the young girl, looking now at her companion, "but are you sure that it was not changed by any one while in your possession? Do not think I would hint one word against your watchful care of it, or—or—your good faith with me; but I am not altogether convinced that papa wrote that letter. Lord Towyn, on reading it, immediately declared it a forgery."

Mrs. Black started.

"Did you show it to Lord Towyn?" she demanded.

"Yes, and he has it now in his possession, and will submit it to Sir John Freise and Mr. Atkins for their inspection and opinion," answered Neva.

Octavia Black's dark cheeks paled in the moonlight, and a sudden terror gathered in her hard black eyes.

“Neva,” she exclaimed harshly, “I am astonished at the singular want of delicacy that prompted your display of your father’s last letter to Lord Towyn. Of course the earl believes the letter a forgery, since he purposes marrying you himself. He believes whatever it is to his interest to believe.”

“Lord Towyn is the soul of honor,” asserted Neva, her cheeks flushing hotly. “He would tell the truth, whether it might be for or against his interests.”

“What simple, childlike faith!” murmured Octavia Black, in affected admiration. “But, my dear child, Lord Towyn is no better than other men. Did—did he think that *I* forged Sir Harold’s letter?”

“No, he has too high an opinion of the lady who has been my father’s wife,” returned Neva proudly, “to think such evil of her. But he fancied the true letter might have been replaced with a forged one. Mrs. Artress—Mr. Black—”

She paused abruptly, having been urged into saying more than she had intended.

“Ah, Lord Towyn thinks them capable of the forgery. Let me tell you, Neva Wynde, that your father told me with his own lips that he had once hoped for your marriage with Lord Towyn, but that he desired in his later days with all his mind and heart that you should marry Rufus Black.”

“Papa said that—to you?”

“He did. I swear it,” cried the woman, perjuring herself, in her eagerness to produce the desired impression upon Neva’s mind.

“But Rufus said he did not know papa?”

“That does not affect the fact that Sir Harold knew him,” said Octavia Black firmly. “Rufus did some brave deed at Oxford—saved a comrade’s life, or some such thing—and that first fixed Sir Harold’s eyes upon him. From that moment Sir Harold watched the young fellow’s progress. He saw him frequently, himself unseen. He studied his character, and he became resolved upon your marriage to Rufus.”

“But, Mrs. Black, this is incredible!” exclaimed Neva, utterly refusing to believe the preposterous story, although until this moment her faith in her companion had remained unshaken. “Papa could not have wished me to marry a man he did not know personally. He would not have laid upon me the burden of a command—for that solemnly expressed desire was little less than a command—to marry a man whom he admired for a single act of personal courage, but of whose character he was ignorant. I know papa too well to believe anything like this,

Mrs. Black."

"You accuse me of falsehood then. I say such was his wish!" declared Octavia, doggedly and sullenly.

Neva looked pained, perplexed, and deeply troubled.

"If this indeed be so," she murmured, "then he could not have been in his right mind, terrible as it seems to utter the words. For there never was a truer, kinder father, or a more noble man, than papa. He thought my happiness of so much moment that he never would have dictated my course in such a vital matter as the acceptance or rejection of a lover, so long as the lover was worthy. I am sorry you have told me this, Mrs. Black. I am compelled to doubt papa's complete sanity, or—or—"

"Or me?" said the handsome Octavia, with an ugly frown. "You ought to know me too well by this time to doubt me. Old gentlemen frequently get odd ideas, which seem at variance with their usual character, but the having them does not prove them insane, only crotchety. As for me, knowing Sir Harold's wishes, I did not doubt that you would act upon them as upon his actual command. Your father told you to obey me in all things. Is that command to be as lightly set aside?"

"Have I failed to consider your wishes, madam?" asked Neva sorrowfully.

"Not until now. But it is my wish that you should marry Rufus Black. Nay it is my command."

Neva's pure proud face looked very white in the moonlight, as she answered:

"Then I must fail in my obedience to you now, Mrs. Black. Papa did not desire me to obey unreasonable commands, to the destruction of my own happiness. He would consider you unfaithful to the charge he gave you, could he know that you are urging me to marry Rufus Black. My rejection of Rufus was final."

"We will see," said Mrs. Black, compressing her lips.

In an angry mood, Octavia walked away, joining her husband on the opposite side of the deck. Neva leaned over the low railing, her face upturned to the stars, and murmured:

"Perhaps—perhaps, after all, *she* forged the letter. How strange she seems to-night. I fear her. I wish I had not come with her. A terrible gloom is on my soul to-night!"

That gloom grew heavier and darker, and the pure face grew whiter and more sorrowful as the time went on, and the yacht bowled on toward the northward, bound—ah whither?

CHAPTER VI.
WHERE NEVA'S TRAVELS ENDED.

Neva Wynde sat until a late hour upon the deck, watching the play of the moonlight on the waters, the leaping white crests of the waves, and the white furrow plowed by the *Arrow* as she sped onward over the waters on her way to the northward.

The prophetic gloom settled down yet more darkly upon the young girl's soul. A bitter, homesick yearning filled her heart—a yearning for her father's love to shield her, her father's arm to lean upon, and her father's wisdom to counsel her.

Ah, could she but have known that far away upon other seas, but under starlit skies, and speeding as fast as steam and wind could bear him, her father whom she so mourned as dead—her father was hurrying toward his home, with the same homesick longing in his breast, the same yearning, to clasp her in his arms, together with the false wife he so idolized!

And could that false wife have but guessed the truth, as she paced the yacht's deck arm in arm with her husband, conspiring against the peace and happiness of Neva, much of grief and terror that was lying in wait for the baronet's daughter, and much of guilt and wickedness that the two conspirators were planning, might have been avoided. But neither knew nor guessed the truth, and long before Sir Harold could arrive in England, Neva's fate was likely to be decided by herself or her enemies.

At a late hour the young heiress went to her state-room, Mrs. Craven Black bidding her a careless good-night as she passed. Mrs. Black's French maid Celeste was in the cabin, yawning and out of temper, and she accompanied Neva to her room and assisted her to disrobe. Neva soon dismissed her, finished her night toilet, and knelt to pray by her small port window, through which she could see the dusky azure sky gemmed with stars, and the white waves glorified by the shimmering pale moonlight.

Neva crept into her narrow berth, leaving her lantern on the wall burning. She could not sleep. A feverish unrest was upon her. The first shadow of distrust of Octavia Black had flung its gloom across her pathway. Until this night she had been full of innocent child-like faith in the woman her father had deemed as pure as an angel. Sir Harold's praises of his second wife had been received by Neva without allowance, and without suspicion that he might be deceived. She had an

implicit reliance upon his judgment, but now she questioned, with a terrible pang, if he had not been deceived.

“I cannot believe Mrs. Black when she says that papa was determined to marry me to a man of whom my father knew nothing, save that he had committed a noble deed upon impulse. And when I refused to believe the story, there was a look on Mrs. Black’s face I have never before seen there, a look as of convicted treachery and falsehood. I distrust her—I almost fear her! I am sorry I came with her. And if it be true that she is false and treacherous, I am reconciled at last to papa’s horrible death. He could never have borne the knowledge of her real character!”

She sighed, and turned restlessly on her pillow.

“I believe Craven Black to be a villain,” her thoughts ran presently. “He made love to me when he was already engaged to marry my father’s widow. I am sure he hates me now. Perhaps he has perverted her mind against me? Perhaps she never liked me? I was never allowed to come back to my own home after she entered it, not even when dear papa died, and my heart seemed breaking, until Madame Dalant wrote that my school-days should terminate, and that I ought to be allowed to enter society. Mrs. Black has a caressing manner toward me, and flatters me, but I am sure she does not love me. Perhaps the two are my enemies? If so, how completely I am in their power, having even left my faithful maid behind me, at Mrs. Black’s request. I fear I have been blind—blind!”

Poor Neva was now thoroughly alarmed. She remembered a score of incidents, scarcely noticed at the time that went far to confirm the truth of her sudden suspicion that Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black were her enemies and that they were conspiring against her. She struggled with her conviction, calling herself foolish, romantic and ungrateful, but the conviction remained.

The fact that the yacht had been engaged for the voyage to Yorkshire, when she expected to go by train, and that she had not been told of the proposed route until her arrival in London, recurred to her unpleasantly, and as something of sinister moment.

The fact also, that Mrs. Craven Black had a keen personal interest in Neva’s marriage to Rufus Black, now for the first time obtruded itself upon the young girl.

“Rufus is Craven Black’s son,” she said to herself, “and if I were married to Rufus, Craven Black would probably assume control of all my property! I acquit Rufus of any share in the conspiracy, but he is so weak of will that he would not

dare to resist his father, who could appropriate half my income to his own use. Can this be Craven Black's design? Can Craven Black have forged that last letter purporting to come from papa? And does Octavia know his designs, and willingly aid him to carry them out? I must study them closely, without seeming to do so. I must be on my guard."

With thoughts like these, Neva tossed upon her pillow for hours, until long after Craven Black and his bride had retired to their state-room, and silence had fallen upon the cabin, and the creaking of a block, or the rattling of cordage, or a voice or footstep on the little deck, sounded through the night with startling loudness, and as something new and strange.

At last she fell asleep, but her slumber was not refreshing, and she was looking very pale and worn when, after a careful toilet in the morning, she came out into the cabin.

The breakfast was spread upon the table and Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black were seated upon a divan, conversing in whispers. They started guiltily at Neva's appearance, and Mrs. Black cried out gayly:

"Good-morning, my dear. You are a laggard this morning. It is ten o'clock, and I have already taken a constitutional on deck. It's a fine, bracing air."

"I hope I have not kept you waiting," said Neva courteously.

"Did you think us barbarous enough to eat our breakfast before your coming?" cried Craven Black, with exaggerated courtesy. "Sorry not to see you looking better. Did you pass a pleasant night?"

"I did not sleep very well," answered Neva quietly.

She took her place at the table, and Craven Black waited upon her and his wife with careful attention. The breakfast consisted of stewed chicken, coffee, bread, fancy biscuits, and delicate fruits, including oranges, grapes, and peaches, and Neva brought to the meal an appetite sharpened by the sea air.

"I suppose we shall sleep at Wynde Heights to-night?" said Neva, forcing a cheerfulness she did not feel. "We must reach Yorkshire at our present rate of sailing long before evening. Do you purpose landing at Scarborough, or Whitby, or Stockton, Mr. Black?" she asked. "All three are railway stations, and we can go on to the Heights without delay."

The husband and wife exchanged significant glances.

"Neva, dear," said Mrs. Black caressingly, "would you care if we do not go to

Wynde Heights? You know the place so little, and have no acquaintances in the neighborhood; and I have none, and I dread a visit to the Yorkshire dower house as something dull and stupid beyond comparison."

Neva looked at the speaker with startled eyes.

"Are we not on our way to Wynde Heights, Mrs. Black?" she demanded, in surprise.

"Yes, dear, if you insist upon adhering to the strict letter of our original plan," answered Mrs. Black. "But I am sure you will not be so hard-hearted and cruel. I no longer want to go to Wynde Heights, and Craven thinks a stay there would be a bore; but of course, if you insist upon it, we will sacrifice our own pleasure to yours."

Neva struggled with her bewilderment.

"I supposed we were on our way to Wynde Heights," she said, "but do not suppose I desire to go there, if you prefer to go elsewhere. It is your wish and pleasure, Mrs. Black, that must be consulted. Would you prefer a watering place, or a visit to the German coast?"

"Neither," said Mrs. Black. "I am *so* relieved, dear Neva, for I feared you would oppose my wishes, and I think if a woman ought ever to have her own way, it should be on her bridal tour. Craven has been telling me of the only piece of property he owns in the world, a worthless old Highland estate, valueless except for the shooting, with a dear old tumble-down house which no one will rent, and I fairly long to see it. It's quite natural, I think, for a bride to desire to visit her husband's property, and this came to Craven through his Scottish ancestors, the Macdonalds, and it has a host of curious legends and ghost stories, and such a charming, romantic name—Wilderness—that I am impatient to go there; and Craven says, if you do not object we will go on to Wilderness."

"Where is this place?" asked Neva.

"In Rosshire. There are post-offices convenient, so that you can write back daily, if you like."

"But our coming will be unexpected," objected Neva. "The servants at Wynde Heights are prepared for our coming, but no one will look for us at Wilderness."

"There is an old couple residing there," said Craven Black, "and everything will be done to make our stay pleasant at my old 'Castle Rackrent.' I confess I should like to take my bride to the old place—it is years since I was there—and a week

could be very pleasantly passed in mountain excursions, rows on the loch, and rides to the village. Can I say nothing to melt the stern resolution I see expressed in your face, Miss Neva?"

"September seems late for the Highlands," said Neva.

"But this is exceptionally lovely weather," urged Mrs. Black. "And we only want to stay there a week. I see you mean to destroy all our pleasure, Neva, and condemn us to follow your lead."

"You are mistaken," said Neva gravely. "I have no desire to urge my own wishes in the matter. This project of visiting the Highlands takes me by surprise, but I have nothing to urge against it. I wish, however," she added coloring, "that you would land me at some convenient point on the coast, and permit me to return to Hawkhurst—"

"What! Alone and unattended?" cried Mrs. Black. "You wish to desert us, when I count upon your companionship and society? If you insist upon returning to Hawkhurst, Neva, of course you can go, and we will go with you. But this selfish tyranny—forgive me—is not like your generous self. I would not have believed you so ungracious. My pleasure is quite spoiled. Craven, dear, let us turn back to London."

Mr. Black arose to go on deck.

Neva detained him by a gesture, her proud face flushing.

"You need not turn back upon my account," she said half haughtily. "I will accompany Mrs. Black to the Wilderness. I have no wish to appear ungracious, but you will remember that my friends do not know where I am, and may be anxious about me."

"Oh, Neva!" cried Mrs. Black reproachfully. "Are we not your best friends? But I am too happy in your concession to find fault with your phraseology. Craven, we will go to your dear old Wilderness, and if I like it, I'll fit it up for a shooting-box, and next year we will come up here the gayest party that ever visited the 'land o' cakes.'"

Neva did not linger in the cabin, but went out on deck, and walked to and fro for exercise, while her eyes scanned the waters and the horizon.

The yacht was far out upon the wide North Sea, or German Ocean, a mere speck in the wild waste of waters. There were sails gleaming in the distance in the clear September sunshine, but no shores were visible. The wind was blowing fair and

free, the sky was clear, the air crisp and chilly, but nevertheless agreeable.

Neva walked alone until she grew tired, and then sat down in her folding deck chair and thought until her brain was wearied. Mr. and Mrs. Black joined her, and talked and chatted for some hours. Luncheon was served on the deck, and the afternoon wore on as the morning had done.

Night again settled down upon the sea, so bright with moonlight and starlight that it was not less lovely than the day had been. Neva went to bed early, and slept profoundly, not being even visited by dreams.

The next day passed as the other had done, but the coast was not yet seen. The wind proved variable upon this day, but Craven Black consulted his charts frequently, and talked with the sailors, and Mrs. Black yawned, and declared that a sea voyage was charming, but intolerably dull.

A third night dragged by, and Neva began to be anxious to get into port. She knew that Lord Towyn must be looking for a letter from her, and she desired to inform him of Mrs. Black's change of plan of travel, and of her own whereabouts.

Upon the fourth day after leaving London, the graceful little yacht stood in for the land. Mrs. Black and Neva, as usual, spent the day on deck. About noon the *Arrow* sped into Moray Frith, in the wake of a steamer bound for Inverness and the Caledonian canal, and followed by one or two sailing vessels which were allowed to pass the swifter yacht.

"Do we go into Inverness?" asked Neva, as she looked at the chart which Craven Black was exhibiting to her and his wife.

"No," answered Black. "Look at the chart, Miss Wynde. Do you see those narrow straits that connect Moray Frith with Cromarty Frith? We thread those straits, and a not very pleasant excursion it is either. Once safe in Cromarty Frith, we have plain sailing. I expect to sleep at Wilderness to-night."

The yacht in good time threaded the straits, and came out into the calmer waters of the loch-like Cromarty Frith, sailing up a portion of its distance, and then obeying the skillful hand at the helm, it shot into a deep stream or river, and went on into the very shadow and heart of the wild mountain region.

It seemed to Neva, as she looked around her in wonder, awe and delight, that the chaos of the primeval creation yet reigned here. She saw no villages, no hamlets, no houses, no signs of habitation—nothing but grim mountain peaks and ranges, frowning cliffs, and inaccessible rocks. The very vegetation was sparse and

stunted, the few trees wildly clinging to niches in the bare rocks, being dwarfed and sickly. Upon higher peaks in the distance, Neva saw glittering crowns of snow, but nearer all was deadness, desolation, chaos.

“It looks as if this part of the earth had been abandoned by God and shunned by man,” she thought. “The utter dreariness is oppressive and terrible.”

The *Arrow* felt her way on up the river, the banks growing steeper and narrower, the rocks and cliffs more frowning, and the waters blacker. Mrs. Black began to look nervous, and to express a fear that the vessel would presently be caught in the narrowing throat of rocks, but her husband smiled reassuringly, and a little later the yacht shot into a little placid mountain loch, shut in by towering mountains, the waters looking black with the everlasting shadows of the hills bending above them.

Both the ladies breathed freer at this unlooked for termination to their voyage. Half way up the loch the yacht came to anchor, and a boat was lowered to convey the passengers ashore.

“But, Craven,” said Mrs. Black wonderingly, “I see no house.”

“Look half way up the mountain side,” said her husband, pointing with his finger. “Do you see that broad ledge set thick with black looking trees, firs, larches and mountain pines? Back of the ledge, at a distance of half a mile, rises the high mountain peak. Well, on that wild looking ledge, perched in mid-air, as one might say, an outlaw ancestor of mine who fought on the losing side in one of the Scottish wars, and was compelled to flee for his life, built an outlaw’s den, in which he spent his last years and finally died. The house has since been improved and enlarged—”

“But, my dear Craven,” interrupted Octavia, “the Wilderness cannot be upon that ledge, up this steep pile of rocks. Why, the ledge is inaccessible, unless to yonder eagle. We cannot get up there without wings.”

“You comprehend why I could never let nor sell the place,” said Craven Black. “But we can get up the cliff. There is a narrow footpath, not especially dangerous, but rather fatiguing. The men will bring up the luggage, and we will walk up. The boat is ready. Come.”

He assisted his wife into the boat, and then Neva. The maid came next. Dressing bags followed. Mr. Black sprang in, and two of the sailors pulled lustily for the shore.

The passengers were landed at a projecting rock at the water’s edge, and Craven

Black, ordering the seamen to remain where they were until he should send a servant to them, conducted his wife, Neva and the maid, by a narrow, steep and tortuous path, up the precipitous face of the cliff. The dreary night fell before they had gained the ledge, but the soft moonlight flecked their path with gleams of brightness, and at last they stood upon the ledge, high up among the mountains, with the loch lying like a tarnished jewel far below at their feet.

“We are buried alive here, *mon Dieu*!” gasped the little French woman, staring around her. “We are in a tomb!”

Neva’s heart echoed the words.

The wide plateau, with its thickly growing trees on every side, looked very grim in the moonlight, obscured as that light was by the towering, frowning mountains. In the midst of the plateau stood an old stone house, long and low, and hideously ugly in its proportions, having a frowning and grim appearance well in keeping with its surroundings.

The front door of this house was opened, and lights gleamed from the windows, and forms were seen hovering near the dwelling in watchful expectation.

“It looks as if we were expected!” said Neva, in surprise. “The house is not closed, as you said, Mr. Black!”

Octavia Black laughed with a strange, mocking cadence that struck a chill to Neva’s heart.

“Give Neva your arm, my dear,” she said gayly. “What an idea of yours that we are expected, Neva! Why, we only decided to come while we were on the sea. I am nearly famished, and hope some one will prepare supper for us and give us something better than oatmeal.”

As the new-comers drew near the house, the forms Neva had seen disappeared. The travelers ascended the single step to the low broad porch, and entered the wide hall of the dwelling. This hall was lighted by a lantern suspended from the ceiling, and had a stone floor, a stone staircase, and doors upon each side opening into the living rooms of the house.

The travelers halted in the midst of the hall, and at the same moment the parlor door opened, and a woman came out with smiles of welcome—a woman clad in bright-colored garments, but with ash-colored hair and complexion.

This woman was Mrs. Artress!

Neva recognized her with a sudden horror. She knew in that instant that her visit

to the Wilderness had been pre-arranged by her enemies—that her wildest suspicions of the falseness and perfidy of Octavia Black had fallen short of the truth—that she had been snared in a trap—that she was a prisoner!

CHAPTER VII.
HOW LALLY TOOK HER DEPARTURE.

The composed and defiant announcement by Mrs. Wroat that she had adopted Lally Bird as her daughter and heiress, was like a bombshell flung into the enemy's camp. Mrs. Blight stood as if turning to stone, in an utter panic, her eyes glaring upon Mrs. Wroat and upon Lally alternately, her chest heaving, her face livid. All her fine schemes of future grandeur became in an instant "airy visions fading into nothingness." She beheld herself and her family upon the brink of insolvency, which this old lady's fortune might have averted. She was convulsed with rage and amazement, and with bitter hatred of her young governess.

What she might have done or said cannot be known, for Peters, desiring to spare her aged mistress a scene and expected reproaches, pushed the bank-notes she held into Mrs. Blight's hand, and taking her by the arm, gently forced her out into the hall and closed the door upon her.

This last indignity was too much for the disappointed woman. With a wild shriek, she fled precipitately down the stairs, and burst into the drawing-room and into her husband's presence like an incarnate whirlwind. And here flinging herself into a chair, she gave way to a burst of hysterics as violent as terrifying.

The first act of Mr. Blight was to deluge his wife with the contents of a carafe of water which happened to be at hand. Then bending over her and chafing her hands, he adjured her to tell him what was the matter, and if the children were all killed.

"You—you beast!" gasped the wife, with the tones and breathing of a drowning woman. "You've ruined my new dress, and it cost fifteen shillings a yard, if it cost a penny! The dear knows where I am to get another. I expect to find myself in the union by this time next year, on account of that treacherous viper that I warmed in my bosom! Oh, my poor children—my poor ruined lambs!"

"What do you mean, Laura?" demanded her husband impatiently. "Don't be a fool, if you can help it, for once. What has happened?"

"Everything has happened!" wailed Mrs. Blight. "We are wretched, good-for-nothing beggars. The old wretch up stairs has gone and left all her money to that jade of a governess—"

“Speak sense, if you can. What do you mean, I ask again? How can Aunt Wroat have ‘gone and left all her money’ to Miss Bird? Is your mind wandering?”

“No, I wish it was. I’d rather be a wild maniac of Bedlam than what I am at this moment,” moaned the unhappy lawyer’s wife. “My governess, Miss Bird, you know, is hob-nobbing with Aunt Wroat; and who do you think the artful minx has turned out to be? Why, she says she’s the daughter of Clara Percy, who married a corn-chandler—the very girl that Aunt Wroat has been looking for for over a year. And Aunt Wroat has adopted her, and says the girl is to inherit every penny of her fifty thousand pounds, except money enough to buy you and me each a penny whistle, or some such thing. And the girl is to have all of Aunt Wroat’s splendid diamonds. O dear! O dear! What is life but a trial? Why was I born?”

“But this is infamous!” gasped the lawyer. “It’s preposterous. The girl’s an impostor. Why didn’t you tell Aunt Wroat so?”

“I did—I did. But she sneered at me—she did, indeed. And here is the five pounds I advanced the girl, and Aunt Wroat paid it back to me. And here is twenty pounds for the expenses we’ve been put to on Aunt Wroat’s account. They made me take it. But what can pay us for our blighted hopes? The girl ought to be arrested. If I were only a judge I’d send her to Botany Bay!”

“Serves you right for taking the jade in! And so she’s the daughter of Clara Percy. I thought her name seemed familiar,” said the lawyer. “Aunt Wroat was always uttering that name on her visit to us last year. What fatality!”

“Must we give up in this way?” sobbed Mrs. Blight. “Is there nothing we can do?”

The lawyer paced the floor excitedly, his features working. Suddenly he paused before his wife, and said in a whisper:

“Are you sure the girl is honest?”

“As sure as that I am—the treacherous cat!”

“Are you sure, Laura, that she hasn’t stolen something of yours—a jewel, a bit of lace, or a trinket?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” answered the obtuse Mrs. Blight. “She’s had no chance to take anything of mine since she came into this house. Ellen’s been sewing in my bedroom every day from morning till night.”

“Are you sure—”

“You’re worse than the solicitor-general in the Tichborne case, with that eternal repetition,” snapped Mrs. Blight angrily. “‘Would you be surprised to hear?’—‘Are you sure?’—I’m not sure of anything, Charles, except that we are lost, ruined, and undone. Yes, I am sure that what you’re thinking of can’t be done. I won’t be dragged into court; I won’t swear to a lie, for I’d be sure to be caught. I won’t be publicly disgraced in an attempt to ruin the girl. We shouldn’t deceive Aunt Wroat, and she’d get a keener lawyer than you are to turn you and me inside out.”

“You needn’t tell all that to the whole house, servants included,” exclaimed Mr. Blight. “Our game is up, unless this girl is got rid of. We can turn her out of the house to-night, and that we will do. But, first of all, we will go up stairs and argue the case with Aunt Wroat.”

“I haven’t told you all,” said Mrs. Blight, still weeping. “Aunt Wroat is not deaf at all, and heard you call her an old cat, and an old nuisance.”

“It was you called her so!”

“It was you! Of course, if we are ruined you’ll lay all the blame on me. Men are all alike, from Adam down. It’s always the woman did it. The idea of her pretending to be deaf and listening to what we said! It’ll do no good to go up stairs to talk with Aunt Wroat, but I’ll make a last effort for the sake of my dear children.”

The well-mated pair went up to the door of Mrs. Wroat’s chamber, and knocked loudly for admittance. Peters replied to them through the key-hole:

“My mistress desires to be excused. She can bear no more excitement to-night. Besides, she is occupied with her niece.”

The lawyer tried the door fiercely: it was locked. Then he stooped, applying his mouth to the key-hole.

“Tell your mistress,” he said, in a sort of roar, “that that girl is an impostor, and no more her niece than she’s her grandfather. The girl is deceiving her—”

He paused discomfited as he heard the old lady hobble away into the inner room, followed by Lally.

“You’d better go down stairs,” advised Peters, through the medium Mr. Blight had employed. “May be you don’t know you are laying yourself liable to a suit for slander.”

“We had better go down,” said the lawyer. “The servants are collecting on the

basement stairs to learn the cause of the hubbub. We'll see Aunt Wroat in the morning, and convince her that she's been taken in by a clever adventuress, but the girl goes to-night."

With this resolve the couple returned to the drawing-room, leaving the door ajar that they might hear Lally's return to her room. They waited hours, but they did not hear it. The servants retired to bed, and the clocks through the house struck twelve, and still Lally did not emerge from Mrs. Wroat's room. The Blights crept up again to their visitor's door, but silence reigned within.

"The old thing has gone to sleep," murmured Mrs. Blight. "I can hear that odious Peters breathing. Perhaps the girl has slipped to her room so silently that we did not hear her."

They stole up to the third floor to see. They found Lally's room empty and dark.

"They've outwitted us," said Mr. Blight, with an oath. "The girl is going to sleep with the old woman to-night. By George, I wish the old creature would die in her sleep. I'd have the girl arrested for her murder. We may as well go to bed, Laura. We must be up early in the morning."

They retired to their room, but we may safely assert that they did not sleep. They lamented the failure of their plans, accused each other of ruining their mutual prospects and the prospects of their children, and arose soon after daybreak, imbittered, angry, and full of rage and bitterness.

About seven o'clock they heard Lally come forth from Mrs. Wroat's chamber and go up to her room. The young governess had slept with her aged kinswoman, and now, by Mrs. Wroat's command, was about to pack her few effects in her box, ready for departure.

Mr. and Mrs. Blight followed Lally to her room, and entered, without knocking.

The girl was busy, folding her garments, and her round gipsy face was all aglow, her black eyes had in them a look of hopefulness of late a stranger to them, and she was altogether changed from the piteously sorrowful young creature of the day before. Even the love of her eccentric kinswoman had served to kindle the spark of new hopes and new interests in Lally's lonely life. She regarded her visitors with something of surprise, but received them courteously.

"Good-morning, madam; good-morning, sir," she said, bowing. "Will you be seated?"

"Viper! Ingrate!" cried Mrs. Blight theatrically, but with genuine anger. "I

warmed you in my bosom, as it were; I fed you at my table; I paid you at the rate of twenty pounds a year; and this is the way you reward me! Serpent! Base serpent!"

"I don't understand you, madam. What is it I have done?"

"Hear her!" cried Mrs. Blight, her hands uplifted, apostrophizing the ceiling. "She asks what she has done!" and the lady's tones grew hysterical. "She has taken the bread from my children's mouths! She has made me a beggar! She has traduced us and lied about us, and now asks us what she has done!"

"Madam," said Lally, her black eyes flashing, "I have not traduced you, nor lied about you."

"You have repeated to Mrs. Wroat my unguarded remarks about her, made to you in confidence."

"Again you are mistaken, madam," said Lally sternly. "I have not repeated those remarks. Mrs. Wroat judged you by words she herself overheard. I have done nothing to injure you, nor is it my fault that my great-aunt has chosen to exalt me at your expense. Believe me, Mrs. Blight, if my aunt had not found me, she would not have left her money to you."

"Your aunt?" cried the lawyer. "Seems to me you are getting along fast, young woman. Your aunt, eh? It is my opinion that you are a clever adventuress, and I deem it my duty to protect my dear aunt from your evil machinations. Put your things into that trunk. Laura, ring the hall bell for Buttons."

Mrs. Blight complied. Buttons made his appearance.

"Take that trunk down to the street, and call a cab," commanded Mr. Blight.

The trunk being locked with a spring catch, Buttons shouldered it and vanished down the stairs.

"Now, Miss," said the lawyer, with vindictive triumph, "you must be off. You cannot be allowed to speak again to the infirm old lady you have persecuted. March down the stairs quietly, or I'll call a policeman and accuse you of stealing."

"Mr. Blight—"

"Not a word, Miss. On with your bonnet and shawl, and depart. One word to arouse Mrs. Wroat, and I'll have you dragged off to jail."

The color went in and out of the girl's cheeks, and she was frightened and

confused. Her situation seemed to her indeed terrible. Peters had confided to her during the previous night, while Mrs. Wroat slept, that the old lady, in addition to her pulmonary disease, had an affection of the heart, and her physician had declared that she must not be unnecessarily excited, for excitement might prove dangerous to her. The excitement of finding her great-niece for whom she had so long sought had been almost too much for her, and Lally feared to disturb her further.

“You need not lay your hands upon me, Mr. Blight,” said the young girl, drawing herself away from his touch. “I will go from your house, as you command—but don’t touch me!”

She hastened down the stairs, followed by her late employers, and paused for a second in the lower hall with her gaze fixed upon Mrs. Wroat’s door. But the door did not open, and she went on and came into the yard. The garden door was open, and a cab stood in front of it, Lally’s box already mounted upon its roof.

“Where shall I tell the cabby to go, Miss?” asked the lawyer, ushering Lally into the street, and laying hold of the cab door. “Get in,” he added fiercely, in an under tone, “or I’ll send for a policeman!”

Lally climbed into the cab, not answering. “To the railway station,” said the lawyer, closing the door softly.

The cab rolled down the street. The Blights, triumphant, reentered their villa.

“I’ll make it right with the old woman,” muttered the lawyer, rubbing his hands. “I’ll tell her the girl has run off, after acknowledging that she was an impostor, and that her real name is Jones. Come in, Laura. We’re not quite ruined yet.”

If he was not quite ruined, he was certainly nearer ruin than he thought. Astute as he believed himself, he had not quite understood the young lady with whom he had to deal. Lally had not gone a block down the street, when she lowered the front window of the cab, and quietly touched the driver’s arm.

“We’ll go back to Sandy Lands,” she said, in a tone of command. “I have no money with me.”

“Forgot your purse, hey?” said the driver. “All right, Miss.”

He turned and drove back.

Lally commanded him to halt in the middle of the road, in full view of the front windows of the villa. The parlor of Mrs. Wroat faced the street. The inside blinds were raised, and Lally gazed up at the windows expectantly.

“Could you throw a pebble to hit those upper windows, driver?” she asked, of the puzzled cabman.

“Doubtful, Miss. Might break the glass, and have a big bill to pay. Is there somebody up stairs there you want to call?”

Lally nodded.

The cabman glanced up and down the street; there was no policeman to be seen; and he then gave utterance to such a yell as brought to the window not only Mrs. Wroat and Peters, but Mr. and Mrs. Blight at the drawing-room windows.

Mrs. Wroat at the upper window saw Lally, the cab, and the box upon it, and comprehended what had occurred. Peters threw up the sash.

“Wait a minute, cabby,” said the old lady, leaning from the window, and speaking shrilly. “There’s two more of us, and a parrot and a dog and plenty of luggage. I’ll give you double fare, cabby—wait!”

She disappeared, just as the lawyer bounded out of the house to order the cabman away. That worthy, obeying Lally’s command, stood his ground, and offered to fight the lawyer if he received “any more of his sarce.” Mr. Blight retreated with his wife, and hurried up to Mrs. Wroat’s chambers. He met her hobbling out of her room leaning upon the arm of the faithful Peters, who was laden with the parrot’s cage, the bandbox and umbrella, and was followed by the dog. This latter immediately conceived a desire to nip the lawyer’s legs, and Mr. Blight was obliged to keep up a very undignified dance to avoid him, while he addressed the old lady in terms of expostulation and entreaty, heaping vituperations upon Lally.

“Send my trunks down, and be lively,” said Mrs. Wroat, paying no heed to his words. “Don’t act like a Dancing Jack, or your friends will put you in Bedlam, Blight. Come, Peters, Mr. Blight has kindly ordered a cab for us, and we must be off. If we’re lively, we can catch the up express.”

She brushed past the Blights, husband and wife, the latter weeping and pleading, and descended into the yard. The cabman was induced to go up after her baggage, the exhibition of a half-crown lending him wonderful strength and alacrity, and the cab was soon piled high with luggage. Mrs. Wroat, Lally and Peters took their places inside, the driver mounted, and just then the Blights, resolved upon a last despairing effort to gain the fleeting fifty thousand pounds, came out to the garden door.

Mrs. Wroat bowed to them mockingly, and said as she waved her hand, with

glowing exultation, her eyes snapping:

“Good-bye, Mr. and Mrs. Blight. My daughter and I will breakfast at the station, and dine at our house in town. My Blighted friends, if you are ever in need, write to my heiress, and I dare say she will send you a half-crown. Driver, to the railway station.”

The cab with its occupants rolled away in triumph.

CHAPTER VIII.
LALLY'S NEW EXISTENCE.

After their triumphant departure from Sandy Lands, and from the presence of the utterly discomfited Mr. and Mrs. Blight, Mrs. Wroat, accompanied by Lally, and attended by the faithful Peters, proceeded without molestation to the Canterbury railway station. The up express was due in some ten minutes, and Mrs. Peters found opportunity to send a telegraphic message to Mrs. Wroat's housekeeper in town announcing the immediate return of her mistress with a young lady guest, and ordering that suitable preparations be made for their reception.

This duty had scarcely been fulfilled, when the train came puffing into the station, and the party took their seats in a first-class coach, securing a compartment to themselves.

On alighting at the London station Peters procured a cab.

"This is my last journey, Peters," sighed Mrs. Wroat, leaning back her head, as the cab rolled out of the station and into the streets. "My traveling days end here!"

"So you always say, ma'am," said Peters cheerfully. "But you've no call to travel any more. You've found what you've been searching for so long," and she glanced at Lally. "You should stay at home now and take comfort."

"The end is near!" sighed the old lady—"very near!"

Peters and Lally looked at the old lady with a sudden keenness of vision. Her hooked nose and pointed chin seemed sharper than usual. Her black eyes were more piercing and lustrous than was their wont; her features were pinched; and over all her face was spread an ominous gray pallor that told to the experienced eyes of Peters that the diseased heart was not properly performing its functions.

Peters turned and looked from the window with tears in her eyes. Her heart echoed those sad words: "The end is near!"

In due time the cab came to a halt in Mount street, Grosvenor Square, before the stately and somewhat old-fashioned mansion which had been the home of Mrs. Wroat for more than half a century. It was a double house, with parlors on either side of a wide hall, and was built of brick with stone copings and lintels, and possessed a pretentious flight of steps guarded by stone lions, and a great oriel window projecting from the drawing-room.

The front door of this house opened as the cab drew up, and a footman and a boy came down the steps and assisted their aged mistress to alight and enter the house. Lally and Peters came after, and Mrs. Wroat was taken to her own room, one of the rear parlors on the first floor, which she had appropriated twenty years before as her bed-chamber.

Out of doors the September air was mild, but in this room of Mrs. Wroat a sea-coal fire was burning in the grate, and its genial heat in that great house was not unpleasant. A crimson carpet covered the floor; crimson damask curtains half draped the wide windows that looked out upon a small square garden; and crimson-hued easy chairs and couches were scattered about the room in profusion.

Mrs. Wroat sank down upon one of the couches, and Peters bent over her, removing her huge scuttle-shaped bonnet and her Indian shawl. The footman and the boy were bringing in the luggage. Lally stood apart, not knowing what to do, when the housekeeper, an elderly, plain-featured Scottish woman, appeared. Mrs. Wroat beckoned the woman to come nearer to her.

“Mrs. Dougal,” she said, in a clear, loud voice, and looking affectionately at the slender, black-robed figure of Lally, “I have brought home with me my great-niece, Miss Lalla Bird, who is also my adopted daughter and heiress. I desire you to consider her as your future mistress.”

Mrs. Dougal bowed low to the young lady, and Mrs. Wroat continued:

“Let the best room in the house be prepared for her use, Mrs. Dougal—the amber room. Ah, it is ready! Show Miss Bird to it then, and see that her trunk is sent up to her. And have luncheon ready for us in half an hour or less, Mrs. Dougal. We are nearly famished.”

The housekeeper again bowed, and conducted Lally into the hall and up the broad stairs to a front chamber, one of the state apartments of the house. Here, soon after, she left the young girl to renovate her toilet, going again to her aged mistress.

“This is a wonderful change for me!” murmured Lally. “I must be dreaming. So lately I slept in a barn with tramps and thieves, glad of even that shelter, and now I am housed in a palace. I am afraid I shall wake up presently to find myself in the barn. Ah, I never even dreamed of such magnificence!”

She examined her surroundings with the delighted curiosity of a child. There was a fire behind the silvered bars of the low, wide grate, and its red gleams

streamed out over the rich blue velvet carpet with its bordering of amber arabesques on a blue ground, and one long red spike of dancing light fell upon the amber silk curtains of the low canopied bedstead. The square pillows were covered with the daintiest of linen, frilled with real lace. The coverlet was of amber satin, embroidered with a great medallion in blue silk. The curtains were of amber satin, with blue fringe, over white lace drapery, and the couches and chairs were upholstered in amber relieved with blue.

Lally observed two doors at one side of the room, and crossing the floor softly, she opened them successively. The first door opened upon a large and handsomely fitted bath-room, with marble basin and marble floor, half covered by a Turkish rug. The other door opened into a beautiful little dressing-room, furnished to match the bed-chamber. A massive armoire of carved ebony, with doors formed of plate-glass mirrors, completely covered one side of the wall, and a long swing mirror, framed in ebony, stood opposite. A gasolier depended from the middle of the ornate ceiling, and in three of the globes a mellow light was burning.

“It is like fairy-land!” thought the girl. “All this for me—for me! I can hardly believe it.”

There were ivory-handled brushes on the low dressing bureau, and Lally handled them carefully, almost afraid to use them. Her poor garments seemed out of place in these beautiful rooms, but she had no better dress, and with a smothered sigh she bathed her face and hands in the bath-room, and brushed her hair and dress in the dressing-room. She tied anew the bow in her hair and her black sash, and her toilet was complete. She gave a last look to her new quarters, and hastened down stairs to the chamber of her benefactress.

She found Mrs. Wroat comfortably ensconced in an easy chair by her fire. The parrot’s cage swung by a stout silver chain from the ceiling; the ugly little dog lay dozing upon a cushion near the fender; and a general atmosphere of delicious warmth and coziness prevailed.

“Come here, my dear, and kiss me,” said Mrs. Wroat, not looking around, but recognizing Lally’s step.

The girl obeyed, and sat down upon a stool at the old lady’s feet. Mrs. Wroat smiled upon her and talked to her, and when Peters came in, announcing that luncheon waited, Lally and her great-aunt were in the midst of a confidential talk, and their friendship had already deepened into a mutual affection.

Luncheon was served in the dining-room, across the hall from Mrs. Wroat’s

chamber. The windows of the dining-room opened into a small conservatory overlooking the garden, and the room itself, lofty and handsome, seemed to Lally the realization of one of her long-ago girlish dreams. Mrs. Wroat sat at one end of the oval table, Peters at the other, and Lally took a place at one side. The footman waited at table, but was soon dismissed, and the three were left to themselves and the enjoyment of the dainties plentifully displayed before them.

After the luncheon, Peters assisted her aged mistress back to her own room, Lally lending an arm to the support of the old lady.

“Ring the bell, Peters,” said Mrs. Wroat, as she again ensconced herself in her favorite chair. “But stay! Bring me my little desk. I want to write a note.”

Peters brought a portable malachite writing-desk, and placed it upon a table before her mistress. Mrs. Wroat, with an unsteady hand, penned a brief note to her lawyer, demanding his immediate attendance upon her, upon a matter of the utmost moment.

“Read it, Peters,” she said, when she had appended her name and the date. “It must be sent immediately. I feel, somehow, as if I had no time to waste. Let the footman take the letter to Mr. Harris and wait for an answer.”

Peters read and sealed the missive, removed the desk and went out upon her errand.

Some two hours later, Mr. Harris, Mrs. Wroat’s lawyer, arrived and was shown into the old lady’s presence. He was an old man, sharp-witted, business-like, and reticent, but honest, kindly, and devoted to the interests of his client, whose personal friend he had been for over a third of a century.

Mrs. Wroat welcomed him with outstretched hands and exclaimed:

“My friend, I have a surprise for you. You have sought, at my request, for my great-niece, Lally Bird, and failed to find her, even with a detective officer to assist you. I am neither lawyer nor detective, but I am more clever than you both. *I* have found my niece, and here she is. Lally, come nearer. Mr. Harris, this is Lally Bird, the daughter of my niece Clara Percy.”

Lally bowed. Mr. Harris stared at the girl in surprise.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Wroat,” he exclaimed, “but your great-niece, Lally Bird, is dead. Our detective discovered the facts some weeks ago, but I feared to communicate them in your present state of health. I cannot, however, permit you to be imposed upon by a possible adventuress. Miss Lally Bird committed

suicide last July. She sprang from London Bridge, and struck upon a passing boat, killing her instantly. I have a newspaper in my pocket—”

“Never mind your paper,” interrupted Mrs. Wroat vivaciously. “Look at the girl. Has she not my black eyes? Can you not remember when I had hair like hers, and that dear olive skin? You are too suspicious, my friend. Where do you suppose I found her? Why, down at Blight’s, at Canterbury. She was governess to the Blight children. Now sit down, and I’ll tell you the whole story. Stay, I am tired, and Lally will tell it. Question her, and be convinced of the truth of my assertions. Sit down, Lally, dear, and tell Mr. Harris all about yourself.”

Lally sat down near her great-aunt. She was a little frightened under the searching gaze of the lawyer, but her clear honest eyes met his unflinchingly, and he read in the sad and innocent face how deeply he had wronged her in deeming her a “possible adventuress.” He asked her a few questions in a quiet, careless manner, referring to a note-book which he produced and then his professional spirit stirring itself, he cross-questioned her as if she had been a witness in court whose evidence he was trying to shake, and upon whose impeachment the success of his cause depended.

He asked her her name, age, and date of her birth, and applied the same questions in regard to each of her deceased parents. He demanded where she had been educated, how she had maintained herself after her father’s death, and finally said, in a tone that betrayed how important the question and its answer was to the establishment of the girl’s claims:

“I have discovered—Miss Bird—assuming that you are Miss Bird—that you left your situation as music-teacher, or, to be more exact, that the school in which you were engaged closed, and you were thrown out of a situation, in the spring of this year. Where did you spend the months that passed between last May and this present month of September? And how, I may as well ask here, did your handkerchief happen to be found upon the water at the precise moment when that poor girl who was drowned, and who was supposed to be Lally Bird, was picked up?”

Lally blushed and paled, and looked appealingly at Mrs. Wroat. The old lady stroked the girl’s black hair softly, and said:

“Mr. Harris, you have touched upon a point of which I, as well as my niece, would have preferred not to speak. But you are my personal friend, and the confidence will be safe with you. Lally, tell Mr. Harris your story.”

Thus adjured, Lally, with much embarrassment, told her story with a quiet

truthfulness that carried conviction to the mind of the lawyer; after which, at a sign from Mrs. Wroat, Lally withdrew with the maid, who soon returned alone.

“Now,” said the old lady briskly, “I want to come to business. Mr. Harris, I desire to make my will. Have you the necessary form with you? I want a will as strong as a will can be made, for the Blights may choose to question its validity, on the ground that I am infirm, or something of the sort. Peters, wheel up the writing-table.”

The maid obeyed. Mr. Harris drew from his pocket a large note-case, from which he extracted a document, which he silently handed to his aged client.

“Ah,” she said, “it is my will, which I requested you, months ago, to draw up, without date or names, ready for signature when I should be ready to sign it. It begins by declaring that I am of sound mind—ah, yes, that is all right. The property is enumerated, and the legacy to Peters is down. I must have the annuity to her, to be paid out of the estate, doubled.”

She read the document carefully and slowly, weighing every word and sentence. When she had finished, she gave it back into her lawyer’s hand.

“Write in the name of the legatee, Mr. Harris. ‘I give and bequeath all my real estate, bank-stock, consols and personal property to my great-niece Lalla Bird.’ Make it plain and strong, so that no one but Lally can get my money. I want the property settled upon her. She may marry some day, if her first marriage was no marriage at all. I’ll discuss that first marriage with you at some future time, for I want to know whether the child is bound or not. But no husband must have power to squander Lally’s money.”

Mr. Harris did as he was directed, making out the will to the perfect satisfaction of Mrs. Wroat. Peters, at the command of her mistress, called up the household, and in the presence of the housekeeper, the house-maid, the cook and the footman, Mrs. Wroat signed the will. The domestics appended their signatures as witnesses, and were then dismissed; Lally was called back to her great-aunt, and soon after the lawyer took his leave.

The next day Mrs. Wroat was so much better that she insisted on going out with her young relative upon a shopping excursion. She presented Lally with a silver portmonnaie, filled with bank-notes, and early in the day Mrs. Wroat, Lally and Peters went out in the ancient family carriage, visiting the most celebrated shops in the West End. The old lady did not permit Lally to expend the money she had given her, but bought, and paid for from her own plethoric pocket-book, a magnificent Indian shawl, jewels, rich and costly laces, a set of Russian sables, a

dressing-case with gold fittings, odor cases, a jewel case, and a host of costly luxuries of which Lally knew neither the uses nor the names.

“Why do you buy an Indian shawl for so young a lady, ma’am?” whispered Peters, in surprise. “And why buy those costly furs in September?”

“I shan’t be here when the cold weather comes, Peters,” answered Mrs. Wroat, in a low voice. “And though I have Indian shawls which she will inherit, I want to buy her one for her own self. She will keep it always, because I bought it for her.”

Lally, as may be supposed, was grateful for her aunt’s kindnesses; she was more than grateful. But in the midst of her pleasure, a pang shot to her heart. She noticed that although this aged relative bought her an abundance of all standard articles, and toilet appurtenances, and dainty personal belongings, she bought but few dresses—a token that she expected Lally soon to put on a mourning garb.

After a visit to the ladies’ outfitter, where Mrs. Wroat purchased for Lally a trousseau fit for a wealthy bride, they returned to Mount street, and to dinner.

The next fortnight passed swiftly both to Lally and her great-aunt. The health of the latter seemed to improve, and Lally and Peters entertained high hopes that their kind friend and benefactress would live many years. The old lady’s physician contracted the habit of calling in daily, but even Mrs. Wroat smiled at his anxiety, and accused him of desiring to increase his fees at her expense without just cause.

These two weeks sufficed to knit the souls of Lally and her aged relative together in a bond which time alone could sever. They grew to entertain a mutual love, which would be to the survivor a sweet and tender memory while life should endure. Lally’s experiences had been very bitter, and she had thought she should never smile again, yet in her aunt’s society she felt a great degree of actual happiness, and waited upon her, and tended her, with the care and love of a daughter. She played and sang to her; she read to her; she listened with keen interest to the old lady’s tales of her youth; and soon Mrs. Wroat was heard to wonder many times each day how she had so long existed without her bright young niece; and Peters grew to love Lally with a protecting tenderness.

During this fortnight, which passed so happily in the great old mansion in Mount street, Mr. Harris had traced out Lally’s history step by step from the hour of her birth until the present moment, not that he doubted her, but that he desired to be supplied with irrefragable proofs of her identity, should the need arise for them.

The lapse of the fortnight indicated brought the time to October. One evening, when the night was wild without, Mrs. Wroat, Lally and Peters sat late in the parlor adjoining the bedroom of the former. Lally played and sang a grand old anthem, while the old lady's crooked chin was bent forward upon her gold-headed staff, and her bright black eyes filled with tears. Then followed some old-time hymns, such as the Covenanters sang in the lonely Scottish wilds, in their hours of stolen secret worship. When the sweet voice had died away, and the strains of music melted into silence, the old lady called Lally to her. The girl came, and seeing the unwonted emotion of her aged relative, knelt before her and caressed her hand softly. The withered yellow hands were upraised tremblingly, and dropped upon the girl's dusky head.

"God bless you, even as I bless you, my darling," said Mrs. Wroat, with a great yearning over the young creature. "Poor orphaned child! You have blessed my last days; may your life be blessed. Peters, when I am gone, stay with Lally. Be everything to her—maid, attendant, nurse, mother—all that you have been to me."

"I will—I will!" said Peters, as if registering a vow.

"And now, my darling, good-night," said Mrs. Wroat softly. "Kiss me, Lally! Again! Again! Good-night."

The girl enfolded the withered form in her arms, and kissed the old lady a hundred times with passionate fervor, and then, sobbing, went up to her own room.

Peters put her mistress to bed. The old lady seemed as well, or better than usual, but there was something unusual in her manner, and Peters sat up to watch by her.

"If she wakes, she'll find old Peters by her side," the woman said to herself. "How sweet she sleeps!"

Toward morning the maid dozed. Just at dawn she awakened with a great start, and a sudden chill. She sprang up and leaned over the recumbent figure of her mistress. How pale the thin, sharp features were! One long lock of gray hair lay on the withered cheek; the bony hands were clasped upon the bosom; the hooked nose and the crooked chin almost met, but upon the shrivelled mouth was a smile far more sweet and lovely than any that had played upon those lips in the old lady's far-past youth—a smile such as angels wear!

Peters thrust her hand upon the sleeper's heart. It was silent. The heart, clogged

or hampered by disease, had ceased to work hours before; all the machinery of life had stopped; and Mrs. Wroat had wakened from her sleep in another world! Lally’s generous and noble friend and protector was dead!

CHAPTER IX.
A SURPRISE FOR MISS WYNDE.

Miss Neva Wynde, on finding herself confronted by Artress at the very door of Mr. Black's wild Highland retreat, comprehended in one swift flash that she had been betrayed by her enemies, and caught in a snare, as we have said—that, in short, she was virtually their prisoner.

But after her first wild start of amazement, after the first wild glance at her enemies, she sternly repressed all signs of terror or surprise, and although her pure, proud face was paler than usual, yet she did not otherwise betray her fears.

"Mrs. Artress here!" she said. "This is a surprise. You said, Mrs. Black, that she was staying with friends in London, did you not?"

An evil smile played about the full sensual lips of Octavia Black, and she looked at Neva keenly as she answered, with affected carelessness:

"I did say so, I believe. But I intended to surprise you. You are so fond of Mrs. Artress, Neva, that I wished her to be of our party. I am glad you are so pleased."

Neva did not reply, but she drew up her slight figure with a sudden haughtiness, and her pale, proud face wore an expression of sternness before which Mrs. Black ought to have quailed. But Octavia only laughed, and as Neva thought, mockingly.

"Come into the drawing-room, good people," cried Mrs. Artress. "I have made the house habitable, and I want you to compliment me upon my handiwork."

Mrs. Black went into the room, and Neva followed her, Craven Black coming last like a body-guard. Neva had an uncomfortable feeling that she was already a prisoner.

The drawing-room at the Wilderness was a long barrack-like apartment, with bare white walls, upon which were hung a few engravings. The furniture was old, but well kept, being a combination of mahogany and black haircloth. The six windows were curtained with faded damask of the color of mahogany, and an old book-case, containing a few old and worn volumes, completed the list of furniture.

"It's a perfect old barrack, Craven!" said Mrs. Black, with a shudder. "But I suppose it must be fearfully difficult to get furniture and such things up the cliff.

However, if we make a shooting box of this place, decent furniture and pictures and things have got to be brought here. This room is like a draughty old barn."

"So is the whole house," said Mrs. Artress. "But the place is so delightfully romantic, and secluded and hidden, you know, that one can put up with drawbacks. I have had my hands full, I assure you, since I arrived here. How do you like the Wilderness, Miss Wynde?"

"It is romantic and secluded, as you say, Mrs. Artress," answered Neva quietly, yet with a shade of hauteur. "Have you been here long?"

"I came direct from Hawkhurst, stopping only a day in London," said Mrs. Artress. "I came by rail to Inverness, and there I chartered a fishing smack and loaded her with provisions and furniture, and bed and table-linen, and whatever else I fancied we were likely to need during our stay here. I had visited the Wilderness once when I was a girl, and knew about what we should require. I came on, sent away the sloop, and put the house in order. I have two women servants in the house, of the stolidest possible description. You will find it next to impossible to make them comprehend your soft southern tongue, Miss Wynde."

Neva wondered if the last sentence contained a hidden meaning.

"It is September at Hawkhurst," continued Mrs. Artress, with a shiver, "but here one might swear it was January, the mountain air is so cold. Will you go up to your rooms?"

"Yes," responded Mrs. Black. "When do we dine?"

Mrs. Artress consulted a tiny jewelled watch, one of her recent acquisitions.

"A half an hour," she said. "You won't have time to dress. I'll send one of the servants down the cliff to guide up the sailors with the luggage. But first I will show you to your rooms."

She passed out into the hall, her train sweeping the floor with silken rustle. Mrs. Black linked her arm in Neva's, but the young girl quietly withdrew her person from her enemy's touch, and walked apart proudly, and with a shade of defiance. Thus they passed up the wooden stairs, Craven Black bringing up the rear.

The upper part of the house was very simply arranged, there being a central hall, with chambers opening off it on either side. At the rear end of the hall was a door opening upon a flight of steps, beyond which lay the passage from which the servants' rooms opened, and from which the servants' staircase led down to

the kitchen.

“The room at the left is yours, Octavia,” said Mrs. Artress. “You will find two dressing-rooms attached, such as they are. The chamber just opposite, here upon the right, is Miss Wynde’s. Permit me to show you into your room, Miss Neva.”

She opened a door upon her right, and ushered Neva into a long ante-room, furnished as a bed-chamber. Beyond this ante-room, the door open between them, was a large square bed-room, where candles were burning in battered silver sconces.

“This ante-room was intended for the use of your maid,” remarked Mrs. Artress, “but as you did not bring your maid, and as Celeste is to attend upon you as well as upon Octavia and me, she may as well occupy your ante-room. In fact, we are so cramped for habitable quarters, that I have been compelled to assign it to her. How do you like your room?”

It was decently furnished, with a new carpet, curtains, and green roller blinds. There was a wood fire on the broad, old-fashioned hearth. The high-post bedstead, a modern armed chair and a low chintz-covered couch were particularly noticeable.

“You have a dressing-room beyond, Miss Wynde,” said Mrs. Artress, as Neva did not answer, pointing out a large light closet adjoining the bedroom. “This is a dear, delightful, out-of-the-world place, is it not?”

Neva deliberately looked into the closet, and surveyed the walls.

“I see no outlet from this room except through the ante-room,” she said abruptly.

“There is none. Those queer old-fashioned architects were very outlandish in their ideas; but then an ante-room is convenient, my dear—”

Neva checked Mrs. Artress’ familiarity by a haughty gesture. She had not liked the woman when Mrs. Artress had been Lady Wynde’s silent and unobtrusive gray companion, and she liked her still less now that she had bloomed into a devotee of fashion, and was obtrusively and offensively familiar and patronizing.

“It strikes me, Mrs. Artress,” she said quietly, “that the marriage of Lady Wynde to Mr. Black has completely transformed you. You do not seem like the same person.”

“And I am not,” declared Mrs. Artress. “There is no use in keeping the secret any longer, Miss Wynde. The whole world may know that I am the cousin of Craven Black, and being his cousin, of course I am his wife’s equal. I am going

into society with Mrs. Craven Black during the approaching season, and it is quite possible that I may make as brilliant a marriage as Octavia Hathaway did when she married Sir Harold Wynde."

Neva started, those careless words bringing to her awakening mind a crowd of new and strange suspicions. She remembered that Mrs. Artress had been in Octavia Hathaway's employ before the marriage of the latter with Sir Harold. And Mrs. Artress was Craven Black's cousin! Perhaps it was through Mrs. Artress, and after the death of Sir Harold Wynde in India, that Craven Black and Lady Wynde had become acquainted? And perhaps Craven Black had known Octavia Hathaway before her marriage to Sir Harold Wynde?

The thought—the doubt—was torture to her.

"I had not suspected your relationship to Mr. Black," she said coldly; "but I saw, upon the very morning after Mrs. Black's marriage, that your relations to her had changed."

She longed to ask, directly or indirectly, how long Octavia had known Craven Black, but her pride would not permit her to put the question. She turned haughtily away from Mrs. Artress, signifying by her manner that she desired to be alone.

The woman's face reddened, and she turned away with scarcely smothered anger.

"There is no bell in the room, Miss Wynde," she said, halting an instant at the door; "but you will hear the dinner bell, even in here. There will be a servant in the hall to show you down to the dining-room."

She went out, closing the door behind her.

Neva's first act, on being left alone, was to examine the two windows under their roller blinds and chintz curtains. The windows were of the quaint, old-fashioned sort, with tiny diamond panes set in heavy divisions of lead. The windows were casements, opening like doors, upon hinges, but the lock and fastening were intricate, and had they not been, it would have been difficult to open the windows owing to the presence of the inside blinds and curtains.

And even while Neva was tugging with all her strength at the cumbrous fastenings, she heard the savage baying of dogs as they chased across the grounds below, and knew that, whether intentionally or otherwise, her escape by her windows, should she ever desire to escape in that manner, would be utterly impracticable.

She retreated from the window and sat down for a few moments by her fire, thinking.

“It will not do to show suspicion,” she decided at length. “Perhaps I am alarmed without cause. Why can my father’s wife, whom my father so loved, desire to harm me? Is she determined upon my marriage to Rufus Black? How will such a marriage benefit her? I acquit Rufus of any share in the conspiracy. They dared not bring him with them to this place. He would not permit this oppression and wickedness. Can it be that my fortune tempts Craven Black and his wife to force me into a marriage that is repugnant to me, and that they count upon the weak nature of Rufus, and that when they get me securely wedded to Rufus, they will seize upon my income and divert it to their own use?”

She could not rid herself of this idea, which, as the reader is aware, approached so nearly to the truth.

“I know that I am in the midst of enemies,” she said to herself energetically. “There is no use in shutting my eyes to the truth. The whole truth has come upon me to-night like a revelation. I must be on my guard, brave and watchful. I must seem unsuspicious, to throw my enemies off their guard. How strange it seems that I, who hate no one, have enemies!”

She arose, not daring to give way further to the suspicions and anxieties crowding upon her, and brushed her brown cloth traveling suit and her red-brown hair, and washed her face and hands. A fresh collar and cuffs were found in her dressing bag, and she had hardly put them on when the loud clangor of a bell in the lower hall announced that dinner was ready.

She went through the ante-room into the hall, and found Celeste, the French maid, waiting to show her down to the dining-room.

“One moment,” said Neva in French, slipping a gold coin into the woman’s hand. “How far is the nearest post-office, Celeste?”

“Fifteen miles across the mountains and lochs, Miss,” answered the woman, pocketing the coin, with a courtesy. “There is a village, or hamlet, fifteen miles from here, but it’s a day’s journey nearly to reach it. It’s over twenty miles to Inverness, and that is a half day by water, with a favorable wind, but Inverness is the family post-office, Miss.”

Neva’s heart sank.

“Could I send a letter to Inverness, do you think?” she inquired.

“Oh yes, Miss. The sailors can go in the sloop. Mr. Black will send them at your bidding, Miss.”

“I prefer a quicker mode,” said Neva, feeling not at all confident that Mr. Black would accede to such a request from her. “I desire to write to an old friend of my father, one of the guardians of my estate—Sir John Freise. Is there no hanger-on about this place who would go secretly and swiftly to Inverness for me? If you can find such a person, I will give him five pounds, and also give you five pounds, Celeste,” she added, carefully concealing her anxiety.

“I will do it, Miss,” exclaimed Celeste enthusiastically. “There is a young man hanging about the kitchen, a relative of the old cook. I will send him. Write your letter to-night, Miss Wynde, and I will send it immediately.”

Neva expressed her satisfaction at this arrangement, and descended the stairs to the lower hall, not seeing the singular gleam in the French woman’s eyes, nor the treacherous smile on the French woman’s countenance. Celeste guided her to the dining-room, a large, long, low room, where Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black and Artress were already gathered. The three greeted Neva courteously, and Craven Black came forward to meet her, and conducted her to her seat at the table.

The dinner consisted of broiled birds upon toast, vegetables, coffee, crystalized fruits, fresh grapes and other delicacies, some of which had been brought up from the yacht. Neva was silent during the meal, and very thoughtful during the subsequent hour she passed with her enemies in the drawing-room. At a very early hour she retired to her own room.

Her luggage had been brought up, and stood unstrapped in her chamber. Neva closed her door, and discovered that there was no key in the lock. She pushed one of her heavy trunks against the door to guard against surprise, and unlocked another trunk, taking out from the tray a dispatch box, upon which she proceeded to write a letter to Sir John Freise.

This was no sooner begun than it was torn up.

“Sir John is too old to be distressed about me,” she thought. “I will write to Arthur, who must be very anxious at not hearing from me. He can consult with Mr. Atkins and Sir John about me if he chooses, or come for me, as he thinks proper.”

She wrote a long letter to her lover, recounting her suspicions of Craven Black and his wife, and declaring that, while she was not locked in her room at the Wilderness, she nevertheless felt herself a prisoner. She entreated her lover to

come to her, but not to come alone. She desired him to bring with him either Sir John or Mr. Atkins, whose support of Lord Towyn's claims to take her home might be necessary. She declared that she was afraid, and that she should count the days until his coming.

Neva sealed and addressed this letter to Lord Towyn, and then stamping it, stole softly out into the ante-room. Celeste sat there sewing a frill upon one of her mistress' robes by the light of candles, but she arose at Neva's entrance.

"Celeste," said the young girl, in a whisper, "here is my letter. And here are five pounds for the boy, and five pounds for you," and she took out two crisp Bank of England notes from her well-filled pocket-book. "When I receive the answer to this letter which I expect, I will give you as much more. You must be very secret, and let no one see you. Have you spoken to the boy?"

"Yes, Miss, and he has got a rough Highland pony, and he says he'll start for Inverness immediately."

With a feeling of relief, Neva placed the two bank-notes and the money in the hands of the French woman.

"Go," she whispered. "And remember, let no one suspect your errand."

The French woman assented, and putting the money and the letter in her pocket, hurried away.

"I am forced to trust her, having no one else to trust," said Neva to herself, after a few minutes of reflection. "Surely she would not take my money and deliberately betray me? She must know my position, but she cannot be sure that I know it. The money must tempt her to be true to me. But will the boy be true? I must see him—I will see him!"

She acted upon the impulse, going out into the hall, and softly descending the stairs. Here she paused, uncertain whether to seek the youth in the kitchen, or out at the stable. He was more likely to be at the latter place, and she flitted along the hall, pausing abruptly as a burst of laughter came from the drawing-room, the door of which was ajar.

She had halted at a point which commanded a view of the interior of the drawing-room, and involuntarily she looked in.

The sight she beheld absolutely transfixed her for the moment.

She beheld Craven Black seated at the centre-table, under a swinging lamp whose light fell full upon him. His wife was looking over his shoulder. Mrs.

Artress and the treacherous French woman stood at a little distance, looking also at Mr. Black. And he—and he—Neva could scarcely believe the evidence of her senses—he was reading her letter which she had written to her lover, and he twirled his waxed mustaches and uttered little mocking sneers as some especially tender passage came under his vision.

“By Jove, she’s sweet on Lord Towyn!” he muttered, with bitter envy, and jealousy, his brows darkening. “But to go on. ‘Oh, my own Arthur—’”

With the spring of a leopardess, with her soul on fire, with her wild eyes flaming, with a cry of awful indignation on her lips, Neva bounded into the room, snatched the letter from the hands of Craven Black, and retreated a few steps, clutching it to her bosom, and glaring around her like some fierce wild creature turned at bay.

CHAPTER X.
THE INAUGURATION OF HOSTILITIES.

The sudden entrance of Neva Wynde into the midst of her exulting enemies struck them dumb. Craven Black sat with hands outstretched, as they had grasped the letter Neva had snatched from them, his face growing livid, and a look of consternation glaring from his eyes. Octavia Black stood, half leaning still over her husband's shoulder, as if turned to stone, the mocking smile frozen on her lips, a look of terror and defiance on her face. Mrs. Artress, retaining more of self-possession than the others, stared at Neva with unmistakable hatred and triumph. The treacherous French woman drooped her gaze, and grew pale and awe-stricken.

Neva, still clutching the letter to her bosom, looked at her enemies one by one, her red-brown eyes blazing. It seemed to those who looked upon her that the red flames leaped from her eyes of gloom, and they trembled before her. Her pure, proud face was deathly white, but it was stern and awful in its wondrous beauty, as she turned it from one to another in an expression of scathing contempt that stung Craven and Octavia Black to the very soul.

Then, without a word, but with her letter still clutched against her panting breast, the young girl swept from the room with the air, the step, and the haughty carriage of an insulted empress.

The conspirators heard her slowly ascend the stairs to her own room. They stared at each other for a brief space in an utter and terrible silence. Mrs. Craven Black was the first to speak, and her companions started as her voice broke the dead and awful hush.

"Well, upon my word!" she ejaculated, forcing a strange, hoarse, and uneasy laugh, that jarred on the ears of her fellow conspirators.

"A queen of tragedy!" muttered Mrs. Artress, referring to Neva's appearance and departure from their presence.

Craven Black sighed and scowled darkly. An ugly smile disfigured his mouth.

"Well," he said, "matters have been brought to a crisis. I would have preferred to keep up the semblance of friendship a while longer, but the girl has torn the masks from our faces. She has declared war—so war let it be. In the fight before us, the strongest must conquer!"

“I could not dream she would follow me,” said the French woman deprecatingly. “I am not to blame. I am sure, very sure, that she is going to run away. She will leave the Wilderness to-night.”

The ugly smile deepened upon Craven Black’s visage.

“We will see!” he said, and his voice was terrible in its significance and threatening.

The French woman had read Neva’s purpose aright.

The young lady went up to her room and closed her door, and held in the flames of the bright wood fire the torn and crumpled letter she had written to her lover, and which she had rescued from the hands of Craven Black. She let the small burning remnant of paper fall upon the blazing log, and watched the blue shrivelled ash wave to and fro in the current of air, and then whirl upward into the capacious chimney.

The letter thus destroyed, Neva, with a white face and wild eyes, set about her few preparations for departure. Her soul was in a tumult; her brain seemed on fire. She could not think or reason yet; she only knew that she longed to get away, that she *must* get away. She put on her round hat above her braids, and was about to throw about her a light shawl, when a sudden fierce rattling of the casements in the wind warned her that a night in late September in the Scottish Highlands was likely to be cold. She opened one of her trunks and dragged out to the light a pretty sleeved jacket of the soft and delicate fur of the silver fox, and this she put on. She took up her muff and dressing bag and hurried into the ante-room, panting and breathless, eager for the outer air.

The door opening from the ante-room into the hall was closed. Neva pulled it open—and found herself face to face with Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, Mrs. Artress and the French woman!

The girl recoiled an instant before this human barricade as if she had received a blow. Then she waved her hand in a haughty, commanding gesture, and said:

“Let me pass! Stand aside!”

“Not so fast, Miss Wynde,” said Craven Black mockingly. “This lady, my wife, is your personal guardian, and she has the authority to control your movements __”

The girl’s passionate eyes flashed stormily at her enemies.

“Let me pass I say!” she cried, in a low, suppressed voice. “Attempt to detain me

here, and I will arouse the household!”

“Do so,” said Craven Black, tauntingly. “The two stolid women in the kitchen cannot hear you; and if they could, they have been prepared for your outcries, and will not heed them. The sailors are on the yacht, in the loch below. You are out of the world up in this eagle’s eyrie, and you may beat your wings against the bars of your cage till you drop dead, my pretty bird, but no one will heed your flutterings. Call, if you will. Try the effect of a shriek!”

He took a step nearer to Neva, who retreated before him, shrinking from his touch. He went after her into the room, his companions following. Celeste closed the door, and placed herself against it.

“Sit down, Neva,” said Octavia Black, with a mocking intonation. “Lay aside your hat and sacque. Don’t abandon us upon the very evening of our arrival in our new residence.”

Neva made no answer, but Octavia shrank before the stern accusing of the girl’s gloomy, passionate eyes.

“As your guardian,” said Mrs. Black, recovering her self-possession, which had been momentarily shaken, “I desire to ask you where you were about to go when we intercepted you?”

“I might refuse to answer, madam,” replied Neva, “but you know as well as I do that I was about to start for Inverness on foot, and that I intended to go back to Hawkhurst and to my friends. Unfortunately, Mrs. Black, you are my personal guardian; but Sir John Freise and my other guardians, are desirous that I should choose another in your stead, and I shall now do so. Your character, madam, is at last revealed to me in all its moral hideousness. My recent vague suspicions of you have become certainties. Mr. Atkins was right in his distrust of you. But, madam, because my dead father loved and trusted you to the last hour of his life, because you have borne his honored name, I will spare you from blame and obloquy, and screen your ill-doings and ill-treatment of me even from my guardians. I will agree to thus screen you if you will stand aside and let me go forth now, at this moment.”

“But, Neva,” said Mrs. Black, “you will lose your way on the mountains; you will make a misstep over some cliff, or into some ravine; or you will die of cold and exhaustion long before you can reach Inverness. It is twenty miles as the crow flies. It is forty, as you would have to travel. We will not send you in the yacht. Your scheme of departure is impracticable. In fact, you cannot go.”

“You mean to detain me here a prisoner?”

“Call yourself by what name you will,” said Craven Black, “you cannot go.”

The young girl looked around her desperately, like a hunted deer. There was no pity or sympathy in those hard and greedy faces. Had she been penniless, she would have been as free as the birds of the air; but being rich, her enemies looked upon her as their rightful prey.

“Are you a pack of outlaws?” demanded Neva, her young voice ringing through the room. “How dare you thus interfere with the liberty of an English woman?”

“You are not an English woman, but only an English girl,” interrupted Octavia Black. “You are a minor, without right or liberty or the exercise of your own will. You are my ward, Neva, and as your guardian I command your obedience. How can you reconcile it with your conscience to rebel against your step-mother?”

“You are not my step-mother,” cried Neva hotly. “When you ceased to be my father’s widow, you ceased to be my step-mother.”

“I think the law takes another view of such a case,” said Mrs. Black. “But, at any rate, I am still your guardian, and as such I have a right to read all the letters you write or receive. I read your letter to Lord Towyn, and exhibited it to my husband—”

“And to your husband’s cousin, and to your maid,” said Neva. “I am aware of all that. As to your right to examine my letters, I do not believe in it. Your action in opening my letter to Lord Towyn,” and Neva’s cheeks flamed, “and in reading its contents aloud to your familiars, was an act of the grossest indelicacy and want of honor and moral principle. Any person with a grain of decency in his composition will confirm what I say!”

Mrs. Craven Black was stung to fury by this outspoken declaration, its truthfulness giving it keener effect. She compressed her lips, being unable to speak, and hurried to and fro with uneven tread like a caged tigress.

“We will not discuss the right or wrong of Mrs. Black’s very natural and proper act,” said Craven Black. “She had the right to read your letter, and therefore did read it. I think you have no further fault to find with us than this?”

“Such an indelicate letter for a young lady to write,” murmured Mrs. Artress, turning her eyes upward. “‘My own dear Arthur.’ I never was so shocked!”

Neva turned her back upon the woman, without a word, and replied to Craven

Black as if she had not heard his cousin speak.

“I have other fault to find with you, Mr. Black,” the young girl said haughtily. “You and your wife have been false and treacherous to me from the beginning. You planned to come to this place before you left Hawkhurst, and you sent Mrs. Artress on in advance to prepare this house for your reception. Yet you pretended to me that we were to go by rail into Yorkshire. You allowed me to convey that impression to my friends, while you intended the impression to be a false one. The manner in which you proceeded from the railway station to Gravesend, and in which you have come to this place, has been secret and furtive, as if you meant to throw off pursuit. You have shamefully deceived me, and I regard your conduct and that of your wife, now that my eyes have been opened, as base, mean, and treacherous.”

“Regard it as you like,” said Craven Black airily, although his face flushed. “My dear child, you are beating against your bars like the bird in the cage to which I likened you. Don’t waste your strength in this manner. Be reasonable, and submit to the power of those who have right and strength upon their side.”

Mrs. Black paused in her walk before Neva, and said vindictively, and even fiercely:

“That is what you will have to do, Neva—submit! We are stronger than you, I should think your conscience would reproach you for rebelling against me in this manner. Did not your father a score of times enjoin you in his letters to love and obey me? Did he not in his will enjoin you to cling to me, and be gentle and loving and obedient to my wishes? Is it thus you respect his wishes and memory —”

“Stop!” cried Neva imperiously. “How dare you urge my father’s wishes upon me? How dare you speak of respect to his memory, which you outraged at the time of your recent and third marriage, when you summoned my father’s tenantry to a ball, and made merry in my father’s house, thus virtually rejoicing in his death? I cannot hear my father’s name from your lips, madam.”

“Oh, you can’t!” sneered Octavia Black. “You will have to hear whatever I may choose to say of him; let me tell you that, Miss Neva. You may fling off my authority and your late father’s together, if you choose, but his last letter to you should be held sacred by you, and its injunctions fulfilled to the letter, as sacred commands from the dead to the living.”

“That last letter!” said Neva. “The letter written by Craven Black, with your assistance and connivance! Ah, you start. You see that I comprehend you at last

—that I have fathomed your wickedness! That letter, now in the hands of Lord Towyn or Mr. Atkins, or Sir John Freise, emanated from Craven Black's brain and hand. It was a clever forgery, but, thank God, I know it to be a forgery! My father could never have so coolly and easily disposed of his daughter's future. He never wrote that letter!"

The girl spoke in a tone of such firm conviction, as if she knew whereof she affirmed, that the discomfited plotters made no attempt to deny her assertion. The Blacks looked at each other darkly, and read in each other's eyes incitement to continue in their wickedness with unabated courage. Mrs. Artress looked on, evilly exultant. She had never liked the heiress of Hawkhurst, with her dainty beauty, her piquant witchery of face and manner, and with all the wealth that seemed so boundless. Mrs. Artress was jealous, envious, and full of hatred of her, and her greed of money had been enlisted against the young girl.

There was a brief pause, during which Neva sat down laying aside her muff and dressing bag. Presently she said:

"I understand you now, as you know. I trust that you understand me. I will not trouble you to deal more in subterfuges and deceptions. I comprehend that I have been decoyed here for a purpose, and that I am now your prisoner. What is your purpose against me?"

"We have no purpose against you, Neva," said Octavia Black quite calmly, and even pleasantly. "You deceive yourself. We saw you anxious to plunge into marriage with Lord Towyn, but disapproving the match, I have brought you here. I stand in the relation of a parent to you, and use a parent's authority, as I have a right. I have other designs for you. A worthy and accomplished young man, the son of my present husband, has solicited your hand in marriage, and I am anxious that you should enter the same family with myself. We will not coerce you; but I am sure, after a residence more or less prolonged at this Wilderness, you will be glad to marry Rufus Black and go back into society. You shall have sufficient time for consideration. I am ready to sacrifice myself and remain here all winter, if necessary to bring you to the desired view of the subject."

"One thing we may as well make plain," said Craven Black deliberately. "When you leave this house, Miss Wynde, it will be as the promised bride of my son."

Neva's eyes flashed mutiny.

"Is Rufus Black a party to this scheme?" she demanded.

“No,” said Mr. Black promptly. “He knows nothing of my designs. I have told him to hope that you will relent, and he thinks that his step-mother has unbounded influence over you, which she will use in his behalf. Rufus is a poor, weak young fellow, with all his desirable qualities, and he would sooner cut his throat than force you into a marriage with him. No; Rufus is at Hawkhurst, where I have ordered him to remain until our return, or until he hears from me. He supposes us to be in Yorkshire. We are ready to start for your home with you any day when you shall have given us your oath that this visit to the Highlands shall be kept secret by you, and that you will marry Rufus on your return to Hawkhurst. These are our terms.”

“I have said upon what terms I am willing to keep your villainy secret,” said Neva haughtily. “My condition is that I am immediately allowed to go free. I shall not repeat that offer after to-night. I shall never agree to your terms. I shall never marry Rufus Black. I am betrothed to a noble and honorable gentleman, and I regard my promise to him as sacred as any oath. In short, Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, I will stay here until I die before I will yield to your dominion, or perjure myself by a cowardly oath.”

“Very well,” said Black. “It only remains to see which will hold out the longest, besiegers or besieged. Octavia, let us go. A night of reflection may bring our young lady to terms.”

“I have a last word to say,” exclaimed Neva, arising, her young face full of a bitter and passionate rebellion against her enemies. “You have not fairly counted the cost of your present undertaking, Mr. and Mrs. Black. The heiress of Hawkhurst, the only child of the late Sir Harold Wynde, the betrothed wife of the wealthiest young nobleman in Great Britain, cannot disappear in a manner so mysterious without exciting attention. I shall be sought after far and wide. My three guardians will set the officers of the law upon my track. Even now it is quite possible my friends may be on their way to this place. I shall be rescued from your hands, and you will be rewarded with the punishment and ignominy you deserve.”

“You believe all this?” cried Craven Black. “You think I am clumsy enough to permit myself to be tracked? How little you know me! I defy all the detectives in the world to trace me. I did not buy the yacht. A friend bought it in his own name, and provisioned it. The three sailors on board the yacht will never see a newspaper; will not stir out of the loch, and will see no one. I have attached them to me by a free use of money, and I have a hold upon them in knowing their past. If the officers of the law were to trace you to the loch below us, the men would

not dare to reveal your whereabouts, for fear of being held as conspirators against your liberty. The two women-servants in this house never stir off the plateau. The cabman I hired to convey us from the London railway station to Gravesend, I discovered, in my conversation with him, was employed for that day alone, to take the place of the cabman who was ill. The fellow told me he was a navvy, bound for a voyage the next day, and he wished he could sail our yacht instead of going out to Australia in a steamer. You see how my tracks are covered? Your help must come from yourself, not from Lord Towyn. I have no more to say at present. If you choose to come to terms, you can send Celeste to my wife at any moment. Permit me to wish you a good-night."

He approached her as if to shake hands. Neva gathered up her effects and retreated into her room. The next instant a key was inserted in the lock, and the bolt was shot home. Neva was in truth a prisoner.

"Celeste, you will occupy this room," said Mrs. Black, to her maid, "and you must sleep with one eye open. Miss Wynde is desperate, and may attempt to pick the lock, or to escape by one of her windows."

"I am not afraid of pursuit," said Mr. Black meditatively, "but I would like to throw the pursuers upon a wrong scent. I wish I could get Lord Towyn over upon the Continent, with that sharp-eyed Atkins. How can we contrive to give them the impression that we are gone upon a Continental tour?"

They pondered the question for many minutes.

"I have it," said Celeste at last. "I have a sister who lives in Brussels, and who works in a milliner's shop in the Rue Montague de la Cour. You shall write a letter for Mademoiselle, Mr. Black, in her very handwriting, and date the letter Brussels, and I will send it under cover to my sister to be posted at Brussels. Yes, my faith, we have it. One of the sailors shall post my letter, with its inclosure, from Inverness. It is well, is it not?"

The plan suited Mr. and Mrs. Black, who resolved to act upon it. The whole party adjourned to the drawing-room. Mrs. Craven Black brought forth several letters she had formerly received from Neva while at the Paris school, and which she had preserved for possible use. Mr. Black still retained the envelope to the letter Neva had addressed to her lover, and which he had intercepted. With these materials, and his skill at counterfeiting, Craven Black set to work to write a letter in Neva's name, and dated at Brussels. While he was thus engaged, Mrs. Black supplying him with suitable paper and ink, the French maid wrote to her sister at Brussels, requesting her to stamp and forward the inclosed missive.

Octavia Black gave her attendant a Bank of England note to inclose in payment of the service.

The double letter was finished and sealed that night, and Craven Black went to Inverness the next day in the yacht and posted it.

This then was the letter which had been brought up to London to Lord Towyn by his steward, and which the young earl, having read, and so instantly and vehemently pronounced a forgery.

But though it failed of its object, and did not deceive the keen-witted young lover as to its origin, it did not enlighten him as to Neva's whereabouts. He continued his search for her, calling in the aid of professional detectives, Mr. Atkins devoting his time also to the search, but they failed to find a clue to the missing young girl. And she, hidden in the far-off Scottish wilds, among mountain peaks and in a secluded rocky wilderness, looked in vain for her lover's coming. Her enemies were indeed more cunning than she had dreamed, and it seemed indeed as if the words of Craven Black would prove true, and the matter between the "besiegers and the besieged" would become a question of resistance. Which would be the first to yield to the loneliness and gloom of the Wilderness, and to the rigors of the swiftly approaching Highland winter?

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. BLIGHT ENTERS UPON HER MOURNING.

The sudden death of Mrs. Wroat proved a severe shock to poor Lally Bird, who had grown to love the eccentric, but kind-hearted old lady with a daughter's affection. She hurriedly dressed herself, and came down to Mrs. Wroat's chamber, pale and awe-struck, with a horrible sense of desolation and misery. It seemed as if a fatality attended her—that those whom she loved were in some way doomed. Her parents were dead, her young husband had been taken from her, and now her great-aunt had died, and she was again alone. She was not selfish in her grief, but she could not help thinking of her own bitter loneliness, as she bent over the still figure, and softly and reverently touched the straying locks of gray hair, and pressed her lips to the shrivelled mouth from which the angel smile seemed slowly fading.

Peters had by this time regained her self-command. There was much to do, and it devolved upon her to do it. Her tears must wait for a more convenient season. She was anxious that "all things should be done decently and in order," and that due respect should be given the dead mistress she had so loved. Her first act then, after arousing Lally and the servants, was to dispatch the footman to the family physician, and to Mr. Harris, Mrs. Wroat's lawyer.

The physician came first. He showed no surprise at the summons, and acknowledged to Peters that he had expected it before. He could only confirm the discovery of Peters that the old lady was dead.

The lawyer arrived while the doctor was in the house. Mrs. Wroat had requested that Mr. Harris should assume control of her affairs after her death, and he proceeded to seal her desk and to take charge of her private papers, while he gave directions for the management of the household while the dead should remain in the house. An undertaker was sent for, and all the grim preparations for the sepulture, so terrible to surviving friends, was entered upon.

The next morning's papers contained the obituary notice of Mrs. Maria Wroat, relict of the late John Wroat, banker, with a statement of her age and of the time appointed for the funeral.

The next afternoon brought to the door of the mansion in Mount street a cab, from which alighted Mr. and Mrs. Blight of Sandy Lands. They sounded the knocker pompously, ringing the bell at the same moment. The footman hastened

to give them admittance.

“I see by the morning’s papers that my dear aunt is dead, Toppen,” said the Canterbury lawyer, who was known and detested by Mrs. Wroat’s servants. “Why was I not informed of her dangerous illness?”

“Mrs. Wroat died sudden, sir,” answered the man respectfully.

“Why was I not telegraphed to immediately upon her death?”

“I don’t know, sir. Mr. Harris, he manages the funeral, sir.”

“Show us up to our room, Toppen. You are perhaps aware that I am the old lady’s heir? I am the nephew of her deceased husband, who left her a good share of his property. It all comes to me. I shall continue you in my service, Toppen, when I come up to town to live, which will be immediately. But, come. Show us our room.”

Toppen hesitated.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he said, “but I’ll just speak to Mrs. Peters. Miss Wroat she can’t be disturbed, and I don’t know which room azackly Mrs. Peters intends for you.”

“The amber room, of course,” said Mrs. Blight superciliously. “We shall have the best room in the house, whatever Mrs. Peters or any one else may say.”

“Miss Wroat has the amber room,” said Toppen.

“Miss Wroat!” repeated the lawyer. “And who may Miss Wroat be?”

“She is Mrs. Wroat’s young niece, sir, that she fetched home with her from Canterbury. The Missus said we were to call the young lady Miss Wroat. If you’ll walk into the drawing-room, I’ll go for Mrs. Peters.”

The Blights went into the drawing-room as desired, and there awaited Mrs. Peters’ appearance with outward bravado and some inward anxiety.

“You don’t suppose the old woman can have made a will giving Lally Bird her fortune?” whispered the Canterbury lawyer’s wife.

“No. I think she went off so suddenly at the last that she had no time to make a will. But if she did make one I stand as good a chance as any one of inheriting her money, even after all that has come and gone between her and us. She got her money from her husband, who was my uncle. The old woman had a stern sense of justice, and she would never have left her entire fortune away from her

husband's nephew, who had, as one may say, a claim upon it. No doubt she left her great-niece a legacy, but you'll find that we come in for the best share of her money."

Mr. Blight did not reflect that Mrs. Wroat's "stern sense of justice" might cause her to leave her money away from him, instead of leaving it to him.

"No matter whether she leaves the girl fifty pounds a year or two hundred pounds a year," said Mrs. Blight venomously, "she goes out of this house on the day after the funeral, bag and baggage, the artful jade! I won't have her under my roof a night longer than I can help."

"Quite right, Laura. We should have had the whole pile only for her."

"I shall furnish the whole house new," said Mrs. Blight reflectively. "Aunt Wroat had abominable taste, and the colors here quite ruin my complexion. Why don't Peters or the housekeeper come? I shall discharge Peters—"

The last words were overheard by Peters herself, who came in in list slippers and a black gown, staid, angular, and sour-visaged as usual, with a warm heart nearly bursting with grief under her prim bodice. She courtesied to the self-invited guests, her lips tightly compressed, and an ominous gleam in her tear-blurred eyes.

"Ah, Peters at last!" said Mrs. Blight condescendingly. "We want to go up to our room, Peters, before we see the remains of our dear aunt. Why were we not sent for yesterday, Peters?"

"I suppose Mr. Harris forgot to telegraph to you," said Peters grimly. "He spoke of doing so. Your room is ready, and I'll send Buttons up to show you the way."

"Toppen calls Miss Bird Miss Wroat—ha, ha!" laughed the Canterbury lawyer. "A queer idea, isn't it, Peters? Does the girl call herself Miss Wroat?"

Peters bowed.

"It was my lady's wish," she said.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Blight. "By the by, Peters, here's a sovereign for you. I always admired your sturdy independence, Peters. My aunt loved you, ah, like a sister, and leaned upon you, and all that, Peters. I hope she has remembered you at the last. It would be a pity if she had not left some trifle, to mark her appreciation of your fidelity and affection."

"I have no fault to find," said Peters coldly, rejecting the coin. "My dear lady

remembered me generously in her will—”

“Her will?” interrupted Mr. Blight eagerly. “She did make a will then? I am glad to hear it. Had she died without a will, Miss Bird and Mrs. Wroat’s other relatives would have divided the Wroat property and fattened upon it. As it is, I am sure Mrs. Wroat has done me justice. She would not have remembered any faults of ours in her dying hour, but would have seen to it that Mr. Wroat’s nephew had his proper share in Mr. Wroat’s property. I suppose you know the purport of the will.”

Peters bowed assent.

“I shouldn’t mind a matter of five pounds,” said Mr. Blight insinuatingly. “I should like to know if my poor aunt did justice to me in her last moments?”

“I don’t want your money, Mr. Blight,” said Peters, “but if you are anxious to know, I will tell you that Mrs. Wroat did you justice in her will. That is all that I will say. I am not at liberty to betray the contents of the will, which will be read immediately after the burial.”

The countenances of the two fortune-hunters glowed with delight. They interpreted Mrs. Peters’ words to suit themselves.

Mrs. Peters gave them no time for further questioning. She summoned the boot-boy, and ordered him to conduct the guests to their chamber, and then departed to the room where her dead mistress was lying. The boy led the way up stairs, Mr. and Mrs. Blight following, and ushered them into the red room, opposite Lally’s apartment, and next in beauty and convenience to Lally’s rooms.

“Peters goes out of this house when Miss Bird goes,” cried Mrs. Blight, sinking into a chair and puffing heavily. “Charles, I believe I shall take the old lady’s room for mine, and save coming up stairs. It will be so convenient. And you must run out a new dressing-room and bath-room; those down stairs don’t suit me at all. Aunt Wroat’s personal tastes were so horrid plain. I shall clean out all the present servants. I know that Toppen hates us both, but he was forced to be civil to the heir, you know. And, by the way, we must have mourning clothes, Charles. You must write to your tailor to send a man to take your measure immediately, and I will drop a note to Jay’s, and have them send a complete mourning outfit and a dressmaker to me.”

The notes were written in Mr. Blight’s most grandiloquent style, and although they were brief, they betrayed the complacency of a satisfied heir in every line.

The tailor and dressmaker arrived in due time, and Mrs. Blight discussed ribbons

and shades of silk, and the respective merits of French and English crape up stairs, while the old lady was being robed for the grave below, and Lally lay upon her own bed, weeping as though her heart were breaking.

Lally kept to her own room until after the funeral. She could not eat nor sleep. Etiquette forbade her attending her deceased relative to the grave, but she watched the departure of the funeral train from her window, her eyes almost blinded with her tears.

After the funeral, Mr. Blight and Mr. Harris the lawyer returned to the mansion in Mount street, and the latter summoned Mrs. Blight, Lally and Peters, to hear the will read.

Mrs. Blight swept in, clad in the deepest mourning, her garments covered deep with crape, a black-bordered handkerchief held at her eyes. Mr. Blight placed an armed chair for her near the hearth, the October day being chilly, and took a seat at her side with quite an air of proprietorship of the house.

Lally, in deep mourning, came next, with the faithful Peters, also in mourning habiliments. Mr. Harris placed a chair for Lally, and Peters sat near her young mistress, to whose service she intended to devote herself.

Mr. Harris then, with preparatory clearings of his throat, read the will. It commenced by declaring the testator of sound mind, being the usual formula, and proceeded with an enumeration of property at which the Blights grew inwardly radiant.

“All this, my real and personal property,” read Mr. Harris, in effect, “I give and bequeath, absolutely and without reserve, to—my beloved great-niece, Lally Bird, the daughter of John Bird and Clara Mulford Percy his wife, to her and to her heirs and assigns forever.”

The Blights gasped for breath.

Lally’s countenance did not change. She knew that her days of poverty were over; that she would never again wander shelterless and forlorn, glad to find shelter at night in a barn, and famished for food. All that distress for her was forever past. Her comfort and prosperity had been secured by the tenderness of her kindly and eccentric old relative, but Lally would willingly have gone back to her old-time poverty and toil, if by so doing she might have recalled her good friend from her grave.

“I say, this is simply infamous!” gasped Mr. Blight, turning upon Mr. Harris fiercely. “Infamous, sir! Do you know whose money, sir, this wretched old

dotard has willed away so lightly? I'll tell you, sir. It was my late uncle's. It should be mine—and, by Heaven, it shall be mine. I'll appeal to the law. I'll contest the will!"

"Are you a lawyer? Why do you talk so childishly?" demanded Mr. Harris. "The property of which Mrs. Wroat has disposed was hers absolutely, to dispose of as she pleased. If your late uncle had wished to provide for you, he would have done so. You are no relative of Mrs. Wroat, and you ought to know that if you contest the will, you won't get a penny. The girl would get it just the same—at least a portion of it—even if you succeeded in breaking the will, which you can't. Mrs. Wroat was indisputably in sound mind when she dictated that will. Under any circumstances, Mr. Blight, you can get nothing. With the exception of an annuity to be paid out of the income to Peters during her lifetime, the remainder of the property is absolutely Miss Bird's—or Miss Wroat's, as it was the wish of our deceased friend that the young lady should be called."

Mr. Blight sullenly recognized the truth of these words. He had been left out in the cold, and he was angry, disappointed, infuriated.

"Oh, my new and expensive mourning!" said Mrs. Blight spitefully. "I wouldn't have put on black for the old creature if I had known the truth. Peters ought to pay me the hundred pounds I have expended. I shall sell every black rag I've bought!"

Lally arose to retire, and Mr. Harris and Peters attended her from the room. Mr. Harris presently returned, and said gravely:

"Miss Wroat is fatigued, and Mrs. Peters thinks her unequal to the task of entertaining guests. At the request of Mrs. Peters, therefore, I have to suggest, sir and madam that you take your leave without again seeing Miss Wroat. I will remain to do the honors of the house, in Miss Wroat's stead, at your departure."

Mr. and Mrs. Blight, thus quietly dismissed, retired to their room and packed their effects. An hour later their cab was announced, and they came down stairs, the lady leaning on her husband's arm and weeping with rage.

As they sat in the cab, the luggage piled on top, and slowly departed from the house where they had hoped to reign, Mrs. Blight looked back, sobbing in her anguish:

"And it might have been ours but for the artful minx I took in, as it were out of the streets. I'll never do a good action again in all my life—never. And now I must go back to poverty, and scrimp to save what I've spent in mourning, and

we and our poor dear lambs may fetch up at the union, while that treacherous cat Lally Bird lolls in wealth. O dear! O dear!”

CHAPTER XII.
A FREAK OF DESTINY.

Upon the morning after the burial of Mrs. Wroat, and the utter discomfiture of the fortune-hunting Mr. and Mrs. Blight, Mr. Harris the lawyer called upon Lally. His card, with a message written upon it, was brought up to the young girl in her own room by Toppen, and Lally came down to the drawing-room, accompanied by Peters. Poor Lally looked very small and weak and childlike in her deep mourning garb, but when she lifted her sorrowful black eyes, the lawyer read in them a woman's capacity for suffering, a woman's strong and resolute character, a woman's enlightened and awakened soul.

"Good-morning, Miss Wroat," he said, with paternal kindness, shaking her hand warmly. "You are looking ill. Ought you not to seek change of air and scene?"

"I would rather remain here, sir," said Lally wearily; "that is, if I may."

"You can go and come at your own will, my dear young lady," said Mr. Harris. "Mrs. Wroat has left you entire liberty to do as you please. This house is yours, and a small country property as well. I came this morning to discuss business with you. I have been the lawyer and business agent of our lamented friend Mrs. Wroat for a third of a century or more, and it was her will that I should continue to have the management of the Wroat property until your marriage, or the attainment of your majority. You are absolute mistress of this house. Is it your desire to keep up the establishment just as it is, or would you prefer a life of greater freedom and of less care?"

"I will stay here," declared Lally. "This house seems home to me. Aunt Wroat loved it, and I will keep it just as she left it. Everything that she has loved or treasured will be sacred to me."

Mr. Harris looked approval of the sentiment. Peters' sour, sharp-featured countenance actually beamed with an unwonted warmth and pleasure. She had feared in her inmost soul that the massive, old-fashioned furniture with its odd carvings and quaint designs was to be sent to an auction room, and to be replaced by modern upholstery.

"Shall you retain the present housekeeper and servants?" inquired the lawyer.

"Yes," said Lally, "the household is to remain exactly as it is. Mrs. Peters will also remain with me as a friend and attendant. She is the only friend I have

now.”

“Not the only one, Miss Wroat,” said the lawyer warmly. “I am your friend, if you will permit me to call myself so. I have now to explain to you the amount of your income. When the late Mr. Wroat died, many years ago, he bequeathed to his wife who has just died the sum of fifty thousand pounds in securities and real estate. Mrs. Wroat had few expenses outside her own household, and did not expend her entire income, the balance of which has been allowed to accumulate, being annually added to the principal. Thus Mrs. Wroat died possessed of over sixty thousand pounds, ten thousand of which is in real estate. This house is not included in the estimate I have made, having been settled upon Mrs. Wroat at her marriage, as her own property to do with as she pleased. In addition to the real estate, therefore, you have fifty thousand pounds, which is invested in the three per cents, in foreign railway shares, in United States bonds, and in other perfectly safe and reliable securities. The interest upon these investments varies from three to seven per cent., but averages five per cent., and I have to announce to you that you have therefore an annual income of twenty-five hundred pounds, of which, by your aunt’s will, you come into immediate possession. Out of this twenty-five hundred pounds per annum, one hundred pounds is to be paid each year to Mrs. Peters, so long as she lives. The rest is absolutely your own! Have I made the matter perfectly plain to you?”

“Perfectly,” said Lally. “It is a large fortune, is it not?”

“It is a very fine income for a young lady,” assented Mr. Harris, “very fine indeed. Your expenditures need not be limited, you see. All reasonable desires can find perfect gratification upon your income, Miss Wroat. Should you desire it, you can take a house at Brighton for the season, or you might find an agreeable change in visiting your country place, although this is scarcely the season.”

“I like the country,” said Lally, “and I think it very pleasant in October.”

“Yes, so it is in Kent and Surrey, and the south of England,” said Mr. Harris, “but this is not a fancy seat, Miss Wroat, and it’s away off at the north—in Scotland, in fact, and on the sea coast. It’s fearfully wild in winter, I’m told, up there. The snow falls early, and the winds rage, and the thermometer falls below zero.”

“I was never in Scotland,” said Lally, a little flush of interest brightening her wan small face. “And I own a place up there—a farm perhaps?”

“Two or three farms, but the soil is sterile, and there is an old house in fine

order.”

“Where is this place? Near Edinburgh?”

“Far north of Edinburgh, Miss Wroat. It’s near Inverness—away out of the world at this season, you see. I was up there last year with a shooting party, Mrs. Wroat kindly placing the house at my disposal. There’s capital shooting over the estate, and we had a good time, the house being furnished, and a steward residing in a cottage on the estate.”

“I should like to go up there,” said Lally. “Perhaps I will a little later—but not yet. I don’t mind the lateness of the season, Mr. Harris, and I am not afraid of cold and wind and snow, if I can have shelter and fires. In fact, I think I would like to hide myself in some far off hidden nook until I shall have learned to bear my trials with fortitude. Life is so very bitter to me, Mr. Harris.”

“Life bitter at seventeen!” said the lawyer, with an indulgent smile. “You have money, youth, beauty, and will have hosts of friends. You will learn, as we all do, sooner or later, Miss Wroat, to take the bitter with the sweet, and to thank God for all his goodness, instead of repining because one or two blessings are withheld out of so many given. But I will not bore you with a sermon. I have little more to say this morning except that, should you need me, I entreat that you will call upon me at any time. I will come to you at a moment’s notice. Is there anything I can now do for you?”

There was nothing, but Lally expressed her gratitude for the offer. Mrs. Peters had a few questions to ask, and when these had been duly answered, Mr. Harris paid into Lally’s hands the sum of six hundred pounds being one quarter’s income. He then departed.

The young girl spent the remainder of the day in her own room, not even coming forth to her meals. The next day she came down to the dining-room, but immediately after dinner retired to her apartment. She read no books nor newspapers, but sat before her fire hour after hour, silently brooding, and Peters with an unspeakable anxiety beheld the round gipsy face grow thin and pallid, dark circles form under the black eyes, and the light figure grow lighter and more slender, until she feared that the young mistress would soon follow the old one.

In her distress, Peters had an interview with the housekeeper, and expressed her fears and anxieties.

“A good wind would just blow Miss Lally away,” she said. “She’s pining, and

the first we know she'll be dead. What can I do?"

"Who'd have thought she'd have loved the Missus so much?" said the housekeeper.

"It isn't that alone," declared Peters, "although she loved Mrs. Wroat as a daughter might have loved her, but she's had other troubles that I'm not at liberty to speak of, but which are pressing on her, along with her great-aunt's death, until, I think, the double burden will crush her into the grave. She don't eat more than a bird. I ordered her mourning for her, and when the shopman brought great parcels of silks and bombazines and crapes, she never even looked at them, but said, 'Peters, please select for me. You know what I want.' The dressmaker was in despair yesterday, because my young lady would not take an interest in her clothes, and did not give a single direction beyond having them made very plainly. I'll go and see Mr. Harris about her, or else the doctor."

"What does a man know in a case like this?" exclaimed the housekeeper. "The young lady is pining herself to death, Mrs. Peters, and that's the long and the short of it. This great house is dull and lonely to her, and the gloom of the funeral isn't out of it yet. The young mistress wants change—that's what she wants. Take her to some watering-place, or to the Continent, or somewhere else, and give her new interests and a change of scene, and she'll come back as pert and chipper as any bird."

The idea struck Mrs. Peters favorably. She hastened up stairs to the amber room, and softly entered. Lally sat in a great chair before the hearth, her little shrunken figure quite lost among the cushions, her small wan face startlingly pale, and her great black eyes fixed upon the fire. She looked up at her attendant, who approached her with a swelling heart, but with outward calmness.

"If you please, Miss Lally," said Peters, broaching her wishes without delay, "I've been thinking that the house is so gloomy without the dear old mistress, and that you keep so close to your room that you will be ill directly unless some change is made. And I am sure I'd like a change too, for a week or month. And so I make bold to ask you to go for a month to Brighton."

The girl shook her head with a look of pain.

"Not there," she murmured. "I cannot bear the crowds, the gayety, the careless faces and curious eyes."

"Then let us go up to the Heather Hills, your Scottish place," urged Peters. "I have been there once, and we could take Toppen with us, Miss Lally. The

steward who lives on the estate can provide us with servants. Let me telegraph him to-day, and let us start to-morrow."

"Very well," said the young mistress listlessly. "If you wish it, Peters, we will go."

The sour face of the faithful maid brightened, and she expressed her thanks warmly for the concession.

"I'll telegraph at once, Miss Lally," she said. "But then the steward is not likely to receive the telegram unless he happens to be at Inverness, which is not likely. I will send Toppen by the first train to prepare for our coming, if you are willing, Miss Lally."

Lally was willing, and Mrs. Peters withdrew to acquaint the tall footman with her mistress' design, and to dispatch him on his journey to the northward. When he had gone she returned to Lally.

"Toppen is on his way to the station, Miss," she announced. "He will have everything in order for us against our arrival. It is cold at Heather Hills, Miss Lally, with the wind blowing off the sea, and you will need flannel and thick boots, and warm clothing."

"Order them for me then, Peters," said Lally, with listless voice and manner.

"But you will want an astrachan jacket to wear with your black dresses, and you must try it on, to be sure that it fits," said Peters. "And you will want books at Heather Hills, and these you can choose best for yourself. And the newspapers must be ordered to be sent to our new address, but that I can do this evening by letter. And you will want work materials, Miss Lally, such as canvas, Berlin wools and patterns; drawing materials, new music, and other things, perhaps. Let me order the carriage, and let us go out and make our purchases."

Lally looked out of the window. The sun was shining, and the air was clear. She had not been out of the house for days, and she assented to Mrs. Peters' proposition. The maid ordered the carriage, and proceeded to array her young mistress for her drive.

The carriage, which was called Mrs. Wroat's carriage, was a job vehicle, hired by the month at a neighboring mews, with horses, and with coachman and footman in livery. It looked like a private brougham, and with its mulberry-colored linings, and plain but elegantly gotten-up harness, was very stylish, and even imposing.

When the carriage came around, Lally and her attendant were quite ready. They descended to the vehicle, and drove away upon their shopping excursion. A fur dealer's was first visited, then a stationer's and bookseller's, then a shop for ladies' work and their materials. Lally's purchases were deposited in the carriage. And lastly the young girl stopped at a picture dealer's in Regent street, a small cabinet painting in the window having caught her eye.

It was simply a quaint Dutch interior, with a broad hearth, a boiling pot over the flames, a great tiled chimney-piece, a Dutch house-wife with ample figure and round, good-natured face, and three or four children pausing at the threshold of the open door to put off their shoes before stepping upon the immaculate floor; a simple picture, executed with fidelity and spirit; but its charm, in Lally's eyes, lay in the fact that in the early days of her marriage, during the brief period she had passed with Rufus Black in New Brompton, in their dingy lodgings, he had painted a cabinet picture of a Dutch interior, nearly like this in design, but as different in execution as may be imagined. His had been but a daub, and he had been glad to get fifteen shillings for it. The price of this picture which had now caught Lally's eye was ten guineas.

The young lady had the picture withdrawn from the window and examined it closely.

"I will take it," she said. "I will select a suitable frame, and you may send it home to-day. Here is my card."

The picture dealer brought an armful of frames for her selection, and while she examined the designs and gilding, a man walked into the shop with a sauntering gait, and paused near her, in contemplation of an old cracked painting to which was attached a card declaring it to be a genuine Murillo.

"This is no more a Murillo than I'm one!" announced the new-comer loudly, half turning his face toward the shopman. "A Murillo? It's a modern daub, gotten up to sell."

At the sound of the stranger's voice Lally started, dropping the frame she held in her hand. She turned around quickly, looking at him with dilating eyes and whitening face, and gasping breath.

The strange connoisseur, who had so boldly given his opinion of the pretended Murillo, was Rufus Black!

He had tired of the loneliness of Hawkhurst, and had run up to town for a day's recreation and amusement. The picture shop in Regent street, into which Lally

had strayed that morning, had long been one of his favorite haunts, and the picture Lally had just bought had really given him the idea of the picture he had painted so long before in the dingy room at New Brompton.

His face was half averted, but Lally knew him, and a deathly faintness seized upon her. He was well dressed and possessed an air of elegance that well became him. His hair was worn long under an artist's broad-brimmed hat, and his features from a side view were sharp and thin. His mouth and chin seemed to have gained firmness and character during the past few months, but in the latter feature was still prominent the dimple Lally had loved, and which, pretty in a woman, is nearly always a sign of weakness and irresolution in a man.

Rufus turned slowly toward the girlish figure in black, his gaze seeking the shopman. A low, strange cry broke from Lally's lips. Rufus heard it and looked at her. Her heavy crape vail was thrown back over her bonnet, and her small face framed in the heavy black folds was so white, so eager, so piteous, that Rufus thought it a vision—an optical illusion—a freak of his imagination. He recoiled in a species of terror.

"Rufus! Oh, Rufus!" cried the deserted young wife in a wild, involuntary appeal.

Mrs. Peters heard the name, and comprehended the identity of the young man. She came and stood by Lally's side, warning off Rufus by her harsh face and angry eyes.

"Come, my dear," she said, "let us go."

"Rufus! Oh, Rufus!" moaned the poor young wife again, seeing nothing but the anguished, horrified face of her husband, hearing nothing but his quick breathing.

Rufus slowly passed his hand over his forehead.

"My God!" he murmured. "Lally's face! Lally's voice!"

Mrs. Peters took the hand of her young mistress, attempting to lead her from the shop, which but for them and the amazed shopman was happily deserted. But Lally stared at her young husband in a species of fascination, and he returned her gaze with one of horror and amazement, and the old woman's efforts were fruitless.

"My dear, my dear!" whispered Peters anxiously. "Come with me. Come, my darling! He abandoned you. Pluck up a spirit, Miss Lally, and leave him alone!"

Lally slowly arose and moved toward the door, but coming quite near to her

stupefied young husband.

“It is I—Lally,” she said, with the simplicity of a child, her great black eyes staring at him piteously. “I am not dead, Rufus. It was not I who was drowned in the Thames. I know that you are going to be married again to a great heiress, and I hope you will be happy with her; but she will never love you as I loved you. Good-bye, dear—good-bye forever!”

With a great sob Lally flitted past him, and hurried out to the waiting carriage. Rufus dashed after her, wild-eyed and wild-visaged; but Mrs. Peters grasped him vigorously by the arm, detaining him.

“None of that!” she ejaculated harshly. “I won’t have my young lady tampered with. You shan’t follow her. You’ve broken her heart already.”

“She’s mine—my wife!” cried Rufus, still amazed, but in an ecstasy of joy and rapture. “I tell you she’s mine. I thought she was dead. I am not engaged to an heiress. I won’t marry one. I want my wife—”

“You’re too late, sir,” said Mrs. Peters grimly. “You should have made up your mind to that effect at the time you abandoned her.”

“But I was compelled to abandon her! God alone knows the remorse and anguish I have known since I supposed her dead. I love her better than all the world. How is it that she lives? Why does she wear mourning? Woman let me go to her!” And he tried to break from the detaining grasp of Peters.

“No, sir,” said the woman still more grimly. “If you have a spark of manliness, you will let the young lady alone. She hates you now. I assure you she does. She’s only a governess, and you’ll lose her her place if you hang around her. I tell you again she hates you.”

Rufus uttered a low moan, and sat down abruptly upon a shop bench. Mrs. Peters glided out and entered the carriage, giving the order to return home.

“I told him a lie, God forgive me!” she muttered, as she looked at Lally, who lay back upon the cushions, faint and white. “I told him that you were a governess, Miss Lally. Let him once get wind of your good fortune, and he’ll abandon his heiress and come back to you. Let us start for the north to-night, dear Miss Lally, and you will not see him if he comes to Mount street. We can take the night express, and sleep comfortably with our lap robes, and to-morrow night we will sleep at Edinburgh.”

“We will do as you say, Peters,” said Lally wearily. “Only don’t speak to me

now.”

She buried her face in the cushions, and was silent with a stillness like death.

Meanwhile Rufus Black sat for some minutes in a sort of stupor, but at last raised his haggard eyes and said to the shopkeeper:

“The—the lady who passed out, Benson, was my wife. I had heard she was dead. Can you give me her address?”

The shopman was all sympathy and kindness. He knew Rufus Black had come of a good family, and he suspected, from the scene he had just witnessed, that he had experienced trouble through his marriage. He picked up the mourning card Lally had laid down and read the address aloud.

“‘Miss Wroat, Mount street, Grosvenor Square,’” repeated Rufus. “My wife is governess in that family. Thanks, Benson. I will go to Mount street.”

He went out with staggering steps, hailed a hansom cab, gave the order, and was driven to the Wroat mansion in Mount street. The boy called Buttons waited upon the door in Toppen’s absence. He was a shrewd lad, and had received private instructions from Peters, who had just come in with her young mistress.

“I want to see Miss Bird,” said Rufus abruptly, making a movement to enter the hall.

The boy blocked his path.

“No such lady here, sir,” he replied.

“Mrs. Black perhaps?” suggested Rufus.

“No such lady,” persisted the boy.

Rufus offered him a bright coin, and said desperately:

“I want to see the governess—”

“No governess here, sir,” said Buttons, pocketing the coin. “No children to teach, sir. There’s no lady in the house but the mistress, Miss Wroat, and she don’t see no one, sir.”

Rufus stood amazed and bewildered.

“Can I not see Miss Wroat?” he asked. “I wish to inquire after a young lady whom I supposed to be here—”

“Miss Wroat can’t be disturbed, sir, on no account,” said Buttons. “She’s not

well, and don’t receive to-day.”

“I will call to-morrow then,” said Rufus, with increasing desperation. “I must see her.”

He descended the steps, and the door closed behind him.

“Benson must have picked up the wrong card,” thought Rufus. “Or Lally might have given a wrong card. Why should she give her employer’s card, unless indeed she was buying a picture for her employer? I’ll go back and see Benson.”

He went back, but the picture dealer affirmed that Lally had given him the card with Miss Wroat’s name upon it, and Rufus said to himself:

“I have it. Miss Wroat is the sour-looking, servant-like woman in black, some *parvenue* grown suddenly rich, and Lally is her companion. This Miss Wroat knows Lally’s story and despises me. I’ll go back to Mount street this evening, and see Miss Wroat. When I tell her the whole truth she will pity me, and allow me to see Lally, I am sure. I won’t care for poverty or toil if I can have back my poor little wife. I will fly with her to some foreign country before my father comes back. But what did Lally mean by my ‘marriage with an heiress?’ My father must have told her of Neva. Why, I’d rather have my poor little Lally than a thousand haughty Nevas, with a thousand Hawkhursts at their backs.”

Early in the evening Rufus returned to Mount street, and Buttons again answered his double knock.

“Family gone away, sir,” said the lad, recognizing the visitor.

“Where have they gone?” inquired Rufus in sudden despair.

Buttons declined to answer, and was about to close the door, when Rufus placed his knee against it and cried out:

“Boy, I must see Miss Wroat, or her young companion. If they have gone away, I must follow them. My business with them is imperative. Tell me truthfully where they have gone, and I will give you this.”

He held up as he spoke a glittering half sovereign.

Buttons hesitated. Clearly he had had his instructions to betray to no one the course his young mistress had taken, and just as clearly his virtue wavered before the glittering bribe offered to him. He reasoned within himself that no one need ever know that he had told, and here was an opportunity to make ten shillings without work. He yielded to the temptation.

“Miss Wroat and Mrs. Peters,” he began, with his eyes fixed on the coin—“they __”

“Mrs. Peters? That is what the young companion calls herself? Go on.”

“Miss Wroat and Mrs. Peters,” repeated the boy, “they have gone to Heather Hills to stay a month—that’s where they’ve gone. Now give me my money.”

“In one moment. As soon as you tell me where is Heather Hills.”

“Scotland,” said the lad. “Inverness. I don’t know nothing more, only I know the boxes and trunks were labelled Inverness, for I looked at ’em. The money!”

Rufus paid it, and hurried away, proceeding to the Great Northern Railway station. When he reached it, the night express had gone!

CHAPTER XIII.
AN ACTIVE RESISTANCE.

Neva Wynde was not one to waste her strength in useless repining, nor to give way to weakness and tears at a time when she needed all her keenness of wit and vigor of body, in the contest begun by her enemies. She was a brave, resolute young girl, and she did not lose her bravery and resolution even after matters had been so singularly precipitated to a crisis, and she knew her enemies as they were. She retired into her own room, as we have said, and was locked in. As the bolt shot home and Neva comprehended that she was an actual prisoner, her cheeks flamed with her indignation at the indignity practised upon her, but she did not weep or moan.

She quietly laid aside her fur jacket and hat and went to her window, essaying to look out. The baying of the dogs in the yard below reached her ears, and she went back to her fire, smiling bitterly.

“I see no way of escape,” she murmured. “The night is cold, and I might die on the mountains in my wanderings, should I get out. I am in lonely Scottish wilds, but I am in the hands of Providence, and I will fear no evil. Surely Arthur will find me out. Craven Black may be keen-witted, but Arthur is keener. He will find me.”

She stirred the logs on the hearth to a brighter blaze, and sat before her fire, until long after she heard the French woman go to her bed in the ante-room. At last she arose and barricaded the door with her trunks, and undressed, said her prayers, and went to bed, but not to sleep.

At the usual hour of the morning she arose and dressed herself, making her own toilet. When she had completed it, the door opened and the French woman entered her presence.

“What, dressed, Mademoiselle?” said Celeste. “I am come to dress you, but of course I had to dress Madame and Mrs. Artress first. Mademoiselle is no longer the first person to be considered and waited upon, you see. Mademoiselle was first at Hawkhurst; she is last at the Wilderness.”

“Leave the room, Celeste,” said Neva haughtily. “After your base treachery to me last night, I must decline your attendance.”

“Madame the step-mamma is to be obeyed, not the refractory Mademoiselle,”

said the French woman insolently. “If Mademoiselle is not satisfied, the remedy lies in Mademoiselle’s own hands. The breakfast waits, and foreseeing that Mademoiselle would be ready for it, Monsieur and Madam are already in the dining-room. I will show you the way.”

Neva had not expected to be allowed to leave her room, and descended at once to the dining-room, closely attended by Celeste, who gave her not the slightest chance of escape. The Blacks and Mrs. Artress were in the dining-room, and addressed Neva courteously; she responded coldly, and took her seat at the table. Not a word was spoken on either side during the progress of the meal, after which Celeste appeared to conduct Neva back to her room, and the captive was again locked in.

During Neva’s brief absence her room had been put in order, and her fire had been freshly made. She sat down with a book, but she could not read. She took out her drawing materials, but she could not work. Her thoughts were with her young lover, and she indulged in speculations as to what he was doing at that moment, and when he would find her.

At noon, Celeste came in bearing a tray on which was a plate of bread and a jug of water. She went out without speaking.

At night, Celeste appeared again with similar refreshments, and made up the fire afresh, and went out without speaking. The prison fare and prison treatment on the silent system was intended to subdue the haughty young captive, whom her enemies expected to see a suppliant for mercy in the course of a few hours. They did not know Neva Wynde. Her proud lip curled, and her soul rebelled against the meanness and wickedness of her oppressors, but she ate her dry bread composedly, and drank the clear water as if it had been wine.

That night, after barricading her door, she went to bed and to sleep.

The next morning, when she was dressed and standing by her window, looking out into the gloom of the firs and mountain pines that grew near to the house, and shut out nearly all light and brightness from her room, her door was unlocked, and Mrs. Craven Black swept into the apartment.

Mrs. Black was attired in a Parisian morning robe of white cashmere faced with ermine, and lined throughout with quilted cherry-colored silk. A band of ermine confined her robe at the waist, and was fastened with a jewel clasp. Her countenance was supercilious and domineering, and her eyes gleamed with prospective triumph.

Neva did not turn from her window after the first glance at her visitor, but continued to look out into the gloom, as if unconscious of her visitor's presence.

"Still rebellious, eh?" said Octavia, pausing near the door, and regarding Neva with smiling insolence. "Are you not ready to become the obedient step-daughter, Neva, and to comply with my commands?"

"I shall never be ready to comply with your commands, madam," said Neva haughtily.

"Never! Ah, that's a word with a long meaning," said Mrs. Black superciliously. "I think you'll change your mind after a little longer imprisonment. How do you like your Lenten fare? Bread and water is what they give to contumacious prisoners, and it is found effective in subduing obstinate tempers. Don't you think such meagre diet affects your resolution, Neva?"

The young girl did not answer.

"Sulky? Yes, I see. You are but a child, Neva, rebelling against rightful authority. Your father enjoined you to yield me a daughter's obedience. I have not been unreasonable, and you should respect my superior knowledge of the world and my superior wisdom, and give way to them. You are not yet prepared to do this?"

"As much now as I ever shall be," said Neva, her eyes flashing. "Are you really so foolish, Mrs. Black, that you believe you will force me into perjuring myself? Do you really think me a child, whom you can coerce or frighten into obedience to an unjust will? You are mistaken in me. You will find me at the end of a year as firm in my refusal to obey you in this same thing, as you find me now."

Mrs. Black looked incredulous.

"My dear Neva," she said caressingly, "I have just been down to the dining-room, and have discovered that we are to have broiled birds on toast, hot rolls and coffee, for breakfast, with the most delicious Scotch marmalade made of Seville oranges. It's a bitter cold morning, just like January. I can feel the cold wind coming in through your windows. Think of going down to the breakfast that is prepared for us below. There is a cover laid for you. Come down with me, Neva, and after breakfast we will go down to the sloop and start on our return home. Is not the picture pleasant? Will you come?"

"I suppose there is a condition attached to partaking of this breakfast," said Neva. "You have not relented?"

“Ah, I hoped you had relented,” said Octavia Black, smiling. “Are you sure I have not tempted you? You have only to speak one little word, Yes, and you shall share our breakfast, and we will start for home to-day.”

“You must have a high opinion of me,” said Neva bitterly. “I will not sell my birthright, madam, for a mess of pottage. I prefer bread and water to the end of my days, rather than to become a party in your vile schemes, or to marry a man I do not love.”

“Then I will send your breakfast up to you,” said Mrs. Black. “I had hoped that you would go down with us. But to-morrow morning may not find you so obstinate.”

She retired, and Celeste brought up a tray with bread and water. The French woman put the room in order and made up the fire anew, bringing in a huge back-log herself, which she dragged along upon a reversed chair. She went out without speaking.

The next day was like this one. Mrs. Black came in in the morning with her proposals, and retired discomfited. Then Celeste brought bread and water and put the room in order, and went out, to return at noon and evening with more bread and water.

Still Neva did not yield. Her imprisonment was telling on her strength, but her courage did not lessen. Her red-brown eyes glowed with courage and resolution from out a pale face, and her lips wore a smile of patience and cheerfulness which angered her enemies.

Upon the fourth morning Neva arose with a determination to make a bold attempt at escape. She could not render her condition worse in any event, and perhaps she might gain her freedom. While she was dressing she formed a plan, upon the success of which she felt that her fate depended.

“I begin to believe that Arthur will never find me here,” she thought. “I must help myself.”

She dressed herself warmly, secured her pocket-book in her bosom and her jewels on her person, and put on her fur jacket and round hat. Thus equipped, she waited at her window with keen nervous anxiety, her ears live to every sound, and her heart beating like a drum.

At the usual hour Mrs. Black came in alone, as she usually came.

There was no one in the ante-room, as Neva knew, Celeste being in attendance

upon Mrs. Artress, who grew more and more exacting of the French woman's services with each day.

Mrs. Black started as she beheld Neva in out-door costume, and halted near the door, looking suspiciously at her captive.

"What! Dressed to go out?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, madam," answered Neva wearily, yet with every nerve in her slender frame quivering. "I am tired of this forced inaction. I long for exercise, for the fresh air, and the songs of birds."

"You know on what terms you can have these blessings," said Octavia Black, still suspiciously.

"Yes, madam, I know."

Mrs. Black's face brightened. In the girl's dejected tone and drooping attitude she believed that she read her own victory. She came toward Neva, her hard black eyes shining, her cheeks burning redly, her lips parted in an exultant smile.

"My dear child," she cried, stretching out her hands. "I was sure the close confinement and prison diet would bring you to a sense of your duty. I have no reproaches to offer; I am too happy in the victory I have won. You have now only to take a solemn oath to marry Rufus Black on our return to Hawkhurst, and never to betray this affair at the Wilderness, and we will set out in the yacht this very morning on our return to Hawkhurst. You shall—"

Neva did not wait for the sentence to be finished.

With a furtive glance she had seen that the door was ajar, and that no one was yet in the ante-chamber; and so, suddenly, with a dart like that of a lapwing, she flew past Mrs. Black, sprang into the outer room, and locked the door upon her utterly amazed and stupefied enemy.

Then she sped across the floor of the ante-room and peeped into the hall.

The upper and lower halls and the stair-way were alike deserted. By some strange fatality, or providence, not one of the household was within sight.

Neva fled down the stair-way with the speed and lightness of an antelope. The front door was ajar. She pulled it open and darted out upon the lawn, and sped away amid the gloom of the trees. And as she thus fled, the loud shrieks of Mrs. Black rang through the house, rousing Mr. Black in the dining-room, Mrs. Artress and Celeste, and even the women in the kitchen.

In seemed less than a minute to Neva, when she heard shouts and cries at the house, the barking of dogs, and the sounds of pursuit.

Neva dared not venture down to the loch, nor dared she risk an appeal to the sailors on board the yacht. Her safety lay in avoiding every one in the vicinity of the Wilderness, and she turned up the wild mountain side, with the idea of skirting the mountain and descending to the valley upon the opposite side.

The low-growing mountain shrubbery screened her from view, but it also impeded her flight. She bounded on and on, panting and breathless, but a horrible pain in her side compelled her to slacken her speed, and finally she proceeded onward at a walk. Her heart seemed bursting with the thronging life-blood, her head and body were one great throbbing pulse, and her feet grew heavy as if clogged with leaden weights.

Unable to proceed further without rest, she sat down upon a huge boulder under a protecting cliff to rest. The gray morning scarcely penetrated to the gloomy spot in which she had halted. The trees were all around her, and the winds made wild moaning among their branches. She could see nothing of the Wilderness, nor of any house. She was lost in the pathless wild, in the chill gray morning, with a drizzling mist, as she now for the first time noticed, falling all around her like a heavy mourning vail.

“At any rate, I am free,” she thought, lifting her pale wild face to the frowning sky in rapture. “Free! O God, I thank thee!”

And then, with that prayer of gratitude upon her lips, with her head raised to ecstacy of joy, there was borne to her ears the barking of dogs and the loud yells of men—the sounds of an active and terrible pursuit! The enemy was close at hand!

CHAPTER XIV.
NEVA STILL DEFIANT.

The sounds of active and hostile pursuit, growing every instant louder as the pursuers neared Neva's temporary halting-place, startled the young fugitive into renewed flight. She started up like a wearied bird from its nest, and fled onward through tangled shrubbery and over outcropping boulders, tripping now and then over some loose rock, which, at the touch of her light feet, went rumbling down the steep mountain side with a crash that rang in her ears, frightening her to yet greater speed. She sped through thickets of the dwarfed mountain pines and firs, and over open and sterile patches of ground, where there were no trees nor friendly rocks to screen her flying figure, and the drizzling Scotch mist fell around her like a dusky vail, and the skies were gloomy above her, and the air was keen with wintry chill.

And still was borne to her ears, sometimes louder, sometimes fainter, the sounds of the barking of dogs and the shouts of men. These sounds quickened Neva's flagging steps, but she could not outrun her pursuers. They were on her track, and sooner or later, unless she could out-wit them, or hide from them, they must capture her.

Her wild eyes searched the mountain side as she hurried on. There was no hole in the rocks into which she might creep, and lie concealed until her enemies should have passed. The trees were too low and scraggy to offer her shelter among their few and scanty foliaged branches. Her way was difficult and tortuous, and with a sudden change of purpose, Neva turned aside from her course of skirting the mountain, and plunged downward toward the mountain's base.

"I shall come down upon the side nearly opposite the loch," she thought. "At any rate, I have passed beyond the plateau."

In the course of ten minutes more, she struck into a rude wagon track, which Neva conjectured led from the Wilderness to some farm-house or hamlet upon the opposite side of the mountain. She followed the circuitous, steep, and slowly descending track, looking, as she ran, like some wild spirit of the mist.

The sounds of pursuit faded out of hearing, and again she sat down to rest, her limbs giving way beneath her. Her tongue was parched and swollen, and the blood surged through her frame still with that one gigantic throbbing, and her

feet ached with an utter weariness, yet she got up presently and staggered on, with fearing backward glances over her shoulders, and her eyes staring wildly from out the wet whiteness of her young face.

“I can’t keep on much longer,” she murmured aloud. “I feel very strange and ill. Perhaps I shall die here, and alone. Oh, is there no help for me?”

No answer came to that piteous cry save the wailing of the winds among the pine boughs, and the dashing of the sleet-like rain in her face. She moved more and more slowly. Her garments seemed strangely heavy to her, and her feet grew more and more like leaden clogs weighing her down to the earth.

A terrible despair seized upon her. With a wild prayer on her lips and a faintness like that of death upon her, she leaned against a low tree, clinging to it to prevent herself from falling. As her head sunk forward wearily upon her breast, her closing eyes caught a glimpse through the trees of an object at a little distance that lent to her for the moment an unreal strength and vigor, and she gave a great cry of joy, as hope surged back into her young fainting heart.

The object was only a small cabin built of cobblestones, a mere shepherd’s hut perhaps, or, as was far more likely, it had been built long ago for the occasional use of belated sportsmen who, during a stay at the Wilderness, found themselves lost upon the mountain. It had a strong roof and a capacious chimney, but it exhibited no sign of habitation. Neva did not observe this fact, and pressed onward to the door of the cabin, which she opened without preliminary knocking. There was no one in the cabin.

Neva’s heart sank as she made this discovery. There was no one here to whom she could appeal for protection. She hesitated whether to go or to remain here, but her physical exhaustion decided the question. It was absolutely necessary that she should rest, and she entered the humble dwelling and closed the door.

The cabin contained but a single room with two closets attached, and but a single window. This was provided with an inside shutter. There was also a stout wooden bar and iron rests for its support, as a means of securing the door. Neva barred the door and shuttered the window, and then sank down in a confused heap upon the floor, listening with sharpened hearing for some sound of pursuit.

But she heard none. Evidently her divergence from her first course had thrown her enemies off her track. A wild joy and gratitude filled her soul. But when its first flush was over, a chill like that of death again seized upon her. Her teeth chattered, and strange rheumatic pains shot through her frame. She shook too, as with an ague.

The room was bare of furniture, but the great blackened hearth, with a few half burnt sticks upon it, testified that some person had lately spent the night in the cabin. The door of one of the closets was open, and Neva could see that there were fagots of wood stored within. She arose feebly, and brought out an armful of wood, piling it on the hearth. She stirred the ashes, in the hope of finding a living coal; and finding none, went back to the closet. Here, to her great joy, she found a tin box half filled with matches hanging against the wall.

In three minutes more she had a glorious fire on the hearth, crackling and blazing and flaming cheerily, and the girl's heart leaped up at the sight of those dancing flames. She sank down upon the hearth, her hands held out to the genial blaze, her pale wild face looking strangely weird and lovely in the red glow, and the steam arising from her wet garments like a thick mist.

A delicious sense of rest pervaded her frame, and the rheumatic pains disappeared before the penetrating heat of the great fire. But a terrible sense of weakness remained. Her prison fare of bread and water, and her lack of exercise, during her dreary days of confinement at the Wilderness, had told seriously upon her strength. She began to fear that she could go no further, and a great hunger began to assail her, seeming like a vulture tearing at her vitals.

Impelled by a vague hope that there might be food in the dwelling, she went to the second small closet. It was filled with empty shelves. In one corner an old torn basket had been carelessly thrown. Neva examined the basket, and discovered in it a small black bottle, with a few drops of Highland whiskey in it, but there was no food. She drank the whiskey and crouched down again upon the hearth, weary and worn, and a little later a merciful stupor enwrapped her senses —the stupor of a death-like sleep, such as utter exhaustion sometimes produces.

It seemed to her that she had slept but a minute, but really she had slept for hours, when she was awakened by a loud beating upon the cabin door. She started up broad awake, and stood in an attitude of flight, her head bent toward the door.

"I say she's in here!" she heard a voice crying loudly—a voice which she recognized with a thrill of terror as the voice of Craven Black. "We've scoured the mountain on this side, and have not found her. She must have taken refuge in this unused cabin. Miss Wynde! Miss Neva!"

Neva was still as death. She scarcely dared to breathe.

Again Craven Black beat furiously upon the door.

“Break in the door!” he shouted. “Here, one of you sailors, bring that log of wood yonder, and we’ll see who has barred this door on the inside. The log of wood! Quick!”

Neva stared around her with wild, frightened eyes. There was no outlet from the cabin save through the door or window, and these were side by side, and both commanded by her enemies.

With a terrible despair she crouched again on the hearth, her head still bent toward the door.

“We’ll make a battering-ram of the log,” said Craven Black. “So! Now the four of us will break the door in in a second. Guard the door, men, while I go in. Keep out those sheep dogs. They act like wolves. Now!”

There was a combined assault upon the door. It trembled and creaked, and one of the iron rests in the wall, unable to resist the pressure brought to bear upon it, gave way, bursting from its socket. The wooden bar dropped to the floor, and the door was burst open so violently and so suddenly that Craven Black came flying into the room like some projectile hurled from a mortar.

He gave a yell of triumph at sight of the slender, crouching figure on the hearth.

“Here she is, boys,” he cried. “We’ve found her! Poor creature! She is still in the delirium of the fever, as I told you. How wild she looks!”

The sailors stood without the door, half-careless, half-pitying. Craven Black had told them that his wife’s step-daughter was ill, and had fled from the Wilderness in the delirium of fever, and they saw nothing in Neva’s appearance to contradict the statement. For the young girl sprang to her feet and retreated from Craven Black with both hands upraised, the palms turned outward, and her wild face full of horror and loathing. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, and her cheeks and lips were tinted with vivid carmine. Even Craven Black was alarmed at her appearance, and was calmed into instant gentleness.

“My poor Neva!” he cried. “I am come to take you home—”

“I will not go!” cried the girl, her red-brown eyes flashing. “O God, am I utterly forsaken and abandoned to my enemies?”

“You hear her?” exclaimed Black. “Poor thing! she needs her step-mother’s tender care and nursing. We brought her up to the Wilderness, hoping that the change would cure her propensity to these paroxysms. Come, Neva. Your step-mother is very anxious about you, and the whole household is alarmed.”

“Let me die here,” said Neva, her sweet young voice rising to a wail. “Oh, men, have you no pity for me? Can you not see that Craven Black is my enemy? Will you not protect me, and set me free? In the name of Mercy—”

“Hear her!” said the sailor who had acted as captain of the yacht, speaking in an audible whisper. “As mad as a March hare—and so young too!”

Clearly there was no help to be expected from the sailors.

Neva retreated to the further corner, as a helpless mouse retreats to a corner of the trap, and Craven Black followed her. There was a brief struggle, and Neva was again a captive.

“We must take turns in carrying her home,” said Craven Black, pinioning Neva’s arms to her sides. “It’ll be a tough job up the steep mountain path, but we can do it.”

“It’s no great task,” said one of the seamen. “She can’t weigh much. She’s fell away since she came to Scotland, and she can’t be heavier nor a child of ten.”

Craven Black caught up the girl’s light figure, and bore her from the cabin, the men following. He strode up the steep hill, holding Neva fiercely to his breast, and now and then he looked down upon her still white face with an expression singularly made up of love and hatred.

Yes, although he had married Lady Wynde from motives of interest, and because, as he had said to himself, a half-loaf of bread was better than none at all, his old love for Neva was not dead in his guilty breast. It was a strange passion, growing hot and cool by turns, now verging toward hatred, and now reviving to its olden strength. As he gathered the girl in his arms, and went up the hill with her at long, fierce strides, he said to himself that there was no crime at which he would pause, no obstacle which he would not sweep from his path, if the heiress of Hawkhurst would only promise to marry him on the attainment of his freedom.

“Neva!” he whispered.

The young girl raised her eyes to his with such a look of loathing and detestation that his love for her changed suddenly again to hatred. He knew in that moment that the guilty scheme he had just conceived was only a vain fancy, and that Neva could never be induced under any circumstances to marry him.

“I’m tired, captain,” he said abruptly. “You can carry her.”

The captain took the helpless burden and went on, Black keeping at his side.

In this manner, taking turns in carrying the young captive, the party returned to the Wilderness.

The mist was still falling when they came upon the plateau, but Mrs. Black stood out upon the lawn, her head bare, her morning robe saturated with wet, and her face worn and haggard with anxiety. There were great dark circles under her hard black eyes, and her mouth was compressed, and there were deep lines about it that added ten years to her apparent age. What she had suffered that day from fear of exposure through her injured step-daughter, her face declared, but she had known less of remorse than of apprehension and terror.

Behind Octavia, upon the porch, and comfortably wrapped in a water-proof cloak, stood Mrs. Artress. Both had thus been watching nearly all the day for the return of the pursuers, and it was now three o'clock of the afternoon, and the dusk was rapidly falling.

"They've come! They've come!" cried Octavia Black hysterically. "They are alone—No; they have got the girl! We are safe—safe!"

She came running to meet her husband, who was now in advance of his men. Craven Black briefly informed his wife how and where he had found Neva, and at the porch he took the captive in his own arms, dismissing the three men to the yacht. He carried Neva to her own room, where Celeste was busy at the moment, and he unloosed the cord confining the girl's arms, setting her free.

There was a wood fire blazing on the hearth. Neva, paying no heed to her enemies, crouched down before it.

"Leave her to herself," said Craven Black. "Celeste, you may remain to dress your young lady—"

"I will dress myself," interposed Neva, in a low, weary voice. "I want to be alone."

"Celeste had better dress Octavia," exclaimed Mrs. Artress abruptly. "Octavia has acted like some cowardly, frightened child all day, Craven. She has stood on the lawn bare headed, in the mist, until she is wet to the skin, and has a fearful cold. She is nearly ill."

"I will have hot drinks prepared immediately," said Craven Black. "Octavia, you must take a hot bath. Celeste, bring a hot bath to Miss Wynde."

He led the way from the room, the others following. Celeste locked Neva's door, putting the key in her pocket. Octavia went to her own room, coughing dismally.

“Do you hear that?” demanded Mrs. Artress, stopping Craven Black in the hall. “Exercise has prevented any serious harm to Miss Wynde from to-day’s exposure; but Octavia has taken a fearful cold. You’d better nurse her carefully. In your desire to get ten thousand a year more, don’t throw away the four thousand you already have. Remember, if Octavia should die, you and I would be beggars!”

“What an infernal croaker you are!” said Black angrily. “It isn’t necessary to twit me with my poverty. As to Octavia, if she’s foolish enough to stand out in a chilling mist out of sheer cowardice, let her cure herself. I am cold and hungry, and I intend to take care of myself.”

He proceeded to do so, ministering to his own wants with assiduity.

The French woman brought in a hot bath to Neva, and a bowl of steaming hot whisky punch, then hastening away to attend upon her mistress. Neva took her bath, changed her wet garments for dry ones, drank her punch, and went to bed. A free perspiration was induced, and the fever that had threatened her subsided, her pulse beat evenly, and her brain grew cool. She went to sleep, and did not awaken until late in the evening.

When she opened her eyes, Mrs. Artress was standing at her bedside, feeling her pulse.

“How do you feel?” demanded the woman, her ashen eyes surveying the girl insolently.

“I am quite well—only tired.”

“Only tired!” echoed Mrs. Artress. “Only tired—after all the trouble you’ve made us to-day? Octavia is downright ill. You won’t get another opportunity to repeat your proceeding of this morning, my fine young lady. Celeste is with me, and hereafter we two shall call upon you together. Octavia was foolish to come in here alone, but she did not know you so well this morning as she does now. We have brought you up a hot supper, by Craven’s orders, but in the morning you go back to the bread and water diet, if you choose to remain obstinate.”

Celeste was standing at the foot of the bed, and now wheeled forward a small table, on which were lighted candles and a large tray of food. This done, Mrs. Artress and the French woman went out together, locking the door behind them.

Neva sat up in bed, leaning against her pillows, and looked hungrily at the tray. There was a pot of steaming coffee, a plate of buttered hot scones, a dish filled with daintily broiled birds on toast, a dish of baked fish, and a basket filled with

oranges, apples and grapes. Neva thought she had never beheld a meal so tempting in her life, and surely she had never been so famished. Craven Black had feared the result of her day's exposure on the bleak mountain to the chilling mist, upon her weakened frame, and had sent her strengthening food more from policy than pity. It was not to his interest that she should die.

Neva ate her dinner, or supper, as it might more properly be termed, and concealed the remnants of fowl in her trunk. It was well she did so, for the next morning Celeste brought to her only a meagre supply of bread and water. The remains of the wild fowls and of the whisky punch, however, were produced by the young girl when alone, and gave her the sustenance she needed.

Her limbs were somewhat stiff upon the day after her adventure on the mountain, but this stiffness wore off gradually, leaving her as well as ever.

Her diet continued meagre in the extreme, no change being afforded her from bread and water. Mrs. Artress and Celeste came to her once a day with food, Craven Black remaining in the ante-room during their visit, as a guard against another possible attempt at escape on the part of the young captive.

A week passed in this manner, before Octavia Black came again to Neva's room. But what a change in her that week had wrought! She had grown thin, and her features were worn to sharpness. A red flush burned fitfully on her cheeks, and her hard black eyes were strangely glittering. She had lost many of the graces that had distinguished her, and looked what she was—a bold, unscrupulous, unprincipled woman. Neva could not particularize in what her charm of person and manner had lain, but those charms were now gone. She looked ten years older than her age, and coughed like a consumptive.

"What have you to say to-day, Neva?" asked Octavia, in a hoarse voice.

"Nothing," said Neva calmly.

"You have put us to a terrible trouble; you have given me a horrible cold and cough; and yet you sit here as obstinate as if you were a princess and we were your subjects. Will nothing subdue your proud spirit? Will nothing bend your haughty will? Do you like bread and water and close confinement so well that you prefer them to a marriage with a handsome young man who adores you?"

"I prefer them to perjuring myself, madam," said Neva bravely. "I prefer a brief imprisonment to a lifetime of sorrow and repining."

"A brief imprisonment!" repeated Octavia. "It won't be so brief as you think. We are going to remain here all winter, if necessary to subdue you. We have

entered on a path from which there is no turning back. The winters, I am told, are fearful in these wild Highlands. We shall soon be shut in with snows and awful winds. Your lover can never trace you here, and if he could he would not be able to reach the Wilderness in the dead of winter. We shall have a dismal winter—you especially. What do you say, Neva?" and her tone grew anxious. "Will you yield?"

"Never!" said Neva quietly. "I am no child to be frightened by cold, and I am not so fond of the pleasures of the table as to sell my soul for them. I will live here till I die of old age before I will yield!"

Octavia Black's face darkened with an awful shadow. She dreaded the terrible Highland winter; and a strange terror, for which she could not account, held possession of her soul night and day. But, as she had said, she had entered on a path from which there was no turning back. Neva *must* yield, sooner or later, she said to herself, even if compelled to yield through physical weakness.

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Black, arising. "We will make preparations to spend the winter here. Craven will go to Inverness in the yacht one day this week, and purchase stores for our use during the cold season. We need blankets, and food of every description. If you should decide to go to Inverness with him, as the promised bride of Rufus Black, you have only to let me know before he sails."

She went out and locked the door, giving the key to Celeste, who waited in the outer room.

CHAPTER XV.
MORE TROUBLE IN THE HIGHLANDS.

Upon the afternoon of the same day on which occurred the interview between Octavia Black and young Neva Wynde, as detailed at the conclusion of the preceding chapter, Lally Bird, attended by Mrs. Peters, arrived at Inverness, having come up from London by easy stages.

It was a week after Neva's wild flight among the mountains of Ross-shire, but a fine, thick rain, like that through which Neva had so fruitlessly wandered, was falling like a dusky pall. The sky was dark and frowning, the air was chill and heavy, and the streets were dismal with the rain.

There was no carriage in waiting to convey the travelers to their destination, and they entered a cab and were conveyed to the Caledonian Hotel, where they passed the night.

The next morning, the mist was still falling thickly, in a dreary, drizzling, listless fashion, as if it never intended to leave off. Lally looked out of her sitting-room window, into the gloomy streets, and said:

"I fear it was a foolish idea to come to Scotland, and so far north too, at this season. And yet I wanted to come."

"It was the best thing we could do," said Mrs. Peters. "You were just pining to death in that great London house, Miss Lally."

"But if we had remained there, I might have seen Rufus again, perhaps," said the girl regretfully. "How shocked he seemed to be at beholding me! He stared at me as at a ghost. I suppose he has long ago ceased to love me. He loves another now. And yet, Mrs. Peters, for the sake of the dear old days when I was all the world to him, he might have followed me to the carriage—he might have traced us home."

"I told him that you were a poor governess, Miss," said Peters, who had not informed her young mistress of Rufus Black's visit to Mount street, having conceived a cordial dislike to Lally's young husband. "P'raps the young gentleman had to go back to his heiress that he is engaged to marry? Surely, Miss Lally, you wouldn't take him back, and he engaged to another lady?"

Lally's brown cheek flushed, and a sudden light leaped to her black eyes.

“Don’t ask me, Peters,” she said softly. “He was not so much to blame as you think. His father forced him to give me up. He’s only a boy, Peters, and this is his birthday. He is twenty-one to-day. How he used to talk of his birthday; quite as if he were a lord, and expected to come into a property upon this day. He was weak and cowardly, but you could see how he had suffered, Peters. He will marry this beautiful and grand young lady, a baronet’s daughter, and he’ll go to court, and his bride will worship him; while I—”

She paused, sighing heavily.

“While you marry some great man, and go to court also, Miss Lally,” said Peters.

The girl shook her head sorrowfully.

“He wrote that I am not his wife,” she said, “but if I am not his wife, I shall never be the wife of any one else. I thought I was truly his wife, Peters, and I loved him as such, and a woman cannot unlove where she has loved with her whole soul. I shall consider myself in my own heart as the wife of Rufus so long as I live. His grand young bride cannot love him as I love him—my poor wronged boy! He would have been true to me always if his father had let him alone.”

Before Mrs. Peters could reply there was a knock on the door, and Toppen, Lally’s London footman, entered, his hat in his hand.

“The Heather Hills carriage waits, Miss Wroat,” he announced respectfully. “The horses have been baited, and are fresh for the journey. We left the Hills yesterday, but broke down on the way, and did not get into Inverness until the evening, when we came to this hotel and found your name registered, and that you had retired for the night. The carriage has been put in repair, and we can leave at any hour it may please you.”

“We will go now,” said Lally. “Have the luggage taken down, Toppen. We will follow.”

She rung for the hotel bill, and paid it. The luggage was carried down, and Lally put on her wrappings and bonnet and vail. Mrs. Peters also hastily attired herself, and they descended to the waiting vehicle.

The Heather Hills carriage proved to be an old-fashioned, cumbrous coach, painted green, and with wheels heavy enough for a luggage cart. It had a stout roof, upon which the luggage was piled. Lally was assisted into the coach, Mrs. Peters entered after her, the windows were drawn up nearly to the top, the

footman mounted beside the coachman, who cracked his whip, and away the equipage went, to the edification of several small boys and hotel waiters.

There were plenty of lap blankets and traveling rugs, and Lally rolled herself snugly in a corner, and rubbing a spot on the window glass, tried to look out into the streets as they passed. Mrs. Peters also rolled herself up comfortably, and was silent.

The estate of Heather Hills was situated on the coast, between Fort George and Nairn—much nearer to Nairn in fact, than to Inverness—but the drive was pleasant in good weather, and the late Mrs. Wroat had always proceeded by carriage from Inverness, a good and sufficient reason why her successor should do so.

The house at Heather Hills was old and picturesque, with a lofty tower that commanded a fine view of Moray Frith. It was of mixed styles of architecture, and was home-like, while it was imposing. The estate took its name from a low range of hills covered with heather, which formed a portion of its boundaries; but these hills were at a considerable distance from the house, which stood upon a tall and naked bluff, overlooking the Frith.

In summer the house was fanned with the salt sea-breezes, making it a delightful retreat. Seen, however, through a Scotch mist upon a day in late October, under a frowning sky, and with the dreariness of coming winter already apparent in the grounds, it was not so delightful. It looked cold, wind-swept, and deserted, to Lally, as she lowered her window and took a survey of her domain.

Around the house was a wide and fine lawn dotted with trees. There were flower-gardens, and the usual appanages to a fine country seat; but Lally's regards were fixed upon the mansion, which, wrapped in gray mist, seemed to its new owner one of the grandest as well as one of the loveliest houses she had ever seen.

The carriage passed up the long winding drive and halted in the wide porch. Toppen sprang nimbly down from the box, threw off his Mackintosh, and opened the coach door, assisting its occupants to alight.

Then he flung open the house door and led the way up the steps into the great hall, while the carriage went around to the stables.

In the wide hall the steward and his wife were waiting, to welcome the new owner of Heather Hills.

The former was a hale, sandy-haired Scotsman, with a plain honest face. The

latter was a broad-faced motherly Scots-woman, who fell in love with the young mistress of the house at first sight.

“Miss Wroat,” said Peters, “these are Mr. and Mrs. Lang, the steward and his wife.”

Lally acknowledged the introduction with a gentle courtesy that won the Scotsman’s heart.

“The house is all in order, Miss,” he said respectfully. “There’s a cook and house-maid from Inverness, and new furniture has been put in your own room, Miss, and your sitting room has been newly furnished, as Mrs. Peters ordered. If the house is not to your liking, anything can be changed as you wish.”

“I will show you up to your room, Miss,” said Mrs. Lang, noticing Lally’s pallor, and evident weariness. “Dinner will be on the table in an hour.”

Lally and Peters followed the steward’s wife to the upper hall, and to a large octagon chamber, newly fitted up with a crimson carpet, crimson-covered chairs, and a cottage piano. A wood fire burned on the hearth, and an easy-chair in a white slip cover was drawn up before it.

“How cozy and pleasant!” exclaimed Lally. “All is warmth and brightness in here, but I can look from my windows upon the wild sea, white with fury. See the sails! I shall never tire of this charming room and charming prospect.”

“Your bed-room adjoins this room, Miss Wroat,” said Mrs. Lang, well pleased with Lally’s praise. “Mrs. Peters’ room is next beyond, and opens into yours.”

“Do you live in the house, Mrs. Lang?” asked Lally.

“No, Miss. We live at the cottage half a mile back, which you passed just before turning into the grounds. We have lived there twenty years. No other spot in the world seems so like home to us. If we had to leave it now,” and Mrs. Lang’s voice trembled, “I think my old man would just fret himself to death.”

“You won’t have to leave it,” said Lally cheerfully. “I do not intend that my aunt’s old friends or faithful servants shall suffer through me. I desire Mr. Lang to continue his stewardship so long as he lives and I live. I do not know anything about the revenue or this little estate; Mr. Harris forgot to mention it perhaps; but I am sure it cannot be in better hands than those in which my aunt placed it.”

Mrs. Lang looked relieved and gratified.

“The estate has yielded some three hundred a year to Mrs. Wroat, after all

salaries were paid," she explained. "It is not as profitable as most places of its size, but it has served as a grand country seat in its day, and the grounds are very extensive and beautiful. The house and outbuildings are in perfect repair; there is a pair of carriage horses, besides the work animals; and there are a fine lot of sheep and cattle of the best breeds, and they can be made a source of greater revenue if you are willing to go to some outlay for stock."

"We will see to all that," said Lally beginning to feel an interest in her new possession. "I would like to talk with Mr. Lang about it some day when he has leisure. I wish you and Mr. Lang would remain to dinner with us."

The steward's wife accepted the invitation with delight, and went down to acquaint her husband with his prospects for the future.

Lally made her toilet, with Mrs. Peters' assistance.

"I can see my future," said Lally, with the first gleam of brightness Mrs. Peters had seen in her black eyes and on her gypsy face since Mrs. Wroat's death. "I dare say I shall in time go to town and the house in Mount street for three months in the year; and I shall live here at Heather Hills, and raise prize pigs and prize sheep and prize Highland cattle, and look out of the windows at the sails; and so the years will pass and I shall grow gray. And, oh, I'll get up a charity school of some sort and teach it myself; and the children, instead of being disfigured with baglike blouses and horrid starched caps, shall all wear the prettiest pink and blue dresses, according to their complexions, and the prettiest white ruffled aprons; and when I die they shall stand in two rows around my grave, and may be somebody will say that I was 'a mother in Israel.'"

It was not a very bright picture of the future of one so young and pretty as Lally, with fortune and all good gifts. She seemed intended for a home fairy, to cheer and uphold and strengthen a kindly, loving husband; to gather little children of her own to her breast; and good Mrs. Peters could not help praying that such might be Lally's destiny.

When the young mistress of Heather Hills had changed her black bombazine traveling dress for a black lustreless silk trimmed heavily with crape, and provided with white crape ruffles at the throat, and had put on her jet jewelry, she was ready for dinner. Her black hair had been gathered into braids, and was ornamented with a black bow, and she looked as she was, gentle, refined, intelligent, weighted with sorrow too heavy for her to bear, yet meek and patient as some young martyr.

"We will go down now to our guests, Peters," she said. "How soon will you be

ready?”

Mrs. Peters’ face flushed.

“Miss Lally,” she said hesitatingly, “it is not suitable I should dine with you. I am only your maid, you know. Mrs. Wroat had me always dine with her, because otherwise she must have dined alone, and she liked company. Mr. Lang is the younger son of a Scottish laird, and he might be affronted to dine with me.”

“But I insist,” said Lally.

“No, no, Miss Lally. When you are alone, I’ll dine with you for company,” said Mrs. Peters stoutly, “but I assure you I would rather eat by myself when there’s company. I won’t have any one say that my young mistress doesn’t know what is suitable to her station. If I could, I’d set you up on a pedestal above everybody else; indeed I would, Miss Lally. I would like to be housekeeper here, and manage the servants, but I can’t dine with you when there’s company.”

“You shall do as you please, Peters,” said Lally. “You are my friend as well as my maid—my only friend, Peters. If you don’t like to dine with company, you shall dine where you please. There, give me a kiss Peters, and I’ll go down.”

Peters gave the desired kiss, with many additional ones, and wiped her eyes as Lally went out, and muttered:

“She is just the bonniest, sweetest young lady that ever lived. If that young gentleman comes up here to see her, he’ll go away with a flea in his ear—see if he don’t.”

Lally went down to her guests and talked with them until the dinner bell rung. Mr. Lang offered her his arm with quite the air of a man of fashion, giving his wife his other arm, and the three went in to dinner.

The dining-room was long and low, with two great wood fires on capacious hearths, and a seven-windowed oriel overhanging the sea. It was bright with ruddy colors and fine china and gleaming silver, and the dinner upon the oval table was in keeping with the room. It was a feast fit for a princess, and had been ordered by Mrs. Lang, with a view to presenting to the heiress of Heather Hills as many varieties of birds and game and fish off her estate as could be obtained.

After dinner, Lally had a long business conversation with Mr. Lang, and repeated the promise she had already given the steward’s wife. She appointed another interview with the steward for the following day, and about dusk the

visitors took their leave.

Lally spent the evening playing upon her piano, in singing, and in thought.

The next morning she walked over to the steward's cottage, and made a brief visit. The day was dark and gloomy, but it did not rain. In the afternoon the steward came up to the great house to see Lally, and he remained until nearly dinner. At five o'clock, Lally and Mrs. Peters dined together in the dining-room overlooking the sea, a dozen candles lighted and sending their bright gleams out over the troubled waters.

"You look better to-night, Miss Lally," said her faithful attendant. "You will find new interests up in this region, and will find that you have something to live for yet."

Lally smiled sadly but did not answer.

They still lingered in the dining-room, Lally standing in the great oriel window and looking out upon the sea, which was being furiously beaten by the winds, when Mrs. Peters heard a carriage come up the drive and halt in the carriage porch.

The good woman's face turned pale. She glanced at her young mistress, but Lally heard no sound save the tumult of the winds and the waves.

"It's a wild night," said the young girl. "I don't see a sail in the Frith. The boats have all made for harbor."

At that moment a double knock was heard upon the front door, and Mrs. Peters heard the housekeeper going to the door.

But Lally's face was pressed against the cold glass, and she did not hear the summons for admittance.

"The wind is rising," the girl said, with a shudder. "I see a steamer coming in. She'll make port just in time. I would not like to be on the sea to-night."

Mrs. Peters heard the front door open.

With a nervous glance at her young mistress, she stole out into the hall.

The front door was open, and a gust of wind was sweeping through the hall like a hurricane. Upon the threshold a man wearing a greatcoat and broad-brimmed artist's hat, a man with a slender figure and eager face, was standing, talking with the house-maid.

Mrs. Peters recognized the unwelcome guest as Rufus Black.

“I want to see Mrs. Peters,” he was saying earnestly—“Miss Wroat’s companion. I have come up expressly from London to see her. I cannot go back to Inverness without seeing Mrs. Peters. She is my wife!”

“Lawks, sir!” said the housemaid, with a wild idea that her visitor was a lunatic.

The reader, who knows how naturally Rufus Black’s mistake had arisen, will not wonder at it.

“I must see her,” persisted Rufus, his voice trembling. “Tell Mrs. Peters a gentleman wishes to see her—”

At that moment Mrs. Peters, grim and terrible, resolving to protect her young mistress from one she deemed unworthy of her, marched out into the full glare of the hall lamp, and placing her arms akimbo, and assuming her most warlike aspect, exclaimed:

“Well, sir! and what may you want of me, sir? *I* am Mrs. Peters!”

CHAPTER XVI.
THE DESPAIR OF RUFUS AND LALLY.

At the grim and warlike announcement of Mrs. Peters' identity, delivered in Mrs. Peters' grimmest and most warlike manner, Rufus Black recoiled involuntarily, his face expressing his utter amazement.

He had felt confident that this angular and sour-visaged woman was Miss Wroat, and that his deserted young wife was in the woman's employ, under the assumed name of Mrs. Peters. In his astonishment and disappointment, he stood pale and speechless.

"You may go down, Mary," said Mrs. Peters to the housemaid. "The gentleman came to see me, you hear."

The housemaid, being in awe of Mrs. Peters, precipitately retired to the servants' hall.

"And now, sir," said Mrs. Peters, in such a voice as she might have employed in uttering a challenge, "what may you want with me?"

Rufus Black struggled to regain his self-control.

"There is some mistake," he gasped. "I—I remember you. I saw you in the Regent street picture-shop the other day, with—with a young lady. I thought she called herself Mrs. Peters. I am come to see her."

"Come in," said Mrs. Peters, who was in inward terror of Lally's appearance upon the scene, and who had made up her mind to prevent an interview between the young pair at all costs. "Come in, sir, and I'll hear what you have to say."

She conducted him to the library, which was across the hall from the drawing-rooms. It was lighted by a pendant chandelier, in which were a dozen wax candles which burned with mellow light. A great circular bay-window took up one side of the apartment, the opposite side containing a great fire-place, in which logs were burning. The angles on either side the chimney were fitted with tall book-cases, and one end of the room was also lined with rows of shelves well filled with books, and protected by plate-glass doors. At the opposite end of the room was a glazed garden door, opening upon the grassy terrace.

This room already bid fair to become a favorite resort of Lally. She had ordered it to be warmed and lighted at the same time with the drawing-room, and was

likely to visit it during the evening. Mrs. Peters locked the door, therefore, as she motioned Rufus to a seat. He declined the civility, however, and remained standing, his hat in his hand.

“I remember you very well now,” said Mrs. Peters, pretending to search her memory, “now that you have mentioned the picture-shop. You are the young gentleman who annoyed the young lady with me? Yes, I remember you. What are you doing here? Why have you followed us to Scotland? Why have you come to Heather Hills?”

“I am come, madam,” cried Rufus, white and agitated, “to see the young lady who was in your company at Benson’s the other day. It is imperative that I should see her.”

“I think not,” said Mrs. Peters gravely. “In the first place, how can you be sure that the young lady is in this house?”

“I have traced her and you all the way from London,” cried Rufus. “I saw the card you gave to Benson, with the name upon it of ‘Miss Wroat, Mount street,’ with the number. I went to Mount street twice, and the second time discovered that you had left town. I hurried to the station of the great Northern, and found that the express had gone. And then—”

“And then?”

“I went to my hotel. I had not money enough for such a trip as this,” said Rufus frankly, “and so I could not come on the morning train. I had to sell my watch, a recent present from my father, and as I had then all day on my hands before I could start for the north, I went to Mount street again. In one of the streets near, I inquired at a shop about Miss Wroat, and there learned that she was an eccentric old lady—excuse me, madam, but I received a very accurate description of *you*. And so I knew that you were Miss Wroat, and that Lally is Mrs. Peters. I took the night train for Edinburgh, twenty-four hours later than yourself. I reached Inverness this afternoon, and discovered the names of Miss Wroat and Mrs. Peters registered at the Caledonian. A servant of the house told me that you were at Heather Hills, and a cabman brought me here. I know that Lally is in this house, madam, and I must see her!”

Mrs. Peters smiled grimly as a full comprehension of Rufus Black’s mistake dawned upon her. She understood readily that the shopman whom Rufus had interrogated had not known of Mrs. Wroat’s death, and had confounded the names of Mrs. Wroat and Miss Wroat, and that Rufus very naturally thought her the “eccentric old lady” of whom he had heard.

“And so you don’t believe that I am Mrs. Peters?” she asked.

“No, madam,” said Rufus bluntly. “I have traced an elderly lady—yourself—and a young girl—Lally—all the way from London, and under the names of Miss Wroat and Mrs. Peters. You are not Mrs. Peters, and I demand to see her.”

“You can not see her,” said Mrs. Peters stoutly. “I have heard the young lady’s story, and I shall protect her from the persecutions of a man who deserted her in the most cowardly fashion, and who, believing her to be dead, never made one movement to save her supposed remains from interment in a pauper’s grave. You have no claim upon Miss Bird, Mr. Rufus Black; you have yourself declared that she is not your wife.”

“Lally has told you all?” cried Rufus, in a low, heart-broken voice. “Not all though, for even she does not know all—the sleepless nights I’ve passed, the days of anguish! I’ve hated myself, and despised myself. I have been on the point again and again of committing suicide. Her poor young face, as I fancied it, mutilated and dead, has haunted me sleeping and waking. God alone knows my anguish, my remorse! If Lally only knew all!”

“She knows more than you think,” said Mrs. Peters significantly.

“How? What? I do not understand.”

“Miss Bird has a shelter under this roof now, and while I live she shall never want a friend,” said Mrs. Peters, purposely confirming Rufus Black’s impression that Lally was a dependent, “but she has known such extremes of poverty as would make you shudder. She left her lodgings in New Brompton, turned out by an insolent landlady, having only the clothes she stood in. She went out upon Waterloo Bridge in her despair, to commit suicide. An unfortunate girl did commit suicide, springing from Lally’s very side and Lally’s handkerchief fluttering after the poor lost creature fixed upon her Lally’s identity. Lally fled from the terrible scene, and that night she slept upon Hampstead Heath, under the open sky, with tramps and thieves all around her in the darkness, and she knowing it not—homeless, houseless, penniless—”

“O Heaven!” cried Rufus Black, in an uncontrollable agitation.

“You think it terrible for a girl so young and beautiful? Listen. Worse was to come. She went to a poor old seamstress she had known when teaching music in a school. This seamstress gave her shelter and protection, but she was dying of consumption, and Lally had soon to work for her and nurse her, and after a little to bury her. When the poor woman died, Lally was once more homeless, and

without work. She was nearly starved, and her one great desire was to look upon your face again, herself unseen. And so she wandered down into Kent—"

"Into Kent? Oh, my poor girl!"

"She was ragged and tattered, hungry and forlorn. She worked in the hop-gardens for food and shelter. She saw you—"

Rufus uttered a cry of incredulity.

"She did not see me!" he ejaculated. "I should have known her in any guise. I should have felt her nearness, had she been on the opposite side of the street."

Mrs. Peters' lip curled.

"You think so?" she said dryly. "Let me tell you that your wronged and deserted young wife was nearer to you than that, and yet you did not know it. Do you remember a certain September evening when you sat beside the heiress of Hawkhurst upon a way-side bank, in the shadow of Hawkhurst park? Do you remember your passionate vows of love to Miss Wynde? Do you remember telling Miss Wynde that your very life here and beyond depended upon her answer to your suit? Well, there was one listening to those passionate vows whom you thought dead. In the thicket, almost within an arm's length of you, a poor worn-out, ragged tramp was lying for a brief rest—a hungry, houseless, tattered tramp, Mr. Black—and that tramp was your disowned young wife!"

"O my God! Impossible!"

"You passed on with your beautiful new love in all her pride and her beauty, and the old love rose up from her thorny bed and crept after you like a shadow, and when you stood in the light upon the Hawkhurst terrace, with the hand of your new love pressed to your lips, the old love stood outside the great gates a long way off, and with her face against the bars looked in upon you both, as a lost soul might look in upon Paradise."

"Oh, Lally, Lally!" cried Rufus, in a wild anguish, utterly losing his self-control. "Lally! Was she there? My poor, poor darling!"

"When you turned to come back down the avenue, she fled moaning. She had seen you, and it seemed as if she must die. But she was young and strong, and life clung to her, although her heart was breaking. She wandered on for hours, and finally lay down under a wayside hedge. The next day she worked in hop-gardens, and the next night she slept in a barn with the hop-pickers, many of whom are tramps and thieves out of London for a holiday. She earned a little

money, and went to Canterbury and advertised for a situation, which she obtained—”

“As your companion, madam? May God in heaven bless you for your goodness to my poor forsaken girl! And she lived and suffered while I mourned her as dead. Oh, madam, I can explain all that seems so strange to you and her. I never loved Miss Wynde as I loved Lally. I believed Lally dead, and that I was her murderer. I was consumed with remorse and anguish. I was desperate, and going to the bad, and I prayed Miss Wynde to save me. But I loved only Lally. I pray you to let me see her. She will believe me—”

“That is the very reason I shall not permit you to see her. She is getting to take an interest in life, and I will not have her growing peace disturbed. You are engaged to this heiress—”

“O no, I am not. And if I were I would not marry her now that I know that Lally lives. My father threatened me with arrest and imprisonment if I did not give Lally up. He assured me that the marriage was null and void, and that he would provide for my poor girl. I’m a coward, Miss Wroat, a poor, pitiful coward, and I have had all my life long a deadly fear of my father. You cannot understand that fear; perhaps no one can; but I shall fling off that awe and terror of him, and be henceforth my own master. I was one-and-twenty yesterday, madam, and I am now accountable alone to God and to the laws of my country. I love Lally, and Lally alone, in all the world. I am going to try to be worthy of her. She is poor, and I am poor; but if she will take me back again,” said Rufus, humbly, “we will begin life anew, and I will try to be a better man. I will work for her, and I’ll try to be a great painter, so that she may be proud of me. And if I can’t be that, I’ll be anything that is honest and manly to earn our support. I know you have a poor opinion of me, madam, and I know I deserve it. I don’t amount to much from any point of view, but if you would intercede for me with Lally, and beg her to try me again and marry me, I will bless you always as my benefactress and savior.”

The young man’s humility and anguished pleading touched the heart of Mrs. Peters, but she steeled herself against him, and said:

“Mr. Black, I am sorry for you. I believe that you mean what you say now, but if you were once to get under your father’s influence again, Miss Lally would be as unhappy as ever. I advise you to go back to Miss Wynde, and leave Lally here. In time she may marry an honorable and upright gentleman, with whom she will be far happier than she could be with you.”

A quick flush of jealousy overspread the youth's face. His eyes glared at Mrs. Peters with a hunted expression.

"She won't marry again until I die, or the law has freed her from me," he exclaimed. "I would never have proposed marriage to Miss Wynde, had I not supposed Lally to be dead. She is my wife, madam, and I'll declare her to be such until she herself forbids me to do so. If she marries any other man I'll kill him!"

The young man's jealous fury was succeeded by an instant and terrible despair.

"Forgive me," he said humbly. "What am I, to talk of controlling Lally's movements? I have forfeited all claim upon her and upon her forgiveness. If she refuses to take me back, I can only go to perdition. If she will stretch out her hand to save me, I will be her slave. Will you not take a brief message to her from me, madam—only a few words?"

Mrs. Peters fancied she heard a light step in the hall. She listened, but convinced of her mistake, said nervously and hastily:

"I cannot convey your message, sir. I entreat you to leave Miss Bird in peace. I repeat that you cannot see her under this roof."

"How summarily you dispose of the happiness and the very destiny of a fellow-being!" said Rufus despairingly and reproachfully. "I would see her in your presence—"

"You cannot. You have prolonged this interview beyond bounds, sir. Take my advice and go back to Miss Wynde. I must bid you a good-evening, Mr. Black. You can go out at this garden door, if you please."

Mrs. Peters threw open the garden door, and a gust of chill wind swept in, nearly extinguishing the lights. Rufus hesitated, but the door remained open, and Mrs. Peters looked so grim and stern that he obeyed her without a murmur, and went out in a dead silence, his wild eyes giving her a last look of reproach and despair.

A minute later, she heard his cab roll away from the house.

"I wonder if I have done right," the woman muttered uneasily, as she closed the door. "I have taken a great responsibility upon myself in deciding the fate of my young mistress. I almost wish that I had let him see her, but she is so young and tender and pitiful, she would be sure to take him back again. His eyes will haunt me. He looked as a man might look on his way to execution."

At that moment the library door was tried from the hall, and an imperious little

knock sounded upon the panels.

“Peters,” cried Lally, from without, in an agitated voice, “let me in! let me in!”

Peters calmed her face, and hastened to unlock the door.

Lally swept in impetuously, her gypsy face aglow, her black eyes full of fire, her chest panting. She held in one hand a gentleman’s glove, which she had just picked up from the hall floor.

Her keen eyes swept the room, and her countenance fell with disappointment at finding Mrs. Peters alone.

“I heard a carriage go away just now, Peters,” she cried. “Who has been here?”

“Was it not the wind, Miss?” cried Peters, flushing.

“No; I heard wheels going down the drive. And here is something I found in the hall, Peters—a man’s glove. Whose is it?”

“It might be Toppen’s, Miss—”

“It might be, but it isn’t,” said Lally, full of suppressed excitement, that made her strangely beautiful. “This is a gentleman’s glove. See how soft and fine the kid is. The color is just the shade of lavender Rufus used to wear when he wore gloves, and it has just the jessamine scent he used to drop always into his gloves. And—and here is one of the very glove buttons he used to slip from one pair of gloves to another. I would know that small gold knob, with its chased edge, anywhere. Peters, he has been here! Rufus has been here.”

The flushing, agitated face of Mrs. Peters confessed the truth.

“He has followed us up from London!” cried Lally, her eyes glowing like suns. “He has come after me and traced me to this place. He loves me still—he must love me, Peters! He must love me better than Miss Wynde?”

“He said so, Miss Lally.”

“Ah, then it is true? But why did he go away without seeing me? Why did you not call me? Perhaps he will give up all for me, thinking me still poor like himself?”

“He said he would, Miss Lally,” said poor, honest Mrs. Peters, driven to full confession. “He thinks that I am Miss Wroat, and that you are Mrs. Peters, my poor companion. And he says he loves you, and wants to marry you; but he is so unstable and cowardly, and I knew you ought to make a grand marriage, with

your face and your fortune; and so—and so, Miss Lally, I sent him off, and he's gone back to England and to Miss Wynde."

Poor Lally stared at her maid with dilating eyes and horror-stricken countenance. Then she said, in a wailing voice:

"Oh, Peters, you meant well, I know: but—but you've broken my heart!"

And with a low, wild moan, Lally fell forward in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XVII.
SIR HAROLD'S RETURN.

That night upon which Rufus Black visited Heather Hills, and was sent away again in despair, was a wild night throughout Great Britain and upon its coasts. Ships were wrecked upon the Goodwin Sands, and upon the south and west coasts. Over the open moors and heaths of the country the winds went roaring like unloosed demons, bent upon terrible mischief. Women with husbands at sea cowered before their blazing fires that night, and children in their beds snuggled closer and held their breaths with very fear. Houses were unroofed in many places, chimneys were blown down, and lives were lost upon bridges and country roads through falling timbers and uprooted trees. The gale that night was one long to be remembered for its wild violence, one so severe not having been experienced in Great Britain for years.

Mr. Atkins, the Canterbury solicitor, sat in his office until a late hour that night. His house was in a pleasant, quiet street, in a good neighborhood, and the lower floor was occupied by him as his office, the drawing-room being upon the second floor, and the family rooms above. The main office had an independent entrance from the street, with a door opening directly into the office—a convenient arrangement duly appreciated by Mrs. Atkins, as it left the house entrance free to her family and guests.

The solicitor had changed somewhat since his first introduction to the reader. His honest face had grown thin and sallow, his hair was streaked with gray, and there were anxious lines about his mouth and eyes that told of unrest and trouble.

He sat in a lounging chair before the fire, his feet on the fender. His family had long since retired, and the hour was wearing on toward eleven o'clock. His fire flamed up in a wild glow, the gas burned brightly, the red fire gleams lighted the dull office carpet and the well-polished furniture, making the room seem especially cozy and delightful. The shutters were lowered, but no care could shut out the sound of the mad winds careering through the streets, clutching at resisting outer blinds, and bearing along now and then some clattering sign-board or other estray.

"An awful night," sighed the solicitor. "I have a strange feeling as if something were going to happen!"

He shifted uneasily in his chair, and bent forward and laid fresh coals upon the

fire. Then he leaned back again and thought.

The office clock struck eleven, and the loud clangor struck upon Mr. Atkins in his nervous mood with singular unpleasantness. Before the echo of the last stroke had died out, footsteps were heard in the street, unsteady and wavering, as if the pedestrian were battling with the storm, and found it difficult to advance against it.

“Some poor fellow,” thought Mr. Atkins. “He must be homeless, to be out at this hour and in such a gale.”

The steps came nearer still and nearer, their sound being now and then lost in the tumult of the winds. They paused at the foot of the solicitor’s office steps, and then slowly mounted to the door.

“Who can it be at this time of night?” muttered Mr. Atkins. “Some vagabond who means to sleep on my steps? Or is it some houseless wanderer who sees my light through the shutters, and is come to beg of me?”

It almost seemed as if it were the latter, for the office lights did gleam out into the black streets, and lighted up a patch of pavement.

A knock, low and unsteady, was rung upon the knocker.

Mr. Atkins hesitated. He was not a timid man, but he had no client who found it necessary to visit him at that hour, and his visitor, he thought, was as likely to be some desperate vagrant or professional thief as an honest man.

The knock, low and faint and imploring, sounded again. It seemed to the solicitor as if there was something especially guarded and secret in the manner of it.

He arose and took from his office desk a loaded pistol, and placed it in his breast pocket. Then he went to the door and undid the bars and bolts, throwing it half way open, and peering out.

A man stood upon the steps, muffled in a thick long overcoat, whose fur collar was turned up above his ears. A slouched hat was drawn over his face, and Mr. Atkins could not distinguish a feature of his face.

“Who is it?” asked the solicitor, his hand feeling for his pistol.

“An old friend,” was the reply, in a hoarse whisper. “I must see you. Let me in, Atkins.”

He stepped forward, with an air of command that impressed Atkins, who

involuntarily stepped aside, giving the stranger admittance.

The new-comer quietly turned the key in the lock.

Atkins clutched his pistol, quietly upon his guard.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What do you want?”

The stranger took off his hat, revealing the upper portion of a noble head, crowned with grizzled hair. Then slowly he turned down his greatcoat collar, and stood before Atkins without disguise, displaying a grandly noble face, with keen blue eyes, a pale bronzed countenance, and sternly set lips above a gray military beard.

Atkins’ hand dropped to his side. With a wild and stifled shriek, he staggered to a chair, his eyes glaring wildly at the stranger.

“My God!” he cried, with white lips. “Sir Harold Wynde!”

Sir Harold—for it was indeed he, returned that day to England, after a prolonged journey from India—smiled his old warm smile, and held out his hand.

“Sir Harold Wynde!” repeated Atkins, not taking the hand—“who—who died —”

“I can give you the best of proofs, Atkins, that I did not die in India,” said the baronet, with a cheery little laugh. “You look at me as at a ghost, but I’m no ghost. Feel my hand. Is not that real flesh and blood? Atkins, you are giving me a sorry welcome, my old friend.”

Atkins still stared with a wild incredulity at his old friend and employer. He could not yet comprehend the glad truth.

“I—I must be dreaming,” he muttered. “I felt queer to-night. I—”

Sir Harold advanced and, pulling off his glove, laid his hand on that of Atkins. Its touch was chill, but unmistakably human.

“What!” cried the baronet. “Do you believe in ghosts, my friend? I wouldn’t have believed a bona-fide wraith could have so startled the hard-headed Atkins I once knew. I was not eaten by the tiger, Atkins, but I have been kept a prisoner in the hands of human tigers until I managed to escape last month. You know me now, and that I am no ghost?”

Atkins rose up, pale and trembling still, but with an unutterable joy on his face.

“It is Sir Harold alive, and in the flesh!” he ejaculated. “Sir Harold whom we

mourned as dead! This is a miracle!”

He clasped the baronet’s hand, and laughed and cried in a breath. He seemed overflowing with his great joy.

The baronet held the trembling hand of his friend in a strong, restful pressure for some minutes, during which not a word was spoken between them. Their hearts were full.

“I am not myself to-night, Sir Harold,” said Atkins brokenly, after a little. “I have been upset lately.”

He drew Sir Harold toward the fire, helped him off with his greatcoat, and ensconced him in the lounging chair before the fender. Then he drew a chair close beside the baronet’s, and asked tremulously:

“Have you been to Hawkhurst yet, Sir Harold?”

“No, not yet. You could not think I would leave home again so soon, if I had gone there? I only landed in England to-day, coming through France. I am a week overdue. I arrived in Canterbury an hour ago, and as soon as I had food I came to you. I saw your light through the shutters, but if I had not seen it I should have rapped you up, in my impatience. I want you to go with me to Hawkhurst, and to break the news that I still live to my wife and daughter. My appearance shocked you nearly into an apoplexy. I must not appear unannounced to them.”

Mr. Atkins trembled, and covered his face with his hands.

“You would go to-night—in this storm?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. What is the storm to me? A few miles only divide me from my home and loved ones. And I shall see them before I sleep. Oh, Atkins, how I have looked forward to this hour of my home coming: I have thought of it during the days and nights when I lay chained in an Indian hut among the Himalayas; I have thought of it when pacing the lonely deck at midnight under the stars. I have prayed for this hour as the crowning joy of my life. Almost home! It seems as if my soul would burst with rapture. My home! My wife! My child! The sweetest, holiest words in our language!”

The baronet’s face glowed with a joyous radiance. Atkins was sick at heart.

“I have been careful that no hint of my return as from the dead should arrive before me,” continued Sir Harold. “I came home under the name of Harold Hunlow. Only Major Archer and his family, besides yourself, know that I still

live. At the hotel I registered the name of Hunlow, and no one but a new waiter I had never seen before saw my face. The surprise of my family will be complete. Come, Atkins, let us be off. I have a cab waiting at the hotel."

"I—I wouldn't go to-night, Sir Harold," said Atkins feebly.

Something in his tones alarmed the baronet.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I—I have taken it for granted that they are all well at home. Octavia—Neva—how are they? Speak!"

Atkins arose, twisting his hands nervously together. His pallor frightened Sir Harold, who arose also.

"What is it?" he whispered. "They—they are not dead?"

"No, Sir Harold—no!"

"Thank God! You frightened me, Atkins. I can bear anything, now that I know they are alive. What has happened? They have not met with an accident? Don't tell me, Atkins, that my wife, my beautiful young wife, is insane through grief at my supposed death?"

Atkins groaned aloud.

"No, no," he said, grating his teeth and clenching his hands. "It is not that."

"What is it then? Speak, for God's sake. The suspense is killing me!"

"I have bad news for you, Sir Harold," said the solicitor tremblingly. "Let me give you a glass of wine—"

Sir Harold clutched the solicitor's arm, his burning eyes fixed upon the solicitor's face.

"Speak!" he said hoarsely.

"I will, if you will sit down."

Sir Harold dropped silently into his chair.

"Lady Wynde," said Atkins—"Lady Wynde—how can I speak the words to you who love her so, Sir Harold—She has married again!"

Every vestige of color died from the baronet's face, and he lay back upon his chair fainting. Atkins rang for water and brandy. He bathed Sir Harold's face and chafed his hands, and poured brandy down his throat, the tears on his own cheeks. Presently Sir Harold gasped for breath, and looked up at him with a

dazed and stunned expression.

“Say that over again, Atkins,” he said feebly. “I don’t quite understand.”

“I said, Sir Harold,” said the solicitor, every word giving him a pang, “that Lady Wynde had married again.”

Sir Harold gave a strange cry, and covered his face with his hands.

“Don’t take it so, Sir Harold,” cried Atkins. “You’ve had a happy escape from her. She’s a heartless, unprincipled—”

Sir Harold put up his hand.

“Don’t!” he said pleadingly. “You hurt me, Atkins. She thought me dead, my poor Octavia. Who—who did she marry!”

“A gamester and adventurer named Craven Black. During the past month, Sir Harold, I have devoted much time to the study of Mrs. Craven Black’s antecedents. Forgive me, Sir Harold, but in this hour you must know all the truth. I am like the physician who cuts deeply to extract a ball. Sir Harold, the woman you married was never fit to be taken into your family; she was never fit to be placed as step-mother and guardian over a pure young girl—”

“Atkins, she is my wife. Mine still, although another claims her. I will not hear a word against her.”

“You must hear it, Sir Harold,” said Atkins resolutely. “If you do not hear it from me, others less kind will pour it into your ears. You cannot escape the knowledge. As I said, during the past month I have studied up Lady Wynde’s antecedents. I have seen Mrs. Hyde, Lady Wynde’s aunt, and I have also seen a former maid of her ladyship. I tell you, Sir Harold, and I pray you to forgive me for telling you the truth, the woman you married never loved you. She married you only as a part of a daring conspiracy—”

“Atkins!”

“It is true, so help me God!” cried Atkins solemnly. “Lady Wynde—I suppose she is Lady Wynde still, her last marriage being rendered invalid by your return to the living, as one might say—Lady Wynde was engaged to marry Craven Black before she ever saw you. Mrs. Hyde told me this herself.”

“I cannot believe it!”

“Craven Black was poor, and so was Octavia Hathaway. You were at Brighton, rich, a widower. Craven Black conceived the idea that Octavia should win and

wed you, and secure a rich jointure, upon which, in due time, having rid themselves of you, they should marry—”

“This is monstrous! Atkins, you are deceived. You are belying a noble woman!”

“Hear the rest, Sir Harold. As God is my judge, I believe your wife married you intending to poison you!”

Sir Harold shook his head. The idea seemed too monstrous for belief.

“That affair in the water at Brighton was planned beforehand,” persisted Atkins. “You rescued the lady, as was expected of you. She followed up the acquaintance, and married you. You went to India; and I believe, if you had not gone, you would have died here suddenly of poison. When Lady Wynde had worn mourning a year in most decorous fashion, Craven Black and his son came up to Wyndham, and early in September there were great festivities at Hawkhurst, at the third marriage of Lady Wynde. There was a ball at the great house, and a ball for the tenantry on the lawn, with music and fire-works. It was for all the world an affair such as might have greeted the coming of age of an heir to a grand property, rather than the marriage of a widow from the house of her late husband to a notorious adventurer.”

Sir Harold groaned heavily.

“And they are at Hawkhurst now?” he said, in a voice so altered that Atkins hardly recognized it.

“No; they have been away for a month.”

“You understand that all these charges are not proved against Lady Wynde?” said Sir Harold. “I shall take my wife back again, Atkins, if she will come, and I will stand between her and the censure of a gossipping world.”

“Did you write from India the night before you disappeared, enjoining your daughter by her love for you to marry the son of Craven Black?” demanded Atkins abruptly.

“No; how should I? I don’t know Craven Black, nor his son.”

Atkins went to his desk, and took out a letter.

“Read that, Sir Harold,” he said, returning and presenting it to the baronet. “Lady Wynde gave that letter to Miss Wynde, telling her that it was your last letter to your daughter, written upon the eve of your supposed death.”

Sir Harold read the letter to the very end, an awful sternness gathering on his

countenance. The tender epithets by which he had called his daughter, his particular modes of speech, and his own phraseology, in that skillfully forged letter staggered him.

“I never wrote it,” he said briefly. “It is a forgery!”

“Of course. I knew that. But Lady Wynde gave it to Miss Neva, declaring it to be your last letter.”

“Who is this Rufus Black?”

“A weak-souled, kindly young fellow, the son of a villain, and a ready instrument in the hands of his father. He loves Miss Neva, and proposed to her. She, however, loves Lord Towyn—”

“Lord Towyn! My old college-mate?”

“No; his son. Arthur has come into the title and property, and is as noble a young man as any in England. Miss Neva favored him, and the result is, Lady Wynde and Craven Black conceived a hatred of your daughter, and determined to bend her to their will. Sir Harold, as God hears me, Lady Wynde is a wicked, unscrupulous woman.”

Sir Harold’s face was deathly white. The letter, still held in his trembling hands, was proof of his wife’s wickedness, and he began to be convinced that he had been cruelly deceived by an unprincipled woman.

“It would have been better if I had died in India!” he moaned.

“Not so. Sir Harold, there is more to hear. Can you bear another blow?”

Sir Harold bowed; he was too broken to speak.

“A month ago, Lady Wynde, with her new husband and Miss Wynde, went away, ostensibly to Wynde Heights. But they did not go there. A letter came from Brussels to Lord Towyn, purporting to be from Miss Wynde, but Lord Towyn went to Brussels, and discovered that the young lady and her enemies have not been there. We have had detectives at work for weeks; Lord Towyn is at work day and night scarcely knowing rest, and I have done all that I could, but the fact remains. Craven Black and his wife have abducted Miss Wynde, and God alone, besides her enemies, knows where she is.”

The baronet leaped to his feet.

“Neva missing!” he cried.

“Yes, Sir Harold, missing for a month past, and she is in the hands of enemies who would not scruple to take her life, if they could hope to make money by her death. We have searched Great Britain for her, and have detectives at this moment upon the Continent. She is gone—lost! Her enemies have determined to force her into a marriage with Rufus Black, and to seize upon her property. She is helpless in their hands. You have returned in time to help search for her, but I am hopeless. We shall never find her except she is dead, or married to the son of that villain!”

Sir Harold was about to speak, but his voice choked. He leaned against his chair, looking like one dying.

And at this juncture, while the wind tore yet more madly through the streets, footsteps were heard ascending to the street door of the office, and, for the second time that night, the office knocker sounded lowly, secretly, and cautiously, yet with an imperiousness that commanded an instant admittance.

CHAPTER XVIII.
ON THE RIGHT TRACK AT LAST.

The conclusion of the low and cautious knocking upon the office door of Mr. Atkins was lost in a wild burst of the gale which tore along the streets, shrieking and moaning like some maddened demon. Sir Harold Wynde and Mr. Atkins looked at each other, and then both glanced at the clock. It was upon the stroke of twelve.

“A late hour for a call,” said the baronet uneasily. “I have no wish to be seen, Atkins. I am in no mood to encounter a possible client of yours.”

The knock sounded again, in a lull of the storm, low, secret and imperative.

Atkins’ face brightened up with sudden relief and joy.

“I know that knock,” he said. “Please step into the inner office, Sir Harold. You shall see no one but friends to-night.”

He opened the door of the small, dark, inner office, and Sir Harold passed in and stood in the darkness, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Atkins hastened to open the outer door. A gust of wind swept fiercely in, and with it, and as if impelled by it, a man hurried into the office, and closed the door with both his hands.

He was slender, but so muffled in coat collar and cap that no one could have guessed his identity.

“Lord Towyn?” said Atkins doubtfully.

The new-comer took off his cap and turned down his collar. The lawyer’s instinct had not deceived him. The noble face, the bright blue eyes, so full of warmth and glow, the tawny mustache, and the golden hair above a grand forehead—all these, now displayed to the solicitor’s gaze, were the features of Neva’s favored lover. But the young earl looked pale and worn by anxieties, and although now there was a glow and brightness and eagerness in his face and manner, yet one could see in all his features the traces of great and recent suffering.

“Alone, Atkins?” he exclaimed, extending his hand, while he swept a quick glance about the room. “I am glad to have found you up, but had you gone to sleep, I must have awakened you. I have just received important news by

messenger, who routed me up at my hotel. I came to you as soon as I could—"

"If the news is unpleasant, do not tell it just yet," said Atkins nervously, with a glance at the inner room. "I have news too, Lord Towyn. Come to the fire. Bless us, how the wind howls!"

The young earl removed his greatcoat and advanced to the fire, and Atkins went into the inner office. The sound of whispering followed. Lord Towyn heard the sound and started, and at the same moment his glance fell upon Sir Harold Wynde's cast-off greatcoat and hat. Presently Atkins returned, rubbing his hands together with excitement.

"You are not alone, I see," said the young earl. "I will see you again, Atkins—"

"Stay, my lord," said the solicitor. "I have news, great news, to impart to you. Let me communicate mine first. Can you bear a great surprise—a shock?"

"You have heard from Miss Wynde?" cried Lord Towyn. "You have later news even than mine? Speak, Atkins. Those villains have not succeeded in forcing her into a marriage with young Black? It is not that—say that it is not."

"It is not that, my lord. How am I to tell you the startling news I have just learned? My lord, I have had a visit to-night from a gentleman who has just returned from India. He knew Sir Harold Wynde well, and came to give me all the particulars of Sir Harold's supposed death!"

"*Supposed* death? How strangely you choose your words, Atkins. *Supposed* death?"

"Yes, my lord," cried Atkins, trembling and eager. "We have all mourned Sir Harold as dead. And this gentleman says—prepare for a surprise, my lord—he says that Sir Harold Wynde still lives!"

The young earl started, and grew white.

"It is impossible!" he ejaculated. "He lives? It is preposterous! Atkins, you are the sport of some impostor!"

"No, no, my lord. I believe it; I believe that Sir Harold lives!"

"Have you forgotten the letter of Surgeon Graham, giving a circumstantial and minute account of Sir Harold's death?" demanded Lord Towyn. "If Sir Harold had survived his encounter with the tiger, would he not have returned home over a year ago?"

"The—the gentleman who gave me the particulars of Sir Harold's fate," said

Atkins, full of suppressed excitement, “says that the baronet was unfortunate enough to incur the enmity of his Hindoo servant, who secretly swore revenge. Sir Harold actually encountered the tiger, as was said, but a shot from the servant frightened the beast, and he fled back into the jungle. Sir Harold was wounded and bleeding and his horse was killed. The Hindoo servant picked up his disabled master, and, instead of taking him back to Major Archer’s bungalow, he carried him forward and gave him into the hands of some of his own friends and country people, and these friends of the Hindoo carried off Sir Harold further into the hill country, to their home, a sort of mountain fastness. They kept him there closely imprisoned, and while we mourned our friend as dead, he was chained in a cell but little better than a dungeon.”

Lord Towyn still looked incredulous.

“How did the bearer of this strange tale discover these strange facts, if facts they are?” he demanded. “I should like to see this gentleman from India? I should like to question him—”

He paused, as the door of the inner room opened, and Sir Harold Wynde, pale and haggard, came into the outer office.

Lord Towyn uttered a strange cry, and sprang backward, his face whitening to deathliness.

Sir Harold approached the young man, extending his hand.

“Behold ‘the gentleman from India,’” he said, faintly smiling. “My dear boy, ask me as many questions as you like. Don’t you know me, Arthur, that you stare at me so? I am no ghost, although our friend Atkins took me for one.”

Another cry, but this time a cry of rapture, broke from the young earl’s lips. He bounded forward and clasped Sir Harold’s hands in his, and both were silent with an emotion too mighty for speech.

Atkins turned aside to add fresh fuel to the blazing fire, his own features working.

“Sir Harold! O, Sir Harold!” cried Lord Towyn at last, in a very ecstasy of gladness. “What a joy this will be to my poor little Neva! She has mourned for you as dead, and I have thought that the shadow of your supposed fate would darken all her life. How glad she will be, my poor little girl!”

“Your little girl?” said Sir Harold.

Lord Towyn’s fair face flushed.

“I love Neva, and she loves me,” he said frankly. “She has promised to marry me, and I hope, Sir Harold, that you retain your former good opinion of me, and will sanction our union.”

“We will see,” said the baronet, pressing the young earl’s hand warmly. “It has always been my desire, as it was that of your father, to unite my family to yours. Your face tells me that you have fulfilled the glorious promise of your boyhood. If Neva consents to marry you, my dear Arthur, I shall not refuse my consent.”

Lord Towyn looked his delight, and then cast a quick, inquiring glance at Atkins.

“Does Sir Harold know?” he asked significantly.

“I have told him,” answered the solicitor, “that Miss Wynde has disappeared in the most mysterious manner and that she is in the power of a couple of adventurers—”

Sir Harold interrupted Atkins by a passionate gesture.

“Arthur,” exclaimed the baronet, his proud face drawn with pain. “Atkins tells me that I have been deceived in—in Lady Wynde, and that he has discovered her to be an adventuress, unscrupulous and unprincipled. Is this his prejudice? I cannot give utter credence to it.”

“It is God’s truth, Sir Harold,” said Lord Towyn solemnly, holding the baronet’s hand in a strong, firm pressure. “It is better that you should know the truth from us than to hear it from strangers, or be further deceived by the woman you made your wife. Lady Wynde is an adventuress, bold and false and wicked.”

“You forget that I knew her history even back to her childhood,” cried Sir Harold eagerly. “I did not marry her with my eyes blindfolded. She never attempted to impose herself upon me as other than she was. She made known her whole life to me. She was the daughter of a naval officer, and the niece of Mrs. Hyde, a lady of good family and position, who lives a very retired life in Bloomsbury Square, London. We ate our wedding breakfast in Mrs. Hyde’s house. Lady Wynde’s first husband was the Honorable Charles Hathaway, the younger son of a Viscount. Lady Wynde’s family connections both by birth and marriage are excellent. I knew all this beyond a peradventure before I married her. And yet you call her an adventuress!”

“And so she was, Sir Harold,” exclaimed Atkins. “Her past life, her family and her connections were all you say. Her record was all fair. Not a word had ever been whispered against her reputation, and she went in the best society, and had admirers and suitors. All this I grant. But she was none the less an adventuress at

heart. She had an income of three hundred pounds a year and spent a thousand, sponged from relatives, or given her by Craven Black, from his winnings at the gaming table or at the races. She was engaged to marry Craven Black soon after Mr. Hathaway's death, and before her marriage with you. Mrs. Hyde is not overfond of her niece, and told me this fact herself. This marriage, owing to the meagre fixed income of the pair, was deferred, and finally they conceived the idea that Mrs. Hathaway should contract a wealthy marriage, secure a comfortable jointure, become a widow, and then marry Craven Black. There can be no doubt that your marriage with Mrs. Hathaway was the result of a conspiracy against you by these two villains, male and female—that they had set a trap for you, Sir Harold, and that you fell into it!"

Sir Harold turned his haggard eyes upon Lord Towyn.

"It is true," said the young earl, full of the tenderest sympathy. "You were imposed upon, Sir Harold. The woman you married, so fair and spotless in seeming, was like some fair fruit with a worm at its core. There are adventuresses in good society, of good birth and spotless reputations, as there are well-born adventurers. Mr. Atkins is right. Craven Black and Mrs. Hathaway have played a daring game, but they have not yet won. This is a terrible stroke to you, dear Sir Harold; but bear it bravely. You are not desolate because Lady Wynde feigned a love for you, and has proved false and wicked. You have the holy memories of your first wife to keep pure and steadfast your faith in woman. You have Neva to love you. You have your friends."

But Sir Harold threw up his arms with a gesture of despair.

"I loved *her*!" he said brokenly. "I have thought of her in my Indian dungeon, and on the lonely sea, and have planned how to break to her the news of my return tenderly and gently, that her reason might be spared a shock which I feared might destroy it. And, O God! all the while she never loved me! While I thought of her upon the deck, with longings for wings, that I might sooner reach her, she was the wife of another, and exulted in the thought that she was rid of me forever! Ah, this is a dreary coming home!"

"It is, Sir Harold," said Lord Towyn sorrowfully; "but the wickedness of one person whom you have loved need not darken your life, nor paralyze your energies. Neva is in peril. Rouse yourself from this great grief for her sake. Think what joy your return will be to her. We must find her, and save her."

The young earl had touched the right chord. Sir Harold aroused himself from his despair, and said:

“Yes; we must find her, and save her. But where are we to look for her? If the detectives have failed to find a clue to her whereabouts, how are we to succeed?”

“I have been upon the Continent,” said Lord Towyn, “and have traveled from one end of England to the other. I have been upon a score of false trails, and failed to find a trace of those I sought. I have now been three or four days in this town, consulting every day with Atkins or Sir John Freise, while the detectives continued the search. And to-night I have received news which for the first time gives me hope that we are nearing the end. A messenger, sent by one of my detectives, came to me by the last down train from London, with a report of discoveries.”

“They have been found?” cried Sir Harold eagerly.

“Not yet. The object of Craven Black and his wife—I hardly know how to call her, Sir Harold—was to marry Neva to Black’s son, and so obtain control over the Hawkhurst property,” said Lord Towyn. “It is to effect this marriage that Craven Black and his wife are engaged in persecuting Neva. When they left Hawkhurst, they left Rufus Black behind them. It occurred to me that when they should deem matters in a fair state of progress, or when Neva showed signs of relenting, they would send for Rufus to come and plead his cause, or to marry her, wherever they might be. I therefore hired a detective to watch Rufus, and it is from this detective, and not from those in search of Neva, that I have to-night heard.”

“And what does he say?” demanded Atkins breathlessly.

“Young Black has remained at Hawkhurst ever since the marriage—some five weeks. Two or three days ago he went up to London. The detective, who had been stopping at Wyndham as a commercial traveler in broken health, went up on the same train. It seemed at first, my messenger says, as if young Black had had no object beyond a day’s saunter in town. He visited picture shops and so on, but that night he went to the Great Northern railway station, and found the train gone. That movement of his, as the detective said, began to look like business. Black went to his hotel, the detective still on his track. The next morning young Black sold his watch and chain, and the next evening he was off again to the Great Northern railway station. He caught the night express, and went on it, the detective on the same train. The detective sent a note from Edinburgh to a fellow-officer, who brought it to me to-night. I am convinced that Rufus Black has gone to rejoin his father, and that if we follow him we shall find Neva.”

“To what place did he book himself?” asked Atkins.

“To Inverness. It is plain that while the Blacks tried to persuade us that they were upon the Continent, they were safely hidden with Neva in the Scottish Highlands. They may have gone there from some idea of bringing about an informal Scottish marriage between Neva and young Black. Neva can know nothing of the marriage laws of Scotland, where a declaration from a woman that a certain man is her husband, when he hears and does not contradict the assertion, and vice versa, constitutes a legal and binding marriage. The Blacks may calculate upon Neva’s ignorance, and hope to avail themselves of the facilities of Scottish law in marrying her to Rufus.”

“It is very probable,” said Atkins, knitting his brows.

“Young Black has the start of us. He must have arrived at Inverness to-day. I came here to propose, Atkins, that we start for the north by the earliest morning train. We are on the right track now,” said Lord Towyn. “Let us follow it up promptly.”

“We will go in the morning,” declared Atkins.

“I shall go also,” said Sir Harold. “Let the secret of my return be kept a secret still. I do not wish to warn this Craven Black, or put him on his guard. Call me Mr. Hunlow. It is the name I traveled home under. And be careful not to betray my secret until I myself declare it.”

The three sat together by the office fire all the remainder of the night and talked. In the morning Atkins wrote a note to his wife, and another to his clerks, and leaving the notes upon his desk, went out with his two guests before the family were astir. Sir Harold muffled his face beyond recognition, and conducted Lord Towyn and Atkins to his hotel. Here they were served with breakfast, and soon after they proceeded to the station, and took the train for London.

Sir Harold breathed more freely when they had left the Cathedral town behind them. He was well known in Canterbury, and with a strange nervous shrinking, he dreaded recognition before he should choose to make his return known.

On arriving in London, the three pursuers hastened to the Great Northern Railway station, and an hour later they were on their way to Scotland, upon the trail of Rufus Black.

CHAPTER XIX.

REUNITED.

Upon the day after the storm, a high wind still prevailed. No sailing vessel dared put out to sea from Inverness. The sky was dun and gray, with now and then a fitful gleam of sickly yellowish sunlight. The black waters were all alive with “white caps,” and the sullen roar of the waves, as they hurled themselves against the cliffs upon whose summit stood the house of Heather Hills, filled all the house with its monotonous tumult.

Lally Bird spent the morning in her own room, upon a sofa in a recessed window. Mrs. Peters came and went softly, bestowing pitying glances upon the round gipsy face lying so white and sorrowful against the cushions, but the dusky eyes were looking seaward with a strange, far off, steadfast gaze, and it was evident that the young girl was not even conscious of the presence of her attendant.

At noon Mrs. Peters brought up a tray on which was spread a tempting luncheon of chocolate, hot rolls, delicate game birds, and jellies. She placed the tray upon a low table, and wheeled it beside the sofa. Still Lally did not stir.

“Miss Lally,” cried the good woman, her lips quivering. “Are you not going to eat to-day? You had no breakfast. You will be ill. I know that I have offended you beyond all forgiveness, and that my face must be unpleasant in your sight, but I would undo what I have done if I could. Better almost any kind of a marriage than to see you lying here looking so wan and hopeless. Oh, Miss Lally, if you would only speak to me!”

Lally turned her face slowly, with a look of surprise mingling with her expression of pain.

“Why, Peters,” she said kindly, “I did not know you were so troubled about me. I am not angry at you. You meant what you did for the best. There, don’t cry, Peters. I am not angry; indeed, I am not. You are as much my friend as ever. Sit down by me, and we will eat our luncheon together.”

Peters complied as soon as she could command her emotion, and Lally aroused herself to speak cheerfully, and to inquire concerning the results of the storm.

After the luncheon the young mistress of Heather Hills announced her intention of going out for a solitary walk. The wind was not so high as it had been in the

morning, and Mrs. Peters did not venture any objections. Lally attired herself in a bombazine walking dress and astrachan jacket, hat and muff, and about two o'clock she went out alone for a walk along the cliffs.

For an hour or more she rambled on, stopping now and then to rest, and keeping near the sea, over whose wide wild waters her gaze strayed and fixed itself with singular steadfastness. At last she sat down upon a great bowlder, and the slender black figure was outlined against the gray sky with startling distinctness.

Before her lay the wild and restless sea, behind her the undulating fields of her new domain. At one side of her, in the gray distance, was the house of Heather Hills, and on the other hand, and nearer, was the low range of heath-clad hills which gave the estate its name.

It was a lonely spot, that upon which she had paused to rest, with a bold bluff surmounted by a very chaos of rocks, upon whose summit she had perched herself. A few sea-gulls were screaming in the air, but besides them and the wild birds on the heath there was no sign of life far or near.

An hour passed. The wind still blew strong and fierce, tugging at her hat and garments with strong, despoiling hands. Her vail was swept over the bluff into the abyss of waters, and her hair was torn from its confining braids, and tumbled over her shoulders in a dusky cascade. But still Lally sat high up upon the rocky mass, paying no heed to wind or murmur of wave, her soul being busy with the great problem of her destiny.

And so, looking seaward with great longing eyes, she did not see a human figure coming toward her over the fields. It came nearer and nearer—the figure of Rufus Black!

The young man had gone back to Inverness upon the previous night, but he had not been content to accept his dismissal at the hands of Mrs. Peters. His old love for Lally was strong and fierce, and he was determined to win back his lost young wife, if energy and patience and love and sincere repentance could win her back. So, after a sleepless night, and a morning spent in indecision and irresolution, he had come out again to Heather Hills. Mrs. Peters was in her own room, and the housemaid had answered his knock. Rufus had inquired for Miss Bird, but the housemaid had never heard the name. He then asked for Mrs. Black. That name was also unknown at Heather Hills. In this dilemma, believing Lally to be at the Hills, as a companion to Miss Wroat, and believing her to have taken a new name as a disguise, he boldly asked for Miss Wroat, determined to see Lally's supposed employer, and to entreat her to intercede in his behalf with

Lally. The housemaid had told him that Miss Wroat had gone out for a walk, indicating the direction, and calling up all his courage, Rufus had started in pursuit.

He saw the dark and slender figure perched on the peaks while yet afar off. Something in its droop reminded him of Lally, and he came on at a swinging pace, his eager gaze never swerving from her; and as he came nearer and yet nearer, the conviction stole upon him that it was Lally at whom he looked.

“She must have come out with Miss Wroat,” he thought. “Rich ladies never walk without an attendant. She has dropped behind, being tired. It is Lally! it is—it is!”

He came up swiftly, the damp soil deadening the sound of his footsteps. He gained the rocks, and began to climb them to Lally’s side, but the girl did not stir, nor notice his approach.

A sudden sound at her side at last startled her. With a quick exclamation, she turned her head—and beheld him!

She did not speak, but her great black eyes grew larger, and her face grew suddenly so deathly white that he thought she must be fainting.

“Lally! O Lally!” he cried to her, in an anguished, broken voice. “Thank God! I have found you! Oh, my darling, my little wife, whom I have mourned as dead!”

He knelt down before her, in the shadow of a projecting rock, the tears streaming over his face, and his eyes regarding her in wild imploring. So a devotee might have knelt to his patron saint, feeling unworthy to approach her, but longing and praying with his whole soul for forgiveness and mercy.

Lally felt her soul melt within her.

“Oh, Rufus!” she gasped, in a choking whisper.

He put up his arms to enfold her. She shrank back, not with loathing, but with a sudden dignity, a sort of majesty, that awed him.

“You must not touch me, Rufus,” she commanded. “I am not your wife—”

“You are! You are! Before God, I declare that you are my wife—”

“Hush, Rufus! You wrote to me that I was not your wife. Don’t you remember? You said that our marriage was ‘null and void.’”

“I thought it was. My father told me so!” cried Rufus. “O Lally, I have been a

poor, weak-souled wretch. I am not worthy of your love. I should have stood by you, instead of basely deserting you through my own personal cowardice. My father threatened to have me indicted for perjury, in swearing that we were of age at the time of our marriage, and I—I was afraid. You can never respect me, Lally, nor love me again, I know, but if you knew how I have suffered you would pity me."

"I have always pitied you," she murmured.

"I thought you dead. I saw your poor mutilated drowned body in my dreams. Day and night it haunted me. I was nearly beside myself. I thought I should go mad. My father's mind was set upon my marriage with a great Kentish heiress who loved another than me. I appealed to her to save me—to save me from my anguish, torture and remorse, produced by continual thoughts of you! I had no heart to give her. I was base and unmanly in offering her the dregs of the cup that had been filled for you; but oh, Lally, I was half mad and wholly despairing! I wanted the love of some good woman to interpose and save me from going to perdition."

"I heard your offer of marriage to her," said Lally. "And you are engaged to marry her?"

"No; she refused me. I am free, Lally, and I thank God for it. What should I have done if I had married her and then discovered that you still live? I love you and you alone in the whole world. I am of age and my own master. I have thrown off the shackles my father has kept upon me. I mean to be brave and honest and true henceforward, so help me God! I mean to be a man, Lally, in the best and noblest sense of the word. It shall never be said again of me that I am 'unstable as water,' or that I am a coward. Lally, I offer you a second marriage, which no one can contest. Will you forgive me, and take me back?"

His words found echo in Lally's heart, but she did not speak. Her pallor gave place to a sudden rose stain, and she began to tremble.

"I came to-day to entreat Miss Wroat to intercede with you for me," said Rufus, becoming alarmed at her silence. "I have not a fine home to offer you, such as Miss Wroat gives you, but I will work for you, Lally. I will make myself a great painter for your sake. Those worthless daubs I painted at New Brompton belong to the past life. Henceforward I will paint better pictures, and show that there is something in me. We will have two cosy rooms somewhere in the London suburbs, and you shall have a sunny window for flowers, and I will work for you, and you shall never know want or misery again. I can do anything with and

for you, Lally, but if left to stand by myself I shall surely fall. Lally, little wife, take me back!”

He crept up nearer to her and held out his arms.

She crept in to them like a weary child.

She might justly have reproached him for his weakness and cowardice, and have taunted him with having courted the heiress of Hawkhurst, but she did neither. She nestled in his arms, and looked up at him with great tender eyes full of a sweet compassion and love and offered him her lips to kiss!

And so they were reunited.

For a while they sat in silence, their hearts too full for words. Then Rufus Black reverently touched her black garments, and asked simply:

“Are these worn for me?”

Lally shook her head.

“For the lost love and vanished trust?” he asked. “Yes, I see. But, my wife, if you will love and trust me again, I will try to make your life all rose color. Poor little wife! How you have suffered! I know the whole story from Miss Wroat. When I called at the house yonder last evening and asked for you as Mrs. Peters, a tall bony woman who stood in the hall came forward and said she was Mrs. Peters. I was completely mystified, for I had decided in my own mind that you were known here as Mrs. Peters, but I now see how it is. The old lady knows your story and was angry at me, and called herself Mrs. Peters to throw me off your track. She told me all your adventures since we parted. And now, little wife, let us seek your employer and tell her that you have taken me back, and that we are to be married to-morrow morning at Inverness.”

“So soon, Rufus?”

“Yes. I mean to make you mine in a new bond that no one can contest. I have never taken steps to have our first marriage set aside, and I think it still stands. But we will be married quietly to-morrow morning in a Presbyterian church, and we can be so married without a license or publication of bans. May I take you to church to-morrow, little wife?”

“Yes,” said Lally, softly. “Oh, Rufus, I do think you are going to be strong and brave and true henceforward, and if so I shall not regret what I have suffered. It has been very bitter,” and she shuddered; “but God is good to us at the last. I will try and be a good wife, and to strengthen and uphold you.”

“You were always a good wife to me,” sobbed Rufus, with a sudden remembrance of her gentleness, her tenderness, her strong faith in him, and her resolute faith that he would some day achieve honors and wealth. “Oh, Lally, I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garments, but for your sake I will be a man.”

Lally stroked his cheek softly, as she had been wont to do in the long-ago, at the dingy lodgings at New Brompton.

“My poor boy!” she whispered yearningly. “My poor dear boy!”

“Shall we go now in search of Miss Wroat?” asked Rufus, drying his eyes. “I do not see her on the shore. I own I am afraid to meet her, Lally. It’s a remnant of the old cowardice, you see. But last night, when she told me your pitiful story, I quailed before her. She must despise me, and she will surely try to persuade you to cast me off.”

“My poor Rufus!” said Lally, with a gay, sweet smile, such as had not visited her roguish mouth since the blight had fallen on her life. “Mrs. Peters is harsh in seeming, but her heart is true and tender. She loves me dearly, and I love her more as a friend than as a mistress. One thing we must understand, Rufus,” and Lally’s gayety increased, “I can’t part with dear old Peters.”

Rufus looked aghast.

“You—you won’t marry me then?” he gasped.

“Yes, Rufus; but I must keep Peters. She won’t leave me; and besides, it was only yesterday I thought her the only friend I had in the world.”

“Her name *is* Peters then?” said Rufus, bewildered. “I traced you two up from London under the names of Miss Wroat and Mrs. Peters. I didn’t notice a third name as belonging to the party. By what name are you known here then, Lally?”

“As Miss Wroat, dear.”

Rufus looked his amazement.

“I—I don’t understand,” he said helplessly. “They said that Miss Wroat was an eccentric old lady, who was rich, and odd as Dick’s hatband. Has she adopted you?”

“Do you remember, Rufus, that last morning we spent together at New Brompton?” said Lally gravely. “I told you then that I had no relative living except a great-aunt, an old lady who lived in London, and who was rich, but

whose name I did not know. That aunt I afterward discovered. Her name was Mrs. Wroat. She was an eccentric old lady, but good and sweet at heart, and I loved her. She is dead, and it is for her I wear mourning."

Rufus looked open-eyed astonishment.

"That is not all," said Lally. "I took my aunt's name at her death, at her request. She made me her heiress. I am the owner of the town house in Mount street, and of the estate of Heather Hills, and have besides fifty thousand pounds safely invested, so that I have an income of about three thousand pounds a year."

Rufus' arms dropped from his wife's waist.

"An heiress!" he muttered. "And I have dared to dream that you would take me back? An heiress! A trifle of money will set you free, Lally, from any marriage claims, and you can marry according to your new position. I do not wonder that Mrs. Peters turned me out of your house, a poor, good-for-nothing coward unfit even to address you. An heiress! O Heaven! The word is like a two-edged sword between us!"

He moved backward, white and trembling.

A mischievous gleam shot from Lally's gipsy eyes.

"I have known so much of poverty," she said, "that I should like to keep this wealth. It would make a good basis to build upon. But if it is 'like a two-edged sword between us,' I suppose I can endow some already rich hospital with it, or give it to Peters, or send it to the heathen."

"You don't mean, Lally," cried Rufus, all agitation, "that you, a rich lady, will stoop from your high estate and marry me, and try to make something of me?"

"I do mean just that!" cried Lally, with spirit. "For you know, Rufus, I—I love you."

Rufus was at her side again in an instant.

The hour wore on, and the early dusk of the gathering evening fell around the reunited lovers. Lally started at last, crying out:

"How dark it grows! It must be five o'clock, and Mrs. Peters will be distracted about me. I don't know as it is just etiquette, Rufus, but the circumstances are peculiar, and I don't believe that Mrs. Grundy has laid down any rule to fit the precise case, and the situation is so remote, and I don't believe anybody will know or care; and so—and so I'll invite you to remain to dine with me. But at an

early hour—by ten o’clock, mind!—you must start for Inverness.”

“And you will meet me there at eleven o’clock in the morning, at the kirk, little wife?”

“Yes,” said Lally solemnly, and with a holy joy in her black eyes, “I will be there! Who shall part us now, Rufus?”

CHAPTER XX.
AN UNTIMELY ARRIVAL.

In the early dawn of a gray wild morning, Sir Harold Wynde, Lord Towyn, and Mr. Atkins arrived at Inverness. They proceeded directly to the Railway Hotel, and secured bedrooms and sitting-room, and ordered breakfast. Some attention to their toilet was necessary, and after baths and vigorous brushing, they met in their sitting-room, and here a very tempting Scottish breakfast was served to them.

They were still lingering at the table, discussing their future movements, when a knock was heard at the door, and the detective who had been set to watch Rufus Black entered the room.

He was a thin, small man, with a sharp business face, and looked the very ideal of a keen commercial traveler, and Sir Harold for the moment supposed that such was his vocation, and that the man had strayed into the wrong room. This impression was speedily corrected.

“Good-morning, my lord,” said the officer, addressing himself to the young earl. “Expected your lordship up yesterday. Good-morning, Mr. Atkins. Fine morning, sir—for Scotland. My lord, can I see you alone for a few minutes?”

“Say what you have to say here, Ryan,” said the young earl. “Mr. Atkins is a fellow-guardian of the young lady of whom we are in search, and this gentleman, Mr. Hunlow, is also a friend of Miss Wynde. Speak out, therefore. Have you any news?”

The detective glanced half uneasily at the baronet, whose striking face announced that he was no common personage. The gray hair and gray military beard had not greatly changed Sir Harold’s looks, but Ryan had never seen the baronet before, and of course conceived no suspicion of his identity.

The baronet arose and went to the hearth, sitting down before the fire, his face half turned away from the detective, who again addressed himself to Lord Towyn.

“There is news, my lord,” he announced. “I succeeded in tracing Rufus Black up to this place. He stopped at the Caledonian. In fact, he is stopping there now.”

The young earl’s face kindled with excitement.

“Then we cannot be far from Miss Wynde!” he exclaimed. “He has stopped two or three days at Inverness, and that proves that he has not much further to go. Has he been out of Inverness since he came?”

The detective’s face clouded a little.

“Rufus Black arrived at Inverness the day before yesterday,” he said. “Upon the afternoon of the very day on which he arrived, while I was at dinner, he went off in a cab, and did not return till late in the evening. I was lounging about the door when he came back, and he looked the very picture of despair, and came in recklessly and went to his room.”

“That proves that Miss Wynde is not many miles from here,” said Lord Towyn. “His despair may be readily accounted for, if he had just come from an interview with her.”

“Yesterday,” continued the officer, “he strolled about the town all the forenoon, and went down to the river, and visited the wharves on the Canal, and seemed to be making up his mind to something that required courage. After luncheon at the Caledonian, he took a cab and went off again, not returning till midnight last night.”

“And you followed him?” cried Atkins.

“What, and put that sharp old ferret Craven Black on his guard!” ejaculated Ryan, in astonishment. “No, sir. We’ve got an uncommon pair to deal with. Mr. Black and his lady are as shrewd and keen as any old stagers I ever knew. It wouldn’t do to let them suspect that we are on their track, or they would outwit us yet, and perhaps put this young lady in peril. People do a many things when they get desperate that will do them no good, and is sure to harm them if found out.”

A stifled groan came from Sir Harold. Ryan shot a quick, suspicious glance at him.

“Then you are at a stand-still, Ryan,” said Mr. Atkins impatiently. “You have treed the game and sat down to wait for us?”

“By no means, sir,” answered Ryan deliberately. “I saw the cabby after Rufus Black had gone to bed, and arf-a-crown drew out of the fellow all that he knew. Mind you my lord, that gold and silver make the best cork-screws in existence. The cabby owned up all he knew, as I said, and a pity it wasn’t more. He drove out with his fare to an estate called Heather Hills, between this and Nairn, on the coast, and a wild, bleak spot it is, according to cabby. They went up a long drive

and stopped in a carriage porch, and Rufus Black he knocked and rung, and a house-maid came to the door, and he asked her something, and she pointed down the coast. And, telling cabby to wait, young Black went down the bluffs and struck across the fields. Cabby put an oil-cloth on his horse, for the wind was blowing free and strong from the sea, and sat there on his box, and sat there till it began to grow dark and he began to swear a blue streak; and then, at last, young Black came back with a young lady dressed in black upon his arm, a hanging on to him so very fond, and a looking up at him so very tender, that cabby saw that they were lovers."

"Impossible!" cried Lord Towyn, turning pale. "I will stake my very soul on Miss Wynde's courage, and her fidelity to me. No personal fears, no cruelty even, could drive her into accepting Rufus Black. I know her brave and glorious nature; I know that she could never know a moment of weakness or yielding. The cabman has deceived you, Ryan."

"No, my lord," said the detective doggedly. "I'll stake anything your lordship likes on his good faith. Rufus Black hung over the lady as if the ground wasn't good enough for her to walk on, and she smiled up at him as loving as—as a basket of chips," said Ryan, at fault for a simile, and concluding his comparison rather ignominiously. "The lady saw cabby, and says she, blushing and smiling, 'The gentleman will stay to dinner, and you can put up your horses in the stable,' says she, 'and go into the servants' hall and get a glass of ale and your dinner.' And cabby put up his horses, and went into the kitchen."

"A queer story," muttered Atkins. "Perhaps Miss Wynde was playing a part—pretending to love Rufus Black in order to throw her jailers off their guard, and so obtain a chance of escape?"

The young earl's face now flushed.

"I can't understand it," he said. "It is not like Miss Wynde to play such a part, even to effect her escape from her enemies. She is truth incarnate. She could never summon to her lips those false smiles; she could never for one moment allow Rufus Black to consider himself her favored lover."

"The earl is right," said Sir Harold. "Neva could never play such a part. She is too truthful and straightforward."

The detective bent another quick glance at the baronet.

"Did the cabman make any further discoveries?" inquired Atkins.

"One or two, of some importance," said Ryan. "In the first place, there were too

few servants for so grand a house. In the second place, the young lady, with an older woman, had come up here within a week. In the third place, the housemaid said that her young mistress was called Miss Wroat, but that that was not her real name, for the young gentleman had asked for her by another name. And altogether, an air of mystery seems to hang about the young lady. But the fact of the most importance of all is, that on the way home from Heather Hills last night, young Black got up on the box with the cabby, and asked him no end of questions about the Scotch laws concerning marriage—if licenses were necessary, if publication of banns was usual, and so on. And the young man asked him which was the best church to step into for a quiet, informal marriage, without license or publication of banns, but the marriage to be perfectly legal and binding."

"Ah!" said Atkins. "That begins to look as if he meant business."

"Young Black seemed to be in gay humor all the way home," said Ryan. "He sung to himself, and talked and laughed, and acted as if he had had a fortune left to him. And as they drove into Inverness, he told the cabby that he wanted him to take him to church this morning at a quarter to ten o'clock, and he told him that he was going to be married to a great heiress whom he adored."

"Is there not some mistake?" asked Lord Towyn excitedly. "Can he be in love with some other lady?"

"I should say not," said Atkins dryly. "Heiresses are not as plenty as oat cakes in Scotland. He's been courting Miss Wynde since last July, and was dead in love with her, as any one could see. He could not shift his affections so soon, and fix them upon another heiress. The young lady is Miss Wynde, fast enough. And she is either deluding him, meaning to denounce him to the minister at the altar, or to escape from him in Inverness, or else her courage is weakened, and she believes herself helpless, and has yielded to her enemies in a fit of despair."

"If she were alone upon the cliffs, she might then have attempted an escape," said Lord Towyn, thoroughly puzzled. "I cannot feel that this smiling, loving bride is Neva. I know she is not. But we will present ourselves at the marriage, and if the bride be Neva, we will save her!"

"I cannot think that she is Neva," said Sir Harold thoughtfully. "And yet, as Atkins says, where could he have found another heiress so soon? And how, if he loved Neva so devotedly, could he be so deeply in love with this young lady who has just come up to Inverness?"

"She comes from Kent," said Ryan. "The housemaid has heard her speak of

being at Canterbury within the month."

"That settles it!" cried Atkins. "It is Miss Wynde!"

"Ryan," exclaimed Lord Towyn, "you must go now and discover to what church Rufus Black is going. We will wait here for you to guide us."

Ryan bowed and departed.

He was gone until nearly ten o'clock, and the time dragged heavily to Neva's friends, who remained in their closed sitting-room, exchanging surmises and doubts, and preparing themselves for an encounter with Craven Black and Octavia.

Sir Harold put on his greatcoat and turned up his collar, and wound a gray woolen muffler about the lower part of his face. He was standing thus disguised, hat in hand, when Ryan came back and quietly slipped into the room.

"The cab is waiting," announced the detective. "I have been at Rufus Black's heels ever since I left you. When I got back to the Caledonian, he was just going out in his cab. I rode on top as a friend of the driver, who was won over to make a friend of me by a gift of a crown. We drove to the minister's, and to the sexton's, and finally to a jeweller's, where Black bought a ring. We then went back to the hotel. And a few minutes ago young Black entered his cab again, and gave the order 'to the church.' I know the church, and we must get on our way to reach it, if we expect to get there in time to stop the ceremony."

Sir Harold and Lord Towyn hurried impetuously out of the room and down the stairs, and were seated in the cab when Atkins and the detective reached the street. These two also entered the vehicle, which rolled swiftly down the street.

A few minutes' drive brought them to the plain, substantial kirk which had been chosen by Rufus Black as the scene of his second marriage to Lally.

The four pursuers leaped from the cab, and hastily entered the edifice by its half-opened door.

Passing through the dim and chilly vestibule, they pushed open one of the baize-covered inner doors, which swung noiselessly upon its well-oiled hinges, and stood within the kirk.

It was a plain church interior, without stained glass or lofty arched window, with bare walls and ceilings, and with the plainest of gasoliers; the reading desk of solid oak, beautifully carved, was yet in keeping with the rugged simplicity of this house of worship. Here the old Covenanters might have worshiped; and here

their descendants did worship, in all the stern simplicity of the faith in which they had been trained.

There was no one save the pew-opener in the church at the moment of the intrusion of Sir Harold Wynde and his companions. The four passed silently down the long dim aisle, and entered a tall-backed pew, in which they were nearly hidden from view. Lord Towyn gave the pew-opener a shilling, and they were left to themselves.

“It doesn’t look like a wedding,” said Sir Harold, shivering in his greatcoat. “If the bridegroom came on before us, where is he?”

The question was answered by the appearance of Rufus Black and the minister from the little vestry, in which they had gone to warm themselves. Rufus wore his ordinary garments, but had bought a white waistcoat and neck-tie, which gave him a clerical air. He kept his eyes upon the door with an anxious, uneasy glance.

“He’s afraid she’ll give him the slip, after all,” muttered Ryan.

The green baize-covered door swung open and closed again. Rufus Black and the occupants of the high-back pew in the corner near the reading desk alike started, but the arrival was only that of a few persons who had seen the open church door, and surmised that a wedding was in progress. They questioned the pew-opener, and subsided into pews.

Presently a few more curious persons appeared, and took their seats also.

The occupants of the high-backed pew grew impatient. It was after ten o’clock, an early hour for a wedding, but the hour Rufus had himself appointed, in his eager impatience to claim his young wife. A cold sweat started to the young bridegroom’s face. He began to think that Lally had thought better of her promise to remarry him, and had decided to give him up for the worthless, weak, irresolute being he knew himself to be.

“There’s a hitch somewhere,” said Ryan.

Again the baize-covered door swung open, and four persons came slowly up the aisle.

It was the bridal party at last.

Rufus Black started forward with an irrepressible eagerness, joy and relief. Sir Harold Wynde and Lord Towyn, alike pale and agitated, regarded the approaching party with burning eyes.

First of all came the steward of Heather Hills, with a girlish figure clinging to his arm. Behind these two came the steward's wife in gray silk, and Peters in black silk and crape, but with white ribbons at her throat, and white lace collar and sleeves.

Sir Harold and the young earl looked at the three strange figures in a sort of bewilderment. They had expected to see Craven Black and Octavia. Not seeing them, they fixed their glances upon Lally.

The young wife had laid aside her mourning for her great-aunt upon this occasion, and wore a dress that Mrs. Wroat had bought for her upon their memorable shopping expedition immediately after Lally's arrival in London.

It was a delicate mauve moire, made with a long train. Over it was worn an upper dress of filmy tulle, arranged in foam-like puffs over all its surface. This too formed a trail. The corsage was of puffs of tulle over the moire, and was made low in the neck and short in the sleeves. The bride wore a tulle vail, which fell over her face in soft folds, and was confined to her head by an aigrette of diamonds. Through the filmy folds of her vail the spectators caught the gleam of diamonds on her arms and neck and bosom.

The steward conducted his beautiful young charge to the altar, and bride and bridegroom stood side by side and the minister slowly took his place.

Lord Towyn made a movement to dash from his seat, but Sir Harold caught his arm in a stern grip, and compelled him to remain.

At the moment of beholding the bride, a mist had swept over the young earl's vision. His brain had seemed to swim. For the instant he had scarcely doubted, in his excitement, that it was Neva who stood before him; but as his vision cleared, he knew that this young bride was not his betrothed wife. He knew it, although he could not see Lally's face. He missed the haughty carriage of Neva's slender figure, the proud poise of her small, noble head, the swaying grace of her movements. This young bride was not so tall as Neva, and had not Neva's dainty imperial grace.

"It's not Neva!" he whispered excitedly. "That is Rufus Black, sure enough, but the lady is not Neva."

"You can't see her face," said Atkins. "I think it is Miss Wynde."

At this moment the bride with a sweep of her hand, threw back her vail. As her bright, dark face, so like a gipsy's and with a glow of happiness upon it, met the gaze of the spectators, Sir Harold stifled a groan.

Lord Towyn stared at the pretty brown face, with its fluctuating color, and the softly melting black eyes, and a dead pallor covered his face.

If this young girl was the chosen bride of Rufus Black, where was Neva? Why had Rufus given her up? The wildest fears for her life and safety possessed him.

The marriage went on. The four pursuers who had come to interrupt the proceedings sat in their high-backed pew as if utterly stupefied. What objection could they raise to the marriage of Rufus Black to a stranger who came to the church escorted by her friends? Why should they object to such a marriage? They heard the questions and answers as in a trance. The name of Lalla Bird sounded strangely upon their ears. And when the minister said, "I now pronounce you man and wife, and whom God has joined together let not man put asunder," Sir Harold Wynde and the young earl looked at each other with terrified, inquiring eyes, that asked the question that filled their souls alike: Where was Neva?

After the prayer that followed the ceremony, the minister went into the vestry, followed by the newly married pair, the steward and his wife, and good Mrs. Peters.

The casual spectators of the wedding stole silently out of the church.

"Well, I've come up here on a fool's errand," muttered Ryan, in a tone of chagrin.

"Perhaps not," said Lord Towyn. "Rufus may be able to give us some clue to his father's whereabouts, if we approach him judiciously. I am going into the vestry to see him."

"And I too," said the baronet, rising.

The young earl led the way from their pew to the vestry, Sir Harold at his side, and Mr. Atkins and Ryan behind them.

The bride, all blushes and smiles, was writing her name in the marriage register, when the young earl and his companions entered the small room. Rufus Black had just signed it, and was putting on his gloves. He gave a great start as he recognized Lord Towyn and Atkins, and stared beyond them with an unmistakable terror, as if he expected to behold the cynical sneering face and angry eyes of his father looming up behind the intruders.

"You here, my lord?" he faltered.

"Yes, Rufus," said the young earl, holding out his hand. "We happened to be at

Inverness and have been witnesses to your marriage. Permit us to congratulate you."

Rufus drew a long breath of relief and shook the earl's hand heartily.

"I thought—I thought—" he began, confused and hesitating—"I was afraid—But never mind. It's odd your being up here, my lord. How do you do, Atkins? Lally," and Rufus turned to his young wife, who was looking curiously at the new-comers, "here are some friends of mine, up from Kent. Lord Towyn, Lally, and Mr. Atkins of Canterbury."

Lally blushed and acknowledged the introduction gracefully.

"Can we see you in the church a moment, Mr. Black?" asked Lord Towyn.

Rufus consented, with that look of fear again in his eyes. He apologized for a moment's absence to his bride and her friends, who were now signing their names to the register, and accompanied his pursuers back into the church. His face brightened when he found that his father was not in waiting for him in the church.

"You have a pretty young bride, Rufus," said the young earl pleasantly. "We have followed you up from Kent, with the idea that you were on your way to Miss Wynde. It was in this way we happened to be at your wedding. Is Mrs. Rufus Black a recent acquaintance?"

Rufus hesitated, with a quick glance at Sir Harold's muffled face and figure. Then he said bravely, resolving to act upon his new principles of straightforwardness and courage:

"It is an odd story, Lord Towyn. I have been married before to my wife to whom I was married this morning. My father separated me from her and I read in a London paper that she was dead. I discovered my mistake the other day in London. I met her in a picture-shop. She came off to Scotland that night, and I found her yesterday. She is an heiress now, my lord, but the same true and loving wife she used to be. I was desperate at her loss; I was half mad, I think, when I asked Miss Wynde to marry me. I never loved any one but my own wife, and I beg you to say to Miss Wynde for me, that I send my best wishes for her happiness, and I should be glad to witness her marriage with you, my lord."

"Thank you, Rufus. But where is Miss Wynde?"

A look of genuine surprise appeared in Rufus Black's eyes.

"Why, she is at Wynde Heights, with my father and her step-mother," he

answered.

“She is not there. They have not been there. They have conveyed her to some lonely place, where they hope to subdue her into consenting to marry you,” said Lord Towyn. “Can you give us no clue to their whereabouts?”

“None whatever, my lord. My father said they were going to Wynde Heights, and ordered me to hold myself in readiness to come to him at a moment’s warning. I have not heard from him since he left Hawkhurst. I am now of age, and have flung off my father’s authority forever. I know no more than you do, my lord, where my father can have gone. But one thing is sure. When he sees the announcement of my marriage in the *Times*, he’ll give up the game, and bring Miss Wynde back to her home.”

“He may not dare to do that,” said Atkins. “He has carried matters with too high a hand, and has gone too far to make an easy retreat. Has your father any property, Mr. Black?”

“About three hundred a year,” said Rufus. “His wife is rich.”

“I mean, does he own any real estate?”

Rufus smiled, shook his head, and hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he said doubtfully. “I believe he does own a small estate somewhere, but it never brought him in a penny. It is barren, unproductive, and out of the world.”

“The very place to which he would have gone!” cried Atkins. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Rufus. “You see my father never talked of his affairs to me. In fact, I never lived with him. I was always at school, and we were more like strangers, or master and serf, than like father and son. His property may be in Wales, and it may be elsewhere. I believe there are mountains near it or around it, but I am not sure. Indeed, my lord, almost any one who ever knew my father can tell you more about his affairs than I can.”

Rufus spoke with a plain sincerity that convinced his hearers of his truthfulness.

“We have had our journey to Scotland for nothing,” said Atkins.

Ryan looked crestfallen.

“We will detain you no longer, Rufus,” said Lord Towyn, a shadow darkening his fair and noble face. “Make our excuses to your bride for taking you from her so soon after your marriage, and accept our best wishes for your future

prosperity and happiness. And now good-morning."

With an exchange of courtesies and friendly greetings the party broke up, Rufus Black returning to his young wife and her wondering friends, to make all necessary apologies for his absence from them, and Lord Towyn and his companions making their way into the street.

"What are we to do now?" demanded the young earl, as they paused at the open door of the cab.

Sir Harold looked at his daughter's lover with haggard eyes.

"I am worn out with excitement and fatigue," said the baronet, in a low, weary voice. "I will go back to the hotel and lie down. I must not become worn out. Heaven knows I shall need all my strength."

"And you, Atkins?" said Lord Towyn.

"I shall try to catch a nap also," said the solicitor gloomily. "I'm tired too. I can't stand it to go banging back to Kent by the first south-bound train."

"And you, Ryan?" asked the earl.

"I don't know," said the detective. "I want to think over what has happened, and see if I can get any new ideas."

He raised his hat, and walked away.

"I'll take a stroll about the town, Sir Harold," said the earl. "I feel strangely restless, and not at all sleepy. I slept very well last night on the train—as well as I have slept since Neva disappeared. I'll meet you and Atkins in our sitting-room at the Railway Hotel by four o'clock."

Sir Harold and Atkins entered the cab, and were driven to their hotel. The young earl watched the cab until it disappeared from sight, and then he walked down the street, idly taking his way toward the river.

The wind blew strong and fiercely—a very winter wind, as cold and keen as if it blew directly from the North pole, and having suggestions of icebergs in it. The young earl shivered, and drew up his coat collar.

"Pretty weather for this season," he muttered. "The gale of night before last has not quite blown itself out, and is giving us a few parting puffs."

He walked down to the wharves and stood by the water's edge, his hat pulled over his fair brows to keep it on, his hands in his pockets, the very picture of a

careless saunterer, but a great wave of despair was surging in his heart.

“My poor Neva!” he said to himself. “Where is she this wild day? Does she begin to think I am never coming to rescue her?”

His wild glances, straying over the boats in the river, settled at that instant upon a graceful yacht just coming to anchor. He could read on her stern her name —*The Arrow*. He watched her idly for a long time. He saw a boat lowered from her deck, and two sailors descend into it. A gentleman in greatcoat and tall silk hat followed them, and was rowed toward the shore.

The young earl started, his blue eyes flaming. Something in the attitude and carriage of the gentleman excited his keenest scrutiny. As the boat came nearer, and the faces of its occupants were revealed more plainly, a strange cry sprang to Lord Towyn’s lips. He had recognized in the tall stranger gentleman his own and Neva’s enemy—Craven Black!

CHAPTER XXI.
TROUBLE AHEAD FOR THE PLOTTERS.

It was a strange fatality that had brought Craven Black to Inverness at the very time when his enemies were there, engaged in a search for him.

The cold weather had set in early in his Highland retreat, and already a foretaste of winter reigned in the Wilderness. Octavia's cold had settled upon her lungs, and she coughed dismally, and in a way that made Artress tremble lest the wealth upon which they all counted and Octavia's life should die out together. Medicine was needed imperatively, and so were all manner of winter supplies: and it was for these things Craven Black had ventured from his stronghold like some beast of prey, and when he should have obtained them he intended to return to the Wilderness, and there wait patiently until Neva should yield to his infamous demands that she should wed his son.

He sprang nimbly from the boat on reaching the wharf, and taking the cigar from his mouth, said, in a voice loud enough to convey his words to the ears of Lord Towyn, whom he had not even seen:

"I am going up among the shops, boys, to make my purchases. I shall go nowhere except to the shops, for I don't want to incur any risks. Be guarded, and say nothing to any one about your business or employer. I sha'n't go aboard under two or three hours, and you can spend the time in some gin-shop. Here's a crown to divide between you, but don't get drunk. Remember, we must get all our stores aboard early and be off at daybreak in the morning. Be back at the boat here in a couple of hours."

The men assented and took the money given them, hurrying away. Craven Black walked in an opposite direction, and was soon lost to view.

Lord Towyn turned his gaze on the yacht. He saw that a man had been left in charge of the yacht, for the captain stood on the deck smoking a pipe.

A waterman was rowing along the river near the wharves, and Lord Towyn signalled him. He came up swiftly to the edge of the wharf upon which the young earl stood, and doffed his tarpaulin.

"Row me out to the yacht yonder," said Lord Towyn, springing into the boat. "I'll board her on the further side."

He sat down and the waterman pulled lustily out into the stream. In a very brief

space of time the boat had crept into the shadow of the yacht on its further side, and the young earl climbed lightly to the deck.

The captain approached him, scowling.

“Hallo, you there; what do you want?” he demanded gruffly. “This here’s a private yacht, sir.”

“So I supposed,” said his lordship coolly. “It belongs to Mr. Craven Black, doesn’t it?”

The pipe fell from the captain’s hands. He changed color.

“I don’t know as it makes no difference who it belongs to,” he said blustering. “I work for pay, and it makes no difference to nobody who I work for. Get out of this, young man!”

“Come, come,” said Lord Towyn sternly, his blue eyes blazing with a light that terrified the captain. “None of your bluff, fellow. It won’t work with me. I know with whom I am dealing. You are the servant of Craven Black, and what have you to urge against my having you indicted with him for the abduction of Miss Wynde?”

The captain fairly gasped for breath. He looked helplessly toward the shore.

“I haven’t done nothing,” he muttered presently, quailing under the steady, fixed and stern gaze of the earl’s blue eyes. “I’ve hired as cap’n, and I am cap’n; but that’s all. On my soul, I an’t no party to no abduction.”

“Your past character will be examined to throw light upon your present motives and doings,” said the earl, with a telling random shot.

The captain winced and quavered.

“Now see here, my man,” said Lord Towyn, following up his advantage. “If you have done anything wrong in the past, it will be like a leaden weight to drag you down when the officers of the law arrest you for assisting in the abduction of Miss Wynde. It makes no difference to you whom I am. Your game is up. The officers of the law have accompanied us up from London. There are four of us in all upon the trail of Craven Black. Refuse to do as I tell you, and I’ll call yonder policeman on the wharf and give you up on the charge of abducting a lady of rank and fortune.”

“What do you want of me?” the captain asked falteringly. “I haven’t had my pay from Mr. Black, and he’ll kill me if I betray him.”

“He need not know that you have betrayed him,” said our hero. “You need not leave this vessel. All that you have to do to secure your safety is this: Tell me exactly the whereabouts of Miss Wynde, and her friends will follow the yacht at a safe distance, quite out of sight from your deck, and you can remain on board and collect your pay of Mr. Black. He need not suspect that you have betrayed him.”

“And what will I gain by betraying him?”

“Your freedom from arrest. You see the policeman still stands on the wharf? So sure as you refuse to speak, and speak quickly, I’ll call him!”

Lord Towyn meant what he said, and the captain comprehended the fact. He saw that Craven Black had been caught in a trap, and with the usual instinct of villainy, he resolved to save himself from the general ruin.

“You swear that I shall be protected if I tell the truth?” he asked.

“I do.”

“I suppose it’s penal servitude for abducting a young lady,” said the captain. “Jack said so last night. Blamed if I haven’t been sick of the job, anyhow. I don’t mind a mutiny at sea, when there’s cause, but I can’t relish making war on a helpless girl, and I haven’t from the first.”

“Come to the point. Where is Miss Wynde?”

“At a place up in the mountains owned by Mr. Black, and called the Wilderness.”

“Miss Wynde is there, and Mrs. Craven Black?”

“Yes; and the servants, and Mrs. Artress.”

“How far from here is the Wilderness?”

“About twenty miles, if you could go direct, which you can’t. It’s forty miles by water. You know Cromarty Frith, up in Ross—and—Cromarty?”

Lord Towyn assented.

“You go about half-way up the Frith and turn into a river that leads up among the mountains. The stream grows narrower as you ascend, but the water remains deep, and at last your boat fetches into a small loch lying at the foot of the mountains and surrounded by them. A steep mountain rises right before you. Half-way up its side lies a wide ledge, and on that the house is built. It’s a wild-

looking spot, sir, and a dreary one. It's mighty cold up there, and I haven't relished the prospect of spending the winter there, not by no means."

The earl asked several questions, to make himself conversant with the route, and also to make sure that the man was not lying to him. Assured on this point, he said:

"Craven Black intends to return home in the morning. He must not suspect that you have betrayed him. Keep the secret, and we will do so."

The captain's look of fear showed conclusively that he would be careful not to allow his employer to suspect his treachery.

After a few further words, Lord Towyn re-entered his boat and returned to the shore.

"Anything more, sir?" asked the waterman, as the boat ground against the wharf.

"Nothing more—unless," added the earl, with a sudden thought, "you could direct me to a small vessel, a fast sailer, that I could hire for a day or two. I should want a couple of men to take charge of her."

"I don't know of any such boat," said the waterman, scratching his head. "And yet *The Lucky* might suit you, sir, though it isn't a gentleman's boat. She's built for a fishing vessel, is brand-new, and had a trial sail the day afore the gale, when she went like a bird."

"I'd like to see her. Take me out to her."

The Lucky lay out in the stream, half a mile further inland. Lord Towyn rowed out to her, and found her joint-owners, two brothers, on board. He went over the vessel, and found it new and clean, and in fine order. The owners were willing to let the little craft with their services, and the young earl hired it for a week, paying in advance twice the sum the thrifty Scotsmen demanded for it.

"She must be provisioned immediately," said Lord Towyn. "Her destination is a secret, which I will tell you in the morning. I have three friends who will make the excursion with me. We shall want blankets, and all kinds of cooked meats and stores. We must leave Inverness at day-break. Come ashore with me, one of you, and I will select the stores we are likely to need."

One of the brothers accompanied the earl ashore, and conducted him to various shops, Lord Towyn keeping a keen look-out for Craven Black, in order to avoid him.

Blankets and mattresses and bed linen were sent down to *The Lucky*; various kinds of cooked meats, including rounds of roast beef, roasted chickens, meat puddings, ham and veal pies, smoked salmon and boiled ham, were packed in hampers and sent aboard; and Lord Towyn added baskets of fruits, both dried and fresh, and jams and confitures of every sort in abundance, besides boxes of biscuits of every description.

“It looks like a v’y’ge to Ingy,” said Macdonald, the one of the two brothers who had accompanied Lord Towyn ashore, contemplating the array of stores with kindling eyes. “We can provision a ship’s crew to Australy.”

“Whatever is left, you will be welcome to,” said the earl, smiling.

The young lord saw his new purchases deposited on board *The Lucky*, and himself attended to the arrangement of the little cabin, and then paying his waterman liberally, he returned to his hotel.

The day had passed swiftly, and he found that it was nearly five o’clock of the short afternoon, and the street lamps were lighted, when he entered his hotel and went up stairs, two steps at a time, to his sitting-room.

CHAPTER XXII.
THE FINAL MOVE IMPENDING.

The young Lord Towyn came into his sitting-room and the presence of his friends like a sunny south breeze, all hopefulness and gladness. He found Sir Harold walking the floor, his head bowed upon his breast, his face ghastly pale, his eyes haggard, his mind bordering upon distraction. The father's anxieties concerning his missing daughter was almost more than the overstrung brain and tortured heart could bear.

Mr. Atkins stood at the window, sullenly despairing.

Ryan, completely at his wit's end, sat before the blazing fire in a crouching attitude, and with crestfallen visage.

Sir Harold, Atkins and Ryan turned, as by one impulse, toward the young earl, as he bounded lightly into the room. Their eyes expressed their wonder at the change a few hours had wrought in him.

"You look like incarnate sunshine, Arthur," said the baronet sadly. "Ah, the elastic spirit of youth!"

The young lord laughed joyously, his fair face aglow with the gladness that filled his being. He took off his greatcoat and hat, great drops of sleet or rain falling from it, and shook himself, as he said:

"There's a mist beginning to fall. We shall have a wet day to-morrow."

Sir Harold looked more keenly at the young earl, and a sudden excitement possessed him.

"What has happened, Arthur?" he demanded. "You have news of Neva?"

The glad smiles rippled like waves of sunlight over the young lord's mouth, and a joyous light danced in his blue eyes.

"Yes," he said, "I have news of Neva."

In an instant, Sir Harold, Atkins and Ryan crowded around our hero, all eagerness and excitement.

"Is she here, at Inverness?" cried Atkins. "Have you seen her?"

"No; she is hidden among the Highlands, up in Ross and Cromarty. She is safe

and well."

"But how do you know it?" demanded Ryan, full of professional zeal and jealousy at once.

Lord Towyn took in his own the right hand of Sir Harold and pressed it, as he answered gravely:

"I have seen Craven Black!"

A series of exclamations burst from the earl's hearers. Sir Harold Wynde trembled like a leaf, and turned his back upon the keen-eyed detective.

"Black is here?" ejaculated Ryan, all thoughts of "the mysterious Mr. Hunlow" lost in his sudden amazement. "Then our trip to Scotland was not a wild-goose chase, after all? Tell me where he is, my lord;" and Ryan took a step toward the door.

"Leave the management of the affair to me for the present, Ryan," said Lord Towyn. "You have placed us on the right track, and you shall have all the credit for doing so, but we want no arrests, no noise, no scandal. The matter must be hushed up for family reasons. No whisper must go forth to the world of the wickedness of Lady Wynde. The failure of the conspirators must be their punishment."

"Yes, yes," said Sir Harold. "The earl is right. There must be no scandal."

The detective shot a keen glance at the baronet, whose back was still toward him.

"I have discovered," continued Lord Towyn, "that Craven Black has an old house up in the Highlands, and that he has Neva there in close imprisonment. Neva has all the courage for which we gave her credit, and holds out stoutly against her enemies. Black apprehends a long stay in the Highlands while reducing her to subjection, and has come to Inverness to-day for winter stores. His yacht lies in the river, and he will be off at daybreak."

"What are we to do?" exclaimed Atkins. "He will escape us. It will be necessary to arrest him."

"I have made all the preparations for pursuit," replied our hero. "I have a sloop, provisioned and ready, in which we will follow the yacht. We will dine here, and at a late hour this evening we will go aboard our vessel. We must be off in the morning, soon after the yacht."

Sir Harold plied the earl with questions, and the latter told the tale of his day's adventures at full length.

At six o'clock, dinner was served in their sitting-room. After dinner they talked for hours, and at ten o'clock that evening they quitted their hotel and went down to the wharf.

A fine mist was falling. The river was shrouded in darkness, but watery gleams of light came from the yacht and the other vessels lying in the river. The wind was still strong and free, blowing in fitful gusts.

The party had hardly come to a halt upon the wharf, when a small boat manned by two rowers shot out of the gloom, and ran along-side the landing-place.

"Is it you, Macdonald?" asked the young earl, bending forward and straining his eyes through the darkness.

"Aye, aye, sir. Is it you, my lord!" said Macdonald, in a loud whisper, rising in the boat.

"You are on time," said Lord Towyn. "The clock is striking the hour at this moment."

The earl assisted Sir Harold into the boat, and sprang in after him. Atkins and Ryan followed, and the boat shot out again into the stream. A vigorous row of several minutes on the part of the brothers Macdonald, brought the party alongside *The Lucky*, and they climbed to her deck. The boat was drawn up and secured to the davits.

The young earl led the way out of the wet and gloom down into the cabin. There was no fire here, but a lantern hung from the ceiling, shedding a bright light upon the table and the bench around it. The air was chilly, and the small cabin, despite its snugness, had the comfortless appearance usual to a ship's cabin.

"It's cold here," said the elder Macdonald, the captain of the sloop. "I'll just mix you a punch. There's nothing like a good punch to keep the rheumatiz out of one's bones."

He brought from the pantry a spirit lamp, which he lighted. Over this, upon a light frame-work, he placed a tea-kettle. Then he brought out an immense bowl and ladle, a netted bag full of lemons, a tin can of sugar, various spices, and a jug of Scotch whisky. When the water in the tea-kettle boiled, he rolled up his sleeves and set to work, concocting a punch which proved a success. The four passengers, as well as the two Macdonalds, did full justice to the warming

beverage.

About eleven o'clock Sir Harold Wynde was persuaded to retire to a state-room and berth, but he did not sleep. A host of anxieties pressed upon him, and he tossed for hours on his hard bed, the prey of a torturing anguish.

Atkins and Ryan went to bed, and to sleep.

Lord Towyn went out upon the deck, and walked to and fro with Macdonald, whom he found to be a shrewd, kindly Scotsman, and he told him enough concerning the misdeeds of Craven Black, and the abduction of Miss Wynde, to interest him personally in the restoration of Neva to her friends.

"We must keep an eye upon the yacht all night," said the earl. "She may creep out in the darkness, and if she attempts that, we will creep after. I know the route she will take, but I prefer to arrive at the inland loch not an hour behind her."

"I will keep watch," said Macdonald. "You ought to get a little sleep, my lord."

"I cannot sleep," answered Lord Towyn, more to himself than to his new ally. "My veins seem full of quicksilver to-night, rather than full of blood. So near to her—so near!"

He paced the deck alone in the mist and the darkness. Around him the watery gleams of light flickered upon the river, and from the wharves other watery gleams strayed, looking like reflections of the first. The bells rang the hours with muffled clangor. A strange ghostliness fell upon the dark river and the sleeping city.

All through the night Lord Towyn continued his weary tramping to and fro upon the deck. One of the Macdonalds shared his vigil; the other slept.

The Arrow lay quietly at her moorings throughout the night, but at daybreak signs of activity were seen upon her deck. The morning had not fairly dawned when the yacht slipped out of the stream, heading toward Moray Frith.

The breeze was favorable to her progress, without being astern, and she bowled away at a fine rate of speed. The young earl, looking through a sea glass, could distinguish four figures upon the deck of *The Arrow*, and one of these he recognized as that of Craven Black.

"Shall we shake out the sails, my lord?" asked the elder Macdonald. "The yacht goes well, but I fancy we might show her the heels of *The Lucky* in a fair race. We can keep her in sight the whole distance."

“That won’t do, Macdonald. Black must not suspect he’s followed. This mist is like a vail, and will conceal us if we keep at a reasonable distance behind. Let him get half way to Fort George, and then we will start.”

In good time, when *The Arrow* had made about the distance indicated as desirable, *The Lucky* slipped from her moorings, and shaking out her sails as a bird shakes its wings, she flew onward over the waters in pursuit.

The sloop was half-way to the fort, and the yacht was out of sight, when the baronet, fully dressed, and showing by his haggard face that he had not slept during the night, came out upon the deck.

The young earl took Sir Harold’s arm and they walked the deck together, conversing in low tones.

A little later, Mr. Atkins and Ryan appeared, and the four passengers adjourned to the cabin, where the younger Macdonald, who acted as steward, had set out upon the cabin table a formidable array of cold meats, bread, biscuits, and fruits, both fresh and preserved. A pot of hot coffee had also been provided, and a bowl of hot punch was ready for those who preferred it.

After breakfast, the passengers returned to the deck.

They passed Fort George in good time, and came out into the rougher waters of the Moray Frith. Here their progress was less rapid. *The Lucky* lurched somewhat; but when she turned into the straits, and finally emerged into the smoother waters of Cromarty Frith, she was moving as steadily, although by no means as swiftly, as a bird upon the wing.

The Arrow was out of sight, and Macdonald crowded on all the sail the small sloop would bear. It was well he did so, for as the day wore on the wind grew shifty, and sometimes blew dead ahead, and the average rate of speed up the Cromarty Frith did not exceed four miles an hour.

It was after midday when they turned into the river which led to the loch of the Wilderness. Lord Towyn recognized the stream by the description that had been given him, and unhesitatingly directed an advance. Sir Harold and Mr. Atkins had many misgivings as the sloop crept slowly up the river, a mere deep cut between high hills, their progress like the snail’s, but they did not venture to express it to their hopeful and confident young guide.

As the stream grew narrower their misgivings increased, and the young earl read their thoughts in their grave faces.

“Courage!” he said, approaching the baronet. “It is true we barely creep along here, and the day is wearing on, but the yacht has had to go slowly here also, and cannot be more than an hour in advance of us.”

“But, Arthur,” suggested the baronet, giving voice to his apprehensions, “suppose that the man of the yacht deceived you as to the proper route, or that we have taken the wrong course in running up this river? I can’t believe that any one can make a cut in the hills like this one an approach even to a Highland stronghold. No wind can strike our sails, or so little, at any rate, that we could easily walk faster than we sail, if only we had a level road to walk on. And if we *are* upon the wrong tack, what will become of Neva, my poor wronged little Neva?”

His voice trembled as he asked the question.

“I know we are going straight to her, Sir Harold,” said the earl hopefully. “Believe and trust in my convictions. You may smile at the idea, but I feel that I am getting nearer and nearer to Neva with every inch we gain.”

The night closed in early in that wild Highland region, a night of wind and mist. Not a light gleamed from the deck of *The Lucky*, as she felt her way between the narrowing rocks. About six o’clock of the early evening, she glided from the narrow river with a sudden bound, as a puff of wind filled her flapping sails, into the hidden loch of the Wilderness.

The yacht lay at anchor at the further side of the loch, and a mile away. A lantern hung at her masthead, and the forms of men were seen in the spectral glare, moving hurriedly to and fro on her deck.

“We have come to the right place, you see,” said Lord Towyn exultantly. “This is the loch. Yonder lies the yacht, but recently come in. The men are busy unloading their purchases.”

Sir Harold and Atkins swept the bold and rocky shores with their keen glances. The rugged steeps were black and bare, and in the dense gloom they saw no gleaming lights, no signs of habitation.

“We must come to anchor up in the deeper shadow of this overhanging cliff,” said Lord Towyn.

The order was obeyed.

“Now lower a boat,” said the earl. “We will go ashore.”

The boat was lowered; the two McDonalds and the four passengers entered it,

and the boat was rowed toward the yacht, keeping close to the black shore.

As they drew near, a row-boat was seen to shoot away from the yacht. The McDonalds held their oars uplifted until the yacht's boat had grounded on the shore, and the three seamen belonging to the yacht had landed. Two of the three employes of Craven Black loaded themselves with hampers and parcels, and the third preceded them up the steep and circuitous path in the mountain side, bearing a lantern which he swung at his side.

"They are all gone up the cliff," said the earl. "No one is left to watch the shore. Strike out, men. Let us land and follow them up the mountain. The man with the lantern shall guide us as well as his comrades."

To say was to do. The sloop's boat speedily grounded on the strip of beach, and Lord Towyn leaped out and sought for the entrance to the narrow path up which the three figures were slowly climbing, one still waving his light. The path was found. The earl bade the boatmen wait, and the four men, Lord Towyn, Sir Harold Wynde, Mr. Atkins and Ryan, glided up the path toward the Wilderness like so many shadows.

CHAPTER XXIII.
THE END OF THE GAME.

The yacht had arrived at the loch at the foot of Wilderness mountain just as the dusk was falling. Craven Black had immediately gone ashore in the mist and gloom, climbed the rugged steep, and hastened to his temporary home. The windows were all uncurtained, and a broad stream of watery light penetrated for a little distance into the darkness. There was no sound of barking of dogs, and the silence struck upon Craven Black's ears strangely. The front door stood wide open, but no one was in the hall.

He entered the house and looked into the drawing-room. Mrs. Artress was there, pale and perturbed, a restless spark in her ashen eyes, and disorder in her attire. She uttered an exclamation as she beheld Mr. Black, and sprang toward him, exclaiming:

"I am so glad you are come, Craven. Have you got the medicines for Octavia?"

"Yes. How is she?"

"I don't know. I am very anxious about her. She looks like death, and her breathing is very strange. She won't lie down, but just wanders about the house like some restless ghost. I think that her lungs are congested, and that she is in serious danger. I really think you ought to take her to Inverness and put her in a physician's care. What if she should die in this remote Wilderness?"

"She won't die while she is able to 'wander about the house,'" responded Craven Black lightly. "When people are seriously ill they take to their beds. Why are the dogs shut up?"

"Octavia ordered it. She could not bear their noise; it drove her wild, she said."

"Humph. Nervous. She will be better of her cold in a day or two. How is Miss Wynde?"

"She is still obstinate, Craven, and never says a word against her starvation diet. I am afraid we've made a serious mistake in our estimate of her. She is what you sometimes call 'game all through.' She'll die, but she won't give in. I wish we had left her alone, and allowed her to marry whom she pleased. That escapade of hers on the mountain may cost Octavia her life. And if Octavia dies, her four thousand a year dies too, and I shall have to become a companion to some lady, and lead a horrible life of dependence and fear, and you will have to go back to

your precarious existence."

"You are a pleasant comforter," said Craven Black impatiently. "All these horrors exist only in your imagination. Octavia will outlive us all. Where is she?"

"In her own room."

Black ran up the stairs to his wife's room. He found Octavia standing before the fire, clad in a loose wrapper, whose bright hue made her pallid face look hideous. Her eyes were strangely large, and they were thrown into relief by heavy black circles under them. Her long black hair hung loosely down her back. She looked thin and old and spectral, all the brightness and beauty gone from her. Her features were hard in their expression, and the wicked soul declared itself plainly in her unlovely countenance.

Craven Black recoiled at sight of her. How two or three days had changed her! He felt a sudden repugnance to her. He had a horror of weakness and illness, and a fear came over him that his cousin's terrors might not be without foundation.

"Oh, it's you, Craven?" cried Octavia, in a thin, querulous voice. "How long you have stayed. Did you get my medicine?"

"Yes, here it is," and Black produced a bottle from his pocket. "It's a cough mixture."

"I feel such a tightness here," and Octavia put her hand upon her chest. "Such a horrible restriction. I dare say, though it will be all right in the morning. I remember, Craven, you hate sick people. Your dinner is waiting. Let us go down."

"You had better go to bed," said Craven abruptly.

"I cannot lie down. My chest pains me when I attempt it. Had you good luck at Inverness?"

Craven Black assented.

"Did you see any one you knew?"

"No; how should I? None of my acquaintances come to the Highlands in November. I was as unrecognized at Inverness as I should be in Patagonia. I will change my clothes and take you down to dinner."

He went into his dressing-room and changed his garments. Octavia paced the room restlessly during his absence. He returned in the course of some minutes

and escorted his wife down to the dining-room, where Mrs. Artress joined them.

He noticed that Octavia ate nothing at the meal. She complained of a lack of appetite, and moved restlessly in her chair, starting at every sound.

“I have read of the ancients placing a death’s head at their feasts,” said Black grimly, “and I seem to have followed their customs. Octavia, do try to look like something better than a galvanized corpse.”

Octavia arose and went to the window, a spasm of pain convulsing her hard features. The heartless mockery of her confederate in guilt smote upon her in that hour of suffering like an avenging sword. How she had loved him, and had sinned for him! And this was her reward!

Craven Black finished his dinner quietly, and drank his wine. Then he arose with an air of gayety, and said:

“I have everything you sent for, Octavia, and some things you neglected to send for. We can stand a siege in this old house all winter, if need be. The boys are already bringing up the hampers. Will you have a look at them?”

Octavia assented with a heavy sigh, and passed out into the front hall with Craven Black and Mrs. Artress.

The three seamen stood in the hall, one with a lantern in his hand, the other two in the act of depositing their hampers upon the floor.

And over the edge of the plateau at that very moment and not a score of rods distant, four men were coming silently and slowly, with stern faces and cautious mien, toward the house.

“That is right,” said Craven Black, examining the hampers. “Bring up the wine baskets next.”

The three men went out. The four pursuers stood in the shadow of the trees as they passed, and then resumed their approach to the dwelling.

“I’d like to see how the girl stands her imprisonment,” said Craven Black. “I’ll let her know that we are prepared to spend the winter here. By the way, Octavia, I posted that second letter to Brussels to-day, addressed under cover of a letter to Celeste’s sister, to Lord Towyn. We have nicely hood-winked the earl, and I should like the girl to know of our successful manœuvres. Where is Celeste?”

“In Neva’s ante-room.”

“Come then. We will visit our prisoner.”

He went upstairs, Octavia following slowly, assisted by Mrs. Artress. Celeste sat at work in the ante-room of Neva's chamber, and admitted the visitors into Neva's presence, entering with them.

And outside the house, upon the lawn, the four shadows came nearer and yet nearer. They flitted up the steps of the porch, and in at the open door. They paused a moment in the deserted lower hall, and then, hearing voices above, came silently and darkly up the stairs, and paused at the door of the ante-room.

That room was deserted. The light streamed from the inner room, where Neva and her enemies were grouped. The sound of voices came out to the intruders. Softly, with sternly eager faces, the four crept across the floor of the ante-room, and two—Sir Harold Wynde and Lord Towyn—looked in upon the Blacks and their young victim.

The earl breathed hard, and would have leaped in like a lion to the rescue of his betrothed and to the confusion of his enemies, but Sir Harold Wynde held him back with a grasp of iron. The baronet meant to learn the falseness and perfidy of the wife he had so idolized and trusted, from her own lips.

And with what unconscious frankness she bared her guilty soul to his scrutiny. How completely she revealed her wickedness to him.

At the moment the intruders looked in with burning eyes upon them, Octavia was speaking. Neva stood up near the fire, very pale and slender and fragile of figure, as her father and lover saw with swelling hearts, but her red-brown eyes glowed with the light of an undying courage, her head was poised haughtily upon her slender throat, and her lips were curled in a smile of dauntless defiance.

"You see, Craven," Octavia was saying querulously. "We have starved the girl; we have fed her for weeks on bread and water, until her bodily strength must be nearly gone, and yet she stands there and defies us. What are we to do with her?"

"Miss Wynde does not sufficiently realize her own helplessness and our power," said Craven Black. "Your friends think you traveling with us upon the Continent, Miss Neva. I have posted to-day a letter apparently in your handwriting, under cover to a friend in Brussels, who will post it back to England. That letter is addressed to Lord Towyn. How he will kiss and caress it, and wear it in his bosom, never doubting that you wrote it. I shall send him another letter next week, in your name, breaking your engagement with him."

The young earl made a slight movement but Sir Harold held him still in a grip of iron.

Neva’s pure, proud face flushed with scorn for her enemies.

“You may send as many letters as you please to Lord Towyn,” she said haughtily, “but you will not deceive him so readily as you did me with that letter purporting to come from papa. Oh, Octavia, I am glad papa never lived to know you as you are, base, treacherous, and full of double-dealing! It is well for him that he did not live, for you would have broken his noble heart. He loved and trusted you, and you have repaid him by oppressing his daughter whom he loved.”

The hard, haggard features of Octavia distorted themselves in a sneer.

The baronet wondered with a sudden horror if this was the woman he had loved. She looked a very Medusa to him now.

“Your father! Your ‘poor papa!’” mocked Octavia, with her hand upon her chest. “You have flung Sir Harold’s name and memory at me ever since we came to this place. And what was Sir Harold? A mere Moneybags to me, that’s all. If you hope to move me to pity you, you couldn’t use a worse name to give effect to your appeal than the name of your father. I never loved Sir Harold Wynde, but I married him because he was rich. You needn’t look so horrified. People marry for such reasons every day, but they have not my frankness to avow it. There stands the man whom I have loved for years,” and she pointed at Craven Black. “It is his son whom I intend you shall marry—”

“To enrich you, madam!” cried Neva.

“Yes, to enrich me, since you say so?” exclaimed Octavia. “You have seventy thousand pounds a year; I have four thousand. I intend to equalize matters before you and I separate. Craven has just returned from Inverness with household stores sufficient to last us through the winter, and we will stay here till spring, if necessary to compel you to accede to our wishes. Your fare, every day through this winter, until you yield to us, shall be bread and water. I warn you not to carry your resistance too far for I may be moved to deprive you of a fire.”

Neva’s lovely face continued to glow with her haughty scorn.

“You seem to think that I am deserted by God and man, and completely given over to you,” she cried. “You are mistaken. God has not deserted me. And I can assure you, Craven and Octavia Black, that before many weeks—before many days perhaps—Lord Towyn will trace me to this place and rescue me from your hands.”

“Let him come!” sneered Craven Black. “Let him come!”

“Yes,” mocked Octavia, “let him come!”

Lord Towyn broke from the grasp Sir Harold still held upon him, and stalked into the chamber.

With a shriek of delight, loud and piercing, Neva flew to his arms.

He held her clasped to his breast and backed toward the door, coming to a halt, looking at Neva’s enemies with stern, accusing eyes.

Craven Black, Octavia, Mrs. Artress and Celeste stared at him appalled. Not one could speak, but Octavia’s hand clutched at her chest with sudden frenzy.

“Lord Towyn!” gasped Mrs. Artress at last, faintly.

Craven Black broke forth into curses. His hand flew to his breast pocket, but fell again, as the door pushed open and Mr. Atkins and Ryan, the detective, entered the room.

“By Heaven, the game is up!” he cried.

“Yes,” said our young hero, “the game is up. You have played a daring game, Craven Black, and you have lost it.”

Octavia gasped for breath. The bitterness of defeat was almost more than she could bear. The sight of Neva in the arms of her lover nearly goaded her to madness.

“Yes, the game is up,” she said hollowly, “I suppose that you traced Craven here from Inverness; but how did you get upon our trail? How did you happen at Inverness? No matter. I do not care to know just yet. You cannot prosecute us, Lord Towyn, if you care to preserve your bride’s family name from scandal. I was Sir Harold Wynde’s wife, and that fact must shield me and my friends. You cannot take from me my jointure of four thousand a year, and with that Craven and I need not suffer, especially as we have the Wynde Heights estate. The game is up, Lord Towyn, as you say, but we are not discomforted nor overthrown. You will keep silence for the sake of the family. Besides, you know I am Neva’s personal guardian, and had a right to take her where I please.”

“That remains to be seen,” said the young earl sternly. “Neva, darling, look up. I have news for you.”

Neva slowly lifted her pale, joyous face from her lover’s bosom, and stood a little way from him, eager, expectant, and wondering.

“My poor little girl!” said the young earl, with an infinite yearning. “How you

have suffered! I have brought you very startling news, and you will need all your bravery to bear it. Give me your hands—so! Neva, I have news from India."

Something in his tone startled the girl. Her face grew paler on the instant.

"Yes, Arthur," she said softly. "You have heard more about his death—poor papa!"

"A gentleman has come from India," said the earl telling the story much as Atkins had told it to him. "He says—can you bear to hear it, darling—he says that Sir Harold did not die out there at all: that he was attacked by a tiger, but was rescued by his Hindoo servant, who sent him away into the mountains in the care of other Hindoos, who kept Sir Harold a captive. And he says that Sir Harold is alive and well to-day."

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur! Can it be?" cried Neva, trembling. "My poor father! I dreamed that he still lived, and my dream has come true. We will start for India at once, and rescue papa. Oh, Arthur, do you think it is true!"

"Yes, my darling, I believe it."

"Well, I don't!" sneered Craven Black, turning pale nevertheless. "Such trumpery tales are common enough. Look at Livingstone. He's been said to be dead these several years, but every little while the newspapers resurrect him. I *know* Sir Harold is dead!"

"And I know it," scoffed Octavia. "Alive, after an absence of so long duration! Bah! I wonder you haven't more sense, Lord Towyn. Sir Harold Wynde alive! I should like to see him!"

The door swung slowly on its hinges, and Sir Harold Wynde walked into the room. He paused near the door, and surveyed his false wife with stern and awful eyes.

Octavia gave utterance to a frightful scream—whose horror was indescribable—and bounded forward, her hand upon her breast, and fell to the floor upon her face.

Sir Harold's awful gaze turned upon Craven Black, and seemed to turn that individual to stone. It rested upon Artress, and she cowered before it in terror. It passed over the French woman, and fixed itself upon Neva, softening and melting to almost more than human tenderness and love, and then, with a great joy shining in his keen blue eyes, he opened wide his arms. Neva sprang forward, and was clasped close to his great heart.

The sacred joy of that reunion need not be dwelt upon.

Presently, as Sir Harold was about to lead his daughter from the room, his glance rested upon the still prostrate figure of Octavia.

“Look to your wife, Mr. Black,” he said; his irony arousing Black from his stupor. “She has fainted!”

Craven Black obeyed the voice of command, essaying to lift the prostrate figure of Octavia, but with a cry of horror he let it fall again, shouting hoarsely:

“She’s dead! Octavia is dead!”

It was true. The engorged lungs had ceased their work. The heart had stopped its beating.

That night, the yacht and the sloop started upon their return to Inverness. In the former were Craven Black, dispirited and despairing; Mrs. Artress, full of bewailings for the poverty into which she was now plunged; the French maid; the dead body of the false Octavia; and the three sailors in Black’s employ.

In the sloop were Neva and her friends.

The two vessels arrived safely at Inverness, and the remains of Lady Wynde were consigned to the grave. Craven Black did not wait to see the last rites performed for her who had served his wicked purposes so faithfully and so well, but, abandoning his cousin, put to sea in his yacht with three sailors, not caring whither he went.

A week later, the wreck of the yacht was found upon the north German coast, and four bodies were washed ashore, two still living, two dead. And of the dead, one was identified, from the papers on his person, as Craven Black.

Sir Harold with his daughter and his friends returned to Hawkhurst. The story of Sir Harold’s return to England had preceded them, and from the moment that the party alighted at the Canterbury station until after their arrival at their own home, Sir Harold received one continual ovation. The tenantry of Hawkhurst turned out in a body to welcome home their beloved landlord. The joy bells were rung in the little village of Wyndham, and guns were fired. It was a day long to be remembered throughout that part of Kent.

The shadow that had fallen on Sir Harold’s life when he first learned the baseness of his second wife, was dispelled by the tender love and attentions of Neva and her young lover. The smiles came back to his lips and the joy to his heart, and he learned the lesson that many must learn, that life need not be all

dark and desolate because one friend of the many has proved false.

A few months later the joy bells rang again, and again the tenantry of Sir Harold made merry. The occasion was the marriage of the heiress of Hawkhurst to the young Lord Towyn. It was a joyous bridal. Sir John Freise and wife, and their seven daughters were there. Mr. Atkins' plain face beamed from the midst of the throng. Rufus Black and his gipsy-faced young wife, both happy and loving, had come down from Mount street to grace the wedding, and no congratulations to the young bridal pair were more sincere than those uttered by Rufus.

At the wedding breakfast, while Neva, fair and proud, and radiant as a star, sat beside her equally radiant young bridegroom, Rufus Black found opportunity to speak a word privately to the bride.

"It has all ended as it ought to, Miss Neva—my lady, I mean," he whispered joyously. "Your father has got over his disappointment and grief, and looks like a king, as he stands yonder. I am getting to be a *man*—an honest, upright, strong-souled man, with genuine backbone and downright vim. Lally believes in me, you see, and upholds me, God bless her. And you and the earl are as happy as angels, Miss Ne—my lady, and you deserve to be. Mrs. Artress is a governess—where do you think—oh, divine justice—in the house of the Blights at Canterbury! What worse could we wish her? Our enemies—they were mine as well as yours, Lady Towyn—played a daring game, and they lost it!"

THE END.

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Transcriber’s Notes:

Punctuation has been made consistent.

Variations in spelling and hyphenation were retained as they appear in the original publication, except that obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

The following changes were made:

p. 72: Blight’s changed to Wroat’s (Mrs. Wroat’s chamber,)

p. 93: Unclear text assumed to be “A half (”A half an hour,“)

p. 243: missing word assumed to be for (scorn for her)

p. 246: Missing word assumed to be “He (him. ”He says)

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