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LIVING OR DEAD BY HUGH CONWAY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LIVING OR DEAD.

A NOVEL.

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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OF VOLUME II.

LIVING OR DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNCEREMONIOUS DISMISSAL.

After my first warm, heartfelt greeting, we separated, and, still holding each other's hands, stood at some length and looked to see what change the past two years had wrought. My father looked healthier and stronger, his face was bronzed, and his figure had lost much of its habitual stoop. But the face, with its exquisite, regular features, was the same as of old, still conveying the same expression of sensitiveness and firmness. The dark eyes gazed into mine in the same mournful, but loving way. Except for his tanned cheeks, he showed no sign of travel. His thick beard was trimmed as accurately

as ever to that point which so well became his peculiar style of face. His attire was faultless, and I felt sure that, in whatever wild countries he had roamed since his departure, he was nowhere mistaken for anything but a high-bred English gentleman. I could only hope, as he looked at me, that my appearance gave him half as much satisfaction.

"You are grown—filled out—become a man, Philip," he said. "It seems well that we should meet in the old home."

"But what a chance!" I said. "A day later, and you would have missed me. When did you return?"

"Yesterday. I went to your rooms and heard you were down here; so I came on as quickly as possible."

We linked our arms and walked down the path towards the house. In my delight I forgot all about Valentine.

"Where is your luggage?" I asked my father.

"The bulk in London; the little I brought with me at the farm. The coach dropped me there, so I told them to send some one across with it."

"You walked over the moor?"

"Yes. I should have been here before, but stayed chatting to a young fellow I met—an artist. A bright, pleasant-spoken boy, whose talk amused me greatly."

Valentine, of course. I laughed as I thought of the contrast between him and my grave father.

"Artists are not often seen in these parts," continued my father, "so I stopped and spoke to him. In a quarter of an hour he had given me his opinions on painting, music, literature, cigars, and the habits of the people of North Devon."

I laughed again at the idea of Valentine, delighted with a new listener, pouring out his views in his eloquent way to a man who knew twice as much as he did on every subject under the sun.

"Did you ask his name, or where he was staying?" I inquired.

"No; but I wished afterwards I had done so. The young fellow's manner rather won upon me. Ah, here we are at home! It seems very natural, Philip."

We passed through the gate, and my father received the astonished welcome of the servants. He spoke to them kindly, and, still arm-in-arm, we entered the house.

I did not tell him that the young artist was his guest and my friend; I thought it would be an amusing scene when, by-and-by, Valentine, with paint-box, easel, umbrella, and other accessories, entered the house and shouted, as was his custom, for food and drink. After the favourable impression he had made, there was no doubt as to his being welcome.

We entered the library. My father threw himself into his usual chair. I sat beside him. He stretched out his hand and took mine.

"You are glad to see me back, my boy?"

My heart was too full for words. I could do little more than press his hand.

"Now then, tell me all about yourself," he said. "How have you been getting on?"

"Rather tell me where you have been—what you have done—if you have returned quite well?"

"All that may wait, Philip. Give me your news first." As I had always obeyed him, I obeyed him now.

"I have been reading fairly hard," I said. "I have lived a pleasant life, thanks to your kindness. I have made many friends; I have done

some foolish things, which I must confess, and entreat forgiveness."

The thought of that large sum of money was growing very distressing now the day of reckoning came.

"Let the foolish things wait, Philip. Tell me only pleasant ones to-day."

"Then I must begin with the pleasantest of all." I felt my cheek blushing as I spoke. My father noticed my confusion, and gave me a searching glance.

"I am engaged to be married," I stammered.

The smile left his face, and the old, weary, sad look came over him. "I do not approve of marrying too young," he said, not unkindly.

"You will approve when you see my choice," I said.

"I hope so. Doubtless you have chosen wisely and well. Tell me the lady's name."

Before giving him the information I drew Claudine's likeness from my breast, and handed it to him. He looked at it attentively.

"She is beautiful, very beautiful. That I expected, knowing your nature. Now let me hear all about her."

"She is a Miss Neville."

"A good name, but there are many branches of that family. Who are her friends?" As he spoke he again took the portrait in his hand, and looked at his future daughter-in-law.

"She is an orphan," I said. "Her father was a Colonel Neville. He has been dead some years."

"Where may you have met her?"

"At her aunt's, one of my dearest friends, Lady Estmere's." As I mentioned Lady Estmere's name, my father started from his chair. Claudine's portrait fell from his hand, and I heard the glass shiver as it struck the polished floor. He leaned over me, and grasped my shoulder in a way which was positively painful.

"Did I hear you aright, Philip? Did you say Lady Estmere, one of your dearest friends?"

The scorn, the bitterness he threw into that last sentence, made my heart sink. Too clearly it told me that the cruel slander had reached even to him in his seclusion, that he had judged and found her guilty. I could not speak, I only bent my head in token of assent.

"Do you know who Lady Estmere is, Philip?" he continued. "Do you know that she is dis-

honoured among women, that her husband drove her from his side for her sin?"

"I have heard the tale. Sir Laurence Estmere must have been mad to lay such an accusation on his wife. See her, as I have seen her, and you would scout the possibility of such a thing! Some day it will be known that she is a much-wronged woman. Some day I shall find means of proving it, then I pity the husband who condemned her!"

I spoke warmly and with conviction. Never shall I forget the look on my father's face; the expression in his eyes. It was not sorrow—it was not anger—it was fear. He saw the astonishment written on my face, and, turning aside, walked to the window.

As I recall this scene, I wonder that the truth did not come to me like a sudden revelation. But then, it is so easy to explain things when all is clear; and perhaps the truth was withheld from me for a higher purpose, for the working out of certain ends.

I followed my father to the window. I took his hand. It lay lifeless in mine, responding not to the clasp.

"We cannot quarrel on the day of your re-

turn," I pleaded. "And let Lady Estmere be all you believe, that cannot affect Miss Neville."

He turned to me. His face was pale, but composed.

"Philip," he said, "you are of age, and past my control, but, with my consent, no son of mine shall marry a woman in any way connected with Lady Estmere. My son's wife shall not come from the house of a woman who brought her husband to shame!"

Those were hard words, but I must bear them, and crush down the hot retort which rose to my lips.

"Let us postpone the discussion for to-day," I said, sorrowfully enough.

"Let us never return to it," said my father, bitterly, and sinking wearily into his chair.

I looked dreamily and listlessly out of the window; thinking of Lady Estmere, of Claudine, of Rothwell's warning, of the contemptible nature of even the best of men, when my father, of all others, could accept such a tale as the truth. I was wondering what I should do under the present painful circumstances—wondering how I could tell my peerless Claudine what had transpired—how she would bear it. Then, as I looked up

the valley, I saw a stalwart form striding towards the house. I even heard the notes of a gay song borne on the breeze, and I realized the fact that in a few minutes Valentine would be shouting and laughing in the hall. He would be under the roof of the man who condemned his mother —and that man my father!

At all cost I must prevent this. I went across to my father.

"You remember the artist you saw on the moor?" He nodded, looking surprised at the irrelevancy of my words.

"I should have told you, but I intended it to be a surprise. He has been staying with me. He is Lady Estmere's son."

My father's lips worked. It was some time before he found power of speech.

"Forbid him the house," he said.

"I can scarcely do that. He leaves to-morrow."

"I will go to my room and stay there until he has gone." He rose and walked to the door. On the threshold he turned.

"He is another of your dearest friends, I suppose?" he said, with a bitter sneer.

"He is my dearest friend," I said stoutly.

"I left my boy," said my father slowly, but in accents that thrilled me, "feeling as proud of him as ever father felt of his son. I return and find him affianced to a girl whose connections are disreputable, and hear that his dearest friend is the bastard son of a dishonoured mother."

He passed from the room. I remained, wondering if my father was mad, or if the Norris pedigree was such that it could not bear the shadow of a stain on its escutcheon.

Presently I roused myself and went to the gate to meet Valentine. He came in with his usual sunny smile on his face, and, tossing his artistic paraphernalia aside, threw himself on the garden-seat, whilst I considered how best to make him aware of the changed state of things.

"Philip," he said, "you have some news to tell me, I think. The wanderer has returned?"

"Yes, my father came back just now, unexpectedly."

"I thought so. I met him on the moor. When I saw him take the path to the house, I knew he must be your father. A very creditable specimen, I call him. I made great friends with him."

I was silent, shrinking from the task before me.

"I am glad he's returned," continued Valen-

tine. "Of course, you have already told him what a daughter is awaiting him? I suppose his arrival will change your plans? You won't come with me to-morrow?"

"No; I must stay here some days longer."

"Well," said Valentine, "has this unexpected event disturbed Mrs. Lee's domestic economy, or shall we get something to eat, as usual? I am famishing."

I led him into the house, where we found our usual mid-day meal in readiness. Valentine looked round, as if expecting to see his new host at the table.

"Will your father join us?" he asked. "I want to resume my discussion with him."

"The fact is, he is knocked up with his walk, and wants rest. He is not very strong, I am afraid."

"Strong! He looked strong enough as he walked over the moor. However, it is perhaps as well he is not here at this moment. I should shock him with my appetite."

Valentine set to work gaily at the food, but I was unable to accompany him—every mouthful seemed to choke me. It was a bitter trial to be

obliged to tell my dearest friend he was no longer welcome in my father's house.

"What's the matter, Philip?" asked Valentine at last, noticing the sorry part I played at table. "Has joy taken away your beautiful appetite?"

"No—not joy."

My accent expressed more than my words. He looked alarmed and surprised.

"What is wrong? Tell me, Philip."

"Everything—I think—I scarcely know how to tell you. Make the telling as easy as you can for me, Valentine."

He looked at me with an earnest expression in his eyes—an expression few save myself knew they were capable of showing.

"Dear old boy!" he said, "speak on."

"My father, Valentine. How can I tell you? He finds your presence under his roof objectionable."

A sad, sweet look crossed Valentine's face—a look the counterpart of that one which was habitual to his mother. He rose from his chair.

"I am sorry for that, Philip," he said, quietly.

"Need I tell you my grief and mortification?" I said.

"No; I can understand them. I will not even

ask you Mr. Norris' reason, as I should not like to think more harshly than I can help of your father. Thank Mr. Norris for the hospitality I have enjoyed through you; but I can best thank him by leaving his house at once."

"You will not go to-day?"

"My dear Philip!" said Valentine, lifting his eyebrows, and speaking in a tone which so fully expressed his astonishment at my supposing he could remain another hour in a house where he was not welcome, that I said no more to dissuade him.

"I must change my clothes, I can't go back to civilization like this. You will send my luggage on, I dare say, and will pack up my sketches. Some are not quite dry, so be careful."

Although the insult must have rankled in his heart, not one word of reproach did he breathe. I was his friend, and the man who insulted him was his friend's father. Valentine loved me, so, for my sake, kept back every word which he knew must add to my vexation and shame. It was his manner on this occasion which showed me what nobility there was in his sweet and seemingly frivolous nature.

He left me to make a few preparations. I

had not the heart to accompany him, but sat, wretched and dispirited, waiting for his reappearance. He soon came back, looking rather pale, but pleasant and smiling. He caught sight of my gloomy face, and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Cheer up, Philip!" he said. "You are not accountable for your father's—what shall I call it? —prejudice. Now call Mrs. Lee. I can't go without saying good-bye to that worthy old soul."

Mrs. Lee was summoned, and informed that Valentine was going. She was much distressed.

"What a pity," she said; "and the master just returned."

"Yes, it is a pity," said Valentine, gravely; "but business is business, you know."

"So it is, sir—so it is. But then, no one expects a gay young gentleman like you to have business to attend to."

"Suppose the Prince of Wales wants me to paint him a picture?"

"That's a different thing, of course, sir."

"Well, good-bye, Mrs. Lee; don't forget to send me those wonderful recipes for making all the good things I have so fully appreciated."

He left the house with a nod and a smile, as

gay, apparently, as when he entered it; but I knew that for once his gaiety was forced. I walked by his side across the garden, and happening to turn round, I saw that my father was watching from his window the departure of his guest. It may have been wrong, but I was determined to show him I was not ashamed of my friend, so I slipped my arm affectionately through Valentine's, and so we walked together by the path towards the moor.

We said little to one another. When we reached the farm we secured the services of a horse and vehicle. I drove Valentine to Minehead, where we parted.

"This will make no difference between us?" I asked wistfully.

Valentine looked at me rather sadly. "Not as far as friendship goes; but I am afraid it must in our intercourse. Besides, Claudine?"

I did not tell him the result of my confession to my father.

"You have told Mr. Norris of your engagement?" he asked.

"I have. I told him at once."

"And he disapproved of it?"

"I am afraid he did."

"For the same reason which made him object to my company?"

I bowed my head. "Oh, Valentine, my friend!" I cried. "Spare me—spare yourself. It must all come right by-and-by."

"By-and-by is a long time, Philip. One woman we know has been waiting for more than twenty dreamy years for that by-and-by! Good-bye. I must, of course, see you in London?"

Our hands met in a true, firm grasp—the grasp of two young men who trusted and loved each other. Then we parted.

"Let things come right or stop wrong," were Valentine's last words. "This is only another insult for which some day I call to account that man—my father—Sir Laurence Estmere!"

As I drove slowly back to Torwood, I hoped that the father and son might never meet.

It was dark when I reached my home. I was weary, and should have gone straight to rest; but to my surprise, I found my father in the library. He asked no question; said nothing about Valentine's departure, nothing about my engagement. We sat for several hours talking. He gave me a brief history of his travels. He had seen many lands and many people, and his description of

his wandering, as he gave it in his own well-chosen, eloquent language, interested and held me, in spite of my troubles and the feeling that he had treated me harshly and unjustly. Indeed, sitting once more with my father, in the old room in the old house, with all things that I remembered as a boy around me, hearing once more the lash of the breakers on the rock, it was as much as I could do to restrain myself from nestling close to his side, placing my hand in his, and believing I was a boy again.

At last we rose to retire for the night. It seemed to me as well that all my unpleasant revelations should be crowded into one day.

"I wish to tell you of a piece of folly of mine."

"We have had enough for one day, Philip."

"I would rather get it over, if you are not too tired."

He sank back into his chair wearily.

"Just after you left," I said, "I was foolish enough to lose a large sum of money at cards."

I thought he looked relieved as he heard my confession.

"Gambling is a bad habit," he said. "I trust you broke yourself of it?"

"Yes, I think so; but I lost a large sum."

"Mr. Grace paid it, I hope. It is not owing now?"

"Yes, Mr. Grace paid it at once. But I am ashamed to say how much it was. It was over three thousand pounds. Will you ever forgive my folly?"

"My dear Philip," said my father, rising, "in the face of other things you have to-day told me, the loss of a little money is not worth considering. Good night."

I went to bed wondering whether my father was mad, or whether he was a millionnaire.

CHAPTER II.

"CHOOSE BETWEEN THE TWO."

FOR two days I stayed on at Torwood without entering upon the debatable ground with my father. I felt sure that when we next discussed the affair a crisis in my life would be at hand. Not for one moment did I contemplate the idea of resigning my future happiness because my father objected to my choice. Much as I loved him, I knew that there were bounds to the duty a son owed to his father—that there are situations in which a man is justified in disregarding parental authority. He had showed me no valid reason for his objection to my marriage with Claudine. If the world laid sin at Lady Estmere's door, it was the refinement of cruelty to visit it upon her niece. If I had ever believed Lord Rothwell's implied supposition that my father would object to the alliance, I felt sure that all opposition must vanish when he saw the girl. Now this hope was at an end. He had

confessed her beautiful; he had nothing to say against her; it was simply her relationship to Lady Estmere which made her obnoxious to him. I sighed deeply as I thought of what might be the result when next I broached the subject to my father.

I was grieved to see that upon his return he at once fell into the old groove of life. So easily did he pick up every dropped thread, that he might have been away for a day in the next county, instead of having made a journey of many thousands of miles. The very morning after his return he resumed a scientific paper at the point he left it when he started. He spent his hours with his books as of old, he took his walks in the same listless way as ever. I could see no change, or prospect of a change, in his manner of life.

During the first two days I was nerving myself for the struggle which I knew must take place. I dare not delay it any longer. Whatever Valentine might tell his mother, she would at least know my father had returned. She and Claudine would be expecting news most likely, expecting I should bring him to them. What would they say when they knew the truth—knew

that he forbade the marriage, and knew or guessed why he did so?

I lay awake at night for hours thinking over my position, and the more I thought, the stronger grew the sad truth that the time was at hand when I must choose between the woman I loved and my father.

The suspense was growing unbearable. Although we met in the most friendly way, I felt there was something between my father and myself, something that changed the old loving relations. I hoped that he would speak, but he showed no inclination to approach the subject, so with a heavy heart I was fain to commence the attack.

It was a glorious summer evening; the sun was already so low that its rays were endurable. My father and I had dined together, and, after lingering a few minutes over our wine, had, by mutual consent, risen from the table and walked out of the house. We strolled slowly to the top of the great tor, and, as we rested there, I thought of the day when I took my first step into the outside world; thought of that moment when I passed in the steamer the old house, and borrowed the captain's binocular to look at the tall,

dark figure standing on the summit of the hill, until the tears which sprang to my eyes blurred the glasses, and for a while rendered them useless. I remembered how that first parting stirred all the passion in my boyish nature, how I blamed and condemned myself for even wishing to leave my father. How I wept as I thought of his loneliness. And now, a few years later, I was compelled to exercise a man's prerogative, and for the sake of the woman I loved rebel against his commands.

Perhaps my silence told my father what was in my mind. He looked at me inquiringly. I think he had made two or three remarks on the beauty of the sunset—remarks which had fallen unheeded on my ears. At last I turned to him.

"I hope you have reconsidered the matter I spoke to you about on the day of your return?"

"It has never left my thoughts a minute," he said, sadly and quietly.

"Surely," I said, "you will withdraw your prohibition. Leaving my happiness out of the question, what would you wish more in my wife? She is beautiful, good, well born, and, if such a recommendation were needed, rich."

"I have spoken, Philip; I have no more to say."

"Then I am to understand that because she is the niece of a woman whose husband left her in a fit of mad jealousy, you think she is unfit to be your daughter. Oh, my father! think again. Remember that I love her. Think what your decision must mean!"

I took his hand, but he kept his eyes turned from me. His face was pale, but the hard, firm look was settling on his mouth. I knew that my entreaties were unavailing.

"I have thought," he said, "and my answer is the same."

"You forbid it absolutely?"

"I forbid it. Stay! I am going beyond my rights. You are a man, and I know mean to please yourself. You have the right to do so. You may marry Miss Neville to-morrow. I cannot prevent you."

"How can I marry her whilst I am dependent on you? I will not live on her money. I must wait until I can make an income."

"It is not a matter of money, Philip. That, thank God, will never come between us. Whether

you marry against my wish or not, your income will be assured."

"How can I take it when I displease you?"

"You need not trouble about that. There is money you are justly entitled to. I will not have you swerve a hair's-breadth from your course for a mercenary consideration. But, Philip—"

He paused, and looked me full in the face with a yearning look in his eyes. "From the day you marry Miss Neville, Lady Estmere's niece, you and I will be strangers. The father and the son who have loved and borne with each other for years will be parted. This is the only threat I hold out, the only deterring influence I use."

My eyes were full of tears. That he was treating me harshly and cruelly I knew; but I loved him, and life without his love would be wretched; and then I loved Claudine. As I guessed it would be, I was called to choose between the two.

For many years I had known the uselessness of appealing against any determination my father had formed, but this time I implored and besought him to withdraw his words. He was adamant. He spoke kindly, as one pitying both

himself and me, even, I thought, as if we were the victims of circumstances, not of his most unprecedented prejudice, pride, or whatever it was. At last, sullenly and sadly I turned away. He followed me and took my arm.

"Philip," he said, "we will not again speak of this. Let all things between us be on the old footing until you write to me and say that Miss Neville is your wife. Then all will be over between us. I have had great disappointments in life, and must bear one more. Now the sun has set, let us go home."

I remained a few days longer at Torwood; but the subject was not mentioned, except once. I was most anxious to learn if it was my father's intention to emerge from his seclusion; if he had returned to England to bury himself once more in that lonely house, with no companions save his books; or at last to step out into the busy world and take that place which his talents and bearing rightly gave him. I asked him the question, and expressed the hope that the latter might be his determination. He looked at me wistfully.

"It was my intention to do as you wish," he

said; "but since my return I have changed my mind."

I knew his meaning.

"You have changed it on my account," I said.

"I shall stay here for a time at least," he said, ignoring my question.

For the first time in my life I was inclined to speak bitter words to him. His meaning was that, returning and hearing my news, he had changed his plan of life. But I said nothing, although I felt that he was treating me with great injustice. I had little hope, if he once more settled down to the life of a recluse, that he would ever be induced to leave it.

Yet in everything else he was kindness itself to me. He showed me a letter he had written to Mr. Grace, saying that the amplest means were to be placed at my disposal, and that he purposed transferring a large sum of money to me absolutely. His heavy luggage was sent from London, and, when he unpacked the boxes, I found that in every land he had thought of me, and carried away some memento of each. He brought me back quite a large collection of quaint and interesting articles, many of which were of

great artistic beauty and of considerable value; some, indeed, he must have had much trouble in obtaining. How was it that, willing to lavish time and money on my unworthy self, he could find the heart to deny me my life's crowning happiness?

With many a question like this in my mind I left him to return to town, where another painful task lay before me—that of telling Claudine and Lady Estmere what had occurred, or as much as I could tell.

Of course I had written to Claudine and hinted that things were not going quite so smoothly as I wished, and of course Valentine had told Lady Estmere something, so I went to the studio to see my friend before I called at the house. Valentine was working away at a large canvas, on which was the bold outline of rocks and craigs well known to me. He welcomed me with a frank smile of pleasure, which told me that he in no way visited his unceremonious dismissal on my head.

"Well," he said, "how did you leave my old friend, Mrs. Lee, and—I suppose I may ask for him—your father?"

"My father is incomprehensible," I said. "Tell me what your mother says."

"She is vexed, of course."

"Not more than vexed?"

"Well, wounded—but you see, Philip, she is used to trouble, and does not wear her heart on her sleeve."

Valentine's bright blue eyes grew very soft as he spoke of his mother.

"Go and see her, Philip," he said.

"I am going at once. Tell me about Claudine."

"I don't think Claudine will take kindly to her father-in-law; I can't say more."

"But she does not blame me?"

"Blame you! You didn't choose your father!"

"You have told her he objects?"

"I haven't, but I suspect my mother has. I have no secrets from her, you know."

Then I went across to Lady Estmere's house. She was at home. Claudine was not, but would return soon.

I could not help feeling that there was a little change in Lady Estmere's manner towards me. This may have been but fancy, but if the difference was there it wore off in a very short time, and her words and manners were sweet

and kind as ever. I sat beside her, but for a few moments did not speak.

"Your father has returned, then?" she said.

"Yes; but his return has not made me so happy as I expected."

"Few of our expectations of happiness are fully realized," said Lady Estmere. There was a pause in the conversation. I knew she was waiting for what I had to communicate to her.

"My father, I have told you, is a strange man," I began.

"From your account of him I have been compelled to think so."

"Yes, he is a strange man; has lived a strange life for many years. He cannot, it seems to me, view things like other people. He is now cruel and unjust to me."

"Speak gently, Philip, he is your father."

"He has taken some strange prejudice to my marriage with Claudine. In fact, dear Lady Estmere, he absolutely declines to receive her as a daughter."

Lady Estmere looked at me. There was no anger in her eyes, nothing but sympathy. She did not even ask me what reason my father gave for his extraordinary conduct.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Do! I can only do one thing. I must marry Claudine, and trust to time to change him!"

"Yet it is a fearful thing disobeying a father."

"It is; but a son has his rights as well as a father. He cannot be called upon to sacrifice his happiness for a whim! Surely you must agree with me in this?"

"I do not know. I cannot advise you. You are a man, and can take your own path. Yet, do nothing rashly. Somehow, Philip, no marriages seem completely happy when a parent's approval is missing. This may be an old world fancy of mine, but I cannot get rid of it."

Before I could reply the door opened. "Well, Sir Truant," said a voice that thrilled my heart, and in a second Claudine was in my arms. Lady Estmere left the room as we embraced.

I spare the reader the delight of our meeting. Only as my lips met Claudine's, as I clasped her supple form, as I saw her glad face glowing with health and beauty, I knew that I could not resign her love, even though its price must be a father's affection. Our greetings over, we sat down, side by side, to talk.

"Philip," she said, "you are looking ill and troubled. Tell me everything.

"It is sorry news."

"I guessed that. Tell me of your father."

"He is mad, dearest, I believe. He must be mad!"

"He disapproves of your choice? Answer me, my love. I can bear it."

"He does," I said, with my cheeks flushing. "But again I say, he's mad!"

"Now, tell me the reason. I am a lady; I do not come empty-handed; you love me—and, to you at least, my lord, I am not without charms."

I snatched a brief reprieve by answering her last remarks in a suitable way; but her face was grave.

"Valentine did not ask you the reason, Lady Estmere did not ask you; but I must know, Philip!"

"He knows Lady Estmere's history," I faltered.

"No, Philip," said Claudine, rising like a queen, and positively stamping her foot on the ground, "not her history! What the world says is her history, he may know. Your father is a coward!"

I felt I could not contradict her. How glorious she looked in her anger! She stood erect, the small head thrown proudly back, the dark

eyes glowing, and the delicate nostrils slightly quivering. It was well for Philip Norris that it was not his fault which had raised this emotion.

"A coward!" she continued. "He condemns because the world condemns—because slander has been at work he slanders. You have called him noble and good. I say again, he is a coward."

"Yet he is my father, Claudine," I said, gravely.

She knew that her words were cutting me to the heart. She looked at me, and her whole appearance changed. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hid her head upon my shoulder.

"My love! My love!" she cried. "I am wrong. Forgive me, Philip."

I kissed her again and again, until she smiled through her tears; but, even as I did so, I thought sadly of the lonely man who loved me, yet assured me that my marriage with Claudine would separate us for ever.

Then I began to speak of our marriage. I could see no reason for postponing it. I knew that nothing I could say would change my father's decision. Perhaps, after Claudine was my wife, I might again appeal to his love, and for once in his life he might yield—might, at last, take

Claudine to his heart and love her. So I pressed her to fix a day in the late autumn. She consented.

"There is no reason why we should wait," she said, sweetly. "We have enough to live upon in a quiet way. Take me, my love, when you will."

Glad to find an opportunity of saying anything in my father's favour, I told her of his princely generosity, so far as money was concerned. She grew troubled.

"Philip," she said softly, "I cannot share that man's money with you."

"It is my father's gift, dearest."

"Yes; but he forbids your marriage. Philip, I love you, but I am proud. All that I have is yours, unreservedly. You must choose between us. If you take my gifts, you must refuse his."

"I cannot live on my wife——"

"Yet you would on the father who spurns your wife! Your pride leads you in the wrong direction, my Philip."

I combated her resolution, but my efforts were but feeble ones. In my heart I knew she was right. As matters stood, there was more degradation in accepting benefits from my father than from the woman for whose sake I resigned them.

"Dearest love," said Claudine, at last, "if you are too proud to use what is mine, let us wait a year, or even two years. Then you may see your way to making your own fortune. Then, if you wish, you may take the little I have to offer. But we cannot be in any way dependent on the father you must give up for me!"

So we settled it, although I felt I was making a great sacrifice. To give up a year, or perhaps two years, of married life with Claudine, was an unprecedented offering on the altar of proper pride.

One thing might shorten the probation. Let me find the means of proving Lady Estmere's innocence; let me bring her wretched husband to her feet, craving pardon for the wrong he had done her, and then, even my father's far-fetched objections must fall to the ground, and I should enter into possession of my kingdom. This was the thought which filled my mind when, after having bidden Claudine adieu, I walked to my chambers. How strange it was that Lady Estmere's sorrow should now become, as it were, part of my life; that my own happiness urged me to get at the bottom of whatever devilish plot Chesham had devised! I remembered Lord Roth-

well's words, that the hand of fate was at work, and, as matters now stood, I felt inclined to agree with them.

The more so as, when entering my room, I found a letter in his big, bold handwriting. He had returned to England and would be at his old quarters to-morrow, where he hoped to see me.

And more and more so, as that night I walked into the smoking-room of the Club, and found Captain Chesham talking for the benefit of a few kindred spirits, with all his old satanic cynicism and disregard for what most men hold pure and holy.

CHAPTER III.

FAILURE.

I FOUND Lord Rothwell the next morning standing in the doorway of his hotel, smoking his long cigar, and watching with an air of keen relish the passers to and fro, many of whom glanced up at the tall, bearded man in the old shooting-coat, and doubtless wondered who and what he was. To me, in my present troubled state, that great broad-shouldered, tender-hearted man, who smiled welcome with grave eyes, seemed like a rock of refuge. To him, at least, I could turn for counsel, and I wanted a counsellor. Dear as Valentine was to me, I could not discuss with him the point on which my father and I were at variance; with Lady Estmere the same reasons prevented my doing so; and Claudine had settled everything according to her own lights. So I was unfeignedly glad when Lord Rothwell's large brown hand clasped mine, and in its clasp told me I was still his friend.

"Come in, Captain Philip," he said—he still occasionally called me by the old boyish name he had given me. "Come in, and have a long talk."

He led me to a room which he had already begun to transform to his taste. The two huge tables were installed, and even now getting covered with odds and ends. I laughed as I looked at the room.

"You soon make your mark in a place," I said.

"Yes; I wonder they allow it. It's because I'm a lord, I suppose. There's a great advantage in having a title, if you know how to use it. People talk about the obligations of rank. Don't believe them, Philip. If there's one man can live to please himself it's a lord. I dare say you are ashamed of me sometimes."

He was maligning himself. Although, to suit his own notions of ease, he chose to lounge about in an old coat, to sit in one of those comfortable round-backed wooden chairs which he had doubtless bribed a waiter to steal from the kitchen, Lord Rothwell, save with his most intimate friends, looked and acted as much like a nobleman as the most exacting in such matters could

demand, whilst his courtesy, courage, and chivalry raised him in my eyes above any nobleman I had as yet met with.

He had not yet seen Valentine or Lady Estmere. His first inquiries were for them. He was pleased to hear that Valentine was making himself known as an artist, and was much vexed when he heard of his ill-starred love affair, which had ended so prematurely. Then he asked me about my own engagement.

I told him everything—told him of my father's sudden return; of Valentine's unceremonious dismissal; of the choice I was called upon to make between my father and Claudine. His face grew grave as he listened.

"I feared it from the first," he said, with a sigh. "You remember my words?"

"Why should you have feared it? To me it is inexplicable?"

"Perhaps it was a presentiment. Perhaps I know the world too well. You will not be rash, Philip?"

"I shall marry Claudine, if that is being rash. Not yet," I added, seeing disapproval written on his face.

"No, not yet. Wait awhile. Is there any chance of your father coming to town?"

"I am afraid not." Then a thought struck me.

"Lord Rothwell," I said, "would you do me a very great favour, if I asked it?"

He turned his eyes to me; those eyes that somehow often, in spite of his strong, manly features, seemed to me like the eyes of a woman.

"I would do much for your father's son, Philip," he said.

"My father's son!" I repeated. "My father is a stranger to you; you have only seen him once, years ago."

"Your father's son is yourself," he said, rather quickly. "What can I do for you?"

I felt almost ashamed at putting my request in words.

"I scarcely like to ask you," I said; "but if you could find the time, and could run down to Devonshire and see him, you could argue with him, could tell him what Claudine is, what Lady Estmere is. He would listen to you. Words from a man of your age and standing would influence him far more than anything I could say. He might see the injustice he is committing."

Lord Rothwell made no immediate reply. He sat as one in deep thought, yet not as if offended by my request. He stretched his hand out and took another cigar, while I sat awaiting his decision.

"Yes," he said, "I will go. I don't think I can do any good; but I will go. I will start to-night."

"I don't know how to thank you enough. Please don't inconvenience yourself—any day will do."

"I will go at once. I hate having anything hanging over me."

"Shall I come with you?"

"No, better not."

"I suppose he will see you," I said, rather doubtfully, thinking of his discourteous treatment of Valentine.

"Mr. Norris is a gentleman. There is no reason why he should refuse to see me. If he should do so I can come back as I went. Now let us talk of something else."

True to his word, Lord Rothwell started that night for the West, and I waited with great anxiety to learn the results of his kindly errand. My hopes rose. I knew he would do all he could

to change my father's mind. Surely his arguments—the arguments of a man of the same age as my father—a man of the world, than whom none knew better what was due to the honour of a family, must at last prevail. So I argued and hoped.

I was much surprised to find, upon inquiry, morning after morning at his hotel, that Lord Rothwell had not returned. Indeed, more than a week passed before I again saw him. As the days went by I expected a letter, but none came; so when I at last stood in his presence I was in utter ignorance as to his success or failure. He did not keep me long in doubt.

"As I expected, I have failed, Philip," he said.

"There is no hope of his relenting?"

"None; on this one point he is determined. His is an obstinate character."

Somehow I felt a greater indignation at Lord Rothwell's failure than at my own.

"He knows that I can be equally firm," I said, passionately; "knows that by his own free will he is casting me off for ever; knows that I will marry Claudine."

"Yes; he knows and expects it."

"Tell me all he said."

"What use, Philip? I argued and combated with him, but not an inch did he move. To repeat his words would be to cause you pain. The case is hopeless."

"Will he keep his threat, do you think?"

"Yes, Philip," said Lord Rothwell, "he will keep it. Think well, my boy, of what you are about to do."

"I have thought. I have decided," I said. "There is nothing more to say, except to thank you for your great kindness. You were well received, I hope?"

"Save on this one point, Mr. Norris and I got on admirably. My prolonged stay answers for that."

"You liked him?"

"I more than liked him. What talents, what learning, to be buried like his are buried! It is piteous, Philip. It is not life. If I waste my time on unworthy objects, at least I live."

"But, knowing Lady Estmere as you do, how could you have stayed with him?"

"I can make allowances for men. And, in spite of all, your father loves you. This made me more kindly disposed towards him."

"In his way, I suppose, he loves me; but he shows it strangely!"

"Make no mistake. He loves you as much as ever a father loved a son. If I blame him, I can still say to you, think well what you are doing."

"You would not ask me to give up Claudine?"

"No, I dare not do that now. But, I say again, work night and day, body and soul, to learn what was the mistake which made Laurence Estmere leave his wife. I told you it was your task to do this. Spare neither time nor money! I am rather disappointed you have as yet done nothing. You are now being punished for your dilatoriness. Go and do your work."

"I have had no chance of doing anything."

"The chance will come. Chance! It is not chance; it is fate! Go and do your work."

I marvelled at the passion in his words. I revolved if he was a fatalist, and, moreover, why his superstition should have led him to believe that I was deputed to clear the name of the woman he loved. Right or wrong, I would obey him, for my interests were now identical with Lady Estmere's.

So it was that, in a fortnight's time, men who

knew Philip Norris shrugged their shoulders and predicted that he was going to the bad as fast as man could go. Was he not hand-in-glove with that clever, cold-blooded gambler, Chesham, who had plucked and ruined many a young fellow before?

CHAPTER IV.

A GAME OF PIQUET.

THE next two months of my life I would willingly obliterate from my memory. Even now I wonder whether the society in which they were passed has not made me take a lower and more debased view of the world, a view which I trust will in time fade away entirely. I was touching pitch, yet striving to keep myself from being defiled. Now, in whatever way you bring yourself in contact with pitch, some of it will stick. I can only hope that the stains will some day wear off.

The pitch I handled was Captain Richard Chesham, and a blacker kind was never manufactured, and as to compass my ends I had not only to handle this villainous substance, but to pretend that I liked doing so, my task was a highly unpleasant one. Many and many a time I felt almost sick at the filthy mass I was en-

deavouring to make run into one particular mould.

But distasteful as I found it, I did my work thoroughly. At the cost of a little money and a great deal of self-respect, I found myself in a very short time the chosen companion and comrade of Asmodeus. We dined together, supped together, sometimes breakfasted together. Where he went I went, so regularly that he might, had he chosen, have discarded that stick of his in favour of its substitute, myself.

Such a strange intimacy was bound to be remarked and commented upon; my best friends shook their heads, and those who had the right to do so remonstrated. Vigor was the first of these.

"What the deuce is the meaning of your friendship with that old rogue, Chesham?" he asked me.

"You don't like him, then?"

"Like him, Philip; I am ashamed of you! There are some men from whom decent men and women shrink as from snakes."

"Snakes, they say, have powers of fascination."

"For cowards and the lower natures. But you

fear nothing, certainly not the world's opinion, or you would not call that reptile your friend."

"Gently! I have not called him my friend."

"But you are with him all day long. You gamble with him, you listen to his blasphemies of women, you even echo them. I have overheard you."

"You listen also with interest when he talks."

"I listen with wonder, and marvel that such creatures live, marvel more that they can find supporters like Philip Norris.

"Why is it?" he continued. "Perhaps you are going after the money you lost to him two years ago."

"No one likes to give up such a large sum without an attempt to get it back," I said, feeling glad that Vigor had suggested an explanation.

"He will ruin you, Philip. It is monstrous to me how hot-headed youngsters can imagine they can match in his own trade a man of his age, of his skill—one who has lived for years on what he has swindled fools like you out of."

"You use hard words, Vigor."

"I apologize—you are not a fool. Yet if you are sanguine enough to play with him and expect to win, why are you his friend? There is

no need for that; you might kick the man downstairs every morning, yet if your money were to be won, he would play with you every evening."

Knowing more of Chesham's revengeful nature than Vigor did, I doubted the truth of this assertion.

"I tell you what, Philip," he said after a short pause, and finding I made no reply, "I'm not going to see one of my best friends go to the devil in Chesham's company. I have heard of you, and where you have been seen together. I shall go and speak to Rothwell about it. He has some influence over you."

To this I made no objection, and I have no doubt but Vigor was as good as his word.

Among other remonstrances came one from Stanton. This rather amused me, for, with all his many good qualities, Stanton was not a man in whose path a younger man might follow with credit.

"I say, Captain Philip," he said one day, shaking his head ominously, "this sort of thing won't do, you know."

"What sort of thing?"

"Here, it's only the other day you were an innocent boy, picking up whelks and sea-anemones

in Devonshire; blushing if a woman spoke to you, and not knowing hearts from diamonds; now you're about with the biggest uncut rep in town. Won't do, Captain Philip."

"I suppose while you and others speak to a man I can do so."

"He's a bad lot, Philip; of course we speak to people, but we don't crony. Wonder what Valentine would say to your new friend?"

"Valentine doesn't choose my friends."

"Much better if he did, if Chesham's a specimen of your unbiassed selection. Valentine is an ass in lots of things, but knows how to choose his friends. I shall speak to Rothwell; he hates Chesham and loves you like a son."

How little he thought that it was only Lord Rothwell's assurance that I might do all save crime to worm the truth out of Chesham made me steadfast in the task I had undertaken, and careless as to what common report said!

Rothwell said nothing to me. Once or twice I attempted to tell him how I was progressing, but he waived the matter aside. "Come to me if you want money, not unless," he said. "I will not interfere. The affair has passed from my hands, and from my guidance. You are work-

ing out your destiny, Philip, and must do it alone."

His words sounded superstitious and wild, but I attributed them to his great and lifelong love for Lady Estmere. For him, the world might fall if her welfare were secured by such a catastrophe.

Destiny or not, how did my work prosper?

I found no difficulty in resuming Chesham's acquaintance. As soon as I showed him I was willing to recommence gambling he was at my call, and making himself as pleasant as it was possible. A hundred or two lost to him, an expressed wish to have my revenge no doubt opened vistas leading to wealth. The readiness with which I had settled his former claim told him I was a pigeon well worth plucking. He little dreamt he was handling a pigeon which one day would turn and rend the hawk.

We played cards together as often as it suited my purpose. Strange to say, I suffered very little in pocket by our bouts. Now that I had no wish to win, luck was frequently on my side. It was when the cards were put away that my true game began.

A sickening game! To win the confidence of

a man like this, I was obliged to make him believe I was a kindred spirit. To sit and listen to recitals of past exploits—ay, even to applaud them. When I look back upon that man as he revealed himself to me, I wonder if the world could show his equal in wickedness.

A man without mercy—without a suspicion of a high thought. To him nothing was sacred. An avowed atheist, not from honest conviction, but choice; and what is even rarer, an utter disbeliever in the existence of good in man or woman—a man who deliberately turned to evil, and said, "Be thou my good."

Virtue and chastity in women, honour and truth in men, he jeered at. To him each man, each woman had a price. A sensualist who gloried in his victories over trusting women, who detailed the arts by which he had brought about the ruin of each with as much gusto as I have known Rothwell display when describing how he outwitted and at last slew some monarch of the forest. To me this man was the devil incarnate; I could scarcely believe that once he had dared to love Lady Estmere; that once he had been called friend by her and her cruel husband; or that the latter had wrecked his life and his wife's

life through jealousy of such a wretch as Richard Chesham.

I cannot describe my life, or assumed life, during the time I enjoyed his intimacy, the places he led me to, the people I met, when he fancied he had satisfied himself that I was a man after his own heart. It was well for me Valentine was away sketching—that Lady Estmere and Claudine were at a friend's in the country. I should have blushed with shame had I been compelled to meet Claudine's pure eyes. The contamination of the scenes I had witnessed would have kept me from her presence.

Chesham boasted—no, I am wrong in saying boasted—he related his successes with women as if the topic was one of interest and nothing more. Moral feeling he had none. He must have been born without it, as at times a man is born without a leg or an arm. He related all his exploits to me as an old veteran might relate his deeds of arms to a young recruit, but as yet he had not mentioned Lady Estmere's name—I dared not put the question direct, although once or twice I had tried to lead up to it. He seemed to avoid it—perhaps he feared my friendship for Valentine.

One night Chesham was in my rooms, to which, carrying out my scheme, I often invited him. We had played *écarté* until I professed myself tired of the game. I was a loser to some extent, so had a right to propose a cessation. We sat talking.

Let me say here that when he talked of other subjects than his exploits, the man was well worth listening to. He knew every country in Europe, and had gone through strange adventures in most of them. He could tell tale after tale, relate experience after experience. All his anecdotes were underlaid with bitter cynicism, but again I say that at such times, if I could have forgotten my purpose and his true nature, he would have been an entertaining, if not an elevating companion.

"I suppose," I said, "you never stooped to the weakness of really loving a woman?"

A bitter smile curved his lips and I saw his teeth close.

"Yes," he said. "Once, only once, I was fool enough to do so."

"You never married?"

"Once I would have done even that. The woman I loved married some one else."

"And lived happily, of course?"

"She threw me over, and I swore to be revenged. By ——, I had revenge."

"The usual sort?"

"The usual sort as you call it. The wife hasn't spoken to her husband for more than twenty years."

I knew I had touched the right chord; but I registered a vow that if ever Chesham were at my mercy I would not lift a finger to save him.

"Who might she have been?" I asked lightly, for Chesham made no secret of names. He said nothing for a while, but drained his glass. I replenished it. It was part of my scheme to take what advantages I could from him when liquor was in the ascendant, but as yet I had met with no success. Drink did not loosen his tongue as a rule.

But the night was warm, and he had drank freely. He may not have been quite himself.

"Who was she?" he muttered, as if to himself. "The proudest and purest of women—so every one said. Yet now people shrug their shoulders and smile. Oh yes, I had plenty of revenge."

I should have liked to have taken him by the throat, and, if possible, have shaken the truth out

of him. I noticed he placed his hand on his hip as if in pain.

"Is your leg bad?" I asked.

"Curse him. It's always bad when I speak of her. He thought he had his revenge when I fell; but what was his to mine? What a fool he was! What a fool!"

How should I lead him on? I was trembling with excitement.

"Who was a fool? Sir Laurence Estmere?" I asked.

"Sir Laurence Tomfool! Lord bigger fool! I can see them now. By Jove, they meant to kill me!"

"You fired in the air, I suppose?"

"I covered his heart to an inch, but the cursed pistol shot crooked. Never mind, I have had my revenge."

Could I get nothing more out of him? I determined to try a bold stroke.

"But how did you make such a fool of Sir Laurence? How did you make him believe his wife was fond of you?"

He looked at me half-dazed, then, by an effort recovered his straying senses. He passed his hand over his eyes and rose from his chair.

"Your whiskey's very strong, my boy; I shall be talking nonsense if I take any more. Good-night."

He hobbled down the stairs, and with a feeling of great disappointment I closed the door behind him.

But from his own lips I had learnt that Lady Estmere was, as I suspected, the victim of some diabolical vengeful plot of his, and I determined to redouble my efforts; to spare no means of finding how the plot had been laid.

I went again and again over Mrs. Payne's tale. She who loved and would have screened her mistress, and saw her, as Sir Laurence saw her, standing at the open window with Chesham's arms round her. Granted that Chesham wished to work out his revenge; that he knew of Sir Laurence's expected return—how could he have brought that situation about?

The only tenable theory was that he had a partner in his guilt; that some one at his instigation had personated Lady Estmere. But who?

There was a lady's-maid. What became of her? Could she throw any light upon the subject? I resolved, if I could find out nothing more from Chesham, to run down to Derbyshire, and

see Mrs. Payne once more. To get from her the name of every servant who was in the Dower House at the time, and trace one and all, and hear what each had to say. As for Chesham, I believed him capable of any villainy that the heart of man could devise.

It was now nearly the end of August. Besides my long-standing engagement with Rothwell I had several other invitations for September. I declined all, being determined that so long as Chesham stayed in town I would keep with him. A man doomed to walk with a thick stick cannot do much with a gun among the turnips and stubble. As yet he gave no sign of quitting London, and his movements controlled my own.

Valentine came back to town for a few days. He called on me, but I was out. Afterwards I met him as I was walking down Piccadilly. Chesham was leaning on my arm at the time, and smiling his evilest smile as he looked at some fair woman who was near us. Valentine, as soon as he saw my companion, started as if shot. He passed me without taking the slightest notice. This was no more than I expected, and I rejoiced to think that as Chesham saw the non-recognition he would believe our friendship was a thing of

the past. He chuckled, and looked after Valentine's retreating figure.

"Your dear friend Estmere didn't notice you," he said.

"We are not such friends as we used to be."

"But you ought to love him for my sake," he said, with a malignant expression in his eyes. "Do you remember how he struck me in your rooms?"

"Yes—very well."

"I've paid off some of that score, and mean to pay off more. Confounded young upstart!"

I did not defend Valentine. It would have suited my purpose better to have abused him, but I could not bring myself to do that.

"It's hot," said Chesham, "the pavements are like fire. Let us go to the club and have a quiet turn at piquet or *écarté*."

I made no objection, and in a few moments we were in the card-room.

"The whole place seems deserted," said my companion. "Hang me, if I don't think we are the last men in town. I shall go abroad again—to Monaco, I think."

"Let me know when you think of going. Perhaps I will go with you."

"I wish you would, and have a shot at the tables. "I'm not fond of young fellows as a rule; but I like you, Norris. That's more than I've said to any man for years."

Curious as it may seem, I believed him. I had noticed many little things lately, which showed me that so far as he was capable of liking any one he was beginning to like me. He was not so keen about winning my money. Once or twice he had told me roughly that I was a fool to play with him. He one day made me a present of a cigar-case—an act of munificence no one would have believed possible from him. If the man had a soft place in his heart I felt sure I was finding it. I was playing my part almost too well. It was a just retribution that the man who as yet had never made a friend should choose at last one who was simulating friendship for the sake of destroying him.

We played two or three games at piquet. Luck went against me, and I lost twenty pounds. I handed him a bank-note of that amount, and having no wish to play longer, put the cards aside. Just then a waiter entered, and Chesham sent him to see if there were any letters for him.

There was one addressed, I noticed, in a

woman's handwriting. This was nothing unusual, as many such notes came to this Don Juan. He opened his letter, read it, and muttered one or two of his pleasantest curses.

"Bad news?" I asked.

"No; only an application for money. That's the worst of any folly, it always costs money. Long after you've forgotten it, it jumps up and duns you."

"I thought you never paid any money for your follies?"

"Never, if I can help it. Begad! folly or not, I've paid through the nose for this." He hobbled across the room, rang the bell, and asked for an envelope and ink. Then he drew out of his note-case the very note for twenty pounds which I had just paid him. He tore the fly-sheet off the letter, wrapped it round the note, and placed it in the envelope. This he directed and stamped, and then placed it in his pocket.

I had paid little attention to him. I made no attempt to ascertain the name of the correspondent who could extort such considerable blackmail from so experienced a villain as Richard Chesham. It was no concern of mine. All I knew was that the note he had so lightly come

by had been used to pay the tribute money, and as far as that went he was welcome to it.

"I'm going to Tattersall's to see what the Leger betting is. I laid the odds against Serpent, and want to hedge. Will you come?"

I declined, pleading another engagement. The truth was, Valentine's look lay heavy on my mind. I wanted to see him, and, although I could not explain matters, to ask him to suspend his judgment for a while.

So Asmodeus limped off alone, little thinking what that rubber of piquet was going to cost him.

I stood at the door of the club thinking where I should go to look for Valentine. Whether to his mother's, or to my rooms and wait there on the chance of his calling. I decided on the latter course, and was just stepping into the street, when a waiter accosted me. He had a crumpled piece of paper in his hand.

"Did you drop this, sir?" he asked.

I took the letter, and, as every one else would, glanced at its contents to ascertain. I laid claim to it. It bore no address—no signature. It was in a woman's writing, and comprised but two lines. So short, indeed, that had I wished to

avoid perusing it, I could not have done so, as I took it all in at one glance.

"Send the money or L. E. shall know all; I swear he shall."

I knew it was the letter that Chesham had torn, and my heart leapt as it told me for whose name those initials stood. I felt that Chesham was delivered into my hands. The very way by which I should hunt him down stood clear before me.

For a second I thought of keeping the letter, but decided against so doing. Asmodeus would miss it, and would doubtless return to find it. His suspicions would be aroused if he learnt that it had reached my hands. Besides, I did not want it, or not enough to run any risk by retaining it. Every word it contained was burnt into my brain, and as the writer's name and address were wanting it was of no further use; so I returned it to the waiter.

"It belongs to Captain Chesham. Put it in an envelope and give it to him when next he is here."

I walked at the top of my speed to Albemarle Street, threw myself into a chair, and began to think how to turn the circumstance to account.

I breathed the freer as I thought that my distasteful task of simulating friendship with a man I scorned was coming to an end.

Accident had given me the clue, but had I not stooped to associate with the man I should not have been in his society when the chance occurred. That I should fail after this never entered my head—that those initials stood for Laurence Estmere was to me a matter of certainty —that I should find the writer and wring the truth from her was a natural sequence.

I was in a state of delighted excitement when Valentine was announced. In my moment of triumph I had almost forgotten the cut direct he bestowed on me just now, and ran forward to greet him. Seeing him stand with his right hand fixed unmovably in the breast of his coat was like a shock of cold water to me.

"Will you not shake hands, old fellow?" I said.

"I will not. I did not intend to come here, until I thought it was mean to sneak away without telling you what I intend doing."

"Well, sit down, don't stand up in that tragical way."

"Can't you see I am not joking, Philip Norris? I believe you are bewitched!"

"I was never in fuller possession of my senses."

"Yet you ask me to take your hand. You who so far forget what is due to your friend and your friend's mother—even to the girl you love."

"I forget nothing, Valentine."

"You do, I say. No one, not even you, who calls Chesham his friend, shall be a friend of mine. Philip, I could not believe my eyes, I could not believe my ears, when people told me."

His voice at the commencement had been almost fierce, but as he spoke the last words it sank to regret and tenderness, whilst his eyes glistened.

"Valentine," I said, "you will not throw old friendship aside for this?"

"I must and will do so. If you can explain, do so. I will entreat your pardon."

"If I cannot explain?"

"Then good-bye. I lose my best friend."

"But you forget your mother and Claudine."

"My mother, much as it will cost her, will

follow my example. Claudine I have no right to speak about."

I paused. Should I tell him with what object I had sought Chesham? How full of promise that intimacy had proved? Curiously enough, Lord Rothwell's superstition, that I was destined to carry this matter to the end without aid, by now had taken full possession of me. Besides, I might fail after all—if so, why raise false hopes? I determined for a time to remain under a cloud in Valentine's eyes.

"Valentine," I said, "we have been true friends. Will you do me a favour?"

He nodded.

"When do you go away again—and for how long?"

"To-morrow, for a couple of months, I expect."

"Will you until your return try and suspend your judgment? Will you think till then that you may have been too hasty? Will you say nothing about this intimacy which troubles you to Lady Estmere or to Claudine?"

"You ask a great deal, Philip."

"No matter; do it for me. Promise and give me your hand on it."

He held out his hand. I grasped it heartily. Then without another word he turned and left me.

Perhaps, after all, it was as well. Any show of friendship between him and me would make Chesham mistrustful, and my great object still was to lull him into fancied security.

As soon as Valentine had departed, I resumed my former train of thought. My first steps needed no hesitation. That morning I had been to my banker's and drawn out two hundred pounds—a fifty, five twenty-pound-notes, and the rest in smaller paper—one of these twenty-pound-notes I had given Chesham.

I looked at the numbers of those left in my pocket-book. These notes were brand new, and numbered consecutively. I had taken the note from the top, so was able to determine its number. I had but to give this to a person whose business it is to make confidential inquiries, and sooner or later it would be traced back from the Bank of England to the person who received it from Chesham.

I lost no time in setting the matter afoot, but I had to wait a few days for the information. The note had passed through very few hands.

It reached the Bank of England from another London Bank—it had been paid into that bank by a large firm of wholesale grocers. It had come to them in two halves from a retail grocer and general dealer at the little town of Surbury, and he had changed it for a Mrs. Merton, whose name was on the back of it. As my agent was instructed not to inquire before a certain date, and as the day on which Mr. Jones, the retail grocer, changed it for Mrs. Merton was the day after Chesham had posted it, there was no need to alarm her by asking her from whom it came —that I knew well enough.

Mrs. Merton lived at Acacia Villa, Surbury. I noted the address, paid and dismissed my agent, and then started for Surbury to finish the inquiry myself.

That game of piquet was going to cost Richard Chesham dear.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. PAYNE TAKES A JOURNEY.

No one—no young man, at any rate—would think of settling down to stay for an indefinite time in Surbury, unless some powerful incentive urged him to do so. The dreaminess and monotony which petty provincial towns present to strangers is proverbial, and I found that Surbury quite justified the commonly-received idea. I have no wish to insult the worthy inhabitants who live, trade, and perhaps enjoy life there; but for my part I should prefer the solitude of the desert to the little interests of such a place as Surbury.

It was an old town; indeed, such towns cannot be new. In the present age there would be no reason to call such a place into life. Having existed to supply a want of old times before railways were dreamt of, it still struggles on, trying to justify itself for having been built. Every census is pointed to with pride as showing a

small increase in its population, and the inhabitants are pleased to think that at the present rate of progression, if the world should last another two thousand years, Surbury may be a city of some importance.

It boasts an old grey cathedral, far too big for its present requirements, but which vouches for its respectability, as an old family coach too cumbrous to use now-a-days might vouch for the respectability of a decayed family. Besides the cathedral, there are churches and chapels of a more recent date, and moreover the ruins of an old castle. Add to these one or two small cloth manufactories, the usual long street of shops, a few old-fashioned inns, a certain number of private houses, and you have Surbury complete.

Yet, although it is hard to imagine people living in such a town unless forced to do so, there are a few who come from a distance to reside there. These are mostly out of business people with small means and large families of boys. They come to Surbury, take a house and live in it for a certain number of years; then shake the dust of dulness from their feet and seek fresh quarters. The secret of this temporary attractiveness is this:—

Many years ago a rich man bequeathed his fortune towards founding and endowing a grammar school. On various subsequent occasions other philanthropists augmented the gift. The property bequeathed in course of time grew greatly in value, and for many years Surbury School has been one of the richest in the kingdom, and can afford to give the sons of its inhabitants a first-class education for merely nominal fees. It is this bait which tempts fresh people to come to the place—a cheap and good education for their sons, with the chance of gaining one of the many scholarships which are the prizes at the end of their career.

Of course, like all little towns, and above all, little cathedral towns, Surbury was divided and subdivided into cliques. The great county clique of magnates who lived on their estates round about need not be counted. To them Surbury was a convenience, and that was all the notice they took of it except at election times, for it still returned one member. In the town proper, at the head of all the cliques was the cathedral clique, with the dean, canons, and precentors. Touching the fringe of this, perhaps sometimes merging into it, was the school clique. The dean and his

subordinates were rather afraid of some members of this. There were a few clever men among them, who, not being in orders, were ungagged by the Thirty-nine Articles. Then came the professional clique, lawyers, doctors, and a couple of bank managers. This clique admitted good clients, patients, and depositors into its bosom, so long as they were not actively engaged in retail trade. The small manufacturers claimed right of access here. Then came the superior tradesmen's clique and the inferior tradesmen's clique. How the division was settled none could say. The only thing certain was that the butcher, the fishmonger, and the greengrocer were not quite on a par with the linen-draper, the chemist, and the jeweller. As they settled the laws of precedence among themselves, the reason of that settlement is the business of none outside.

In a word, the little town was eminently dull, respectable, and orthodox. The last place in the world, one would think, in which to try and trace back the threads of a fiendish scheme like Chesham's.

It was the first week in September when I went down to Surbury. I put up whilst I was inspecting the ground at one of the old-fashioned

inns, the Mitre it was called. Then I began my search after Mrs. Merton.

I made no direct inquiries. The gossip I heard the first evening, when for want of something better to do I smoked a cigar in the bar-parlour of the inn, told me that if I gave the slightest inkling of my business to a soul it would be over the town in a few hours. I must, I knew, fight entirely on my own hand. I had the woman's address, so the morning after my arrival I sallied forth in search of her abode.

I found it easily enough—a small semi-detached villa on the outskirts of the town. I had not yet fathomed the little mysteries of Surbury, or I should have known that the greater number of these houses were occupied by those persons who were called by the townspeople casuals—those I have spoken of as sojourning in Surbury for the advantages offered by the Grammar School. The houses were small, and it spoke badly for Surbury that several were untenanted. The one directly opposite Acacia Villa was to let furnished.

Nothing could have been more opportune. My mind was at once made up. I returned to the

town, found the house-agent, and by twelve o'clock was the accepted tenant of that eligible residence, suitable for a small family, Rose Villa, North Road.

The agent asked for references; merely as a matter of form, he said. I paid three months rent in advance, which suited him just as well as if the dean and the whole chapter had vouched for my respectability. It was only when the contract was in black and white I remembered I had not even looked over my new house; but that was of no consequence, except that it made the house-agent look on me as an eccentric character.

Eccentric or not, I could not set up housekeeping without a servant, so I inquired if Surbury possessed a registry office, and having found one and made my wants known, in the afternoon became the proprietor of a stout, middle-aged female, who would condescend to act for the time as a general servant. She was old and ugly enough to set any breath of slander at defiance.

I arranged to enter into possession of my new abode in two days' time. Before doing so I returned to town, and packed up enough books and other things to make my new life endurable. Then on the morning of the appointed day I re-

ceived the keys of the house, and proceeded to instal myself.

The whole of that day was consumed in getting the place ship-shape and in order. My stay might be a long or a short one, that depended upon Mrs. Merton; any way it was as well to make myself as comfortable as possible. There was not much to complain of in the house and its fittings. Allowing for the exaggeration indispensable to his business, the house-agent had not treated me unfairly.

Although the back room of the house was the pleasantest, looking out over green fields, and commanding a view of the fine old cathedral towers, it was the front room I decided upon making my dwelling-place. I re-arranged the furniture, placed a large table close to the window; I bought a blind which I could see through without being seen. I covered my table with books and papers, so that I should be able to sit, to all appearance, hard at work, but the while keeping a strict watch on the opposite house.

I had not formed the slightest plan of action. To tell the truth I was certain in my own mind that whatever success I met with would be the result of accident. Accident had revealed to me

the existence of Mrs. Merton and her connection with Chesham. Accident, I knew, would at last show me the way to learn what I wanted to learn. Sooner or later the opportunity would come. As Rothwell said, the hand of fate was at work. Still, I trusted that I should not be compelled to remain many months in Surbury.

Understanding the necessity of giving some reason for a young man like myself taking a house and living in it in solitary grandeur, in such an unattractive place, I endeavoured to forestall the gossip of my neighbours by telling my servant that I was to be kept entirely free from interruption, as I was engaged in writing a book. To carry out this occupation successfully I told her that quiet was indispensable; it was for this reason I had come to reside for a few months at Surbury. I have not the least doubt but the next day my next door neighbour's servants and my opposite neighbour's servants knew all about my business, and were reconciled to such a phenomenon as a young man taking a house in the quiet shades of North Road.

Now, I am pleased to think that a man who is known to be writing a book is an object of some veneration and awe to a certain number of

his fellow creatures. The amount of steady manual labour such an effort entails, the labour of writing such thousands of consecutive words, is enough to command a certain amount of respect for the author's perseverance, leaving the intellectual value, if any, of the work out of the question. Whether the subject be historical or philosophical, tragic or comic; whether the author is engaged on novel or guide-book—even cookery-book, his pursuit surrounds him with a little glamour, and permits him to be eccentric in his actions. Although most literary men who do any good work do it as regularly and methodically as clocks or chronometers, the public is pleased to think otherwise, and to credit them with peculiar and unbusiness-like habits.

So I could not have given a better reason for my appearance in Surbury. It left me free to follow my own devices, choose my hours for going out and coming in; and, moreover, to tell the truth, it was not altogether a false statement. I had for a long time been meditating throwing my thoughts and imaginative faculties on to foolscap, but as I commenced this history by saying, I little guessed that the first work of mine which would see the light would be the story of my own life.

Let my reason for occupying that seat at the table in the window be false or sham, the morning after my arrival I was there, and commenced my inspection of the opposite house. My breakfast things were cleared away, and by the aid of a good cigar, I settled down patiently to my self-imposed task. Of course, at present, this was simply to ascertain who the inmates of the house were, and what they were like.

The first person I saw emerge was a boy of about fifteen. He came out with a cricket-bat on his shoulder, and went down the road whistling gaily. Half an hour afterwards a tall, slim girl, quietly dressed, came out. She carried a roll of music, and as she was scarcely old enough to be a teacher, I presumed she was on her way to receive a lesson. After her departure the door opened many times, but only responsive to the summons of peripatetic vendors of fruit and vegetables, or of butchers', bakers', and other tradesmen's boys. At last when I grew almost tired of watching, a woman came to the window just opposite me, and stood there for some minutes. I felt certain that I was looking at the mysterious Mrs. Merton herself.

She threw open the window and began water-

ing a box of plants which stood on the ledge, so there was nothing to obstruct my view of her, and by the aid of an opera-glass I was enabled to make a thorough study of her personal appearance.

She was between forty and fifty years of age; dark-eyed, dark-haired, and of medium height. Her face was pale and wan, but I felt sure that at one time she had possessed a considerable share of good looks, although her face now was not a pleasant one to look at. She was quietly and respectably dressed in plain black, and from her exterior there was nothing to determine what station in life she filled. Any way, I felt sure she was Mrs. Merton, and therefore watched her attentively.

Presently she leaned out of the window and looked down the road, and a sudden transformation seemed to take place in her features. She became positively good-looking. A smile lit her face and brightened her dark eyes. I followed the direction of her eyes, and saw that the boy and girl were returning, walking side by side. As they ran hastily up the little strip of garden, Mrs. Merton left the window and opened the door to them. The caresses she welcomed them with left no

doubt in my mind as to their relationship being that of mother and children.

Now, having seen Mrs. Merton, and what manner of woman she was, it behoved me to find out something about her history; and the only person I could question about this with safety was the servant I had engaged.

Fortunately she was no stranger to the little town—no stranger even to North Road. She had lived with a family close by, so had all the gossip of the place at her finger-ends. There was nothing peculiar in a new-comer like myself wishing to know something about his neighbours, and my servant was only too eager to oblige me with all the information she possessed.

It was of no interest to me to hear that on one side of me lived a Mr. Bell, a consumptive gentleman, who coughed in a heartrending manner, and must die before the year was out; that on the other side lived a Dissenting parson, who was so poor that one joint of meat a week was all he could afford; that a little higher up the road, at a larger house, lived a colonel, very haughty and rich—why he should live in such a place is a mystery I have never troubled to solve. It did not vex me to hear that Mrs. Smith, next

door but two, washed at home and disgraced the neighbourhood by using the back garden for a drying-ground; nor was I properly shocked at the sad news that Mr. Davis drank and beat his wife. It was when the current of gossip made for the opposite bank that my attention was aroused.

Yes, my domestic knew all about the people opposite. Mrs. Merton lived there, with her son and daughter. She was one of those who came to Surbury to reap the benefits of those handsome bequests to the Grammar School. She was a widow, or, said my informant, with meaning in her voice, supposed to be one. Any way, she didn't wear a cap as a proper widow should. She was not rich, but pretty well off; at least the servant there, a respectable young woman and friend of her own, didn't grumble much about cheeseparing. Still, there was something about Mrs. Merton. The fact was, no one knew anything about her, that was the worst that could be said.

And what worse could be said? In a town like Surbury, people must know everything about their neighbours, or they are sure to credit them with all sorts of evil doing.

"Were they quiet people, or did they keep company?" I asked.

Very quiet, my gossip averred. In fact, the respectable young person, her friend, found her health and spirits suffering from the monotonous existence—a monotony, which, by the bye, I had noticed she endeavoured to relieve by ogling the butcher's and baker's boys, &c. Unless Master Merton brought one of his school friends in, no one entered the house from New Year's Day to December the 31st. The young miss was going to be a governess or a music mistress, so the deponent was sure that Mrs. Merton could not be quite the lady.

After extracting this information a day or two passed without my making any progress in my researches. I felt I was doing no good sitting at my window and watching for the rare occasions when Mrs. Merton went out of doors. I must find whether any link in her early life fitted into Lady Estmere's, and to ascertain this I must know something about her antecedents. Who she was before she appeared in Surbury, whether her present respectability was the growth of later years: in a word, her early history.

Casting about which way to proceed, I thought

of the housekeeper at Estmere Court, Mrs. Payne. I felt sure that she would do all she could to aid me, so resolved to go to Derbyshire and persuade her to return with me to Surbury. If Mrs. Merton were in any way connected with the Estmere family, Mrs. Payne would surely recognize her. So having no one to consult, I started the next day for the North.

Estmere Court looked dreary and deserted as when Valentine and I visited it two years ago. Neither Sir Laurence nor his eldest son had been near it. In my heart I doubted whether that eldest son was alive. I could not understand a man never seeking his mother. To me, who for years and years had longed for a mother's love, such an absence of filial affection seemed inexplicable. Nor could I understand a young man allowing this splendid place to go to rack and ruin. His father might have unpleasant associations connected with Estmere Court, but surely the son must hope some day to play an important part in his native country. The only explanation I could suggest for the young man's silence and absence was that he must be dead, and his heartless father had never made known the fact to his wife. If so, as such a property as this was

certain to be entailed, some day Valentine must succeed to the title and the estates. Yet I knew he would value them nothing whilst the terrible fact remained that his father denied his right to the name of Estmere.

Mrs. Payne remembered me and made me welcome. Her husband was with her now, and in spite of the fear she had expressed of incurring his displeasure, by allowing us to go over the house, I found him one of those honest, dull, thick-headed men, who, to their own great advantage, are completely ruled by their wives. Mrs. Payne asked affectionately after Lady Estmere and that bonny young gentleman, Mr. Valentine.

"He sent the gown he promised me," she said. "It was a beauty. Far too good to wear. I haven't even had it made up yet, sir."

"Keep it until Sir Laurence and his wife come back to Estmere Court," I said.

"If I keep it for that, I'd better give it away to my niece, Polly, who is going to be married next month and hankers after it like."

"Don't do anything of the kind, Mrs. Payne. Lay it by in lavender until I find out all the vile plot and show Sir Laurence his frightful mistake."

"You're joking, sir," said Mrs. Payne.

"I was never further from joking. I have come two hundred miles to see you solely for this reason, and to-morrow I want you to go back with me."

She saw I was speaking in earnest. No doubt she had been wondering why I had made my appearance at Estmere Court.

"I would go two hundred or two thousand miles, if it would do her ladyship any good. Oh, what a sweet young woman she was! My heart aches as I think of her."

"Very well. You be ready to start to-morrow as soon as possible. I can't tell you all, but I believe I shall trace out the whole of Captain Chesham's villainy.

"Your husband won't mind your leaving him," I added, remembering there was such a person as Mr. Payne.

"Not he, sir. John, my man, I'm going a journey to-morrow with this gentleman. I shall be back—when shall I be back, sir?"

"In two days, at the outside three."

"All right, my lass," said John. "If you says you be right in going, why, right you be."

So the matter was settled.

As Estmere Court was a long way from any decent hotel accommodation, I was obliged to accept Mrs. Payne's kind offer of finding me a bed for the night. I did not like the idea of making use of Sir Laurence Estmere's house; but, after all, the worthy housekeeper and her husband were certainly in a position which would permit them to ask a friend to stay with them, so I calmed my conscience by looking upon myself as their guest, and in no way taking hospitality from their absentee master.

I spent several hours that afternoon wandering through the large deserted rooms and again inspecting Valentine's ancestors. I must own to a feeling of annoyance as I contrasted my own position with his. There were no pictures of stately men and fair ladies which I could look upon and say, "These are my forbears." Of my mother's family I knew nothing; indeed I had long ago made up my mind it was a humble one. But it was strange that my father never spoke of his own relatives. Leaving his ample means out of the question, I felt sure he had come from a good stock. His manner and his education were sufficient to vouch for the position

his own people had held. Yet, so far as I knew, with him began the history of my family.

I am bound to confess that, if only for the sake of showing Claudine that my lineage was equal to her own, I wished it was otherwise, and, as I walked between those lines of dead and buried Estmeres, I resolved that when next I saw my father I would tell him that the time was come when I had a right to know something of my family history; but, all the same, I knew that unless it suited him to enlighten me I should still be left in ignorance.

When I, at last, grew tired of the company of Valentine's ancestors, I went out of doors, and accompanied Mr. Payne, or as I should rather call him, Mrs. Payne's husband, walked round the neglected gardens, and heard a great deal about the past glories of the Estmeres and their present possessions. My informant reckoned that the estates were worth at least twenty thousand a-year, and had heard that an immense sum of money had been saved during all the years which Sir Laurence had spent in wandering abroad. The agent and the London lawyer managed everything. They might know where the master was, but no one else ever heard a word from him. It

would be a good day for the whole country side when he threw Estmere Court open once more. Several rich people had wanted to rent it, but so far as John Payne understood, Sir Laurence was too proud to let his house although he did not care to live in it himself. He had never even let the Dower House; since Lady Estmere left, it had been occupied only by a caretaker.

The next morning Mrs. Payne and I started on our journey. John borrowed a light cart and drove us to the nearest railway-station. The parting between the husband and wife was quite affecting, she might have been going to Australia instead of to Somersetshire. Indeed, in spite of my promise to see that she lacked nothing, he insisted upon his wife encumbering herself with edibles enough to have lasted, with proper management, to the equator. No doubt he thought I was rather young to be trusted with such a precious possession as his buxom wife; for he gave his "lass," as he called her, many cautions as to taking care of herself, and being on the look-out for pickpockets. Although she received his warnings with a certain air of condescension, it was easy to see she was somewhat appalled by the immensity of the journey before her. This

is not to be wondered at, as I believe until now she had never crossed the border of her native county.

The train cut short adieus and warnings, and sped us away to the south. We reached Surbury late at night. I could not have timed it better. I was able to take Mrs. Payne to my house without observation by the neighbours. I had ordered a room to be kept in readiness for an unexpected visitor, and other creature comforts prepared; so that Mrs. Payne was able to retire to rest, not feeling so bad as she expected to feel after such a journey.

We breakfasted together the next morning, and then adjourned to my study. My guest had not yet asked me what I required of her. She was a good soul, quite content to do what she was asked to do without seeking for an object. I placed her in my chair in front of the window.

"Have you eyesight, Mrs. Payne?" I asked.

"Sharp as needles, sir; ne'er a member of my family ever wore glasses until after sixty."

"Well, you're a long way off sixty. I want you to look at the opposite house, and when you see a lady come out or look out of window, try if you can recall her face."

"Have I seen her before, sir?"

"I can't tell; I want to know that. You haven't seen her for many years—more than twenty, certainly."

"Twenty years plays tricks with faces and with memories, sir," said Mrs. Payne with a sigh.

"I shouldn't think you had changed much. Country air preserves good looks, you know."

Mrs. Payne laughed. No woman is too old to like a compliment. She fixed her eyes on the house opposite, and waited Mrs. Merton's appearance. By-and-by she seemed to grow tired of watching, and glanced round my room and frowned.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The dust, sir; I can't abide dust. That servant of yours is an idle hussy, I'll be bound."

"You shall talk to her presently about it. Now look at the other house. Ah, there she is!"

Mrs. Merton, according to her custom, was standing at her window, watering her geraniums.

Mrs. Payne looked long and earnestly at her. She rose from her seat and approached the window, evidently wishing to look over the blind. I pulled her back.

"Don't show yourself. Go as close to the window as you like, but keep below the blind."

I wheeled the table out of the way. She knelt down and peered through the interstices of the blind.

"Do you know her?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, I know her. I remember her face; but I can't think where I saw her, or what her name is."

"Look again, and try."

I was kneeling by her side. Presently Mrs. Merton turned to speak to some one inside the room, and in so doing presented her profile to us.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Payne, with a sigh of relief. "Now I know. Dearie me! dearie me! how twenty years can change a body! No wonder I didn't know her."

"Who is she? Don't make any mistake. Don't tell me unless you are quite certain. A great, a very great deal depends on it."

"Oh, I'm quite certain now," said she, moving from the window as if fully satisfied. "I can't think how I could have been so stupid."

"Well, who is she?"

"That's Mary Williams, Lady Estmere's maid as was."

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

THE plot thickened. The identification of Mrs. Merton and Mary Williams, the maid who had been in Lady Estmere's service when the catastrophe took place, removed any fear that I was not upon the right track. The only question was how to follow that track to its proper end.

The first thing to be done was to get rid of Mrs. Payne. If she saw her, my opposite neighbour would most assuredly recognize her old fellow-servant, and the suspicion her presence would arouse must defeat my ends. So I kept my guest a strict prisoner for the rest of the day.

I don't suppose she found the confinement very irksome, as she employed the time in going over my house, and pointing out for the benefit of my servant all evidences of neglect and uncleanliness. No doubt she visited their sins of

omission very heavily, for as soon as her back was turned, I was informed that if that lady was going to be mistress there I had better seek another servant. I suppose her tormentor's speedy departure made my domestic reconsider her determination, for I heard no more about her going, although I was often reminded of Mrs. Payne's disgust when a cloud of dust arose as I displaced any article.

By the first train the next morning, before neighbours were astir, I sent Mrs. Payne back to her John. I wished to reward her for her trouble, but she utterly refused to hear of such a thing. It would be a proud day for her if anything she had done would benefit her old mistress and Master Valentine. I put her in charge of the guard, who promised at Bristol to see her into a through carriage for the North, and am glad to say she accomplished her journey safely.

Now for Mrs. Merton. How was I to get that confession from her? Should I attempt to force, cajole, or bribe her to tell the truth? I shrunk from the last-named course, thinking that evidence given for a pecuniary consideration would always bear a certain venal taint about it. In whatever way the confederates may have tricked Sir Laurence

Estmere, it would be well that nothing should damage the testimony of the one who confessed to it.

There were three methods of appeal—to the woman's fears; to her right feelings, if she had any; and lastly, to her cupidity. The last method I put aside as one only to be used in extremities. Before I could decide which of the others to adopt, it was absolutely necessary I should know something of Mrs. Merton's character. I must establish myself on a footing of friendship with her.

I began operations through the schoolboy. Acquaintance with a lad like this is easily made. A few remarks about the noble game of cricket; a morning's practice together with bat and ball; an invitation to see my books and other few belongings, and we were like old friends.

He was a bright, clever boy; as quick and ready, it seemed to me, at his books as at his sports. His society was no infliction on me; although, had he been the dullest oaf in the world, I should still have sought it, in order to fulfil my mission. Yet, for a while, I gathered nothing by it, except that I established a bowing acquaintance with Mrs. Merton, and that her

daughter looked rather conscious, and as if she wished I would speak as I passed her.

One morning I met Charley Merton in the road. He looked rather sulky and downcast; so I asked him what was amiss.

"Mother's been scolding me. She says I ought to fag at Latin and Greek during the holidays. She is going to get some one to coach me."

"Well, that's all right; you oughtn't to complain!"

"I know I oughtn't," said the boy, penitently. "But it seems a jolly shame to have to 'swot' in this fine weather."

I laughed as I heard the old school word for "working." "Your mother wants you to get up in the school, I suppose," I said.

The boy blushed. "The truth is, Mr. Norris," he said, "we are so precious poor that mother says if I don't get a scholarship some day I shall have to be an errand-boy, or something of that sort."

An idea struck me. I saw a way of establishing friendly relations with my opposite neighbour.

"Would you like me to come and coach you, Charley?"

"You, Mr. Norris? Why, you're a gentleman."

"Don't you want a gentleman?"

"Yes," stammered the boy. "But we want some poor sort of a chap, who won't mind small pay."

"I don't mind small pay. I shall see your mother about it. Come in with me now."

The boy preceded me, looking timid and puzzled. He showed me into a sitting-room, then went in search of his mother.

In a few minutes she appeared, and bade me a stiff and rather embarrassed good morning.

"I dare say your boy has told you why I have called," I said.

"He told me something, but I could scarcely understand him."

"I hear you want a tutor for him. I have come to offer my services."

She hesitated. "You are a stranger," she said.

"Yes, to you; but not to Latin and Greek. I took a high degree at Oxford. I am quite competent to teach a lad."

"But I can afford to pay so little."

"Never mind that, Mrs. Merton. Money need not enter into the discussion. I have taken an interest in the boy; so, unless you positively object to the arrangement, I shall consider it settled."

She said no more, except by way of thanks; so the next morning I went across the road and began playing my new part of a tutor to youth.

The ice being broken between Mrs. Merton and myself, it was not long before I made opportunities for closer intercourse. Indeed, before a week was out, I was spending the evening at the opposite house, and that evening was the first of many.

What kind of a woman did I find my neighbour? Of course, she was not a lady, although in the course of her career she had picked up enough to enable her to pass muster fairly well. There was something about the woman to dislike —nothing, except her passionate devotion to her children, to like. Whatever may have been her life since she left Lady Estmere, that life was wrapped up in her son and daughter. It was because I praised, truthfully enough, the boy's

talents, that she admitted me into her friendship. So far as I could sum the woman up she was a vain, somewhat bad-tempered creature, fearful, I am sure, that her low origin would be discovered.

She told me, when, after a while, she began to be confidential to me, that her late husband was a lawyer, who died young, and left her with two children, and very little to rear them on. Whether she spoke the truth—whether she was ever married—is a thing I have not yet discovered, and having no interest in the discovery, shall not try to make it. She seemed rather curious to know something about myself, and, having no object in concealment, I told her exactly where I came from, and the little I knew about my family. I was amused to find, from several little tokens, that her minute inquiries had been made, because she had imbibed the, perhaps not unnatural, idea that her daughter's charms had induced me to introduce myself to her family circle.

The girl was a nice, quiet, well-behaved young woman, who played and sang very sweetly, but my heart was proof against all attractions, and Mrs. Merton must soon have been convinced that

she had made a mistake in attributing my visits to her daughter's charms.

Then, I fancy, a spice of the old lady's-maid vanity and coquetry made her wonder if it could be possible I came for her own sake. After all, she was not an old woman, and retained many traces of good looks. I must soon have undeceived her, and left her to fall back upon my interest in Charley, as an explanation for my visits.

Perhaps Mrs. Merton wished me to believe that she had at one time moved in good circles, for she frequently mentioned the names of distinguished people, with whom she implied, rather than stated, she had an acquaintance in other days. These, no doubt, were persons whose existence became known to her whilst she served as Lady Estmere's maid. One day she said to me—

"You know many people in London, I suppose?"

"A great many."

"Do you know any people named Estmere?"

I could scarcely repress my start of astonishment. For a moment I hesitated how to answer her question.

"I know a lady Estmere, and her son Valentine."

"Those are whom I mean. What is she like now?"

"She is very good-looking, although her hair is quite white. Did you know her?"

"Yes, before I was married."

I said no more, thinking it better to wait her pleasure.

"Is she happy?" she asked after a pause.

"How can she be happy? Her husband left her years ago, and they tell me will never return to her."

"But great ladies get over that sort of thing, don't they?"

"I am not a great lady, Mrs. Merton, so can't say."

I wondered whether the woman was beginning to feel compunction—whether, if I led her to the point, she would make a clean breast. But it was too early to risk such a step.

"Do you know Sir Laurence Estmere?" she asked.

"No. Since he left his wife he has wandered over the face of the earth, a wretched man, I believe."

There was a most curious expression in the woman's eyes. It was half-sorrowful, half-triumphant.

"Twenty years is a long time," she said.

"It is a long time—a long time for a woman to bear the blame of the world, a long time for her to see her son's prospects blasted; a son she loves most likely as fondly as you love yours. Of course, whatever happened was before my time; but if Lady Estmere is blameless, what must be the feelings of those who are to blame?"

I said more than I intended to say. She gave me a startled look, with suspicion clearly marked in it.

"No one can say Lady Estmere is blameless," she said, almost sullenly.

"No, so long as her husband condemns her. But she is a friend of mine, and I respect her. How did you know her history? Was she a friend of yours?"

"I knew her slightly, but I heard all the talk at the time. You must please excuse me, Mr. Norris. I have one of my headaches coming on, and must go and lie down."

I left her feeling sure that matters were coming to a crisis. I scarcely knew whether to

hope or to fear I had raised any suspicion in her mind that I was particularly interested in getting at the truth concerning Lady Estmere. Still I felt something was afoot which would help me in the task I had undertaken—some accident or fatality.

But a week went by quietly enough, the only thing of note being that Mrs. Merton was trying to avoid me. I did not go to the house so often now. School had re-opened, and Charley's proper tutors took my place. Still, several evenings I called in and helped him with his studies. Each time Mrs. Merton, after a few polite words, disappeared, and I saw her no more. She showed me no animosity, and I hoped that on some future occasion I might find the chance of bringing up the subject of the Estmeres once more, and jogging her conscience, if she had one to jog. I almost decided that I would tell her all I knew, all I suspected, and try and force the truth from her.

The last few days Mrs. Merton was not looking well. She gave as a reason want of sleep. This I knew was true, as every night when I went to bed I saw her room lit up. I never went to rest until very late, and as I saw that light I

wondered at a woman being up at such an unorthodox hour.

One night I was undressing myself and now and again glancing across the road. My window was wide open, and the venetian blind turned so that I could see through it without obstruction. Mrs. Merton's lamp was burning brilliantly. "I wonder what the woman is doing at such a time!" I said to myself; and wished I could look through that white blind which covered her window.

Presently I saw her shadow; she must have moved the lamp to the back of the room. No one can judge what a person's actions are from a shadow on the blind, but I was more than puzzled at one movement of that dark figure. It seemed to mount on a chair or something to raise it and was stretching its shadowy arms above its head. I was watching it disgusted with my inability to read the meaning of the action, when suddenly the light in the room appeared to grow ten times more brilliant, and the shadow vanished. Before I had time to think what had occurred I heard a piercing shriek—the blind was torn down from the window and I saw Mrs. Merton standing there enveloped in flames. The

look of terror on her face froze my blood. It was but for a second I saw her. She rushed away from the window and disappeared. I had seen enough to show me that some dreadful accident had happened. Quickly throwing on my coat I ran down-stairs, and in a few moments was hammering at Mrs. Merton's door eager to render what aid I could. For a while no one responded to my summons, but I could hear piercing shrieks inside the house. Then the door opened suddenly, and young Merton, with very little clothes upon him, rushed out nearly overturning me. "My mother! The doctor!" I heard him gasp as he passed, and ran wildly up the road. I entered the house, and closing the door behind me went up-stairs. In such a moment there was no need of ceremony, so I at once proceeded to the room whence those cries of anguish came. A fearful sight met my eyes!

Mrs. Merton was lying on the floor writhing in agony like a worm beneath the heel. Her body from the waist downwards was only covered by a mass of charred, half-burnt garments. The arms were bare, the sleeves of her dress having apparently been burned off, and her hands and arms were pitifully scorched, no doubt in her

efforts to extinguish the flames. Her daughter, half-distracted, was kneeling beside her, and the servant was wringing her hands and almost stupid with fright.

The situation needed no explanation. In some way, no doubt, when I saw her reaching up, the poor woman had brought her lower garments in contact with the flame of the lamp. The moment she found out what had happened, presence of mind had deserted her. In her pain and terror she had first of all rushed to the window as if to seek succour in that direction. Afterwards she must have run wildly to her daughter's room, where the flames were either extinguished or burned themselves out; but not before severe, probably fatal, injuries had been inflicted.

I lifted the poor wretch from the floor, and carrying her as tenderly as I could to her room, laid her on her own bed. Her sufferings appeared to me to be excruciating, and I deeply regretted that it was not in my power to allay the tortures, the severity of which was clearly shown by the spasmodic contractions of the muscles of her face. I could do no more to help her than the women. We could but wait and hope that the doctor would arrive.

He came at last, and as he examined his patient shook his head ominously. I stayed in the house as long as there was any service I could render to the poor people; then I went across to my own quarters, but before going begged the doctor to give me a call when he left Mrs. Merton.

He remained with her for hours, applying what remedies he could, trying to the best of his ability to make the anguish bearable. Then he came across to me.

"It's a bad job—a very bad job," he said.

"Will she die?" I asked.

"I don't see how she can recover. She is terribly burnt. If she had only shown presence of mind enough to jump into bed and roll all the clothes round she would have come off with a few scorches. No, like a true woman, she rushes out and screams for help."

"Is she in immediate danger?"

"No, I think not. I shall know better when I see her by-and-by. Good morning."

The doctor left me, and I sat down to think. I was of course much upset by the scene I had witnessed. A fellow-creature reduced in a second, by an act of carelessness, to such a pitiable con-

dition must touch the hardest heart. No one could see his worst enemy in such a plight without feeling moved. But I had more than sentimental reasons to distress me. What if Mrs. Merton should die with her lips sealed? Her death would then destroy every hope of getting at the bottom of Chesham's villainy. I could scarcely believe such a thing could be possible. I preferred to think that even this tragic affair was all of a part with the other fortuitous circumstances which had aided my quest. Either Mrs. Merton would recover, or if she died would speak the truth. I was anxious, but I was not so fearful of her carrying her secret to the grave as it seems natural I should have been.

However, she lingered on for several days. The doctor held out little hope. "I do not think she can recover," was his constant opinion. I was regular with my inquiries at the house, and really pitying the distress of the boy and girl, begged them to make use of me in any way they wished. I ardently longed for a few minutes' talk with the dying woman—perhaps, with the fear of death before her, she might consent to tell all she knew. I smiled as I thought of how many destinies might be changed by a few words from

her lips. Lady Estmere's, Sir Laurence Estmere's, Valentine's, and in a lesser degree my father's, Claudine's, and mine. I grew more and more anxious as the days passed by and the doctor still shook his head.

One morning, before the doctor's visit, young Merton told me that he believed his mother was better—the pain had almost left her. She lay so quietly in her bed now, that the boy spoke hopefully of her recovery. But when I saw the doctor he had another tale to tell.

"It's only a question of hours now with the poor woman," he said.

I was aghast. "Her son told me she was better—that the pain had diminished," I said.

"Yes, she will not feel much more pain. As I feared, mortification is setting in. It is all up with her."

"Is she conscious—strong enough to see any one?"

"Yes, but she is very weak, and the weakness will increase. There can be no objection to your seeing her if you wish to do so."

"Does she know she is dying?"

"Yes, she asked me. It would have been a poor mercy to deny it."

I felt that I must take immediate steps to obtain an interview with Mrs. Merton, or all my trouble would be of no avail. To-morrow, even this afternoon, might be too late. I must see her at once.

I was, however, spared any difficulty. Shortly after the doctor left me, Charley Merton crossed the road; his eyes were red with weeping.

"If you please, Mr. Norris," he said, "mother would be so glad to say a few words to you before she dies."

He spoke in a mechanical way, as though scarcely understanding the meaning of the message he bore.

In spite of the throb my heart gave, I pitied the lad. "I will come at once," I said, rising from my chair.

Then I followed the boy to his home, fully assured that I should leave it with my self-imposed mission accomplished.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

MRS. MERTON was lying partly propped up in bed. I started as I first caught sight of her face. I had seen death several times, but the victims had been those who had met the dread king without preparation. Men who had been drowned, and on one occasion, a man who had fallen from the top of a cliff. Never as yet had I seen a human being killed, as it were, by pain. The change in Mrs. Merton was appalling. The cheeks fallen in; the temples and cheek-bones prominent; the lips drawn back from the teeth; in fact, the whole appearance one of intense suffering. Had it not been for the large luminous black eyes which shone from that ashen face, I should have believed that I was too late, and that death had forestalled me; but the look of those eyes was sufficient to tell me that not only life was with the sufferer, but consciousness.

She did not waste her strength in making

any attempt at giving me a conventional greeting. She whispered a word to the attendant at her side. The nurse at once withdrew, and I was alone with the dying woman. I placed a chair by her bedside so that I could bend over and catch her faintest whisper.

"Mr. Norris," she said faintly, "I have no right to ask a favour of you, but you have been kind to my boy and seemed to like him."

Her eyes grew wonderfully soft and human as she spoke of her son.

"I am dying," she continued. "There will be nothing, absolutely nothing, left for my children."

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Mrs. Merton; surely it cannot be as bad as that."

"There will be nothing. I have lived on a small annuity, which dies with me. My boy and girl will be thrown penniless on the world. Oh, that I could have lived five years longer! I could have seen them both in the way of making their living."

She turned her head restlessly, and with what force she could muster struck her hand on the bed-clothes.

"Surely you must have friends who will do something," I said.

"I have not a friend in the world; but there is one man who may, if you will help me, do something for my children."

"Let me hear what I can do."

"I want you to see this man and tell him I am dead. I want you to ask him if he will pay for the children's living and education."

"Yes, I can do that."

"I want you to do more. He will not do it for love of me, he is not a friend. I want you to say, 'She left a sealed packet with me; unless you lodge the proper amount of money with two honest persons as trustees, I am instructed to break the seals and send the packet to the person to whom it is addressed.' It will not be much trouble, Mr. Norris. He will be sure to pay the money, then you can give him the packet; will you do this for a dying woman?"

Her voice if weak was eager and pleading. She little thought that I knew exactly from whom the money was to be extorted and pretty well guessed the contents of the packet.

"Will you do this?" she asked again, seeing that I hesitated.

I was only pausing to consider what course to adopt. I had only to promise to comply with

her request, and I felt certain that her confession would be placed in my hands. Once in my possession I could use it as I pleased. But I felt that come what might I could not deceive this dying wretch.

"I will not do it," I said.

She moaned, and her fingers picked convulsively at the bed-clothes.

"Oh!" she said, and would have cried had strength enough been hers, "for God's sake, for my children's sake, do this thing for me. It is very, very little to ask."

The critical moment had come. I leant over her and looked into her wild beseeching eyes.

"Mrs. Merton," I said, "can you, a sinful, dying woman, call this a little thing? You would make me the instrument to wring the money you want from Captain Chesham, and, that money once given, are content to die, knowing that the vile conspiracy you and he concocted twenty years ago will never be revealed. Mary Williams, now that you lie on your death-bed, do the one good action of your life and clear the innocent."

I thought sheer fright would have cut short the little life left her. Her large eyes dilated with horror and fear. In spite of her weakness

she half raised herself in the bed and stared at me.

"What have you to do with Richard Chesham and his crimes now?" I continued. "How will you face the next world with this last act on your soul? As you hope for mercy, show mercy!"

"Who are you?" she gasped. "How do you know my name? You are Lady Estmere's son!" she said suddenly.

"I am not. I am who I told you I was, nothing more. Her friend."

She closed her eyes and lay muttering. The only words I could catch from her parched drawn lips were, "My children starving! penniless!"

This love, this devotion to her children was my cue.

"Mrs. Merton—Mary Williams," I said, "listen to me—I am rich. I pledge my word as a man, my honour as a gentleman, that if, of your own free will and accord, you place that confession in my hands, I will do all, even more for your children than you wished to ask of Chesham."

She opened her eyes and looked at me as though she would search my heart.

"Let me hear that again," she whispered.

I repeated my words.

"You swear it?" she said.

"I swear it—I will see them launched in life."

Once more she closed her eyes, and the few moments which passed before she made any further sign seemed ages to me.

"Take a chair," she whispered, "and look on the top of the wardrobe. Give me a box you find there."

I obeyed her and brought her a small box or desk. It was whilst she was placing it there the fatal accident had occurred. It seemed like a just retribution.

The box was locked, and as Mrs. Merton said nothing about the key, I wrenched the cover off. There lay the packet sealed and without address. I took it out, and, in default of any commands to the contrary, opened it.

There was an inner cover directed not to Sir Laurence Estmere or to Lady Estmere, but to Lord Rothwell. Mary Williams was a clever woman, and knew who would be certain to see that the confession did its work.

I tore the cover open as well. It was no time to stand upon ceremony. Several sheets covered with writing were inside.

"It is all here?" I said.

She was eyeing me eagerly. "All—everything," she whispered, "I finished it that night. You first made me think of putting it on paper."

"I must have it attested by two witnesses," I said. "I will go and find them."

"Not my children—my dear children," she said in a fierce whisper. "If you bring them I will die swearing it is a lie."

"It shall not be your children."

I placed the precious document in my breast and left the room. I felt I could not be too cautious. So many interests turned on that paper. Unless the most indisputable evidence of its authority was forthcoming, a suspicious man, as I felt sure Sir Laurence Estmere must be, would reject it as a fabrication. To him it would be a warrant of condemnation.

I went to the clergyman of the parish; for North Road had a church of its own. I had scraped up a kind of acquaintance with him. I told him the facts of the case, that a dying sinner wished to make what atonement she could, and I asked him if he would accompany me to her bedside, and also if he would bring another man of

standing with him. He was interested and anxious to help me.

"My neighbour is a magistrate," he said. "He will be the proper person if we can find him at home."

The worthy magistrate was at home, pottering about his greenhouse. Such a request as mine must have been an event in his quiet life, and he gladly acceded to it. In a very short time we were standing by the dying woman's bed.

Yet even in that brief interval a change had taken place. I, without professional skill, could see that. So I drew out the confession and read it through as quickly as possible, so quickly that I scarcely gathered the gist of its contents, although I could see from time to time the two witnesses looking askance at the dying woman, who lay silent, but as I was glad to think, perfectly conscious.

At last I came to an end. The magistrate took the paper from my hand and leant over Mrs. Merton.

"You have heard the contents of this paper," he said, in a solemn, judicial voice, "and declare that to the best of your belief they are the truth?"

"They are the truth," repeated the dying woman.

The magistrate asked for pen and ink, and the clergyman and himself signed the document.

"You have nothing you wish to add?" I asked, bending over Mrs. Merton.

"Nothing for them to hear. Come closer."

Her voice was growing fainter and fainter. I placed my ear nearly touching her lips.

"You may add why I did it," she whispered. "A giddy, vain girl; I loved Sir Laurence. I offered him my love. He would not condescend to understand me. I was too far beneath him for him to tell his wife to get rid of me. Then I hated him—and he paid for it."

The clergyman having signed the paper, fell on his knees at the bedside, and began to pray for a departing sinner. His friend handed me the attested confession, and crept silently from the room.

"Send for my children—my children," moaned the dying woman.

I saw there was not a moment to spare, and at once summoned them; at the same time telling the servant to run for the doctor. Then I returned to the death-room.

Her children's young faces were pressed against her wasted cheeks, her feeble hands were trying to caress them, her lips were moving convulsively. The pious ministrations of the good vicar fell upon heedless ears. As I re-entered the room Mrs. Merton looked at me, and there was something in her eyes which made me draw close to her.

"Your promise," I heard her say, or rather saw her lips form the words.

"I will keep it; die in peace," I replied.

Her eyes closed to open no more, and the only sound in the room were the sobs of the boy and girl, and the voice of the clergyman.

"There is more joy in heaven."

I fear if the good man had known the frame of mind in which she died, he would scarcely have found that text appropriate. But, penitent and unrepentant, Mrs. Merton had drawn her last breath, and her last act had, as far as could be, undone the evil she had wrought.

CHAPTER VIII.

MY RIVAL, YET MY DEAREST FRIEND.

WHEN I stepped out of Acacia Villa, and reached my own domain, it seemed to me that, in spite of the recollection of the death-scene I had just witnessed, a ton's weight was removed from my mind. For the first time since I sought Captain Chesham in simulated friendship I felt my own man once more. Farewell to all trickery and double-dealing, even if it be that good may result from it. For the future, if I want any detective work done, I will employ legitimate aid. Yet in this particular case I felt that no detective could have succeeded, although this success was not due to my craft and shrewdness. Accident had befriended me all through—even to that last terrible accident which caused the death of the woman opposite.

I was shocked at what had taken place, but to say I was sorry would be untrue. Mrs. Merton was no more to me than a stranger, and her

death had crowned my mission with success, and set me free from a duty which, any way I looked at it, was not without degradation. And now what was to be done?

The confession was addressed to Lord Rothwell. Although, as I read it through hurriedly in that race against death, I received the impression that it completely exculpated Lady Estmere, I did not look at it again. I placed it in a sealed envelope, to be broken only by Lord Rothwell. Knowing he was in Derbyshire shooting, I at once telegraphed to him, "All is cleared up. Where shall I meet you?" Then I began to make preparations for leaving Surbury.

First of all it was needful that I should do something to help the young Mertons in their distress, although under the circumstances I could not stay and attend their mother's funeral, so I inquired about for a respectable solicitor and gave him instructions to see to all that was needful. In a short time I would write him as to the final disposal of the boy and girl. I went across the road, and told them what I had done. They were deeply grateful, but looked troubled when they heard that business obliged me to quit Surbury the next morning. I was the only being

approaching a friend they had in the place. My heart smote me as I thought how far from their friend I really was, and I resolved that my promise to the mother should be more than kept. Whatever her sins, they should not be visited upon this boy and girl.

I did not get Rothwell's reply to my telegram until the next morning. As it told me to meet him in London that night, it was evident that my news had seemed of sufficient importance to him to make him start at once for town. At seven o'clock I was at his hotel waiting for him. As soon as he arrived he wrung my hands vigorously. I believe had not the hotel servants been present he would have embraced me.

"Come up-stairs," he said, "come to my room."

I followed him. The room was always reserved for him, and he kept the key himself. No one on any pretence was to enter it during his absence, so it was in a nice state of dust and general untidiness. He shut the door and placed his hands on my shoulders and looked at me with that strange tender expression in his eyes. The earnestness of his manner almost startled me.

"Philip, is it true? You — you have done this?"

"I have done it. I have intrigued, I have lied. I have worn a mask for months, but I have succeeded."

"Tush! What matter how you found the truth! Is it the truth? There must be no flaw— no discrepancy."

"There is none — everything is perfect and clear as the day."

He turned from me and paced the room in agitation. For the time, he almost forgot my presence.

"Laurence! Laurence!" I heard him say. "The day has come at last—the day I told you would come, when every one of those cruel, biting, scornful words will fly back to you and pierce your heart like an arrow. Laurence, how will you bear it?"

I felt indignant at such misplaced sympathy.

"It is Lady Estmere you should think of, not a man like that! The wrongfully condemned usually merit pity, not the mistaken judge!"

He turned on me impatiently, almost fiercely.

"And who are you to judge, young sir? I tell you I have sympathized with and pitied Lady

Estmere for years; more than that, I have believed in her innocence. But at this moment, when you tell me you can prove her purity, I say my pity is not for her, it is for him, one of the noblest natures in the world—the man who, had he unwittingly wronged a slave, would, if need be, make atonement on his knees—my boyhood's friend, the friend of my early manhood—my rival, yet my dearest friend, Laurence Estmere!"

I was silenced by this burst of emotion.

"Boy," he continued, "you have done your work well, yet I could almost wish it were undone! Think of that man and tremble for what your news may mean to him! Yet you cannot help it; the work was given you: you could not help doing it; it was your destiny. Who can tell what the consequences may be? But let truth prevail!"

It seemed almost pure fanaticism to believe that I had been predestined to restore Lady Estmere to innocence in her husband's eyes. She was a dear, a very dear, friend of mine. I loved Valentine as a brother, and I was to marry her niece; but these facts did not seem enough to account for my being selected as the instrument.

Rothwell's mood changed. "Forgive my ex-

citement," he said, calmly, and seating himself at the table. "Now tell me all, from the very beginning."

"You must be tired with your journey. Why not have dinner first?"

"Tired with my journey!" he exclaimed. "Dinner first! The boy must be mad! For more than twenty years I have waited to hear this; and he talks about my dinner! Go on with your tale."

I felt rather snubbed, but took no notice of the rebuke. I sat down in the other chair, and told him all that had happened to me. Told him how Chesham's incautious act had revealed to me Mrs. Merton's existence and her claim upon him; how I had traced the note, and gone down to Surbury to spy out the enemy; how the housekeeper had identified her as Mary Williams; how that fatal accident and the woman's passionate love for her children had assisted me; how only yesterday I had obtained from her that paper addressed to himself, but which was only intended to reach him if Chesham declined to comply with her last request; how I had taken the precaution of getting it attested by two persons whose credibility was beyond doubt; how I

had brought it to him, and having done my part, left him to take what course he thought most desirable.

He listened without a word until my tale was finished and the packet placed in his hands. He did not open it for a minute. He seemed far away in thought.

"I remember her," he said. "A handsome, dark-eyed girl. What became of her I never knew."

He turned the packet over and over. "Shall I open it, Philip?" he said.

"Why not?"

"It may be a man's death-warrant. Shall I consult Lady Estmere first?"

"Speaking as an embryo lawyer, I should say not. She should know nothing about it until her innocence is proved to her husband's satisfaction."

Rothwell looked at me in a strange, inexplicable way.

"So be it. I will be guided by you." He spoke gravely, almost solemnly.

He opened the packet, and in silence read and re-read its contents. His brow contracted, and once or twice he struck his hand on the table. Then he turned to me.

"Duped!" he said. "The fiends!"

"Have you read this, Philip?" he asked, after another look at it.

"Of course I read it, but so quickly as scarcely to comprehend it."

"Sit down and read it again, whilst I go out of doors for a short time. I must breathe the open air, or I shall do some one a mischief."

He left me, and I read slowly and attentively the whole history of the vulgar but effective plot by which Richard Chesham wrought out his revenge. As neither the writing nor the verbiage was that of a person without education I may transcribe Mrs. Merton's confession in full. It ran so:—

"My Lord,—I write this, although I have no intention of sending it to you. I scarcely know why I write it, as only in the event of my death and a certain person not doing what he should do, will it reach your hands. If ever you get it, I know it will be welcome, as it will tell you exactly why Sir Laurence Estmere turned his wife away from him, and ought to show every one that her ladyship is an ill-used woman.

"I do not write this because I am what people

call penitent. Perhaps at the time I did not guess the full effects of what I did, but I knew them afterwards, and for interested motives kept my tongue still. If I speak at last it will only be from interested motives, or for the sake of revenge. Still you may feel certain that every word I now write is truth.

"My name you will no doubt forget. It was then Mary Williams. I was in Lady Estmere's service as lady's-maid. I was a vain girl. People called me good-looking, and I knew I was so, and trusted that my good looks would make my fortune.

"I expect you will never get this letter, and if you do, it will be all over with me; so I need not feel ashamed of saying I was never what is called a good girl. My own folks always said I should go to the bad, and I never doubted them, but I resolved to make money by doing so.

"I entered Lady Estmere's service shortly after her second baby was born. It was not a bad place, but rather too quiet for me. Although they had been married more than two years, they were as fond of each other as a bride and bridegroom. If her husband was away for two days, her ladyship did nothing but bewail his absence.

I could get very fond of a man who loved me, but I could never understand such love as hers.

"Of course as soon as I became Lady Estmere's maid I picked up all the gossip of the household. I heard how your lordship had been wildly in love with her whilst you were a poor man—too poor to think of getting married; and how, just after her marriage with Sir Laurence, you came unexpectedly into a title and estates. I heard, too, that she was once really engaged to a cousin named Chesham, and how for some reason she broke it off with him. I found that Sir Laurence, who was too high and proud a gentleman to be jealous, let this cousin, this Chesham, have the run of his house, let him come and go as he liked. And I thought Sir Laurence a fool for his pains, and I think him so now.

"Captain Chesham came several times to Estmere Court, and seemed almost like one of the family. I knew what sort of a man he was as soon as I saw him; and, as I have said, I was a good-looking girl, so he cast his eyes on me at once. But it was a long time before he got any good out of that. I was beginning life, and aimed high for a while. Marry me he might,

and welcome, and I thought he might have done worse. I would have made him a better wife than many of the fine ladies he knew.

"But he never thought of marrying me. Although he spoke smooth enough I knew he was laughing in his sleeve at my request. But he never gave me a moment's peace. Whenever he was staying at Estmere he was after me, making all sorts of fine promises. I can't say he deceived me, for I knew all about his manner of life, and the names of several girls he had ruined. I could have told my mistress things which would have astonished her. So whatever I did was done with my eyes open.

"If I never trusted him, after a bit I began to get in a way fond of him. He was very good-looking, and, until the devil was roused in him, as soft and kind-spoken as a man could be. Besides, he always talked to me when I didn't make him angry as if I were a lady born. I used to slip out of the house at nights and meet him in the shrubbery. We were too clever to be caught, so no one suspected what was going on between Captain Chesham and Mary Williams. I was no fool, and soon saw how the matter must end between us. At one time I used to think he

was so much in love with her ladyship that it stood in my way; but I soon found that he hated her more than he loved her; and as for Sir Laurence, I have seen him look like a devil when I spoke of his love for his wife. I have no doubt if he had seen the least chance of doing so, he would have tried to make her ladyship forsake her husband for him, but he was too clever a man to attempt impossibilities.

"Yet I used to twit him with his love for Lady Estmere, and laugh at its hopelessness, till I threw him into such rages that at times I trembled, fearing he might do me bodily injury.

"One evening I said to him, 'It's no use denying it, you love her a thousand times better than you love me. I hate you!'

"This time he did not fly into a rage. He laughed a mocking laugh.

"'Hate away, my dear,' he said.

"This unexpected coolness enraged me. 'I am prettier than she is,' I said. 'Others can see it if you don't.'

"'Never make comparisons—it is always unfortunate,' he said sneeringly.

"'Give me the fine things she wears,' I cried.

'Dress me like her, tell no one which is Lady Estmere, and you will see I am right.'

"Something seemed to strike him. He turned to me and caught my arm.

"'You handsome baggage!' he said, 'we'll see all about that. I believe you're right in what you say! Any way, we'll try it!'

"Then we made peace, and I thought no more about it.

"A few days afterwards her ladyship had a new dress sent down from town. It was of a most striking description, although not a grand toilet. She wore it the same evening, and when I undressed her she told me that her husband and Captain Chesham had greatly admired it. Like all ladies, she was glad when her good taste was recognized, especially so when Sir Laurence commended it.

"The next day Chesham went to London; but his stay there was short. A few days after his return to Estmere Court he gave me a large parcel.

"'There,' he said, 'I always keep my promises. I have paid Lady Estmere's dressmaker a fortune for the counterpart of her gown. Some day I will see you in it, and form my own opinion.

Don't be a fool, and show it to any one before then.'

"I took the parcel to my room and opened it. As Chesham said, the dress it contained was the counterpart of that of my mistress.

"Much as I longed to show myself in it I dared not do so. It was too noticeable. If seen by any one, I should lose my place at once for wearing my lady's clothes. So it was only when I was alone at night I could venture to attire myself in my new dress, and I had no one except myself to judge as to my appearance in it.

"Shortly afterwards Chesham went back to London. Before he left Estmere, I had consented to join him, and live with him as his mistress. I expected he would have been eager for me to accompany him, but it was not so. Under the excuse of furnishing a suitable place, he deferred the matter for a month or two. As soon as he was ready for me he would write.

"Perhaps the carelessness and seeming neglect made me really anxious that he should take me at my word, made me fancy that I loved the man, and would do anything for his sake.

"I heard nothing from him for two months; at the end of this time Sir Laurence and Lady

Estmere went to spend a couple of weeks at the Dower House.

"I detested that dull, wretched place, where scarcely a soul came. I was delighted to hear that Chesham was expected there. I knew he came for me, and was determined that, unless he was ready to take me, I would make an end to everything between us. Willing as I was to give myself to him, I expected to find him at least ready to accept the gift.

"He spoke to me smoothly, and told me that his one desire was to take me with him when he left the Dower House. Whether he would have done so had his plans miscarried I cannot say. The wound my vanity suffered when I found that he had used me for a tool extinguished all the love I ever bore him.

"Sir Laurence sometimes had business at Estmere Court. When he rode over there he generally stayed the night, returning to assuage his wife's fears the first thing the next morning. One day he started for the Court, intending to sleep there. The only persons left in the house, except servants and children, were Lady Estmere and the friend of the family, Captain Chesham.

"They dined together; Lady Estmere that

evening wore the dress I have spoken of. As I fastened it, I did nothing but think how much better I looked in my copy of it than her ladyship did.

"After the dinner I slipped out and met Chesham as usual. He was in very good spirits, and told me to hold myself in readiness to go to London with him. He might perhaps start to-morrow.

"'By the bye,' he said, 'let me see you in the dress I gave you; Lady Estmere has worn hers to-night, so now I shall be able to judge between you.'

"I was nothing loth to oblige him; but told him I could not do so until her ladyship had gone to bed. Even then I scarcely knew how to manage it; I did not care for any of the other servants to accuse me of wearing her clothes, and I did not choose to let Chesham come into my room, nor would I go to his.

"'Never mind,' he said. 'Put your mistress to bed and then change your gown. When you are ready I will look at you in her dressing-room. The door of it is next to my room. No one will come there, and we need not talk and disturb

Lady Estmere. I only want to admire you in silence."

"His plan seemed a curious one, but I had no idea to what it was tending. The dressing-room after Lady Estmere had left it would be as safe and secret a place of meeting as anywhere in the house. No one would dare to enter it. So I agreed to do as he suggested.

"Lady Estmere went to bed at an early hour, being, I suppose, anxious to get rid of the hours which separated her from her husband by the aid of sleep. I put her dresses away, then leaving the lamp burning went to my own room, changed my dress, and, mightily proud of my appearance, crept back to the dressing-room. Your lordship will remember that the Dower House is a low building, all the bed-rooms being on one floor, so that in crossing from one room to the other I ran little risk of being observed. Chesham was on the watch for me, and soon joined me. I was rather surprised to find the window open and the blind drawn up. I felt certain I had drawn it down whilst Lady Estmere was undressing. Had I not done so she would have noticed it.

"Chesham admired me to my heart's content, although he only expressed his approval in the

lowest whispers, for fear of her ladyship overhearing us. He took the lamp and held it near to me that he might see me the better. Then he placed it on a table at the back of the room. I noticed a box that did not belong to Lady Estmere was on the table. He opened it.

"'Let me make the resemblance complete,' he whispered, and to my astonishment drew out a wig of golden hair resembling her ladyship's. 'Put it on,' he said. I obeyed, thinking for the time it was but a joke.

"Then he led me to the window and embraced me. I begged him not to be too rash. The room was as light as day. Any one coming down the drive must see us.

"'Who will come at this hour?' he whispered, adding, 'and if they do who will they think is with me?'

"Then, and only then, I knew what the object of this masquerading was. He hoped that some one would see us and spread the report about that he had been standing that night with Lady Estmere in his arms.

"I did not break away from him. He held me with a grip of iron. I must have struggled and made an uproar in order to bring about my

release. Besides, I was not much troubled by what he was doing. I cared nothing for Lady Estmere, and as for Sir Laurence, I was quite content that he should suspect his wife to be as free with her kisses as many other grand ladies I had known. He was a proud man, and quite deserved to get a fall. So I stayed still as Chesham wished, till I began to grow quite tired of standing. Then I felt a tremble run through him, and his hands held me tighter, and as he kissed me again and again, I knew that his teeth were gritting one against another. There was some one outside the house; he could see, but I could not.

"I tried to turn round. He whispered fiercely, 'If you turn your face to the window I will strangle you.' He would have done so, I firmly believe.

"Presently he put his arm round my waist, and, with my back still to the window, guided me across the room, extinguishing the lamp as we reached it.

"'Go to your room,' he said; 'go at once. Strip off those things, hide them away, and get into bed. You have been a good girl; keep secret, and I will love you for ever. I shall leave here

to-night or to-morrow. Join me in London at this address as soon as possible.'

"He gave me a paper and some money. I went steadily to my room, and did as he told me.

"The next morning I found that he was gone. Then I heard from one of the grooms that Sir Laurence came back that night about eleven o'clock, and put his horse up at the stables, and I knew perfectly well why Chesham had acted as he did; why Sir Laurence and Lady Estmere parted the next day. It was a secret only known to Chesham and myself.

"All the servants were dismissed, and the house shut up. I met Chesham in London as arranged. I followed him abroad, and nursed him after Sir Laurence shot him.

"I need not say that Chesham treated me like he treated every woman whose love he won. In a few months he grew tired of me, and would, if possible, have thrown me aside as he had thrown others. But he could not quite get rid of me, because I had the secret of how he had for revenge parted Lady Estmere and her husband. At any time by going to Sir Laurence I could undo him, and moreover, he knew if I spoke his life would not be worth a day's purchase.

"Except for this hold upon him he would have left me to starve; and it was for the sake of being able to threaten him that I kept his secret. I made him pay me for keeping it. He cursed me, but gave me money, not as much as I wanted; but so long as I was young and kept my good looks that did not matter much. I still get money from him when I am hard pressed; no doubt he will never entirely refuse to supply me, and in writing this I am but wasting my time. Still it is well to be prepared for the worst.

"Your lordship knows the rest of the tale better than I do. I am not sure whether Sir Laurence Estmere is living or dead, but I have no doubt that if living both he and Lady Estmere will remember that at the time I speak of I was in their service under the name of Mary Williams (now Mary Merton)."

This ended the cynical, revolting narrative of a thoroughly bad woman. Yet in spite of its inherent wickedness the whole tale was stamped with truth, and coincided in every detail with what Mrs. Payne told me. I marvelled that such creatures as Chesham and his whilom mistress could be formed out of the same flesh and blood

as one's self. Here was a woman who for purely mercenary motives had allowed an innocent woman to lie for years and years under a foul imputation, whilst her husband had been driven by his pride and disappointment to become a life-long wanderer. Except for the hint she gave me in her last breath, that somehow Sir Laurence Estmere had aroused her hatred by his utter indifference to her, I should have considered her conduct even baser than the Arch Conspirator's. He, at least, worked only for malignant revenge. Bad at this might be, it seemed a higher motive than mere pecuniary interest. As I thought of this my soul sickened at the woman's grovelling iniquity, and I thrust her so-called confession from me, as if its touch was contamination.

Rothwell had returned before I had finished the perusal of the document. He said nothing until I thrust it from me; his walk seemed to have allayed his agitation and to have brought back his calm, sensible, reflective self.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked.

"A low, vulgar pest—lacking even originality."

"When people take a leaf out of the devil's book they usually choose a well-thumbed one. But her tale reads like truth."

"It is true, every word of it. The most sceptical would be convinced."

"Even my poor friend Laurence, you think?"

"Please not to call that man your friend before me. I condemn him, but if he had taken the trouble I, a stranger, have, he might have spared his wife these years of pain."

"And himself, Philip—don't forget that! She, at least, had the consciousness of her own innocence—she could deplore the mistake, and could still love him. He was debarred from even that. Philip, you will pity and forgive him as I do—as she will."

I had nothing to forgive him. He had not wronged me; so I contented myself by saying nothing.

"It would be well," I said, coming back to the commonplace, "to get some corroboration of this tale. It will add greatly to its weight if we can trace that Chesham ordered that dress to be made."

"Can we find that out?"

"I dare say we can; we will try to-morrow. Then, I suppose, you will go in search of Sir Laurence. Where is he now?"

"Ah, where is he?" echoed Rothwell, and

then relapsed into thoughtful silence. He seemed in no mood for conversation. No doubt his thoughts were far away—flown back to the days when he and Sir Laurence Estmere were young men, and rivals for the love of the fair girl whose life had been so completely spoiled. I had several things I wished to do, so left him alone with his dreams.

"At any rate," I said, half-triumphantly as I left him, "my father, if he has any sense of justice, will not oppose my marriage with Claudine any longer."

"Are you going to write to him?"

"Yes, at once."

"You had better wait, Philip. After all, nothing can be said to be settled until Sir Laurence is convinced. Don't write."

"Why not?"

He hesitated. "Because for one thing I don't think you have any right to speak about these matters which have come to your knowledge until the principal parties interested have settled what to do."

There was no appeal against this. It was as much as saying it was a matter of honour. I promised to defer my communication to my father.

"A few days won't matter much to a young fellow like you," he said, as I wished him good-night.

As I neared the club I thought I would look in and see if any letters were waiting for me. Standing on the steps was Chesham. I was surprised to see him, as I thought he was certain, like the rest of the world, to be out of town.

I was close to him before I noticed him. He stretched out his hand, and a look, I believe, of genuine pleasure crossed his face.

"Norris!" he said, "I thought I should never see you again. I have inquired high and low for you, and fancied you were gone to the devil or bolted. Shake hands, my boy!"

Then slowly and unmistakably I put my right hand behind my back. The farce was over. My fingers should rot off before they clasped those of Richard Chesham! He saw and understood the action. A slight flush crossed his cheek.

"You mean this?" he said.

"I mean it fully."

"You will give me your reason?" he said, in his clear metallic voice. Fresh from the perusal of that confession of villainy, I began to boil with indignation, although my manner, I hope,

was as calm as his own. Why should I not give him my reason? Besides, I wished him to know I had been playing a part.

"Certainly I will, Captain Chesham," I said. "You asked me where I have been. I have been staying at Surbury."

He started; I saw it. "You speak in riddles," he said.

"Are you a student of Shakespeare?" I said, scornfully. "If so, do you remember the plot of 'Much Ado about Nothing'? If not, I will tell you in plain words that your confederate, Mrs. Merton, Mary Williams, is dead; that her written and attested confession was placed in my hands to give to Lord Rothwell. He is this moment reading it."

His face, as I saw it in the gaslight, grew very pale, his thin lips twitched convulsively, he leant heavily upon his stick.

"But you," he said; "what have you to do with the matter? You are my friend."

"Let me undeceive you, Captain Chesham. I have played cards with you; I have lost money to you; I have sought your society, and, it appears, made myself agreeable to you; but all with one purpose. My end is gained. Lady Estmere's

innocence will be clearly proved; and from this moment all intercourse must cease between me and the villain who wrecked her life. Let me pass, if you please."

He barred the way. For a moment every evil passion seemed to be gathered together in his face; but the malignant expression left it as soon as it came, and was succeeded by what vexed me far more, a look of what I am bound to call sorrow.

"Then you," he said, "you, whom I was fool enough to fancy liked me; you, whom I was fool enough to begin to care for and trust, have been a traitor all the while!"

"A traitor can only be matched by his own weapons," I said scornfully, and trying to pass him again. When he spoke, his voice and accent were the bitterest I ever heard.

"Not so fast, sir," he said. "Listen. In my life I have loved one woman—one only. She threw me aside. You know what happened. I have also trusted one man. He has deceived and betrayed me. Do you fancy my reckoning with him will be less heavy?"

"I neither know nor care. Let me pass."

For a moment I stood on my guard. The look in his eyes made me apprehensive of personal violence. He saw what I suspected, and laughed a cruel laugh.

"No, you fool, I shall not strike you here. You would trample me under foot. You are a gentleman, I suppose?"

"I believe so."

"Then if I call you a lying coward it will be enough. I will do it before witnesses, if you like!"

I restrained myself, although I longed to wring his neck.

"It is quite enough," I said.

"Is it enough to bring you abroad to meet me? If not, I will find you in some public place and spit in your face."

His words, his manner roused all the devil in me. Unfortunately, I was of the age and disposition at which one does not regard a duel as a murder. In my heart I had an idea of what would happen when Chesham knew his iniquity had been revealed through my agency. Having cheated him, I felt that, should he demand this old-fashioned satisfaction, I must give it to him. Besides, no man in the world should call me a

coward; and the last insult made me as eager to kill him as he was to kill me. So I said—

"I am at your service any time, Captain Chesham; but not having your experience in these matters must ask you to undertake all arrangements."

"You will come when I send for you?" he asked, fiercely.

"Certainly."

"So be it. I go to Monaco to-morrow; I will inquire and fix the best spot—most likely we must go in French territory. I will write."

He raised his hat and hobbled down the steps. I went into the club with the strange and novel feeling that I had perhaps only a fortnight to live. Chesham's vindictive eyes told me that he would do all he could to cut short my career if ever that promised meeting took place.

Then I went back to my rooms and wrote a long letter to Claudine.

CHAPTER IX.

SIR LAURENCE ESTMERE.

I HAVE said little or nothing of Claudine for a long time; simply because this is not a love-tale; certainly not the story of our loves. Nevertheless, during my absence, letters had passed between us nearly every day. I did not tell her exactly why I sojourned at Surbury; but for my own sake I let her know that my apparent friendship for Chesham was part and parcel of the work I was engaged upon. She was content to take me at my word, to wait and trust. She was at Cheltenham, staying with her ex-guardian, the terrible old General. Although he had washed his hands of her, she was welcome to come to his house, so long as she did not bring that young adventurer in her train. The truth is, the old soldier and his sister loved her dearly. Perhaps, had I known that, I should have kept my temper on the occasion of that stormy interview.

So I wrote a long letter to Claudine. Per-

haps, as I thought of what was before me, an unusually tender one. However that may be, the only portion of it which concerns this tale was the postscript, in which I asked her to telegraph at once, and if she could let me know the name of Lady Estmere's dressmaker twenty years ago. I did not explain why I made the request, knowing that Claudine would guess at its importance.

The telegram came at noon on the next day. "Always the same, Madame Bianchi, Regent Street." I went in search of Rothwell, and asked him to accompany me to the unknown regions I must explore.

We called at the great dressmaker's feeling terribly shy and ill at ease as we passed through the glass-doors which opened upon the mysterious land of millinery. I insisted that Rothwell should be the spokesman. His greater age would carry weight and win confidence. He reluctantly consented, and with a furtive glance around him, advanced, and asked one of the young ladies behind the counter if we could see Madame Bianchi.

Madame was particularly engaged at present. Did we call by appointment? The young lady eyed us curiously. No doubt the appearance of

two full-grown, able-bodied men, in such an establishment was unprecedented.

We did not call by appointment. Ah, then it was impossible to say when we could see Madame. We would wait on the chance, as our business was of great importance. So we were accommodated with chairs, and sat down rather ruefully, feeling much like fish out of water.

The young ladies in the shop looked at us suspiciously. Rothwell stuck his large brown hands in his pockets, stretched out his long legs, trying to look as much at his ease as possible. But it was no use, we felt like criminals or desecrators. It needed only two or three ladies to pass in and out, and give us a surprised glance as they swept by, to complete our misery.

"This is very terrible, Philip," whispered Rothwell.

"It is. What shall we do?"

"I don't know. I believe those girls think we are bailiffs! I wish you wouldn't eye the dresses in that way. They think it the commencement of an inventory."

"Can't you go and buy a bonnet, or a petticoat, or something," he said, after a pause, "just to show that we are honest men?"

"I wonder if Claudine would be annoyed if I gave a few preliminary orders for the trousseau?" I said, laughing.

"Do something, for Heaven's sake!"

"Send your name up to Madame. She will see a lord, no doubt."

"I will try," he said sadly, and timidly approached one of the presiding goddesses.

The talisman worked. The message was sent, and we soon found ourselves in Madame Bianchi's presence.

She was a dark-eyed, clever-looking woman, very quietly but richly dressed. Her hands, which were plump and white, always moved as she spoke, and looked as if engaged in smoothing out some imaginary wrinkles on a phantom dress. She received us gracefully and condescendingly, but it was perfectly clear she was quite aware of her own superior station in life. A peer is but an accident of birth, but a great milliner is a gift from above.

We apologized for our intrusion, and made known our errand. It was to learn if about a certain date, many years ago, a gentleman had ordered a replica of one of Lady Estmere's dresses.

"My books will show," she said. She rang a bell and gave orders that certain books should be brought her. She turned back page after page, passing her white forefinger rapidly down each. Suddenly it stopped.

"It must be this," she said. "Here is the entry in the order-book."

We looked where her index finger had arrested itself, and read—

"'Mr. ——. Demi-toilet the same as Lady Estmere's. To be ready by next Friday; paid in advance.'"

"I remember the circumstances now I look at the entry," said Madame. "A gentleman called and told me his wife was so struck with her ladyship's dress that she must have one like it. I objected to make it, as we do not care to make two dresses alike; but he insisted, and said his wife wanted to take it abroad. In fact she had gone abroad now; so it was to be made to Lady Estmere's measure and altered afterwards, if necessary."

"He gave no name?"

"It seems not—but that did not matter, as you see he paid for it before it was made."

We knew all we wanted. At any time an in-

spection of Madame's books would prove the truth of Mrs. Merton's tale so far as the two dresses were concerned. So thanking Madame for her civility, we left her establishment.

"That," said Rothwell, as we energed from the glass doors, "is a thing a single man should only be called upon to do once in a lifetime."

We walked across to his hotel, where I had promised to lunch with him.

"Now," I said, "my task is done. The rest is your part."

"You did not write to your father last night?" he asked.

"Certainly not—you had my promise."

"You would like him to know about this?"

"As soon as possible."

"Well, I have reconsidered the matter. He had better be told. Is he still in Devonshire?"

"Yes, I found a letter from him awaiting me yesterday."

"Then we will settle your affairs first. We will go to Torwood to-morrow."

"Will you come?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course I will. You will want my testimony. Besides, that paper never leaves me until I give it to Laurence Estmere."

I thought it very kind of Lord Rothwell to interest himself about my concerns. I told him so.

"Spare me your thanks, Philip, and be ready to start by the first train to-morrow."

We started as he suggested by the early train, and having at last reached Minehead, took a carriage and posters, to carry us as near to Torwood as they could. Then, dismissing them, we struck across the moor straight to our destination.

It was a journey which consumed much time, so it was not until the evening we reached Torwood. The latter part of the journey had not been a lively one. Rothwell had for some reason or other cloaked himself with moodiness and silence. I could scarcely get a question answered, so at last gave up all attempts at sustaining a conversation.

"Thank Heaven, home at last!" I said, as the dim outline of Torwood grew visible. "I must say you have been a cheerful companion since we left Minehead."

"I have been thinking how we shall go back."

"We can go by boat, or walk until we get a conveyance."

"You do not know my meaning," he said.

"What meaning?" You spoke plainly."

"Never mind. Go on first. It grows dark, and you know the path."

Some of his sayings recently had been quite enigmatical.

We reached the gate and passed up the steep garden. There was a light burning in the library, and the curtains were not drawn. I looked through the window and saw my father at the table, reading. As I looked at his beautiful, intellectual face, so full of sadness and thought, my heart leaped out to him. As I pictured his dreary solitude, I am not ashamed to say that the tears came to my eyes, and for a moment I felt as if Claudine had but the second place in my heart. But I knew this was but the sentiment of the moment. I turned away.

"Stay one moment," said Rothwell, who was beside me, "don't disturb him for a little while."

Perhaps he spoke louder than he intended; perhaps my foot grated on the gravel. My father raised his head, and rising from his seat, came to the window. He opened it. "Who is there?" he said.

"It is I, father."

"Philip, my son! Who else?"

"Lord Rothwell."

I was close to the window; my hand was in my father's as I spoke. I was looking eagerly into his face and wondered at the strange expression which crossed it as I told him who my companion was. He drew his hand from mine.

"You are both welcome," he said; "I will open the door."

In a few seconds I was in his arms. Then he held out his hands and grasped Lord Rothwell's. Any fear I might have felt as to my companion being welcome was dispelled. The greeting between the two men was almost affectionate.

Mrs. Lee as soon as she had recovered from her surprise was ordered to prepare the best meal she could. Then we went to our rooms to remove the stains of travel.

I dressed myself, and opening my window, looked out. The old sound of the waves beating on the beach below brought back its thousand memories. The fresh sea breeze braced me and invigorated me. "After all," I thought, "with all its dreariness, I love the wild solitary old home." Then, as I mused, I felt an arm passed round

my neck. It was my father's; he had entered noiselessly, and now stood beside me.

"Our visit must have taken you by surprise," I said cheerfully.

"No, I have been expecting to see you. I felt that you would come soon."

"I am afraid I have neglected you shamefully," I said, feeling rather conscience-stricken.

"It is not that. Do you love me, Philip?" he asked abruptly but solemnly.

"You know I do. I would that I could prove it in any way but one."

He sighed. I fully expected he was going to make another appeal to me to give up Claudine. But no.

"If I died, you would always remember me kindly, my boy?"

I turned his face to the light, and looked at it. A kind of weary smile played round his lips.

"Why do you say such things?" I cried. "Surely you are not ill?"

"No, I am not ill, Philip. I am stronger and better than I have been for years."

"Then why talk so gloomily. My dear father, you are depressed. No wonder, living

alone like this. Rothwell and I will cheer you up."

"Yes; you and Rothwell will cheer me up. I hear him going down. Are you ready?"

I slipped my arm through his, and so we went down to the dining-room.

"Glad to see you," cried Rothwell. "I'm as hungry as a pike! but my trust in Mrs. Lee is unbounded. Wonderful appetizing air that of the Devonshire moors."

He spoke gaily; but somehow it struck me his gaiety was forced. My father made no reply to his guest's sally. He handed me his keys.

"Go down to the cellar, Philip. Bring some champagne and some Lafite; you know where to find them."

When I returned with the bottles I evidently cut short an argument between the two men. Its closing words I heard. They were spoken by Lord Rothwell.

"I swear you shall listen if I wait here till Doomsday!"

It was clear from this he had broached the object of our visit; but I feared he had not done so judiciously. My father was not the man to brook such peremptory words as these.

The meal we sat down to was a silent, sorry affair. My father had already dined, and Rothwell, in spite of his protestations of hunger, soon appeased his appetite. I had the food and the wine almost to myself. My father scarcely spoke a word. He sat stroking his long grey moustache or his pointed beard. I felt sure that my advocate's hastiness had damaged my cause.

At last my pangs of hunger were satisfied. My father pushed the claret to Lord Rothwell. His guest declined it.

"Will you smoke?" asked my father.

"In your library with you," replied Rothwell, with meaning.

"You are resolved?"

"Quite."

"If I insult you, you won't leave me?"

"You cannot insult me. It is no use to try."

My father rose, with a dark frown on his brow. I could scarcely believe him to be the man who, a few minutes before, had pleaded, as it were, for the love which was his by right and gratitude.

"Come then," he said, shortly and imperiously. He turned on his heel, and in a discourteous manner passed out of the room.

I half rose from my chair. "I had better be with you," I said.

Rothwell pushed me back. "Stay where you are until I want you, and, Philip, listen—if ever you say prayers—pray that nothing may make this night a fearful memory."

He left the room, leaving me in a state of wonder. There was an excitement and agitation about both him and my father which the circumstances of the case could not account for. Lord Rothwell had now gone to plead my cause, but I was beginning to think diplomacy was not his forte. He had commenced by putting my father in a rage. Well, I must trust to myself in future!

I lit a cigar. Mrs. Lee came in and cleared away the dinner. I had a long gossip with her. She asked for news of Valentine, and was much disappointed that I had not seen him for so long. She wondered why the master took her up so short when she had mentioned his name, and why, at last, he told her in his sternest manner never to let him hear it again. And I wondered too why my father should have taken such an inveterate prejudice against the Estmere family.

With his words lingering in my ears I inquired

of Mrs. Lee as to his general health, and was assured that he had spoken truly in saying it never was better. Then the old soul left me to my cigar and my thoughts.

I thought a good deal about Claudine. I wondered why the two men in the next room were having such a prolonged interview. I wondered if Richard Chesham would really send me his cartel, and whether, if we met, I should kill him or he would kill me. I was not much afraid. I was a skilled pistol-shot, although I had never fired at a human creature who was firing at me in return. Still I had no wish to die. Life was very dear. My code of honour insisted that I should try events with Chesham, but I was likely enough to come out unscathed. What would Claudine do if I were shot? Poor Claudine! What would my father do? How strange he should talk about death, little knowing it might be so near his son! And Rothwell? Well, I believe Rothwell loved me well enough to shoot Chesham in revenge for my fall. What a strange thing that a middle-aged man like Lord Rothwell should have grown so fond of me. I wonder why it is—I wonder why—

Then tired with the day's travel I fell asleep in my chair, and slept for two hours. It was well I did, for I was to get little other sleep that night.

The dining-room door was open, so when some one turned the handle of the library door I awoke. I heard Lord Rothwell's deep voice—it seemed to come through a dream.

"You promise on your honour?"

"Till you return—I promise on my honour."

I started to my feet. I heard the library door shut and found Rothwell standing before me. The eyes of the great six foot man were positively full of tears. The laughing reproach for his long absence died on my lips. I gazed at him and knew that his emotion was due to no commonplace cause.

He took both my hands in his, but he spoke not a word.

"What is it?" I cried. "Is anything the matter?"

Still he said nothing, but looked at me with his true, loving eyes.

"He must have believed you," I said. "The evidence was unimpeachable."

"He did believe; he was overwhelmed, Philip."

"He is a just man," I said. "He blames himself for lending too eager an ear to common report. He is grieved, of course, but glad that a wrong is righted."

Still Lord Rothwell held my hands—still he looked at me.

"He is convinced, Philip. Laurence Estmere knows that his wife is innocent."

"Laurence Estmere! My father you mean."

"Your father I mean. Philip, Philip! Do you know why I have loved you as a son? Why I knew that it was your destiny to work out this thing? Why I bade you spare nothing—even honour; stop short of nothing, save crime, to learn the truth? Shall I tell you? Can you bear it?"

I could scarcely breathe, much less speak. My eyes were riveted on his.

"Because," he said, "you are the eldest son of her I loved—of him I loved. Because your father, William Norris, is the man you have condemned and blamed—Laurence Estmere!"

The truth came to me; it came like a flood. Such a flood as no brain could hold or withstand. In one second or tenth of a second the whole of my life seemed jostled together. I saw and knew everything. My state was not one of astonish-

ment. It was simply that of one upon whom a sudden revelation bursts. Doubt I had none. I saw, knew, and remembered everything. The truth and the train of thought which rushed after it was too much. Physically, and I believe mentally, I was a strong man; but this was more than body or mind could bear. For the first, and I hope the last time in my life I fainted.

CHAPTER X.

A QUESTION OF PRECEDENCE.

I STRUGGLED back to consciousness, and found Lord Rothwell standing over me, bathing my forehead. Seeing my eyes open, he filled a glass with wine and brought it to me. I drank in a mechanical way, then by an effort stood upright. The paramount idea in my mind was that Lady Estmere was my mother. I walked towards the door. Rothwell followed, and seized my arm.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I am going to my mother—at once."

"Sit down, Philip; don't be unreasonable. You are bewildered, naturally. Try and collect yourself."

"I say I am going to my mother. Who are you, sir," I continued, scarcely responsible for my words, "who are you, who dares to stand between my mother and her son? For more than twenty years we have been parted by fraud! No one shall part us again."

Rothwell, who was immensely powerful, absolutely forced me back to a chair.

"Sit still," he said, "and try to think; try to realize everything. Remember that every word such as you speak now will give a fresh wound to your father's heart."

"Why did I not know all this before? What right had you to keep it secret?"

"Listen, Philip, or, as I should call you now, Laurence—I was bound for several reasons to respect your father's secret. The day after he wounded Chesham he disappeared. I sought him everywhere, but could find no trace of him. For years I neither saw nor heard of him. All I knew was that he was alive. The one man who knew his abode, Mr. Grace, the solicitor, told me that much. But he was faithful to his trust, and, although with great misgivings, he consented to forward a letter of mine, I heard nothing more of Laurence Estmere for nearly twelve years. Then, as you know, chance brought me to your house, and in your father I recognized my old friend. Perhaps you may remember how resolutely he denied all previous acquaintance with me, until I began to believe I had been misled by a chance resemblance. For if William Norris was Laurence

Estmere, he had greatly changed in look. Just as I was unwillingly about to depart, I remembered that whilst boys together his hand had been wounded, and a slight scar had always remained. I looked and found it there. Then I insisted upon an interview.

"I begged and prayed him to return to the world; to return to his wife. I pointed to the sweet, blameless life she had led since he left. I again avowed my belief in her innocence. All was unavailing. A proud, sensitive man, wounded to death by what he fancied had occurred, he was immovable. Then I spoke of you, and of the wrong he was doing you by bringing you up in such a solitary manner. He told me you would be none the worse for your strange life. You would, he asserted, be more likely to grow up a good man as plain Philip Norris, than as the heir to a title and riches. This I did not dispute, although I believe his true reason for keeping you in ignorance was the fear lest, when you knew your mother's name, you would seek her and perhaps desert him for her. He was then—he is now, passionately fond of you."

Rothwell paused. I nodded my head.

"Argument was useless," he continued, "so at

last I lost my patience, and told him for his own sake I should reveal his retreat. I refused to be bound to silence. Then he threatened. He had chosen his own way of life. If I made his assumed name and abode public; if he was troubled in his retirement; he would come back to the world; but his first act would be to sue for a divorce. Leave him alone, he would leave others alone. Then I flushed up and quarrelled with him."

"But you parted the best of friends," I said, as I recalled all I had seen of the meeting.

"We did. Why? Because, in the middle of my tirade he looked up at me, just as he used to look when we were boys together, and I heard him whisper, 'Even you, old friend!' So, like a fool or a boy at school, I put my arm round his neck and swore that, right or wrong, I would do as he wished. All I could hope was that time and chance might make things right again. I did not dare to hope that the boy who made his way to my heart at once would be the means."

I sat in deep thought. My one longing was to go to my mother, throw myself into her arms, and give her the glad tidings. I told Rothwell so. He frowned.

"Your mother can wait. It is your father you must think of now. Come to him."

"Not to-night; I cannot, will not see him! Let him first repair the wrong."

"Come to him at once, I say! Who are you to judge him? Remember what he saw. Put yourself in his place. Come with me; we have been away from him too long."

Still I held back. I wanted time to think, to recover myself. Rothwell's strong fingers closed on my shoulder.

"Did you hear him promise something, on his honour, as I left him?" There was such meaning in his voice that a chill crept over me.

"He promised me," said Rothwell, in low, deep tones, "not to take his own life until my return. Did I not say that paper might be a man's death warrant?"

"And you dared to leave him alone!" I cried. "Come!"

"When Laurence Estmere makes a promise, let it be for good or evil, he keeps it."

By this time I had reached the library door. "Let me go first," whispered Rothwell. I yielded the point.

My father was at his desk, and as we entered,

started, as one surprised in the midst of a train of deep thought. In front of him lay a miniature in a gold frame, and his right was toying with a pistol.

Rothwell walked to him and laid his hand on the weapon. My father calmly resigned it. I was struck with horror. All I could do was to rush to his side, kneel down and implore him to think of me before he did any rash act.

His arm stole round my neck. He was preternaturally calm. "Fear nothing, Laurence," he said.

"Call me by my own name," I cried.

"Your name is Laurence Estmere. You have told him all, Rothwell?"

"Everything."

"Then I need say no more at present, except to ask my son if he forgives me."

"I have nothing to forgive! Nothing! But my poor mother—the years of suffering. Father, you were cruelly wronged!"

He was calm still; but I felt a shiver run through him. He leaned forward and looked at the portrait before him. It was that of his wife, young, fair, and happy.

Presently he moved his arm from my shoulder.

He rose, and, I noticed, placed the portrait next his heart.

"I am tired," he said. "I have much to think about. Good night, my son. Good night, my friend."

I scarcely knew what to make of his manner. He was changed in some way; but spoke quietly and calmly. Yet, in Rothwell's hand was the weapon which I firmly believe his promise only kept from being turned against his heart.

"By the bye," he said, "where is Chesham?"

Now, running under all my thoughts and agitation was the one idea that in a few days I should have the pleasure of trying to kill Chesham. Not for a kingdom would I have consented to forego my chance. As I heard my father ask the question, and moreover, mention the man's name without apparent effort or emotion, I replied as if I were answering a most commonplace inquiry.

"He has gone to Monaco."

Rothwell darted a fierce look at me, and I saw the folly of which I had been guilty.

"Good night," said my father once more.

"My dear Laurence," said Rothwell, "you may

be sure I am not going to lose sight of you to-night. You are not well enough to sleep alone."

My father smiled, half-contemptuously.

"You are a good fellow, Frank," he said, reverting to the Christian name of his friend. "Be at your ease."

"But I am not. I will not leave you."

My father reseated himself. "Give me that book near your hand," he said. I handed it to him. He opened it and ran through the pages, whilst Rothwell exchanged looks of astonishment with me.

Presently my father found the passage he wanted. He handed the book to Rothwell, and told him to read. I took the liberty of looking over his shoulder.

The book was, "Lives of Distinguished Judges." The paragraph pointed out to us set forth how Lord C—— had once, by his summing up, doomed an innocent man to the gallows, and it enlarged upon the distress of mind he ever afterwards felt. Then, in a logical, clever way, the writer showed that this distress was purely sentimental — that the blame did not rest on the shoulders of the judge, but on those of certain witnesses who had sworn falsely. The blood of

the judicial victim was on their souls, not on the judge's.

We caught my father's meaning, and an immense weight was lifted from my mind.

"You identify yourself with Lord C——?" said Rothwell.

"I do. I argued the matter out whilst you were absent. I remembered this case just in time. It changed my plans. No; the punishment should not fall on the misled judge, but on the false witness. Be satisfied. Good night."

We made no further resistance. His manner impressed us. Yet a certain doubt lingered in our minds. To me this calmness seemed appalling.

"Are we right to leave him?" I asked.

"Yes; but we may as well see him to his room."

We went to his bed-room. He received us with a sort of sad irony, and, noticing the quick glance Rothwell cast around him, said:

"Don't be afraid, Frank. There are none here. It is twenty years and more since I shaved myself."

Then we left him, and shortly afterwards followed his example and went to our rooms.

Whether my friend slept or not I cannot say. For me, the events of the day had banished sleep. I was tired physically; but my fatigue had gone past the stage of drowsiness, and reached that of wakefulness. So I sat at my window and thought, thought, thought.

What a change in my life! This morning Philip Norris, this evening Laurence Estmere. Valentine my brother! Well, I could scarcely love him more for that; but still, it was delightful news. Claudine my cousin! That made little difference; the lesser relationship would be merged in the greater. But, over and above all, Lady Estmere my mother. Would she love me as she loved Valentine? Should I be able to make her understand how I had longed for a mother's love? If I could have chosen my unknown mother from the women I had seen, I should have chosen Lady Estmere. Now I should be able to bring her, not only my love, but her husband's love. I sat and revelled in these visions, in spite of the one dark spot in them. Through all of them rose Chesham's malignant face, and a fierce joy swept through me as I persuaded myself that, not only was I the means of restoring love to my father and mother, but I should be the avenger of their

wrongs. This duty done, I would return, marry Claudine, and live happily ever afterwards.

So I sat, hour after hour, picturing what the great change in my life would mean—building castles, planning plans. I thought of the happy day when Sir Laurence Estmere, his wife and sons, would be assembled together in Estmere Court—when the grand old house, so long left desolate, should awake again to life. Yes, there was a great future before me, and, in spite of the trouble and uncertainty surrounding me and those I loved, I can scarcely be blamed for painting it in rosy colours.

Once or twice during my vigil I crept from my room and listened at my father's door. I heard no sound, and trusted that sleep had come to him more readily than he seemed inclined to come to me. I began now to wish that I could snatch some hours of repose, feeling sure that I should want all my powers when the day came. And, as I framed the wish, nature must at last have yielded, for the next thing I can remember is finding myself shivering in my chair before the open window, and for a moment wondering why I was not in bed.

I looked at my watch. It was three o'clock.

A fresh breeze was blowing from the west, and the moon shone brightly as it escaped for a few minutes from the light, drifting clouds. I could see the long, white, quivering path of moonlight stretching away across the sea. I gazed at it in a dreamy way, and should most likely have fallen asleep whilst doing so, but heard a harsh, grating sound on the shingle at the foot of the tall crags between which our house nestled.

I knew what the sound meant. I had heard it often and often in the early morning. The fishermen were launching their heavy boat. In a few minutes I heard the splash of an oar, and knew they were afloat and paddling out of the surf, whilst the sail was being hoisted. I wished I had known they were going off so early, a brisk sail would have been the very thing for me. I had a great mind to run down to the beach and hail them. Better not, perhaps—it may be hours before I could get back, and under present circumstances, Rothwell and my father might be frightened if I did not appear in the morning.

Presently I saw the boat, with her dark tanned sails, creep out. She came into the moonlight and steered straight up the glittering path; straight away from land, on a long stretch out

before going up or down channel. I could see one or two dark figures in the stern, and wished that I were with them. I watched the boat for a long time, till I saw it change its course; saw the heavy mansail swing out as the sheet was slackened, and the bow turned for a run up channel. For a few seconds the boat had vanished in the darkness, and I closed my window and undressed myself, resolved to make a bid for sleep.

I slept and woke. I slept and woke again. The night seemed interminable, but it did end at last. Shortly after eight o'clock I dressed myself and went down-stairs. Rothwell soon joined me.

My father was an early riser, but this morning we were before him. Mrs. Lee came in to know if we would wait breakfast for him. He must have overslept himself, she fancied, as he had not yet taken in the can of hot water left outside his door. My heart grew sick, and I could see my fears reflected in Rothwell's face. We said nothing, but simultaneously went upstairs to his room. I knocked; there was no answer. I tried the door. Thank God, it was unlocked! My knees quaked as I entered the room. I dreaded that some sight of horror would

meet my eyes. In spite of his promise—in spite of his assuring argument, we should find him dead! Why did we leave him for a second?

No! the room was peaceful and undisturbed, but it was untouched. The bed was as smooth as when Mrs. Lee made it yesterday morning. It had not been slept in. My father was gone.

We stared at each other. Had it not been for the undisturbed bed, we might have comforted courselves by thinking he had taken an early walk, as was sometimes his custom. But his not having rested at all gave his absence a much graver aspect. Still, it was a relief to find that our great dread had been groundless.

We questioned the servants. They had found the house door unbolted, but each thought the other had opened it. Neither Mrs. Lee nor the apple-cheeked, open-mouthed maid had heard any sound in the night. Mrs. Lee inspected his wardrobe and found that linen and other things were missing; also a small portmanteau which stood in his room. This was good news whatever his object in stealing away like this might be; these preparations showed he meant no harm to himself.

The idea which at once occurred to me was

that he had gone in search of his wife. I made this known to Rothwell as we returned to the dining-room.

"No," he said with a frown, "he is gone where your foolish words of last night pointed at. Unless we can overtake him first we shall find him at Monaco. He has gone to reckon up with Richard Chesham."

I was obliged to agree with the speaker. My father's words about the deserts of the false witness confirmed Rothwell's theory.

But how had he gone? It was no easy matter to find one's way at night across the moor. Then I thought of the fishing-boat. I ran down to the beach, and found one of the fishermen's wives.

Yes—about three o'clock the master had aroused her husband and told him to launch the boat. He must go to Minehead at once. He had important business calling him from home. There was a fine breeze blowing. Her husband and her eldest son got out the boat and away they all went.

This intelligence settled the matter. The only thing to be decided was how to follow the fugitive—by land or by water? We found we had

no choice. Fisherman No. 2 was away with his craft, so by land we must go. We snatched a hasty breakfast, put together the few things we needed, and started forthwith.

Ill-luck beset us. The only chance of getting a conveyance was at the little farm. Arriving there we found that farmer Pasmore was away, and, what was worse, in company with his light cart. There was no horse left they could put in harness, even if they could have found anything to which to harness it. Mrs. Pasmore, who saw from our looks the urgency of the case, expressed her sorrow in good musical Devonshire, and assured us that her husband might return any moment. So we waited, Rothwell puffing at a great cigar, and, I am sorry to say, mingling much strong language with the smoke.

Mrs. Pasmore was tearful in her regret when minute after minute passed without her husband making his appearance. After losing a precious hour we made up our minds to start again on foot and walk until we found a conveyance. We trudged on ten miles before relief came to us.

Now, ten miles walking to men encumbered with bags means about three hours, more or less.

The consequence was that when we reached Minehead, we found the train we hoped to catch had just left, and there was nothing to take us to Bristol in time to catch any train before the night mail; so it was four o'clock in the morning when we disembarked at Paddington. If my father had caught the first train from Minehead, it was clear he had nearly twenty-four hours' start of us.

I confess that by this time I was thoroughly tired out. Rothwell noticed my state. He himself was so accustomed to fatigue that the exertions of the day scarcely told upon him.

"We can't do anything more to-night, Philip. Let us turn into the hotel and get an hour or two's sleep. We have a long journey before us and must start as fresh as possible."

To bed we went, but not for many hours. At half-past seven we were at breakfast together, and settling which route to take to the Continent.

"We shall only be a few hours behind him," said Rothwell. "We shall reach Monaco before he has time to settle anything."

"You feel quite sure he has gone there. Might he not have gone straight to my mother?"

How strange those two last words sounded on my tongue!

"No—his one idea will be vengeance. He will not look upon his wife's face again until he has wiped out Chesham. I should do the same —you would do the same, Philip—Laurence I ought to call you."

"Still, let us make sure," I urged.

"Certainly—but how? We can telegraph to your mother, and ask her if anything unusual has occurred. But I don't believe he knew where to find her. Did you tell him?"

I shook my head. Then I suggested a visit to Mr. Grace, my father I knew kept very little money in the house. If he needed any, he would most likely go to his solicitor for it.

Lord Rothwell fell in with my proposal. We finished our breakfast, and afterwards drove over to Russell Square, as it was too early to expect to find Mr. Grace at his office. Mr. Grace was at his breakfast, but upon our names being sent in to him came to us at once, redolent with the odour of his morning coffee, and brushing the crumbs of bread from his black trousers.

"Lord Rothwell and Mr. Philip Norris," he

said; "I am surprised—I may even say astonished."

"You can call this gentleman Mr. Estmere," said Rothwell. "He knows all."

"I must respectfully beg your lordship's pardon. Without disputing the fact that Mr. Philip knows all, I must still call him by the name his father calls him, until that father introduces him to me by another designation."

"Never mind, Mr. Grace," I said, "call me what you will."

"It is not what I will, Mr. Philip; it is what your father wills."

"Kindly tell us, Mr. Grace," said Rothwell, impatiently, "if Sir Laurence has been with you."

"Sir Laurence, as you know, Lord Rothwell, is a client of mine, but for many years I have been instructed to say nothing about his movements."

Rothwell was growing very angry at the old man's methodical exactness and obedience to his employer.

"Mr. Grace," I said, "never mind about Sir Laurence—has my father, Mr. Norris, been with you? Answer me, please, it is a matter of life and death."

"Your father, Mr. Philip, called on me about

one o'clock yesterday. He informed me he was going abroad. He wanted money, so I gave him two hundred pounds."

Rothwell and I exchanged glances. Our conjectures were right. "He did not say where he was going, or why he was going?"

"He did not, Mr. Philip."

"Did he seem quite well, quite himself?"

"He seemed quite well, although I do not wish to imply that his state of health appeared robust. He was with me a very short time and spoke but few words."

"He was calm and collected?"

"He was very calm, very collected, Mr. Philip."

We thanked Mr. Grace for his information, and wished him good morning. Then we went to our respective abodes to make a few preparations, agreeing to meet and start by the first train to Dover.

"Although I don't quite know why we are going," said Rothwell, "unless it is to see fair play. Laurence Estmere will finish Chesham safe enough this time."

"We can stop the meeting."

"Can we? Not unless both men have greatly

changed. Chesham, with all his rascality, was never a coward, and as to your father, I have never yet been able to stop him from doing what he chose. If he insults Chesham in public, how can we, two English gentlemen, stop the duel?"

I knew how to stop it; I had a prior claim to Chesham's attention. He had no right to go risking the life I meant to have against any one else, until I was satisfied. However, to avoid interference, I thought it best not to mention my lien to Rothwell.

"We had better go," I said.

"Yes, we will go; but I swear to you, Philip, that if your father wishes to kill that man he shall have the chance. He will do it too."

"But men don't fight duels to the death, now-a-days."

"Don't they! Not such fellows as you know about town, perhaps, but I have seen many duels fought out to the end even in these degenerate days. This will be fought out. It shall not be stopped. I will stand by your father as I stood once before, and see that dog fall to rise no more."

"But suppose—"

"I won't suppose anything—but I'll tell you

one thing. If Chesham leaves the ground alive I'll have him out myself the next day."

With three men so kindly disposed towards him Chesham's career bade fair to be brought to a sudden stop. Still I was determined to have the precedence in the matter.

CHAPTER XI.

A LA BARRIÈRE.

We travelled with all speed to Monaco. At every halting-place we inspected the other carriages of the train, knowing that my father could not be much ahead of us, and that a chance delay of a few hours on his part might make us fellow-travellers. But our search was vain; we saw nothing of him.

It was night when we arrived at Monaco. We found we should just have time to engage beds at an hotel, and reach Monte Carlo before the hour struck at which that well-conducted establishment insisted that winners and losers should postpone their struggles until another sun rose high in the heavens. We felt sure that so long as the tables were open it would be vain to seek

Chesham elsewhere; and where Chesham was we should find traces of my father.

Lord Rothwell, who was far from being entirely above the weaknesses of humanity, had been at Monte Carlo many a time. He knew the place and the ways of it. The necessary formalities were soon complied with, and under his guidance I entered for the first time the gigantic gambling establishment from which M. Blanc, by the aid of a small percentage of chance, draws a princely income which may be calculated upon as certainly as if he were in the most quiet and legitimate way of business.

We walked from table to table and inspected the ring of eager faces surrounding each battle-field of fortune. Neither at *roulette* nor at *trente et quarante* could we discover Chesham—nowhere could we see my father. We were turning away to pursue our researches in other and more innocent adjuncts to the building, when we were accosted by a man well known to both of us. He had just risen from one of the tables, and bore the cheerful face of a winner.

"Come to tempt fortune?" he said.

"Not to-night—we are only looking round," answered Rothwell.

"Looking round," said our friend, who was a small wit in his way. "I expect I'm looking round. My pockets are crammed with notes and gold; I never had such a night!"

We offered our congratulations.

"You ought to have been here just now, Norris," continued our lucky friend. "It might have done your heart good to have seen your old antagonist Chesham, cleaned out of everything."

"Chesham cleaned out! How was that?"

"Cleaned out of every rap, by George! He's just left as bare as the palm of your hand. Began with wonderful luck—won the maximum three times. I sat next him, and backed his luck till it began to change. A man came in and stood opposite him, and looked at him. Then he seemed to go to pieces."

Rothwell laughed a low laugh.

"Who was the man?" I asked.

"I don't know. Tall, good-looking man, short beard and moustache. I fancy I've seen some one like him years ago, but can't remember where. He stood for hours just opposite Chesham staking a fiver every now and then as if for appearances. But he changed Chesham's luck."

"Did he speak to him?"

"Not a word; but Chesham looked at him, and I saw one of his sweetest expressions come over his face. Then he lost and lost. He got pricked and went at it like a boy or a madman. He must have lost all his winnings, and five thousand beside."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Not half an hour. I was glad to see him off. I was afraid he was going to make an ass of himself. I lent him two hundred. He wanted more, but I told him it was no good whilst luck was against him. So then he went."

"And the man you spoke of?"

"He went too, I suspect. I did not notice him again."

Rothwell pressed my elbow, and having with some trouble shaken off our fortunate friend, we prepared to go in search of Chesham. The man we had been talking to told us the name of his hotel.

It wanted but a few minutes to eleven. We were close to one of the *roulette* tables. Gamblers, male and female, were concentrating their energies on the last few spins. Rothwell paused and watched the table being covered with gold according to the pleasure or superstition of the

punters. I was annoyed at the delay, being eager that not a moment should be wasted.

"Let us take an omen, Philip," said Rothwell. "How old are you?"

I told him.

"Put these four napoleons on the number; no, put four of your own."

I did so, and in another minute found one hundred and forty napoleons added to my stake.

"Put it all on the even chance," said Rothwell, "on the red."

Caring nothing whether I won or lost, I obeyed, and presently found my stake doubled.

"Once more," said Rothwell, "leave the maximum there—two hundred and forty."

Round went the little mill, whiz went the ball, running round and round till at last it settled in its appointed place. I had won again.

This was the last spin of the evening. I picked up my twelve thousand francs, stuffed them into my pocket, determined they should be devoted to buying jewels for Claudine.

"Come," said Rothwell, "our star is in the ascendant. I accept the omen, and fear nothing."

For a man of his experience and intellect I

began to think him absurdly superstitious. I had noticed this tendency several times recently, and was vexed that at this particular time it should have made us waste minutes which might be irretrievable. I felt certain that my father had followed Chesham from the rooms, and perhaps that by this time the two men had arranged when and where the meeting was to be.

We drove straight to Chesham's hotel. If we could find him we could no doubt ascertain where my father was staying. Moreover I might be able to arrange with him that little matter about which Rothwell knew nothing. I could, I hoped, forestall my father. Rothwell, when he knew the facts of the case, would be compelled to give me all the assistance he could. Everything would go well if I could be before Sir Laurence.

Chesham was not in. He had been in, settled his hotel bill, and taken a carriage. He had not left the place altogether, as his luggage still remained. He was sure to return that night. He had given the driver instructions to take him along the Nice road. Would we leave our names.

No, we would not. Our business was of no consequence. We went away, and at once entered

into a deep consultation. Why had Chesham started on a drive at this time of the night?

"He may want to see a friend and bespeak his assistance," I hazarded.

"Or he may be gone to meet some one who will never lose sight of him again," said Rothwell, with meaning in his voice.

I started at the suggestion.

"But at night!" I said. "They must have seconds, too!"

"Night! Look at the moon—it is light as day. When your father shoots Chesham he won't trouble whether it is by day or night, with seconds or without them."

"We must follow at once!" I cried. "Not a moment must be lost." We found a carriage, and instructed the driver to go with all speed along the Nice road until we bade him stop.

Rothwell was right. The moon was up, and houses, hedges, trees, and what people we passed were plainly visible by her light. On that score there was no reason why two men should not meet and work out their deadly purpose. As I saw the road growing more and more deserted and lonely I began to dread and believe that Rothwell had guessed the true state of affairs. I

urged the driver to get all the speed he could out of his horses.

Rothwell said little or nothing. He neither assisted nor checked my exertions to get the pace at which we were going increased. His brow was stern, and his manner moody. Feeling that concealment was of no further use, I told him of my engagement with my father's enemy, asserting my prior claim. He expressed no surprise.

"Your father's claim is one of long years standing," he said. "Nothing will make him forego it in your favour."

We drove on some five miles without meeting with anything to give us information. Then we heard the sound of wheels and a carriage passed us. It was going in an opposite direction, and seeing it was empty I called to the driver and bade him stop. He told us he had driven a gentleman some half a mile further. A fair English gentleman, who walked with a halt. Nevertheless, this gentleman had expressed his intention of performing the remainder of his journey on foot. His destination was a village some few miles off. He told our driver the exact spot at which his fare left him, and as our man asserted

he knew the place perfectly we bade him make all haste to it.

Now it was that Rothwell seemed to emerge from the gloominess and silence which had sat upon him since we started. Now he took, so to say, the lead in the expedition. It was he who discharged the driver, when we reached the indicated spot, and told him we should require his services no longer. He paid the man lavishly, and, holding my arm, stood still until the retreating wheels had vanished from our sight.

"They met here," he said, "and have gone down to the coast. We must follow them."

Still grasping my arm so tightly as almost to feel like a restraint placed on me, he turned from the road, and we struck across a narrow strip of land which lay between us and the sea-shore. We reached the edge of the cliff—if it could be called a cliff—as it sloped to the beach below gradually enough to allow any one on foot to pass up or down with ease. Some little way from us standing at the edge of the tide were two men—a tall man and a shorter one, the latter, I could see by the light of the glorious moon, leaning on a stick. There was no mistake,

my father and Chesham were there, and it appeared talking to each other.

"Thank God, we are in time!" I cried.

Then I strove to disengage my arm from Lord Rothwell's, intending to run down the bank and interpose between the two foes. My friend held me like a vice.

"Let me go!" I said, struggling to free myself.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked in a low fierce voice.

"Do! Go down and stop the duel. I will stand in my father's place. I claim the right. Let me go!"

"Never! Shall Laurence Estmere be baulked of his revenge? Sit down here and see the end."

I looked at him in sheer astonishment. His eyes were gleaming with fire. The strongest passion was written in every feature. I saw in a moment he had no intention of interfering. His strange superstition told him that Chesham was doomed. His one object in coming here was to see my father take his revenge. Even now, writing in cold blood, I must say that for the time I believe he was half mad.

The moments were slipping away. I grew as fierce as my friend. "Let me go!" I said, "or I will shout and interrupt them."

Before my sentence was finished I was lying half-dazed on the ground with Lord Rothwell's great weight on top of me. He had closed with me and thrown me like a child.

Till then I had no idea that a man could be so strong as my assailant. I had read of his own modest accounts of feats of strength done in strange lands, and I had heard about them from others, but I should not have believed that any man breathing could have thrown himself upon me and rendered me perfectly helpless — could whilst keeping me in this position have been able to make use of one hand to absolutely gag me and stifle my cries.

"Philip! you are a fool," he said. "Unless you swear to keep silent, to stay in this place, I will keep you here until all is over, even if I have to stun you—I mean it. Choose!"

I struggled in vain. His arms and legs were like bars of iron, his large hand still covered my mouth and almost stifled me. I was helpless.

"Promise," he said, "promise to be still and silent. You need fear nothing."

Anything was better than this. Let me see what the men below us were doing. At this very moment Chesham's pistol might be aimed at my father's heart; I must see what was going on.

I managed to make some sort of ejaculation signifying assent. Rothwell thereupon removed his hand and left me free.

"Come here, and lie down," he whispered. "I did not mean to be so rough. But nothing shall stop this."

I moved to the edge of the bank, and lay down beside my commander. I looked eagerly at the shore below. The two men were still together, and I saw my father's face in the moonlight—saw it calm and pale and without a trace of agitation on it. Oh God! How will it look in ten minutes' time!

He stooped and laid something white—a handkerchief I thought—on the sand at his feet. He pointed to it, and seemed to speak to Chesham, who nodded assent.

"A la barrière," whispered Rothwell in my ear.

"What does that mean?" I gasped.

"They will each go some paces from that mark, then turn and fire when they like. If one

fires and misses, the other may walk up to the mark and shoot him. This is to the death, Philip. Chesham will never leave the ground alive."

So certain was he in his superstition that, although his dearest friend's life hung upon an even chance only, he spoke with absolute exultation. I shuddered; a horrible dryness came into my mouth. Had I wished to shout I scarcely think my tongue would have done its office. I felt it was now too late to interfere, yet I knew that if my father fell my life would be one of unmitigated remorse.

The men beneath us separated. I could see that each held something in his right hand. They walked a few paces in opposite directions, and as they did so the thought crossed my brain, what if Chesham, villain as he was, should fire before my father was ready. It would be murder, but would he shrink from that? He knew nothing of the two witnesses so close at hand.

What Rothwell in his extraordinary state of mind may have thought I know not, but I trembled in every limb as I saw my father turn his back to the white handkerchief, and walk away a few paces. Every moment I expected to hear

Chesham's shot and know that murder had been done.

But no. The villain may have been too brave for that. He walked like my father to his appointed place, and the two men turned and faced each other.

The distance they were apart seemed nothing. My feeling was that it was utterly impossible for either to fire and miss the other. Why, in spite of my promise, had I not given the alarm. Too late now! too late! My cry, if raised, might be fatal to the one I loved. I must see the wretched tragedy to the end.

The men have turned, and are facing each other. Chesham's back is towards us. I notice he has dropped his stick, and even in this supreme moment I wonder if he will ever need it again. My father's face we can see: it is calm, set, and terrible, as that of the avenging angel's. He stands like a rock, without motion, apparently without feeling. Chesham raises his hand, and drops it again. Oh, why does not my father fire, and kill his foe? He cannot miss him at this distance. How long have they been standing here? Is it hours, minutes, moments?

Now Chesham has moved a step, two steps

nearer—another! He is raising his hand! Oh, my father, fire! Kill him ere he kills you! I feel Rothwell's hand seek mine and grasp it. I can hear his deep, quick breathing, and in my heart I curse him for not preventing this. If my father dies, I will kill this false friend. I swear it!

Ah! Chesham's pistol is up and levelled. The moon's rays glint on the barrel. I can bear it no longer! I bury my head in the turf and shut my eyes.

It is over! The shot rang through the air! I cannot help myself. I spring to my feet. A great sob of joy breaks from my heart. My father stands there upright, and calm as ever. To all appearance unhurt.

Rothwell kneels at my side and grasps my hand fiercely. But I have no time or thought save for the scene below us. A sickening thought passes through me—I am to see a man die.

Give him his due. For the only time in my life I admired that man. His miss had forfeited his life. He knew it well. Yet he stood his ground without flinching. He waited for death as boldly as if he had lived a blameless, sinless life. Who can tell what his thoughts were at

that moment? Who can say what he felt when he saw that stern pale face opposite him, the face of a man he had robbed of happiness, a face that showed neither anger or emotion, and one that not a trace of mercy crossed?

His agony of mind did not last long. Sir Laurence Estmere took three paces towards him. He raised his arm, and apparently taking a careless aim fired. Simultaneously with the report Richard Chesham staggered a pace forward, then fell on his face.

My father did not even glance twice at the result of his shot. He threw the pistol from him, walked straight to the cliff, and commenced the ascent. We saw that he must pass close to us.

"Shall we stop him?" I whispered.

"Not for worlds. Lie down. This way; he will not see us here."

We hid ourselves. In a minute or two my father passed close to us. He walked leisurely and calmly as one who might be enjoying a ramble by moonlight. We watched him until we knew he must have nearly reached the high road.

Rothwell's excitement had vanished. He turned to me sadly and seriously.

"Forgive me, Philip, this thing had to be. I felt it to be fatality."

I could not forgive him yet. I felt he had acted like a madman or a fanatic.

"Let us go down to the beach," I said; "we cannot leave a man like that."

"Yes, we will go down, although we can do nothing. Your mother's wrongs are avenged."

"Where will my father go?" I said.

"We will follow him presently. Hark! What is that?"

In the distance we heard the sound of a horse's hoofs.

"He must have got a horse from somewhere," said Rothwell. "It must have been waiting for him. He was certain of returning, you see; Chesham was not. We shall not find your father to-night. Let us go down to the beach."

We went down the cliff. I ran to Chesham, and raised him in my arms. Rothwell, who knew as much about gunshot wounds as the best surgeon, felt his pulse and then pointed to a hole in his clothes, which were wet with blood.

"Right through the heart," he said. "We can do nothing for him. He died at once.

"Lay him as he fell," he continued. I obeyed.

"Find the other pistol, the one your father used."

I looked for it and found it. Rothwell examined it. It bore Chesham's initials in silver. Its fellow was tightly grasped in the dead man's hand.

Rothwell picked up the handkerchief which had done duty for the fatal barrier. He tied it round the pistol, and with one sweep of his muscular arm sent them some sixty yards out to sea.

"There is little rise and fall here," he said. "There they may lie till some convulsion changes land and sea. Come away, we can do no more. It will be dangerous to linger."

"Must we leave the poor wretch so?" I asked.

"Yes. What has he done that he should merit consideration from your father's son?—come away."

He spoke sternly, as one feeling contempt for my weakness. His words were true. The dead man deserved nothing from me, so I followed my friend.

We walked back to Monaco. It was too late to dream of finding my father that night. I went to bed, praying that no terrible sequence might

be the result of the night's work. My haunting fear was that my father would be arrested for the murder of Richard Chesham. In law he would be guilty.

The next morning we inquired for any one answering to the description of my father. We found that a gentleman who gave the name of Norris had stayed for a few hours at one of the smaller hotels. He had dined there, and after dinner had gone out. About eleven o'clock he had returned and said he wanted to hire a horse, as he intended to ride to Nice. He would send it back by some one the next day. This proceeding being demurred to, he offered to deposit the value of the horse, and claim it when the animal was duly returned. It was a strange request, but as Englishmen are all more or less mad, not so much to be wondered at. The money was paid, and the gentleman had the horse. When he brought it back the money would be refunded. He had fastened his small portmanteau in front of him, paid his bill, and departed.

So he had gone to Nice, ridden there as soon as he had done the deed of vengeance or justice. No doubt he would be off by the first

train in the morning, and would once more have a few hours start of us.

I was for following at once, but Rothwell vetoed my plan.

"We must stay at least two days," he said. "Heaven knows what suspicions our sudden departure may give rise to. We saw several men we knew last night. I am not afraid about your father now. Let him get to England quietly."

My objections were overruled. We stayed two days. Every moment I expected to hear that Chesham's body had been found. Every moment I thought of that motionless form lying face downwards on the coast line, with the waves lapping within a few feet of the wicked white face. Such was my state of excitement and suspense that I was fain to gamble highly to counteract it. But fortune still proved kind, and I left Monte Carlo much richer than I came to it.

Our lucky friend remarked Chesham's absence. "Shouldn't wonder if he's shot himself," he said. "He was about cleaned out, I think."

We waited for the two days, then hearing nothing made the best of our way home. The day after we left Monaco, the body was discovered. The situation spoke for itself. A lonely

place on the coast. A ruined gambler dead—a bullet through his heart—a pistol, his own, in his hand. Such occurrences, when hinted about, are apt to bring M. Blanc's admirably-conducted establishment into ill-favour. When such things happen, they are hushed up with as little inquiry as possible. There was no one to claim the dead man, there was enough money in his pocket to bury him; so buried he was, and as his name was known it was placed on the stone above him. If he had any heirs, there was nothing for them to succeed to. The drivers of the carriage which took him and ourselves to the scene of the tragedy either never heard what had happened, or troubled nothing about it. Richard Chesham was dead and buried, and no further questions were asked.

Men who knew him heard that he had been cleaned out at the tables, and shot himself in consequence.

"Poor devil!" they said, "he played a fine rubber, but would have you if he could." This was his epitaph.

CHAPTER XII.

A MESSAGE OF PEACE.

On our journey back to England we spent much time in speculating as to where Sir Laurence would go, and in what place we should seek him with the greatest likelihood of finding him. Rothwell's sanguine view of things alone kept me from feeling most miserable and frightened. His idea was that my father would at once go to Mr. Grace for tidings of Lady Estmere, and when we again saw him we should find that forgiveness had been craved and accorded. I doubted, but tried to believe this; in spite of the sanity of his proceedings a fear crept over me, that whilst he was at Monaco in pursuit of his revenge, my father was not quite accountable for his own actions. That strange midnight duel; the carelessness with which he faced death; the way in which he had left the ground, evidently feeling so certain that his ends had been accomplished as not to trouble to ascertain whether his foe was living or dead;

the absence of any precautions against being accused of murder; all these things as I thought of them tended to show that he must have been in a strange abnormal state of mind.

Rothwell would not agree with me. In my father's place he would have acted in a similar manner. Justice, stern justice had been done; reconciliation and happy days were to follow.

We agreed, on our arrival in town, to go once more to Mr. Grace. If he knew nothing we would telegraph to Mrs. Lee. If my father was not there we would look for him at my mother's, he might in some way have ascertained her abode.

We went to Mr. Grace. He had heard or seen nothing further of his client. We telegraphed to Mrs. Lee, but hours and hours must elapse before we could hope to get a reply from such an outlandish place as Torwood. Then we telegraphed to Lady Estmere, a message revealing nothing, as it simply asked if anything unusual had occurred; the reply soon came to this, "Nothing—I am quite well," and we were sure that Sir Laurence had not yet sought his wife.

Later in the day we called once more at Mr. Grace's office. While we were there a telegraphic message was brought to the solicitor. It was from

the agent or steward at Estmere:—"Sir L. has returned. He is at the Dower House; very ill and queer."

The next train carried us north. We arranged that Mr. Grace, if his presence were needed, should follow us the next morning, and if we found my father's state critical, should bring an eminent doctor with him.

We had miles to drive from the nearest station to the Dower House. It was daybreak before we reached our destination. People were astir in the house, and we were soon received by the agent.

He knew Lord Rothwell of old, and upon hearing who I was, expressed his pleasure that I had at last come to the home of my race.

We cut his welcome short. I was too anxious about my father to waste time in bandying civilities or accepting congratulations; I demanded particulars.

"Mrs. Payne can tell you best," said the agent. "I will call her."

Mrs. Payne made her appearance. No doubt the agent had informed her who the visitors were, and the worthy woman's surprise when she found

that Sir Laurence's eldest son was myself, was plainly depicted on her face.

But she was a sensible woman, and postponed inquiring into the mystery. In a few words she told us what had happened.

Sir Laurence had made his appearance at Estmere Court. Although so many years had elapsed since she had seen him, Mrs. Payne recognized him at once. He said nothing to explain his sudden and unexpected visit. He walked, in a dreamy kind of way, she said, into the house, went straight to his wife's bed-room, and finding it with the furniture all covered up, turned to the housekeeper, who had ventured to follow him, and asked if Lady Estmere was at the Court.

Mrs. Payne was almost too frightened to reply, but managed to stammer out that her ladyship was from home.

"Ah, at the Dower House," said Sir Laurence. "I will go and join her. Tell them to saddle my horse."

The good woman was at her wits' end. She stood staring at her master, and began to wonder if he was an apparition.

"Do as you are bid," said Sir Laurence, sternly. "At once, I have no time to waste."

She hurried out and consulted her husband. Both were much frightened, and anxious to do their best to obey their master. It happened that a farmer who lived at a distance had that day ridden in to see some friends in the village, and being a careful man, who liked to save a shilling when he could do so, had by Payne's permission stabled his horse in one of the outhouses about the Court. So John Payne, under the unprecedented circumstances, decided to make free with his friend's horse. He saddled it, and brought it to the door, and held the stirrup for Sir Laurence to mount. He sprang to the saddle and dashed away at a headlong pace, leaving Mrs. Payne and her husband in that strange state which poor people describe by saying, they might have been knocked down by a feather.

The case had gone beyond their comprehension. Something, however, must be done. Here was the master galloping off for the Dower House, which was in the same dismantled state as Estmere Court, and under the care of a stupid old man and his wife. The Paynes started off at once, and made the agent aware of what strange things

had happened. He lived in a house close by, and his first fear was that some letter or telegram had miscarried. He could not believe that Sir Laurence would return in this unexpected manner, after an absence of so many years. It was some time before the Paynes could convince him they were not under a delusion. He, himself, had never seen Sir Laurence, his appointment dating subsequent to the break up. But the Paynes knew him, and were positive the right man had arrived. So it became Mr. Black, the agent, to bestir himself. So far as he could, he grasped the situation. His eccentric employer must be made as comfortable as possible. In a few minutes his horse was harnessed, and in company with Mrs. Payne and one of his own maid-servants, he was away to the Dower House to do the best he could.

Sir Laurence had been there, and frightened the old caretakers out of their lives. He had looked round and simply ordered the house to be got ready, as if a staff of servants were at beck and call. Then he had gone out, and it was supposed was wandering about the grounds.

The hearts of Mr. Black, Mrs. Payne, and the maid-servant sank within them. Still the master

must be obeyed. The women worked like furies; in an hour one of the sitting-rooms was almost fit for occupation. A make-shift of a dinner was even prepared. In the mean time Mr. Black had gone in search of Sir Laurence. He introduced himself, but was received in such a manner that he returned to the house discomfited and distressed. Sir Laurence had told him shortly not to trouble him, but go and attend to his business; such a reception made Mr. Black fear that the return of the absentee would be a serious calamity for him.

Sir Laurence at last re-entered the house, and coolly asked if dinner were ready. Mrs. Payne, with fear and trembling, placed the apology for the meal before him. He frowned. "Lay another cover," he said, "Lady Estmere will be here presently. Has she not come yet?"

Mrs. Payne left him and waited events. There was still much to do. It was evident that Sir Laurence meant to stay the night; a bed-room must be got ready, and to get a bed-room ready after a house had been shut up for more than twenty years is no easy task.

Several times they heard Sir Laurence leave the room, and watched him go to the front-door

and look up the drive; he even went to the gates, and gazed as if expecting some one who was to come by road. The servants began to think that Lady Estmere would appear as suddenly as her husband.

But the night wore on and she came not. Sir Laurence made no further sign, Mrs. Payne crept to the floor of the room, and listening, she fancied she heard him talking to himself; she grew frightened, and determined to enter the room under the pretence of wishing to remove the dinner-things. She opened the door, and saw at a glance that the poor dinner had not been touched; and, moreover, she saw Sir Laurence, looking wild and frenzied, stretching out his arms with passionate gestures, and begging and calling on his wife to return to him.

He was quite delirious; all they could do now was to put him to bed and send for a doctor. Each of these proceedings was a difficult matter. The first was accomplished, and then poor ill-used Mr. Black was compelled to rouse up his weary horse, harness him and drive several miles for medical assistance. The doctor came at last, and asserted that Sir Laurence was suffering from brain-fever: so far as he could see there was no

danger as yet, although there were symptoms he could not quite account for.

In the morning the perplexed Mr. Black bethought himself of telegraphing to Mr. Grace; it was many miles to an office, so it was not until late in the day we heard what had happened.

This is an extended version of Mrs. Payne's account of Sir Laurence Estmere's return to his home. It made both her hearers feel very anxious, and as I coupled his present condition with his strange behaviour at Monaco, I feared that the strain of the last few days had unhinged my father's mind. I wished to go to him at once, but Rothwell decided it would be better to see the doctor first. He was in the house, having by Mr. Black's request undertaken to stay the night.

Sir Laurence was very ill, he said—he was feverish, but the fever was not severe enough to account for his delirious and strange state. The doctor was grieved to be a prophet of evil, but he feared there was some mental injury; whether its effects would be temporary or permanent he could not at present say. One thing he was certain of; as yet his patient was in no danger; we could see him, it would perhaps ease his mind to find his friends were about him.

The doctor led us to my father's room. He lay with his eyes wide open; they looked dark, lustrous, and eager. He turned them to us as we entered the door, but I fancied their gaze passed over me and rested on Lord Rothwell; as his old friend approached him he raised himself in the bed and stretched out his hands.

"Frank! Frank!" he cried, "is she here? Has she come with you?"

"Not yet, she will soon come," answered Rothwell.

"Soon! how soon? Why do they keep her from me? Why have I been kept from her so long? Margaret! My love! My wife! Come before it is too late!"

He sank back murmuring those last words over and over again,

"My love, my wife, come to me!"

I went to his bedside and took his hand.

"Father," I said, "do you know me?"

"Yes, I know you—you are my eldest son, but you have been with me all through the bitter black time. Now I want no son. I want my wife, my love! Cruel! Why have they kept her from me? Dearest, the days have been long—so long. Come!"

His voice sank to a whisper; he stretched out his hands with a piteous appealing gesture.

"Come," he whispered, with a tenderness which is indescribable.

I rose and joined Rothwell.

"He knows or remembers nothing of recent occurrences," whispered Rothwell. "You must go and fetch your mother."

"Will she come?" I asked, as the years of cruel neglect and shame she had endured rose before me.

"Go to her, tell her how you have left him, how he lies and calls for her. She will come, or she is not the woman I have known so long."

"Why do you whisper?" cried my father. "Frank, false friend! have you taken her away? have you hidden her? You loved her once. You never told me, but I knew it. Give her back to me—give me my wife!"

Rothwell went to him, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Philip is going to fetch her. Be patient."

"Who is Philip? Let my son go—my eldest son, Laurence, who is with you. I have another son, but he is too young. Send Laurence."

"He shall go at once if you will promise to be patient and wait quietly."

"Have I not been patient and waited for years—long, dark years? My patience is worn out. Margaret, my wife, have pity on me and come!"

He was beginning to show signs of great excitement, but Rothwell calmed him by repeating his promise.

"Go at once, Laurence," he said, turning to me.

I pressed my father's hand and kissed his forehead; then I left the room. Rothwell followed me very shortly.

"Go to bed and sleep," he said; "drive over in the morning and catch the first train. I shall not see you before you go, I must stay with your father."

"Let me sit up with him."

"No; so long as he thinks you are going on your errand I shall be able to keep him calm. Tell your mother all, and do not return without her. If she can start at once you may be here to-morrow evening."

I begged hard to be allowed to see my father once more before I started, but Rothwell was firm.

He promised he would call me in the morning and let me know how he was.

When the time for my departure came I was rejoiced to hear he seemed no worse. So long as Rothwell was with him he kept comparatively calm; so, hoping for the best, I went to make known what had occurred to Lady Estmere, my mother.

She was in Dorsetshire, staying with an old friend. I knew the name of the place and the name of the friend, but I had some trouble in finding out the best route. As it was, I made a mistake, or was misdirected, and found myself at ten o'clock at night more than twelve miles from my destination. With some difficulty I obtained a conveyance, but the horse was tired, the road was hilly; so it was nearly midnight when I stood before the door of the house at which my mother was a visitor.

The inmates were all gone to rest, but the importance of my errand would not admit of delay, or allow me to stand on ceremony, even if my own feelings would have permitted me to wait until the morning before I revealed myself to my mother. My heart beat violently as I rang the bell and waited for the summons to be an-

swered. I heard bars and bolts undone, and the door opened about three inches. A man's voice asked my business. I told him I must see Lady Estmere at once on a matter of great moment. I gave my name and was admitted, but not without a careful inspection.

The sleepy-looking, half-dressed man-servant showed me into a room, and after lighting a candle went to call Lady Estmere. I sat picturing what was to follow. She came in a very few moments. A dainty dressing-gown covered her from head to foot. Her beautiful and striking-looking hair was uncovered. The alarm she naturally felt gave her features more animation and character than they were wont to bear; never had she looked more sweet and lovely than at this moment when I was about to tell her I was her eldest son.

She came to me hastily. "Philip!" she said; "at this hour! What has happened? Tell me! Valentine—that shooting——"

"Valentine is quite well, dear Lady Estmere. I have not seen him, but I heard of him a few days ago."

"Claudine — tell me. Don't keep me in suspense."

"Claudine, I hope and trust, is well."

"Thank God, you bring no bad news from Valentine or Claudine. Anything else I think I can bear. You look agitated—you have something to tell me?"

"Please sit down," I said, leading her to the sofa. I sat beside her, and still held her hand. She looked surprised, but did not withdraw it.

"Tell me what is the matter," she said.

Now I had rehearsed this scene many and many a time during the last few days. I was anxious to break my news gently; I had prepared all I would say with a view to this; but now the moment came words and ideas seemed to desert me—everything was merged in a great longing to take my mother to my heart, tell her I would love her for ever, and beg her to give me the love I had waited for so long.

But I dared not obey my longing, I dreaded the consequences of so sudden a revelation; I remembered the effect it had upon me, and I was a strong man—my mother a slight delicate woman.

I restrained myself. "I bring good news and bad," I said. "But both are of such importance I was obliged to disturb you to-night."

She looked at me anxiously.

"Dear Lady Estmere," I said, "how shall I tell you what has happened? I come from some one you loved once, some one who has wronged you and would atone."

Her face grew pale. "There are some wrongs nothing can atone for," she said.

"No; they can only be forgiven. Lady Estmere, I come from Sir Laurence, your husband."

She said nothing, but tried to draw her hand from mine.

"I am the bearer of a message; will you hear it? A message of peace."

She laughed a strange little laugh. She drew her hand from mine so quickly that I could not intercept the movement. She stood up and looked at me.

"At last," she said, with bitterness in her voice. "It comes at last; after half a lifetime of scorn he condescends to send me a message—a message. Perhaps I shall hear you add, a message of forgiveness, Mr. Norris."

"Far, far from it! Believe me, all is made clear to him. He knows how he wronged you by his suspicions—knows he was the dupe of a crafty rogue."

"He knows all this?"

"All."

"And he sends you to me! My God, this is the greatest wrong of all! If I have dreamed that one day he would know the truth, I dreamed also that on that day he would come to me—that his lips would be the first to tell me. Yet he sends another!"

The scorn in her voice was indescribable.

"Let me explain," I began eagerly.

"Explain! Yes, you can explain why Sir Laurence Estmere entrusts his commissions to you, who, so far as I know, must be a stranger to him."

How sweet she looked in her anger! How did I refrain from telling all a moment longer?

"He chose me because I am, or have been, the fortunate instrument of making all things clear to him. Dear Lady Estmere, I have worked day and night to get at the truth. Chance favoured me; a death-bed confession by a maid in your employ told me all; Sir Laurence heard and was convinced."

Her voice grew icy. "I thank you, Mr. Norris, for your good intentions; but your zeal was misplaced. Whatever you found I suppose might

have been found by Sir Laurence had he cared to look for it. We will discuss the matter no more. I will now say good-night—a bed shall be prepared for you."

She was actually sweeping from the room. I went after her and caught her hand.

"I have other news—even stranger news."

My voice must have betrayed my emotion. She turned and looked at me in wonder.

"I have seen your eldest son," I said—"Laurence Estmere."

She trembled and leant her hand on the table.

"Valentine is my son," she said. "I have no other."

"Yes," I cried passionately, "you have. One who will love you even as Valentine loves you; one who has never known a mother's love—has never known his mother lived until a few days ago. One who from his childhood has passed under a false name. Oh, cannot you see the truth! Speak! oh, speak to me!"

Her eyes were riveted on my face, her lips were trembling as though striving to find words.

"Why do I come from Sir Laurence Estmere!" I cried. "Because Sir Laurence Estmere

and my father are one—because I am your son! Oh, mother, my sweet mother! think even in my earliest childhood I can remember no mother's kiss or love! Kiss me, my mother; love me and bless me!"

I threw my arms round her and kissed her pale face passionately. It was some seconds before I was aware that I embraced an inanimate form; she had fainted.

I laid her on the couch and bathed her forehead; I called for no aid, no hand but mine should touch her. Soon I heard her breathe a deep sigh, and then her eyes opened.

I need say but little more of that night. Hour after hour the mother and son sat together, in one unceasing embrace. Few words, or coherent words, were spoken. The joy in our hearts was too great and overwhelming for speech; so wondrous, that in my first transports of delight I almost forgot that far away lay a man whose life perhaps hung on my mother's forgiveness.

"Mother," I whispered, "sweet mother, you will come with me; you will come to my father."

"I cannot—I cannot; he must come to me."

"You will come, my mother. Shall I tell you

how I left him? He is at the house from which he drove you forth. He is delirious—he is calling night and day for you—you only. Come and save him."

"Ill—my husband ill. Tell me, I can bear the worst now."

I could not tell her all. That deadly deed of justice must be known to none save those who witnessed it; but I told her how the revelation of the truth had, I feared, unhinged his mind; how he had fled in the night; how Lord Rothwell and I found him at the Dower House, delirious and calling unceasingly for the wife he had banished from his side.

It was enough; no argument, no appeal was needed. Rothwell had predicted truly; the picture I drew swept all wrong and suffering from her heart. Had it been possible she would have started at once for her husband's bedside; as it was, it was arranged that we should commence our journey the first thing in the morning.

Then, although I would have sat all night enjoying my new-found happiness, I insisted that my mother should tear herself from my arms and return to her bed.

Again and again we said good night—again

and again our hands and lips met. Still we lingered, until it became evident that unless we could consent to postpone our transport until to-morrow, the night would pass without rest to either. At last my mother led me to the room which had been prepared for me, and, kneeling by my bedside with my hand in hers, thanked God that her son—her first-born—had returned to her; thanked God that her husband's eyes were opened, and prayed that days of happiness might yet be in store.

"You have forgiven, my mother?" I asked, as she rose.

She placed her lips to my forehead. "I have forgiven, Laurence, my son, I have forgiven. I loved him, and I love him now."

Then we parted. In spite of the many thoughts that crowded my mind, fatigue conquered and I slept. Did she sleep that short night? Could she have slept with the morrow before her? The morrow on which she was to meet again the man whose stern fiat had condemned and driven her from her home and all the brightness of her life? No, sleep must have kept afar. She must have lain picturing the coming meeting, living again the past until morn-

ing broke on what might be once more a happy world for her.

She was the first to greet me in the morning. She led me to her hostess and presented me as her eldest son. My heart leaped as I knew she spoke the words of introduction with love and pride. A brief explanation was given, and then we started.

On that journey together we were able to talk rationally. I told her how I suspected Chesham's villainy was at the bottom of it; how by an accident I had traced Mrs. Merton; how she had been identified as Mary Williams the lady's-maid. I related her horrible death, and how the attested confession had been wrung from her by the one redeeming point in her sordid nature—maternal love. And it may be that as I looked at the sweet, long-suffering woman by me I said harsh words of one who, with all his faults, had always loved me—my father.

She checked me; she would not listen to a breath of disparagement. Oh, wondrous power of woman's love! She had forgiven freely, unreservedly. He had been wronged—even more than herself. He had suffered even more. Had he not, just on the brink of a successful, even

famous career, for this resigned his dreams of distinction and fame? Had he not buried himself, and for long years hidden from the world under a false name? What was her trouble to his? He, rich, talented, honoured, to have spent the prime of his life in a dreary, desolate, forsaken place! What was the wreck of such a poor little craft as hers when compared to the destruction of such a noble freight as his?

Yes, she had forgiven. She talked now of what he was when he wooed her. The handsomest, brightest, cleverest man of all she knew. She told me, and as she spoke the blush mantled her cheek, of the day when first she dared to believe he was seeking her love—told me of the day when their hands were joined, as it seemed, till life should end—told me of the joy which waited on my birth—on Valentine's birth—and she wept a little as she thought of what might have been, and what had been.

She had forgiven, but with one stipulation——Valentine must at once be sent for. If he were not welcome in his father's house the mother and her son would once more leave it, never to return.

"I shall love you, Laurence, always," she said;

"but Valentine has been mine, and mine only. He has never left me."

I promised that the next day I would fetch Valentine. Indeed, the delight I anticipated in informing him of our newly-discovered tie would have made me do so without any urging.

It was dark before our drive from the railway to the Dower House was at an end. During this part of the journey my mother was silent. Her hand held mine, and its pressure told me when any well-remembered spot was past. She was weeping, I knew—who could wonder at it? But she was calm—far calmer than I was. At last we drove up to the Dower House. She alighted from the carriage with a firm step. I threw my arms round her and kissed her. She returned my embrace, and together we passed into the house.

On the way to the Dower House we had inquired as to the health of my father, and learned that his condition was certainly no worse. So our fears on that score were allayed.

Lord Rothwell was at the door to welcome us. My mother drew her arm from mine, and held out her hand to him. He took it and pressed it to his lips.

"Old friend," she said, "your prophecy has at last been fulfilled."

He stooped, and, as a brother might have done, kissed her forehead, whispering some words I could not catch.

She divested herself of her mantle and bonnet, she smoothed her beautiful thick white hair, and, womanlike, glanced at the mirror.

"Take me to my husband," she said.

I sprang forward, but she waved me aside, and held out her hand to Rothwell.

"No; you, old true friend, it is you who shall lead the wife back to her husband." He took her hand, and with old-fashioned courtliness led her up-stairs. I did not grudge him the boon. In his face I could see that he was now reaping the reward of years of faith and trust. He was leading the woman he loved to the friend he loved.

I followed. The door opened. They passed through; she left Lord Rothwell's side and glided to the bed. My father lay there, sleeping calmly.

She clasped her hands and glanced at him, then she turned to Rothwell, with an inquiring, eager look. He nodded. She bent over the sleeper, and her lips touched his forehead.

His eyes opened. He raised his head, and with a rapturous cry of joy, threw his arms around her. He drew her face to his and covered it with fierce kisses.

"Margaret! my sweet—my wife! So many years—dark and dreary! Cruel! Cruel!"

These were the broken ejaculations we heard; but, strange to say, no entreaty for pardon; no avowal of wrong done to the woman he loved; no attempted excuse; only a kind of bitter sorrow that fate had treated the two so harshly, mingled with passionate love. And she, she asked no more. Her arm went round his neck; she laid her face on the pillow beside his. Her white hair mingled with his grey locks. Her cheeks lay against his, and I heard her sweet voice whispering words of love and soothing endearment.

Rothwell took my arm. The tears were streaming from his eyes and his voice broken by emotion.

"It is enough," he said, "let us leave them so."

We crept from the room and closed the door behind us. Such a meeting as this was too sacred for even a son to witness; but I felt that until

life was ended nothing would again part Sir Laurence Estmere and his wife.

I was very anxious to see Rothwell alone and hear his opinion of my father's state of health. On some points it reassured me; on others left me uneasy.

"There is little amiss bodily," he said. "In a day or two I believe he will be up again, as strong as ever. But so far as I can see, there is something strange, mentally. He seems to have adopted the idea that since he parted with your mother, she has been kept from him against his will. At times he speaks as if he had been a prisoner for many years—only now released. He begs me never to speak of the dark past during which he was so unhappy. He wishes to blame no one, he says; but he has been cruelly treated. As soon as his wife returned he would forget it all. However, in a few days we shall see how he is."

"But Chesham—Monaco—the duel, does he say nothing of these?"

"Not a word; I believe all that was done in a kind of dream, and is now forgotten. He seems to infer that he left Torwood, fled secretly at night, and came straight here to find his wife.

His recollection of what has really happened is, I am sure, quite distorted."

"It may be so much the better," I said.

"We will hope so, that he will recommence life as one emerging from a long illness. Any way, we can hope for the best, and trust your mother to forgive, and let things be as he wishes to think them, or as they seem to him."

We sat talking for an hour or two, and then my mother joined us.

"He is sleeping," she said, "so I crept away to say good-night."

There was a look of ineffable happiness on her face—a look I had never yet seen there. Rothwell inquired how she left the patient.

"He is calm and peaceful," she said. Then she turned to me, and embracing me whispered, "My son, he is your father, and once more my own dear husband."

"To-morrow I shall fetch Valentine," I said, as I returned her caress. She thanked me by a look, and hurried back to the room which she was loth to quit for even a second.

CHAPTER XIII.

BROTHERS.

THE Dower House, Estmere Court, and Rothwell's place are situate on the three points of an equal-sided triangle, so I was within easy riding distance of Valentine. The thoughtful Mr. Black had, as soon as Sir Laurence returned, sent over a horse and man, thinking such articles might come in useful when illness was in a house. So in the morning I mounted and rode away to look for my brother.

It was perfectly delicious to picture his surprise when I should tell him the strange news; and, eager to enjoy it, I pricked on as fast as I could, reaching Mirfield about noon.

Valentine and Lord Rothwell's other guests were out shooting, but, as I ascertained where they were to meet the luncheon-basket, I should have no difficulty in finding them. It was not very far away, so after stabling Mr. Black's horse I walked across to the place.

They were all there, Valentine, Stanton, and

Vigor, vigorously engaged in satisfying the healthy appetite produced by a morning's sport. No one saw me till I was in the midst of the party. Then all sprang to their feet and bade me a vociferous, hearty, but astounded welcome.

But it was Valentine's hand I grasped the first, and held the longest, glad to find that my grasp was returned with all the cordiality of yore. Perhaps my sudden appearance made him forget that our last parting was not of the friendliest description; perhaps he guessed that I had come to explain what seemed so strange to him. Any way, he welcomed me with all his native frankness. Then I shook hands with my other friends.

"Philip Norris! Captain Philip!" cried Vigor and Stanton simultaneously, "what the deuce brings you here?"

"Philip," continued Stanton, "you can give us some tidings of our noble host. If he has gone to Patagonia or Africa, he has perhaps left word how long we are to run this establishment of his, and who is to take the command. I sha'n't; I know nothing about conducting a household."

"We'll look after it off and on till the shooting is over," said Vigor, "then leave it to its fate."

"Haven't you heard from him?" I asked.

"Not a line; not a telegram. He went off in a hurry. Said he must go to town; impossible to say how long he should be away. We must all stop and do just as we liked; the limited resources of the establishmeut were placed at our entire disposal. He hadn't time to shake hands with us, although I believe he wanted to kiss Valentine, or bless him, or something. What peculiar charms he sees in a fellow who can't shoot straight I don't know."

"What nonsense!" cried Valentine. "But where is he, Philip? Did he come back with you?"

"No; but I saw him in town a few days ago."

"All right, was he?"

"Quite; sent me down to look after you."

"So long as there's nothing the matter with him we are content. I went down into the cellar yesterday. There's enough Pommery left to last us till next season. We shall manage all right. Now sit down, Philip, and have some food."

Although I was burning to tell Valentine the news, I thought it better to defer it until after lunch. I sat down and joined the merry party.

The laughter and jokes did me good—it seemed years since I had indulged in any merriment.

All took it for granted that I had come down for shooting purposes, and Stanton rejoiced that now they would be able to have a decent rubber of an evening. Valentine inquired after Claudine, and seemed surprised to hear I had not seen her for so long.

Lunch was over; cigars were lit, and the men lounged about preparatory to resuming their sport.

"Now," said Vigor, who being town-bred was by far the most enthusiastic sportsman of the party, "time's up; let us go to work again."

"Where's your gun, Philip?" asked Stanton.

"I didn't come out to shoot. I came to see Valentine."

"Well, you've seen him. He's more beautiful than ever. All the farmers' wives and daughters hang about trying to catch a glimpse of him. I shot the feather out of a young woman's hat the other morning. She was peeping at him through the trees. I mistook her head-gear for a pheasant."

"Considering the date, such a confession

speaks well for your conscientious observance of the game-laws," said Valentine.

I told him I wanted to see him on business, and asked him to walk back to the house with me. He readily consented, and we went away arm-in-arm, leaving our friends complaining of our desertion.

Valentine was in the highest spirits. He laughed and jested; poured out a flood of questions as to where I had been, what I had been doing. He marvelled at hearing I had stayed so long in a dull place like Surbury. He shook his head warningly when he found I had recently returned from Monaco. "I hate to hear of your gambling, Philip," he said.

"But I won—twenty thousand francs."

"I don't care. You are too good a fellow to gamble."

Valentine always grew serious on this point. No doubt the thought of my exploits reminded him of my objectionable connection with his foe.

"I hope Chesham did not accompany you," he said.

"No, I went with Rothwell."

"Went with Rothwell! What took Rothwell there?"

"A whim, I suppose. We heard of Chesham at the tables."

"Of course you did. I hope he was ruined."

"He was, literally. A day or two afterwards they found him lying by the sea, shot through the heart."

"Chesham? Dead!—Dead without speaking —without retracting his lies!"

"Yes, his end was a fitting one."

"And you say that, yet called yourself his friend!" He spoke with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"I never called myself his friend. I was much with him at one time, for certain reasons—reasons you ought to guess. One of the things I came here for to-day is to make everything clear to you and receive your love and friendship again."

He stretched out his hand. "It has never left you, Philip. I tried to throw you away, but I could not. We are too dear to each other."

"You love me like a brother, Valentine?"

"Like a brother! That would be a poor compliment. I know nothing of brothers. I will love you as David loved what's his name."

"Now, tell me your business," he continued after a few moments silence.

"Wait till we are indoors; I can tell you better there."

We reached the house. Valentine led the way to the smoking-room. As I looked at him I felt that he was a brother to be proud of—a son a father should glory in. His tall, well-formed figure; his light, elastic step; his bright hair and eyes; his whole sunny, gay appearance; together with that irresistible charm of address, made me wonder whether, after enjoying so many years the foremost place in my father's affections, I should not now have to yield it to this new son.

He threw himself into a chair and took a cigar. "Now, Philip, fire away, I am all attention. Although I can guess what you are going to say, the time is come when, cruel fathers notwithstanding, you and Claudine have fixed the day. Am I right?"

"Never further from it. Don't light your cigar; you won't smoke it yet."

He looked at me in surprise. He saw I was not jesting.

"You have something serious to talk about."

"Yes, so serious that I don't know how to begin."

He waited my pleasure.

"Valentine," I began, "I have come from your mother."

"My mother. She is not ill?"

"No, quite well. But she sent me to you."

"I never thought of asking you about her. She was in Dorsetshire a day or two ago. I did not think it possible you could have met her. What does she want?"

"She wants you to come to her, at once. To come back with me."

"Of course I will, dear woman. It is ages since I saw her. We will start to-morrow."

"No; to-day. I must tell you she left Dorsetshire with me yesterday."

"You frighten me, Philip. You look so grave and mysterious. Tell me again she is well and happy."

"Both."

"Where is she—in London?"

"No. She is only twenty miles away. Can you not guess where?"

The truth, or something like it, came to him. His face showed signs of strong excitement. His eyes were fixed on mine as though striving to make sure before he put his thoughts into words.

"At Estmere Court?" he whispered.

"No. But the very next thing to it. At the Dower House."

"Then Sir Laurence Estmere is dead?"

"Your father and mother are together." His surprise was unbounded.

"Tell me all—everything!" he cried. "She cannot have stooped so low as to have gone back as soon as he beckoned her. Without reparation and atonement. Such wrongs as hers could not permit that."

"I know little of what has passed between them, all I know is that her innocence is completely proved."

"It never needed proof," said Valentine, scornfully. "But tell me all."

"I can only tell you very shortly now. Since that day we visited Estmere Court together, I vowed that I would get at the truth. That was why I affected friendship for Chesham. The clue came by accident. I followed it to the end, and brought such evidence to Lord Rothwell that he could lay it before your father with the certainty of sweeping every doubt from his mind. I can say no more at present. Your mother is at the Dower House, and you must go to her immediately."

He made no reply. He sat twisting something nervously between his fingers. For a while he remained in deep thought.

"Does he; does my father wish me to come?" he asked at length.

"Certainly he does," I said boldly. "He is ill, and your mother is nursing him."

"Then I will obey my mother. Yet, how little I thought that I should go to that man the moment he wished it."

"Of course you will go to him. Happy days are coming, Valentine, for all of us."

He paused, then asked, "What is he like? Have you seen him?"

"I have seen a great deal of him lately. Valentine, let me entreat you to get rid of all prejudices. Wait till you meet your father. In a week's time you will love him dearly."

"Never, I am afraid; but I will do my duty. But how strange it all seems! How strange that you, Philip, should have brought this about! It was a happy day for me when I first met you, Philip."

"And happier for me, when all is known. If I give you anything, you give me more."

His mind was too much disturbed to notice any hidden meaning in my last words.

"When shall we start?" he asked. "How shall we get over there?"

"I have a horse. You must get something to carry you. Rothwell told me there were horses here."

"Is Rothwell with my mother?"

"Yes, waiting for you. But, Valentine," I said, "there is some one else you ought to ask for. Have you nothing to say about your brother?"

His brow grew dark. "Nothing; I will forgive my father, because he is my father, and my mother forgives him. I will try to love him. But between my brother and myself there can be nothing in common. I will neither see nor speak to him."

"You cannot help yourself. You have already done so."

"Unwittingly then."

"Yes; shall I tell you more, Valentine? You have both seen and spoken to your father."

"Where? Tell me, Philip. Do not make any more mysteries."

He had not the faintest idea of my meaning. He thought that he must have encountered his father and his brother somewhere in society. He

was as unprepared for the revelation as I was when Rothwell came to me in the dining-room at Torwood.

"You saw and talked to your father that morning when you were sketching on the moor—the day you left Torwood."

He would not understand. I could not have believed Valentine was so dense.

"What are you talking about, Philip? It was your father I saw."

"Yes, it was my father, and yours, Valentine! Valentine, we shall not be the less friends because we are brothers!"

I took both his hands and wrung them.

"But you are Philip Norris," he cried.

"Not after to-day. If Sir Laurence Estmere chose to hide himself for years under the name of William Norris, now that he once more takes his right name I can take mine—Laurence Estmere; your brother, Valentine."

I have no very clear recollections of what followed. All I know is that Valentine was shaking my hands, walking round me, embracing me, and, I believe, kissing me.

"Brothers!" he said over and over again, "you and I brothers! Philip, it is too delightful! Your

mother mine—my father yours! Why did you keep it secret? You might have trusted me!"

It was some time before he could be made to understand that until a few days ago I was as much in the dark as himself. That our meeting, our friendship, my discovery of Chesham's conspiracy all took place without my imagining that I was in any way related to the Estmere family, or that I had any claim to that long line of ancestors whose portraits at the Court moved me to envy Valentine his lineage. I had to tell him the whole story from beginning to end. He listened and wondered. Then he took my hand.

"Our father and mother reconciled! The brother I hated and wished to avoid, Philip Norris! Chesham dead! You were at Monaco, Philip—did you shoot him?"

He asked the last question fiercely.

"No," I replied. "I went to do so, but was forestalled."

"I am glad you went to do it, and I am glad there was no need of it. Yes, Philip—Laurence, brother and friend, happy days are coming. Let us start for our home."

We left the house and went round to the stables. There was a dog-cart and a set of

harness. We installed Mr. Black's horse in these, and in a few moments started for home.

Two miles along the road we came upon Stanton and Vigor. They stopped us.

"Now, where are you fellows going to?" asked Stanton. "If you think you are going to walk Valentine off you are much mistaken, Philip."

"Is it a secret?" whispered Valentine to me.

"Not the slightest," I answered.

Valentine leaned down to his friends.

"Stanton, Vigor," he said, "let me introduce you. This is my elder brother—Laurence."

The two men stared at one another. Vigor shook his head mournfully.

"The sun wasn't very hot," he said, "but some heads are unusually soft and easily affected by a sunstroke. Don't wait, Philip, drive on to the doctor's as soon as possible."

"It may be liquor," suggested Stanton. "Two boys like this should not be trusted alone."

"This is my brother Laurence," said Valentine with dignity; "we are going to join my father and mother at the Dower House."

Stanton whistled; Vigor held out his hand and caught Valentine's.

"Is it true?" he said, turning to me.

"Quite; my father, known for so long as William Norris, turns out to be the missing Sir Laurence. I think our troubles are all over. Rothwell is with us—I dare say he will run over and see you to-morrow. He will explain all. Goodbye—our time is short."

The two men congratulated us heartily. They knew enough of our histories to be able to dovetail the facts and arrive at a right understanding of the situation. We wished them a merry adieu.

"Stop a minute," said Vigor, "here's the boy with the game-bag. Chuck it into the cart. When a family returns to a house shut up for twenty years, the commissariat is apt to hitch. The birds may come in useful."

"And that Valentine has such a devil of an appetite," added Stanton.

Valentine rejoined with his usual gaiety, and, followed by good wishes, we drove off, leaving our friends with enough to talk about until they should see us again.

My mother was at the door to welcome us. It must have been her native kindness and grace which made her turn first to her eldest son.

"At last!" she whispered. "Husband, wife, and children under one roof! Ah, me! How happy I am!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

WHETHER my father's malady was mental or bodily, his recovery, so far as we could see, was a rapid one. In a very few days all anxiety was at an end. He was able to leave his room and take out-of-door exercise. Indeed, I was able to assure my mother that of recent years I had never seen him look better.

I was not present at the first interview he had with Valentine. My brother told me he called him to his side and, holding his hand, expressed his delight at finding his son such a credit to his race. He spoke most affectionately, and expressed bitter regret that a cruel misfortune should have compelled them to remain strangers for so long. The future should make up for the past. His words were sweet and kind, but yet were invested with a certain dignity which forbade his youngest son to pass judgment on what had

occurred. Valentine left his presence, pleased, but puzzled.

"It seems to me," he said, "he cannot, or will not, recall anything that has happened. But he was very kind, and he is certainly a man one is glad to call father."

Now that he was convalescent and about again, Valentine saw a great deal of him, more than any one, save my mother. She was never away from his side, but Valentine was generally on the other. For a while I was completely out in the cold. But I murmured not. I was too happy to feel discontent.

As I predicted, in a few days my father had made a conquest of his younger son. Any natural embarrassment which may have existed at first vanished. In a very short time Valentine was quite at his ease, and rattling out his airy opinions of men and things as if the two had been acquainted all their lifetime. I felt that my father could not have a better companion to chase any morbid regret which might still be left in his mind. In charge of Valentine and my mother I might with a clear conscience leave him.

Rothwell had departed—gone to gladden the hearts of Vigor and Stanton, and make excuses

and amends for his unceremonious absence. Soon I began to think it time to follow his example, and look after an important piece of self-interest, which I had of late shamefully neglected.

I had written to Claudine and apprised her of the extraordinary turn of affairs. I refrain from giving my letter or her reply, because, as before stated, this is not a love-tale. I can only say that the manner in which she congratulated me on my success and new prospects, and the flattering commendation she bestowed on what she was pleased to call my cleverness, made me most anxious to hear her lips repeat the pleasant phrases. My mother making no objection, I went away on my agreeable errand.

Claudine was still at Cheltenham with her military ex-guardian and his sister. I laughed to myself as I walked up to the house, although I felt terribly nervous at the thought of once more being focused by the General's abnormal spectacles. I prepared a suitable apology for my ill-behaviour on a previous occasion, and trusted the old soldier would forgive and forget.

I asked for Miss Neville, and was shown into the drawing-room, redolent of sandal-wood work-

boxes and other strangely-scented ornaments. In a minute Claudine was in my arms.

After our first rapturous greetings we sat down on one of the General's elaborately carved but very comfortable Bombay sofas, and I was praised, petted, and scolded for my long absence to my heart's content. Then I was made to relate the whole story.

Claudine cried for joy when she heard of her aunt's reconciliation to her husband; so full, so complete. She was delighted to hear that Valentine and his father were bidding fair to become such friends. As to the change in my own circumstances—

"That matters little," she said. "I loved Philip Norris—I shall love Laurence Estmere."

For which assertion I thanked her in the only possible way.

"Now," she said, "I must not stay here alone with you any longer; although you are my first cousin, I must send for the General and Aunt Selina."

I groaned. "What shall I do?"

"Do! Nothing, but receive their congratulations. I told the General a few days ago that my engagement with that Mr. Norris was at an

end; and that I was going to marry my cousin, Valentine's brother. He looks upon me as rescued from ruin, and you as my saviour!"

The General and his sister appeared, and I was duly presented. I quailed as the eye-glass came to the aid of those dreadful spectacles; but as the bearer of these optical aids was most friendly and cordial, I ventured to hope I had escaped recognition. Selina knew me again. I could tell it by her look. But as I found afterwards that Claudine had taken her into her confidence that mattered nothing.

General Gore invited me to dine with him. It was a pleasant dinner, except for the fearfully hot ingredients of some of the dishes. Claudine should have warned me what to avoid. I felt, as I emptied the water-bottle at my side, that a few years of such a peppery diet would make me as liverless and heartless as my host himself; when a man can browse on red and green chilies, he must be beyond hope.

After dinner the General congratulated me. He knew my father at one time, and was delighted to hear he had emerged from his mysterious retirement and seclusion. Then he favoured me with some advice on the marriage state,

which, considering he was a confirmed bachelor, was, no doubt, very valuable. He likened a wife to a regiment. She should be governed with a firm but gentle hand; should be led, not followed. Small requests which did not interfere with discipline should be acceded to. There were many little matters which seemed trifling to a colonel, but which were to the regiment of the utmost importance. So it was between husband and wife. Give way in little things, be firm in great ones.

This was also good advice; but, unfortunately, the General was famous as having been the greatest martinet of his day!

I looked as grateful as I could; but my gratitude was not assumed when he proposed to join the ladies.

"By the bye, Mr. Estmere," he said as we rose, "it is, of course, no secret from you that Claudine was entangled into an engagement which is now happily at an end. The young man was a needy adventurer, sir—an adventurer!"

I told him that Claudine had fully confided in me.

"A young man without a mother—and whose

father was abroad—Norris, he called himself—a Devonshire Norris. Did you ever hear of a Devonshire Norris?"

"Not that I remember."

"No—nor anybody else. Hampshire Norrises, Middlesex Norrises—never was a Devonshire Norris."

As I did not contradict him, he led the way to the drawing-room.

"I have been asking Mr. Estmere, Selina," he said, "if he ever heard of a Devonshire Norris. He agrees with me—there are none."

He felt that this parting cut was due to Claudine. I caught her eye, and it needed all my powers of self-control to keep from laughing aloud.

I stayed at Cheltenham for a week; during which Claudine and I settled the month, if not the day, when we were to be married. Then I went back to Derbyshire.

I saw very little of my father and mother. Whilst I was absent, they had settled upon going abroad for two or three months. They were to go alone. Even Valentine was not to accompany them, but when they came back they were to come back to Estmere Court.

I told them what I had arranged with Claudine. My father assented to my wishes, as though the matter had been foreseen all along. He only stipulated that Estmere Court should be our home. If I should have preferred commencing housekeeping on my own account, I dared not hint at such a thing—in my case, my mother's appealing eyes would have turned the scale.

So they left us. My mother, in spite of her snow-white hair, looking as fair as a bride, bound on her honeymoon. I told her so, and she blushed as vividly as a young girl might blush.

Valentine and I were commissioned to see that everything at Estmere Court was in readiness for their return. We spent many delightful days in our future home. We revelled in the long-hidden treasures which were brought to light, and carefully checked off on a bulky inventory brought down by one of Mr. Grace's young men. Cabinets of the rarest porcelain, chests of exquisite old plate, hundreds and hundreds of priceless treasures accumulated by a long line of men of taste. To watch all these brought out of their hiding-places, and, at the command and pleasure of a gentleman sent from London for the purpose, arranged in their proper stations in cabi-

nets, was indeed a labour of love to Valentine and to me.

There was an immense amount of work to be done before Estmere Court could be put in proper trim to receive its master; but, as no expense need be spared, we hoped that all would be ready when the wanderers returned from the Continent.

They did return in two months' time, but only stayed in England for a couple of days. They came back to my wedding.

Claudine and I were married very quietly at Cheltenham, and then went off for a long rambling, delightful honeymoon, moving from place to place at our own sweet will, and with no purpose except to enjoy ourselves. When we thought we had neglected our friends at home as long as we dared we turned our faces to our new home, Estmere Court.

Valentine is the first to welcome us; he meets us on the road, and rides back at the side of the carriage. We reach the Court, and on the broad terrace I see my father and mother standing, as noble and fair types of a middle-aged English gentleman and lady as may well be met with. Her hand rests on his arm, and he looks

at her with an expression of intense love on his handsome face. His eyes light up as Valentine, who has preceded us, springs from his horse and takes his station at his side; but as he grasps my hand, and in his sweet, grave manner bids me and my bride welcome home, there is a look in his eyes which tells me that I am, if anything, dearer to him than in those days when I was his only associate in that wind-swept, solitary house on the wild Devonshire coast.

* * * * * *

I have brought my tale to a close. All that has happened since bears nothing worthy of record. Some years have passed since I was instrumental in bringing my mother back to the husband she loved. Valentine has married well and happily. If he does not ply his brush so keenly as of old, his name is well known in the art world. He is the same sweet, bright fellow as of old, and the news that he is about to pay a visit to Estmere Court is welcome to all its inmates. Now that he can fully gratify it, his passion for jewellery is waning. The rings which made his hands glorious are, for the most part, resigned to his wife. Spoil given up to the conqueror, he says. He has not, so far as I know,

a care in life. Amply provided for, occupied sufficiently to make time pass pleasantly, loving and beloved, Valentine bids fair to live the life of a thoroughly happy man.

Rothwell made one more journey, wrote one more book; then retired on his laurels. He has done up, and in a fashion refurnished Mirfield, but, after all, he spends more time at Estmere Court than at home. He is essentially the friend of the family, always welcomed when he arrives, regretted when he departs.

There is no Lady Rothwell; and to the best of my belief there will be none. His title will die with him, and he will leave his broad lands to Valentine—but may that day be far distant.

For myself and Claudine, I need say little. We love each other, and are blessed with children. I have my ambitions—I have had some success, and hope for more. But all this has nothing to do with this tale.

I will not forget to say that I kept my promise to the dying woman, Mrs. Merton. Although I did not care to see them again, and although I kept the source of their supplies a secret, the boy and girl were looked after until the latter

married, and the former was placed in a fair way of earning a good living.

Lastly, my father and mother. I must speak of them together. It is impossible now to dissociate them. Claudine cites his tenderness and devotion to my mother whenever she is pleased to accuse me of neglecting anything due to her as my wife. If the aftermath can atone for the ruined harvest, my mother will call her life a happy one. He seems unable to bear her absence for an hour. It is only when she is with him that his smile is a perfectly happy one. Her every wish is forestalled, her every thought anticipated. Everything must be done for her comfort and delight. He will not enter public life because its duties would take him from her side. In the struggle for such fame I am to be his delegate.

But he is widely known for all that. His pen can be plied without tearing himself from his wife's side. His keen and trenchant articles are given places of honour in great reviews. His scientific researches are embodied in journals which stamp them as of importance. If he ever returns to London life, he will find himself honoured and courted.

Yet, passionately devoted as he is to his wife,

I know that no word-explaining, excusing, or entreating forgiveness for the past has ever crossed his lips. Whether this is caused by pride, shame, or, as I sometimes fear, by some strange mental disorganization, making many years of his life like a hideous, blurred dream, I cannot say. To Valentine, to Rothwell, not a word has he said. Even to me he has never spoken of the years we spent together—father and son—alone. Yet, to all appearances, his intellect is as keen and his memory as retentive as of old. Chesham's name he has never breathed. He does not know that Rothwell and I witnessed that fearful act of justice. I verily believe that, during the time he was taking his revenge, he knew nothing, that he acted as a somnambulist might have acted, that the tragedy faded from his memory, or that it had never been fully impressed on it. Rothwell and I talked it over, and came to the conclusion that only two people in the world knew the particulars of Chesham's fate. Sir Laurence Estmere, though accountable for it, knew nothing of what his hand had done.

Seeing with what strange persistence he avoided the past, on my own responsibility I dismantled and shut up Torwood. Mrs. Lee was

pensioned off. I would willingly have found her a post of trust at Estmere Court, but feared her presence might be unwelcome to my father.

But it is, of course, impossible for a man to say that he will forget twenty years of his life. In my father's position there is much business to be attended to and talked about. Mr. Grace and Mr. Black, the agent, were bound to speak of things which had occurred at such and such a date; my father at times was compelled to do the same. He speaks of that interregnum as when he was out of his senses—incapable of managing his own affairs. These remarks have been repeated, and it is confidently believed throughout the county that for many years Sir Laurence Estmere was an inmate of a lunatic asylum.

What he believes himself I dare not think or say. On this point, even to me, who watch and study him, he is a riddle. Can it be false pride which forbids him to speak or think of the past? Can it be that he has reasoned with himself and decided his wrong was as great as his wife's? Or can it be that some strange state of the brain, which culminated in that attack of delirium, has actually brought about forgetfulness of things, the recollection of which would have been torture

and pain to such a sensitive nature? It is a problem I have not yet solved.

Problem or not, there is one who seeks no explanation—who is content that nothing more shall be said—who bears her happiness as calmly and sweetly as she bore her wrongs. If she is content, the state of my father's mind concerns no one else. Mad or sane, he is her husband, dearer to her now than even in the days of their first love.

We live a quiet life at Estmere Court. My father and mother feel that the friends of their youth have drifted out of sight, and they have now arrived at that age when new friendships are rarely made. My father's position in the county compels him to mix to a certain extent in society. The obligations of courtesy are amply fulfilled, and there the matter ends.

There are times when I watch him anxiously —when I feel that if the past is obliterated or forced aside, its traces are still left. Even now he is scarcely past the prime of life, yet in many things he is an old man. I notice a change every time I return to Estmere Court after an interval of absence, and my heart feels sad, as something tells me that many years will not elapse

before my father and mother must bid each other adieu for ever—when the treasure saved at last from the wreck of their former happiness must be assigned—when I shall see that sweet, grave face smile no more—when those eyes which have always looked on me with love shall be closed for ever.

God grant that I deceive myself! The day which makes me Sir Laurence Estmere will be the darkest and bitterest day my life has known.

THE END.

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