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WYLDER'S HAND.

A Novel.

BY

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WYLDER'S HAND.

CHAPTER I.

RELATING HOW I DROVE THROUGH THE VILLAGE OF GYLINGDEN WITH MARK WYLDER'S LETTER IN MY VALISE.

It was late in autumn, and I was skimming along, through a rich English country, in a postchaise, among tall hedge-rows gilded, like all the landscape, with the slanting beams of sunset. The road makes a long and easy descent into the little town of Gylingden, and down this we were going at an exhilarating pace, and the jingle of the vehicle sounded like sledge-bells in my ears, and its swaying and jerking were pleasant and life-like.

An undulating landscape, with a homely farmstead here and there, and plenty of old English timber scattered over it, extended mistily to my right; on the left the road is overtopped by a noble forest. The old park of Brandon lies there, more than four miles from end to end. These masses of solemn and discolored verdure, the faint but splendid lights, and long filmy shadows, the slopes and hollows — my eyes wandered over them all with that strange sense of unreality, and that mingling of sweet and bitter fancy, with which we revisit a scene familiar in early childhood, and which has haunted a long interval of maturity and absence, like a romantic reverie.

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As I looked through the chaise-windows, every moment presented some group, or outline, or homely object, for years forgotten; and now, with a strange surprise how vividly remembered, and how affectionately greeted! We drove by the small parsonage at the left, with its double gable and pretty grass garden, and trim yews and modern lilacs and laburnums, backed by the grand timber of the park.

The pretty mill-road, running up through Redman's Dell, dank and dark with tall trees, was left behind in another moment; and we were now traversing the homely and antique street of the little town, with its queer shops and solid steep-roofed residences. Up Church-street I contrived a peep at the old grey tower where the chimes hung; and as we turned the corner a glance at the "Brandon Arms." How very small and low that palatial hostelry of my earlier recollections had grown! There were new faces at the door. It was only two-and-twenty years ago, and then I was but eleven years old.

My journey was from London. When I had reached my lodgings, after my little excursion up the Rhine, upon my table there lay, among the rest, one letter which I viewed with suspicion. I could not in the least tell why. It was a broad-faced letter, of bluish complexion, and had made inquisition after me in the country — had asked for me at Queen's Folkstone; and, *vised* by my cousin, had presented itself at the Friars, in Shropshire, and thence proceeded by Sir Harry's direction (there was the autograph) to Nolton Hall; thence again to Ilchester, whence my fiery and decisive old aunt sent it straight back to my cousin, with a whisk of her pen which seemed to say, "How the plague can I tell where the puppy is? — 'tis your business, sir, not mine, to find him out!" And so my cousin despatched it to my head-quarters in

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town, where from the table it looked up in my face, with a broad red seal, and a countenance scarred and marred all over with various post-marks, erasures, and transverse directions, the scars and furrows of disappointment and adventure.

It had not a good countenance, somehow. The original lines were not prepossessing. The handwriting I knew as one sometimes knows a face, without being able to remember who the plague it belongs to; but, still, with an unpleasant association about it. I examined it carefully, and laid it down unopened. I went through half-a-dozen others, and recurred to it, and puzzled over its exterior again, and again postponed what I fancied would prove a disagreeable discovery; and this happened every now and again, until I had quite exhausted my budget and then I did open it, and looked straight to the signature.

"Pooh! Mark Wylder," I exclaimed, a good deal relieved.

Mark Wylder! Yes, Master Mark could not hurt *me*. There was nothing about him to excite the least uneasiness; on the contrary, I believe he liked me as well as he was capable of liking anybody, and it was now seven years since we had met.

I had been his working junior in the cause of Wylder *v.* Trustees of Brandon, minor — Dorcas Brandon, his own cousin. There was a complicated cousinship among these Brandons, Wylders, and Lakes — inextricable intermarriages, which, five years ago, before I renounced the bar, I had at my fingers' ends, but which had now relapsed into haze. There must have been some damnable taint in the blood of the common ancestor — a spice of the insane and the diabolical. They were an ill-conditioned race — that is to say, every now and then there emerged

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a miscreant, with a pretty evident vein of madness. There was Sir Jonathan Brandon, for instance, who ran his own nephew through the lungs in a duel fought in a paroxysm of Cencian jealousy; and afterwards shot his coachman dead upon the box through his coach-window, and finally died in Vienna, whither he had absconded, of a pike-thrust received from a sentry in a brawl.

The Wylders had not much to boast of, even in contrast with that wicked line. They had produced their madmen and villains, too; and there had been frequent intermarriages — not very often happy. There had been lawsuits, frequent disinheritings, and even worse doings. The Wylders of Brandon appear very early in history; and the Wylder arms, with their legend, "resurgam," stand in bold relief over the great door of Brandon Hall. So there were Wylders of Brandon, and Brandons of Brandon. In one generation, a Wylder ill-using his wife and hating his children, would cut them all off, and send the estate bounding back again to the Brandons. The next generation or two would amuse themselves with a lawsuit, until the old Brandon type reappeared in some bachelor brother or uncle, with a Jezebel on his left hand, and an attorney on his right, and, presto! the estates were back again with the Wylders.

Here is Mark Wylder's letter: —

"DEAR CHARLES — Of course you have heard of my good luck, and how kind poor Dickie — from whom I never expected anything — proved at last. It was a great windfall for a poor devil like me; but, after all, it was only right, for it ought never to have been his at all. I went down and took possession on the 4th, the tenants very glad, and so they might well be; for, between ourselves, Dickie, poor fellow, was not always pleasant to deal with. He let the roof all out of repair, and committed waste be-

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side in timber he had no right to in life, as I am told; but that don't signify much, only the house will cost me a pretty penny to get it into order and furnished. The rental is five thousand a-year and some hundreds, and the rents can be got up a bit — so Larkin tells me. Do you know anything of him? He says he did business for your uncle once. He seems a clever fellow — a bit too clever, perhaps — and was too much master here, I suspect, in poor Dickie's reign. Tell me all you can make out about him. It is a long time since I saw you, Charles; I'm grown brown, and great whiskers. I met poor Dominick — what an ass that chap is — but he did not know me till I introduced myself, so I must be a good deal changed. Our ship was at Malta when I got the letter. I was sick of the service, and no wonder: a lieutenant — and there likely to stick all my days. Six months, last year, on the African coast, watching slavers — think of that! I had a long yarn from the Viscount — advice, and that sort of thing. I do not think he is a year older than I, but takes airs because he's a trustee. But I only laugh at trifles that would have riled me once. So I wrote him a yarn in return, and drew it uncommon mild. And he has been useful to me; and I think matters are pretty well arranged to disappoint the kind intention of good uncle Wylder — the brute; he hated my father, but that was no reason to persecute me, and I but an infant, almost, when he died. Well, you know he left Brandon with some charges to my cousin Dorcas. She is a superbly fine girl. Our ship was at Naples when she was there two years ago; and I saw a good deal of her. Of course it was not to be thought of then; but matters are quite different now, and the Viscount, who is a very sensible fellow in the main, saw it at once. You see, the old brute meant to leave her a life estate; but it does not amount to that, though it won't

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benefit me, for he settled that when I die it shall go to his right heirs — that will be to my son, if I ever have one. So Miss Dorcas must pack, and turn out whenever I die, that is, if I slip my cable first. Larkin told me this — and I took an opinion — and found it so; and the Viscount seeing it, arranged the best thing for her as well as me would be, we should marry. She is a wide-awake young lady, and nothing the worse for that: I'm a bit that way myself. And so very little courtship has sufficed. She is a splendid beauty, and when you see her you'll say any fellow might be proud of such a bride; and so I am. And now, dear Charlie, you have it all. It will take place somewhere about the twenty-fourth of next month; and you must come down by the first, if you can. Don't disappoint. I want you for best man, maybe; and besides I would like to talk to you about some things they want me to do in the settlements, and you were always a long-headed fellow: so pray dont refuse.

"Ever most sincerely, Your old Friend,

"MARK WYLDER.

"P. S.— I stay at the Brandon Arms in the town, until after the marriage; and then you can have a room at the Hall, and capital shooting when we return, which will be in a fortnight after."

I can't say that Wylder was an old *friend*. But he was certainly one of the oldest and most intimate acquaintances I had. We had been for nearly three years at school together; and when his ship came to England, met frequently; and twice, when he was on leave, we had been for months together under the same roof; and had for some years kept up a correspondence, which first grew desultory, and finally, as manhood supervened, died out. The plain truth is, I did not *very* much like him.

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CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH I ENTER THE DRAWING-ROOM.

I was now approaching Brandon Hall; less than ten minutes more would set me down at its door-steps. The stiff figure of Mrs. Marston, the old housekeeper, pale and austere, in rustling black silk (she was accounted a miser, and estimated to have saved I dare not say how much money in the Wylder family) — kind to me with the bread-and-jam and Naples-biscuit-kindness of her species, in old times — stood in fancy at the doorway. She, too, was a dream, and, I dare say, her money spent by this time. And that other dream, to which she often led me, with the large hazel eyes, and clear delicate tints — so sweet, so *riante*, yet so sad; poor Lady Mary Brandon, dying there — so unhappily mated — a young mother, and her baby sleeping in long "broderie anglaise" attire upon the pillow on the sofa, and whom she used to show me with a peeping mystery, and her finger to her smiling lip, and a gaiety and fondness in her pretty face. That little helpless, groping, wailing creature was now the Dorcas Brandon, the mistress of the old mansion and all its surroundings, who was the heroine of the splendid matrimonial compromise which was about to reconcile a feud, and avert a possible lawsuit, and for one generation at least, to tranquilize the troubled annals of the Brandons and Wylders.

And now the ancient gray chapel, with its stained window, and store of old Brandon and Wylder monuments among its solemn clump of elm-trees, flitted by on my

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right; and in a moment more we drew up at the great gate on the left, not a hundred yards removed from it, and with an eager recognition I gazed on the noble front of the old manorial house.

Up the broad straight avenue, with its solemn files of gigantic timber towering at the right and the left hand, the chaise rolled smoothly, and through the fantastic iron gate of the courtyard, and we drew up handsomely before the door-steps, with the Wylder arms carved above it.

The sun had just gone down. The blue shadows of twilight overcast the landscape, and the mists of night were already stealing like thin smoke among the trunks and roots of the trees. Through the stone mullions of the projecting window at the right, a flush of fire-light looked pleasant and hospitable, and on the threshold were standing Lord Chelford and my old friend Mark Wylder; a faint perfume of the mildest cheroot declared how they had been employed.

So I jumped to the ground and was greeted very kindly by the smokers.

"I'm here, you know, *in loco parentis*; — my mother and I keep watch and ward. We allow Wylder, you see, to come every day to his devotions. But you are not to go to the Brandon Arms — you got my note, didn't you?"

I had, and had come direct to the Hall in consequence.

Dusty and seedy somewhat, as men are after a journey, I chatted with Mark and the noble peer for a few minutes at the door, while my valise and *et ceteras* were lifted in, and hurried up the stairs to my room, whither I followed them. While I was at my toilet, in came Mark Wylder laughing, as was his wont, and very unceremoniously he took possession of my easy-chair, and threw his leg over the arm of it.

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"I'm glad you're come, Charlie; you were always a good fellow, and I really want a hand here confoundedly. I think it will all do very nicely; but, of course, there's a lot of things to be arranged — settlements, you know — and I can't make head or tail of their lingo, and a fellow don't like to sign and seal hand over head: and Chelford is a very good fellow, of course, and all that — but he's taking care of Dorcas, you see; and I might be left in the lurch."

"It is a better way, at all events, Mark, than Wylder *versus* Trustees of Brandon, minor," said I.

"Well, things do turn out very oddly; don't they?" said Mark, with a sly glance of complacency, and his hands in his pockets. "But I know you'll hold the tiller till I get through; hang me, if I know the soundings, or where I'm going; and you have the chart by heart, Charlie."

"I'm afraid you'll find me by no means so well up now as six years ago in "Wylder and Brandon;" but surely you have your lawyer, Mr. Larkin, haven't you?"

"To be sure — that's exactly it — he's Dorcas's agent. I don't know anything about him, and I do know you — don't you see? A fellow doesn't want to put himself into the hands of a stranger altogether, especially a lawyer, ha, ha! it wouldn't pay."

I did not half like the equivocal office which my friend had prepared for me. If family squabbles were to arise, I had no fancy to mix in them; and I did not want a collision with Mr. Larkin either; and, on the whole, notwithstanding his modesty, I thought Wylder very well able to take care of himself. There was time enough, however, to settle the point. So by this time, being splendid in French boots and white vest, and altogether perfect and refreshed, I emerged from my dressing-room, Wylder by my side.

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We had to get along a dim oak-pannelled passage, and into a sort of *œil-de-bœuf*, with a lantern light above, from which diverged two other corridors, and a short puzzling turn or two brought us to the head of the upper stairs. For I, being a bachelor, and treated accordingly, was airily perched on the third story.

It was dark by this time, and the drawing-room — a vast and grand chamber, with no light but the fire and a pair of dim soft lamps near the sofas and ottomans, lofty, and glowing with rich tapestry curtains, and pictures, and mirrors, and carved oak, and marble — was already tenanted by the ladies.

Old Lady Chelford, stiff and rich, a Vandyke dowager, with a general effect of deep lace, funereal velvet, and pearls; and pale, with dreary eyes, and thin high nose, sat in a high-backed carved oak throne, with red cushions. To her I was first presented, and cursorily scrutinised with a stately old-fashioned insolence, as if I were a candidate footman, and so dismissed. On a low seat, chatting to her as I came up, was a very handsome and rather singular-looking girl, fair, with a light golden-tinted hair; and a countenance, though then grave enough, instinct with a promise of animation and spirit not to be mistaken. Could this be the heroine of the pending alliance? No; I was mistaken. A third lady, at what would have been an ordinary room's length away, half-reclining on an ottoman, was now approached by Wylder, who presented me to Miss Brandon.

"Dorcas, this is my old friend, Charles de Cresseron. You have often heard me speak of him; and I want you to shake hands and make his acquaintance, and draw him out — do you see; for he's a shy youth, and must be encouraged.

The lady rose, in a soft floating way; tall, black-haired

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— but a blackness with a dull rich shadow through it. I had only a general impression of large dusky eyes and very exquisite features — more delicate than the Grecian models, and with a wonderful transparency, like tinted marble; and a surperb haughtiness, quite unaffected. She held forth her hand, which I did little more then touch. There was a peculiarity in her greeting, which I felt a little overawing, without exactly discovering in what it consisted; and it was, I think, that she did not smile. She never took that trouble for form's sake, like other women.

So, as Wylder had set a chair for me, I could not avoid sitting upon it, though I should much have preferred standing, after the manner of man, and retaining my liberty.

CHAPTER III.

OUR DINNER PARTY AT BRANDON.

I WAS curious. I had heard a great deal of her beauty, and it had exceeded all I heard; so I talked my sublimest and brightest chitchat, in my most musical tones, and was rather engaging and amusing, I ventured to hope. But the best man cannot manage a dialogue alone. Miss Brandon was plainly not a person to make any sort of exertion towards what is termed keeping up a conversation; at all events she did not, and after a while the present one got into a decidedly sinking condition. An acquiescence, a faint expression of surprise, a fainter smile — she contributed little more, after the first few questions of courtesy had been asked, in her low silvery tones, and answered by me. To me the natural demise of a *tête-à-tête* discourse

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has always seemed a disgrace. But this apathetic beauty had either more moral courage or more stupidity than I, and was plainly terribly indifferent about the catastrophe. I've sometimes thought my struggles and sinkings amused her cruel serenity.

I told her my early recollections of Brandon and Gylingden, and how I remembered her a baby, and said some graceful trifles on that theme, which I fancied were likely to please. But they were only received, and led to nothing. In a little while in comes Lord Chelford, always natural and pleasant, and quite unconscious of his peerage — he was above it, I think — and chatted away merrily with that handsome animated blonde — who on earth, could she be? — and did not seem the least chilled in the stiff and frosted presence of his mother, but was genial and playful even with that Spirit of the Frozen Ocean, who received his affectionate trifling with a sort of smiling, though wintry pride and complacency.

I thought I heard him call the young lady Miss Lake, and there rose before me an image of an old General Lake, and a dim recollection of some reverse of fortune. He was — I was sure of that — connected with the Brandon family; and was, with the usual fatality, a bit of a *mauvais sujet*. He had made away with his children's money or squandered his own; or somehow or another impoverished his family not creditably. So I glanced at her, and Miss Brandon divined, it seemed, what was passing in my mind, for she said: —

"That is my cousin, Miss Lake, and I think her very beautiful — don't you?"

"Yes, she certainly is very handsome," and I was going to say something about her animation and spirit, but remembered, just in time, that that line of eulogy would hardly have involved a compliment to Miss Brandon. "I

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know her brother, a little — that is Captain Lake — Stanley Lake; he's her brother, I fancy?"

"*Oh?*" said the young lady, in that tone which is between a note of inquiry and of surprise. "Yes; he's her brother."

And she paused; as if something more were expected. But at that moment the bland tones of Larcom, the solemn butler, announced the Rev. William Wylder and Mrs. Wylder, and I said —

"William is an old college friend of mine;" and I observed him, as he entered, with an affectionate and sad sort of interest. Eight years had passed since we met last, and that is something at any time. It had thinned my simple friend's hair a little, and his face, too, was more careworn than I liked, but his earnest, sweet smile was there still. Slight, gentle, with something of a pale and studious refinement in his face. The same gentle voice, with that slight, occasional hesitation, which somehow I liked.

And who was this little Mrs. William Wylder who came in, so homely of feature, so radiant of good humor, so eager and simple, in a very plain dress, leaning so pleasantly on his lean, long, clerical arm, and who looked round with that anticipation of pleasure, and that simple confidence in a real welcome, which are so likely to insure it? Was she an helpmeet for a black-letter man, who talked with the Fathers in his daily walks, could extemporise Latin hexameters, and dream in Greek. Was she very wise, or at all learned? I think her knowledge lay chiefly in the matters of poultry, and puddings, and latterly, of the nursery, where one treasure lay — a golden-haired little boy, four years old.

When the Vicar, I dare say, in a very odd, quaint way, made his proposal of marriage, moved thereto assuredly,

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neither by fortune, nor by beauty, to good, merry, little Miss Dorothy Chubley, whom nobody was supposed to be looking after, and the town had, somehow, set down from the first as a natural-born old maid — there was a very general amazement; some disappointment here and there, with customary sneers and compassion, and a good deal of genuime amusement not ill-natured.

Miss Chubley, all the shopkeepers in the town knew and liked, and, in a way, respected her, as "Miss Dolly." Old Reverend John Chubley, D. D., who bad been in love with his wife from the period of his boyhood; and yet so grudging was Fate, had to undergo an engagement of nigh thirty years before Hymen rewarded their constancy; being at length made Vicar of Huddelston, and master of church revenues to the amount of three hundred pounds a year — had, at forty-five, married his early love, now forty-two.

I remembered the Vicar, but more dimly than his merry little wife, though she went first. She made raisin-wine, and those curious biscuits that tasted of Windsor soap.

And this Mrs. William Wylder just announced by soft-toned Larcom, is the daughter (there is no mistaking the jolly smile and lumpy odd little features, and radiance of amiability) of the good Doctor and Mrs. Chubley, so curiously blended in her loving face. And last comes in old Major Jackson, smiling largely, squaring himself, and doing his courtesies in a florid military style, and plainly pleased to find himself in good company and on the eve of a good dinner. And so our dinner-list is full.

The party were just nine — and it is wonderful what a row nine well-behaved people will contrive to make at a dinner-table. The inferior animals — as we see them caged and cared for, and fed at one o'clock, in those public

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institutions provided for their maintenance — confine their uproar to the period immediately antecedent to their meal, and perform the actual process of deglutition with silent attention, and only such suckings, lappings, and crunchings, as illustrate their industry and content. -It is the distinctive privilege of man to exert his voice during his repast, and to indulge also in those specially human cachinnations which no lower creature, except that disreputable Australian biped known as the "laughing jackass," presumes to imitate; and to these vocal exercises of the feasters respond the endless ring and tinkle of knife and fork on china plate, and the ministering angels in white chokers behind the chairs, those murmured solicitations which hum round and round the ears of the revellers.

I don't know how it happened, but Wylder sat beside Miss Lake. I fancied he ought to have been differently placed, but Miss Brandon did not seem conscious of his absence, and it seemed to me that the handsome blonde would have been as well pleased if he had been anywhere but where he was. There was no liking, though some faint glimmerings both of annoyance and embarrassment in her face. But in Wylder's I saw a sort of conceited consciousness, and a certain eagerness, too, while he talked; though a shrewd fellow in many ways, he had a secret conviction that no woman could resist him.

"I suppose the world thinks me a very happy fellow, Miss Lake?" he said, with a rather pensive glance of inquiry into that young lady's eyes, as he set down his hock-glass.

"I'm afraid it's a selfish world, Mr. Wylder, and thinks very little of what does not concern it."

"Now, *you*, I dare say," continued Wylder, not caring to perceive the *soupçon* of sarcasm that modulated her answer so musically, "look upon me as a very fortunate fellow?"

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"You *are* a very fortunate person, Mr. Wylder; a gentleman of very moderate abilities, with no prospects, and without fortune, who finds himself, without any deservings of his own, on a sudden, possessed of an estate, and about to be united to the most beautiful heiress in England, *is*, I think, rather a fortunate person."

"You did not always think me so stupid, Miss Lake," said Mr. Wylder, showing something of the hectic of vexation.

"Stupid! did I say? Well, you know, we learn by experience, Mr. Wylder. One's judgment matures, and we are harder to please — don't you think so? — as we grow older."

"Aye, so we are, I dare say; at any rate, some things don't please us as we calculated. I remember when this bit of luck would have made me a devilish happy fellow — *twice* as happy; but, you see, if a fellow hasn't his liberty, where's the good of money? I don't know how I got into it, but I can't get away now; and the lawyer fellows, and trustees, and all that sort of prudent people, get about one, and persuade, and exhort, and they bully you, by Jove! into what they call a marriage of convenience — I forget the French word — you know; and then, you see, your feelings may be very different, and all that; and where's the good of money, I say, if you can't enjoy it?"

And Mr. Wylder looked poetically unhappy, and trun dled over a little bit of fricandeau on his plate with his fork, desolately, as though earthly things had lost their relish.

"Yes; I think I know the feeling," said Miss Lake, quietly. "That ballad, you know, expresses it very prettily:— "Oh, thou hast been the cause of this anguish, my mother?'"

Wylder looked sharply at her, but she did not smile,

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and seemed to speak in good faith; and being somewhat thick in some matters, though a cunning fellow, he said —

"Yes; that is the sort of thing, you know — of course, with a difference — a girl is supposed to speak there; but men suffer that way, too — though, of course, very likely it's more their own fault."

"It is very sad," said Miss Lake, who was busy with a *pâté*.

"She has no life in her; she's a mere figurehead; she's awfully slow; I don't like black hair; I'm taken by conversation — and all that. There are some men that can only really love once in their lives, and never forget their first love, I assure you."

Wylder murmured all this, and looked as plaintive as he could without exciting the attention of the people over-the-way.

Mark Wylder had, as you perceive, rather vague notions of decency, and not much experience of ladies; and thought he was making just the interesting impression he meditated. He was a good deal surprised, then, when Miss Lake said, and with quite a cheerful countenance, and very quickly, but so that his words stung his ear like the prick of a bodkin.

"Your way of speaking of my cousin, sir, is in the highest degree discreditable to you and offensive to me, and should you venture to repeat it, I will certainly mention it to Lady Chelford."

And so she turned to old Major Jackson at her right, who had been expounding a point of the battle of Vittoria to Lord Chelford; and she led him again into action, and acquired during the next ten minutes a great deal of curious lore about Spanish muleteers and French prisoners, together with some particulars about the nature of picket duty, and "that scoundrel, Castanos."

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CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH WE GO TO THE DRAWING-ROOM AND THE PARTY BREAKS UP.

Wylder was surprised, puzzled, and a good deal incensed — that saucy craft had fired her shot so unexpectedly across his bows. He looked a little flushed, and darted a stealthy glance across the table, but no one he thought had observed the manœuvre. He would have talked to ugly Mrs. W. Wylder, his sister-in-law, at his left, but she was entertaining Lord Chelford now. He had nothing for it but to perform *cavalier seul* with his slice of mutton. He would have liked, at that moment, a walk upon the quarter-deck, with a good head-wind blowing, and liberty to curse and swear a bit over the bulwark. Women are so full of caprice and hypocrisy, and "humbugging impudence!"

Wylder was rather surly after the ladies had floated away from the scene, and he drank his liquor doggedly. It was his fancy, I suppose, to revive certain sentimental relations which had, it may be, once existed between him and Miss Lake; and he was a person of that combative temperament that magnifies an object in proportion as its pursuit is thwarted.

In the drawing-room he watched Miss Lake over his cup of coffee, and after a few words to his *fiancée* he lounged toward the table at which she was turning over some prints.

"Do come here, Dorothy," she exclaimed, not raising her eyes, "I have found the very thing."

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"What thing? my dear Miss Lake," said that good little woman, skipping to her side.

"The story of "Fridolin," and Retzch's pretty outlines. Sit down beside me, and I'll tell you the story."

"Oh!" said the Vicar's wife, taking her seat, and the inspection and exposition began; and Mark Wylder, who who had intended renewing his talk with Miss Lake, saw that she had foiled him, and stood with a heightened color and his hands in his pockets, looking confoundedly cross and very like an outcast, in the shadow behind.

After a while, in a pet, he walked away. Lord Chelford had joined the two ladies, and had something to say about German art, and some pleasant lights to throw from foreign travel and devious reading, and was as usual intelligent and agreeable; and Mark was still more sore and angry, and strutted away to another table, a long way off, and tossed over the leaves of a folio of Wouvermans' works, and did not see one of the plates he stared at so savagely.

Then he joined a conversation going on between Dorcas Brandon and the Vicar, his brother. He assisted at it, but took no part, and in fact was listening to that other conversation which sounded, with its pleasant gabble and laughter, like a little musical tinkle of bells in the distance. His gall rose, and that distant talk rang in his ears like a cool but intangible insult.

It was dull work. He looked at his watch — the brougham would be at the door to take Miss Lake home in a quarter of an hour; so he glided through a second drawing-room, and into the hall, where he saw Larcom's expansive white waistcoat, and disregarded his advance and respectful inclination, and strode into the outer hall or vestibule, where were hat-stands, walking-sticks, great coats, umbrellas, and the exuviæ of gentlemen.

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Mark clapped on his hat, and rifled the pocket of his paletot of his cigar-case and matches, and spluttered a curse or two, according to old Nollekens' receipt for easing the mind, and on the door-steps lighted his cheroot, and became gradually more philosophical.

In due time the brougham came round with its lamps lighted, and Mark, who was by this time placid, greeted Price on the box familiarly, after his wont, and asked him whom he was going to drive, as if he did not know, cunning fellow; and actually went so far as to give Price one of those cheap and nasty weeds, of which he kept a supply apart in his case for such occasions of good fellowship.

So Mark waited to put the lady into the carriage, and he meditated walking a little way by the window and making his peace, and there was perhaps some vague vision of jumping in afterwards; I know not. Mark's ideas of ladies and of propriety were low, and he was little better than a sailor ashore, and not a good specimen of that class of monster.

He walked about the courtyard smoking, looking sometimes on the solemn front of the old palatial mansion, and sometimes breathing a white film up to the stairs. But honest Mark forgot that young ladies do not always come out quite alone, and jump unassisted into their vehicles. And in fact not only did Lord Chelford assist the fair lady, cloaked and hooded, into the carriage, but the vicar's good-humoured little wife was handed in also, the good Vicar looking on, and as the gay good-night and leave-taking took place by the door-steps, Mark drew back, like a guilty thing, in silence, and showed no sign but the red top of his cigar, glowing like the eye of a Cyclops in the dark; and away rolled the brougham, with the two ladies, and Chelford and the Vicar went in, and Mark

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hurled the stump of his cheroot at Fortune, and delivered a fragmentary soliloquy through his teeth; and so, in a sulk, without making his adieux, he marched off to his crib at the Brandon Arms.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH MY SLUMBER IS DISTURBED.

The ladies had accomplished their ascension to the upper regions. The good Vicar had marched off with the Major, who was by this time unbuckling in his lodgings; and Chelford and I, *tête-à-tête*, had a glass of sherry and water together in the drawing-room before parting. And over this temperate beverage I told him frankly the nature of the service which Mark Wylder wished me to render him; and he as frankly approved, and said he would ask Larkin, the family lawyer, to come up in the morning to assist.

The more I saw of this modest, refined, and manly peer, the more I liked him. There was a certain courteous frankness, and a fine old English sense of duty perceptible in all his serious talk. So I felt no longer like a conspirator, and was to offer such advice as might seem expedient, with the clear approbation of Miss Brandon's trustee. And this point clearly settled, I avowed myself a little tired; and lighting our candles at the foot of the stairs, we scaled that long ascent together, and he conducted me through the intricacies of the devious lobbies up stairs to my chamber-door, where he bid me good-night, shook hands, and descended to his own quarters.

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My room was large and old-fashioned, but snug; and I, beginning to grow very drowsy, was not long in getting to bed, where I fell asleep indescribably quickly. In all old houses one is of course liable to adventures. There was a picture in the outer hall — one of those full-length gentlemen of George II.'s time, with a dark peruke flowing on his shoulders, a cut velvet coat, and lace cravat and ruffles. This picture was pale, and had a long chin, and somehow had impressed my boyhood with a singular sense of fear. The foot of my bed lay towards the window, distant at least five-and-twenty feet; and before the window stood my dressing-table, and on it a large looking-glass.

I dreamed that I was arranging my toilet before this glass — just as I had done that evening — when on a sudden the face of the portrait I have mentioned was presented on its surface, confronting me like a real countenance, and advancing towards me with a look of fury; and at the instant I felt myself seized by the throat and unable to stir or to breathe. After a struggle with this infernal garotter, I succeeded in awaking myself; and as I did so, I felt a rather cold hand really resting on my throat, and quietly passed up over my chin and face. I jumped out of bed with a roar, and challenged the owner of the hand, but received no answer, and heard no sound. I poked up my fire and lighted my candle. Everything was as I had left it except the door, which was the least bit open.

In my shirt, candle in hand, I looked out into the passage. There was nothing there in human shape, but in the direction of the stairs the green eyes of a large cat were shining. I was so nervous that even "a harmless, necessary cat" appalled me, and I clapped my door, as if against an evil spirit.

In about half an hour's time, however, I had quite worked off the effect of this nightmare, and reasoned my-

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self into the natural solution that the creature had got on my bed, and lay, as I have been told they will, upon my throat, and so, all the rest had followed.

Not being given to the fear of *larvæ* and *lemures*, and also knowing that a mistake is easily committed in a great house like that, and that my visitor might have made one, I grew drowsy in a little while, and soon fell asleep again.

In the morning Mark Wylder was early upon the ground. He had quite slept off what he would have called the nonsense of last night, and was very keen upon settlements, consols, mortgages, jointures, and all that dry but momentous lore.

I find a note in my diary of that day: — "From half-past ten o'clock until two with Mark Wylder and Mr. Larkin, the lawyer, in the study — dull work — over papers and title — Lord Chelford with us now and then to lend a helping hand."

Lawyer Larkin, though he made our work lighter — did not make our business, to me at least, any pleasanter. Wylder thought him a clever man; Lord Chelford, a most honorable one; yet there came to me by instinct an unpleasant feeling about him. It was not in any defined way — I did not fancy that he was machinating, for instance, any sort of mischief in the business before us — but I had a notion that he was not quite what he pretended.

Perhaps his *personnel* prejudiced me — though I could not quite say why. He was a tall, lank man — rather long of limb, long of head, and gaunt of face. He wanted teeth at both sides, and there was rather a skull-like cavity when he smiled — which was pretty often. His eyes were small and reddish, as if accustomed to cry; and when everything went smoothly were dull and dove-like, but when things crossed or excited him, which occurred when his own pocket or plans were concerned, they grew

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singularly unpleasant, and greatly resembled those of some not amiable animal — was it a rat, or a serpent?

I might be all in the wrong — and was, no doubt, unreasonable — for he bore a high character, and passed for a very gentlemanlike man among the villagers. He was also something of a religious light, and had for a time conformed to Methodism, but returned to the Church. He had a liking for long sermons, and a sad abhorrence of amusements, and sat out the morning and the evening services regularly — and kept up his dissenting connection too, and gave them money — and appeared in print, in all charitable lists — and mourned over other men's backslidings and calamities in a lofty and christian way, shaking his tall, bald head, and turning up his pink eyes mildly.

Notwitstanding all which he was somehow unlovely in my eyes, and in an indistinct way, formidable. It was not a pleasant misgiving about a gentleman of Larkin's species, the family lawyer, who become *viscera magnorum domum*.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH DORCAS BRANDON SPEAKS.

In answer to "the roaring shiver of the gong" we all trooped away to luncheon. Lady Chelford and Dorcas and Chelford had nearly ended that irregular repast when we entered. My chair was beside Miss Brandon; she had breakfasted with old Lady Chelford that morning, and this was my first meeting that day. It was not very encóuraging.

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People complained that acquaintance made little way with her. That you were, perhaps, well satisfied with your first day's progress, but the next made no head-way; you found yourself this morning exactly at the point from which you commenced yesterday, and to-morrow would recommence where you started the day before. This is very disappointing, but may sometimes be accounted for by there being nothing really to discover. It seemed to me, however, that the distance had positively increased since yesterday, and that the oftener she met me the more strange she became. If Dorcas Brandon had been a plain woman, I think she would have been voted an impertinent bore; but she was so beautiful that she became an enigma. I looked at her as she stood gravely gazing from the window. Is it Lady Macbeth? No; she never would have had energy to plan her husband's career and manage that affair of Duncan. A sultana rather — sublimely egotistical, without reverence — a voluptuous and haughty embodiment of indifference. I paused, looking at a picture, but thinking of her, and was surprised by her voice very near me.

"Will you give me just a minute Mr. De Cresseron, in the drawing-room, while I show you a miniature? I want your opinion."

So she floated on and I accompanied her. "I think," she said, "you mentioned yesterday, that you remembered me when an infant. You remember my poor mamma, don't you, very well?"

This was the first time she had yet shewn any tendency, so far as I had seen, to be interested in anything, or to talk to me. I seized the occasion, and gave her, as well as I could, the sad and pretty picture that remained, and always will, in the vacant air, when I think of her, on the mysterious retina of memory.

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On a cabinet near to where she stood was a casket of ormolu, which she unlocked, and took out a miniature, opened, and looked at it for a long time. I knew very well whose it was, and watched her countenance; for, she interested me strangely. I suppose she knew I was looking at her; but she showed always a queenlike indifference about what people might think or observe. There was no sentimental softening; but her gaze was such as I once saw the same proud and handsome face turn upon the dead — pale, exquisite, perhaps a little stern. What she read there — what procession of thoughts and images passed by — threw neither light nor shadow on her face. Its apathy interested me inscrutably.

At last she placed the picture in my hand, and asked,

"Is this really very like her?"

"It is, and it is *not*," I said, after a little pause. "The features are true: it is what I call an accurate portrait, but that is all, I dare say, exact as it is, it would give to one who had not seen her a false, as it must an inadequate, idea of the orignal. There is something *naïve* and *spirituel*, and very tender in her face, which he has not caught — perhaps it could hardly be fixed in colors."

"Yes. I always heard, her expression and intelligence were very beautiful. It was the beauty of mobility — true beauty."

"There is a beauty of another stamp, equally exquisite, Miss Brandon, and perhaps more overpowering." I said this in nearly a whisper, and in a very marked way, almost tender, and the next moment was amazed at my own audacity. She looked on me for a second or two, with her dark drowsy look, and then it returned to the picture, which was again in her hand. There was a total want of interest in the careless sort of surprise she vouchsafed my little sally; neither was there the slightest resentment.

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I was ridiculously annoyed with myself. The position of a shy man, who has just made an unintelligible joke at a dinner-table, was not more pregnant with self-reproach and embarrassment.

Upon my honor, I don't think there was anything of the *roué* in me. I own I did feel towards this lady, who seemed to me so singular, a mysterious interest just beginning — of that peculiar kind which becomes at last terribly absorbing. I was more elated by her trifling notice of me than I can quite account for. I think if she had listened to me with even the faintest intimation of caring whether I spoke in this tone or not, with even a flash of momentary resentment, I might have rushed into a most reprehensible and ridiculous rigmarole. But she was looking, just as before, at the miniature, as it seemed to me, in fancy infusing some of the spirit I had described into the artist's record, and she said, only in soliloquy, as it were, "Yes, I see — I *think* I see."

So there was a pause; and then she said, without removing her eyes from the miniature, "You are, I believe, Mr. De Cresseron, a very old friend of Mr. Wylder's. Is it not so?"

So soon after my little escapade, I did not like the question; but it was answered. There was not the faintest trace of a satirical meaning, however, in her face; and after another very considerable interval, at the end of which she shut the miniature in its case, she said, "It was a peculiar face, and very beautiful. It is odd how many of our family married for love — wild love-matches. My poor mother was the last. I could point you out many pictures, and tell you stories — my cousin, Rachel, knows them all. You know Rachel Lake?"

"I've not the honor of knowing Miss Lake. I had not an opportunity of making her acquaintance yesterday; but I know her brother — so does Wylder."

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and made my criticisms — not very novel, I fear — upon the pages he turned over; and I am sorry to say I don't think he heard much of what I was saying, for he suddenly came out with —

"And where is Stanley Lake now, do you know?"

"I saw him in town — only for a moment though — about a fortnight ago; he was arranging, he said, about selling out."

"Oh! retiring; and what does he propose doing then?" asked Wylder, without raising his eyes from his book. He spoke in a sort of undertone, like a man who does not want to be overheard.

"I have not an idea. I don't think he's fit for many things. He knows something of horses, I believe, and something of play."

"But he'll hardly make out a living that way," said Wylder, with a sort of sneer or laugh.

"I fancy he has enough to live upon, without adding to it, however," I said.

Wylder leaned back in his low chair, with his hands stuffed in his pockets, and the air of a man trying to look unconcerned, but both annoyed and disconcerted nevertheless.

"I tell you what, Charlie, between you and me, that fellow, Stanley, is a d—d bad lot. I may be mistaken, of course; he's always been very civil to me, but we don't like one another; and I don't think I ever heard him say a good word of any one; I dare say he abuses you and me, as he does every one else."

"Does he?" I said. "I was not aware he had that failing."

"Oh, yes. He does not stick at trifles, Master Stanley. He's about the greatest liar, I think, I ever met with," and he laughed angrily.

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I happened at that moment to raise my eyes, and I saw Dorcas's face reflected in the mirror; her back was towards us, and she held the letter in her hand as if reading it, but her large eyes were looking over it, and on us, in the glass, with a gaze of strange curiosity. Our glances met in the mirror; but her's remained serenely undisturbed, and mine dropped and turned away hastily. I wonder whether she heard us. I do not know. Some people are miraculously sharp of hearing.

Wylder was leaning on his elbow, with just the tip of his thumb to his teeth, with a vicious character of biting it, which was peculiar to him when anything vexed him considerably, and glancing sharply this way and that —

"You know," he said, suddenly, "we are a sort of cousins; his mother was a Brandon — a second cousin of Dorcas's — no, of her father's — I don't know exactly how. He's a pushing fellow, one of the coolest hands I know; but I don't see that I can be of any use to him, or why the devil I should. I say, old fellow, come out and have a weed, will you?"

I raised my eyes. Miss Brandon had left the room. I don't know that her presence would have prevented his invitation, for Wylder's wooing was certainly of the coolest. So forth we sallied, and under the autumnal foliage, in the cool amber light of the declining evening, we enjoyed our cheroots; and with them, Wylder his thoughts; and I, the landscape and the whistling of the birds; for we waxed Turkish and taciturn over our tobacco.

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CHAPTER VII.

RELATING HOW A LONDON GENTLEMAN APPEARED IN REDMAN'S DELL.

THERE is, near the Hall, a pretty glen, called Redman's Dell, very steep, with a stream running at the bottom of it, but so thickly wooded that in summer you can only now and then catch a glimpse of the water gliding beneath you. Deep in this picturesque ravine, buried among the shadows of tall old trees, runs the narrow mill-road, which lower down debouches on the end of the village street. There, in the transparent green shadow, stand the two mills — the old one with A. D. 1679, and the Wylder arms, and the eternal "resurgam" projecting over its doors; and higher up, on a sort of platform, the steep bank rising high behind it, with its towering old wood overhanging and surrounding, stands an old and small two-storied brick and timber house; and though the sun does not often glimmer on its windows, it possesses an air of sad, old-world comfort — a little flower-garden lies in front, with a paling round it. But not every kind of flowers will grow there, under the lordly shadow of the elms and chestnuts.

This sequestered tenement bears the name of Redman's Farm; and its occupant was that Miss Lake whom I had met last night at Brandon Hall, and whose pleasure it was to live here in independent isolation.

There she is now, busy in her tiny garden, with the birds twittering about her, and the yellow leaves falling; and her thick gauntlets on her slender hands. This young lady's little Eden, though encompassed with the solemn

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sylvan cloister of nature's building, and vocal with sounds of innocence — the songs of birds, and sometimes those of its young mistress — was no more proof than the Mesopotamian haunt of our first parents against the intrusion of darker spirits. So, as she worked, she lifted up her eyes, and beheld a rather handsome young man standing at the little wicket of her garden, with his gloved hand on the latch. A man of fashion — a town man — his dress bespoke him: smooth cheeks, light brown curling moustache, and eyes peculiar both in shape and color, and something of elegance of finish in his other features, and of general grace in the *coup d' œil*, struck one at a glance. He was smiling silently and slily on Rachel, who, with a little cry of surprise, said —

"Oh, Stanley! is it you?"

And before he could answer, she had thrown her arms about his neck and kissed him two or three times. Laughingly, half-resisting, the young man waited till her enthusiastic salutation was over, and with one gloved hand caressingly on her shoulder, and with the other smoothing his ruffled moustache, he laughed a little more, a quiet low laugh.

"Yes, Radie, you see I've found you out;" and his eye wandered, still smiling oddly, over the front of her quaint habitation.

"And how have you been, Radie?"

"Oh, very well. No life like a gardener's — early hours, work, air, and plenty of quiet." And the young lady laughed.

"And what do you call this place?"

"'The Happy Valley,' *I* call it. Don't you remember 'Rasselas?'"

"No," he said, looking round him; "I don't think I was ever there."

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"You horrid dunce! — it's a book, but a stupid one — so no matter," laughed Miss Rachel, giving him a little slap on the shoulder with her slender fingers.

"It's a confounded deal more like the 'Valley of the Shadow of Death, in Pilgrim's Progress' — you remember — that old Tamar used to read to us in the nursery," replied Master Stanley, who had never enjoyed being quizzed by his sister.

"If you don't like my scenery, come in, Stanley, and admire my decorations. You must tell me all the news, and I'll show you my house, and amaze you with my house-keeping. Dear me how long it is since I've seen you."

So she led him in by the arm to her tiny drawing-room; and he laid his hat and stick, and grey paletot, on her little marquetrie-table, and sat down, and looked languidly about him, with a sly smile, like a man amused.

"You are very oddly housed, Radie."

"I like it," she said quietly, also with a glance round her homely drawing-room.

"What do you call this, your boudoir or parlor?"

"I call it my drawing-room, but i'ts anything you please."

"What very odd people our ancestors were," he mused on. "They lived, I suppose, out of doors like the cows, and only came into their sheds at night, when they could not see the absurd ugliness of the places they inhabited. Lots of rats, I fancy, Radie, behind that wainscoting? What's that horrid work of art against the wall?"

"A shell-work cabinet, dear. It is not beautiful I allow. If I were strong enough, or poor old Tamar, I should have put it away; and now that you are here, Stanley, I think I'll make you carry it out to the lobby for me."

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"I should not like to touch it, dear Radie. And pray how do you amuse yourself here? How on earth do you get over the day, and, worse still, the evenings?"

"Very well — well enough. I make a very good sort of a nun, and a capital housemaid. I work in the garden, I mend my dresses, I drink tea, and when I choose to be dissipated, I play and sing for old Tamar — why did not you ask how she is? I do believe, Stanley, you care for no one, but" (she was going to say yourself, she said instead, however, but) "perhaps, the least in the world for me, and that not very wisely," she continued, a little fiercely, "for from the moment you saw me, you've done little else than try to disgust me more than I am with my penury and solitude. What do you mean? You always have a purpose — will you ever learn to be frank and straightforward, and speak plainly to those whom you ought to trust, if not to love? What are you driving at, Stanley?"

He looked up with a gentle start, like one recovering from a reverie, and said, with his yellow eyes fixed for a moment on his sister, before they dropped again to the carpet,

"You're miserably poor, Rachel: upon my word, I believe you haven't clear two hundred a year. I'll drink some tea, please, if you have got any, and it isn't too much trouble; and it strikes me as very curious you like living in this really very humiliating state."

"I don't intend to go out for a governess, if that's what you mean; nor is there any privation in living as I do. Perhaps you think I ought to go and housekeep for you."

"Why — ha, ha! — I really don't know, Radie, where I shall be. I'm not of any regiment now."

"Why, you have not sold out?" She flushed and suddenly grew pale, for she was afraid something worse

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might have happened, having no great confidence in her brother.

"I *have* sold my commission."

She looked straight at him with large eyes and compressed lips and nodded her head two or three times, just murmuring, "Well! well! well!"

"Women never understand these things. The army is awfully expensive — I mean, of course, a regiment like ours; and the interest of money is better to me than my pay; and see, Rachel, there's no use in lecturing *me* — so don't let us qnarrel. We're not very rich, you and I; and we each know our own affairs, you yours, and I mine, best."

There was something by no means pleasant in his countenance when his temper was stirred, and a little thing sometimes sufficed to do so. Rachel treated him with a sort of deference, a little contemptuous perhaps, such as spoiled children receive from indulgent elders; and she looked at him steadily, with a faint smile and arched brows, for a little while, and an undefinable expression of puzzle, and curiosity.

"You are a very amusing brother — if not a very chary or a very useful one, Stanley."

She opened the door, and called across the little hall into the homely kitchen of the mansion.

"Tamar, dear, Master Stanley's here, and wishes to see you."

"Oh! yes, poor dear old Tamar; ha, ha!" says the gentleman, with a gentle little laugh, "I suppose she's as frightful as ever, that worthy woman. Certainly she *is* awfully like a ghost. I wonder, Radie, you're not afraid of her at night in this cheerful habitation. *I* should, I know."

And just then old Tamar opened the door. I must al-

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low there was something very unpleasant about that worthy old woman; and not being under any personal obligations to her, I confess my acquiescence in the spirit of Captain Lake's remarks.

She was certainly perfectly neat and clean, but white predominated unpleasantly in her costume. Her cotton gown had once had a pale pattern over it, but wear and washing had destroyed its tints, till it was no better than white, with a mottling of grey. She had a large white kerchief pinned with a grisly precision across her breast, and a white linen cap tied under her chin, fitting close to her head, like a child's night-cap, and destitute of border or frilling about the face. It was a dress very odd and unpleasant to behold, and suggested the idea of an hospital, or a mad house, or death, in an undefined way.

She was past sixty, with a mournful puckered and puffy face, tinted all over with a thin gamboge and burnt sienna glazing; and very blue under the eyes, which showed a great deal of their watery whites. This old woman had in her face and air, along with an expression of suspicion, and anxiety, a certain character of decency and respectability, which made her altogether a puzzling and unpleasant apparition.

Being taciturn and undemonstrative, she stood at the door, looking with as pleased a countenance as so sad a portrait could wear, upon the young gentleman.

He got up at his leisure and greeted "old Tamar," with his sleepy, amused sort of smile, and a few trite words of kindness. So Tamar withdrew to prepare tea; and he said, all at once, with a sudden accession of energy, and an unpleasant momentary glare in his eyes —

"You know, Rachel, this sort of thing is all nonsense. You cannot go on living like this; you must marry — you shall marry. Mark Wylder is down here, and he

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has got an estate and a house, and it is time he should marry you."

"Mark Wylder is here to marry my cousin, Dorcas; and if he had no such intention, and were as free as you are, and again to urge his foolish suit upon his knees, Stanley, I would die rather than accept him."

"It was not always so foolish a suit, Radie," answered her brother, his eyes once more upon the carpet. "Why should not *he* do as well as another? You liked him well enough once.'

The young lady colored rather fiercely.

"I am not a girl of seventeen now, Stanley; and — and, besides, I *hate* him."

"What d—d nonsense! I really beg your pardon, Radie, but it *is* precious stuff. You are quite unreasonable; you've no cause to hate him; he dropped you because you dropped him. It was only prudent; he had not a guinea. But now it is different, and he *must* marry you."

The young lady stared with a haughty amazement upon her brother.

"I've made up my mind to speak to him; and if he won't I promise you he shall leave the country," said the young man gently, just lifting his yellow eyes for a second with another unpleasant glare.

"I almost think you're mad, Stanley; and if you do anything so insane, sure I am you'll rue it while you live; and wherever he is I'll find him out, and acquit myself, with the scorn I owe him, of any share in a plot so unspeakably mean and absurd."

"Brava, brava! you're a heroime, Radie; and why the devil," he continued, in a changed tone, "do you apply those insolent terms to what I purpose doing?"

"I wish I could find words strong enough to express

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my horror of your plot —a plot every way disgusting. You plainly know something to Mark Wylder's discredit; and you mean, Stanley, to coerce him by fear into a marriage with your penniless sister, who *hates* him. Give up every idea of it this moment. Has it not struck you that Mark Wylder may possibly know something of you, you would not have published?"

"I don't think he does. What do you mean?"

"On my life, Stanley, I'll acquaint Mr. Wylder this evening with what you meditate, and the atrocious liberty you presume to take with my name — unless you promise, upon your honor, now and here, to dismiss for ever the odious and utterly resultless scheme."

Captain Lake looked very angry after his fashion, but said nothing. He could not at any time have very well defined his feelings toward his sister, but mingling in them, certainly, was a vein of unacknowledged dread, and, shall I say, respect. He knew she was resolute, fierce of will, and prompt in action, and not to be bullied.

"There's more in this, Stanley, than you care to tell me. You have not troubled yourself a great deal about me, you know; and I'm no worse off now than any time for the last three years. You've *not* come down here on *my* account — that is, altogether; and be your plans what they may, you shan't mix my name in them; and I tell you again, Stanley, unless you promise, upon your honor, to forbear all mention of my name, I will write this evening to Lady Chelford, apprising her of your plans, and of my own disgust and indignation; and requesting her son's interference. *Do* you promise?"

"There's no such *haste*, Radie. I only mentioned it. If you don't like it, of course it can lead to nothing, and there's no use in my speaking to Wylder, and so there's an end of it."

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"There *may* be some use, a purpose in which neither my feelings nor interests have any part. I venture to say, Stanley, your plans are all for *yourself*. You want to extort some advantage from Wylder; and you think, in his present situation, about to marry Dorcas, you can use me for the purpose. Thank Heaven! sir, you committed for once the rare indiscretion of telling the truth; and unless you make me the promise I require, I will take, before evening, such measures as will completely exculpate me. Once again, do you promise?"

"Yes, Radie; ha, ha! of course I promise."

"Upon your honor?"

"Upon my honor — *there*."

"I believe, you gentlemen dragoons observe that oath — I hope so. If you choose to break it you may give me some trouble, but you shan't compromise me. And now, Stanley, one word more. I fancy Mr. Wylder is a resolute man — none of the Wylders wanted courage."

Captain Lake was by this time smiling his sly, sleepy smile upon his French boots.

"If you have formed any plan which depends upon frightening him, it is a desperate one. All I can tell you, Stanley, is this, that if I were a man, and an attempt made to extort from me any sort of concession by terror, I would shoot the miscreant who made it through the head, like a highwayman."

"What the devil are you talking about?" said he.

"About *your danger*," she answered. "For once in your life listen to reason. Mark Wylder is as prompt as you, and has ten times your nerve and sense; you are more likely to have committed yourself than he. Take care; he may retaliate your *threat* by a counter move more dreadful. I know nothing of your doings, Stanley — Heaven forbid! but be warned, or you'll rue it."

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"Why, Radie, you know nothing of the world. Do you suppose I'm quite demented? Ask a gentleman for his estate, or his watch, because I know something to his disadvantage! Why, ha, ha! dear Radie, every man who has ever been on terms of intimacy with another must know things to his disadvantage, but no one thinks of telling them. I don't affect to be angry, or talk romance and heroics, because you fancy such stuff; but I assure you — when will that old woman give me a cup of tea? — I assure you, Radie, there's nothing in it."

Rachel made no reply, but she looked steadfastly and uneasily upon the enigmatical face and downcast eyes of the young man.

"Well, I hope so," she said at last, with a sigh, and a slight sense of relief.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN LAKE TAKES HIS HAT AND STICK.

So the young people sitting in the little drawing-room of Redman's farm pursued their dialogue; Rachel Lake had spoken last, and it was the Captain's turn to speak next.

"Do you remember Miss Beauchamp, Radie?" he asked, rather suddenly, after a very long pause.

"Miss Beauchamp? Oh! to be sure; you mean little Caroline; yes, she must be quite grown up by this time — five years — she promised to be pretty. What of her?"

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Rachel, very flushed and agitated still, was now trying to speak as usual.

"She *is* good-looking — a little coarse some people think," resumed the young man; "but handsome; black eyes — black hair — rather on a large scale, but certainly handsome. A style I admire rather, though it is not very refined, nor at all classic. But I like her, and I wish you'd advise me." He was talking, after his wont, to the carpet.

"Oh?" she exclaimed, with a gentle sort of derision.

"You mean," he said, looking up for a moment, with a sudden stare, "she has got money. Of course she has: I could not afford to admire her if she had not; but I see you are not just now in a mood to trouble yourself about my nonsense — we can talk about it to-morrow; and tell me now, how do you get on with the Brandon people?"

Rachel was curious, and would, if she could, have recalled that sarcastic "oh" which had postponed the story; but she was also a little angry, and with anger there was pride, which would not stoop to ask for the revelation which he chose to defer; so she said, "Dorcas and I are very good friends; but I don't know very well what to make of her. She is either absolutely uninteresting, or very interesting indeed, and I can't say which."

"Does she like you?" he asked.

"I really don't know. She tolerates me, like everything else; and I don't flatter her; and we see a good deal of one another upon those terms, and I have no complaint to make of her. She has some aversions, but no quarrels; and has a sort of laziness — mental, bodily, and moral — that is sublime, but provoking; and sometimes I admire her, and sometimes I despise her; and I do not yet know which feeling is the juster."

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"Surely she is woman enough to be fussed a little about her marriage?"

"Oh, dear, no! she takes the whole affair with a queen-like and supernatural indifference. She is either a fool or a very great philosopher, and there is something grand in the serene obscurity that envelopes her," and Rachel laughed a very little.

"I must, I suppose, pay my respects; but to-morrow will be time enough."

Old Tamar had glided in while they were talking, and placed the little tea equipage on the table unnoticed, and the captain was sipping his cup of tea, and inspecting the pattern, while his sister amused him.

"This place, I suppose, is confoundedly slow, is not it? Do they entertain the neighbors ever at Brandon?"

"Sometimes, when old Lady Chelford and her son are staying there."

"But the neighbors can't entertain them, I fancy, or you. What a dreary thing a dinner party made up of such people must be — like "Æsop's Fables," where the cows and sheep converse.

"And sometimes a wolf or a fox," she said.

"Well, Radie, I know you mean me; but as you wish it, I'll carry my fangs elsewhere;— and what has become of Will Wylder?"

"Oh! he's in the Church!"

"Quite right — the only thing he was fit for;" and Captain Lake laughed like a man who enjoys a joke slily.

"And where is poor Billy quartered?"

"Not quite half a mile away; he has got the vicarage of Naunton Friars."

"Oh, then, Will is not quite such a fool as we took him for."

"It is worth just £180 a year; but he's very far from a fool."

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"Yes, of course, he knows Greek poets and Latin fathers, and all the rest of it. I dare say he's the kind of fellow *you'd* like very well, Radie." And his sly eyes had a twinkle in them which seemed to say, "perhaps I've divined your secret."

"And so I do, and I like his wife, too, *very* much."

"His wife! So William has married on £180 a year;" and the Captain laughed quietly, but very pleasantly again.

"On a very little more, at all events; and I think they are about the happiest, and I'm sure they are the best people in this part of the world."

"Well, Radie, I'll see you to-morrow again. You preserve your good looks wonderfully. I wonder you haven't become an old woman here."

And he kissed her, and went his way, with a slight wave of his hand, and his odd smile, as he closed the little garden gate after him.

Rachel was flushed, and felt oddly; a little stunned and strange, although she had talked lightly and easily enough.

"I forgot to ask him where he is staying; the Brandon Arms, I suppose. I don't at all like his coming down here after Mark Wylder; what *can* he mean. He certainly never would have taken the trouble for *me*. What *can* he want of Mark Wylder? I think *he* knew old Mr. Beauchamp. He may be a trustee, but that's not likely; Mark Wylder was not the person for any such office. I hope Stanley does not intend trying to extract money from him; anything rather than that degradation — than that *villany*. Stanley was always impracticable, perverse, deceitful, and so foolish with all his cunning and suspicion — so *very* foolish. Poor Stanley! He's so unscrupulous; I don't know what to think. He said he could force Mark Wylder to leave the country. It must

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be some bad secret. If he tries and fails, I suppose he will be ruined. He will blast himself, and disgrace all connected with him; and it is quite useless speaking to him."

Perhaps if Rachel Lake had been in Belgravia, leading a town life, the matter would have taken no such dark coloring and portentous proportions. But living in a small old house, in a dark glen, with no companion, and little to occupy her, it was different.

She looked down the silent way he had so lately taken, and repeated, rather bitterly: "My only brother! my only brother! my only brother!"

That young lady was not quite a pauper, though she may have thought so. She had just that symmetrical three hundred pounds a year, which the famous Dean of St. Patrick's tells us he so "often wished that he had clear." She had had some money in the Funds besides, still more insignificant; but this her brother Stanley had borrowed and begged piecemeal, and the Consols were no more. But though something of a nun in her way of life, there was no germ of the old maid in her, and money was not often in her thoughts. It was not a bad *dot*; and her brother Stanley had about twice as much, and therefore was much better off than many a younger son of a duke. Old General Lake had once had more than ten thousand pounds a year, and lived, until the crash came, in the style of a vicious old prince. It was a great break up, and a worse fall for Rachel than for her brother, when the plate, coaches, pictures, and "all the valuable effects" of old Tiberius went to the hammer, and he himself vanished from his clubs and other haunts, and lived only — a thin intermittent rumor — surmised to be in gaol, or in Guernsey, and quite forgotten soon, and a little later actually dead and buried.

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CHAPTER IX.

I SEE THE RING OF THE PERSIAN MAGICIAN.

"That's a devilish fine girl," said Mark Wylder.

He was sitting at this monent on the billiard table, with his coat off and his cue in his hand, and had lighted a cigar. He and I had just had a game, and were tired of it.

"Who?" I asked. He was looking on me from the corners of his eyes, and smiling in a sly rakish way that no man likes in another.

"Radie Lake — she's a splendid girl, by Jove! Don't you think so? and she liked me once devilish well, I can tell you. She was thin then, but she has plumped out a bit, and improved every way."

"Yes, she is — she's very well; but hang it Wylder, you're a married man now, and must give up talking that way. People won't like it, you know; they'll take it to mean more than it does, and you oughtn't. Let us have another game."

"By-and-by; what do you think of Larkin?" asked Wylder, with a sly glance from the corners of his eye. "I think he prays rather more than is good for his clients; mind I spell it with an 'a,' not with an 'e;' but hang it, for an attorney, you know, and such a sharp chap, it does seem to me rather a — a joke, eh?"

"He bears a good character among the townspeople, doesn't he? And I don't see that it can do him any harm, remembering that he has a soul to be saved."

"Or the other thing, eh?" laughed Wylder. "But I think he comes it a little too strong — two sermons last Sunday, and a prayer meeting at nine o'clock!"

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"Well, it won't do him any harm," I repeated.

"Harm! O, let Jos Larkin alone for that. It gets him all the religious business of the county; I dare say it brings him in two or three hundred a year, eh?" And Wylder laughed again. "It has broken up his hard, proud heart," he says; "but it left him a devilish hard head, I told him, and I think it sharpens his wits."

"I rather think you'll find him a useful man; and to be so in his line of business he must have his wits about him, I can tell you."

"He amused me devilishly," said Wylder, "with a sort of exhortation he treated me to; he's a delightfully impudent chap, and gave me to understand I was a limb of the Devil, and he a saint. I told him I was better than he, in my humble opinion, and so I am, by chalks. I know very well I'm a miserable sinner, but there's mercy above, and I don't hide my faults. I don't set up for a light or a saint; I'm just what the prayer-book says — a miserable sinner. There's only one good thing I can safely say for myself — I am no Pharisee; that's all; I'm no religious prig, puffing myself, and trusting to forms, making long prayers in the market-place" (Mark's quotations were paraphrastic), "and thinking of nothing but the uppermost seat in the synagogue, and the praise of men — hang them, I hate those fellows."

"Do you wish another game?" I asked.

"Just now," said Wylder, emitting first a thin stream of smoke, and watching its ascent. "Dorcas is the belle of the county; and she likes me, though she's odd, and don't show it the way other girls would. But a fellow knows pretty well when a girl likes him, and you know the marriage is a sensible sort of thing, and I'm determined, of course, to carry it through; but, hang it, a fellow can't help thinking sometimes there are other things besides

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money, and Dorcas is not my style. Rachel's more that way; she's a *tremendious* fine girl, by Jove! and I think, if I had seen her first, I'd have thought twice before I'd have got myself into this business."

I only smiled and shook my head.

"What do you laugh at, Charlie?" said Wylder, grinning himself.

"At your confounded grumbling, Mark. The luckiest dog in England! Will nothing content you?"

"Why, I grumble very little, I think, considering how well off I am," rejoined he, with a laugh.

"Grumble! If you had a particle of gratitude, you'd build a temple to Fortune — you're pagan enough for it, Mark."

"Fortune has nothing to do with it," says Mark, laughing again.

"Well, certainly, neither had you."

"It was all the Devil. I'm not joking, Charlie, upon my word, though I'm laughing." (Mark swore now and then, but I take leave to soften his oaths.) "It was the Persian Magician."

"Come Mark, say what you mean."

"I mean what I say. When we were in the Persian Gulf, near six years ago, I was in command of the ship. The captain, you see, was below, with a hurt in his leg. We had very rough weather — a gale for two days and a night almost — and a heavy swell after. In the night time we picked up three poor devils in an open boat. One was a Persian merchant, with a grand beard. We called him the magician, he was so like the picture of Aladdin's uncle."

"Why *he* was an African," I interposed, my sense of accuracy offended.

"I don't care a curse what he was," rejoined Mark;

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"he was exactly like the picture in the story-books. And as we were lying off — I forget the cursed name of it — he begged me to put him ashore. He could not speak a word of English, but one of the fellows with him interpreted, and they were all anxious to get ashore. Poor devils, they had a notion, I believe, we were going to sell them for slaves, and he made me a present of a ring, and told me a long yarn about it. It was a talisman, it seems, and no one who wore it could ever be lost. So I took it for a keepsake; here it is," and he extended his stumpy, brown little finger, and showed a thick, coarsely-made ring of gold, with an uncut red stone, of the size of a large cherry stone, set in it.

"The stone is a humbug," said Wylder. "It's not real. I showed it to Platten and Foyle. It's some sort of glass. But I would not part with it. I got a fancy into my head that luck would come with it, and maybe that glass stuff was the thing that had the virtue in it. Now look at these Persian letters on the inside, for that's the oddest thing about it. Hang it, I can't pull it off — I'm growing as fat as a pig — but they are like a queer little string of flowers; and I showed it to a clever fellow at Malta — a missionary chap — and he read it off slick, and what do you think it means: 'I will come up again;'" and he swore a great oath. "It's as true as you stand there — *our* motto. Is not it odd? So I got the "resurgam" you see there engraved round it, and by Jove! it did bring me up. I was near lost, and did rise again. Eh?"

Well, it certainly was a curious accident. Mark had plenty of odd and not unamusing lore. Men who beat about the world in ships usually have.

"When I got this ring, Charley, three hundred a year and a London life would have been Peru and Paradise to poor Pilgarlick, and see what it has done for me."

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"Aye, and better than Aladdin's, for you need not rub it and bring up that confounded ugly genii; the slave of your ring works unseen."

"So he does," laughed Wylder, in a state of elation, "and he's not done working yet, I can tell you. When the estates are joined in one, they'll be good eleven thousand a year: and Larkin says, with smart management, I shall have a rental of thirteen thousand before three years! And that's only the beginning, by George! Sir Henry Twisden can't hold his seat — he's all but broke — as poor as Job, and the gentry hate him, and he lives abroad. He has had a hint or two already, and he'll never fight the next election. D'ye see — hey?"

And he laughed with cunning exultation.

"Miss Rachel will find I'm not quite such a lubber as she fancies. But even then it is only begun. Come, Charlie, you used to like a bet. What do you say? I'll buy you that twenty-five guinea book of pictures — what's its name? — if you give me three hundred guineas one month after I'm a peer of Parliment. Hey? There's a sporting offer for you. Well! what do you say — eh?"

I laughed and declined, to his great elation, and just then the gong sounded and we were away to our toilets.

While making my toilet for dinner, I amused myself by conjecturing whether there could be any foundation in fact for Mark's boast, that Miss Brandon liked him. Women are so enigmatical — some in everything — all in matters of the heart. Don't they often affect indifference, and occasionally even aversion, where there is a different sort of feeling?

As I went down I heard Miss Lake chatting with her queen-like cousin near an open door on the lobby. Rachel Lake was, indeed, a very constant guest at the Hall, and the servants paid her much respect, which I look upon

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as a sign that the young heiress liked her and treated her with consideration; and indeed there was a fiery spirit in that young lady which would have brooked nothing less and dreamed of nothing but equality.

CHAPTER X.

THE ACE OF HEARTS.

Who should I find in the drawing-room, talking fluently and smiling, after his wont, to old Lady Chelford, who seemed to receive him very graciously, for her at least, but Captain Stanley Lake!

"You know Captain Lake?" said Lord Chelford, addressing me.

And Lake turned round upon me, a little abruptly, his odd yellowish eyes. There was something evil and skrinking in his aspect, which I felt with a sort of chill, like the commencing fascination of a serpent. I often thought since that he had expected to see Wylder before him.

You're surprised to see me here," he said, in his very pleasing low tones.

"I lighted on him in the village; and I knew Miss Brandon would not forgive me if I allowed him to go away without coming here. They are cousins, you know; we are all cousins. I'm bad at genealogies. My mother could tell us all about it — we, Brandons, Lakes, Wylders, and Chelfords."

At this moment Miss Brandon entered, with her brilliant cousin, Rachel. The blonde and the dark, it was a dazzling contrast.

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So Chelford led Stanley Lake before the lady of the castle. I thought of the "Fair Brunnisende," with the captive knight in the hands of her seneschal before her, and I fancied he said something of having found him trespassing in her town, and brought him up for judgment. Whatever Lord Chelford said, Miss Brandon received it very graciously, and even with a momentary smile. I wonder she did not smile oftener, it became her so. But her greeting to Captain Lake was more than usually haughty and frozen, and her features particularly proud and pale.

"Shake hands with your cousin, my dear," said old Lady Chelford, peremptorily. The little scene took place close to her chair; and upon this stage direction the little piece of by-play took place, and the young lady coldly touched the Captain's hand, and passed on.

Young as he was, Stanley Lake was an old man of the world, not to be disconcerted, and never saw more than exactly suited him.

When Lord Chelford joined us, I perceived that Wylder was in the room, and saw a very cordial greeting between him and Lake. The Captain appeared quite easy and cheerful: but Mark, I thought, notwithstanding his laughter and general jollity, was uncomfortable; and I saw him once or twice, when Stanley's eye was not upon him, glance sharply on the young man with an uneasy and not very friendly curiosity.

At dinner Lake was easy and amusing. That meal passed off rather pleasantly; and when we joined the ladies in the drawing-room, the good Vicar's enthusiastic little wife came to meet us, in one of her honest little raptures.

"Now, here's a thing worth your looking at! Did you ever see anything so bee-utiful in your life? It is such a

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darling little thing; and — look now — is not it magnificent?"

She arrested the file of gentlemen just by a large lamp, before whose effulgence she presented the subject of her eulogy — one of those costly trifles which announce the approach of Hymen, as flowers spring up before the rosy steps of May.

Well, it was pretty — a set of tablets — a toy — the cover of enamel, studded in small jewels, with a slender border of symbolic flowers, and with a heart in the center, a mosaic of little carbuncles, rubies, and other red and crimson stones, placed with a view to light and shade.

"Exquisite, indeed!" said Lord Chelford. "Is this yours, Mrs. Wylder?"

"Mine, indeed!" laughed poor little Mrs. Dorothy. "Well, dear me, no, indeed;" — and in an earnest whisper close in his ear —" a present to Miss Brandon, and the donor is not a hundred miles away from your elbow, my Lord!" and she winked slyly, and laughed, with a little nod at Wylder.

"Oh! I see — to be sure — really, Wylder, it does your taste infinite credit."

"I'm glad you like it," says Wylder, chuckling benignantly on it, over his shoulder. "I believe I *have* a little taste that way; those are all real, you know, those jewels."

"Oh, yes! of course. Have you seen it, Captain Lake?" And he placed it in that gentleman's fingers, who now took his turn at the lamp, and contemplated the little parallelogram with a gleam of sly amusement.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Wylder, a little snappishly.

"I was thinking it's very like the ace of hearts," answered the Captain softly, smiling on.

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"Well now, thought, really it is funny; it did not strike me before, but do you know, now, it *is*," laughs out jolly Mrs. Dolly, "isn't it. Look at it, do, Mr. Wylder — isn't it like the ace of hearts?"

And Wylder laughed too, more suddenly and noisily than the humor of the joke seemed quite to call for, and glanced a grim look from the corners of his eyes on Lake, but the gallant Captain did not seem to perceive it; and after a few seconds more he handed it very innocently back to Mrs. Dorothy, only remarking —

"Seriously, it *is* very pretty, and *appropriate*."

And Wylder, making no remark, helped himself to a cup of coffee, and then to a glass of Curaçoa, and then looked industriously at a Spanish quarto of Don Quixote, and lastly walked over to me in the hearth-rug.

"What the d— has he come down here for? It can't be for money, or balls, or play, and he has no honest business anywhere. Do you know?"

"Lake? Oh! I really can't tell; but he'll soon tire of country life. I don't think he's much of a sportsman."

"Ha, isn't he? I don't know anything about him almost; but I hate him."

"Why should you, though? He's a very gentlemanlike fellow, and your cousin."

"My cousin — the Devil's cousin — every-one's cousin. I don't know who's my cousin, or who isn't; nor you don't, who've been for ten years over those d—d papers; I took a dislike to him at first sight long ago, and that never happened me but I was right."

"He's not a man for country quarters; he'll soon be back in town, or to Brighton," I said.

"If *he* doesn't, *I* will. That's all."

Just to get him off this unpleasant groove with a little jolt, I said —

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"By-the-bye, Wylder, you know the pictures here; who is the tall man, with the long, pale face, and wild, phosphoric eyes? I was always afraid of him; in a long peruke, and dark red velvet coat, facing the hall-door. I had a horrid dream about him last night."

"That? Oh, I know — that's Lorne Brandon. He was one of our family devils, he was. (All the time he was talking to me his angry little eyes were following Lake.) "They say he killed his son, a blackguard, who was found shot, with his face in the tarn in the park. He was going to marry the game-keeper's daughter, it was thought, and he and the old boy, who was for high blood, and all that, were at logger-heads about it. It was not proved, only thought likely, but he might have done worse. I suppose Miss Partridge would have had a precious lot of babbies; and who knows where the estate would have been by this time."

"I believe, Charlie," he re-commenced suddenly, "there is not such an unnatural family on record as ours; is there? Ha, ha, ha! It's well to be distinguished in any line. I forget all the other good things he did; but he ended by shooting himself through the head in his bedroom, and that was not the worst thing ever he did."

And Wylder laughed again, and began to whistle very low — not, I fancy, for want of thought, but as a sort of accompaniment thereto, for he suddenly said —

"And where is he staying?"

"Who? — Lake?"

"Yes."

"I don't know; but I think he mentioned Larkin's house, didn't he? I'm not quite sure."

"I suppose he thinks I'm made of money. By Jove! if he wants to borrow any I'll surprise him, the cur; I'll talk to him; ha, ha, ha!"

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And Wylder chuckled angrily, as his eye glanced on the graceful Captain, who was entertaining the ladies, nc doubt, very agreeably in the distance.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH LAKE UNDER THE TREES OF BRANDON, AND I IN MY CHAMBER, SMOKE OUR NOCTURNAL CIGARS.

Miss Lake declined the carriage to-night. Her brother was to see her home, and there was a leave-taking, and the young ladies whispered a word or two, and kissed, after the manner of their kind. To Captain Lake, Miss Brandon's adieux were as cold and haughty as her greeting.

"Did you see that?" said Wylder in my ear, with a chuckle; and, wagging his head, he added, rather loftily for him, "Miss Brandon, I reckon, has taken your measure, Master Stanley, as well as I. I wonder what the deuce the old dowager sees in him. Old women always like rascals."

I suppose the balance of attraction and repulsion was overcome by Miss Lake, much as he disliked Stanley, for Wylder followed them out with Lord Chelford, to help the young lady into her cloak and galoshes, and I found myself near Miss Brandon for the first time that evening, and to my surprise she was first to speak, and that rather strangely.

"You seem to be very sensible, Mr. De Cresseron; pray tell me, frankly, what do you think of all this?"

"I am not quite sure, Miss Brandon, that I understand your question," I replied.

"I mean of the — the family arrangements, in which,

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as Mr. Wylder's friend, you seem to take an interest?" she said.

"There can hardly be a second opinion, Miss Brandon; I think it a very wise measure," I replied, much surprised.

"Very wise — exactly. But don't these very wise things sometimes turn out very foolishly? Do you really think your friend, Mr. Wylder, cares about me?"

"I take that for granted: in the nature of things it can hardly be otherwise," I replied, startled and perplexed by the curious audacity of her interrogatory.

"It was very foolish of me to expect from Mr. Wylder's friend any other answer; you are very loyal, Mr. De Cresseron."

And without awaiting my reply she made some remark which I forgot to Lady Chelford, who sat at a little distance; and, appearing quite absorbed in her new subject, she placed herself close beside the dowager, and continued to chat in a low tone.

I was vexed with myself for having managed with so little skill a conversation which, opened so oddly and frankly, might have placed me on relations so nearly confidential, with that singular and beautiful girl. I ought to have rejoiced — but we don't always see what most concerns our peace.

By this time Lord Chelford and Wylder returned; and, disgusted rather with myself, I ruminated on my want of generalship.

In the meantime, Miss Lake, with her hand on her brother's arm, was walking swiftly under the trees of the back avenue towards that footpath which, through wild copse and broken clumps near the park, emerges upon the still darker road which passes along the wooded glen by the mills, and skirts the little paling of the recluse lady's

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garden. They had not walked far, when Lake suddenly said —

"What do you think of all this, Radie — this particular version, I mean, of marriage, *à-la-mode*, they are preparing up there?" and he made a little dip of his cane towards Brandon Hall, over his shoulder. "I really don't think Wylder cares twopence about her, or she about him," and Stanley Lake laughed gently and sleepily.

"I don't think they pretend to like one another. It was all, you know, old Lady Chelford's arrangement; and Dorcas is so supine, I believe she would allow herself to be given away by any one, and to any one, rather than be at the least trouble. She provokes me."

"But I thought she liked Sir Harry Bracton: he's a good-looking fellow; and Queen's Bracton is a very nice thing, you know."

"Yes, so they said; but that would, I think, have been worse. Something may be made of Mark Wylder. He has some sense and caution, has not he? — but Sir Harry is wickedness itself!"

"Why — what has Sir Harry done? That is the way you women run away with things! If a fellow's been a little bit wild, he's Beelzebub at once. Bracton's a very good fellow, I can assure you."

The fact is, Captain Lake, an accomplished player, made a pretty little revenue of Sir Harry's billiards, which were wild and noisy; and liking his money, thought he liked himself — a confusion not uncommon.

"I don't know, and can't say, how you fine gentlemen define wickedness; only, as an obscure female, I speak according to my lights: and he is generally thought the wickedest man in this county."

"Well, you know, Radie, women like wicked fellows:

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it is contrast, I suppose, but they do; and I'm sure, from what Bracton has said to me — I know him intimately — that Dorcas likes him, and I can't conceive why they are not married."

Their walk continued silent for the greater part, neither was quite satisfied with the other. But Rachel at last said —

"Stanley, you meditate some injury to Mark Wylder."

"I, Radie?" he answered quietly, "why on earth should you think so?"

"I saw you twice watch him when you thought no one observed you — and I know your face too well, Stanley, to mistake."

"Now that's impossible, Radie; for I really don't think I once thought of him all this evening — except just while we were talking."

"You keep your secret as usual, Stanley," said the young lady.

"Really, Radie, you're quite mistaken. I assure you, upon my honor, I've no secret. You're a very odd girl — why won't you believe me?"

"Well, Stanley, I ask no more — but you don't deceive me."

"I don't try to. If your feelings indeed had been different, and that you had not made such a point — you know" —

"Don't insult me, Stanley, by talking again as you did this morning. What I say is altogether on your own account. Mark my words, you'll find him too strong for you; aye, and too deep. I see very plainly that *he* suspects you as I do. You saw it, too, for nothing of that kind escapes you. Whatever you meditate, he probably anticipates it — you know best — and you will find him prepared. You were always the same, close, dark, and

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crooked, and wise in your own conceit. I am very uneasy about it, whatever it is. *I* can't help it. It will happen — and most ominously I feel that you are courting a dreadful retaliation, and that you will bring on yourself a great misfortune; but it is quite vain, I know, speaking to you."

"Really, Radie, you're enough to frighten a poor fellow; you won't mind a word I say, and go on predicting all manner of mischief between me and Wylder, the very nature of which I can't surmise. Would you dislike my smoking a cigar, Radie."

"Oh no," answered the young lady, with a little laugh and a heavy sigh, for she knew it meant silence, and her dark auguries grew darker.

To my mind there has always been something inexpressibly awful in family feuds. The mystery of their origin — their capacity for evolving latent faculties of crime — and the steady vitality with which they survive the hearse, and speak their deep-mouthed malignities in every newborn generation, have associated them somehow in my mind with a spell of life exceeding and distinct from human, and a special Satanic action.

My chamber, as I have mentioned, was upon the third story. It was one of many, opening upon the long gallery, which had been the scene, four generations back, of that midnight duel which had laid one scion of this ancient house in his shroud, and driven another a fugitive to the moral solitudes of a continental banishment.

Much of the day, as I told you, had been passed among the grisly records of these old family crimes and hatreds. They had been an ill-conditioned and not a happy race. When I heard the servant's step traversing that long gallery, as it seemed to me in haste to be gone, and when all grew silent, I began to feel a dismal sort of sensation, and

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lighted the pair of wax candles which I found upon the small writing table. How wonderful and mysterious is the influence of light! What sort of beings must those be who hate it?

The floor, more than anything else, showed the great age of the room. It was warped and arched all along by the wall between the door and the window. My bed was unexceptionably comfortable, but, in my then mood, I could have wished it a great deal more modern. Its four posts were, like the rest of it, oak, well-nigh black, fantastically turned and carved, with a great urn-like capital and base, and shaped midway, like a gigantic lance-handle. Its curtains were of thick and faded tapestry. There was a great lowering press of oak, and some shelves, with withered green and gold leather borders. All the furniture belonged to other times.

I shan't trouble you about my train of thoughts or fancies; but I began to feel very like a gentleman in a ghost story, watching experimentally in a haunted chamber. My cigar case was a resource. I was not a bit afraid of being found out. I did not even take the precaution of smoking up the chimney. I boldly lighted my cheroot. I peeped through the dense window curtain: there were no shutters. A cold, bright moon was shining with clear sharp lights and shadows. Everything looked strangely cold and motionless outside. The chapel lay full in view, where so many of the strange and equivocal race, under whose ancient roof-tree I then stood, were lying under their tomb stones.

Somehow, I had grown nervous. A little bit of plaster tumbled down the chimney, and startled me confoundedly. Then, some time after, I fancied I heard a creaking step, on the lobby outside, and, candle in hand, opened the door, and looked out with an odd sort of expectation, and a rather agreeable disappointment, upon vacancy.

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CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH UNCLE LORNE TROUBLES ME.

I was growing most uncomfortably like one of Mrs. Anne Radcliff's heroes — a nervous race of demigods. I walked like a sentinel up and down my chamber, puffing leisurely the solemn incense, and trying to think of the Opera and my essay on "Paradise Lost," and other pleasant subjects. But it would not do. Every now and then, as I turned towards the door, I fancied I saw it softly close. I can't say whether it was altogether fancy. I called out once or twice sharply — "Come in!" "Who's there?" "Who's that?" and so forth, without any sort of effect except that unpleasant reaction upon the nerves which follows the sound of one's own voice in a solitude of this kind. The fact is I did not myself believe in that stealthy motion of my door, and set it down to one of those illusions which I have sometimes succeeded in analysing — a half-seen combination of objects which, rightly placed in the due relations of perspective, have no mutual connection whatever.

I had now got half-way in my second cheroot, and the clock clanged "one." It was a very still night, and the prolonged boom vibrated strangely in my excited ears and brain. One o'clock was better, however, than twelve. Although, by Jove! the bell was "beating one," as I remember, precisely as that king of ghosts, old Hamlet, revisited the glimpses of the moon, upon the famous platform of Elsinore.

I had pondered too long over the lore of this Satanic family, and drunk very strong tea, I suppose. I could

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not get my nerves into a comfortable state, and cheerful thoughts refused to inhabit the darkened chamber of my brain. As I stood in a sort of reverie, looking straight upon the door, I saw — and this time there could be no mistake whatsoever — the handle — the only modern thing about it — slowly turned, and the door itself as slowly pushed about a quarter open.

I do not know what exclamation I made. The door was shut instantly, and I found myself standing at it, and looking out upon the lobby, with a candle in my hand, and actually freezing with foolish horror.

I was looking towards the stair-head. The passage was empty, and ended in utter darkness. I glanced the other way, and thought I saw — though not distinctly — in the distance a white figure, not gliding in the conventional way, but limping off, with a jerky motion, and, in a second or two, quite lost in darkness.

I got into my room again, and shut the door with a clap that sounded loudly and unnaturally through the dismal quiet that surrounded me, and stood with my hand on the handle, with the instinct of resistance.

I felt uncomfortable; and I would have secured the door, but there was no sort of fastening within. So I paused. I did not mind looking out again. To tell you the plain truth, I was just a little bit afraid. Then I grew angry at having been put into such remote, and, possibly, suspected quarters, and then my comfortable scepticism supervened.

So, in due course having smoked my cheroot, I jerked the stump into the fire. Of course I could not think of depriving myself of candle-light; and being already of a thoughtful, old-bachelor temperament, and averse from burning houses, I placed one of my tall wax-lights in a basin on the table by my bed — in which I soon effected a lodgment, and lay with a comparative sense of security.

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Then I heard two o'clock strike; but shortly after, as I suppose, sleep overtook me, and I have no distinct idea for how long my slumber lasted. The fire was very low when I awoke, and saw a figure — and a very odd one — seated by the embers, and stooping over the grate, with a pair of long hands expanded, as it seemed, to catch the warmth of the sinking fire.

It was that of a very tall old man, entirely dressed in white flannel — a very long spencer, and some sort of white swathing about his head. His back was toward me; and he stooped without the slightest motion over the fireplace, in the attitude I have described.

As I looked, he suddenly turned toward me, and fixed upon me a cold, and as it seemed, a wrathful gaze, over his shoulder. It was a bleached and a long-chinned face — the countenance of Lorne's portrait — only more faded, sinister, and apathetic. And having, as it were, secured its awful command over me by a protracted gaze, he rose, supernaturally lean and tall, and drew near the side of my bed.

I continued to stare upon this apparition with the most dreadful fascination I ever experienced in my life. For two or three seconds I literally could not move. When I did, I am not ashamed to confess, it was to plunge my head under the bed-clothes, with the childish instinct of terror; and there I lay breathless, for what seemed to me not far from ten minutes, during which there was no sound, nor other symptom of its presence.

On a sudden the bed-clothes were gently lifted at my feet, and I sprang backwards, sitting upright against the back of the bed, and once more under the gaze of that long-chinned old man.

A voice, as peculiar as the appearance of the figure, said :—

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"You are in my bed — I died in it a great many years ago. I am Uncle Lorne; and when I am not here, a devil goes up and down in the room. See! he had his face to your ear when I came in. I came from Dorcas Brandon's bed-chamber door, where her evil angel told me a thing; — and Mark Wylder must not seek to marry her, for he will be buried alive if he does, and he will, maybe, never get up again. Say your prayers when I go out, and come here no more."

He paused, as if these incredible words were to sink into my memory; and then, in the same tone, and with the same countenance, he asked —

"Is the blood on my forehead?"

I don't know whether I answered.

"So soon as a calamity is within twelve hours, the blood comes upon my forehead, as they found me in the morning — it is a sign."

The old man then drew back slowly, and disappeared behind the curtains at the foot of the bed, and I saw no more of him during the rest of that odious night.

So long as this apparition remained before me, I never doubted its being supernatural. I don't think mortal ever suffered horror more intense. For some seconds I hardly knew where I was. But soon a reaction came, and I felt convinced that the apparition was a living man. It was no process of reason or philosophy, but simply I became persuaded of it, and something like rage overcame my terrors.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE PONY CARRIAGE.

So soon as daylight came, I made a swift cold water toilet, and got out into the open air, with a solemn resolution to see the hated interior of that bed-room no more.

Stanley Lake did not appear that day; Wylder was glowering and abstracted — worse company than usual; and Rachel seemed to have quite passed from his recollection.

While Rachel Lake was, as usual, busy in her little garden that day, Lord Chelford, on his way to the town, by the pretty mill-road, took off his hat to her with a smiling salutation, and, leaning on the paling, he said —

"I often wonder how you make your flowers grow here — you have so little sun among the trees — and yet, it is so pretty and flowery; it remains in my memory as if the sun were always shining specially on this little garden."

Miss Lake laughed.

"I am very proud of it. They try not to blow, but I never let them alone till they do. See all my watering-pots, and pruning-scissors, my sticks, and bass-mat, and glass covers. Skill and industry conquer churlish nature — and this is my Versailles."

"I don't believe in those sticks, and scissors, and watering-pots. You won't tell your secret; but I'm sure it's an influence — you smile and whisper to them."

She smiled — without raising her eyes — on the flower she was tying up; and, indeed, it was such a smile as must have made it happy — and she said, gaily —

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"You forget that Lord Chelford passes this way sometimes, and shines upon them, too."

"No, he's a dull, earthly dog; and if he shines here, it is only in reflected light."

"Margery, child, fetch me the scissors."

And a hobble-de-hoy of a girl, with round eyes, and a long white apron, and bare arms, came down the little walk, and — eyeing the peer with an awful curiosity — presented the shears to the charming Atropos, who clipped off the withered blossoms that had bloomed their hour, and were to cumber the stalk no more.

"Now, you see what art may do; how *passée* this creature was till I made her toilet, and how wonderfully the poor old beauty looks now," and she glanced complacently at the plant she had just trimmed.

"Well, it is young again and beautiful; but no — I have no faith in the scissors; I still believe in the influence — from the tips of your fingers, your looks, and tones. Flowers, like fairies, have their favorites, whom they smile on and obey; and I think this is a haunted glen — trees, flowers, all have an intelligence and a feeling — and I am sure you see wonderful things, by moonlight, from your window."

With a strange meaning echo, those words returned to her afterwards — "I'm sure you see wonderful things, by moonlight, from your window."

And as they chatted in this strain, Rachel paused on a sudden, with upraised hand, listening pleasantly.

"I hear the pony-carriage; Dorcas is coming," she said.

And the tinkle of tiny wheels, coming down the road, was audible.

"There's a pleasant sense of adventure, too, in the midst of your seclusion. Sudden arrivals and passing pil-

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grims, like me, leaning over the paling, and refreshed by the glimpse the rogue steals of this charming oratory. Yes; here comes the fair Brunnisende."

And he made his salutation. Miss Brandon smiled from under her gipsy-hat very pleasantly for her.

"Will you come with me for a drive, Radie?" she asked.

"Yes, dear — delighted. Margery, bring my gloves and cloak."

And she unpinned the faded silk shawl that did duty in the garden, and drew off her gauntlets, and showed her pretty hands; and Margery popped her cloak on her shoulders, and the young lady pulled on her gloves. All ready in a moment, like a young lady of energy; and chatting merrily, she sat down beside her cousin, who held the reins. As there were no more gates to open, Miss Brandon dismissed the servant, who stood at the ponies' heads, and who, touching his hat with his white glove, received his *congé*, and strode with willing steps up the road.

"Will you take me for your footman as far as the town?" asked Lord Chelford; so, with permission, up he jumped behind, and away they whirled, close over the ground, on toy wheels ringing merrily on the shingle, he leaning over the back and chatting pleasantly with the young ladies as they drove on.

They drew up at the Brandon Arms, and little girls courtesied at doors, aud householders peeped from their windows, not standing close to the panes, but respectfully back, at the great lady and the nobleman, who was now taking his leave.

And next they pulled up at that official rendezvous, with white-washed front — and "post-office," in white letters on a brown board over its door, and its black, hinged window-pane, through which Mr. Driver — or, in

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his absence, Miss Anne Driver — answered questions, and transacted affairs officially.

In the rear of this establishment were kept some dogs of Lawyer Larkin's; and just as the ladies arrived, that person emerged, looking overpoweringly gentlemanlike, in a white hat, grey paletot, lavender trowsers, and white riding gloves. He was in a righteous and dignified way pleased to present himself in so becoming a costume, and moreover in good company, for Stanley Lake was going with him to Dutton for a day's sport, which neither of them cared for. But Stanley hoped to pump the attorney, and the attorney, I'm afraid, liked being associated with the fashionable Captain; and so they were each pleased in the way that suited them.

The attorney, being long as well as lank, had to stoop under the doorway, but drew himself up handsomely on coming out, and assumed his easy, high-bred style, which, although he was not aware of it, was very nearly insupportable, and smiled very engagingly, and meant to talk a little about the weather; but Miss Brandon made him one of her gravest and slightest bows, and suddenly saw Mrs. Brown at her shop door on the other side, and had a word to say to her.

And now Stanley Lake drew up in the tax-cart, and greeted the ladies, and told them how he meant to pass the day; and the dogs being put in, and the attorney, I'm afraid a little spited at his reception, in possession of the reins, they drove down the little street at a great pace, and disappeared round the corner; and in a minute more the young ladies, in the opposite direction, resumed their drive. The ponies, being grave and trustworthy, and having the road quite to themselves, needed little looking after, and Miss Brandon was free to converse with her companion.

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"I think, Rachel, you have a lover," she said.

"Only a bachelor, I'm afraid, as my poor Margery calls the young gentleman who takes her out for a walk on a Sunday, and I fear means nothing more."

"This is the second time I've found Chelford talking to you, Rachel, at the door of your pretty little garden."

Rachel laughed.

"Suppose, some fine day, he should put his hand over the paling, and take yours, and make you a speech."

"You romantic darling," she said, "don't you know that peers and princes have quite given over marrying simple maidens of low estate for love and liking, and understand match-making better than you or I; though I could give a tolerable account of myself, after the manner of the white cat in the story, which I think is a pattern of frankness and modest dignity, I'd say with a courtesy — 'Think not, prince, that I have always been a cat, and that my birth is obscure; my father was king of six kingdoms, and loved my mother tenderly,' and so forth."

"Rachel, I like you," interrupted the dark beauty, fixing her large eyes, from which not light, but, as it were, a rich shadow fell softly on her companion. It was the first time she had made any such confession. Rachel returned her look as frankly, with an amused smile, and then said, with a comic little toss of her head —

"Well, Dorcas, I don't see why you should not, though I don't know why you say so."

"You're not like other people; you don't complain, and you're not bitter, although you have had great misfortunes, my poor Rachel."

There be ladies, young and old, who, the moment they are pitied, though never so cheerful before, will forthwith dissolve in tears. But that was not Rachel's way; she

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only looked at her with a good-humored but grave curiosity for a few seconds, and then said, with rather a kindly smile —

"And now, Dorcas, I like you."

Dorcas made no answer, but put her arm round Rachel's neck, and kissed her; Dorcas made two kisses of it, and Rachel one, but it was cousinly and kindly; and Rachel laughed a soft little laugh after it, looking amused and very lovingly on her cousin; but she was a bold lass, and not given in anywise to the melting mood, and said gaily, with her open hand still caressingly on Dorcas's waist —

"I make a very good nun, Dorcas, as I told Stanley the other day. I sometimes, indeed, receive a male visitor at the other side of the paling, which is my grille; but to change my way of life is a dream that does not trouble me. Happy the girl — and I am one — who cannot like until she is first beloved. Don't you remember poor, pale Winnie, the maid who used to take us on our walks all the summer at Dawling; how she used to pluck the leaves from the flowers, like Faust's Marguerite, saying, "he loves me a little — passionately, not at all." Now if I were loved passionately, I might love a little; and if loved a little — it should be not at all. And so Dorcas, as swains are seldom passionately in love with so small a pittance as mine, I think I shall mature into a queer old maid, and take all the little Wylders, masters and misses, with your leave, for their walks, and help to make their pinafores." Whereupon Miss Dorcas put her ponies into a quick trot, and became absorbed in her driving.

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CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH VARIOUS PERSONS GIVE THEIR OPINIONS OF CAPTAIN STANLEY LAKE.

"STANLEY is an odd creature," said Rachel, so soon as another slight incline brought them to a walk; "I can't conceive why he has come down here, or what he can possibly want of that disagreeable lawyer. They have got dogs and guns, and are going, of course, to shoot; but he does not care for shooting, and I don't think Mr. Larkin's society can amuse him. Stanley is clever and cunning, but he is neither wise nor frank. He never tells me his plans, though he must know — he *does* know — I love him; yes, he's a strange mixture of suspicion and imprudence. He's wonderfully reserved. If he were like Lord Chelford, or even like our good Vicar — not in piety, for poor Stanley's training, like my own, was sadly neglected there — I mean in a few manly points of character, I should be quite happy, I think, in my solitary nook."

"Is he so very odd?" said Miss Brandon, coldly.

"I only know he makes me often very uncomfortable," answered Rachel. "I never mind what he tells me, for I think he likes to mislead everybody; and I have been too often duped by him to trust what he says. I only know that his visit to Gylingden must have been made with some serious purpose, and his ideas are all so rash and violent."

"He was at Donnyston for ten days, I think, when I was there, and seemed clever. They had charades and *proverbes dramatiques*. I'm no judge, but the people who understood it, said he was very good."

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While these young ladies are discussing Stanley Lake, I may be permitted to mention my own estimate of that agreeable young person.

Captain Lake was a gentleman and an officer, and of course an honorable man; but somehow I should not have liked to buy a horse from him. He was gentlemanlike in appearance, and even elegant; but I never liked him, although he undoubtedly had a superficial fascination. I think he was destitute of those fine moral instincts which are born with men, but never acquired; and in his way of estimating his fellow-men, and the canons of honor, there was occasionally perceptible a faint flavor of the villanous, and an undefined savor, at times, of brimstone. I know, also that when his temper, which was nothing very remarkable, was excited, he could be savage and brutal enough; and I believe he had often been violent and cowardly in his altercations with his sister — so, at least, two or three people, who were versed in the scandals of the family affirmed. His morality, however, I suppose, was good enough for the world, and he had never committed himself in any of those ways of which that respectable tribunal takes cognisance.

"So that d—d fellow Lake is down here still; and that stupid, scheming lubber, Larkin, driving him about in his tax-cart, instead of minding his business. I could not see him to-day. That sort of thing won't answer me; and he *is* staying at Larkin's house, I find." Wylder was talking to me on the door steps after dinner, having in a rather sulky way swallowed more than his usual modicum of Madeira, and his remarks were delivered interruptedly — two or three puffs of his cigar interposed between each sentence.

"I suppose he expects to be asked to the wedding. He *may* expect — ha, ha, ha! You don't know that lad as I do."

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Then there came a second cigar, and some little time in lighting, and full twenty enjoyable puffs before he resumed.

"Now, you're a moral man, Charlie, tell me really what you think of a fellow marrying a girl he does not care that for," and he snapt his fingers. "Just for the sake of her estate — it's the way of the world, of course, and all that — but, is not it a little bit shabby, don't you think? Eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll not debate with you, Wylder, on that stupid old question. It's the way of the world, as you say, and there's an end of it."

"They say she's such a beauty! Well, so I believe she is, but I can't fancy her. Now you must not be angry. I'm not a poet like you — book-learned, you know; and she's too solemn by half, and grand. I wish she was different. That other girl, Rachel — she's a devilish handsome craft. I wish almost she was not here at all, or I wish she was in Dorcas' shoes."

"Nonsense, Wylder! stop this stuff; and it is growing cold: throw away that cigar, and come in."

"In a minute. No, I assure you, I'm not joking. Hang it! I must talk to some one. I'm devilish uncomfortable about this grand match. I wish I had not been led into it. I don't think I'd make a good husband to any woman I did not fancy, and where's the good of making a girl unhappy, eh?"

"Tut, Wylder, you ought to have thought of all that before. I don't like your talking in this strain when you know it's too late to recede; besides, you are the luckiest fellow in creation. Upon my word, I don't know why the girl marries you; you can't suppose that she could not marry much better, and if you have not made up your mind to break off, you had better not speak in that way any more."

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"Why, it was only to you, Charlie, and to tell you the truth, I do believe it *is* the best thing for me: but I suppose every fellow feels a little queer when he is going to be spliced, eh? I suppose I'm a bit put out by that disreputable dog's being here — I mean Lake; not that I need care more than Dorcas, or any one else; but he's no credit to the family, you see, and I never could abide him. I've half a mind, Charlie, to tell you a thing; but hang it! you're such a demure old maid of a chap. Will you have a cigar?"

"No."

"Well, I believe two's enough for me," and he looked up at the stars.

"I've a notion of running up to town, only for a day or two, before this business comes off, just on the sly; you'll not mention it, and I'll have a word with Lake, quite friendly, of course; but I'll shut him up, and that's all. I wonder he did not dine here to-day. Did you ever see so pushing a brute?"

So Wylder chucked away his cigar, and stood for a minute with his hands in his pockets, looking up at the stars, as if reading fortunes there.

I had an unpleasant feeling that Mark Wylder was about some mischief — a suspicion that some game of mine and countermine was going on between him and Lake, to which I had no clue whatsoever. I dare say my last night's adventure tended to make me more nervous and prone to evil anticipation. And although my quarters had been changed to the lower story, I grew uncomfortable as it waxed late, and half regretted that I had not migrated to the "Brandon Arms."

Uncle Lorne, however, made me no visit that night. Once or twice I fancied something, and started up in my bed. It was fancy, merely. What state had I really been

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in, when I saw that long-chinned apparition of the pale portrait? Many a wiser man than I had been mystified by dyspepsia and melancholic vapors.

CHAPTER XV.

DORCAS SHOWS HER JEWELS TO MISS LAKE.

STANLEY LAKE and his sister dined next day at Brandon. Under the cold shadow of Lady Chelford, the proprieties flourished, and generally very little else. Awful she was, and prompt to lecture young people before their peers, and spoke her mind with fearful directness and precision. But sometimes she would talk, and treat her hearers to her recollections, and recount anecdotes with a sort of grim cleverness, not wholly unamusing.

When I entered the drawing-room after dinner, Lord Chelford was plainly arguing a point with the young ladies, and by the time I drew near, it was Miss Lake's turn to speak. "Flattering of mankind, I am sure, I have no talent for; and without flattering and wheedling you'll never have conjugal obedience. Don't you remember Robin Hood? how —

The mother of Robin said to her husband,
My honey, my love, and my dear!

And all this for leave to ride with her son to see her own brother at Gamwell."

"I remember," said Dorcas, with a smile. "I wonder what has become of that old book, with its odd little woodcuts.

And he said, I grant thee thy boon, gentle Joan!
Take one of my horses straitway."

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"Well though the book is lost, we retain the moral, you see," said Rachel with a little laugh; "and it has always seemed to me that if it had not been necessary to say, 'my honey, my love, and my dear,' that good soul would not have said it, and you may be pretty sure that if she had not, and with the suitable by-play too, she might not have ridden to Gamwell that day."

"And you don't think *you* could have persuaded yourself to repeat that little charm, which obtained her boon of his horses straitway?" said Lord Chelford.

"Well, I don't know what a great temptation and a contumacious husband might bring one to; but I'm afraid I'm a stubborn creature, and have not the feminine gift of flattery. If, indeed, he felt his inferiority and owned his dependence, I think I might, perhaps, have called him 'my honey, my love, and my dear,' and encouraged and comforted him; but to buy my personal liberty, and the right to visit my brother at Gamwell — never!"

And yet she looked, Lord Chelford thought, very good-humored and pleasant, and he fancied a smile from her might do more with some men than all gentle Joan's honeyed vocabulary.

"I own," said Lord Chelford, laughing, "that, from prejudice, I suppose, I am in favor of the apostolic method, and stand up for the divine right of my sex; but then, don't you see, it is your own fault, if you make it a question of right, when you may make it altogether one of fascination?"

"Who, pray, is disputing the husband's right to rule?" demanded old Lady Chelford unexpectedly.

"I am very timidly defending it against very serious odds," answered her son.

"Tut, tut! my dears, what's all this; you *must* obey your husbands," cried the dowager, who put down non-

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sense with a high hand, and had ruled her lord with a rod of iron,

"That's no tradition of the Brandons," said Miss Dorcas, quietly.

"The Brandons — pooh! my dear — it is time the Brandons should grow like other people. Hitherto, the Brandon men have all, without exception, been the wickedest in all England, and the women the handsomest and the most self-willed. Of course the men could not be obeyed in all things, nor the women disobeyed. I'm a Brandon myself, Dorcas, so I've a right to speak. But the words are precise — honor and obey — and obey you *must*; though, of course you may argue a point, if need be, and let your husband hear reason."

And, having ruled the point, old Lady Chelford leaned back and resumed her doze.

There was no longer anything playful in Dorcas's look. On the contrary, something fierce and lurid, which I thought wonderfully becoming; and after a little she said,

"I promised, Rachel, to show you my jewels. Come now — will you? — and see them."

And she placed Rachel's hand on her arm, and the two young ladies departed.

"Are you well, dear?" asked Rachel when they reached her room.

Dorcas was very pale, and her gaze was stern, and something undefinably wild in her quietude.

"What day of the month is this?" said Dorcas.

"The eighth — is not it? — yes, the eighth," answered Rachel.

"And our marriage is fixed for the twenty-second — just a fortnight hence. I am going to tell you, Rachel, what I have resolved on."

"How really beautiful these diamonds are! — quite superb."

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"Yes," said Dorcas, opening the jewel-cases, which she had taken from her cabinet, one after the other.

"And these pearls! how very magnificent! I had no idea Mark Wylder's taste was so exquisite."

"Yes, very magnificent, I suppose."

"How charming — quite regal — you will look, Dorcas!"

Dorcas smiled strangely, and her bosom heaved a little, Rachel thought. Was it elation, or was there not something wildly bitter gleaming in that smile?

"I *must* look a little longer at these diamonds."

"As long, dear, as you please. You are not likely, Rachel, to see them again."

From the blue flash of the brilliants Rachel in honest amazement raised her eyes to her cousin's face. The same pale smile was there; the look was oracular and painful. Had she overheard a part of that unworthy talk of Wylder's at the dinner-table, the day before, and mistaken Rachel's share in the dialogue?

And Dorcas said —

"You have heard of the music on the waters that lures mariners to destruction. The pilot leaves the rudder, and leans over the prow, and listens. They steer no more, but drive before the wind; and what care they for wreck and drowning?"

I suppose it was the same smile; but in Rachel's eyes, as pictures will, it changed its character with her own change of thought, and now it seemed the pale rapt smile of one who hears music far off, or sees a vision.

"Rachel, dear, I sometimes think there is an evil genius attendant on our family," continued Dorcas, in the same subdued tone, which, in its very sweetness, had so sinister a sound in Rachel's ear. "From mother to child, from child to grandchild, the same influence continues, and, one

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after another, wrecks the daughters of our family. Here I stand, forwarned, with my eyes open, determinedly following in the funereal footsteps of those who have gone their way before me. These jewels all go back to Mr. Wylder. He never can be anything to me. I was, I thought, to build up our house. I am going, I think, to lay it in the dust. With the spirit of the insane, I feel the spirit of a prophetess, too, and I see the sorrow that awaits me. You will see."

"Dorcas, darling, you are certainly ill. What is the matter?"

"No, dear Rachel, not ill, only may be agitated a little. You must not touch the bell — listen to me; but first promise, so help you Heaven, you will keep my secret."

"I do promise, indeed Dorcas, I swear I'll not repeat one word you tell me."

"It has been a vain struggle. I know he's a bad man, a worthless man — selfish, cruel, maybe. Love is not blind with me, but quite insane. He does not know, nor you, nor any one; and now, Rachel, I tell you what was unknow to all but myself and Heaven — looking neither for counsel, nor for pity, nor for sympathy, but because I must, and you have sworn to keep my secret. I love your brother. Rachel, you must try to like me."

She threw her arms round her cousin's neck, and Rachel felt in her embrace the vibration of an agony.

She was herself so astonished that for a good while she could hardly collect her thoughts or believe her senses. Was it credible? Stanley! whom she had received with a coldness, if not aversion, so marked, that, if he had a spark of Rachel's spirit, he would never have approached her more! Then came the thought — perhaps they understood one another, and that was the meaning of Stanley's unexpected visit?

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"Well Dorcas, dear, I *am* utterly amazed. But does Stanley — he can hardly hope?"

Dorcas removed her arms from her cousin's neck; her face was pale, and her cheeks wet with tears, which she did not wipe away.

"Sit down by me, Rachel. No, *he* does *not* like *me* — that is — I don't know; but, I am sure, he can't suspect that I like him. It was my determination it should not be. I resolved, Rachel, quite to extinguish the madness; but I could not. It was not his doing, nor mine, but something else. There are some families, I think, too wicked for Heaven to protect, and they are given over to the arts of those who hated them in life and pursue them after death; and this is the meaning of the curse that has always followed us. No good will ever happen us, and I must go like the rest."

There was a short silence, and Rachel gazed on the carpet in troubled reflection, and then, with an anxious look, she took her cousin's hand, and said —

"Dorcas, you must think of this no more. I am speaking against my brother's interest. But you must not sacrifice yourself, your fortune, and your *happiness* to a shadow; whatever his means are, they hardly suffice for his personal expenses — indeed, they don't suffice, for I have had to help him. But that is all trifling compared with other considerations. I am his sister, and, though he has shown little love for me, I am not without affection — and strong affection — for him; but I must and will speak frankly. You could not, I don't think any one could be happy with Stanley for her husband. You don't know him: he's profligate; he's ill-tempered; he's cold; he's selfish; he's secret. He was a spoiled boy, totally without moral education; he might, perhaps, have been very different, but he *is what* he is, and I don't think he'll ever change."

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"He may be what he will. It is vain reasoning with that which is not reason; possibly he may never know, and that might be best — but be it how it may, I will never marry any one else."

"Dorcas, dear, you must not speak to Lady Chelford, or to Mark Wylder, to-night. It is too serious a step to be taken in haste."

"There has been no haste, Rachel, and there can be no change."

"And what reason can you give?"

"None; no reason," said Dorcas, slowly.

"Wylder would have been suitable in point of wealth. Not so well, I am sure, as you *might* have married; but neither would *he* be a good husband, though not so bad as Stanley; and I do not think that Mark Wylder will quietly submit to his disappointment."

"It was to have been simply a marriage of two estates. It was old Lady Chelford's plan. I have now formed mine, and all that's over. Let him do what he will — I believe a lawsuit is his worst revenge — I'm indifferent."

Just then a knock came to the chamber door.

"Come in," said Miss Brandon; and her maid entered to say that the carriage was at the door to take Miss Lake home.

"I had no idea it was so late," said Rachel.

"Stay, dear, don't go for a moment. Jones, bring Miss Lake's cloak and bonnet here. And now, dear," she said, after a little pause, "you'll remember your solemn promise?"

"I never broke my word, dear Dorcas; your secret is safe."

"And, Rachel, try to like me."

"I love you better, Dorcas, than I thought I ever could. Good night, dear."

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And the young ladies parted with a kiss, and then another.

CHAPTER XVI.

"JENNY, PUT THE KETTLE ON."

Old Lady Chelford, having despatched a sharp and unceremonious message to her young kinswoman, absent without leave, warning her, in effect, that if she returned to the drawing-room it would be to preside, alone, over gentlemen, departed, somewhat to our secret relief.

Upon this, on Lord Chelford's motion, in our forlorn condition, we went to the billiard-room, and there, under the bright lights, and the gay influence of that wonderful game, we forgot our cares, and became excellent friends apparently — Lord Chelford joked, Wylder "chaffed," even Lake seemed to enjoy himself; and the game proceeded with animation and no lack of laughter, beguiling the watches of the night; and we were all amazed, at length, to find how very late it was. So we laid down our cues, with the customary ejaculations of surprise.

We declined wine and water, and all other creature comforts. Wylder and Lake had a walk before them, and we bid Lord Chelford "good night" in the passage, and I walked with them through the deserted and nearly darkened rooms.

Our talk grew slow, and our spirits subsided in this changed and tenebrose scenery. The void and the darkness brought back, I suppose, my recollection of the dubious terms on which these young men stood, and a feeling of the hollowness and delusion of the genial hours

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just passed under the brilliant lights, together with an unpleasant sense of apprehension. I suspect that Wylder and Lake, too, felt something of the same ominous qualm, for I thought their faces looked gloomy in the light, as they stood together buttoning their loose wrappers and lighting their cigars.

With a "good night, good night," we parted, and I heard their retreating steps crunching along the walk that led to Redman's Hollow; and by Miss Rachel's quiet habitation. I heard no talking, such as comes between whiffs with friendly smokers, side by side; and, silent as mutes at a funeral, they walked on, and soon the fall of their footsteps was heard no more, and I re-entered the hall and shut the door. The level moonlight was shining through the stained heraldic window, and fell bright on the portrait of Uncle Lorne, at the other end, throwing a patch of red, like a stain, on one side of its pale forehead.

I had forgot, at the moment, that the ill-omened portrait hung there, and a sudden horror smote me. I thought of what my vision said of the "blood upon my forehead," and, by Jove! there it was!

At this moment the large white Marseilles waistcoat of grave Mr. Larcom appeared, followed by a tall powdered footman, and their candles and business-like proceedings frightened away the phantoms. So I withdrew to my chamber, where, I am glad to say, I saw nothing of Uncle Lorne.

Miss Lake, as she drove that night, toward Gylingden, said little to the Vicar's wife, whose good husband had been away to Friars, making a sick-call, and she prattled on very merrily about his frugal little tea awaiting his late return, and asked her twice on the way home whether it was half-past nine, for she did not boast a watch; and in the midst of her prattle was peeping at the landmarks of their progress.

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"Oh, I'm so glad — here's the finger post, at last!" and then — "Well, here we are at the "Cat and Fiddle;" I thought we'd never pass it."

And, at last, the brougham stopped at the little garden-gate, at the far end of the village; and the good little mamma called to her maid-of-all-work from the window —

"Has the master come yet, Becky?"

"No, ma'am, please."

And I think she offered up a little thanksgiving she so longed to give him his tea herself: and then she asked —

"Is our precious mannikin asleep?" Which also being answered happily, as it should be, she bid her fussy adieux, with a merry smile, and hurried across the little flower-garden; and Miss Lake was shut in and drove on alone, under the thick canopy of old trees, and up the mill-road, lighted by the flashing lamps, to her own little precincts, and was, in turn, at home — solitary, triste, but still her home.

"Get to your bed, Margery, child, you are sleepy," said the young lady kindly to her queer little maid-of-honor. Rachel was one of those persons who, no matter what may be upon their minds, are quickly impressible by the scenes in which they find themselves. She stepped into her little kitchen — and she looked all round and smiled pleasantly, and kissed old Tamar, and said —

"So, my dear old fairy, here's your Cinderella home again from the ball, and I've seen nothing so pretty as this since I left Redman's Farm. How white your table is, how nice your chairs; I wish you'd change with me and let me be cook week about; and, really the fire is quite pleasant to-night. Come, make a cup of tea, and tell us a story, and frighten me and Margery before we go to our beds. Sit down, Margery, I'm only here by permission. What do you mean by standing?" And the

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young lady, with a laugh, sat down, looking so pleased, and good-natured, and merry, that even old Tamar was fain to smile a glimmering smile; and little Margery actively brought the tea-caddy; and the kettle being in a skittish, singing state, quickly went off in a boil, and Tamar actually made tea in her brown tea-pot.

"Oh, no; the delft cups and saucers; — it will be twice as good in them;" and as the handsome mistress of the mansion, sitting in the deal chair, loosened her cloak and untied her bonnet, she chatted away, to the edification of Margery and the amusement of both.

This little extemporised bivouac, as it were, with her domestics, delighted the young belle. What saloon was ever so cheery as this, or flashed all over in so small a light so splendidly, or yielded such immortal nectar from chased teapot and urn, as this brewed in brown crockery from the roaring kettle?

So Margery sitting upon her stool in the back-ground — for the queen had said it, and sit she must — and grinning from ear to ear, in a great halo of glory, partook of tea.

"Well, Tamar, where's your story?" said the young lady.

"Story! La! bless you, dear Miss Radie, where should I find a story? My old head's a poor one to remember," whimpered white Tamar.

"Anything, no matter what — a ghost or a murder."

Old Tamar shook her head.

"Or an elopement?"

Another shake of the head.

"Or a mystery — or even a dream?"

"Well — a dream! Sometimes I do dream. I dreamed how Master Stanley was coming, the night before."

"You did, did you? Selfish old thing! and you meant to keep it all to yourself. What was it?"

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Tamar looked anxiously and suspiciously in the kitchen fire, and placed her puckered hand to the side of her white linen cap.

"I dreamed, ma'am, the night before he came, a great fellow was at the hall-door."

"What! here?"

"Yes, ma'am, this hall-door. So muffled up I could not see his face; and he pulls out a letter all over red."

"Red ink?"

"No, miss, red *paper*, written with black, and directed for you."

"Oh!"

"And so, miss, in my dream, I gave it you in the drawing-room; and you opened it, and leaned your hand upon your head, sick-like, reading it. I never saw you read a letter so serious-like before. And says you to me, miss, "It's all about Master Stanley; he is coming." And sure enough, here he was quite unexpected, next morning."

"And was there no more?" asked Miss Lake.

"No more, miss. I awoke just then."

"It *is* odd," said Miss Lake, with a little laugh. "Had you been thinking of him lately?"

"Not a bit ma'am. I don't know when."

"Well, it certainly is *very* odd.

At all events, it had glanced upon a sensitive recollection unexpectedly. The kitchen was only a kitchen now; and the young lady, on a sudden, looked thoughtful — perhaps a little sad.

"Light the candles in the drawing-room, Margery, and then, child, go to your bed," said the young lady, awakening from an abstraction. "I don't mind dreams, Tamar, nor fortune-tellers — I've dreamed so many good dreams, and no good ever came of them. But talking of Stanley reminds me of trouble and follies that I can't help, or

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prevent. He has left the army, Tamar, and I don't know what his plans are."

"Ah! poor child; he was always foolish and changeable, and a deal too innocent for them wicked officer-gentlemen; and I'm glad he's not among them any longer to learn bad ways — I am."

So, the drawing-room being prepared, Rachel bid Tamar and little Margery good-night, and the sleepy little handmaid stumped off to her bed; and white old Tamar, who had not spoken so much for a month before, put on her solemn round spectacles, and by her dipt candle read her chapter in the ponderous Bible she had thumbed so well, and her white lips told over the words as she read them in silence.

It was a small house, this Redman's Farm, but very silent, for all that, when the day's work was over; and very solemn, too, the look-out from the window among the colonnades of tall old trees, on the overshadowed earth, and through them into deepest darkness; the complaining of the lonely stream far down is the only sound in the air.

There was but one imperfect vista, looking down the glen, and this afforded no distant view — only a downward slant in the near woodland, and a denser back-ground of forest rising at the other side, and to-night mistily gilded by the yellow moonbeams, the moon herself unseen.

Rachel had opened her window-shutters, as was her wont when the moon was up, and with her small white hands on the window-sash, looked into the wooded solitudes, lost in haunted darkness in every direction but one, and there massed in vaporous and discolored foliage, hardly more distinct, or less solemn.

"Poor old Tamar says her prayers, and reads her Bible; I wish *I* could. How often I wish it. That good, simple Vicar — how unlike his brother — is wiser, per-

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haps, than all the shrewd people that smile at him. He used to talk to me; but I've lost that — yes — I let him understand I did not care for it, and so that good influence is gone from me — graceless creature. No one seemed to care, except poor old Tamar, whether I ever said a prayer, or heard any good thing; and when I was no more than ten years old, I refused to say my prayers for her. My poor father. Well, Heaven help us all."

So she stood in the same sad attitude, looking out upon the shadowy scene, in a forlorn reverie.

Her interview with Dorcas remained on her memory like an odd, clear, half-horrible dream. What a dazzling prospect it opened for Stanley; what a dreadful one might it not prepare for Dorcas. What might not arise from such a situation between Stanley and Mark Wylder, each in his way a worthy representative of the ill-conditioned and terrible race whose blood he inherited? Was this doomed house of Brandon never to know repose or fraternity?

Was it credible? Had it actually occurred, that strange confession of Dorcas Brandon's?

"What can she see in him? There's nothing remarkable in Stanley, poor fellow, except his faults. There are much handsomer men than he, and many as amusing — and he with no estate."

Rachel was troubled by a sort of fear to-night, and the low fever of an undefined expectation was upon her. She turned from the window, intending to write two letters, which she had owed too long — young lady's letters; and as she turned, with a start, she saw old Tamar standing in the door-way, looking at her.

"Tamar!"

"Yes, Miss Rachel."

"Why do you come so softly, Tamar? Do you know, you frightened me?"

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"I thought I'd look in, miss, before I went to bed, just to see if you wanted anything."

"No — nothing, thank you, dear Tamar."

"And I don't think, Miss Rachel, you are quite well to-night, though you are so gay — you're pale, dear; and there's something on your mind. Don't be thinking about Master Stanley; he's out of the army now, and I'm thankful for it; and make your mind easy about him; and would not it be better, dear, you went to your bed, you rise so early."

"Very true, good old Tamar, but to-night I must write a letter — not a long one, though — and I assure you, I'm quite well. Good-night, Tamar."

Tamar stood for a moment with her odd weird look upon her, and then bidding her good-night, glided stiffly away, shutting the door.

So Rachel sat down to her desk and began to write; but she could not get into the spirit of her letter; her mind wandered away, and she found herself listening, every now and then, and at last she fancied that old Tamar, about whom that dream, and her unexpected appearance at the door, had given her a sort of spectral feeling that night, was up and watching her; and the idea of this white sentinel outside her door excited her so unpleasantly, that she opened it, but found no Tamar there; and then she revisited the kitchen, but that was empty too, and the fire taken down. And, finally, she passed into the old woman's bed-chamber, whom she saw, her white head upon her pillow, dreaming again, perhaps. And so, softly closing her door, she left her to her queer visions and deathlike slumber.

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CHAPTER XVII.

RACHEL LAKE SEES WONDERFUL THINGS BY MOONLIGHT FROM HER WINDOW.

THOUGH Rachel was unfit for letter-writing, she was still more unfit for slumber. She leaned her temple on her hand, and her rich light hair half covered her fingers, and her amazing interview with Dorcas was again present with her, and the same feeling of bewilderment.

It was late now, not far from one o'clock, and around her the terrible silence of a still night. All those small sounds lost in the hum of mid-day life now came into relief — a ticking in the wainscot, a crack now and then in the joining of the furniture, and occasionally the tap of a moth against the window pane from outside, sounds sharp and odd, which made her wish the stillness of the night were not so intense.

As from her little table she looked listlessly through the window, she saw against the faint glow of the moonlight, the figure of a man who seized the paling and vaulted into the flower garden, and with a few swift, stumbling strides over the flower-beds, reached the window, and placing his pale face close to the glass, she saw his eyes glittering through it; he tapped — or rather beat on the pane with his fingers — and at the same time he said, repeatedly: "Let me in; let me in."

Her first impression, when she saw this person cross the little fence at the road-side was, that Mark Wylder was the man. But she was mistaken; the face and figure were Stanley Lake's.

She would have screamed in the extremity of her terror,

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but that her voice for some seconds totally failed her; and recognising her brother, she rose up, and with an awful ejaculation, she approached the window.

"Let me in, Radie; d— you, let me in," he repeated, drumming incessantly on the glass. There was no trace now of his sleepy jeering way. Rachel saw that something was very wrong, and beckoned him toward the porch in silence, and having removed the slender fastenings of the door, it opened, and he entered in a rush of damp night air. She took him by the hand, and he shook hers mechanically, like a man rescued from shipwreck, and plainly not recollecting himself well.

"Stanley, dear, what's the matter, in Heaven's name?" she whispered, so soon as she had got him into her little drawing-room.

"He has done it; d—him, he has done it," gasped Stanley Lake.

He looked in her face with a glazed and ashy stare. His hat remained on his head, overshadowing his face; and his boots were soiled with clay, and his wrapping coat marked, here and there, with the green of the stems and branches of trees, through which he had made his way.

"I see, Stanley, you've had a scene with Mark Wylder; I warned you of your danger — you have had the worst of it."

"I spoke to him. He took a course I did not expect. I'm not well."

"You've broken your promise. I see you have used *me*. How base; how stupid!"

"D— him; I wish I had done as you said. I wish I had never come here. Give me a glass of wine. He has ruined me."

"You cruel, wretched creature!" said Rachel, now convinced that he had compromised her as he threatened.

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"Yes, I was wrong; I'm sorry; things have turned out different. Who's that?" said Lake, grasping her wrist.

"Who — where — Mark Wylder?"

"No; it's nothing, I believe."

"Where is he? Where have you left him?"

"Up there, at the pathway, near the stone steps."

"Waiting there?"

"Well, yes; and I don't think I'll go back, Radie."

"You *shall* go back, sir, and carry my message; or, no, I could not trust you. I'll go with you and see him, and disabuse him. How could you — how *could* you, Stanley?"

"It was a mistake, altogether; I'm sorry, but I could not tell there was such a devil on the earth."

"Yes, I told you so. *He* has frightened *you*," said Rachel.

"He *has maybe*. At any rate, I was a fool, and I think I'm ruined; and I'm afraid, Rachel, you'll be inconvenienced too."

"Yes, you have made him brutal; and between you, I shall be called in question, you wretched fool!"

Stanley was taking these hard terms very meekly for a savage young coxcomb like him. Perhaps they bore no very distinct meaning just then to his mind. Perhaps it was preoccupied with more exciting ideas; or, it may be, his agitation and fear cried "amen" to the reproach; at all events, he only said, in a pettish but deprecatory sort of way —

"Well, where's the good of scolding; how can I help it now?"

"What's your quarrel? why does he wait for you there? why has he sent you here? It must concern *me*, sir, and I insist on hearing it all."

"So you shall, Radie; only have patience just a

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minute — and give me a little wine or water — anything."

"There is the key. There's some wine in the press, I think."

He tried to open it, but his hand shook. He saw his sister look at him, and he flung the keys on the table rather savagely, with, I dare say, a curse between his teeth.

Rachel took the key with a faint gleam of scorn on her face, and brought out the wine in silence.

He took a tall-stemmed Venetian glass that stood upon the cabinet, an antique decoration, and filled it with sherry — a strange revival of old service! How long was it since lips had touched its brim before, and whose? Lovers', maybe, and how? How long since that cold crystal had glowed with the ripples of wine? This, at all events, was its last service. It is an old legend of the Venetian glass — its shivering at touch of poison; and there are those of whom it is said, "the poison of asps is under their lips."

"What's that?" ejaculated Rachel, with a sudden shriek — that whispered shriek, so expressive and ghastly, that you, perhaps, have once heard in your life — and her very lips grew white.

"Hollo!" cried Lake. He was standing with his back to the window, and sprang forward, as pale as she, and grasped her, with a white leer that she never forgot, over his shoulder, and the Venice glass was shivered on the ground.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

And Rachel, in a whisper, ejaculated the awful name that must not be taken in vain.

She sat down. She was looking at him with a wild, stern stare, straight in the face, and he still holding her arm, and close to her.

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"I see it all now," she whispered.

"Who — what — what is it?" said he.

"I could not have fancied *that*," she whispered with a gasp.

Stanley looked round him with pale and sharpened features.

"What the devil is it? If that scoundrel had come to kill us you could not cry out louder," he whispered, with an oath. "Do you want to wake your people up?"

"Oh! Stanley," she repeated, in a changed and horror-stricken way, "What a fool I've been. I see it at last; I see it all now," and she waved her white hands together very slowly towards him, as mesmerisers move theirs.

There was a silence of some seconds, and his yellow ferine gaze met hers strangely.

"You were always a sharp girl, Radie, and I think you do see it." he said at last, very quietly.

"The witness — the witness — the dreadful witness!" she repeated.

"I'll show you, though, it's not so bad as you fancy. I'm sorry I did not take your advice; but how, I say, could I know he was such a devil. I must go back to him. I only came down to tell you, because Radie, you know you proposed it yourself; *you* must come too — you *must* Radie."

"Oh, Stanley, Stanley, Stanley!"

"Why, d— it, it can't be helped now; can it?" said he, with a peevish malignity. But she was right; there was something of the poltroon in him, and he was trembling.

"Why could you not leave me in peace, Stanley?"

"I can't go without you, Rachel. I won't; and if we don't we're both ruined," he said, with a bleak oath.

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"Yes, Stanley, I knew you were a coward," she replied, fiercely and wildly.

"You're always calling names, d— you; do as you like. I care less than you think how it goes."

"No, Stanley; you know me too well. Ah! No, you shan't be lost if I can help it." Rachel shook her head as she spoke, with a bitter smile and a dreadful sigh.

Then they whispered together for three or four minutes, and Rachel clasped her jewelled fingers tight across her forehead, quite wildly, for a minute.

"You'll come then?" said Stanley.

She made no answer, and he repeated the question.

By this time she was standing; and without answering, she began mechanically to get on her cloak and hat.

"You must drink some wine first; he may frighten you, perhaps. You *must* take it, Rachel, or I'll not go."

Rachel seemed to have made up her mind to submit passively to whatever he required. Perhaps, indeed, she thought there was wisdom in his advice. At all events she drank some wine.

Rachel Lake was one of those women who never lose their presence of mind, even under violent agitation, for long, and who generally, even when highly excited, see, and do instinctively, and with decision, what is best to be done; and now, with dilated eyes and white face, she walked noiselessly into the kitchen, listened there for a moment, then stole lightly to the servants' sleeping-room, and listened there at the door, and lastly looked in, and satisfied herself that both were still sleeping. Then as cautiously and swiftly she returned to her drawing-room, and closed the window-shutters and drew the curtain, and signalling to her brother they went stealthily forth into the night air, closing the hall-door, and through the little garden, at the outer gate of which they paused.

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"I don't know, Rachel — I don't like it — I'm not fit for it. Go back again — go in and lock your door — we'll not go to him — *you* need not, you know. He may stay where he is — let him — I'll not return. I'll get away. I'll consult Larkin — shall I? Though that won't do — he's in Wylder's interest — curse him. What had I best do? I'm not equal to it."

"We *must* go, Stanley. You said right just now; be resolute — we are both ruined unless we go. You have brought it to that — you *must* come."

"I'm not fit for it, I tell you — I'm not. You were right, Radie — I think I'm not equal to a business of this sort, and I won't expose you to such a scene. *You're* not equal to it either, I think," and Lake leaned on the paling.

"Don't mind me — you haven't much hitherto. Go or stay, I'm equally ruined now, but not equally disgraced; and go we must, for it is *your only* chance of escape. Come, Stanley — for shame!"

In a few minutes more they were walking in deep darkness and silence, side by side, along the path, which diverging from the mill-road, penetrates the coppice of that sequestered gorge, along the bottom of which flows a tributary brook that finds its way a little lower down into the mill-stream. This deep gully in character a good deal resembles Redman's Glen, into which it passes, being fully as deep, and wooded to the summit at both sides, but much steeper and narrower, and therefore many shades darker.

They had now reached those rude stone steps, some ten or fifteen in number, which conduct the narrow footpath up a particularly steep acclivity, and here Lake lost courage again, for they distinctly heard the footsteps that paced the platform above.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

MARK WYLDER'S SLAVE.

NEARLY two hours had passed before they returned. As they did so, Rachel Lake went swiftly and silently before her brother. The moon had gone down, and the glen was darker than ever. Noiselessly they re-entered the little hall of Redman's Farm. The candles were still burning in the sitting-room, and the light was dazzling after the profound darkness in which they had been for so long.

Rachel sat down. No living woman ever showed a paler face, and she stared with a look that was sharp and stern upon the wainscot before her.

For some minutes they were silent; and suddenly, with an exceeding bitter cry, she stood up, close to him, seizing him in her tiny hands by the collar, and with wild eyes gazing into his, she said —

"See what you've brought me to — wretch, wretch, wretch!"

And she shook him with violence as she spoke. It was wonderful how that fair young face could look so terrible.

"There, Radie, there," said Lake, disengaging her fingers. "You're a little hysterical, that's all. It will be over in a minute; but don't make a row. You're a good girl, Radie. For Heaven's sake, don't spoil all by folly now."

He was overawed and deprecatory.

"A slave; only think — a slave! Oh frightful, fright-

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ful! Is it a dream? Oh frightful, frightful! Stanley, Stanley, it would be *mercy* to kill me," she broke out again.

"Now, Radie, listen to reason, and don't make a noise; you know we agreed, *you* must go; and *I can't* go with you."

Lake was cooler by this time, and his sister more excited than before they went out.

"I used to be brave; my courage I think is gone; but who'd have imagined what's before me?"

Stanley walked to the window and opened the shutter a little. He forgot how dark it was. The moon had gone down. He looked at his watch, and then at Rachel. She was sitting, and in no calmer state; serene enough in attitude, but the terribly wild look was unchanged. He looked at his watch again, and held it to his ear, and consulted it once more before he placed the tiny gold disk again in his pocket.

"This won't do," he muttered.

With one of the candles in his hand he went out and made a hurried, peeping exploration, and soon, for the rooms were quickly counted in Redman's Farm, he found her chamber, small, neat, *simplex munditiis*. Bright and natty were the chintz curtains, and the little toilet set out, not inelegantly, and her pet piping-goldfinch asleep on his perch, with his bit of sugar between the wires of his cage; her pillow so white and unpressed, with its little edging of lace. Were slumbers sweet as of old ever to know it more? What dreams were henceforward to haunt it? Shadows were standing about that lonely bed already.

When he came back to the drawing-room, a toilet bottle of *eau de cologne* in his hand, with her lace handkerchief he bathed her temples and forehead. There was nothing

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very brotherly in his look as he peered into her pale, sharp fratures, during the process. It was dark and pallid scrutiny of a familiar of the Holy Office, bringing a victim back to consciousness.

She was quickly better.

"There, don't mind me," she said sharply; and getting up she looked down at her dress and thin shoes, and seeming to recollect herself, she took the candle he had just set down, and went swiftly to her room.

Gliding without noise from place to place, she packed a small black leather bag with a few necessary articles, changed her dress quickly, put on walking boots, a close bonnet and thick veil, and taking her purse, she counted over its contents, and then standing in the midst of the room looked round it with a great sigh, and strange look, as if it was all new to her. And she threw back her veil, and going hurriedly to the toilet, mechanically surveyed herself in the glass. And she looked fixedly on the pale features presented to her, and said —

"Rachel Lake, Rachel Lake! what are you now?"

A few minutes later her brother, who had been busy down stairs, put his head in and asked —

"Will you come with me now, Radie, or do you prefer to wait here?"

"I'll stay here — that is, in the drawing-room," she answered, and the face was withdrawn.

In the little hall Stanley looked again at his watch, and getting quietly out, went swiftly through the tiny garden, and once upon the mill-road, ran at a rapid pace down towards the town.

The long street of Gylingden stretched dim and silent before him. Slumber brooded over the little town, and his steps sounded sharp and hollow among the houses. He slackened his pace, and tapped sharply at the little window

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of that modest post-office, at which the young ladies in the pony carriage had pulled up the day before, and within which Luke Waggot was wont to sleep in a sort of wooden box that folded up and appeared to be a chest of drawers all day. Luke took care of Mr. Larkin's dogs, and groomed Mr. Wylder's horse; and "cleaned up" his dog-cart, for Mark being close about money, and finding that the thing was to be done more cheaply that way, put up his horse and dog-cart in the post-office premises, and so evaded the livery charges of the "Brandon Arms."

But Luke was not there; and Captain Lake recollecting his habits and his haunt, hurried on to the "Silver Lion," which has its gable towards the common, only about a hundred steps away, for distances are not great in Gylingden. Here were the flow of soul and of stout, long pipes, long yarns, and tolerably long credits; and the humble scapegraces of the town restored thither for the pleasures of a club-life, and often revelled deep into the small hours of the morning.

So Luke came forth.

"D— it where's the note?" said the Captain, rummaging uneasily in his pockets.

"You know me — eh?"

"Captain Lake. Yes, sir,"

"Well — oh! here it is."

It was a scrap pencilled on the back of a letter —

"LUKE WAGGOT,— Put the horse to and drive the dog-cart to the "White House." Look out for me there. We must catch the up mail train at Dollington. Be lively. If Captain Lake chooses to drive you need not come.

'M. WYLDER."

"I'll drive," said Captain Lake. "Lose no time and I'll give you half-a-crown."

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Luke stuck on his greasy wideawake, and in a few minutes more the dog-cart was trundled out into the lane, and the horse harnessed.

"Easily earned, Luke," said Captain Lake, in his soft tones.

The Captain had buttoned the collar of his loose coat across his face, and it was dark beside. But Luke knew his peculiar smile, and presumed it; so he grinned facetiously as he put the coin in his breeches pocket and thanked him; and in another minute, the Captain, with a lighted cigar between his lips, mounted to the seat, took the reins, the horse bounded off, and away rattled the light conveyance, sparks flying from the road, down the deserted street of Gylingden, and quickly melted in darkness.

That night a spectre stood by old Tamar's bedside, in shape of her young mistress, and shook her by the shoulder, and stooping, said sternly, close in her face —

"Tamar, I'm going away — only for a few days; and mind this — I'd rather be *dead* than any creature living should know it. Little Margery must not suspect — you'll manage that. Here's the key of my bed-room — say I'm sick — and you must go in and out, and bring tea and drinks, and talk and whisper a little, you understand, as you might with a sick person, and keep the shutters closed; and if Miss Brandon sends to ask me to the Hall, say I've a headache, and fear I can't go. You understand me clearly, Tamar?"

"Yes, Miss Radie," answered old Tamar, wonder-stricken, with a strange expression of fear in her face.

"And listen," she continued, "you must go into my room, and bring the message back, as if from me, with *my love* to Miss Brandon; and if she or the Vicar's lady should call to see me, always say I'm asleep and a little better. You see exactly what I mean?"

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"Yes, miss," answered Tamar, whose eyes were fixed, with a sort of fascination, full on those of her mistress.

"If Master Stanley should call, he is to do just as he pleases. You used to be accurate, Tamar; may I depend upon you?"

"Yes, ma'am, certainly."

"If I thought you'd fail me now, Tamar, I should *never* come back. Good night, Tamar. There — don't bless me. Good night."

When the light wheels of the dog-cart gritted on the mill-road before the little garden gate of Redman's Farm, the tall slender figure of Rachel Lake was dimly visible, standing cloaked and waiting by it. Silently she handed her little black leather bag to her brother, and then there was a pause. He stretched his hand to help her up. In a tone that was icy and bitter, she said —

"To save myself I would not do it. You deserve no love from me — you've showed me none — *never*, Stanley; and yet I'm going to give the most desperate proof of love that ever sister gave — all for your sake; and it's guilt, guilt, but my *fate*, and I'll go, and you'll never thank me; that's all."

In a moment more she sat beside him; and silent as the dead in Charon's boat, away they glided toward the "White House" which lay upon the high road to Dollington.

The sleepy clerk that night in the Dollington station stamped two first-class tickets for London, one of which was for a gentleman, the other for a cloaked lady, with a very thick veil, who stood outside on the platform.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE TARN IN THE PARK.

NEXT morning Stanley Lake, at breakfast with the lawyer, said —

"A pretty room this is. That bow window is worth all the pictures in Brandon. To my eye there is no scenery so sweet as this, at least to breakfast by. These undulations, and all that splendid timber, and the glorious ruins on that hillock over there! How many beautiful ruins that picturesque old fellow Cromwell has left us."

"You don't eat your breakfast, though," said the attorney, with a charming smile of reproach.

"Ah, thank you; I'm a bad breakfaster; that is," said Stanley, recollecting that he had made some very creditable meals at the same table, "when I smoke so late as I did last night."

"You drove Mr. Wylder to Dollington?"

"Yes; he's gone to town, he says — yes, the mail train — to get some diamonds for Miss Brandon — a present — that ought to have come the day before yesterday. He says they'll never have them in time unless he goes and blows them up. Are you in his secrets at all?"

"Something in his confidence, I should hope," said Mr. Larkin, in rather a lofty and reserved way.

"Oh, yes, of course, in serious matters; but I meant other things. You know he has been a little bit wild; and ladies, you know, ladies will be troublesome sometimes; and

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to say truth, I don't think the diamonds have much to say to it."

The gracious attorney glanced at his guest with a thoroughly business-like and searching eye.

"You don't think there's any really serious annoyance — you don't know the party?" said he.

"*I?* — oh, dear, no. Wylder has always been very reserved with me. He told me nothing. If he had, of course I should not have mentioned it. I only conjecture, for he really did seem to have a great deal more on his mind; and he kept me walking back and forward, near the mill-road, a precious long time. And I really think once or twice he was going to tell me."

"Oh! you think then, Mr. Lake, there *may* be some serious — a — a — well, I should hope not — I do most earnestly *trust* not." This was said with upturned eyes and much unction. "But do you happen, Captain Lake, to know of any of those unfortunate, those miserable connections which young gentlemen of fashion — eh? It's very sad. Still it often needs professional advice to solve such difficulties — it is very sad — oh! is not it sad?"

"Pray, don't let it affect your spirits," said Lake, who was leaning back in his chair, and looking on the carpet, about a yard before his lacquered boots, in his usual sly way. "I may be quite mistaken, you know, but I wished you to understand — having some little experience of the world, I'd be only too happy to be of any use, if you thought my diplomancy could help poor Wylder out of his trouble — that is, if there really is any. But *you* don't know?"

"*No*," said Mr. Larkin, thoughtfully, with a sharp glance now and then at the unreadable visage of the cavalry officer. It was evident his mind was working, and nothing was heard in the room for a minute but the tapping of his nails on the chair, like a death-watch.

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"No," said Mr. Larkin again, "I'm not suspicious — naturally too much the reverse, I fear; but it certainly does look odd. Did he tell the family at Brandon?"

"Certainly not, that I heard. He may have mentioned it. But I started with him, and we walked together, under the impression that he was going, as usual, to the inn, the — what d'ye call it? — "Brandon Arms;" and it was a sudden thought — now I think of it — for he took no luggage, though to be sure I dare say he has got clothes and things in town."

"And when does he return?"

"In a day or two at furthest," he said.

"I wonder what they'll think of it at Brandon?" said the attorney, with a cavernous grin of sly enquiry at his companion, which, recollecting his character, he softened into a sad sort of smile, and added, "No harm, I dare say; and, after all, you know, why should there — any man may have business; and, indeed, it is very likely, after all, that he really went about the jewels.

"By-the-by," said Lake, rather briskly for him, rummaging his pockets, "I'm glad I remembered he gave me a little note to Chelford. Are any of your people going to Brandon this morning?"

"I'll send it," said the lawyer, eyeing the little pencilled note wistfully, which Lake presented between two fingers.

"Don't you think it had best go at once? — there may be something requiring an answer, and your post leaves, doesn't it, at twelve?"

"Oh! an answer, is there?" said Mr. Larkin, drawing it from his pocket, and looking at it again with a perceptible curiosity.

"I really can't say, not having read it, but there *may*," said Captain Lake, who was now and then a little imperti-

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nent, just to keep Mr. Larkin in his place, and perhaps to hint that he understood him.

When at the later breakfast, up at Brandon, that irregular pencilled scroll reached Lord Chelford's hand, he said, as he glanced on the direction —

"This is Mark Wylder's; what does he say?"

"So Mark's gone to town," he said; "but he'll be back again on Saturday, and in the meantime desires me to lay his heart at your feet, Dorcas. Will you read the note?"

"No," said Dorcas, quietly.

Lady Chelford extended her long, shrivelled fingers, on which glimmered sundry jewels, and made a little nod to her son, who gave it to her, with a smile. Holding her glasses to her eyes, the note at a distance, and her head rather back, she said —

"It is not a pretty billet," and she read in a slow and grim way: —

"DEAR CHELFORD,— I'm called up to London just for a day. No lark, but honest business. I'll return on Saturday; and tell Dorcas, with dozens of loves, I would write to her, but have not a minute for the train.

"Yours, &c.

"M. WYLDER."

"No; it is not pretty," repeated the old lady; and, indeed, in no sense was it. Before luncheon Captain Lake arrived.

"So Wylder has run up to town," I said, so soon as we had shaken hands in the hall.

"Yes; *I* drove him to Dollington last night; we just caught the up train."

"He says he'll be back again on Saturday," I said.

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"Saturday, is it? He seemed to think — yes — it *would* be only a day or so. Some jewels, I think, for Dorcas. He did not say distinctly; I only conjecture. Lady Chelford and Miss Brandon, I suppose, in the drawing-room?"

So to the drawing-room he passed.

"How is Rachel? how is your sister, Captain Lake, have you seen her to-day?" asked old Lady Chelford, rather benignantly. She chose to be gracious to the Lakes.

"Only for a moment, thank you. She has one of her miserable headaches, poor thing; but she'll be better, she says, in the afternoon, and hopes to come up here to see you and Miss Brandon, this evening."

Lord Chelford and I had a pleasant walk that day to the ruins of Willerton Castle. After this he wished to make a visit to the Vicar, and so we parted company. I got into Brandon Park by the pretty gate near Latham.

It was a walk of nearly three miles across the park from this point to the Hall, and the slopes and hollows of this noble, undulating plain, came out grandly in the long shadows and slanting beams of evening. That yellow, level light has, in my mind, something undefinably glorious and melancholy, such as to make almost any scenery interesting, and my solitary walk was delightful.

After many devious wanderings, I found, under shelter of a wonderful little hollow, in which lay, dim and still, a tarn, reflecting the stems of the trees that rose from its edge, in a way so clear and beautiful, that, with a smile and a sigh, I sat myself down upon a rock among the ferns, and fell into a reverie.

The image of Dorcas rose before me. There is a strange mystery and power in the apathetic, and in that unaffected carelessness, even defiance of opinion and criti-

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cism, which I had seen here for the first time, so beautifully embodied. I was quite sure she both thought and felt, and could talk, too, if she chose it. What tremendous self-reliance and disdain must form the basis of a female character, which accepted misapprehension and depreciation with an indifference so genuine as to scorn even the trifling exertion of disclosing its powers.

She could not possibly care for Wylder, any more than he cared for her. That odd look I detected in the mirror — what did it mean? and Wylder's confusion about Captain Lake — what was that; I could not comprehend the situation that was forming. I went over Wylder's history in my mind, and Captain Lake's — all I could recollect of it — but could find no clue, and that horrible visitation or vision! what was *it?*

This latter image had just glided in and taken its place in my waking dream, when I thought I saw reflected in the pool at my feet, the shape and face which I never could forget, of the white, long-chinned old man.

For a second I was unable, I think, to lift my eyes from the water which presented this cadaverous image. But the figure began to move, and I raised my eyes, and saw it retreat, with a limping gait, into the thick copse before me, in the shadow of which it stopped and turned stiffly round, and directed on me a look of horror, and then withdrew.

It is all very fine laughing at me and my fancies. I do not think there are many men who in my situation would have felt very differently. I recovered myself; I shouted lustily after him to stay, and then in a sort of half frightened rage, I pursued him; but I had to get round the pool, a considerable circuit. I could not tell which way he had turned on getting into the thicket; and it was now dusk, the sun having gone down during my reverie.

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So I stopped a little way in the copsewood, which was growing quite dark, and I shouted there again, peeping under the branches, and felt queer and much relieved that nothing answered or appeared.

Looking round me, in a sort of dream, I remembered suddenly what Wylder had told me of old Lorne Brandon, to whose portrait this inexplicable phantom bore so powerful a resemblance. He was suspected of having murdered his own son, at the edge of a tarn in the park. *This* tarn maybe — and with the thought a deeper and colder shadow gathered over the ominous hollow in which I stood, and the rustling in the withered leaves sounded angrily.

I got up as quickly as might be to the higher grounds, and waited there for a while, and watched for the emergence of the old man. But it did not appear; and shade after shade was spreading solemnly over the landscape, and having a good way to walk, I began to stride briskly along the slopes and hollows, in the twilight, now and then looking into vacancy, over my shoulder.

The little adventure, and the deepening shades, helped to sadden my homeward walk; and when at last the dusky outline of the Hall rose before me, it wore a sort of weird and haunted aspect.

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN LAKE TAKES AN EVENING STROLL ABOUT GYLINGDEN.

THE absence of an accustomed face, even though the owner be nothing very remarkable, is always felt; and

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Wylder was missed, though, sooth to say, not very much regretted. For the first time we were really a small party. Miss Lake was not there. The gallant Captain, her brother, was also absent. The Vicar, and his good little wife, were at Naunton that evening to hear a missionary recount his adventures and experiences in Japan, and none of the neighbors had been called in to fill the empty chairs.

Dorcas Brandon did not contribute much to the talk; neither, in truth, did I. Old Lady Chelford occasionally dozed and nodded sternly after tea, waking up and eyeing people grimly, as though enquiring whether anyone presumed to suspect her ladyship of having had a nap.

Chelford, I recollect, took a book, and read to us now and then, a snatch of poetry — I forget what. *My* book — except when I was thinking of the tarn and that old man I so hated — was Miss Brandon's exquisite and mysterious face.

That young lady was leaning back in her great oak chair, in which she looked like the heroine of some sad and gorgeous romance of the old civil wars of England, and directing a gaze of contemplative and haughty curiosity upon the old lady, who was unconscious of the daring profanation.

All on a sudden Dorcas Brandon said —

"And pray what do you think of marriage, Lady Chelford?"

"What do I think of marriage?" repeated the dowager, throwing back her head and eyeing the beautiful heiress through her gold spectacles, with a stony surprise, for she was not accustomed to be catechised by young people. "Marriage? — why 'tis a divine institution. What can the child mean?"

"Do you think, Lady Chelford, it may be safely contracted, solely to join two estates?" pursued the young lady.

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"Do I think it may safely be contracted, solely to join two estates?" repeated the old lady, with a look and carriage that plainly showed how entirely she appreciated the amazing presumption of her interrogatrix.

There was a little pause.

"*Certainly*," replied Lady Chelford; "that is, of course, under proper conditions, and with a due sense of its sacred character and a—a— obligations."

"The first of which is *love*," continued Miss Brandon; "the second *honor* — both involuntary; and the third *obedience*, which springs from them."

Old Lady Chelford coughed, and then rallying, said —

"Very good, miss!"

"And pray, Lady Chelford, what do you think of Mr. Mark Wylder?" pursued Miss Dorcas.

"I don't see, Miss Brandon, that my thoughts upon that subject can concern any one but myself," retorted the old lady, severely, and from an awful altitude. "And I may say, considering who I am — and my years — and the manner in which I am usually treated, I am a little surprised at the tone in which you are pleased to question me."

These last terrible remarks totally failed to overawe the serene temerity of the grave beauty.

"I assumed, Lady Chelford, as you had interested yourself in me so far as to originate the idea of my engagement to Mr. Wylder, that you had considered these to me very important questions a little, and could give me satisfactory answers upon points on which my mind has been employed for some days; and, indeed, I think I've a right to ask that assistance of you."

"You seem to forget, young lady, that there are times and places for such discussions; and that to Mr.—a—a— your visitor (a glance at me,) it can't be very interesting to listen to this kind of — of — conversation, which is neither very entertaining, nor very *wise*."

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"I am answerable only for *my* part of it; and I think my questions very much to the purpose," said the young lady, in her low, silvery tones.

"I don't question your good opinion, Miss Brandon, of your own discretion; but *I* can't see any profit in now discussing an engagement of more than two months' standing, or a marriage, which is fixed to take place only ten days hence. And I think, sir (glancing again at me,) it must strike *you* a little oddly, that I should be invited, in your presence, to discuss family matters with Miss Dorcas Brandon?"

I paused long enough to allow Miss Brandon to speak, but she did not choose to do so, thinking, I suppose, it was my business.

"I believe I ought to have withdrawn a little," I said, very humbly; and old Lady Chelford at the word shot a gleam of contemptuous triumph at Miss Dorcas; but I would not acquiesce in the dowager's abusing my concession, to the prejudice of that beautiful and daring young lady —"I mean, Lady Chelford, in deference to you, who are not aware, as Miss Brandon is, that I am one of Mr. Wylder's oldest and most intimate friends; and at his request, and with Lord Chelford's approval, have been advised with, in detail, upon all the arrangements connected with the approaching marriage."

"I am not going, at present, to say any more upon these subjects, because Lady Chelford prefers deferring our conversation," said this very odd young lady; "but there is nothing which either she or I may say, which I wish to conceal from any friend of Mr. Wylder's."

The idea of Miss Brandon's seriously thinking of withdrawing from her engagement with Mark Wylder, I confess never entered my mind. Lady Chelford, perhaps, knew more of the capricious and daring character of the

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ladies of the Brandon line than I, and may have discovered some signs of a coming storm in the oracular questions which had fallen so harmoniously from those beautiful lips. As for me, I was puzzled.

Lake's late smoking with Wylder must have disagreed with him very much indeed, for he seemed more out of sorts as night approached. He stole away from Mr. Larkin's trellised porch, in the dusk. He marched into the town rather quickly, like a man who has business on his hands; but he had none — for he walked by the "Brandon Arms," and halted, and stared at the post-office, as if he fancied he had something to say there. But no — there was no need to tap at the window-pane. Some idle boys were observing the dandy Captain, and he turned down the short lane that opened on the common, and sauntered upon the short grass.

Two or three groups, and an invalid visitor or two — for Gylingden boasts a "spa"— were lounging away the twilight half-hours there. He seated himself on one of the rustic seats, and his yellow eyes wandered restlessly and vaguely along the qutline of the beautiful hills. Then for nearly ten minutes he smoked — an odd recreation for a man suffering from the cigars of last night — and after that, for nearly as long again, he seemed lost in deep thought, his eyes upon the misty grass before him, and his small French boot beating time to the music of his thoughts.

Several groups passed close by him, in their pleasant circuit. Some wondered what might be the disease of that pale, peevish-looking gentleman, who sat there so still, languid, and dejected. Others set him down as a gentleman in difficulties of some sort, who was using Gylingden for a temporary refuge.

When Lake, with a little shudder, for it was growing

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chill, lifted up his yellow eyes suddenly, and recollected where he was, the common had grown dark, and was quite deserted. There were lights in the windows of the reading-room, and in the billiard-room beneath it; and shadowy figures, with cues in their hands, gliding hither and thither, across its uncurtained windows.

With a shrug, and a stealthy glance round him, Captain Lake started up. The instinct of the lonely and gloomy man unconsciously drew him towards the light, and he approached.

Captain Lake, waiting with his hand on the door-handle, for the stroke, heard the smack of the balls, and the score called by the marker, and entered the hot, glaring room. Old Major Jackson, with his glass in his eye, was contending in his shirt-sleeves heroically with a Manchester bag-man, who was palpably too much for him. The double-chinned and florid proprietor of the "Brandon Arms," with a brandy-and-water familiarity, offered Captain Lake two to one on the game in anything he liked, which the Captain declined, and took his seat on the bench.

He was not interested by the struggle of the gallant Major, who smiled like a prize-fighter under his punishment. In fact, he could not have told the score at any point of the game; and, to judge by his face, was translated from the glare of that arena into a dark and splenetic world of his own.

When he wakened up, in the buzz and clack of tongues that followed the close of the game, Captain Lake glared round for a moment, like a man called up from sleep; the noise rattled and roared in his ears, the talk sounded madly, and the faces of the people excited and menaced him undefinably, and he felt as if he was on the point of starting to his feet and stamping and shouting.

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The fact is, I suppose, he was confoundedly nervous, dyspeptic, or whatever else it might be, and the heat and glare were too much for him.

So, out he went into the chill, fresh night-air, and round the corner into the quaint main-street of Gylingden, and walked down it in the dark, nearly to the last house by the corner of the Redman's Dell road, and then back again, and so on, trying to tire himself, I think; and every time he walked down the street, with his face toward London, his yellow eyes gleamed through the dark air, with the fixed gaze of a man looking out for the appearance of a vehicle. It, perhaps, indicated an anxiety and a mental look-out in that direction, for he really expected no such thing.

Then he dropped into the "Brandon Arms," and had a glass of brandy and water, and a newspaper, in the coffee-room; and then he ordered a "fly," and drove in it to Lawyer Larkin's house —"The Lodge," it was called — and entered Mr. Larkin's drawing-room very cheerfully.

"How quiet you are here," said the Captain. "I have been awfully dissipated since I saw you."

"In an innocent way, my dear Captain Lake, you mean, of course — in an innocent way."

"Oh! no; billiards, I assure you. Do you play?"

"Oh! dear no — not that I see any essential harm in the game *as* a game, for those, I mean, who don't object to that sort of thing; but for a resident here, putting aside other feelings — a resident holding a position — it would not do, I assure you. There are people there whom one could not associate with comfortably. I don't care, I hope, how poor a man may be, but do let him be a gentleman. A man, my dear Captain Lake, whose father before him has been a gentleman (old Larkin, while in the flesh, was an organist, and kept a small day school

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at Dwiddleston,) and who has had the education of one does not feel himself at home, you know — I'm sure you have felt the same sort of thing yourself."

"Oh! of course; and I had such a nice walk on the common first, and then a turn up and down before the "Brandon Arms," where at last I read a paper, and could not resist a glass of brandy and water, and, growing lazy, came home in a "fly," so I think I have had a very gay evening."

Larkin smiled benignantly, and would have said something no doubt worth hearing, but at that moment the door opened, and his old cook and elderly parlor-maid, and Sleddon the groom, walked in, with those sad faces which, I suppose, were first learned in the belief that they were acceptable to their master.

"Oh!" said Mr. Larkin, in a low, reverential tone, and the smile vanished; "prayers!"

"Well, then, if you permit me, being a little tired, I'll go to my bedroom."

And he lighted a bedroom candle and left the room.

"What a beast that fellow is. I don't know why the d— I stay in his house."

One reason was, perhaps, that it saved him nearly a guinea a day, and he may have had some other little reasons just then.

"Family prayers, indeed! and such a pair of women — witches, by Jove! — and that rascally groom, and a hypocritical attorney! And the vulgar brute will be as rich as Crœsus, I dare say."

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CHAPTER XXI.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN LAKE VISITS HIS SISTER'S SICK-BED.

Captain Lake wanted rest — sleep — quiet thoughts at all events. When he was alone he was at once in a state of fever and gloom, and seemed always watching for something. His strange eyes glanced now this way, now that with a fierce restlessness — now to the window — now to the door — and you would have said he was listening intently to some indistinct and too distant conversation affecting him vitally, there was such a look of fear and conjecture always in his face.

He bolted his door and unlocked his dressing case, and from a little silver box in that glittering repository he took, one after the other, two or three little wafers of a dark hue, and placed them successively on his tongue, and suffered them to melt, and so swallowed them. They were not liquorice. I am afraid Captain Lake dabbled a little in opium. He was not a great adept — yet, at least — like those gentlemen who can swallow five hundred drops of laudanum at a sitting. But he knew the virtues of the drug, and cultivated its acquaintance, and was oftener under its influence than perhaps any mortal, except himself, suspected.

Stanley Lake would have given more than he could well afford that it were that day week, and he no worse off. Why did time limp so tediously away with him, prolonging his anguish gratuitously? He felt truculently, and

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would have murdered that week, if he could, in the midst of its loitering sunshine and gaiety.

There was a strange pain at his heart, and the pain of intense and fruitless calculation in his brain; and, as the Mahometan prays towards Mecca, and the Jew towards Jerusalem, so Captain Lake's morning orisons, whatsoever they were, were offered at the window of his bed-room toward London, from whence he looked for his salvation, or it might be the other thing — with a dreadful yearning.

When Lake had ended his toilet and stared in the glass, he still looked so haggard, that on greeting Mr. Larkin in the parlor, he thought it necessary to mention that he had taken cold in that confounded billiard-room last night, which spoiled his sleep, and made him awfully seedy that morning. Of course, his host was properly afflicted and sympathetic.

"By-the-bye, I had a letter this morning from that party — our common friend, Mr. W., you know," said Larkin, gracefully.

"Well, what is he doing, and when does he come back? You mean Wylder, of course?"

"Yes; my good client, Mr. Mark Wylder. Permit me to assist you to some honey, you'll find it remarkably good, I venture to say; it comes from the gardens of Queen's Audley."

"Thank you — delicious, I'm sure. May I see Wylder's note — that is, if there's no private business?"

"Oh, certainly."

And, with Wylder's great red seal on the back of the envelope, the letter ran thus: —

"DEAR LARKIN,— I write in haste to save post, to say I shall be detained in town a few days longer than I thought.

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Don't wait for me about the parchments; I am satisfied. If anything crosses your mind, a word with Mr. De C. at the Hall, will clear all up. Have all ready to sign and seal when I come back — certainly, within a week.

"Yours sincerely,

"M. WYLDER,

'London."

It was evidently written in great haste, with the broad-nibbed pen he liked; but notwithstanding the sort of swagger with which the writing marched across the page, Lake might have seen here and there a little quaver — indicative of something different from haste — the vibrations of another sort of flurry.

"'Certainly within a week,' he writes. Does he mean he'll be here in a week or only to have the papers ready in a week?" asked Lake.

"The question, certainly, does arise. It struck me on the first perusal," answered the attorney. "His address is rather a wide one, too — London! Do you know his club, Captain Lake?"

"'The *Wanderers*.' He has left the '*United Service*.' Nothing for me, by the way?"

"No letter. No."

"*Tant mieux*, I hate them," said the Captain. "I wonder how my sister is this morning."

"Would you like a messenger? I'll send down with pleasure to enquire."

"Thank you, no; I'll walk down and see her."

And Lake yawned at the window, and then took his hat and stick and sauntered toward Gylingden. At the post-office window he tapped with the silver tip of his cane, and told Miss Driver with a sleepy smile —

"I'm going down to Redman's Farm, and any letters for my sister, Miss Lake, I may as well take with me."

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There was only one letter — the address was written — "Miss Lake, Redman's Farm, near Brandon Park, Gylingden," in a stiff hand, rather slanting backwards.

Captain Lake put it in his paletot pocket, looked in her face gently, and smiled, and thanked her in his graceful way — and, in fact, left an enduring impression upon that impressible nature.

Turning up the dark road at Redman's Dell, the gallant Captain passed the old mill, and, all being quiet up and down the road, he halted under the lordly shadow of a clump of chestnuts, and opened and read the letter he had just taken charge of. It contained only these words:—

"Wednesday

"On Friday night, next, at half-past twelve."

This he read twice or thrice, pausing between whiles. The envelope bore the London postmark. Then he took out his cigar case, selected a promising weed, and wrapping the laconic note prettily round one of his scented matches, lighted it, and the note flamed pale in the daylight, and dropped, still blazing, at the root of the old tree he stood by. Having completed his mysterious incremation, he, with his yellow eyes, made a stolen glance around, and lighting his cigar, glided gracefully up the steep road, under the solemn canopy of old timber, toward Redman's Farm.

As he entered the flower-garden, the jaundiced face of old Tamar, with its thousand small wrinkles and its ominous gleam of suspicion, was looking out from the darkened porch. The white cap, kerchief, and drapery, courtesied to him as he drew near, and the dismal face changed not.

"Well, Tamar, how do you do? — how are all? Where is that girl, Margery?"

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"In the kitchen, Master Stanley," said she courtesying again.

"Well, come up stairs to your mistress' room," said Lake, mounting the stairs, with his hat in his hand, and on tip-toe, like a man approaching a sick chamber.

There was something I think grim and spectral in this ceremonious ascent to the empty chamber. Children had once occupied that silent floor, for there was a little balustraded gate across the top of the staircase.

"I keep this closed," said old Tamar, "and forbid her to cross it, lest she should disturb the mistress. Heaven forgive me!"

"Very good," he whispered, and he peeped over the banister, and then entered Rachel's silent room, darkened with closed shutters, the white curtains and white coverlet so like "the dark chamber of white death."

He had intended speaking to Tamar there, but changed his mind, or rather could not make up his mind; and he loitered silently, and stood with the curtain in his gloved hand, looking upon the cold coverlet, as if Rachel lay dead there.

"That will do," he said, awaking from his wandering thought. "We'll go down now, Tamar."

And in the same stealthy way, walking lightly and slowly, down the stairs they went, and Stanley entered the kitchen.

"How do you do, Margery? You'll be glad to hear your mistress is better. You must run down to the town, though, and buy some jelly, and you are to bring her back change of this."

And he placed half-a-crown in her hand.

"Put on your bonnet and my old shawl, child; and take the basket, and come back by the side door," croaked old Tamar.

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So the girl dried her hands — she was washing the tea-cups — and in a twinkling was equipped and on her way to Gylingden.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN LAKE MEETS A FRIEND NEAR THE WHITE HOUSE.

LAKE had no very high opinion of men or women, gentle or simple.

"She listens, I dare say, the little spy," said he.

"No, Master Stanley! She's a good little girl."

"She quite believes her mistress is up stairs — eh?"

"Yes; the Lord forgive me — I'm deceiving her."

He did not like the tone and look which accompanied this.

"Now, my good old Tamar, you really can't be such an idiot as to fancy there can be any imaginable wrong in keeping that prying little slut in ignorance of that which in no wise concerns her. This is a critical matter, do you see, and if it were known in this place that your young mistress had gone away as she has done — though quite innocently — upon my honor — I think it would blast her. You would not like, for a stupid crotchet, to ruin poor Radie, I fancy."

"I'm doing just what you both bid me," said the old woman.

"You sit up stairs chiefly?"

She nodded sadly.

"And keep the hall door shut and bolted?"

Again she nodded.

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"I'm going up to the Hall, and I'll tell them she's much better, and that I've been in her room, and that, perhaps, she may go up to see them in the morning."

"How long is all this to go on for, Master Stanley?"

"Why, d — you, Tamar, can't you listen?" he said, clutching her wrist in his lavender kid grasp rather roughly. "How long — a very short time, I tell you. She'll be home immediately. I'll come to-morrow and tell you exactly — maybe to-morrow evening — will that do? And should they call, you must say the same; and if Miss Dorcas — Miss Brandon, you know — should wish to go up to see her, tell her she's asleep. Stop that hypocritical grimacing, will you. It is no part of your duty to tell the world what can't possibly concern them, and may bring your young mistress to — *perdition*. That does not strike me as any part of your religion."

Tamar groaned again, and she said: "I opened my Bible, Lord help me, three times to-day, Master Stanley, and could not go on. It's no use — I can't read it."

"Time enough — I think you've read more than is good for you. I think you are half mad, Tamar; but think what you may, it must be done. Have not you read of straining at gnats and swallowing camels? You used not, I've heard, to be always so scrupulous, old Tamar."

There was a vile sarcasm in his tone and look.

"It is not for the child I nursed to say that," said Tamar.

There were scandalous stories of wicked old Tiberius — bankrupt, dead and buried — compromising the fame of Tamar — not always a spectacled and cadaverous student of Holy Writ. These, indeed, were even in Stanley's childhood, old-world, hazy traditions of the servants' hall.

But boys hear often more than is good, and more than

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gospel, who live in such houses as old General Lake, the millionaire widower, kept.

"I did not mean anything, upon my honor, Tamar, that could annoy you. I only meant you used not to be a fool, and pray don't begin now; for I assure you Radie and I would not ask it, if it could be avoided. You have Miss Radie's secret in your hands. I don't think you'd like to injure her, and you used to be trustworthy. I don't think your Bible teaches you anywhere to hurt your neighbor and to break faith."

"Don't speak of the Bible now; but you needn't fear me, Master Stanley," answered the old woman, a little sternly. "I don't know why she's gone, nor why it's a secret — I don't, and I'd rather not, and I'll do as you bid me, and I *have* done, Master Stanley, howsoever it troubles my mind; and now old Tamar's word's spoke — that's all."

"Old Tamar is a sensible creature, as she always was. I hope I did not vex you, Tamar. I did not mean, I assure you; but we get rough ways in the army, I'm afraid, and you won't mind me. You never *did* mind little Stannie when he was naughty, you know."

There was here a little subsidence in his speech. He was thinking of giving her a crown, but there were several reasons against it, so that handsome coin remained in his purse.

"And I forgot to tell you, Tamar, I've a ring for you in town — a little souvenir; you'll think it pretty — a gold ring with a stone in it — it belonged to poor dear Aunt Jemima, you remember. I left it behind; so stupid!"

So he shook hands with old Tamar, and patted her affectionately on the shoulder, and he said:

"Keep the hall door bolted. Make any excuse you

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like; only it would not do for any one to open it, and run up to the room as they might, so don't forget to secure the door when I go. I think that is all. Ta-ta, dear Tamar. I'll see you in the morning."

As he walked down the mill-road toward the town, he met Lord Chelford on his way to make enquiry about Rachel at Redman's Farm; and Lake, who, as we know, had just seen his sister, gave him all particulars.

Chelford, like the lawyer, had heard from Mark Wylder that morning — a few lines, postponing his return. He merely mentioned it, and made no comment; but Lake perceived that he was annoyed at his unexplained absence.

Lake dined at Brandon that evening. and though looking ill, was very good company, and promised to bring an early report of Rachel's convalescence in the morning.

I have little to record of next day, except that Larkin received another London letter. Wylder plainly wrote in great haste, and merely said: —

"I shall have to wait a day or two longer than I yesterday thought, to meet a fellow from whom I am to receive something of importance, rather, as I think, to me. Get the deeds ready, as I said in my last. If I am not in Gylingden by Monday, we must put off the wedding for a week later—there is no help for it. You need not talk of this. I write to Chelford to say the same."

This note was unceremonious, and still shorter. Lord Chelford would have written at once to remonstrate with Mark on the unseemliness of putting off his marriage so capriciously, or, at all events, so mysteriously — Miss Brandon not being considered, nor her friends consulted. But Mark had no fancy to be worried, when he had made up his mind, by prosy remonstrances; he shut out the whole tribe of letter-writers by simply omitting to give them his address.

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Like most rustic communities, Gylingden and its neighborhood were early in bed. Few lights burned after half-past ten, and the whole vicinity was deep in its slumbers before twelve o'clock.

At that dread hour, Captain Lake, about a mile on the Dollington, which was the old London road from Gylingden, was pacing backward and forward under the towering files of beech that overarch it at that point.

Stanley Lake did not like waiting any more than did Louis XIV. He was really a little tired of acting sentry, and was very peevish by the time the ring of wheels and horse-hoofs approaching from the London direction became audible. Even so, he had a longer wait than he expected, sounds are heard so far by night. At last, however, it drew nearer — nearer — quite close — and a sort of nondescript vehicle — one horsed — loomed in the dark, and he calls —

"Hallo! there — I say — a passenger for the 'White House?'

At the same moment, a window of the cab — shall we call it — was let down, and a female voice — Rachel Lake's — called to the driver to stop.

Lake addressed the driver —

"You come from Johnson's Hotel — don't you — at Dollington?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll pay you half-fare to bring me there."

"All right, sir. But the 'oss, sir, must 'av 'is oats fust."

"Feed him here, then. They are all asleep in the 'White House.' I'll be with you in five minutes, and you shall have something for yourself when we get into Dollington."

Stanley opened the door. She placed her hand on his,

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and stepped to the ground. It was very dark under those great trees. He held her hand a little harder than was his wont.

"All quite well, ever since. You are not very tired, are you? I'm afraid it will be necessary for you to walk to 'Redman's Farm,' dear Radie — but it is hardly a mile, I think — for, you see, the fellow must not know who you are; and I must go back with him, for I have not been very well — indeed I've been, I may say, very ill — and I told that fellow, Larkin, who has his eyes about him, and would wonder what kept me out so late, that I would run down to some of the places near for a change, and sleep a night there; and that's the reason, dear Radie, I can walk only a short way with you; but you are not afraid to walk a part of the way home without me? You are so sensible, and you have been, really, so very kind, I assure you I appreciate it, Radie — I do, indeed; and I'm very grateful — I am, upon my word."

Rachel answered with a heavy sigh.

CAAPTER XXIII.

HOW RACHEL SLEPT THAT NIGHT IN REDMAN'S FARM.

"ALLOW me — pray do," and he took her little bag from her hand. I hope you are not very tired, darling; you've been so very good; and your not afraid — you know the place is so quiet — of the little walk by yourself. Take my arm; I'll go as far as I can, but it is very late you know — and you are sure you are not afraid?"

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"I ought to be afraid of nothing now, Stanley, but I think I am afraid of everything."

"Merely a little nervous — it's nothing — I've been wretchedly since, myself; but, I'm so glad you are home again; you shall have no more trouble, I assure you; and not a creature suspects you have been from home. Old Tamar has behaved admirably."

Rachel sighed again, and said —

"Yes — poor Tamar."

"And now, dear, I'm afraid I must leave you — I'm very sorry; but you see how it is; keep to the shady side, close by the hedge, where the trees stop; but I'm certain you will meet no one. Tamar will tell you who has called — hardly anyone — I saw them myself every day at Brandon, and told them you were ill. You've been very kind, Radie; I assure you I'll never forgot it. You'll find Tamar up and watching for you — I arranged all that; and I need not say you'll be very careful not to let that little girl of yours hear anything. Good-night, Radie; God bless you, dear. I wish very much I could see you all the way, but there's a risk in it, you know. Good-night, dear Radie. By-the-bye, here's your bag; I'll take the rug, it's too heavy for you, and I may as well have it to Dollington."

He kissed her cheek in his slight way, and left her, and was soon on his way to Dollington, where he slept that night — rather more comfortably than he had done since Rachel's departure.

Rachel walked on swiftly. Very tired, but not at all sleepy — on the contrary, excited and nervous, and rather relieved, notwithstanding that Stanley had left her to walk home alone.

It seemed to her that more than a month had passed since she saw the mill road last. How much had hap-

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pened! how awful was the change! Familiar objects glided past her, the same, yet the fashion of the countenance was altered; there was something estranged and threatening.

The pretty parsonage was now close by: in the dews of night the spirit of peace and slumber smiled over it; but the sight of its steep roof and homely chimney-stacks smote with a shock at her brain and heart — a troubled moan escaped her. She looked up with the instinct of prayer, and clasped her hands on the handle of that little bag which had made the mysterious journey with her; a load which no man could lift lay upon her heart.

Then she commenced her dark walk up the mill road —her hands still clasped, her lips moving in broken appeals to Heaven. She looked neither to the right nor to the left, but passed on with inflexible gaze and hasty steps, like one who crosses a plank over some awful chasm.

Old Tamar, with her shawl over her head, sat listening for her young mistress's approach, on the little side-bench in the trellised porch, and tottered hastily forth to meet her at the garden wicket, whispering forlorn welcomes and thanksgivings, which Rachel answered only with a kiss.

The hall-door was now shut and bolted. Wise old Tamar had turned the key upon the sleeping girl. There was nothing to be feared from prying eyes and listening ears.

"You are cold, Miss Radie, and tired—poor thing! I lit a bit of fire in your room, miss; would you like me to go up stairs with you, miss?"

"Come."

And so up-stairs they went; and the young lady looked round with a strange anxiety, like a person seeking for something, and forgetting what; and, sitting down, she

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leaned her head on her hand with a moan, the living picture of despair.

"You've a headache, Miss Radie?" said the old woman, standing by her with that painful enquiry which sat naturally on her face.

"A heartache, Tamar."

"Let me help you off with these things, Miss Radie, dear."

The young lady did not seem to hear, but she allowed Tamar to remove her cloak and hat and handkerchief.

The old servant had placed the tea-things on the table, and what remained of that wine of which Stanley had partaken on the night from which the eclipse of Rachel's life dated. So, without troubling her with questions, she made tea, and then some negus, with careful and trembling hands.

"No," said Rachel, a little pettishly, and put it aside.

"See now, Miss Radie, dear. You look awful sick and tired. You are tired to death and pale, and sorry, my dear child; and to please old Tamar, you'll just drink this."

"Thank you, Tamar, I believe you are right."

The truth was she needed it; and in the same dejected way she sipped it slowly; and then there was a long silence — the silence of a fatigue, like that of fever, near which sleep refuses to come. But she sat in that waking lethargy in which are sluggish dreams of horror, and neither eyes nor ears for that which is before us.

When at last, with another great sigh, she lifted her head, her eyes rested on old Tamar's face, at the other side of the fire-place, with a dark, dull surprise and puzzle for a moment, as if she could not tell why she was there, or where the place was; and then rising up, with piteous look in her old nurse's face, she said, "Oh! Tamar, Tamar. It is a dreadful world."

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"So it is, Miss Radie," answered the old woman, her glittering eyes returning her sad gaze wofully. "Aye, so it is, sure! — and such it was and will be. For so the Scripture says — "Cursed is the ground for thy sake" — hard to the body — a vale of tears — dark to the spirit. But it is the hand of God that is upon you, and, like me, you will say at last, 'it is good for me that I have been in trouble.' Lie down, dear Miss Radie, and I'll read to you the blessed words of comfort that have been sealed for me ever since I saw you last. They have — but that's over."

And she turned up her pallid, puckered face, and, with a trembling and knotted pair of hands uplifted, she muttered an awful thanksgiving.

Rachel said nothing, but her eyes rested on the floor, and, with the quiet obedience of her early childhood, she did as Tamar said. And the old woman assisted her to undress, and so she lay down with a sigh in her bed. And Tamar, her round spectacles by this time on her nose, sitting at the little table by her pillow, read, in a solemn and somewhat quavering voice, such comfortable passages as came first to memory.

Rachel cried quietly as she listened, and at last, worn out by many feverish nights, and the fatigues of her journey, she fell into a disturbed slumber, with many startings and sudden wakings, with cries and strange excitement.

Old Tamar would not leave her, but kept her seat in the high-backed arm-chair throughout the night, like a nurse — as indeed she was — in a sick chamber. And so that weary night limped tediously away, and morning dawned, and tipped the discolored foliage of the glen with its glow, awaking the songs of all the birds, and dispersing the white mists of darkness. And Rachel, with a start awoke, and sat up with a wild look, and a cry —

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"What is it?"

"Nothing, dear Miss Radie — only poor old Tamar."

And a new day had begun.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DORCAS BRANDON PAYS RACHEL A VISIT.

It was not much past eleven that morning when the pony carriage from Brandon drew up before the little garden wicket of Redman's farm. The servant held the ponies' heads, and Miss Dorcas passed through the little garden, and met old Tamar in the porch.

"Better to-day, Tamar?" enquired this grand and beautiful young lady.

The sun glimmered through the boughs behind her; her face was in shade, and its delicate chiselling was brought out in soft reflected lights; and old Tamar looked on her in a sort of wonder, her beauty seemed so celestial and splendid.

"Well, she *was* better, though she had had a bad night. She was up and dressed, and this moment coming down, and would be very happy to see Miss Brandon, if she would step into the drawing-room.

Miss Brandon took old Tamar's hand gently and pressed it. I suppose she was glad and took this way of showing it; and tall, beautiful, graceful, in rustling silks, she glided into the tiny drawing-room silently, and sat down softly by the window, looking out upon the flowers and the falling leaves, mottled in light and shadow.

There came a step and a little rustling of feminine draperies, the small door opened, and Rachel entered, with her hand extended, and a pale smile of welcome.

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Women can hide their pain better than we men, and bear it better, too, except when *shame* drops fire into the dreadful chalice. But poor Rachel Lake had more than that stoical hypocrisy which enables the tortured spirits of her sex to lift a pale face through the flames and smile.

She was sanguine, she was genial and companionable, and her spirits rose at the sight of a friendly face. This transient spring and lighting up are beautiful — a glamour beguiling our senses.

"Rachel, dear, I'm so glad to see you," said Dorcas, placing her arms gently about her neck, and kissing her twice or thrice. There was something of sweetness and fondness in her tones and manner, which was new to Rachel, and she returned the greeting as kindly, and felt more like her former self. "You have been more ill than I thought, darling, and you are still from quite recovered."

Rachel's pale and sharpened features and dilated eye struck her with a painful surprise.

"I shall soon be as well as I am ever likely to be — that is, quite well," answered Rachel. "You have been very kind. I've heard of your coming here, and sending, so often."

They sat down side by side, and Dorcas held her hand.

"Maybe, Rachel dear, you would like to drive a little?"

"No, darling, not yet; it is very good of you."

"You have been so ill, my poor Rachel."

"Ill and troubled, dear — troubled in mind, and miserably nervous."

Poor Rachel! her nature recoiled from deceit, and she told, at all events as much of the truth as she dared.

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Dorcas' large eyes rested upon her with a grave enquiry, and then Miss Brandon looked down in silence for a while on the carpet, and was thinking a little sternly, maybe, and with a look of pain, still holding Rachel's hand, she said, with a sad sort of reproach in her tone,

"Rachel, dear, you have not told my secret?"

"No, indeed, Dorcas — never, and never will; and I think, though I have learned to fear death, I would rather die than let Stanley even suspect it."

She spoke with a sudden energy, which partook of fear and passion, and flushed her thin cheek, and made her languid eyes flash.

"Thank you, Rachel, my cousin Rachel, my only friend. I ought not to have doubted you," and she kissed her again. "Chelford had a note from Mr. Wylder this morning — another note — his coming delayed, and something of his having to see some person who is abroad," continued Dorcas, after a little pause. "You have heard, of course, of Mr. Wylder's absence?"

"Yes, something — *everything*," said Rachel, hurriedly, looking frowningly at a flower which she was twirling in her fingers.

"He chose an unlucky moment for his departure. I meant to speak to him and end all between us; and I would now write, but there is no address to his letters. I think Lady Chelford and her son begin to think there is more in this oddly-timed journey of Mr. Wylder's than first appeared. When I came into the parlor this morning I knew they were speaking of it. If he does not return in a day or two, Chelford, I am sure, will speak to me, and then I shall tell him my resolution."

"Yes," said Rachel.

"I don't understand his absence. I think *they* are puzzled, too. Can you conjecture why he is gone?"

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Rachel made no answer, but rose with a dreamy look, as if gazing at some distant object among the dark masses of forest trees, and stood before the window so looking across the tiny garden.

"I don't think, Rachel dear, you heard me?" said Dorcas.

"Can I conjecture why he is gone?" murmured Rachel, still gazing with a wild kind of apathy into distance. "Can I? What can it now be to you or me — why? There are many things best not conjectured about at all — some interesting, some abominable, some that pass all comprehension: I never mean to conjecture, if I can help it again."

And the wan oracle having spoken, she sat down in the same sort of abstraction again beside Dorcas, and she looked full in her cousin's eyes.

"I made you a voluntary promise, Dorcas, and now you will make me one. Of Mark Wylder I say this: his name has been for years hateful to me, and recently it has become frightful; and you will promise me simply this, that you will never ask me to speak again about him. Be he near, or be he far, I regard his very name with horror."

Dorcas returned her gaze with one of haughty amazement; and Rachel said,

"Well, Dorcas, you promise?"

"You speak truly, Rachel, you *have* a right to my promise: I give it."

"Dorcas, you are changed; have I lost your love for asking so poor a kindness?"

"I'm only disappointed, Rachel; I thought you would have trusted me, as I do you."

"It is an antipathy — an antipathy I cannot get over, dear Dorcas; you may think it a madness, but don't

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blame me. Remember I am neither well nor happy, and forgive what you cannot like in me. I have very few to love me now, and I thought you might love me, as I have begun to love you. Oh! Dorcas, darling, don't forsake me; I am very lonely here, and my spirits are gone, and I never needed kindness so much before."

And she threw her arms round her cousin's neck, and brave Rachel at last burst into tears.

Dorcas, in her strange way, was moved.

"I like you still, Rachel; I'm sure I'll always like you. You resemble me, Rachel: you are fearless and inflexible and generous. That spirit belongs to the blood of our strange race: all our women were so. Yes, Rachel, I do love you. I was wounded to find you had thoughts you would not trust to me; but I have made the promise, and I'll keep it; and I love you all the same."

"Thank you, Dorcas, dear. I like to call you cousin — kindred is so pleasant. Thank you, from my heart, for your love; you will never know, perhaps, how much it is to me."

The young queen looked on her kindly, but sadly, through her large, strange eyes, clouded with a pressage of futurity, and she kissed her again, and said —

"Rachel, dear, I have a plan for you and me: we shall be old maids, you and I, and live together like the ladies of Llangollen, careless and happy recluses. I'll let Brandon and abdicate. We will make a little tour together, when all this shall have blown over, in a few weeks, and choose our retreat; and with the winter's snow we'll vanish from Brandon, and appear with the early flowers at our cottage among the beautiful woods and hills of Wales. Will you come, Rachel?"

At sight of this castle or cottage in the air, Rachel lighted up. The little whim had something tranquilizing

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and balmy. It was escape flight from Gylingden — flight from Brandon — flight from Redman's Farm: they and all their hated associations would be far behind, and that awful page in her story, not torn out, indeed, but gummed down as it were, and no longer glaring and glowering in her eyes every moment of her waking life.

CHAPTER XXV.

CAPTAIN LAKE LOOKS IN AT NIGHTFALL.

In the queer little drawing-room of Redman's Farm it was twilight, so dense were the shadows from the great old chestnuts that surrounded it, before the sun was well beneath the horizon; and you could, from its darkened window, see its red beams still tinting the high grounds of Willerston, visible through the stems of the old trees that were massed in the near foregronnd.

A figure which had lost its energy — a face stamped with the lines and pallor of a dejection almost guilty — with something of the fallen grace and beauty of poor Margaret, as we see her with her forehead leaning on her slender hand, by the stirless spinning-wheel — the image of a strange and ineffaceable sorrow, sat Rachel Lake.

Tamar might glide in and out; her mistress did not speak; the shadows deepened round her, but she did not look up, nor call, in the old cheerful accents, for lights. No more roulades and ringing chords from the piano — no more clear spirited tones of the lady's voice sounded through the low ceilings of Redman's Farm, and thrilled

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with a haunting melody the deserted glen, wherein the birds had ended their vesper songs and gone to rest.

A step was heard at the threshold — it entered the hall; the door of the little chamber opened, and Stanley Lake entered, saying in a doubtful, almost timid way —

"It is I, Radie, come to thank you, and just to ask you how you do, and to say I'll never forget your kindness; upon my honor, I never can."

Rachel shuddered as the door opened, and there was a ghastly sort of expectation in her look. Imperfectly as it was seen, he could understand it. She did not bid him welcome or even speak. There was a silence.

"Now, you're not angry with me, Radie dear; I venture to say I suffer more than you: and how could I have anticipated the strange turn things have taken? You know how it all came about, and you must see I'm not really to blame, at least in intention, for all this miserable trouble. Come, Radie, let by-gones be by-gones. There's a good girl; won't you?"

"Aye, by-gones are by-gones; the past is, indeed, immutable; and the future is equally fixed, and more dreadful."

"Come, Radie; a clever girl like you can make your own future."

"And what do you want of me now?" she asked, with a fierce cold stare.

"But I did not say I wanted anything."

"Of course you do, or I should not have seen you. Mark me though, I'll go no further in the long route of wickedness you seem to have marked out for me. I'm sacrificed, it is true, but I won't renew my hourly horrors, and live under the rule of your diabolical selfishness."

"I don't know really, Radie, why you should talk as

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you do. I don't want you to do anything — upon my honor I don't — only just to exercise your common sense — and you have lots of sense, Radie. Don't you know very well, in a small place like this, they are all alive with curiosity? and if you choose to make such a tragedy figure, and keep moping and crying, and all that sort of thing, and look so *funeste* and miserable, you'll be sure to fix attention and set the whole d—d place speculating and gossiping? and really, Radie, you're making mountains of mole-hills. It is because you live so solitary here, and it *is* such a gloomy out-o'-the-way spot — so awfully dark and damp, nobody *could* be well here, and you really must change. It is the very temple of blue-devilry, and I assure you if I lived as you do I'd cut my throat before a month — you *musn't*. And old Tamar, you know, such a figure! She gives me the horrors, I assure you, whenever I look at her; you must not keep her, she's of no earthly use, poor old thing; and, you know, Radie, we're not rich enough — you and I — to support other people. You must really place yourself more cheerfully, and I'll speak to Chelford about Tamar. There's a very nice place — an asylum, or something, for old women — near — (Dollington he was going to say, but the associations were not pleasant) — near some of those little towns close to this, and he's a visitor, or governor, or whatever they call it. It is really not fair to expect you or me to keep people like that."

"She has not cost you much hitherto, Stanley, and she will give you very little trouble hereafter. I won't part with Tamar.

"She has not cost me much?" said Lake, whose temper was not of a kind to pass by anything. "No; of course, she has not. *I* can't afford a guinea. You're poor enough; but in proportion to my expenses — I'm a

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a great deal poorer than you; and I never said I gave her sixpence, did I? I have not got it to give, and I don't think she's fool enough to expect it; and, to say the truth, I don't care. I only advise you. There are some cheerful little cottages near the Green, in Gylingden, and I venture to think, this is one of the very gloomiest and most uncomfortable places you could have selected to live in."

Rachel looked drearily toward the window and sighed — it was almost a groan.

"It was cheerful always till this frightful week changed everything. Oh! why, why, why did you ever come?" She threw back her pale face, biting her lip, and even in that deepening gloom her small pearly teeth glimmered white; and then she burst into sobs and an agony of tears.

Captain Lake knew something of feminine paroxysms. Rachel was not given to hysterics. He knew this burst of anguish was unaffected. He was rather glad of it. When it was over he expected clearer weather and a calm. So he waited, saying now and then a soothing word or two. "There — there — there, Radie — there's a good girl. Never mind — there — there."

With Rachel this weakness did not last long. It was a gust — violent — soon over; and the "o'er-charged" heart and brain were relieved. And she pushed open the window, and stood for a moment in the chill air, and sighed, and whispered a word or two over the closing flowers of her little garden toward the darkening glen, and with another great sigh closed the window, and returned.

"Can I do anything, Radie? You're better now. I knew you would be. Shall I get some water from your room?"

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"No, Stanley; no, thank you. I'm very well now," she said, gently.

"Yes, I think so. I knew you'd be better." And he patted her shoulder with his soft hand; and then followed a short silence.

"I wish you were more pleasantly lodged, Radie; but we can speak of that another time."

"Yes — you're right. This place is dreadful, and its darkness dreadful; but light is still more dreadful now, and I think I'll change; but, as you say, there is time enough to think of all that."

"Quite so — time enough. By-the-by, Radie, you mentioned our old servant, whom my father thought so highly of — Jim Dutton — the other evening. I've been thinking of him, do you know, and I should like to find him out. He was a very honest fellow, and attached, and a clever fellow, too, my father thought; and *he* was a good judge. Hadn't you a letter from his mother lately? You told me so, I think; and if it is not too much trouble, dear Radie, would you allow me to see it?"

Rachel opened her desk, and silently selected one of those clumsy and original missives, directed in a staggering, round hand, on paper oddly shaped and thick, such as mixes not naturally with the aristocratic fabric, on which crests and ciphers are impressed, and placed it in her brother's hand.

"But you can't read it without light," said Rachel.

"No; but there's no hurry. Does she say where she is staying, or her son?"

"Both, I think," answered Rachel, languidly; "but he'll never make a servant for you — he's a rough creature, she says, and was a groom. You can't remember him, nor I either."

"Perhaps — very likely;" and he put the letter in his pocket.

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"I was thinking, Rachel, you could advise me, if you would, you are so clever, you know."

"Advise!" said Rachel, softly; but with a wild and bitter rage ringing under it. "I did advise when it was yet time to profit by advice. I bound you even by a promise to take it! but you know how it ended! You don't want my advice."

"But really I do, Radie. I quite allow I was wrong — worse than wrong — but where is the use of attacking me now, when I'm in this dreadful fix? I took a wrong step; and what I now have to do is to guard myself, if possible, from what I'm threatened with."

She fancied she saw his pale face grow more bloodless, even in the shadow where he sat.

"I know you too well, Stanley. You want *no* advice. You never took advice — you never will. Your desperate and ingrained perversity has ruined us both."

"I wish you'd let me know my own mind. I say I do — (and he uttered an unpleasant exclamation). Do you think I'll leave matters to take their course, and sit down here to be destroyed? I'm no such idiot. I tell you I'll leave no stone unturned to save myself; and, in some measure, *you* too, Radie. You don't seem to comprehend the tremendous misfortune that menaces me — *us* — *you* and me."

And he cursed Mark Wylder with a gasp of hatred not easily expressed.

She winced at the name, and brushed her hand to her ear.

"Don't — don't — *don't*," she said, vehemently.

"Well, what the devil do you mean by refusing to help me, even with a hint? I say — I *know* — all the odds are against us. It is sometimes a long game; but unless I'm sharp, I can't escape what's coming. I *can't* — you

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can't — sooner or later. It is in motion already — d — him — it's coming; and you expect me to do everything alone."

"I repeat it, Stanley," said Rachel, with a fierce cynicism in her low tones, "you don't want advice: you have formed your plan, whatever it is, and that plan you will follow, and no other, though men and angels were united to dissuade you."

There was a pause here, and a silence for a good many seconds.

"Well, perhaps, I *have* formed an outline of a plan, and it strikes me as very well I have — for I don't think you are likely to take that trouble. I only want to explain it, and get your advice, and any little assistance you can give me; and surely that is not unreasonable?"

"I have learned one secret, and am exposed to one danger. I have taken — to save you — it may be only a *respite* — one step, the remembrance of which is insupportable. But I was passive. I am fallen from light into darkness. There ends my share in your confidence and your fortunes. I will know no more secrets — no more disgrace; do what you will, you shall never use me again."

"Suppose these heroics of yours, Miss Radie, should contribute to bring about — to bring about the worst," said Stanley, with a sneer, through which his voice trembled.

"Let it come — my resolution is taken."

Stanley walked to the window, and in his easy way, as he would across a drawing-room to stand by a piano, and he looked out upon the trees, whose tops stood motionless against the darkened sky, like masses of ruins. Then he came back as gently as he had gone, and stood beside his sister; she could not see his yellow eyes now as he stood with his back to the window.

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"Well, Radie, dear — you have put your hand to the plough, and you shan't turn back now."

"You seem, sir, to fancy that I have no right to choose for myself," said Miss Rachel, spiritedly.

"Now, Radie, you must be reasonable — who have I to advise with?"

"Not me, Stanley — keep your plots and your secrets to yourself. In the guilty path you have opened for me one step more I will never tread."

"You'll see that you must, though. You'll see it in a little while. Self-preservation, dear Radie, is the first law of nature."

"For yourself, Stanley; and for *me*, self-sacrifice," she retorted, bitterly.

"Well, Radie, I may as well tell you one thing that I'm resolved to carry out," said Lake, with a dreamy serenity, looking on the dark carpet. "Do you recollect, Radie, what I said that morning when I first called here, and saw you?"

"Perhaps I do, but I don't know what you mean," answered she.

"I said *he* should go abroad, and so he shall," said Lake, in a very low tone, with a grim oath.

"Why do you talk that way? You terrify me," said Rachel, with one hand raised toward his face with a gesture of horror and entreaty, and the other closed upon his wrist.

"I say he *shall*, Radie."

"Has he lost his wits? I can't comprehend you — you frighten me, Stanley. You're talking wildly on purpose, I believe, to terrify me. You know the state I'm in — sleepless — half wild — all alone here. You're talking like a maniac. It's cruel — it's cowardly."

"I mean to *do* it — you'll see."

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Suddenly she hurried by him, and in a moment was in the little kitchen, with its fire and candle burning cheerily. Stanley Lake was at her shoulder as she entered, and both were white with agitation.

Old Tamar rose up affrighted, her stiff arms raised, and uttered a blessing. She did not know what to make of it. Rachel sat down upon one of the kitchen chairs, scarce knowing what she did, and Stanley Lake halted near the threshold — gazing for a moment as wildly as she, with the ghost of his sly smile on his smooth, cadaverous face.

"What ails her — is she ill, Master Stanley?" asked the old woman, returning with her white eyes the young man's strange yellow glare.

"I — I don't know — maybe — give her some water," said Lake.

"Glass of water — quick, child," cried old Tamar to Margery.

"Put it on the table," said Rachel, collected now, but pale, and somewhat stern.

"And now, Stanley, dear," said she, for just then she was past caring for the presence of the servants, "I hope we understand one another — at least that you do me. If not, it is not for want of distinctness on my part; and I think you had better leave me for the present, for, to say truth, I do not feel very well."

"Good-night, Radie — good-night, old Tamar. I hope, Radie, you'll be better — every way — when next I see you. Good-night."

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CHAPTER XXVI.

CAPTAIN LAKE FOLLOWS TO LONDON.

WYLDER'S levanting in this way was singularly disconcerting. The time was growing short. He wrote with a stupid good-humor, and an insolent brevity which took no account of Miss Brandon's position, or of her noble relatives. Lord Chelford plainly thought more than he cared to say; and his mother, who never minced matters, said perhaps more than she quite thought.

"Lake has gone up to town this morning — some business with his banker about his commission — and he says he will make Wylder out on his arrival, and write to me," said Lord Chelford.

Old Lady Chelford glanced across her shoulder at Dorcas, who leaned back in a great chair by the window, listlessly turning over a book.

"She's a strange girl, she does not seem to feel her situation — a most painful and critical one. That low, coarse creature must be looked up somehow."

So, in a quiet key, Miss Dorcas being at a distance, though in the same room, the dowager and her son discussed this unpleasant and very nervous topic.

That evening Captain Lake was in London, comfortably quartered in a private hotel, in one of the streets off Piccadilly. He went to his club and dined better than he had done for many days. He really enjoyed his three little courses — his pint of claret, his cup of *café noir* and his *chasse*; the great Babylon was his Jerusalem, and his spirit found rest there.

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After dinner he got into a cab, and drove to Mark Wylder's club. Was he there? — No. Had he been there to-day? No. Or within the last week? No; not for two months. He had left his address, and was in the country. The address to which his letters were forwarded was "The Brandon Arms, Gylingden."

So Captain Lake informed that functionary that his friend had come up to town, and asked him again whether he was quite certain that he had not called there or sent for his letters. No; nothing of the sort. Then Captain Lake asked to see the billiard-marker, who was likely to know something about him. But he knew nothing. He certainly had not been at the "Lark's Nest," which was kept by the marker's venerable parent, and was a favorite haunt of the gay Lieutenant.

Then our friend Stanley, having ruminated for a minute, pencilled a little note to Mark, telling him that he was staying at Muggeridge's Hotel, 7 Hanover Street, Piccadilly, and wished *most* particularly to see him for a few minutes; and this he left with the hall-porter, to give him should he call.

Then Lake got into his cab again, having learned that he had lodgings in St. James's Street when he did not stay at the Club, and to these he drove. There he saw Mrs. M'Intyre, a Caledonian lady, at this hour somewhat mellow and talkative; but she could say nothing to the purpose either. Mr. Wylder had not been there for nine weeks and three days; and would owe her, on Saturday next, twenty-five guineas. So here, too, he left a little note to the same effect; and, reëntering his cab, he drove a long way, and past St. Paul's, and came at last to a court, outside which he had to dismount from his vehicle, entering the grimy quadrangle through a narrow passage. He had been there that evening before, shortly after his

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arrival, with old Mother Dutton, as he called her, about her son, Jim.

Jim was in London looking for a situation, all which pleased Captain Lake; and he desired that she should send him to his hotel to see him in the morning.

But being in some matters of a nervous and impatient temperament, he had come again, as we see, hoping to find Jim there, and to anticipate his interview of the morning.

This time he went to a somewhat mysterious and barricadoed place, where, in a blaze of light, in various rooms, gentlemen in hats, and some in great coats, were playing roulette or hazard; and I am sorry to say, that our friend, Captain Lake, played first at one, and then at the other with what success exactly I don't know. But I don't think it was very far from four o'clock in the morning when he let himself into his family hotel with that latch-key, the cock's tail of Micyllus, with which good-natured old Mrs. Muggeridge obliged the good-looking Captain.

Captain Lake having given orders the evening before, that anyone who might call in the morning, and ask to see him, should be shown up to his bed-room *sans ceremonie*, was roused from deep slumber at a quarter past ten, by a knock at his door, and a waiter's voice.

"Who's that?" drawled Captain Lake, rising, pale and half awake, on his elbow, and not very clear where he was.

"The man, sir, as you left a note for yesterday, which he desires to see you?"

"Tell him to step in."

So out went the waiter in pumps, and the sound of thick shoes was audible on the lobby, and a sturdier knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," said the Captain.

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And Jim Dutton entered the room, and, closing the door, made at the side of the bed his reverence, consisting of a nod and a faint pluck at the lock of hair over his forehead.

Now Stanley Lake had, perhaps, expected to see some one else; for though this was a very respectable-looking fellow for his walk in life, the gay young officer stared full at him, with a frightened and rather dreadful countenance, and actually sprang from his bed at the other side, with an ejaculation at once tragic and blasphemous.

The man plainly had not expected to produce any such result, and looked very queer. Perhaps he thought something had occurred to affect his personal appearance; perhaps some doubt about the Captain's state of health, and misgiving as to delirium tremens may have flickered over his brain.

They were staring at one another across the bed, the Captain in his shirt.

At last the gallant officer seemed to discover things as they were.

"And so it is you, Jim," said the Captain. "And how do you do — quite well, Jim — and out of place? You've been hurt in the foot, eh? so old — your — Mrs. Dutton tells me, but that won't signify. I was dreaming when you came in; not quite awake yet, hardly; just wait a bit till I get my slippers on; and this" — So into his red slippers he slid, and got his great shawl dressing-gown, about his slender person, and greeted Jim Dutton again in very friendly fashion, enquiring very particularly how he had been ever since, and what his mother was doing; and I'm afraid not listening to Jim's answers as attentively as one might have expected.

Whatever may have been his intrinsic worth, Jim was not polished, and spoke, moreover, an uncouth dialect,

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which broke out now and then. But he was in a sort of way attached to the Lake family; the son of an hereditary tenant on that estate, which had made itself wings, and flown away like the island of Laputa.

When they had talked together for a while, the Captain said —

"The fact is, it is not quite on me you would have to attend; the situation, perhaps, is better. You have no objection to travel. You *have* been abroad, you know; and of course wages and all that will be in proportion."

Well, Jim had not any objection to speak of.

"What's wanted is a trustworthy man, perfectly steady, you see, and a fellow who knows how to hold his tongue."

The last condition, perhaps, struck the man as a little odd; he looked a little confusedly, and he conveyed that he would not like to be in anything that was not quite straight.

"Quite straight, sir!" repeated Stanley Lake, looking round on him, sternly; "neither should I, I fancy. You are to suppose the case of a gentleman who is nursing his estate — you know what that means — and wants to travel, and keep quite quiet, and who requires a steady, trustworthy man to look after him, in such a way as I shall direct, with very little trouble and capital pay. I have a regard for you, Dutton; and seeing so good a situation was to be had, and thinking you the fittest man I know, I wished to serve you and my friend at the same time."

Dutton became grateful and docile upon this.

"There are reasons, quite honorable I need not tell you, which make it necessary, James Dutton, that the whole of this affair should be kept perfectly to ourselves; you are not to repeat one syllable I say to you to your mother, do you mind, or to any other person living. The

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gentleman is liberal, and if you can just hold your tongue, you will have little trouble in satisfying him upon all other points. But if you can't be quite silent, you had better, I frankly tell you, decline the situation, excellent in all respects as it is."

"I'm a man, sir, as can be close enough."

"So much the better. You don't drink?"

Dutton colored a little and coughed and said —

"No, sir."

"You have your papers?"

"Yes, sir."

So Jim Dutton made his bow, and departed; and Captain Lake continued to watch the door for some seconds after his departure, as if he could see his retreating figure through it. And, said he, with an oath, and his hand to his forehead, over his eyebrow —

"It *is* the most unaccountable thing in nature!"

Then, after a reverie of some seconds, the young gentleman applied himself energetically to his toilet; and coming down to his sittting room, he looked into his morning paper, and then into the street and told the servant as he sat down to breakfast, that he expected a gentleman named Wylder to call that morning, and to be sure to show him up directly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LAWYER LARKIN'S MIND BEGINS TO WORK.

THAT morning Lake's first report upon his inquisition into the whereabouts of Mark Wylder — altogether disap-

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pointing and barren — reached Lord Chelford in a short letter; and a similar one only shorter, found Lawyer Larkin in his pleasant breakfast parlor.

Now this proceeding of Mr. Wylder's at this particular time, struck the righteous attorney, and reasonably, as a very serious and unjustifiable step. It actually threatened the engagement which was so near its accomplishment. Some most powerful and mysterious cause must undoubtedly be in operation to induce so sharp a "party," to risk so huge a prize. Whatever eminent qualities Mark Wylder might be deficient in, the attorney very well knew that cunning was not among the number.

"It is nothing of the nature of debt — plenty of money. It is nothing that money can buy off easily either, though he does not like parting with it. Ten — *twenty* to one — it is the old story — some unfortunate female connection — some ambiguous relation, involving a doubtful marriage."

After this Mr. Larkin's ruminations darkened, and grew, perhaps, less distinct. He had no particular objection to a mystery. In fact, he rather liked it, provided he was admitted to confidence. A mystery implied a difficulty of a delicate and formidable sort; and such difficulties were not disadvantageous to a clever and firm person, who might render himself very necessary to an embarrassed principal with plenty of money.

Mr. Larkin had a way of gently compressing his under-lip between his finger and thumb — a mild pinch, a reflective caress — when contemplations of this nature occupied his brain. The silver light of heaven faded from his long face, a deep shadow of earth came thereon, and his small, dove-like eyes grew intense, hungry, and rat-like.

When Jos Larkin had speculated for some time longer he said quietly to himself —

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"Yes."

And then he ordered his dog-cart, and drove off to Dollington, and put up at Johnson's Hotel, where Stanley Lake had slept on the night of his sister's return from London. Mr. Larkin got into a little brown room, looking into the inn garden, and called for some luncheon, and pen and ink, and had out a sheaf of law papers he had brought with him, tied up in professional red tape; and asked the waiter, with a grand smile and recognition, how he did; and asked him next for his good friend, Mr. Johnson; and trusted that business was improving; and would be very happy to see him for two or three minutes, if he could spare time.

So, in due time, in came the corpulent proprietor, and Lawyer Larkin shook hands with him, and begged him to sit down, like a man who confers a distinction; and assured him that Lord Edward Buxleigh, whom he had recommended to stay at the house for the shooting, had been very well pleased with the accommodation — very highly so indeed — and his lordship had so expressed himself when they had last met at Sir Hugh Huxterly's, of Hatch Court.

Then he inquired after the two heifers that Mr. Johnson was so good as to feed for him on his little farm; and then he mentioned that his friend, Captain Lake, who was staying with him at his house at Gylingden, was also very well satisfied with his accommodation, when he, too, at Lawyer Larkin's recommendation, had put up for a night at Johnson's Hotel; and it was not every house which could satisfy London swells of Captain Lake's fashion and habits, he could tell him.

Then followed some conversation which, I dare say, interested the lawyer more than he quite showed in Mr. Johnson's company. For when that pleased and com-

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municative host had withdrawn, Jos Larkin made half-a-dozen little entries in his pocket-book, with "Statement of Mr. William Johnson," and the date of their conversation, at the head of the memorandum.

So the lawyer, having to run on as far as Charteris by the goods-train, upon business, walked down to the station, where, having half-an-hour to wait, he fell into talk with the station-master, whom he also knew, and afterwards with Tom Christmas, the porter; and in the waiting-room he made some equally business-like memoranda.

By the time his little book was again in the bottom of his pocket, the train had arrived, and doors swung open and clapt, and people got in and out to the porter's accompaniment of "Dollington — Dollington — Dollington!" and Lawyer Larkin took his place, and glided away to Charteris, where he had a wait of two hours for the return train, and a good deal of barren talk with persons at the station, rewarded by one or two sentences worth noting, and accordingly duly entered in the same little pocket-book.

Thus was the good man's day consumed; and when he mounted his dog-cart, at Dollington, wrapped his rug about his legs, whip and reins in hand, and the ostler buckled the apron across, the sun was setting redly behind the hills; and the air was frosty, and the night dark, as he drew up before his own door-steps, near Gylingden. A dozen lines of one of these pages would suffice to contain the fruits of his day's work; and yet the lawyer was satisfied, and even pleased with it, and eat his late dinner very happily; and went to bed after a calm and pleased review of his memoranda, and slept the sleep of the righteous.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARK WYLDER'S SUBMISSION.

EVERY day the position grew more critical and embarrassing. The day appointed for the nuptials was now very near, and the bridegroom not only out of sight but wholly untraceable. What was to be done?

A long letter from Stanley Lake told Lord Chelford, in detail, all the measures adopted by that energetic young gentleman for the discovery of the truant knight: —

"I have been at his club repeatedly, as also at his lodgings — still *his*, though he has not appeared there since his arrival in town. The billiard-marker at his club knows his haunts; and I have taken the liberty to employ, through him, several persons who are acquainted with his appearance, and, at my desire, frequent those places with a view to discovering him, and bringing about an interview with me.

"He was seen, I have reason to believe, a day or two before my arrival here, at a low place called the "Millers' Hall," in the City, where members of the "Fancy" resort, at one of their orgies, but not since. I have left notes for him wherever he is likely to call, entreating an interview.

"On my arrival I was sanguine about finding him; but I regret to say my hopes have very much declined, and I begin to think he must have changed his quarters. If you have heard from him within the last few days, perhaps you

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will be so kind as to send me the envelope of his letter, which, by its postmark, may possibly throw some light, or hint some theory as to his possible movements. He is very clever; and having taken this plan of concealing his residence, will conduct it skilfully. If the case were mine, I should be much tempted to speak with the detective authorities, and try whether they might not give their assistance, of course without *éclat*. But this is, I am aware, open to objection, and, in fact, would not be justifiable, except under the very peculiar urgency of the case.

"Will you be so good as to say what you think upon this point; also, to instruct me what you authorise me to say should I be fortunate enough to meet him. At present I am hardly in a position to say more than an acquaintance — never, I fear, very cordial on his part — would allow; which, of course, could hardly exceed a simple mention of your anxiety to be placed in communication with him.

"If I might venture to suggest, I really think a peremptory alternative should be presented to him. Writing, however, in ignorance of what may since have passed at Brandon, I may be assuming a state of things which, possibly, no longer exists. Pray understand that in any way you please to employ me, I am entirely at your command. It is also possible, though I hardly hope it, that I may be able to communicate something definite by this evening's post.

Whatever may be the cause of Mark Wylder's present line of conduct, it appears to me that if he really did attend that meeting at the "Millers' Hall," there cannot be anything *very* serious weighing upon his spirits. My business will detain me here, I rather think, three days longer."

By return of post Lord Chelford wrote to Stanley Lake: —

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"I am very much obliged to you for all the trouble you have taken. The measures which you have adopted are, I think, most judicious; and I should not wish, on consideration, to speak to any official person. I think it better to trust entirely to the means you have already employed. I do not desire to speculate as to the causes of Wylder's extraordinary conduct; but, all the circumstances considered, I cannot avoid concluding, as you do, that there must be some *very* serious reason for it. I enclose a note, which, perhaps, you will be so good as to give him, should you meet before you leave town."

"The note to Mark Wylder was in these terms: —

"DEAR WYLDER,— I had hoped to see you before now at Brandon. Your unexplained absence longer continued, you must see, will impose on me the necessity of offering an explanation to Miss Brandon's friends, of the relations, under these strange circumstances, in which you and she are to be assumed to stand. You have accounted in no way for your absence. You have not even suggested a postponement of the day fixed for the completion of your engagement to that young lady; and, as her guardian, I cannot avoid telling her, should I fail to hear explicitly from you within three days from this date, that she is at liberty to hold herself acquitted of her engagement to you. I do not represent to you how much reason every one interested by relationship in that young lady has to feel offended at the disrespect with which you have treated her. Still hoping, however, that all may yet be explained,

"I remain, my dear Wylder, yours very truly,

"CHELFORD."

Lord Chelford had not opened the subject to Dorcas.

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Neither had old Lady Chelford, although she harangued her son upon it as volubly and fiercely as if he had been Mark Wylder in person, whenever he and she were *tête-à-tête.* She was extremely provoked, too, at Dorcas's evident repose under this astounding treatment, and was enigmatically sarcastic upon her when they sat together in the drawing-room.

This evening, in the drawing-room, there were two very pretty ormolu caskets upon the little marble table.

"So, so, something new, and very elegant and pretty," said the old lady holding her head high, and looking as if she were disposed to be propitiated. "I think I can risk a conjecture. Mr. Wylder is about to reappear, and has despatched these heralds of approach, no doubt, suitably freighted, to plead for his re-acceptance into favor. You have heard, then, from Mr. Wylder, my dear Dorcas?"

"No, Lady Chelford," said the young lady, with a grave serenity, turning her head leisurely towards her.

"No? Oh, then where is my son? He, perhaps, can explain; and pray, my dear, what are these?"

"These caskets contain the jewels which Mr. Wylder gave me about six weeks since. I had intended restoring them to him; but as his return is delayed, I mean to place them in Chelford's hands; because I have made up my mind, a week ago, to put an end to this odious engagement. It is all over."

Lady Chelford stared at the audacious young lady with a look of incensed amazement for some seconds, unable to speak.

"Upon my word, young lady! vastly fine and independent! You *chasser* Mr. Wylder without one moment's notice, and without deigning to consult me, or any other person capable of advising you. You are about to commit as gross and indelicate a breach of faith as I recol-

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lect anywhere to have heard of. What will be thought? — what will the world say? Will you be good enough to explain yourself? *I'll* not undertake your excuses, I promise you."

"Excuses! I don't think of excuses, Lady Chelford; no person living has a right to demand one."

"I don't believe you are serious, Dorcas," said Lady Chelford, more anxiously, and also more gently. I can't suppose it. I'm an old woman, my dear, and I shan't trouble you very long. I can have no object in misleading you, and you have never experienced from me anything but kindness and affection. I think you might trust me a little, Dorcas — but, that, of course, is for you, you are your own mistress now — but, at least, you may reconsider the question you propose deciding in so extraordinary a way. I allow you might do much better than Mark Wylder, but also worse. He has not a title, and his estate is not enough to carry the point *d force d'argent;* I grant all that. But *together* the estates are more than most titled men possess; and the real point is the fatal slip in your poor uncle's will, which makes it so highly important that you and Mark should be united; bear that in mind, dear Dorcas. You must not act precipitately, and under the influence of mere pique. His absence, I will lay my life, will be satisfactorily accounted for; he has set his heart upon this marriage, and I really think you will almost drive him mad if you act as you threaten."

"You have, indeed, dear Lady Chelford, been always very kind to me, and I do trust you," replied the beautiful heiress, turning her large, shadowy eyes upon the dowager, and speaking in slow and silvery accents, somehow very melancholy. "I dare say it is very imprudent, and I don't deny that Mr. Wylder may have

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reason to complain of me, and the world will not spare me either; but I have quite made up my mind, and nothing can ever change me; all is over between me and Mr. Wylder — quite over — for ever."

"Upon my life, young lady, this is being very sharp, indeed. Mr. Wylder's business detains him a day or two longer than he expected, and he is punished by a final dismissal!"

"So far, dear Lady Chelford, from provoking me to this decision, his absence is, I assure you, the sole reason of my having delayed to inform him of it."

"And I assure you, Miss Brandon, *I* shan't undertake to deliver your monstrous message. He will probably be here to-morrow. You have prepared an agreeable surprise for him. You shall have the pleasure of administering it yourself, Miss Brandon. For my part, I have done my duty, and here and now renounce all responsibility in the future management of your affairs."

Saying which, she rose, in a stately and incensed way, and looking with flashing eyes over Dorcas's head to a far corner of the apartment, without another word she rustled slowly and majestically from the drawing-room.

She was a good deal shocked, and her feelings quite changed, however, when next morning the post brought a letter to Chelford from Mark Wylder, bearing the Boulogne post-mark. It said —

"DEAR CHELFORD, — Don't get riled; but the fact is I don't see my way out of my present business" — (this last word was substituted for another, crossed out, which looked like "scrape") — "for a couple of months, maybe. Therefore you see, my liberty and wishes being at present interfered with, it would be very hard lines if poor Dorcas should be held to her bargain. Therefore, I

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will say this — *she is quite free* for me. Only, of course I don't decline to fulfil my part whenever at liberty. In the meantime, I return the miniature, with her hair in it, which I constantly wore about me since I got it. But I have no right to it any longer, till I know her decision. Don't be too hard on me, dear Chelford. It is a very old lark has got me into this present vexation. In the meantime, I wish to make it quite clear what I mean. Not being able by any endeavor" — (here a nautical phrase scratched out, and "endeavor" substituted) — "of mine to be up to time, and as these are P. P. affairs I must only forfeit. I mean, I am at the lady's disposal, either to fulfil my engagement the earliest day I can, or to be turned adrift. That is all I can say.

"In more trouble than you suppose, I remain, dear Chelford, yours, whatever you may think, faithfully,"

"MARK WYLDER."

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW MARK WYLDER'S DISAPPEARANCE AFFECTED HIS FRIENDS.

LADY CHELFORD'S wrath was now turned anew upon Wylder — and the inconvenience of having no visible object on which to expend it was once more painfully felt. Railing at Mark Wylder was, alas! beating the air. The most crushing invective was — thanks to his adroit mystification — simply a soliloquy. Poor Lady Chelford, who loved to give the ingenious youngsters of both sexes, when occasion invited, a piece of her mind was here — absolutely tongue-tied! If it had been possible to tell

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Wylder what she thought of him it would, perhaps, have made her more tolerable than she was, for some days after the arrival of that letter, to other members of the family.

The idea of holding Miss Brandon to this engagement, proroguing her nuptials from day to day, to convenience the bridegroom — absent without explanation — was quite untenable. Fortunately, the marriage, considering the antiquity and the territorial position of the two families who were involved, was to have been a very quiet affair indeed — no festivities — nothing of the nature of a county gala — no concussions of society — a dignified but secluded marriage.

This divested the inevitable dissolution of these high relations of much of its *éclat* and ridicule.

Of course there was abundance of talk. Scarce a man or woman in the shire but had a theory or a story — sometimes bearing hard on the lady, sometimes on the gentleman; still it was an abstract breach of promise, and would have much improved by some outward and visible sign of disruption and disappointment. Some concrete pageantries to be abolished and removed; flagstaffs, for instance, and banners, marquees, pyrotechnic machinery, and long tiers of rockets, festoons of evergreens, triumphal arches with appropriate mottoes, to come down and hide themselves away, would have been pleasant to the many who like a joke, and to the few who love a sneer.

But there were no such fopperies to hurry off the stage disconcerted. In the autumnal sun, among the thinning foliage of the noble trees, Brandon Hall looked solemn, sad, and magnificent, as usual, with a sort of retrospective serenity, buried in old-world glories and sorrows, and heeding little the follies and scandals of the hour.

In the same way Miss Brandon, with Lord and Lady

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Chelford, was seen next Sunday afternoon, serene and unchanged, in the great carved oak Brandon pew, raised like a dais two feet at least above the level of mere Christians, who frequented the family chapel. When the good Vicar, the Rev. William Wylder, at three o'clock, performed his holy office in reading desk and pulpit, the good folk from Gylingden assembled in force, saw nothing noticeable in the demeanor or appearance of the great Brandon heiress. No shadow of trouble on that calm marble beauty, no light of joy, but a serene superb indifference.

Of course there was some satire in Gylingden; but, in the main, it was a loyal town, and true to its princess. Mr. Wylder's settlements were not satisfactory, it was presumed, or the young lady could not bring herself to like him, or however it came to pass, one way or another, that sprig of willow inevitably to be mounted by hero or heroine upon such equivocal occasions was placed by the honest town by no means in her breast, but altogether in his button-hole.

Gradually, in a more authentic shape, information traceable to old Lady Chelford, through some of the old county families who visited at Brandon, made it known that Mr. Wylder's affairs were not at present by any means in so settled a state as was supposed; and that a long betrothal not being desirable on the whole, Miss Brandon's relatives thought it advisable that the engagement should terminate, and had so decided, Mr. Wylder having, very properly, placed himself absolutely in their hands.

As for Mark, it was presumed, he had gone into voluntary banishment.

It was know to be quite final, and as the lady evinced no chagrin and affected no unusual spirits, but held, swanlike and majestic, the even tenor of her way, there

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was on the whole, little doubt anywhere that the gentleman had received his *congé* and was hiding his mortification and healing his wounds in Paris or Vienna, or some other suitable retreat.

But though the good folk of Gylingden, in general, cared very little how Mark Wylder might have disposed of himself, there was one inhabitant to whom his absence was fraught with very serious anxiety and inconvenience. This was his brother, William, the Vicar.

Poor William, sound in morals, free from vice, no dandy, a quiet, bookish, self-denying mortal, was yet, when he took holy orders and quitted his chambers at Cambridge, as much in debt as many a scamp of his college. He had been, perhaps, a little foolish and fanciful in the article of books, and had committed a serious indiscretion in the matter of a carved oak bookcase; and, worse still, he had published a slender volume of poems, and a bulkier tome of essays, scholastic and theologic, both which ventures, notwithstanding their merits, had turned out unhappily; and worse still, he had lent that costly loan, his sign manual, on two or three occasions, to friends in need, and one way or another found that, on winding up and closing his Cambridge life, his assets fell short of his liabilities very seriously.

He had staved off some of his troubles by a little loan from an insurance company, but the premium and the instalments were disproportioned to his revenue, and indeed very nearly frightful to contemplate. The Cambridge tradesmen were growing minatory; and there was a stern person who held a renewal of one of his old paper subsidies to the necessities of his scampish friend Clarkson, who was plainly a difficult and awful character to deal with.

Dreadful as were the tradesmen's peremptory and wrath-

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ful letters, the promptitude and energy of this latter personage were such as to produce a sense of immediate danger so acute that the sacred Vicar opened his dismal case to his brother Mark.

Mark, sorely against the grain, and with no good grace, at last consented to advance 300*l.* in this dread emergency, and the Vicar blessed his benefactor, and in his closet on his knees, shed tears of thankfulness over his deliverance, and the sky opened and the flowers looked bright, and life grew pleasant once more.

But the 300*l.* were not yet in his pocket, and Mark had gone away; and although of course the loan was sure to come, the delay — any delay in his situation — was critical and formidable. Still he would not believe it possible that he could forget his promise, or shut up his bowels of mercy, or long delay the remittance which he knew to be so urgently needed.

In the meantime, however, a writ reached the hand of the poor Vicar of Naunton Friars, who wrote in eager and confused terror to a friend in the Middle Temple on the dread summons, and learned that he was now "in court," and must "appear," or suffer judgment by default.

The end was that he purchased a respite of three months, by adding thirty pounds to his debt, and so was thankful for another deliverance, and was confident of the promised subsidy within a week, or at all events a fortnight, or at worst — three months was a long reprieve — and the subsidy must arrive before the emergency.

When the "service" was over, the neighborly little congregation, with a sprinkling of visitors to Gylingden, for sake of its healing waters, broke up, and loitered in the vicinity of the porch, to remark on the sermon or the weather, and ask one another how they did, and to see the

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Brandon family enter their carriage; and, this incident over, they broke up gradually into little groups, in Sunday guise, and many colors, some for a ramble on the common, and some to tea, according to the primitive hours that ruled old Gylingden.

The Vicar, and John Hughes, clerk and sexton, were last out; and the reverend gentleman, thin and tall, in white necktie, and black, a little threadbare, stood on the steps of the porch, in a sad abstraction. The sound of the oak door closing heavily behind him and John Hughes, and the key revolving in the lock recalled him, and with a sigh and a smile, and a kindly nod to John, he looked up and round on the familiar and pretty scenery undecided. It was not quite time to go home; his troubles were heavy upon him, too, just then; and the quiet of the road, and the sweet air and sunshine, tempted him to walk off the chill and fever of the fit.

As he passed the little cottage where old Widow Maddock lay sick, Rachel Lake emerged. He was not glad. He would rather have had his sad walk in his own shy company. But there she was — he could not pass her by; so he stopped, and lifted his hat and greeted her; and then they shook hands. She was going his way. He looked wistfully on the little hatch of old Widow Maddock's cottage; for he felt a pang of reproach at passing her door; but there was no comfort then in his thoughts, only a sense of fear and hopeless fatigue.

"How is poor old Mrs. Maddock?" he asked; "you have been visiting the sick and afflicted, and I was passing by; but, indeed, if I were capable at this moment I should not fail to see her, poor creature."

There was something apologetic and almost miserable in his look as he said this.

"She is not better; but you have been very good to

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her, and she is very grateful; and I am glad," said Rachel, "that I happened to light on you."

They were by this time walking side by side; and she glanced at him enquiringly; and he thought that the handsome girl looked rather thin and pale.

"You once said," Miss Lake resumed, "that sooner or later I should be taught the value of religion, and would learn to prize my great privileges; and that for some spirits the only approach to the throne of mercy was through great tribulation. I have often thought since of those words, and they have begun, for me, to take the spirit of a prophecy — sometimes that is — but at others they sound differently — like a dreadful menace — as if my afflictions were only to bring me to the gate of life to find it shut."

"Knock, and it shall be opened," said the Vicar; but the comfort was sadly spoken, and he sighed.

"But is there not a time, Mr. Wylder, when He shall have shut the door, and are there not some who, crying to him to open, shall yet remain for ever in outer darkness."

"I see, dear Miss Lake, that your mind is at work — it is a good influence — at work upon the great theme which every mortal spirit ought to be employed upon."

"My fears are at work; my mind is altogether dark and turbid; I am sometimes at the brink of despair."

"Take comfort from those fears. There is hope in that despair;" and he looked at her with great interest in his gentle eyes.

She looked at him, and then away toward the declining sun, and she said despairingly —

"I cannot comprehend you."

Miss Lake's way lay by a footpath across a corner of the park to Redman's Dell. So they crossed the stile,

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and still conversing, followed the footpath under the hedge-row of the pretty field, and crossing another stile, entered the park.

CHAPTER XXX.

IN BRANDON PARK.

STILL pursuing her solemn and melancholy discourse, the young lady followed the path, accompanied by the Vicar.

"Truth," said the Vicar, "your mind is disturbed, but not by doubt. No; it is by *truth*." He glanced aside at the tarn where I had seen the phantom, and by which their path now led them — "You remember Parnell's pretty image?

> So when a smooth expanse receives impreet
> Calm nature's image on its watery breast,
> Down bend the banks, the trees depending grow,
> And skies beneath with answering colors glow;
> But if a stone the gentle scene divide,
> Swift ruffling circles curl on every side,
> And glimmering fragments of a broken sun,
> Banks, trees, and skies, in thick disorder run.

But, as I said, it is not a doubt that agitates your mind — that is well represented by the "stone," that subsides and leaves the pool clear, it maybe, but stagnant as before. Oh, no; it is an angel who comes down and troubles the water."

"What a heavenly evening!" said a low, sweet voice, but with something insidious in it, close at his shoulder.

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With a start, Rachel glanced back, and saw the pale, peculiar face of her brother. His yellow eyes for a moment gleamed into hers, and then on the Vicar, and, with his accustomed smile, he extended his hand.

"How do you do? — better, I hope, Radie? How are you, William?"

Rachel grew deadly pale, and then flushed, and then was pale again.

"I thought, Stanley, you were in London."

"So I was; but I arrived here this morning; I'm staying for a few days at the Lodge — Larkin's house; you're going home, I suppose, Radie?"

"Yes — oh, yes — but I don't know that I'll go this way. You say you must return to Gylingden now, Mr. Wylder; I think I'll turn also, and go home that way."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," said the Vicar, truly as well as kindly, for he had grown interested in their conversation; "but I fear you are tired" — he looked very kindly on her pale face — "and you know it will cost you a walk of more than two miles."

"I forgot — yes — I believe I *am* a *little* tired; I'm afraid I have led *you*, too, farther than you intended." She fancied that her sudden change of plan on meeting her brother would appear odd.

"I'll see you a little bit on your way home, Radie," said Stanley.

It was just what she wished to escape. She was more nervous, though not less courageous than formerly. But the old, fierce, defiant spirit awoke. Why should she fear Stanley, or what could it be to her whether he was beside her in her homeward walk?

So the Vicar made his adieux there, and began, at a brisker pace, to retrace his steps toward Gylingden; and she and Stanley, side by side, walked on toward Redman's Dell.

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"What a charming park! and what delightful air, Radie; and the weather so very delicious. They talk of Italian evenings; but there is a pleasant sharpness in English evenings quite peculiar. Is not there just a little suspicion of frost — not actually cold, but crisp and sharp — unspeakably exhilarating; now really, this evening *is* quite celestial."

"I've just been listening to a good man's conversation, and I wish to reflect upon it," said Rachel, very coldly.

"Quite so; that is, of course, when you are alone," answered Stanley, serenely. "William was always a very clever fellow to talk — very well read in theology — is not he? — it is a pity he is not quite straight, or at least more punctual, in his money affairs."

"He is distressed for money? William Wylder is distressed for money! Do you mean *that?*" said Rachel, in a tone of sudden surprise and energy, turning full upon him, and stopping short.

"Oh, dear! no — not the least distressed that I ever heard of," laughed Stanley coldly — "only just a little bit roguish, maybe."

"That's so like you, Stanley," said the young lady, with a quiet scorn, resuming her onward walk.

"How very beautiful that clump of birch trees is, near the edge of the slope there; you really can't imagine, who are always here, how very intensely a person who had just escaped from London enjoys all this."

"I don't think, Stanley," said the young lady, coldly, and looking straight before her as she walked, "you ever cared for natural scenery — or liked the country — and yet you are here. I don't think you ever loved me, or cared whether I was alone or in company; and yet seeing — for you *did* see it — that I would now rather be alone, you persist in walking with me, and talking of trees

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and air and celestial evenings, and thinking of something quite different. Had you not better turn back to Gylingden, or the Lodge, or wherever you mean to pass the evening, and leave me to my quiet walk and my solitude?"

"In a few minutes, dear Radie — you are so odd. I really believe you think no one can enjoy a ramble like this but yourself."

"Come, Stanley, what do you want?" said his sister, stopping short, and speaking with the flush of irritation on her cheek — "do you mean to walk to Redman's Dell, or have you anything unpleasant to say?"

"Neither, I hope," said the Captain, with his sleepy smile.

"I don't understand you, Stanley, I am always uncomfortable when you are near me. You stand there like an evil spirit, with some purpose which I cannot divine; but you shall not ensnare me. Pursue your own plots — your wicked plots; but let me rest. I *will* be released, sir, from your presence."

"Really this is very fine, Radie, considering how we are related; I'm Mephistophiles, I suppose, and you Margaret, or some other simple heroine — rebuking the fiend in the majesty of your purity."

"I tell you, Stanley, I feel that you design employing me in some of your crooked plans. I have horrible reasons, as you know, for avoiding you, and so I will. I hope I may never desire to see you alone, again, but if I do, it shall not be to receive, but to impose commands. You had better return to Gylingden, and leave me."

"So I will, dear Radie, by-and-by," said he, with his amused smile.

"That is, you *won't* until you have said what you meditate. Well, then, as it seems I must hear it, pray speak at once, standing where we are, for the sun will soon go down, and one step more I will not walk with you."

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"Well, Radie, you are pleased to be whimsical; and, to say truth, I *was* thinking of saying a word or two, just about an idea that has been in my mind some time, and which you half divined the first day I saw you at Redman's Farm. You know you fancied I was thinking of marrying."

"I don't remember that I said so, but I thought it. You mentioned Caroline Beauchamp, but I don't see how your visit *here* could have been connected with that plan."

"But don't you think, Radie, I should do well to marry, that is, assuming everything to be suitable."

"Well, perhaps, for *yourself*, Stanley; but —"

"Yes, of course," said Lake; "but the unfortunate girl, you were going to say — thank you. She's, of course, very much to be pitied, and you have my leave to pity her as much as you please."

"I do pity her," said Rachel.

"Thank you again," said Stanley; "but seriously, Radie, you can be, I think, very essentially of use to me in this affair, and you must not refuse."

"Now, Stanley, I will cut this matter short. I can't serve you. I won't. I don't know the young lady, and I don't mean to make her acquaintance."

"But I tell you that you *can* serve me," retorted Stanley, with a savage glare, and features whitened with passion, "and you *shall* serve me; and you *do* know the young lady intimately."

"I say, sir, I do *not*," replied Rachel, haughtily and fiercely.

"She is Dorcas Brandon; you know *her*, I believe. I came down here to marry her. I had made up my mind when I saw you first, and I'll carry my point; I always do. She does not like me, maybe; but she *shall*. I never yet resolved to make a woman like me, and failed. You

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need not look so pale; and put on that affected look of horror. I may be wild, and — and what you please, but I'm no worse than that brute, Mark Wylder, and you never turned up your eyes when he was her choice; and I knew things about him that ought to have damned him, and she's well rid of a branded rascal. And now, Rachel, you know her, and you must say a good word for me. I expect your influence, and if you don't use it, and effectually, it will be worse for you. So, listen to me, this is a vital matter; indeed, it is, Radie. I have lost a lot of money, like a — fool, I suppose; well, it is gone, and this marriage is indispensable. I must go in for it, it is life or death; and if I fail through your unkindness (here he swore an impious oath), I'll end all with a pistol, and leave a letter to Chelford, disclosing everything concerning you, and me, and Mark Wylder.

I think Rachel Lake was as near fainting as ever lady was, without actually swooning. It was well they had stopped just by the stem of a great ash tree, against which Rachel leaned for some seconds, with darkness before her eyes, and the roar of a whirlpool in her ears.

After a while, with two or three gasps, she came to herself. Lake had been railing on all this time, and his voice, which, in ill-temper, was singularly bleak and terrible, was again in her ears the moment she recovered her hearing.

"I do not care to quarrel; there are many reasons why we should not," Lake said in his peculiar tones. "You have some of my secrets, and you must have more; it can't be helped, and, I say, you *must*. I've been very foolish. I'll give up play. I've paid away all I could, and given bills for the rest; but I can't possibly pay them, don't you see; and if things go to the worst, I tell you I'll not stay. I don't want to make my bow just yet,

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and I've no wish to injure you, but I'll do as I have said, and Chelford shall have a distinct statement under my hand of everything that has happened. I don't suppose you wish to be accessary to all this, and therefore it behoves you, Rachel, to do what you can to prevent it. You'll do all you can; and you can do a great deal. I know it; I'll do as much for you, Radie! Anything you like."

"After all that I have done and suffered!" said she, with a faint smile of unimaginable bitterness; "I did not think that human wickedness could produce such a brother as you are."

"Well, it is no news you think of me, and not much matter, either. I don't see that I am a worse brother than you are a sister." Stanley Lake was speaking with a livid intensity. "You see how I'm placed; a ruined man, with a pistol to my head; what you can do to save me may amount to nothing, but it may be everything, and you say you won't try! Now I say you *shall*, and with every energy and faculty you possess, or else abide the consequences."

"And I tell you, sir," replied Rachel, "I know you; you are capable of anything but of hurting yourself. I'll never be your slave; though, if I pleased, I might make you mine. I scorn your threats — I defy you."

Stanley Lake looked transported, and the yellow fires of his deep-set eyes glared on her, while his lips moved to speak, but not a word came, and it became a contortion; he grasped the switch in his hands as if to strike her.

"Take care, sir, Lord Chelford's coming," said the young lady, haughtily, with a contracted glance of horror fixed on Lake.

Lake collected himself. He was a man who could do it pretty quickly; but he had been violently agitated, and the traces of his fury could not disappear in a moment.

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Lord Chelford was, indeed, approaching, only a few hundred yards away.

"Take my arm," said Lake.

And Rachel mechanically, as story-tellers say, placed her slender gloved hand upon his arm — the miscreant arm that had been so nearly raised to strike her; and they walked along, brother and sister, in the Sabbath sunset light, to meet him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN REDMAN'S DELL.

LORD CHELFORD raised his hat, smiling: "I am so very glad I met you, I was beginning to feel so solitary!" he placed himself beside Miss Lake. "I've had such a long walk across the park. How do you do, Lake; when did you come?"

And so on -- Lake answering and looking wonderfully as usual.

I think Lord Chelford perceived there was something amiss between the young people, for his eye rested on Rachel with a momentary look of enquiry, unconscious, no doubt, and quickly averted, and he went on chatting pleasantly; but he looked, once or twice, a little hard at Stanley Lake. I don't think he had an extraordinarily good opinion of that young gentleman. He seldom expressed an ill one of anybody, and then it was in very measured language. But though he never hinted at an unfavorable estimate of the Captain, his intimacies with him were reserved; and I think I have seen him, even when he smiled,

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look the least bit in the world uncomfortable, as if he did not quite enter into the Captain's pleasantries.

They had not walked together very far, when Stanley recollected that he must take his leave, and walk back to Gylingden; and so the young lady and Lord were left to pursue their way towards Redman's Farm together.

It would have been a more unaccountable proceeding on the part of Stanley Lake, and a more romantic situation, if Rachel and his lordship had not had before two or three little accidental rambles together in the grounds and gardens of Brandon. There was nothing quite new in the situation, therefore; and Rachel was for a moment indescribably relieved by Stanley's departure.

It was rather a marked thing — as lean Mrs. Loyd, of Gylingden, who had two thin spinsters with pink noses under her wing, remarked — this long walk of Lord Chelford and Miss Lake in the park; and she enjoined upon her girls the propriety of being specially reserved in their intercourse with persons of Lord Chelford's rank; not that they were much troubled with dangers from any such quarter. Miss Lake had, she supposed, her own notions, and would act as she pleased; but she owned for her part she preferred the old fashion, and thought the men did also; and was sure, too, that young ladies lost nothing by a little reserve and modesty.

The sun just touched the verge of the wooded uplands, as the young people began to descend the slope of Redman's Dell.

"How very short!" Lord Chelford paused, with a smile, at these words. "I was just going to say how short the days have grown, as if it had all happened without notice, and contrary to the almanac; but really the sun sets cruelly early this evening, and I am so *very* sorry our little walk is so soon to end."

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There was not much in this little speech, but it was spoken in a low, sweet voice; and Rachel looked down on the ferns before her feet, as they walked on side by side, not with a smile, but with a blush, and that beautiful look of gratification so becoming and indescribable. Happy that moment — that enchanted moment of oblivion and illusion! But the fitful evening breeze came up through Redman's Dell, with a gentle sweep over the autumnal foliage. Sudden as a sigh, and cold; in her ear it sounded like a whisper or a shudder, and she lifted up her eyes and saw the darkening dell before her; and with a pang, the dreadful sense of reality returned. She stopped, with something almost wild in her look. But with an effort she smiled, and said, with a little shiver, "The air has grown quite chill, and the sun nearly set; we loitered, Stanley and I, a great deal too long in the park, but I am now at home, and I fear I have brought you much too far out of your way already; good-bye." And she extended her hand.

"You must not dismiss your escort here. I must see you through the enchanted dell — it is only a step — and then I shall return with a good conscience, like a worthy knight, having done my devoir honestly."

She looked down the dell, with a dark and painful glance, and then she said a few words of hesitating apology and acquiescence, and in a few minutes more they parted at the little wicket of Redman's Farm. They shook hands. He had a few pleasant, lingering words to say. She paused as he spoke at the other side of that little garden door. She seemed to like those lingering sentences — and hung upon them — and even smiled — but in her eyes there was a vague and melancholy pleading — a wandering and unfathomable look that pained him.

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They shook hands again — it was the third time — and then she walked up the little gravel walk, hardly a dozen steps, and disappeared within the door of Redman's Farm, without turning another parting look on Lord Chelford, who remained at the little paling — excepting one, I think — to lift his hat and say one more parting word.

She turned into the little drawing-room at the left, and, herself unseen, did take that last look, and saw him go up the road again towards Brandon.

On the table there lay a letter which Margery had brought from the post-office. So Rachel lighted her candles and read it with very little interest, for it concerned a world towards which she had few yearnings. There was just one sentence which startled her attention: it said, "We shall soon be at Knowlton — for Christmas, I suppose. It is growing too wintry for mamma near the sea, though I like it better in a high wind than in a calm; and a gale is such fun — such a romp. The Dulhamptons have arrived: the old Marchioness never appears till three o'clock, and only out in the carriage twice since they came. I can't say I very much admire Lady Constance, though she is to be Chelford's wife. She has fine eyes — and I think no other good point — much too dark for my taste — but they say clever;" and not another word was there on this subject.

Lady Constance! arranged, I suppose, by Lady Chelford — no great dot — and an unamiable family — an odious family — nothing to recommend her but her rank."

So ruminated Rachel Lake as she looked out on her shadowy garden, and tapped a little feverish tattoo with her finger on the window pane; and she meditated a great while, trying to bring back distinctly her recollection of Lady Constance, and also vaguely conjecturing who had arranged the marriage, and how it had come about.

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"Chelford cannot like her. It is all Lady Chelford's doing. Can I have mistaken the name?"

But no. Nothing could be more perfectly distinct than "Chelford," traced in her fair correspondent's very legible hand.

"He treats the young lady very coolly," thought Rachel, forgetting, perhaps, that his special relations to Dorcas Brandon had compelled his stay in that part of the world.

Mingled with this criticism, was a feeling quite unavowed even to herself — that Lord Chelford had been — and this she never admitted to herself before — more particular — no, not exactly that — but more something or other — not exactly expressible in words, in his approaches to her, than was consistent with his sitnation. But then she had been very guarded; not stiff or prudish, indeed, but frank and cold enough with him, and that was comforting.

"Rachel, Rachel, is it possible?" murmured the young lady, with a dubious smile, looking down upon the ground, and shaking her head. "Yes, I do really think you had begun to like Lord Chelford — only *begun*, the least little insidious bit; but thank you, wild Bessie Frankleyn, you have quite opened my eyes. Rachel, Rachel, girl! what a fool you were near becoming!"

She leaned for a while with her fingers upon the window sash; and when she turned to old Tamar, who brought in her tiny tea equipage, it seemed as if the shadow of the dell, into which she had been vacantly gazing, still rested on her face.

"Not here, Tamar; I'll drink tea in my room; and you must bring your tea-cup, too, and we'll take it together. I am — I think I am — a little nervous, darling, and you won't leave me?"

So they sat down together in her chamber. It was a

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cheery little bedroom, when the shutters were closed, and the fire burning brightly in the grate.

"My good Tamar will read her chapters aloud. I wish I could enjoy them like you. I can only wish. You must pray for me, Tamar. There is a dreadful image — and I sometimes think a dreadful being — always near me. Though the words you read are sad and awful, they are also sweet, like funeral music a long way off, and they tranquilize me without making me better, as the harping of David did the troubled and forsaken King Saul."

So the old nurse mounted her spectacles, glad of the invitation, and began to read.

"Stop," said Rachel suddenly, as she reached about the middle of the chapter.

The old woman looked up, with her watery eyes wide open, and there was a short pause.

"I beg your pardon, dear Tamar, but you must first tell me that story you used to tell me long ago of Lady Ringdove, that lived in Epping Forest, to whom the ghost came and told something she was never to reveal, and who slowly died of the secret, growing all the time more and more like the spectre; and besought the priest when she was dying, that he would have her laid in the abbey vault, with her mouth open, and her eyes and ears sealed, in token that her term of slavery was over, that her lips might now be open, and that her eyes were to see no more the dreadful sight, nor her ears to hear the frightful words that used to scare them in her life-time; and then, whenever afterwards they opened the door of the vault, the wind entering in, made such moanings in her hollow mouth, and declared things so horrible that they built up the door of the vault, and entered it no more. Let me have the entire story, just as you used to tell it."

So old Tamar, who knew it was no use disputing a

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fancy of her young mistress, although on Sunday night she would have preferred other talk, recounted her old tale of wonder,

"Yes, it is true — a true allegory, I mean, Tamar. Death will close the eyes and ears against the sights and sounds of earth; but even the tomb secures no secrecy. Oh, Tamar! turn over the pages, and try to find some part which says where safety and peace may be found at any price; for sometimes I think I am almost bereft of — reason."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MR. LARKIN AND THE VICAR.

THE good Vicar was not only dismayed but endangered by his brother's protracted absence. It was now the first week in November. Bleak and wintry that ungenial month set in at Gylingden; and in accord with the tempestuous and dismal weather the fortunes of the Rev. William Wylder were darkened and agitated.

This morning a letter came at breakfast, by post, and when he had read it, the poor Vicar grew a little white, and he folded it very quietly and put it in his waistcoat pocket, and patted little Fairy on the head. Little Fairy was asking him a question all this time, very vehemently, "How long was Jack's sword that he killed the giants with?" and several times to this distinct question he received only the unsatisfactory reply, "Yes, my darling;" and at last, when little Fairy mounted his knee, and hugged the abstracted Vicar round the neck, urged his

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question with kisses and lamentations, the parson answered with a look of great perplexity, and only half-recalled said, "Indeed, little man, I don't know. How long, you say, was Jack's sword? Well, I dare say it was as long as the umbrella." He got up, with the same perplexed and absent look, as he said this, and threw an anxious glance, about the room, as if looking for something he had mislaid.

"Are you looking for anything, Willie, darling? Your keys are in my basket."

"No, darling; no, darling — nothing. I have everything I want. I think I must go to the Lodge and see Mr. Larkin, for a moment."

"Have you heard anything of Mark, darling?" she enquired eagerly.

"Of Mark? Oh, no! — nothing of Mark." And he added with a deep sigh, "Oh, dear! I wonder he does not write — no, nothing of Mark."

She followed him into the hall.

"Now, Willie darling, you must not go till you have had your breakfast — you will make yourself ill — indeed you will — do come back, just to please me, and eat a little first."

"No, darling; no, my love — I can't indeed. I'll be back immediately; but I must catch Mr. Larkin before he goes out. It is only a little matter — I want to ask his opinion — and — oh! here is my stick — and I'll return immediately."

So, spite of remonstrances, with a hurried kiss or two, away he went alone, at a very quick pace, through the high street of Gylingden, and was soon in the audience chamber of the serious, gentleman attorney.

The attorney rose with a gaunt and sad smile of welcome — and begged Mr. Wylder, with a wave of his long hand, to be seated.

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"Have you heard anything since, Mr Larkin? Can you conjecture where his address may now be?" asked the Vicar, a little abruptly.

"Oh! Mr. Mark Wylder, perhaps, you refer to?"

"Yes; my brother, Mark."

Mr. Larkin smiled a sad and simple smile, and shook his head.

"I have heard from him this morning, however," remarked the lawyer; "he was pleased to direct a power of attorney to me to receive his rents and sign receipts; and he proposes making Lord Viscount Chelford and Captain Lake trustees, to fund his money or otherwise invest it for his use, and" —

"Has he — I beg pardon — but did he mention a little matter in which I am deeply — indeed, vitally interested?" The Vicar paused.

"I don't quite apprehend; perhaps if you were to frame your question a little differently, I might possibly — a — you were saying" —

"I mean a matter of very deep interest to me," said the poor Vicar, coloring a little, "though no very considerable sum, viewed absolutely; but, under my unfortunate circumstances, of the most urgent importance — a loan of three hundred pounds — did he mention it?"

Again Mr. Larkin shook his head, with the same sad smile.

"But, though we do not know how to find him, he knows very well where to find us — and no doubt he recollects his promise, and will transmit the necessary directions all in good time."

"I earnestly hope he may," and the poor cleric lifted up his eyes unconsciously and threw his hope into the form of a prayer. "For, to speak frankly, Mr. Larkin, my circumstances are very pressing. I have just heard

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from Cambridge, and find that my good friend, Mr. Mountain, the bookseller, has been dead two months, and his wife is his sole executrix, and has sold the business, and directed two gentlemen — attorneys — to call in all the debts due to him — peremptorily — and they say I must pay before the 15th; and I have but five pounds in the world, until March, when my half-year will be paid. And indeed, only that the trades-people here are so very kind, we should often find it very difficult to manage."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Larkin, blandly, "you would permit me to look at the letter you mention having received from the solicitors at Cambridge?"

"Oh, thank you, certainly; here it is," said William Wylder, eagerly, and he gazed with his kind, truthful eyes upon the attorney's countenance as he glanced over it, trying to read something of futurity therein.

"Foukes and Mauley," said Mr. Larkin. "I have had but one transaction with them; they are not always pleasant people to deal with. You must be cautious; indeed, my dear sir, *very* cautious. The fifteenth — just ten clear days. Well, you know you have till then to look about you; and we may any day hear from your brother, directing the loan to be paid over to you. And now, my dear and reverend friend, you know me, I hope," continued Mr. Larkin, very kindly, as he handed back the letter; "and you won't attribute what I say to impertinent curiosity; but your brother's intended advance of three hundred pounds can hardly have had relation only to this trifling claim upon you. There are, no doubt — pardon me — several little matters to be arranged; and considerable circumspection will be needed, pending your brother's absence, in dealing with the persons who are in a position to press their claims unpleasantly. You must not trifle with these things. And let

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me recommend you seeing your legal adviser, whoever he is, immediately."

"You mean," said the Vicar, who was by this time very much flushed, "a gentleman of your profession, Mr. Larkin. Do you really think — well, it has frequently crossed my mind — but the expense, you know; and although my affairs are in a most complicated state, I am sure that everything would be perfectly smooth if only I had received the loan my kind brother intends.

"But, my dear sir, do you really mean to say that you would pay claims from various quarters — how old is this, for instance? — without examination!"

The Vicar looked very blank.

"I — this — well, this I certainly do owe; it has increased a litttle with interest, though good Mr. Mountain never charged more than six per cent. It was I think, about fifteen pounds — books — I am ashamed to say how long ago.

"Were you of age, my dear sir, when he gave you these books on credit?"

"Oh! no; not twenty; but then I owe it, and I could not, as a Christian man, you know, evade my debts."

"Of course; but you can't pay it at present, and it may be highly important to enable you to treat this as a debt of honor, you perceive. Suppose, my dear sir, they should proceed to arrest you, or to sequestrate the revenue of your vicarage. I really must tell you, frankly, that if you dream of escaping the most serious consequences, you must at once place yourself and your affairs in the hands of a competent man of business. It will probably be found that you do not in reality owe sixty pounds of every hundred claimed against you."

"Oh! Mr. Larkin, if I could induce *you*."

Mr. Larkin smiled a melancholy smile, and shook his head.

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"My dear sir, I only wish I could; but my hands are so awfully full," and he lifted them up and shook them, and shook his tall, bald head at the same time, and smiled a weary smile.

"It was very unreasonable of me to think of troubling you with my wretched affairs; but really I do not know very well where to turn, or whom to speak to. Maybe, my dear sir, you can think of some conscientious and Christian practitioner who is not so laden with other people's cares and troubles as you are."

Mr. Larkin stood at the window ruminating, with his left hand in his breeches pocket, and his right, with finger and thumb pinching his under lip, after his wont, and the despairing accents of the poor Vicar's last sentence still in his ear.

"Well," he said, hesitatingly, "it is not easy, at a moment's notice, to point out a suitable solicitor; there are many, of course, very desirable gentlemen, but I feel it, my dear sir, a very serious responsibility, naming one for so peculiar a matter. But you shall not go to the wall for want of advice. Rely upon it, we'll do the best we can for you," he continued, in a patronising way, with his chin raised, and extending his hand kindly to shake that of the parson. Can you give me two hours tomorrow evening — say to tea — if you will do me the honor. My friend, Captain Lake, dines at Brandon tomorrow. He's staying here with me, you are aware, on a visit; but we shall be quite by ourselves, say at seven o'clock. Bring all your papers, and I'll get at the root of the business, and see, if possible, in each particular case, what line is best to be adopted."

"How can I thank you, my dear sir, cried gentle William Wylder, his countenance actually beaming with delight and gratitude. "I feel as if my prayer for direction

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and deliverance were answered at last. Oh! my dear sir, I have suffered a great deal; but something assures me I am rescued, and shall have a quiet mind once more —I am now in safe and able hands." And he shook the safe and able, and rather large, hands of the amiable attorney in both his.

"You make too much of it, my dear sir. I should at any time be most happy to advise you," said Mr. Larkin, with a lofty and pleased benevolence, "and with great pleasure, *provisionally*, until we can hit upon a satisfactory solicitor, with a little more time at his disposal, I undertake the management of your case."

"Thank Heaven!" again said the Vicar, who had not let go his hands. "And it is so delightful to have for my guide a Christian man, who, even were I so disposed, would not lend himself to an unworthy or questionable defence; and although at this moment it is not in my power to reward your invaluable assistance" —

"Now really, my dear sir, I must insist — no more of this, I beseech you. I do most earnestly insist that you promise me you will never mention the matter of professional remuneration more, until, at least, I press it, which, rely upon it, will not be for a good while."

The attorney's smile plainly said, that his "good while" meant in fact "never."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LADIES OF GYLINGDEN HEATH.

JUST at this moment they became aware of a timid little tapping which had been going on at the window during

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the latter part of this conference, and looking up, the attorney and the Vicar saw "little Fairy's" violet eyes peering under his light hair.

"I beg pardon," said the Vicar, rising with a sudden smile, and going to the window. "It is my little man. Fairy! Fairy! What has brought you here, my little man?"

Fairy glanced, shamefacedly at the grand attorney, and in his little fist he held a pair of rather seedy gloves to the window pane.

"So I did. I protest I forgot my gloves. Thank you, little man. Who is with you? Oh! I see. That is right."

The maid ducked a short courtesy.

"Indeed, sir, please, Master Fairy was raising the roof (a nursery phrase, which implied indescribable bellowing), and as naughty as could be, until missis allowed him to come after you."

"Oh! my little man, you must not do that. Ask nicely you know; always quietly, like a little gentleman."

"But, oh! Wapsie, your hands would be cold;" and he held the gloves to him against the glass.

"Well, darling, thank you; you are a kind little man, and I'll be with you in a moment," said the Vicar, smiling very lovingly on his naughty little man.

"Mr. Larkin," said he, turning very gratefully to the attorney, "you can lay this Christian comfort to your kind heart, that you have made mine a hundredfold lighter since I entered this blessed room, by the timely proffer of your invaluable assistance."

Again the attorney waved off, with a benignant and humble smile, rather oppressive to see, all idea of obligation, and accompanied his grateful client to the glass door of his little porch, where Fairy was already awaiting him with the gloves in his hand.

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The attorney stood at his window with a shadow on his face, and his small eyes a little contracted and snakelike, following the slim figure of the threadbare Vicar and his goldenhaired, dancing little comrade; and then he mounted a chair, and took down successively four of his japanned boxes; two of them, in yellow letters, bore respectively the label "*Brandon*, *No.* 1," and "*No.* 2;" the other, "*Wylder*, *No.* 1," and "*No.* 2."

He opened the "Wylder" box first, and glanced through a neat little "statement of title," prepared for counsel when draughting the deed of settlement for the marriage which was never to take place.

"The limitations, let me see, is not there something that one might be safe in advancing a trifle upon — eh? — h'm — yes."

And, with his lip in his finger and thumb, he conned over those remainders and reversions with a skilled and rapid eye.

Rachel Lake was glad to see the slender and slightly-stooped figure of the Vicar standing that morning — his bright little boy by the hand — in the wicket of the tiny flower-garden of Redman's Farm. She went out quickly to greet him. The sick man likes the sound of his kind doctor's step on the stairs! and, be his skill much or little, trusts in him, and will even joke a little asthmatic joke, and smile a feeble hectic smile about his ailments, when he is present.

So they fell into discourse among the autumnal flowers and withered leaves; and, as the day was still and genial, they remained standing in the garden; and away went busy little "Fairy," smiling and chatting with Margery to see the hens and chickens in the yard.

They talked a long while — Rachel chiefly a listener, and often quietly weeping; and, at last, a very kindly

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parting, and a promise from the simple and gentle Vicar that he would often look in at Redman's Farm.

She watched his retreating figure as he and little Fairy walked down the tenebrose road to Gylingden, following them with a dismal gaze, as a benighted and wounded wayfarer in that "Valley" would the pale lamp's disappearing that had for a few minutes, in a friendly hand, shone over his dreadful darkness.

And when, in fitful reveries, fancy turned for a moment to an earthly past and future, all there was a blank — the past saddened, the future bleak. She did not know, or even suspect, that she had been living in an aerial castle, and worshipping an unreal image, until, on a sudden, all was revealed in that chance gleam of cruel lightning, the line in that letter, which she read so often, spelled over, and pozzled over so industriously, though it was clear enough. How noble, how good how bright and true, was that hero of her unconscious romance.

Well, no one else suspected that incipient madness — that was something; and brave Rachel would quite master it. Happy she had discovered it so soon. Besides, it was, even if Chelford were at her feet, a wild impossibility now; and it was well, though despair were in the pang, that she had, at last, quite explained this to herself.

As Rachel stood in her little garden, on the spot where she had bidden farewell to the Vicar, she was roused from her vague and dismal reverie by the sound of a carriage close at hand. She had just time to see that it was a brougham, and to recognise the Brandon liveries, when it drew up at the garden wicket, and Dorcas called to her from the open window.

"I'm come, Rachel, expressly to take you with me; and I won't be denied."

"You are very good, Dorcas; thank you, dear, very

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much! but I am not very well, and a very dull companion to-day."

"You think I am going to bore you with visits. No such thing, I assure you. I have taken a fancy to walk on the common, that is all — a kind of longing; and you must come with me; quite to ourselves, you and I. You won't refuse me, darling; I know you'll come."

Well, Rachel did go. And away they drove through the quiet town of Gylingden together, and through the short street on the right, and so upon the still quieter common. This plain of green turf broke gradually into a heath; and an irregular screen of timber and underwood divided the common of Gylingden in sylvan fashion from the moor. The wood passed, Dorcas stopped the carriage, and the two young ladies descended. It was a sunny day, and the air still; and the open heath contrasted pleasantly with the somber and confined scenery of Redman's Dell.

"It was good of you to come, Rachel," said Miss Brandon; "and you look tired! but you shan't speak more than you like; and I'll tell you all the news. Chelford is just returned from Brighton; he arrived this morning; and he and Lady Chelford will stay for the Hunt Ball. I made it a point. And he called at Hockley, on his way back, to see Sir Julius. Do you know him?"

"Sir Julius Hockley? No — I've heard of him only."

"Well, they say he is wasting his property very fast; and I think him every way very nearly a fool; but Chelford wanted to see him about Mr. Wylder. Mark Wylder, you know, of course, has turned up again in England. His letter to Chelford, six weeks ago, was from Boulogne; but his last was from Brighton; and Sir Julius Hockley witnessed — I think they call it — that letter of attorney which Mark sent about a week since to Mr. Larkin; and

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Chelford, who is most anxious to trace Mark Wylder, having to surrender — I think they call it — a "trust" is not it — or something — I really don't understand these things — to him, and not being able to find out his address, Mr. Larkin wrote to Sir Julius, whom Chelford did not find at home, to ask him for a description of Mark, to ascertain whether he had disguised himself; and Sir Julius wrote to Chelford such an absurd description of poor Mark, in doggrel rhyme — so like — his odd walk, his great whiskers, and everything. Chelford does not like personalities, but he could not help laughing. Are you ill, darling?"

Though she was walking on beside her companion, Rachel looked on the point of fainting.

"My darling, you must sit down; you do look very ill. I forgot my promise about Mark Wylder. How stupid I have been; and perhaps I have distressed you."

"No, Dorcas, I am pretty well; but I have been ill, and I am a little tired; and, Dorcas, I don't deny it, I *am* amazed, you tell me such things. That letter of attorney, or whatever it is, must not be acted upon. It is incredible. It is all horrible wickedness. Mark Wylder's fate is dreadful, and Stanley is the mover of all this. Oh! Dorcas, darling, I wish I could tell you everything. Some day I may be — I am sick and terrified."

They had sat down, by this time, side by side, on the crisp bank. Each lady looked down, the one in suffering, the other in thought.

"You are better, darling; are not you better?" said Dorcas, laying her hand on Rachel's and looking on her with a melancholy gaze.

"Yes, dear, better — very well" — answered Rachel, looking up, but without an answering glance at her cousin.

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"You blame your brother, Rachel, in this affair."

"Did I? Well — maybe — yes, he *is* to blame — the miserable man — whom I hate to think of, and yet am always thinking of — Stanley well knows is not in a state to do it."

"Don't you think, Rachel, remembering what I have confided to you, that you might be franker with me in this?"

"Oh, Dorcas! don't misunderstand me. If the secret were all my own — Heaven knows, hateful as it is, how boldly I would risk all, and throw myself on your fidelity or your mercy — but this *is* not mine — only in part — that is, I dare not tell it — but may be soon free — and to us all, dear Dorcas, a woful, *woful* day will it be."

"I made you a promise, Rachel," said her beautiful cousin, gravely, and a little coldly and sadly, too; "I will never break it again — it was thoughtless. Let us each try to forget that there is anything hidden between us."

"If ever the time comes, dear Dorcas, when I may tell it to you, I don't know whether you will bless or hate me for having kept it so well; at all events, I think you'll pity me, and at last understand your miserable cousin."

"I said before, Rachel, that I liked you. You are one of us, Rachel. You are beautiful, wayward, and daring, and one way or another, misfortune always waylays us; and *I* have, I know it, calamity before me. There is not a beautiful portrait in Brandon that has not a sad and true story. Come, Rachel, shall we escape from the spell and the destiny into solitude? What do you think of my old plan of the valleys and lakes of Wales; a pretty foreign tongue spoken round us, and no one but ourselves to commune with, and books, and music. It is not, Radie, altogether jest. I sometimes yearn for it, as they say foreign girls do for convent life."

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"Poor Dorcas," said Rachel, very softly, fixing her eyes upon her with a look of inexpressible sadness and pity.

"Rachel," said Dorcas, "I am a changeable being — violent, self-willed. My fate may be quite a different one from that which *I* suppose or *you* imagine. I may yet have to retract *my* secret."

"Oh! would it were so — would to Heaven it were so."

"Suppose, Rachel, that I had been deceiving you — perhaps deceiving myself — time will show."

There was a wild smile on beautiful Dorcas's face as she said this, which faded soon into the proud serenity that was its usual character.

"Oh! Dorcas, if your good angel is near, listen to his warnings."

"We have no good angels, my poor Rachel; what modern necromancers, conversing with tables, call "mocking spirits," have always usurped their place with us.

"Dorcas, dear," said Rachel, after both had been silent, for a time, speaking suddenly, and with a look of pale and keen entreaty — "Beware of Stanley — oh! beware. I think I am beginning to grow afraid of him myself."

Dorcas was not given to sighing — but she sighed — gazing sadly across the wide, bleak moor, with her proud, apathetic look, which seemed passively to defy futurity — and then, for awhile, they were silent.

Each understood that the conversation on that theme was ended, and somehow each was relieved.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

SIR JULIUS HOCKLEY'S LETTER.

Jos Larkin mentioned in his conversation with the Vicar, just related, that he had received a power of attorney from Mark Wylder.

This legal instrument was attested by two witnesses, and bore date about a week before the interview, just related, between the Vicar and Mr. Larkin. Here, then, was a fact established. Mark Wylder had returned from Boulogne, for the power of attorney had been executed at Brighton. Who were the witnesses? One was Thomas Tupton, of the Travellers' Hotel, Brighton.

This Thomas Tupton was something of a sporting celebrity, and a likely man enough to be of Mark's acquaintance.

The other witness was Sir Julius Hockley, of Hockley, an unexceptionable evidence, though a good deal on the turf.

Now our friend Jos Larkin had something of the Red Indian's faculty for tracking his game, by hardly perceptible signs and tokens, through the wilderness; and this mystery of Mark Wylder's flight and seclusion was the present object of his keen and patient pursuit.

On receipt of the "instrument," therefore, he wrote by return of post, "presenting his respectful compliments to Sir Julius Hockley, and deeply regretting that, as solicitor of the Wylder family, and the *gentleman* (*sic*) empowered to act under the letter of attorney, it was imper-

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ative upon him to trouble him (Sir Julius H) with a few interrogatories, which he trusted he would have no difficulty in answering."

The first was, whether he had been acquainted with Mr. Wylder's personal appearance before seeing him sign, so as to be able to indentify him. The second was, whether he (Mr. M. W.) was accompanied, at the time of executing the instrument, by any friend; and if so, what were the name and address of such friend. And the third was whether he could communicate any information whatsoever respecting Mr. M. W.'s present place of abode?

The same queries were put in a somewhat peremptory way to the sporting hotel-keeper, who answered that Mr. Mark Wylder had been staying for a week at his house, about five months ago, and that he had seen him twice —once "backing" Jonathan, when he beat the great American billiard-player; and another time, when he lent him his copy of "Bell's Life," in the coffee-room; and thus he was enabled to identify him. For the rest he could say nothing.

Sir Julius's reply was of the hoity-toity and rollicking sort, bordering in parts very nearly on nonsense, and generally impertinent. It reached Mr. Larkin as he set at breakfast with his friend, Stanley Lake.

"Pray read your letters, and don't mind me, I entreat. Perhaps you will allow me to look at the 'Times;' and I'll trouble you for the sardines."

The postmark "Hockley," stared the lawyer in the face; and, longing to break the seal, he availed himself of the Captain's permission. So Lake opened the "Times;" and, as he studied its columns, I think he stole a glance or two over its margin at the attorney, now deep in the letter of Sir Julius Hockley.

He (Sir J. H.) "presented his respects to Mr. Lark*ens*,

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or Lark*ins*, or Lark*me*, or Lark*us* — Sir J. H. is not able to read *which* or *what*; but he is happy to observe at all events, that, end how he may, the gentleman begins with a 'lark!' which Sir J. H. always does when he can. Not being able to discover his terminal syllable, he will take the liberty of styling him by his sprightly beginning, and calling him shortly 'Lark;' and by way of a lark, Sir J. will answer Lark's questions, which are not, he thinks, very inpertinent. The wildest of all Lark's questions, refers to Wylder's place of abode, which Sir J. was never wild enough to think of asking after, and does not know; and so little was he acquainted with the gentleman, that he forgot he was an evangelist doing good under the style and title of Mark. Lark may, therefore, tell Mark, if he sees him, or his friends — Matthew, Luke, and John — that Sir Julius saw Mark only on two successive days, at the cricket-match, played between Paul's Eleven and the Ishmaelites (these, I am bound to observe, were literally the designations of the opposing sides); and that he had the honor of being presented to Mark — saint or sinner, as he may be — on the ground, by his, Sir J. H.'s, friend, Captain Stanley Lake, of the Guards."

Here was an astounding fact. Stanley Lake had been in Mark Wylder's company only ten days ago, when that great match was played at Brighton! What a deep gentleman was that Stanley Lake, who sat at the other end of the table with the "Times" before him. What a varnished rascal — what a matchless liar!

He had returned to Gylingden, direct, in all likelihood, from his conferences with Mark Wylder, to tell all concerned that it was vain endeavoring to trace him, and still offering his disinterested services in the pursuit.

No matter! We must take things coolly and cautiously. All this chicanery will yet break down, and the conspiracy,

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be it what it may, will be thoroughly exposed. Mystery is the shadow of guilt; and, most assuredly, thought Mr. Larkin, there is some *infernal* secret, *well worth knowing*, at the bottom of all this. You little think I have you here! and he slid Sir Julius Hockley's piece of banter into his waistcoat pocket, and then opened and glanced at half-a-dozen other letters, in a quick, official way, endorsing a little note on the back of each with his pencil.

"Paul's Eleven have challenged the Gipsies," said Lake, languidly lifting his eyes from the paper. By-the-by, are you anything of a cricketer? And they are to play at Hockley, Sir Julius Hockley's ground. You know Sir Julius, don't you?"

"Very slightly. I may say I *have* that honor, but we have never been thrown together; a mere — a — the slightest thing in the world."

"Not schoolfellows — you are not an Eton, man, eh?" said Lake.

"Oh no! My dear father would not send a boy of his to what he called an idle school. But my acquaintance with Sir Julius was a trifling matter. Hockley is a very pretty place, is it not?"

"A sweet place. A great match was played between those fellows at Brighton; Paul's Eleven beat fifteen of the Ishmaelites, about a fortnight since; but they have no chance with the Gipsies. It will be a one-innings affair."

"Have you ever seen Paul's Eleven play?" asked the lawyer, carelessly taking up the newspaper which Lake had laid down.

"I saw them play that match at Brighton, I mentioned just now, a few days ago."

"Ah! did you?"

"Did not you *know* I was there?" said Lake in rath-

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er a changed tone. Larkin looked up, and Lake laughed in his face quietly the most impertinent laugh he had ever seen or heard, with his yellow eyes fixed on the lawyer's pink little optics. "I was there, and Hockley was there, and Mark Wylder was there — was not he?" and Lake stared and laughed, and the attorney stared; and Lake added, "What a d — d cunning fellow you are; ha, ha, ha!"

Larkin was not easily put out, but he *was* disconcerted now; and his cheeks and forehead grew suddenly pink, and he coughed a little, and tried to throw a look of mild surprise into his face.

"Why, you have this moment had a letter from Hockley. Don't you think I knew his hand and the post-mark, and your look said quite plainly, 'Here's news of my friend Stanley Lake and Mark Wylder.' I really think I have brought my little evidences very prettily together, and jumped to a right conclusion — eh?"

A flicker of that sinister shadow I have sometimes mentioned crossed Larkin's face, and contracted his eyes as he said, a little sternly —

"I have nothing on earth to conceal, sir. All *my* conduct has been as open as the light; there's not a letter, sir, I ever write or receive, that might not, so far as *I* am concerned, lie open on that table for every visitor that comes in to read;" and the attorney waved his hand grandly.

"Hear, hear, hear," said Lake, languidly, and tapping a little applause on the table, while he watched the solicitor's rhetoric with his sly, disconcerting smile.

"It was but conscientious, Captain Lake, that I should make enquiry respecting the genuineness of a legal instrument conferring such powers. How on earth, sir, could I have the slightest suspicion that *you* had seen my client,

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Mr. Wylder, considering the tenor of your letters and conversation. And I venture to say, Captain Lake, that Lord Chelford will be just as much surprised as I, when he hears it."

"But he'll *not* hear it; *I* won't tell him, and you shan't; because I don't think it would be prudent of us — do you? — to quarrel with Mark Wylder, and he does not wish our meeting known. It is nothing on earth to me; on the contrary, it rather places me in an awkward position keeping other people's secrets."

The attorney made one of his slight, gentlemanlike bows, and threw back his head with a lofty and reserved look.

"I don't know, Captain Lake, that I would be quite justified in withholding the substance of Sir Julius Hockley's letter from Lord Chelford, consulted, as I have had the honor to be, by that nobleman. I shall, however, turn it over in my mind."

"Don't the least mind me. In fact, I would rather tell it than not. And I can explain to Chelford why *I* could not mention the circumstance. Wylder, in fact, tied me down by a promise, and he'll be devilish angry with you; but, it seems, you don't very much mind that."

He knew that Mr. Larkin *did* very much mind it; and the quick glance of the attorney could read nothing whatever in the Captain's pallid face and downcast eyes, smiling on the points of his varnished boots.

"Of course, you know, Captain Lake, in alluding to the possibility of my making any communication to Lord Chelford, I limit myself strictly to the letter of Sir Julius Hockley, and do not, by any means, my dear Captain Lake, include the conversation which has just occurred and the communication which you have volunteered to make me."

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"Oh! quite so," said the Captain, looking up suddenly, with a momentary glare, like a man newly-waked from a narcotic doze.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE HUNT BALL.

By this time your humble servant, the chronicler of these Gylingden annals, had taken his leave of magnificent old Brandon, and of its strangely interesting young mistress, and was carrying away with him, as he flew along the London rails, the broken imagery of that grand and shivered dream. He was destined, however, before very long, to revisit these scencs; and in the meantime heard, in rude outline, the tenor of what was happening — the minute incidents and coloring of which were afterwards faithfully communicated.

The Hunt Ball is the great annual event of Gylingden. The critical process of "coming out" is here consummated by the young ladies of that town and vicinage. It is looked back upon for one-half of the year, and forward to for the other. People date by it. The battle of Inkerman was fought immediately before the Hunt Ball. It was so many weeks after the Hunt Ball that the Czar Nicholas died. Its solemn and universal importance in Gylingden and the country round, gave me some notion of what the feast of unleavened bread must have been to the Hebrews and Jerusalem.

The connubial capabilities of Gylingden are positively wretched. When I knew it, there were but three single men, according even to the modest measure of Gylingden

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housekeeping, capable of supporting wives, and these were difficult to please, set a high price on themselves — looked the country round at long ranges, and were only wistfully and meekly glanced after by the frugal vestals of Gylingden, as they strutted round the corners, or smoked the pipe of apathy at the reading-room windows.

Think, then, what it was, when Mr. Pummice, of Copal and Pummice, the splendid house-painters at Dollington, arrived with his artists and charwoman to give the Assembly room its annual touching-up and bedizenment, preparatory to the Hunt Ball. The Gylingden young ladies used to peep in, and from the lobby observe the wenches dry-rubbing and waxing the floor, and the great Mr. Pummice, with his myrmidons, in aprons and paper caps, retouching the gilding.

It was a tremendous crisis for honest Mrs. Page, the confectioner, over the way, who, in legal phrase, had "the carriage of the supper and refreshments, though largely assisted by Mr. Battersby, of Dollington. During the few days' agony of preparation that immediately preceded this notable orgie, the good lady's countenance bespoke the magnitude of her cares. Though the weather was usually cold, I don't think she ever was cool during that period — I am sure she never slept — I don't think she ate — and I am afraid her religious exercises were neglected.

Equally distracting, emaciating, and godless, was the condition to which the mere advent of this festival reduced worthy Miss Williams, the dressmaker, who had more white muslin and young ladies on her hands than she and her choir of needlewomen knew what to do with. During this tremendous period Miss Williams hardly resembled herself — her eyes dilated, her lips were pale, and her brow corrugated with deep and inflexible lines of fear and

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perplexity. But somehow, generally things came pretty right in the end. One way or another, the gay belles and elderly spinsters, and fat village chaperons, were invested in suitable costume by the appointed hour, and in a few weeks Miss Williams' mind recovered its wonted tone, and her countenance its natural expression.

The great night had now arrived. Gylingden was quite in an uproar. Rural families of eminence came in. Some in old fashioned coaches; others, the wealthier, more in London style. The stables of the "Brandon Arms," of the "George Inn," of the "Silver Lion," even of the "White House," though a good way off, and generally every vacant standing for horses in or about the town were crowded; and the places of entertainment were vocal with the talk of flunkies, patrician with powdered heads, and splendent in variegated liveries.

The front of the Town Hall resounded with the ring of horse-hoofs, the crack of whips, the bawling of coachmen, the clank of carriage steps, and clang of coach doors. A promiscuous mob of the plebs and profanum vulgus of Gylingden beset the door, to see the ladies — the slim and the young in white muslins and artificial flowers, and their stout guardian angels, of maturer years, in satins and velvets, and jewels — some real, and some just as good, of paste.

When the Crutchleighs, of Clay Manor, a good, old, formal family, were mounting the stairs in solemn procession — they were always among the early arrivals — they heard a piano and a tenor performing in the supper-room.

Now, Old Lady Chelford chose to patronise Mr. Page, the Dollington professor, and partly, I fancy, to show that she could turn things topsy-turvy in this town of Gylingden, had made a point, with the rulers of the feast, that her client should sing half-a-dozen songs in the supper-room before dancing commenced.

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Mrs. Crutchleigh stayed her step upon the stairs abruptly, and turned, with a look of fierce surprise upon her lean, white-headed lord, arresting thereby the upward march of Corfe Crutchleigh, Esq. the hope of his house, who was pulling on his gloves, with his eldest spinster sister on his lank arm.

"There appears to be a concert going on; we came here to a ball. Had you not better enquire, Mr. Crutchleigh; it would seem we have made a mistake?"

Mrs. Crutchleigh was sensitive about the dignity of the family of Clay Manor; and her cheeks flushed above the rouge, and her eyes flashed severely.

"That's singing — particularly *loud singing*. Either we have mistaken the night, or somebody has taken upon him to upset all the arrangements. You will be good enough to enquire whether there will be dancing to-night; I and Anastasia will remain in the cloak-room; and we'll all leave if you please, Mr. Crutchleigh, if this goes on."

The fact is, Mrs. Crutchleigh had got an inkling of this performance, and had affected to believe it impossible; and, detesting old Lady Chelford for sundry slights and small impertinences, was resolved not to be put down by presumption in that quarter.

Old Lady Chelford sat in an arm-chair in the supper-room, where a considerable audience was collected. She had a splendid shawl or two about her, and a certain air of demi-toilette, which gave the Gylingden people to understand that her ladyship did not look on this gala in the light of a real ball, but only as a sort of rustic imitation — curious, possibly amusing, and, like other rural sports, deserving of encouragement, for the sake of the people who made innocent holiday there.

Mr. Page, the performer, was a plump young man,

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with black whiskers, and his hair in oily ringlets, such as may be seen in the model wigs presented on smiling, waxen dandies, in Mr. Rose's front window at Dollington. He bowed and smiied in the most unexceptionable of dress coats, and drew off the whitest imaginable pair of kid gloves, when he sat down to the piano, subsiding in a sort of bow upon the music-stool, and striking those few, brisk and noisy chords with which such artists proclaim silence and reassure themselves.

Stanley Lake, that eminent London swell, had attached himself as gentleman-in-waiting to Lady Chelford's household, and was perpetually gliding with little messages between her ladyship and the dapper vocalist of Dollington, who varied his programme and submitted to an occasional *encore* on the private order thus communicated.

"I told you Chelford would be here," said Miss Brandon to Rachel, in a low tone, glancing at the young peer.

"I thought he had returned to Brighton. I fancied he might be — you know the Dulhamptons are at Brighton; and Lady Constance, of course, has a claim on his time and thoughts."

Rachel smiled as she spoke, and was adjusting her bouquet, as Dorcas made answer —

"Lady Constance, my dear Radie! That, you know, was never more than a mere whisper; it was only Lady Chelford and the Marchioness who talked it over — they would have liked it very well. But Chelford won't be managed or scolded into anything of the kind; and I assure you, dear Radie, there is not the least truth in that story about Lady Constance."

Why should Dorcas be so earnest to convince her handsome cousin that there was nothing in this rumor? Rachel made no remark, and there was a little silence.

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"I'm so glad I succeeded in bringing you here," said Dorcas; "Chelford made such a point of it; and he thinks you are losing your spirits among the great trees and shadows of Redman's Dell; and he made it quite a little cousinly duty that I should succeed."

At this moment Mr. Page interposed with the energetic prelude of his concluding ditty. It was one of Tom Moore's melodies.

Rachel leaned back, and seemed to enjoy it very much. But when it was over, I think she would have found it difficult to say what the song was about.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BALL ROOM.

Rachel Lake was standing by the piano, turning over the leaves of the volume of "Moore's Melodies," from which the artist in black whiskers and white waistcoat had just entertained his noble patroness and his audience, when a low, pleasant voice near her said —

"I was so glad to see that Dorcas had prevailed, and that you were here. We both agreed that you are too much a recluse in that Der Frieschutz Glen, and owe it to us all to appear now and then in this upper world."

Miss Lake again looked down upon the page, and as she did so, Lord Chelford continued.

"You are a worshipper of Tom Moore, Miss Lake?"

"An admirer, perhaps — certainly no worshipper. Yet, I can't say. Perhaps I do worship; but if so, it is a worship strangely mixed with contempt." And she laugh-

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ed a little. "A kind of adoring which I fancy belongs properly to the lords of creation, and which we of the weaker sex have no right to practise."

"Miss Lake is pleased to be ironical to-night," he said, with a smile.

"Am I? I dare say. All women are. Irony is the weapon of cowardice, and cowardice the vice of weakness. Yet I think I was naturally bold and true. I hate cowardice and deception even in myself — I hate perfidy — I hate *fraud*."

She tapped a little emphasis upon the floor with her white satin shoe, and her eyes flashed with an angry meaning among the crowd at the other end of the room, as if, following an object to whom in some way the statement applied.

The strange bitterness of her tone, though it was low enough, and something wild, suffering, and revengeful in her look, did not escape Lord Chelford, and he followed unconsciously the direction of her glance; but there was nothing there to guide him to a conclusion.

"And yet, Miss Lake, we are all more or less cowards or deceivers — at least, to the extent of suppression. Who would speak the whole truth, or like to hear it — not I, I know."

"Nor I," she said, quietly.

"I like a little puzzle and mystery — they surround our future and our past; and the present would be insipid, I think, without them. Now, I can't tell, Miss Lake, as you look on Tom Moore there, and I try to read your smile, whether you happen at this particular moment to adore or despise him."

"Moore's is a daring morality — what do you think for instance, of these lines?" she said, touching the verse with her bouquet.

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Lord Chelford read —

> I ask not, I know not, if guilt's in thy heart :
> I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art.

He laughed.

"Very passionate, but hardly respectable. I once knew," he continued a little more gravely, "a marriage made upon that principle, and not very audaciously either, which turned out very unhappily."

"So I should conjecture," she said, rising from her chair, rather drearily and abstractedly," and there is good old Lady Sarah. I must go and ask her how she does." She paused for a moment, holding her bouquet drooping towards the floor, and looking with her clouded eyes down — down — through it; and then she looked up suddenly, with an odd, fierce smile, and she said, bitterly enough — "And yet, if I were a man, and capable of loving, I could love no other way; because I suppose love to be a madness, and the sublimest and the most despicable of states. And I admire Moore for that flash of the fallen angelic — it is the sentiment of a hero and a madman — too base and too *noble* for this cool, wise world."

She was already moving away, nebulous in hovering folds of snowy muslin. And she floated down like a cloud upon the ottoman, beside old Lady Sarah, and smiled, and leaned towards her, and talked in her sweet, low, distinct accents. And Lord Chelford followed her, with a sad sort of smile, admiring her greatly.

Of course, it was not every man's privilege to dance with the splendid Lady of Brandon. Her kinsman, Lord Chelford, did so; and now handsome Sir Harry Bracton, six feet high, so broad-shouldered and slim-waisted, his fine but not very wise face irradiated with indefatigable smiles, stood and conversed with her, with that jaunty

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swagger of his — boisterous, rollicking, beaming with immeasurable self-complacency.

Stanley Lake left old Lady Chelford's side, and glided to that of Dorcas Brandon.

"Will you dance this set — are you engaged, Miss Brandon?" he said, in low eager tones.

"Yes, to both questions," answered she, with the faintest gleam of the conventional smile, and looking now gravely again at her bouquet.

"Well the next, possibly, I hope?"

"I never do that," said the apathetic beauty, serenely.

Stanley looked as if he did not quite understand, and there was a little silence.

"I mean, I never engage myself beyond one dance. I hope you do not think it rude — but I never do."

"Miss Brandon can make what laws she pleases for all here, and for some of us everywhere," he replied, with a mortified smile and a bow.

At that moment Sir Harry Bracton arrived to claim her, and Miss Kybes — elderly and sentimental, and in no great request — timidly said, in a gobbling, confidential whisper —

"What a handsome couple they do make! Does not it quite realise your conception, Captain Lake, of young Lochinvar, you know, and his fair Helen —

So stately his form, and so lovely her face—

"It does really; and that "one cup of wine"— you recollect — which the hero drank; and, I dare say, it made young Lochinvar a little noisy and swaggering, when he proposed "treading the measure"— is not that the phrase? Yes, really; it is a very pretty poetical parallel."

When Miss Brandon returned, Lake was unfortunately

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on duty beside old Lady Chelford, whom it was important to propitiate, and who was in the middle of a story — an extraordinary favor from her ladyship; and he had the vexation to see Lord Chelford palpably engaging Miss Brandon for the next dance.

When she returned, she was a little tired, and doubtful whether she would dance any more — certainly not the next dance. So he resolved to lie in wait, and anticipate any new suitor who might appear.

His eyes, however, happened to wander, in an unlucky moment, to old Lady Chelford, who instantaneously signalled to him with her fan.

"— the woman," mentally exclaimed Lake, telegraphing, at the same time, with a bow and a smile of deferential alacrity, and making his way through the crowd as deftly as he could; "what a — fool I was to go near her."

So the Captain had to assist at the dowager lady's supper; and not only so, but in some sort at her digestion also, which she chose should take place for some ten minutes in the chair that she occupied at the supper table.

When he escaped, Miss Brandon *was* engaged once more — and to Sir Harry Bracton, for a second time.

And moreover, when he again essayed his suit, the young lady had peremptorily made up her mind to dance no more that night.

How *can* Dorcas endure that man," thought Rachel, as she saw Sir Harry lead her to her seat, after a second dance. "Handsome, but so noisy and foolish, and wicked; and is not he vulgar, too?"

But Dorcas was not demonstrative. Her likings and dislikings were always more or less enigmatical. Still Rachel Lake fancied that she detected signs, not only of tolerance, but of positive liking, in her haughty cousin's

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demeanor, and wondered, after all, whether Dorcas was beginning to like Sir Harry Bracton.

Twice, for a moment, their eyes met; but only for a moment. Rachel knew that a tragedy might be — at that instant, and under the influence of that very spectacle — gathering its thunders silently in another part of the room, where she saw Stanley's pale, peculiar face; and although he appeared in nowise occupied by what was passing between Dorcas Brandon and Sir Harry, she well knew that nothing of it escaped him.

The sight of that pale face was a cold pang at her heart — a face prophetic of evil, at sight of which the dark curtain which hid futurity seemed to sway and tremble, as if a hand from behind was on the point of drawing it. Rachel sighed profoundly, and her eyes looked sadly through her bouquet on the floor.

"I'm very glad you come, Radie," said a sweet voice, which somehow made her shiver, close to her ear. "This kind of thing will do you good; and you really wanted a little fillip. Shall I take you to the supper-room?"

"No, Stanley, thank you; I prefer remaining."

"Have you observed how Dorcas has treated me this evening?"

"No, Stanley; nothing unusual is there?" answered Rachel, glancing uneasily round, lest they should be overheard.

"Well, I think she has been more than usually repulsive — quite marked; I almost fancy these Gylingden people, dull as they are, must observe it. I have a notion I shan't trouble Gylingden or her after to-morrow."

Rachel glanced quickly at him. He was deadly pale; and he returned her glance for a second wildly, and then dropped his eyes to the ground.

"I told you" he resumed again, after a short pause,

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and commencing with a gentle laugh, that she liked that fellow, Bracton."

"You did say something, I think, of that, some time since," said Rachel; "but really"—

"But really, Radie, dear, you can't need any confirmation more than this evening affords. We both know Dorcas very well; she is not like other girls. She does not encourage fellows as they do; but if she did not like Bracton very well, indeed, she would send him about his business. She has danced with him twice, on the contrary, and has suffered his agreeable conversation all the evening; and that from Dorcas Brandon means, you know, everything."

"I don't know that it means anything. I don't see why it should; but I am very certain, Stanley, that if this supposed preference leads you to abandon your wild pursuit of Dorcas, it will prevent more ruin than, perhaps, either of us anticipates; and, Stanley," she added in a whisper, looking full in his eyes, which were raised for a moment to hers, "it is hardly credible that you dare still to persist in so desperate and cruel a project."

"Thank you," said Stanley quietly, but the yellow lights glared fiercely from their sockets, and were then lowered instantly to the floor.

"She has been very rude to me to-night; and you have not been, or tried to be, of any earthly use to me; and I will take a decided course. I perfectly know what I'm about. You don't seem to be dancing. *I* have not either; we have both got something more serious, I fancy, to think of."

And Stanley Lake glided slowly away, and was lost in the crowd. He went into the supper-room, and had a glass of seltzer water and sherry. He loitered at the table. His ruminations were dreary, I fancy, and his

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temper by no means pleasant; and it needed a good deal of that artificial command of countenance which he cultivated, to prevent his betraying something of the latter, when Sir Harry Bracton, talking loud and volubly as usual, swaggered into the supper-room, with Dorcas Brandon on his arm.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SUPPER-ROOM.

It was rather trying, in this state of things, to receive from the triumphant baronet, with only a parenthetical "Dear Lake, I beg your pardon," a rough knock on the elbow of the hand that held his glass, and to be then summarily hustled out of his place. It was no mitigation of the rudeness, in Lake's estimate, that Sir Harry was so engrossed and elated as to seem hardly conscious of any existence but Miss Brandon's and his own.

Lake was subject to transient paroxysms of exasperation; but even in these he knew how to command himself pretty well before witnesses. His smile grew a little stranger, and his face a degree whiter, as he set down his glass, quietly glided a little away, and brushed off with his handkerchief the aspersion which his coat had suffered.

In a few minutes more Miss Brandon had left the supper-room leaning upon Lord Chelford's arm; and Sir Harry remained, with a glass of pink champagne, such as young fellows drink with a faith and comfort so wonderful, at balls and *fêtes champêtres*.

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Now, Sir Harry's rudeness to Lake had not been, I am afraid, altogether accidental. The barouet was sudden and vehement in his affairs of the heart; but curable on short absences, and easily transferable. He had been vehemently enamored of the heiress of Brandon a year ago and more; but during an absence Mark Wylder's suit grew up and prospered, and Sir Harry Bracton acquiesced; and, to say truth, the matter troubled his manly breast but little.

He had hardly expected to see her here in this rollicking rustic gathering. She was, he thcught, even more lovely than he remembered her. Wylder had gone off the scene, as Mr. Carlyle says, into infinite space. Who could tell exactly the cause of his dismissal, and why the young lady had asserted her capricious resolve to be free?

There were pleasant theories adaptable to the circumstances; and Sir Harry cherished an agreeable opinion of himself; and so the old flame blazed up wildly, and the young gentleman was more in love then, and for some weeks after the ball, than perhaps he had ever been before.

Now some men — and Sir Harry was one of them — are churlish and ferocious over their loves, as certain brutes are over their victuals. In one of those tender paroxysms, when in the presence of his dulcinea, the young Baronet was always hot, short, and saucy, with his own sex; and when his jealousy was ever so little touched, positively impertinent.

He perceived what other people did not, that Miss Brandon's eye once on that evening rested on Captain Lake with a peculiar expression of interest. This look was but once and momentary; but the young gentleman resented it, brooded over it, every now and then, when the pale

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face of the Captain crossed his eye; and two or three times, when the beautiful young lady's attention seemed to wander from his agreeable conversation, he thought he detected her haughty eye moving in the same direction. So he looked that way too; and although he could see nothing noticeable in Stanley's demeanor, he could have felt it in his heart to box his ears.

Therefore, I don't think he was quite so careful as he might have been to spare Lake that jolt upon the elbow, which coming from a rival in a moment of public triumph was not altogether easy to bear like a Christian.

"Some grapes, please," said Lake, to the young lady behind the table.

"Oh, *uncle!* Is that you, Lake?—beg pardon; but you *are* so like my poor dear uncle, Langton. I wish you'd let me adopt you for an uncle. He was such a pretty fellow, with his fat white cheeks and long nose, and he looked half asleep. Do, pray, Uncle Lake; I should like it so," and the Baronet, who was, what some people would term, perhaps, vulgar, winked over his glass at the blooming confectioner, who tittered over her shoulder at the handsome Baronet's charming banter.

The girl having turned away to titter, forgot Lake's grapes; so he helped himself, and leaning against the table, looked superciliously upon Sir Harry, who was not to be deterred by the drowsy gaze of contempt with which the Captain retorted his angry "chaff."

"Poor uncle died of love, or chicken-pock, or something, at forty. You're not ailing, Nunkie, are you? You do look wofully sick, though; too bad to lose a second uncle at the same early age. You're near forty, eh, Nunkie? and such a pretty fellow! You'll take care of me in your will, Nunkie, won't you? Come, what will you leave me; not much tin, I'm afraid."

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"No, not much tin," answered Lake; "but I'll leave you what you want more, my sense and decency, with a request that you will use them for my sake."

"You're a devilish witty fellow, Lake; take care your wit don't get you into trouble," said the Baronet, chuckling and growing angrier, for he saw the Hebe laughing; and not being a ready man, though given to banter, he sometimes descended to menace in his jocularity.

"I was just thinking your dullness might do the same for you," drawled Lake.

"When do you mean to pay Dawlings that bet on the Derby?" demanded Sir Harry, his face very red, and only the ghost of his smile grinning there. "I think you'd better; of course it is quite easy."

The Baronet was smiling his best, with a very red face and that unpleasant uncertainty in his contracted eyes which accompanies suppressed rage.

"As easy as that," said Lake, chucking a little bunch of grapes full into Sir Harry Bracton's handsome face.

Lake recoiled a step; his face blanched as white as the cloth; his left arm lifted, and his right hand grasping the haft of a table-knife.

There was just a second in which the athletic Baronet stood, as it were breathless and incredulous, and then his Herculean fist whirled in the air with a most unseemly oath: the girl screamed, and a crash of glass and crockery, whisked away by their coats, resounded on the ground.

A chair between Lake and Sir Harry impeded the Baronet's stride, and his uplifted arm was caught by a gentleman in moustache, who held so fast that there was no chance of shaking it loose.

"The people — hang it! — you'll have all the people about you. Quiet — quiet — can't you, I say. Settle it quietly. Here I am."

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"Well, let me go; that will do," said he, glowering furiously at Lake, who confronted him, in the same attitude, a couple of yards away. "You'll hear," and he turned away.

"I am at the 'Brandon Arms' till to-morrow," said Lake, very quietly, to the gentleman in moustaches, who bowed slightly, and walked out of the room with Sir Harry.

Lake poured out some sherry in a tumbler, and drank it off. He was a little bit stunned, I think, in his new situation.

Except for the waiters, and the actors in it, it so happened that the supper-room was empty during this sudden fracas. Lake stared at the frightened girl, in his fierce abstraction. Then, with his wild gaze, he followed the line of his adversary's retreat, and shook his ears slightly like a man at whose hair a wasp has buzzed.

"Thank you," said he to the maid, suddenly recollecting himself, with a sort of smile; "That will do. What confounded nonsense! He'll be quite cool again in five minutes. Never mind."

And Lake pulled on his white glove, glancing down the file of silent waiters — some looking frightened, and some reserved — in white ties and waistcoats, and he glided out of the room — his mind somewhere else — like a somnambulist.

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AFTER THE BALL.

LAKE glided from the feast with a sense of a tremendous liability upon him. There was no retreat. The morning — yes, the morning — what then? Should he live to see the evening? Sir Harry Bracton was the crack shot of Swivel's gallery. There he was, talking to old Lady Chelford. Very well; and there was that fellow with the twisted moustache — plainly an officer and a gentleman — twisting the end of one of them, and thinking profoundly, evidently considering his coming diplomacy with Lake's "friend." Aye, by the bye, and Lake's eye wandered in bewilderment among village dons and elderly country gentlemen, in search of that inestimable treasure.

"Monstrous hot, sir — hey? ha, ha, by Jove!" said Major Jackson, who had just returned from the supper-room, where he had heard several narratives of the occurrence. Don't think I was so hot since the ball at Government House, by Jove, sir, in 1828 — awful summer that!"

The Major was jerking his handkerchief under his florid nose and chin, by way of ventilation; and eyeing the young man shrewdly the while, to read what he might of the story in his face.

"Been in Calcutta, Captain Lake?"

"No; very hot, indeed. Could I say just a word with you — this way a little. So glad I met you." And they edged into a little nook of the lobby, where they

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had a few minutes' confidential talk, during which the Major looked grave and consequential, and carried his head high, nodding now and then with military decision.

Major Jackson whispered an abrupt word or two in his ear, and threw back his head, eyeing Lake with grave and sly defiance. Then came another whisper and a wink; and the Major shook his hand, briefly but hard, and the gentlemen parted.

Lake strolled into the ball-room, and on to the upper end, where the "best" people are and suddenly he was in Miss Brandon's presence.

"I've been very presumptuous, I fear to-night, Miss Brandon," he said, in his peculiar low tones. "I've been very importunate — I prized the honor I sought so very much, I forgot how little I deserved it. And I do not think it likely you'll see me for a good while — possibly for a very long time. I've therefore ventured to come, merely to say good-bye — only that, just — good-bye. And — and to beg that flower" — and he plucked it resolutely from her bouquet — "which I will keep while I live. Good-bye, Miss Brandon."

And Captain Stanley Lake, that pale apparition was gone.

I do not know at all how Miss Brandon felt at this instant; for I never could quite understand that strange lady. But I believe she looked a little pale as she gravely adjusted the flowers so audaciously violated by the touch of the cool young gentleman.

I can't say whether Miss Brandon deigned to follow him with her dark, dreamy gaze. I rather think not. And three minutes afterwards he had left the Town Hall.

The Brandon party did not stay very late. And they dropped Rachel at her little dwelling. How very silent Dorcas was, thought Rachel, as they drove from Gyling-

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den. Perhaps others were thinking the same of Rachel.

Next morning, at half-past seven o'clock, a dozen or so of rustics, under command of Major Jackson, arrived at the back entrance of Brandon Hall, bearing Stanley Lake upon a shutter, with glassy eyes, that did not seem to see, sunken face, and a very blue tinge about his mouth.

The Major fussed into the house, and saw and talked with Larcom, who was solemn and bland upon the subject, and went out, first to make personal inspection of the Captain, who seemed to him to be dying. He was shot somewhere in the shoulder or breast — they could not see exactly where, nor disturb him as he lay. A good deal of blood had flowed from him, upon the arm and side of one of the men who supported his head.

Lake said nothing — he only whispered rather indistinctly one word, "water" — and was not able to lift his head when it came; and when they poured it into and over his lips, he sighed and closed his eyes.

"It is not a bad sign, bleeding so freely, but he looks devilish shaky, you see. I've seen lots of our fellows hit, you know, and I don't like his looks — poor fellow. You'd better see Lord Chelford this minute. He could not stand being brought all the way to the town. I'll run down and send up the doctor, and he'll take him on if he can bear it."

The Major surprised Doctor Buddle shaving. He popped in unceremoniously. The fat little doctor received him in drawers and a very tight web worsted shirt, standing by the window, at which dangled a small looking-glass.

"By George, sir, they've been at mischief," burst forth the Major; and the Doctor, razor in hand, listened with wide open eyes and half his face lathered, to the story. Before it was over the Doctor shaved the unshorn side,

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and (the Major still in the room) completed his toilet in hot haste.

Honest Major Jackson was very uncomfortable. Of course, Buddle could not give any sort of opinion upon a case which he had not seen; but it described uglily, and the Major consulted in broken hints, with an uneasy wink or two, about a flight to Boulogne.

"Well, it will be no harm to be ready; but take no step till I come back," said the Doctor, who had stuffed a great roll of lint and plaster, and some other medicinals into one pocket, and his case of instruments, forceps, probe, scissors, and all the other steel and silver horrors, into the other; so he strutted forth in his great coat unnaturally broad about the hips; and the Major, "devilish uncomfortable," accompanied him at a smart pace to the great gate of Brandon.

Lord Chelford being an early man, was, notwithstanding the ball of the preceding night, dressing, when St. Ange, his Swiss servant, knocked at his door with a dozen pocket handkerchiefs, a bottle of eau-de-cologne, and some other properties of his métier.

St. Ange could not wait until he had laid them down, but broke out with —

Oh, mi Lor! — qu'est-il arrivé? — le pauvre capitaine! il est tué — il se meurt — he dies — d'un coup de pistolet. He comes de se battre from beating himself in duel — il a été atteint dans la poitrine — le pauvre gentilhomme! of a blow of the pistol."

And so on, the young nobleman gathering the facts as best he might.

"Is Larcom there?"

"In the gallery, mi Lor."

"Ask him to come in."

So Monsieur Larcom entered, and bowed ominously.

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"You've seen him Larcom. Is he very much hurt?"

"He appears my Lord to me, I regret to say, almost a-dying like."

"Very weak? Does he speak to you?"

"Not a word, my Lord. Since he got a little water he's quite quiet."

"Poor fellow. Where have you put him?"

"In the housekeeper's lobby, my Lord. I rather think he's-a-dying. He look's uncommon bad, and I and Mrs. Esterbroke, the housekeeper; my Lord thought you would not like he should die out of doors."

"Has she got your mistress's directions?"

"Miss Brandon is not called up, my Lord, and Mrs. Esterbroke is unwillin' to halarm her; so she thought it better I should come for orders to your lordship; which she thinks also the poor young gentleman is certainly a-dying."

"Is there any vacant bedroom near where you have placed him? What does Mrs. —— the housekeeper, say?"

"She thinks, my Lord, the room hopposit, where Mr. Sledd, the architeck, slep, when 'ere, would answer very nice. It is roomy and hairy, and no steps. Major Jackson, who is gone to the town to fetch the doctor, my Lord, says Mr. Lake won't a-bear carriage; and so the room on the level, my Lord, would, perhaps, be more convenient."

"Certainly; tell her so. I will speak to Miss Brandon when she comes down. How soon will the doctor be here?"

"From a quarter to half an hour, my Lord."

"Then tell the housekeeper to arrange as she proposes. and don't remove his clothes until the doctor comes. Everyone must assist. I know, St. Ange, you'll like to assist."

So Larcom withdrew ceremoniously and Lord Chel-

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ford hastened his toilet, and was down stairs, and in the room assigned by the housekeeper to the ill-starred Captain Lake, before Doctor Buddle had arrived.

It had already the dismal character of a sick chamber. Its light was darkened; its talk was in whispers; and its to-ings and fro-ings on tip-toe. An obsolete chambermaid had been already installed as nurse. Little Mrs. Esterbroke, the housekeeper, was fussing hither and thither about the room noiselessly.

While the wounded Captain lay on the bed, with his clothes on, and the coverlet over him, and that clay-colored apathetic face, with closed eyes, upon the pillow, without sigh or motion, not a whispered word escaped him; but his brain was appalled, and his heart died within him in the unspeakable horror of death.

Lord Chelford, too, having looked on Lake with silent, but awful misgivings, longed for the arrival of the Doctor; and was listening and silent when Buddle's short step and short respiration were heard in the passage. So Larcom came to the door to announce the Doctor in a whisper, and Buddle fussed into the room, and made his bow to Lord Chelford, and his brief compliments and condolences.

"Not asleep?" he enquired, standing by the bed.

The Captain's lips moved a disclaimer, I suppose, but no sound came.

So the Doctor threw open the window-shutters, and clipped Stanley Lake's exquisite coat ruthlessly through with his scissors, and having cleared the room of all useless hands, he made his examination.

It was a long visit. Buddle in the hall afterwards declined breakfast — he had a board to attend. He told Lord Chelford that the case was "a very nasty one."

In fact, the chances were against the Captain, and he,

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Buddle, would wish a consultation with a London surgeon — whoever Lord Chelford had most confidence in — Sir Francis Seddley, he thought, would be very desirable — but, of course, it was for the family to decide. If the messenger caught the quarter to eleven up train at Dollington, he would be in London at six, and could return with the Doctor by the down mail train, and so reach Dollington at ten minutes past four next morning, which would answer, as he would not operate sooner.

As the Doctor toddled towards Gylingden, with sympathetic Major Jackson by his side, before they entered the town they were passed by one of the Brandon men riding at a hard canter for Dollington.

The ladies that morning had tea in their rooms. It was near twelve o'clock when Lord Chelford saw Miss Brandon. She was in the conservatory among her flowers, and on seeing him stepped into the drawing-room.

"I hope, Dorcas, you are not angry with me. I've been, I'm afraid, very impertinent; but I was called on to decide for you, in your absence, and they all thought poor Lake could not be moved on to Gylingden without danger."

"You did quite rightly, Chelford, and I thank you," said Miss Brandon, coldly; and she seated herself, and continued —

"Pray, what does the Doctor really say?"

"He speaks very seriously."

Miss Brandon looked down, and then, with a pale gaze, suddenly in Chelford's face —

"He thinks he may die?" said she.

"Yes," said Lord Chelford, in a very low tone, returning her gaze solemnly.

"And nobody to advise but that village doctor, Buddle — that's hardly creditable, I think."

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"Pardon me. At his suggestion I have sent for Sir Francis Seddley, from town, and I hope he may arrive early to-morrow morning."

"Why, Stanley Lake may die to-day."

"He does not apprehend that. But it is necessary to remove the bullet, and the operation will be critical, and it is for that specially that Sir Francis is coming down."

"It is to take place to-morrow, and he'll die in that operation. You know he'll die," said Dorcas, pale and fierce.

"I assure you, Dorcas, I have been perfectly frank. He looks upon poor Lake as in very great danger — but that is all."

"What brutes you men are!" said Dorcas, with a wild scorn in her look and accent, and her cheeks flushed with passion. "You knew quite well last night there was to be this wicked duel in the morning — and you — a magistrate — a lord lieutenant — what are you? — you connived at this bloody conspiracy — and *he* — your own cousin, Chelford — your cousin!"

Chelford looked at her very much amazed.

"Yes; you are worse than Sir Harry Bracton — for you're no fool; and worse than that wicked old man, Major Jackson — who shall never enter these doors again — for he was employed — trusted in their brutal plans; but you had no excuse and every opportunity — and you have allowed your cousin Stanley to be murdered."

"You do me great injustice, Dorcas. I did not know, or even suspect that a hostile meeting between poor Lake and Bracton was thought of. I merely heard that there had been some trifling altercation; and when, intending to make peace between them, I alluded to it, just before we left, Bracton said it was really nothing — quite blown over — and that he could not recollect what either had

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said. I was entirely deceived. They think it fair, you know, to dupe other people in such affairs; and I will also say," he continued, a little haughtily, "that you might have spared your censure until at least you had heard what I had to say."

"I do believe you, Chelford; you are not vexed with me. Won't you shake hands?"

He took her hand with a smile.

"And now," said she, "Chelford, ought not we to send for poor Rachel: her only brother! Is not it sad?"

"Certainly; shall I ask my mother, or will you write?"

"I will write," she said.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN WHICH MISS RACHEL LAKE COMES TO BRANDON, AND DOCTOR BUDDLE CALLS AGAIN.

In about an hour afterwards, Rachel Lake arrived in the carriage which had been despatched for her with Dorcas's note. Dorcas met her at the door, and they kissed silently.

"How is he, Dorcas?"

"Very ill, dear, I'm afraid — sit down, darling."

Rachel was relieved, for in her panic she almost feared to ask if he were living.

"Oh! Dorcas, darling, he'll die; I know it. Oh! merciful Heaven! how tremendous."

"You will not be so frightened in a little time. You have only just heard it, Rachel dearest, and you are startled. I was so myself."

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