

Aaron The Jew

Vol.III

By
Benjamin Leopold Farjeon

Freeeditorial 

AARON THE JEW VOL. III

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HONOURABLE PERCY STORNDALE.

For the second time on this eventful day Aaron felt as if his sin were about to be brought home to him, as if the temple which, by long years of honourable and upright conduct, he had built for himself, were about to crumble to dust. In that temple was enshrined not only his good name, but what was far more precious to him, his wife's happiness and peace of mind. He had not yet nerved himself to the effort to go to her frankly and say, "Ruth is not our child." Out of Rachel's innate goodness and sweetness sprang the love she bore for the young girl. The suggestion of love may come from without, but the spirit of love is the offspring of one's own heart, and it is made enduring and ennobling by one's own higher qualities; and in a like manner it is one's lower passions which debase and degrade it. In whatever fashion Rachel would receive her husband's confession, he knew full well that it would inflict upon her the most exquisite suffering; the cherished ideal of her life would be shattered, and she would sit for ever afterwards in sackcloth and ashes. This was his torturing belief; it was not that he dreaded exposure for his own sake; he had no wish to spare himself, but to spare Rachel inevitable suffering. He knew that the truth could not be much longer hidden, and yet he was too weak to take the deciding step. He had sown a harvest of woe, and his constant fervent prayer was that he might not be compelled to reap it with his own hands.

Agitated as he was, he did not betray himself by word or sign, but by a courteous movement of his hand invited his visitor to proceed.

"It is a family matter," said Mr. Dillworthy, "of a peculiarly delicate nature, and my client thought it could best be arranged in a private personal interview."

"Being of such a nature," observed Aaron, "would it not have been better that it should be arranged privately between the parties interested instead of through an intermediary?"

"Possibly, possibly; but my client holds strong views, and feels he could scarcely trust himself."

"Favour me with the name of your client."

"Lord Storndale."

"Lord Storndale? I have not the pleasure of his acquaintance."

"But you are familiar with his name."

"Not at all. It is the first time I have heard it."

"You surprise me. Lord Storndale is a peer."

"I know very few peers, and have had no occasion to study the peerage."

"But, pardon me, Storndale is the name; it may have escaped you."

"I repeat, the name is strange to me."

"I do not presume to doubt you, but it introduces a new element into the matter. Your daughter, then, has never mentioned the Honourable Percy Storndale to you?"

"Never, and I am at a loss to understand the association of their names."

The lawyer paused. In this unexpected turn of affairs a deviation suggested itself to his legal mind which would be likely to assist him.

"Mr. Cohen, you have the reputation of being an earnest and sincere Jew."

"I follow the precepts and the obligations of my faith," said Aaron, with a searching glance at his visitor.

"In this back-sliding and time-serving age orthodoxy--especially, I should say, in the Jewish religion--has a hard time of it. The customs and duties of an enlightened civilisation must clash severely with the precepts and obligations you speak of. It is because of the difficulty--perhaps the impossibility--of following the hard and fast laws of the Pentateuch that divisions have taken place, as in all religions, and that you have among you men who call themselves Reformed Jews."

"Surely it is not part of your mission to debate this matter with me," said Aaron, who had no desire to discuss these questions with a stranger.

"No, it is not, and I do not pretend to understand it; but in a general way the subject is interesting to me. If you will permit me, I should like to ask you one question." Aaron signified assent. "What is your opinion of mixed marriages?"

Aaron did not answer immediately; he had a suspicion that there was something behind, but the subject was one regarding which both he and Rachel held a strong view, and he felt he would be guilty of an unworthy evasion if he refused to reply.

"I do not approve of them," he said.

"You set me at ease," said the lawyer, "and it will gratify Lord Storndale to hear that you and he are in agreement upon the question. As our interview is private I may speak freely. Unhappily, Lord Storndale is a poor peer. Since he came into the title he has had great difficulties to contend with, and as his estates lay chiefly in Ireland these difficulties have been of late years increased. Happily or unhappily, also, he has a large family, two daughters and six sons. Of these sons the Honourable Percy Storndale is the youngest. I do not know who is more to be pitied, a poor peer struggling with mortgages, decreased rents, and the expenses of a large family, or a younger son who comes into the world with the expectation that he is to be provided for, and whose father can allow him at the utmost two hundred and fifty or three hundred a year. Father and son have both to keep up appearances, and the son's allowance will scarcely pay his tailor's and his glover's bills. There are a thousand things he wants, and to which he believes himself entitled. Flowers, horses, clubs, a stall at the theatre, and so on and so on, ad infinitum. The consequence is that the young gentleman gets into debt, which grows and grows. Perhaps he thinks of a means of paying his creditors--he plunges on a horse, he plays for high stakes at his club. You know the result. Into the mire, deeper and deeper. A sad picture, Mr. Cohen."

"Very sad," said Aaron, who had listened patiently, and knew that the crucial part of the lawyer's mission--that which affected himself and Ruth--had not yet been reached.

"Lord Storndale," continued the lawyer, "is a gentleman of exclusive views, and is perhaps prouder in his poverty than he would be with a rent-roll of a hundred thousand a year. His son's extravagances and debts are not hidden from his knowledge--the moneylenders take care of that. From time to time, and at a great sacrifice, he extricates the young scapegrace from temporary difficulties, but at length he comes to a full stop. His own means are exhausted, and willing as he may be to keep putting his hand in his pocket, it is useless to do so, because the pocket is empty. But he has some influence in a small way, and he obtains for his son the offer of a post in the colonies; not very grand certainly, but affording an opening which may lead to something better, if the young gentleman will only condescend to look at life seriously--which, as a rule, such young

fellows decline to do until it is too late. However, a father, whether he be a peer or a common labourer, can do no more than his duty. He informs his son of the appointment he has obtained for him, and the scapegrace--I am speaking quite openly, Mr. Cohen; the Honourable Percy Storndale is one--declines to accept it. 'Why?' asks the astonished father. 'I cannot live on it,' replies the son. Then the father points out how he can live on it by cutting down some of his extravagances, and that he may find opportunities in the colonies which he can never meet with here. The son remains obdurate. 'There is another reason for your refusal,' says the father. 'There is,' the son admits. 'I prefer to remain in London; it is the only city in the world worth living in.' 'And starving in,' suggests the father. The scapegrace shrugs his shoulders, and says something will turn up here, and that he will not submit to banishment because he happens to have been born a few years too late--a reflection upon his brother, the eldest son, who in course of time will inherit the family embarrassments and mortgages. The father remonstrates, argues, entreats, but the young man will not give way. Meanwhile the appointment is bestowed upon another and a worthier gentleman, and the chance is lost. I trust I am not wearying you."

"No. I am attending to all you say, and waiting to hear how my daughter's name comes to be mixed up with the family history you are giving me."

"You will understand everything presently. My object is to make the matter perfectly clear, and to have no concealment. For this reason I wish you to be aware of the character of the young gentleman, and I am describing it carefully at the express wish of his father. At the same time I lay no positive charge against him; I am not saying he is a bad man, but an undesirable man. There are thousands of young fellows who are living just such a careless, irresponsible, reckless life, who get into debt, who gamble, and who ultimately find themselves passing through the bankruptcy court. Young men without balance, Mr. Cohen, and who, in consequence, topple over. They sow trouble wherever they go, and they are always smiling, self-possessed, and pleasant-mannered. Women especially are caught by these externals; but speaking myself as the father of grown-up daughters, I should be sorry to see one of that class visiting my house as a suitor to one of my girls."

Aaron started, but did not speak.

"Lord Storndale suspected that there was another reason which his son had not mentioned for his refusal of the colonial appointment, and in a short time his suspicions were confirmed. It came to his knowledge that his son was paying attentions to a young lady whom he was in the habit of meeting at garden parties and tennis, and probably by arrangement in the parks, and he taxed the young gentleman with it. His son did not deny it; he said that he loved the lady, that her father was very wealthy, and that she was

in every way presentable. 'I do not know,' said the young man, 'whether the circumstance of her father being a commoner will prejudice you against him.' Lord Storndale replied that he would have preferred his son had chosen from his own rank, but that marriages between rich commoners and members of the aristocracy were not unusual in these days, and that he would sanction the match if the lady's father were a gentleman. To be honest with you, Mr. Cohen, Lord Storndale has no liking for commoners who have made fortunes in trade or by speculating; but he did not allow these scruples to weigh with him, his hope being that the proposed union would be the means of extricating his son from his difficulties, and of steadying him. The young man said that the lady's father was a gentleman widely known for his benevolence and uprightness of character, and that he was held in universal esteem. Up to this point the interview had been of an amicable nature, but then arose an insurmountable difficulty. 'Who is the gentleman?' inquired Lord Storndale. 'Mr. Aaron Cohen,' replied the young man."

Observing Aaron's agitation the lawyer suspended his narration, and said,--

"Pardon me; you were about to speak."

Aaron by a great effort controlled himself.

"I will wait till you have quite finished, Mr. Dillworthy. Before I commit myself it will be as well that I should be in possession of all the facts."

"Quite so. I have been explicit and circumstantial in order that there shall be no mistake. When I have finished you will have few, if any, questions to ask, because you will know everything it is in my power to tell. Upon hearing your name, his lordship remarked that it was a Jewish name. 'Yes,' said the young man, 'Mr. Cohen is a Jew.' Lord Storndale was angry and distressed. I admit that it is an unreasonable prejudice; but he has an invincible dislike to Jews, and it shocked him to think that his son contemplated a marriage with a Jewess. I need dwell no longer upon the interview, which now took a stormy turn, and it ended by the son abruptly leaving the room. On no account, whatever, Mr. Cohen, will Lord Storndale or any member of his family consent to such an alliance; if it is accomplished the young man will be thrown upon his own resources, and his wife will not be recognised by his kinsfolk. The trouble has already reached a climax. The young gentleman is hot-headed--a Storndale failing--and he declines to listen to remonstrances; the consequence is, that he has been forbidden his father's home till he comes to reason. But despite his extravagances and the constant and perplexing involvements issuing therefrom, his father has an affection for him, and is bent upon saving his family from----"

The lawyer pausing here, with an awkward cough, as though he was choking down a word, Aaron quietly added it.

"Disgrace?"

"Well, yes," said Mr. Dillworthy, briskly; "we will not mince matters. It is not my word, but Lord Storndale's. He would account such an alliance a disgrace. I will say nothing in his excuse. In all civilised countries we have living evidences of happy unions between members of the aristocracy and wealthy daughters of Israel, and also living evidences of happy mixed marriages between persons neither aristocratic nor wealthy; and these might be brought forward as powerful arguments against the view my client entertains. But they would have no weight with him. We must take into consideration the pride of race."

"Yes," said Aaron, still speaking in a quiet tone, "we must take that into consideration. You have not quite finished, sir?"

"Not quite. As a last resource, Lord Storndale consulted me, and entrusted me with a painful task. He requested me to call upon you, and represent the matter in the plainest terms, which I have endeavoured to do, omitting or concealing no single incident of the unhappy affair. I am deputed to ask you to take a course with your daughter similar to that he has taken with his son--that is, to absolutely forbid the union. The young gentleman is in a state of extreme pecuniary embarrassment, and it is possible--I do not state it as a fact, but merely as a presumption--that he reckons upon your aid to settle with his creditors. When he finds that this aid will not be forthcoming, and that he cannot depend upon your making a suitable settlement upon your daughter, he is not unlikely, for prudential reasons, to beat a retreat."

"What is the inference you wish me to draw from this expression of opinion?"

"That Mr. Storndale is following your daughter for your money."

"And that he has no love for her?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. The interview was taking a turn not exactly pleasing to him.

"You are not flattering the young gentleman," Aaron said.

"I had no intention of doing so. Of course, it is for you to consider the matter from your own point of view. First, as a father----"

He paused.

"Yes, first as a father," repeated Aaron.

"Next, as a Jew."

"Yes, next as a Jew," said Aaron, again repeating the lawyer's words.

He was agitated by conflicting emotions, which no man but he could have understood--and which, indeed, in the light of the revelation which had been made, he himself could scarcely grasp, so strongly did it affect the secret of his life. But that secret still was his, and he had still to play his part.

"You are commissioned to take my answer to Lord Storndale?"

"He is anxiously awaiting it."

"I may trust you to convey that answer as nearly as possible in my own words?"

"It shall be my endeavour."

"You will tell him, then, that the mission with which he has entrusted you comes upon me as a surprise. As I have already informed you, I have never, until this day, heard his name or the name of his son. As to the character you give the young gentleman, it may or may not be correct, for you speak of him as an advocate on the other side----"

"But surely," interrupted the lawyer, "that would not affect the religious aspect of the question."

"No, it would not affect it. But whether correct or not, it seems clear that the young gentleman has not acted as a man of honour, although he is Lord Storndale's son. A young girl's trustfulness and innocence should be her safeguard; but here they have been basely used, according to your own statement, by a man whose external accomplishments have unhappily attracted her."

"And from such a man," said the lawyer, rather too eagerly, "it is a fathers duty to protect his daughter."

"Undoubtedly," replied Aaron, who could not dispute the lawyer's reasoning. "That my wife and I should have been kept in ignorance of Mr. Storndale's attentions is to be

deplored; and it appears certain that he must have bound Miss Cohen by a promise to say nothing to us about them. You speak of the pride of race as affecting Lord Storndale. We have also that pride, and if any Jewish parent were so far forgetful of the obligations of his faith as to admit your client's son into his family, it is upon him and upon Lord Storndale that honour would be conferred."

"It is a fair retort," said the lawyer. "I beg you to believe that the views I have expressed are not mine, but Lord Storndale's, in whose interests I am acting. I am, as you say, an advocate--merely a mouthpiece, as it were--and I am bound to follow out my instructions. Your disapproval of mixed marriages gives me confidence that my mission has not failed, and it will be a satisfaction to Lord Storndale. May I take it that you will pursue the course with your daughter that he has taken with his son, and that you will forbid the union?"

"Have I not made myself sufficiently clear?" asked Aaron, with an inward rebellion against the evasion he felt himself compelled to practise.

"Yes, yes," said the lawyer, hastily, too astute to press for precise words. "And I may inform Lord Storndale that you distinctly disapprove of marriages between Jews and Christians?"

"You may."

Mr. Dillworthy, believing he had gained his point, wisely dropped the subject, and expressing his obligations to Aaron, rose to take his departure. Before he reached the door, however, he turned, and in a tone of courteous deference, asked if Mr. Cohen could spare him a few moments more. Aaron assenting, the lawyer resumed his seat, and taking a pocket-book from his pocket searched in it for a letter.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD PAST.

Aaron observed him anxiously. The disclosure that had already been made had so agitated him that he was apprehensive of further trouble.

"Ah! here it is," said the lawyer, opening the letter for which he had been looking; "I was afraid I had left it behind me. Excuse me a moment; I wish to refresh my memory."

He ran his eye over the letter, and nodded as he went through its points of importance.

"Does it concern the unhappy affair we have discussed?" inquired Aaron, unable to restrain his impatience.

"No," replied the lawyer; "I take it that is settled, and I trust, for the sake of both the families, that it will not be re-opened."

"I trust not."

"This is quite a different matter, and I hardly know how to excuse myself for troubling you with it. It is a sudden thought, for I came here with no such intention. You must thank your own reputation for it, Mr. Cohen; it is well known that you have never neglected an opportunity to do an act of kindness, and though what I am about to speak of has come to me in the way of business, the story contains elements so romantic and peculiar that it has strangely attracted me. The reference in the letter which induces me to think that you may be able to help me is that you are a gentleman of influence in your community, and have a wide acquaintance with your co-religionists. Perhaps I had better read the words. My correspondent says--'I know that there are peculiar difficulties in the search I intend to make upon my return home, but before my arrival you may be able to discover something which will be of assistance to me. Probably if you consult some kind-hearted and influential member of the Jewish race you may, through him, obtain a clue; or, failing this, you might employ a Jewish agent to make inquiries.' It is a lady who writes to me, and her letter comes from Australia. May I continue? Thank you. Let me tell you the story; it will interest you, and I will be as brief as possible. The letter is too long to read throughout." He handed it to Aaron. "It occupies, you see, fourteen closely written pages, and it is somewhat in the nature of a confession. If you wish, I will have a copy of it made, and will send it on to you to-morrow."

Aaron, turning over the pages, came to the superscription:

"I remain,

"Yours truly,

"Mary Gordon."

Truly this was a day of startling surprises to him. He recollected the name as that of the gentleman for whom, twenty years ago, Mr. Moss had undertaken the commission which had lifted him from beggary by placing in his hands a large sum of money to which in strict justice he was not entitled, but which, from fear that the deception he had practised might otherwise be discovered, he was compelled to accept. He had, as an atonement, expended in secret charities a hundred times the sum; but this did not absolve him from the responsibility. The spirit of the dead past rose before him, and he was overwhelmed with the dread possibilities it brought with it.

"I fear," said the lawyer, "that I have been inconsiderate in introducing the matter at the present moment. I will postpone it to a future occasion."

"Pray continue," said Aaron, whose burning desire now was to know the worst. "I have had an exciting day, but I will pay due attention to what you wish to impart to me."

"I appreciate your kindness. If you cannot assist me, you may recommend me to an agent whom I will employ. I noticed that you referred in the letter to the name of my correspondent, Mrs. Gordon; the inquiry is of a delicate nature, and it may be her wish that her name is not too freely mentioned--at all events, for the present. Her story is not an uncommon one, but it takes an extraordinary and unusual turn. She is now, according to her own account, a lady of considerable means; her husband has lately died, and she has come into a fortune. Some twenty odd years ago she was a young woman, and had two lovers, one of whom wooed her with dishonourable intentions, and by him she was betrayed. This occurred during the absence in Australia of the gentleman who had proposed to her, and whom she had accepted. He was a resident in Australia, and it was his intention to make his home there. While he was on his way to England, with the intention of making her his wife and returning with her to the colony, she discovered that she was about to become a mother. In despair she fled from London, where he expected to find her, and sought to hide her shame among strangers. The place she selected was Portsmouth, and there she went through a series of harrowing trials, and was reduced to extreme poverty. In her letter to me she makes no effort to disguise the misery into which she was plunged, and she is frank and outspoken in order that I

may properly understand how it was that she was forced to abandon the child that was born in Portsmouth under most distressing circumstances. For it appears that when the suitor who wooed her honourably arrived in London and learned the story of her betrayal, he was still desirous to make her his wife. He traced her to Portsmouth, and found her there with her babe, who was then but a few days old. This would have induced most men to forego their honourable intentions; but Mr. Gordon, whose name she now bears, was an exception to the rule, and, through a gentleman who acted as a go-between, he made a singular proposition to her. It was to the effect that she should consent to give up her child entirely, and during his lifetime to make no effort to recover it; he undertook to find a respectable and comfortable home for the babe, and to make a liberal provision for it. This is the bare outline of his proposition, and I need not go further into it. So desperate was her position that she and her child at the time were literally starving; she had not a friend but Mr. Gordon, who was stern in his resolve not to befriend her unless she accepted the conditions he dictated; the gentleman who acted as a go-between had behaved very kindly to her, but could not assist her further. In these circumstances she made the sacrifice, and parted with her child, who from that day to this she has never seen. Mr. Gordon honourably fulfilled the terms of the agreement; a home was found for the child, and he married the lady, and took her to Australia, where she has resided for the last twenty years. It was part of the agreement that she should not be informed of the name of the people who adopted the child, and should not, directly or indirectly, make the least endeavour to obtain any information concerning it while her husband was alive. If he died before her she was free to act as she pleased in the matter. This has occurred, and the widow, who has had no children by her marriage, is bent upon recovering her child, who, I may mention, is a girl. The task is beset with difficulties, and may prove hopeless. Shortly stated, Mr. Cohen, this is the case as it at present stands."

"Is there a special reason," inquired Aaron, "for your applying to me for assistance?"

"Not exactly special; it is in a sense accidental, inspired by my visit this evening on the other matter we have spoken of. There are certain particulars in relation to Mrs. Gordon's search for her daughter which I have omitted. The arrangements for the future provision of the babe were carried out, I understand, by a firm of lawyers whose names Mrs. Gordon has been unable to ascertain; but she is acquainted with the name of the gentleman who in Portsmouth conveyed Mr. Gordon's proposition to her. This gentleman is Dr. Spenlove, who, leaving Portsmouth several years ago, has attained an eminent position in London. You may be acquainted with him."

"He was at my house to-day."

"Then you are on terms of intimacy with him."

"No. We met to-day for the first time."

"In her letter Mrs. Gordon refers me to Dr. Spenlove, and I have not yet communicated with him. The letter only reached me this morning, and I have not had time to see him."

"You have not explained why you apply to me."

"The explanation is simple. During her husband's lifetime Mrs. Gordon faithfully carried out her obligation, and, as it appears to me, no words passed between them on the subject of the child. In his last moments, however, he must have relented; unfortunately, he left it too late to give his wife the information she so eagerly desired; he could scarcely articulate, and all she could gather from him was that he had employed an agent to look after the child, and that this agent was of the Jewish persuasion. The conclusion is that he was a resident of Portsmouth, but he may not be living; and it has occurred to me that you, who have friends of your persuasion everywhere, may expedite the discovery by giving me the name and address of some old inhabitant who can put us on the track of Mr. Gordon's agent. When the lady arrives in England she will naturally go to Dr. Spenlove, who will doubtless assist her in her natural endeavour to obtain intelligence of the fate of her child. If you can also assist us you will earn a mother's gratitude."

"I will consider it," said Aaron, and his voice was troubled; "that is all I can promise at present."

"It is all we can expect of you. There is another peculiar feature in this strange case. Mrs. Gordon, before she left England, entrusted Dr. Spenlove with a metal casket in which she had deposited some memorials of interest; this casket was to be given to the man who undertook to bring up the child, on the understanding that it was to be handed to the young lady at the age of twenty-one (supposing, of course, that she lived to that age), or before that time to be returned to the mother if she came to claim it. The young lady, if she be living, is not yet twenty-one, and it is the mother's intention to recover this casket, if it be possible. It is to be hoped it fell into the hands of an honest man."

"It is to be hoped so," said Aaron, mechanically.

Mr. Dillworthy said in a kind tone, "It is not an opportune time to seek your aid in a cause in which you are not personally interested, when another subject, the welfare of a dear daughter, engrosses your attention. Pray forgive me, Mr. Cohen."

Aaron bent his head, and as the lawyer closed the door behind him, sank back in his chair with a heavy sigh.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BEFORE ALL, DUTY.

He sat silent for many minutes, his mind in a state of chaos; but presently his native strength of character came to his aid, and he resumed the task which the entrance of Mr. Dillworthy had interrupted! In addition to the important meeting he had to attend that night, his presence was expected at the board of a Jewish charity, of which he was the founder. This meeting came first, and his colleagues could not proceed to business without him; he must not disappoint them. Before all, duty. The thought shaped itself in whispered words, which he repeated again and again, and their iteration brought to him a sense of their true significance. Duty had been a leading principle of his life, and in the part he had taken in public matters he had never neglected it, and had never studied his personal convenience. But he had now to consider the principle in its most comprehensive aspect, and he felt that its application to his private affairs was imperative in the conflicting interests in which he was engaged. This being so, what was his duty here at home in respect of his wife and the girl he had brought up as their daughter, and how should he perform it? Love played so vital a part in the consideration of this question that he could not thrust it aside. It was, indeed, its leading element. For years past he had lived in a fool's paradise, and time had crept on and on until suddenly he saw the flowers withering before him. He had been false to himself, he had worn a mask, and now it was to be torn aside; but this he could bear. How would Rachel bear it?

Unconsciously he had risen from his chair, and was pacing to and fro while he reflected. Pausing, he saw upon the table the papers he had been studying. The meeting of the Jewish society was of minor consequence, and required but little thought; the second meeting, however, was of vast importance, for there a decision was to be arrived at which would affect thousands of poor families and have a direct bearing upon the question of capital and labour. There had been a great strike in the building trade, and thousands of men had deliberately thrown themselves out of employment, choosing, in their adherence to a principle, what was almost next door to starvation. The strike had been brought about by a rival contractor, a Mr. Poynter, an employer of labour on an extensive scale, and a man as well known as Aaron himself. To say that these two were rivals does not necessarily imply that they were enemies, for that is a game that two must play at, and it was a game in which Aaron played no part. He did not approve of Mr. Poynter's methods: he went no further than that; and if he was called upon to express his opinion upon the subject he did so in a manner which robbed it of any personal application. Mr. Poynter, on the other hand, was nothing if he was not personal, and he hated Aaron with a very sincere and conscientious hate. He hated him because he had lost several profitable contracts, which Aaron had obtained; and this

hatred may be applied in a general sense, because he hated every successful rival, great or small. He hated him because Aaron was genuinely respected by large bodies of working men, and had great influence with them; and this hatred may also be applied in a general sense, because he hated all employers of labour who were held by their workmen in higher respect than himself. He hated Aaron because he was a Jew; and this may certainly be applied in a general sense, because he had a bitter hatred of all Jews, and would have willingly subscribed liberally and joined in a crusade to hunt them out of the country. He did not subscribe to the Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, because to Christianise them would be to admit them upon terms of equality, and the idea was abhorrent to him. On no terms could a Jew be made the equal of a Christian. That a Jew could be a good man, that he could be a just man, that he could do anything without an eye to profit or self-aggrandisement--these, in his belief, were monstrous propositions, and no man of sense, certainly no true Christian, could seriously entertain them. Mr. Poynter was a Christian, a true Christian, regular in his attendance at church, and fairly liberal, also, in his charities, though his left hand always knew what his right hand did. And here he found another cause for hating Aaron. He heard his name quoted as a man of large benevolence, and he went so far as to declare that Aaron's charities were a means to an end. "He looks upon them as an investment," he said; "they bring him a good return. Did you ever know a Jew part with money without an eye to the main chance?" When he heard that it was generally reported that Aaron gave away in secret much more than he gave away in public, his comment was, "What is easier than to set such a rumour afloat? Any rich man can do it by an expenditure of ten pounds a year! If money is bestowed in secret, who is to know of it but the donor? If it becomes public, who could have spoken of it first but the donor? No one but a fool would be gulled by so transparent a trick!" These detractions were generally uttered to men who sympathised with the speaker, and they were not without effect. By which it will be seen that Aaron had enemies, as all men have. Mr. Poynter posed as a moral man, and it is the very essence of these usurpers of morality that each of them must stand alone, and that upon the pedestal he sets up there shall be no room for any other braggart. He was a married man, with sons and daughters, and a wife, who all looked upon the husband and father as a pattern. Whether his children followed the pattern or not does not concern this history, which has to do with the head of the family alone. Whatever a man may be in the prime of life, the earlier Adam, if it differ from the later, will very likely assert itself in the blood of his descendants, and this may have been the case with Mr. Poynter's children, despite the respect in which they held him. You come into contact with a sober-faced man whose distinguishing mark is one of intense respectability; you see him at home in the bosom of his family, whom he entertains with severely respectable platitudes; you hear his opinions on matters of current interest, a trial, a scandal in high life, tittle-tattle of the stage, the Court, the Church, and society in general. What an intensely respectable gentleman, what severely respectable views, what strict morality, what an estimable father of a family! Ah, but draw the curtain of

years aside, and we behold another man--another man, yet still the same, a man about town, philandering, deceiving, lying, and playing the base part to serve his selfish pleasures. Where is the morality, where the respectability now--and which of the two is the true man?

Was this the case with Mr. Poynter? The course of events may possibly supply the answer to this question presently. Meanwhile, nothing is more certain to-day than that he is accepted as he presents himself. But, if in the past life of such a man as Aaron Cohen may be found an episode of his own creating upon which he looks with dismay, why might it not be so with such a man as Mr. Poynter?

In a country like England, where operations of magnitude are being continually undertaken, there is room for all who occupy the higher rungs of the ladder; it is only the lower rungs which are overcrowded, and which need clearing by means of emigration to lands where there is room for the toiling, suffering millions. But Mr. Poynter chose to believe that there was not room for Aaron and himself, and he nursed and fostered a venomous desire to drag Aaron down. This desire, indeed, had really become a disease with him, and had grown by what it fed on. He hunted about for the means, he asked questions. It was unquestionably true that there were Jews who had grown rich through dishonesty and usury, and Mr. Poynter did not stop to consider that this applied equally to Christians. Perhaps it was the knowledge of his own early life that made him think, "If I could find something in his past that would bring shame upon him--if I could only rake up something that would show him in his true light! It would be the commercial and social ruin of him. He would never be able to hold up his head again." He would gladly have paid for some such discovery.

At the present time he had special reasons for hate. One reason was that the strike in the building trade was affecting him seriously. He was engaged in large contracts, in the carrying out of which thousands of men were needed, and it was chiefly against himself that the strike was ordered by the unions. He was on the brink of great losses, and Aaron had been called in as a mediator and arbitrator. The strike at an end, and the masters the victors, he was safe, and more prosperous than ever; but every day that it was prolonged meant so many hundreds of pounds out of his pocket. His fate seemed to hang upon the final advice to the men which Aaron was to give, and his profits would be large or small according to the nature of that advice. He laid the credit of the strike at Aaron's door; for in their enterprises he and Aaron employed different methods. Aaron had pursued in England the course he had pursued in France. He paid his men liberally, gave them bonuses, even to a certain extent acknowledged them as co-operators. In Mr. Poynter's eyes this was a crime, for it struck at the very root of his prosperity. "He is a rabid socialist," Mr. Poynter said; "men of his stamp are a danger to society."

Another reason was that tenders had lately been called for works of exceptional magnitude, and he had entertained hopes of obtaining the contract. Again he was worsted by this insidious enemy. Within the last few hours he had heard that Aaron's tender had been accepted. He ground his teeth with rage. He could have undertaken the works in spite of the strike, for he had very nearly completed arrangements for the introduction of foreign workmen, whom he was determined to employ if the English workmen held out. There would be a row, of course, and the lower classes would cast obloquy upon him, for which he would have to thank his rival and enemy. When he heard that he had lost the contract he said to a friend, "I would give half I am worth to drag him down." And he meant what he said.

The last meeting of the strikers was now being held. It had been called for seven o'clock, and it was known that the discussion would occupy several hours. Aaron was not asked to attend this discussion, which was to be private, even the representatives of the press not being admitted. Eleven o'clock was the hour at which he was expected, and it was understood that he would bring with him certain propositions from the masters, which, with the workmen's views, were to be discussed, and a decision arrived at. To-morrow morning's papers would announce whether the strike was to be continued or was at an end.

He studied the papers before him--the arguments and statements of employers of labour, comparisons of wages here and in foreign countries, the comparative rates of living here and there, and the conflicting views of the living wage, documents of every description, among which were pathetic letters from wives of the strikers, imploring him to put an end to the strike. He had mastered them all, and was familiar with every detail, but he read them again in order to divert his attention for this night from his own private affairs. His mind must be free; he would think of them to-morrow. He had public duties to attend to. Before all, duty.

The words haunted him, and he was dismayed to find that all his efforts to concentrate his attention upon his public duties were vain. Pictures of the past presented themselves: he saw his home in Gosport; he saw Rachel lying in bed with her dead babe by her side; he saw himself engaged in the task of completing the guilty deception, changing the clothing of the infants, and giving his own child to a strange woman,--every incident connected with his sin was stamped indelibly upon his brain, and now rose vividly before him. Very well. He had half an hour to spare before he left his house for the Jewish meeting; he would devote the time to a consideration of his private affairs.

He gathered his papers, arranged them in order, and put them in his pocket. He dallied with them at first, but feeling that he was prolonging the simple task in order to shorten

the time for serious thought, he smiled pitifully at his weakness, and completed it expeditiously.

In admitting Ruth into his household, in adopting her as a daughter he had undertaken a sacred responsibility. He was fully conscious of this twenty years ago in Gosport, and what he had done had been done deliberately. It was a question then of the sacrifice of a precious life. The doctor had stated the case very clearly. The pregnant words they had exchanged were in his memory now, and might have been spoken only a few moments since. "Her life," the doctor had said, "hangs upon the life of her child." "If our child lives," Aaron had asked, "there is hope that my wife will live?" "A strong hope," the doctor had answered. "And if our child dies?" asked Aaron. The doctor answered, "The mother will die."

He recalled the agony of those hours, the sufferings through which Rachel had passed with so much sweetness and patience, his poverty and helplessness, the dark future before him. Then came the ray of light, Mr. Moss, with the strange commission of the deserted child. He had not courted it, had not invited it; he had had no hand in it. He had regarded it as a message from heaven. What followed? The death of his own babe, the calm and peaceful death, the young soul taken to heaven, his beloved wife in an untroubled sleep by the side of her dead babe. It was a visitation of God. Could he be accused of having had a hand in it? Heaven forbid! On the contrary, who could blame him for believing that it was a Divine direction of the course he was to take? And who was wronged? Surely not the mother who had deserted her babe. Surely not the babe, who had found a happy home. The wrong--and herein was the sting--was to Rachel, whose life had been saved by the deceit. So far, then, was he not justified?

But if, before the committal of a sin, we could see the consequences of the sin--if he had seen the consequences of his, would he not have paused, and said, "It rests with God; let it be as He wills; I will be no party to the deceit"? In that case Rachel's life would have been sacrificed. There was no human doubt of it. Rachel would have died, and the blessings she had shed around her, the good she had been enabled to do, the suffering hearts she had relieved, the light she had brought into despairing homes, would never have been. Against a little evil, so much good. Against a slight error, so much that was sweet and beautiful.

But in these reflections he had taken into account only Rachel and himself--only their two lives. How about Ruth herself?

He had never disguised from himself that there was much in Ruth's character which was not in accordance with Rachel's views or his own, which she did not assimilate with either of their natures. Being one of his family in the eyes of the world, he had brought

her up as a Jewess. She was born a Christian. Was this not a crime of which she had been made the victim? He had experienced great difficulties in her education. He wished to correct the defect which exists in ninety-nine English Jewesses out of a hundred--he wished her to pray in the Hebrew tongue, and to understand her prayers. To this end he himself had endeavoured to teach her to read and translate Hebrew. She would not learn. Even now as a woman she understood but a very few words, and this scanty knowledge was mechanical. A parrot might have learned as much. She had an aversion to Jewish society. As a child, when she was necessarily in leading strings, she was taken by Rachel to the synagogue on every Sabbath day, but when she began to have intelligent ideas she rebelled; she would not go, and Rachel walked to the House of God alone. It was a grief to her that Ruth would not follow in her footsteps, and she and Aaron had frequently conversed upon the subject. "It is so with many Jewish women," Aaron said. "It would be wrong to force her; she will find out her error by-and-by." But Ruth never did, and Rachel suffered in silence.

There was another sorrow. Between their son Joseph and Ruth did not exist that love which brother and sister should bear each other. Joseph was ready with demonstrative affection, but Ruth did not respond. Aaron had taken note of this, but he was powerless to remedy it, and the lad, who was as solicitous as his father to spare the dear mother pain, made no trouble of it. Ruth respected and admired her reputed father, and in the feelings she entertained towards him there was an element of fear, because of his strength of character, but she did not love him as a child should. He, knowing what he knew, found excuses for her. "It is in her blood," he said to himself.

All this was hidden from Rachel, to whom Ruth was tender and kind. Who could be otherwise to so sweet a woman? But Rachel did not know of what she was deprived until Esther Moss began to make long visits to their home. "Esther is like a daughter to me," she said, and only Aaron was aware of the depth of meaning these simple words conveyed. In Rachel's association with Esther she had realised what a daughter might have been to her.

But now he had to consider the matter, not from his or Rachel's point of view, but from Ruth's. She was a woman in her springtime, and love had come to her, and she had held out her arms to it. And the man she loved was a Christian.

It was not within his right to take into consideration that the man she loved was a spendthrift and a scapegrace. The question had often intruded itself since she was grown to womanhood, whether he would not be adding sin to sin by encouraging her to marry a Jew. She had answered the question herself. What right had he to gainsay her? He might, as a true and sincere friend, say to her, "This man will not make you happy. He has vices and defects which will bring misery upon your home. You must not marry

him." But he had no right to say to her "You must not marry this man because he is a Christian." It would be a detestable argument for one in his position, and in hers, to advance.

Then Mr. Dillworthy might be wrong in his estimate of the young man's character. The only objection Lord Storndale had to the union was that Ruth was a Jewess. But she was not a Jewess, and it was in his power to go to the young man's father and make the disclosure to him. Lord Storndale's natural reply would be, "Let it be clearly understood. You have done this lady a grievous wrong. You are a wealthy man. Repair the wrong by making a suitable settlement upon her. But it must be publicly done, and the injustice of which you have been guilty must be publicly acknowledged." The only answer he could make would be, "It is just. I will do as you dictate."

What would be the effect as regarded himself? Among his co-religionists he was held up as a pillar of the old Jewish faith. His voice had been raised against apostasy; he had taken a decided stand against the more liberal ideas of civilised life which prevailed and were adopted by a large section of his race. Even now he was pledged to deliver a public address against the backsliding of the modern Jew, who was disposed to adapt his life to the altered circumstances of the times. He had written this address, and public attention had been drawn to the coming event. His arguments were to himself convincing, and by them he hoped to stem the tide. He had always been orthodox, and he hoped to prevail against the wave of heterodoxy which was sweeping over modern Judaism. He had stepped forward as a champion. In the light of the domestic revelation which must presently be made, how dare he, himself a transgressor, presume to teach his brethren their religious duty? His sound judgment of things which interested or affected him was due to his common sense, which, he had been heard to say, was a rare quality.

"You are always right," Mr. Moss once said to him. "How is it?"

"If I form a correct opinion," he replied, with a smile, "it is because I exercise my common sense. I do not judge from my own standpoint."

He did this now. He put himself in the place of other men. He listened to his own confession. He passed the verdict upon himself.

"This man has been living the life of a hypocrite. He has accepted money for false service. Not perhaps by word of mouth, but most assuredly by his acts, he has lied. He has violated the canons of his religion. He has deceived his wife--for money, which he pretends to despise. He has robbed a young girl of her birthright. And he dares to preach to us of duty!"

Who would believe him if he told the true story of his hard trial, if he described the bitter tribulation of his soul when his beloved wife was lying at death's door? He had counselled many men in their days of struggle and temptation to be brave and do their duty. How had he performed his in his hour of temptation? No one would believe the only story he could plead in extenuation of his sin. He would be condemned by all.

And he was in the zenith of his fame. On this very day, when exposure seemed to be approaching with, swift and certain steps, he had been honoured as few men live to be. If he felt pleasure in the position he had won, it was because it was a source of pride and pleasure to Rachel. Was he, with his own hand, to destroy the ideal he had created? Was this the plain duty that lay now before him?

"The carriage is at the door, sir."

It was a servant who interrupted his tortured musings; he had given orders to be informed when his carriage was ready. With slow steps he left his study.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ESTHER MOSS RECEIVES A LETTER.

There was an apartment in Aaron Cohen's house which was called the Cosy Room, where the family were in the habit of sitting when they had no visitors, and it was here that their real domestic happiness reigned. Here Aaron used to smoke his old silver-mounted pipe, and chat with his wife, and indulge in his entertaining pleasantries when he was in the humour; and here the feeling used to steal over him that life would hold more joy for him and those dear to him if they dwelt in a smaller house and his doings were less under the public eye.

"I am convinced," he would say, "that those who are in the lower middle class are the best off. They have fewer cares, they have more time for domestic enjoyment, they can attend without hindrance to their own affairs. Their neighbours are not jealous of them; they are not high enough to be envied, nor low enough to be pitied. There is no happiness in riches. Miserable man that I am! Why do I continue to wish to accumulate more money?"

"Because," Rachel would answer affectionately, "it enables you to contribute to the happiness of others. But I should be as contented if we were poor."

On the occasion of Mr. Dillworthy's visit to Aaron a scene of a different nature was being enacted in the Cosy Room. Rachel was overpowered with languor, and she fell into a doze. The apartment was large; but an arrangement of screens, and the disposal of the furniture, made it look small; domestically speaking, there is no comfort in any but a small room. Esther, during her present visit, had noticed with concern that Mrs. Cohen appeared weak, that her movements, which were always gentle, were more languid than usual, and that her quiet ways seemed to be the result of physical prostration. She spoke of it to Rachel, who confessed that she had not felt strong lately, but cautioned the young girl to say nothing of it to Aaron.

"He is so easily alarmed about me," she said, "and he has great anxieties upon him."

"But you should see the doctor," urged Esther, solicitously.

"I will wait a day or two," answered Rachel, and again enjoined Esther not to alarm her husband.

On the evening of this exciting day she looked so pale and fatigued that she yielded to Esther's solicitations, and, without Aaron's knowledge, sent for the physician who was in the habit of attending her. While waiting for him she fell asleep in her armchair in the Cosy Room. At her request Esther played softly some of Rachel's favourite pieces; the piano was behind a screen at one end of the room, and Esther did not know that she had fallen asleep. While thus employed Prissy quietly entered the room. The faithful woman looked at her mistress, and stepped noiselessly to the screen.

"Miss Esther," she whispered.

The girl stopped playing immediately, and came from behind the screen.

"Is it the doctor, Prissy?" she asked.

"No, miss."

Prissy pointed to her mistress, and Esther went to the armchair and adjusted a light shawl which was falling from the sleeping lady's shoulder. It was a slight action, but it was done with so much tenderness that Prissy smiled approvingly. She liked Esther much better than Ruth, who did not hold in her affections the place the other members of the family did. Humble as was her position in the household, she had observed things of which she disapproved. Ruth was from home more frequently than she considered proper, and had often said to her, "You need not tell my mother that I have gone out unless she asks you." Prissy had not disobeyed her, and the consequence was that Ruth was sometimes absent from the house for hours without her mother or father being aware of it. Prissy's idea was that her young mistress would bring trouble on the house; but she kept silence because she would otherwise have got into trouble herself with Ruth, and would also have distressed her dear lady if she had made mention of her suspicions, for which she could have offered no reasonable explanation. Prissy's distress of mind was not lessened because Ruth, when she enjoined secrecy upon her, gave her money, as if to purchase her silence. She would have refused these bribes; but Ruth forced them upon her, and she felt as if she were in a conspiracy to destroy the peace of the family.

"I did not know she was asleep," said Esther, coming back to Prissy.

"I'm sure you didn't, miss. She falls off, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Esther, with affectionate solicitude.

"As she used to do a good many years ago--long before you knew her, miss. She had gone through a severe illness, and was that delicate for months afterwards that you could almost blow her away. She never complained, and never did a cross word pass her lips. I'm glad you're with her, Miss Esther: you're a real comfort to her. I've got a letter for you, miss."

"I didn't hear the postman."

"The postman didn't bring it, miss," said Prissy, giving her the letter. "A boy. Said immejiet."

"It must be from---- no." She was thinking of her lover as she looked at the letter, but she saw it was not his hand. She recognised the writing: it was Ruth's. "The envelope is not very clean, Prissy."

"So I told the boy when he brought it to the back door."

"The back door!" exclaimed Esther, rather bewildered.

"It's curious, isn't it, miss, that it wasn't sent by post?"

"Yes, it is. What did the boy say?"

"It's what I said first, miss. 'You've been and dropped it in the gutter,' I said; but he only laughed, and said it was give to him this morning, and that he was to bring it to the servants' entrance and ask for Prissy."

"But why didn't he deliver it this morning?" asked Esther, her bewilderment growing.

"I don't know, miss. He's been playing in the streets all day, I expect. Anyway, he said I was to give it to you when nobody was looking. It's Miss Ruth's writing, miss."

Esther made no remark upon this, but asked, "Did he say who gave it to him?"

"A young lady, he said, miss."

"That will do, Prissy."

"Can I do anything for you, miss?"

"Nothing, thank you."

Prissy gone, Esther looked at the envelope, and saw written in one corner, "Read this when you are alone." Troubled and perplexed, she stood with the letter in her hand; but when the door was opened again and the doctor was announced, she put it hastily into her pocket, and went forward to meet him.

Dr. Roberts had attended Rachel for some years past, and took the deepest interest in her.

"Sleeping," he said, stepping to her side. He turned to Esther, and, questioning her, learned why he had been sent for. "She falls asleep," he said, with his fingers on Rachel's pulse. "Ah, you are awake," as Rachel sat upright. "Now, let us see what is the matter. You are not in pain? No. That's good."

"There is really nothing the matter with me, doctor," said Rachel.

"But you feel weak and drowsy at times. We will soon set that right."

Dr. Roberts was one of those cheerful physicians whose bright ways always brighten their patients. "Make the best of a case," was a favourite saying of his, "not the worst."

He remained with Rachel a quarter of an hour, advised her to get to bed, gave her instructions as to food, ordered her a tonic, and took his leave. Esther went with him into the passage.

"There is no danger, doctor?"

"Not the slightest, my dear," he answered, in a fatherly manner. "But I would advise perfect rest. Don't tell her anything exciting. She must not be worried. Get a humorous story and read it to her. Make her laugh. Let everything be bright and cheerful about her. But I need not say that: it always is--eh? If you have any troubles, keep them to yourself. But what troubles should a young girl like you have?"

He met Aaron at the street door.

"Ah, Mr. Cohen, I have been to see your wife--in a friendly way."

"She is not ill?" asked Aaron, in an anxious tone, stepping back.

"No; a little weak, that is all. Don't go up to see her; I have just left her, and she will think there is something the matter, when there's nothing that cannot be set right in a

few days. She wants tone, that is all, and rest, and perfect freedom from excitement. That is essential. Such a day as this, flattering and pleasant as it must have been, is not good for her. Keep her mind at rest, let her hear nothing that is likely to disturb her, speak of none but cheerful subjects to her, and she will be herself again in a week. Follow my advice, and there is not the least cause for alarm."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RUTH'S SECRET.

Dr. Roberts spoke so heartily and confidently that Aaron's anxiety was relieved, and the counsel that Rachel should be told nothing that was likely to disturb her was something like a reprieve, as it prevented him from precipitating matters. A few days were still left for reflection, and he went forth to his public duties with a lighter heart.

Esther, meanwhile, was busy for some time attending to Rachel, who wished the young girl to remain with her till she was asleep. With Ruth's letter in her pocket, which had been delivered almost clandestinely at the house, and which she was enjoined to read when she was alone, she was compelled to bridle her impatience. She did not dare to speak of it to Rachel, and the course the conversation took in the bedroom did not tend to compose her. Rachel spoke only of family matters, of her husband and children, and presently the conversation drifted entirely to the subject of Ruth.

"Young girls," said Rachel, "confide in each other. There is a true affection between you, is there not, my dear?"

"Yes," replied Esther, wondering what was coming, and dreading it.

"It happens sometimes," continued Rachel, with a sigh, "that parents do not entirely win their children's confidence. Joseph has not a secret from me. Do you think Ruth is quite happy, my dear?"

"I think so," said Esther.

"I am not asking you to break a confidence she may have reposed in you----"

Esther could not refrain from interrupting her.

"But, dear mother, I know nothing."

As she uttered the words a guilty feeling stole over her. What did the letter in her pocket contain?

Rachel drew the girl's face to hers, and caressed her.

"Now it is you," she said, "who are speaking as if you are in trouble. I am very inconsiderate; but love has its pains as well as its joys. You have no trouble, Esther?"

"None, dear mother. I am perfectly happy."

"See how mistaken I am; and I hope I am mistaken also about Ruth. I feared that she had some secret which she was concealing from me. Blind people are suspicious, and breed trouble for themselves and others."

"Not you, dear mother," said Esther, kissing her. "Now you must go to sleep. This is quite against the doctor's orders."

Rachel smiled and yielded. She took pleasure in being led by those she loved.

In the solitude of her chamber Esther read the letter.

"Darling Esther,--

"I am in great trouble, and you must help me. You are the only friend I have in the world----but no, I must not say that; it is not true. What I mean is, you are the only friend at home I can trust.

"Father and mother, and you, too, think I am in Portsmouth with your family. Dear Esther, I am in London; I have been in London all the week. The happiness of my life is in your hands; remember that.

"I went down to Portsmouth, but I only stayed two days. I told your father I had to pay a visit to other friends, and he believed me. And now I hear he is in London, and of course will come to the house. He is the only person you may tell; you must beg him not to say a word about my going from Portsmouth; you must make him promise; you don't know what depends upon it. Speak to him quietly, and say he must not betray me; he will do anything for you.

"Dear, darling Esther, I have a secret that I cannot disclose yet. I will soon--perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in a week; I cannot fix a time, because it does not depend upon me. But remember my happiness is in your hands.

"Your loving

"Ruth."

The young girl was bewildered and distressed by this communication. They had all believed that Ruth was on a visit to Esther's family, and Esther had received letters from her with the Portsmouth postmark on them. It was true that Ruth had asked her, as a particular favour, not to reply to the letters, and though Esther considered it a strange request, she had complied with it. Ruth's stronger will always prevailed with her. But what did it all mean? If Ruth had been in London a week, where was she stopping? Esther's character could hardly as yet be said to be formed: it was sweet, but it lacked decision, and now that she was called upon to act in a matter of importance she looked helplessly round, as if for guidance. She was glad when Prissy knocked at her door and said that her father was downstairs. Part of the responsibility seemed to be already lifted from her shoulders.

"Prissy," she said, before she went down, "you haven't spoken to anybody about the letter?"

"No, miss."

"Don't say anything about it, please. Mrs. Cohen is not well, and the doctor is very particular that she shall not be bothered or worried."

"I won't say anything, miss." She shook her head gravely as Esther tripped downstairs, and muttered, "Trouble's coming, or my name ain't what it is."

"I am so glad you are here, father," said Esther; "I have something to tell you."

"I have something to tell you," said Mr. Moss. "Such an odd impression! Of course I must be mistaken. But first I want to know how Mrs. Cohen is. I thought she was not looking strong to-day."

Esther told him of the doctor's visit and the instructions he had given, and then handed him Ruth's letter, which he read in silence.

"I don't like the look of it," he said. "I hate mystery, and I cannot decide immediately whether it ought to be kept from Mr. Cohen."

"Oh, father," cried Esther, "Ruth will never forgive me if I betray her."

"I don't think it is a question of betrayal," said Mr. Moss. "She tells you to speak to me, and you have done so. I take the blame on myself, whatever happens. My dear, you are

not old enough to understand such matters, and you must leave this to me. The letter will be better in my keeping than in yours. Just consider, Esther; would you have behaved so?"

"No, father, I could not."

"There is the answer. The odd impression I spoke of was that I saw Ruth to-night in a hansom cab. I thought I was mistaken, but now I am convinced it was she. If I had known what I know now I should have followed her. As to Ruth never forgiving you, what will Mr. Cohen's feelings be towards you when he discovers that you have acted in a treacherous manner towards him and his wife? Ruth is very little older than yourself, and I am afraid cannot discriminate between right and wrong; she must not be allowed to drag us into a conspiracy against the peace of the family."

Esther was dismayed; she had not looked upon it in this light.

"Was Ruth alone?" she asked, in a faltering voice.

"No, she had a gentleman with her. It is a bad business--a bad business. I intended to return to Portsmouth to-morrow, but now I shall remain till the matter is cleared up."

"Shall you speak to Mr. Cohen to-night, father?"

"No. I shall do nothing till the morning; I must have time to consider how to act. Mr. Cohen will not be home till past midnight, and he will be completely tired out with the fatigues of the day. To think that it should turn out so! Good-night, my dear child. Get to bed, and try to sleep. Things may turn out better than we expect, after all."

But despite that hope Mr. Moss, when he left Aaron's house, could find nothing more cheerful to occupy his mind than the Miserere from "Il Trovatore," which he hummed dolefully as he trudged through the streets. There was very little sleep for his daughter on this night, and very little also for Aaron Cohen. The cloud that was gathering was too ominous for repose.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HONOURABLE PERCY STORNDALE MAKES AN APPEAL TO AARON COHEN.

On the following morning Aaron had a great deal of work before him which could not be neglected. He had returned home late on the previous night, after an exhausting interview with the strikers, in which he had won the battle. It is to be doubted whether any other man in London could have exercised so commanding an influence over men who were convinced that they had right on their side, and many of whom were still inclined to hold out for better terms than Aaron was empowered to offer them; but his arguments prevailed in the end, and the men gave way. Neither the masters nor the strikers obtained all they desired; each side had to concede something; though, in the main, the advantage lay with the men, whose delegates, in generous words, acknowledged the services which Aaron had rendered to the cause they were fighting for. The newspapers, in recording that the strike was over, were no less generous in their acknowledgments. "It will be long remembered," said the editor of a leading journal, "that a grave danger has been averted chiefly through the influence and high character of one of the most esteemed of our Jewish citizens. To Mr. Aaron Cohen, and to him alone, may be said to be due the credit of terminating a strike which, had it been much longer continued, would have had a disastrous effect upon an important industry, and in the performance of a service which was as disinterested as it was arduous he has established his claim to be ranked among the public benefactors of the country. Masters may well take a lesson from this gentleman, who, in the building up of his own fortunes, has been consistently mindful of the interests and well-being of his workmen. Herein we see the value of character and its influence on the masses. Were capital generally to follow the example of Mr. Cohen in its dealings with labour there would be less room for discontent. In another column will be found an account of the proceedings which took place at this gentleman's house yesterday, upon which occasion a deserved honour was paid to him. If he deserved, as he certainly did, such a tribute yesterday, he deserves it tenfold to-day when the thanks of the nation are due to him for his successful efforts in the builders' strike." At any other time Aaron would have been proud to read these remarks, but now he put the newspaper aside with a heavy sigh. The higher the position the greater the fall. He alone knew that his fair reputation was in danger, and that the honourable edifice he had built for himself was tottering to the ground. From these matters, however, his attention was diverted by a visit from his wife's physician.

Dr. Roberts had not been quite ingenuous in his report of Rachel's condition: his ripe experience warned him that a crisis might occur, and that a few days must elapse before the extent of the danger, if any existed, could be ascertained. It was this that caused him

to call early at the house to see Rachel, and when he left her he sought Aaron to confer with him. The moment the doctor entered the room Aaron's thoughts flew to his beloved, and he started up in alarm.

"Doctor!" he cried.

"Now what do you see in my face," said Dr. Roberts, with a smile, "to cause you to start up so suddenly? Sit down, sit down, and let me tell you at once that your wife is in no danger--only she requires a little care and attention. I have come to give you advice, if you will listen to it."

"Of course I will listen to it."

"Of course you will; and you will follow it."

"To the letter."

"That is right. My advice is that you send Mrs. Cohen at once to the seaside. She will be better out of London. I saw on her table a number of letters--begging letters, I was informed--which Miss Moss had been reading to her. Just now she is not equal to the strain. She must be free from the emotions created by these appeals, and from anything of an agitating nature. Perfect repose and rest--that is what she requires, with brighter sunshine and a balmier air, and in a week or two she will be well. I should recommend Bournemouth, and if you wish I will run down and see her there. Meanwhile, I will give you the name of a physician who will understand her case as well as I do. Let Miss Moss go with her; your wife is fond of her, and she is a cheerful companion, though she seems to be rather depressed this morning. I have been lecturing the young lady, and she tells me she has had a bad night. It will do them both good."

"I cannot accompany her to-day," said Aaron. "I have so many important matters to attend to. We will go down to-morrow."

"Send her to-day," urged the physician, "and you can follow on to-morrow, or later. It is good weather for travelling; in a few hours it may change. To-day, by all means. We doctors are autocrats, you know, and will not listen to argument. To-day."

Had the business he had to attend to been of less importance, Aaron would have put it aside, and travelled with his wife to the seaside; but it was business which imperatively demanded his personal attention, and he had no alternative but to send her with Esther and the ever faithful Prissy, in whom he had every confidence. He accompanied them as far as the railway station, and held Rachel's hand in his as they drove to Waterloo. It was

not only that they were still lovers, but that he felt the need of the moral support which he derived from the tender hand-clasp.

"Do not be anxious about me, dear," said Rachel, "and do not come down till Friday. Then you can stop till Monday morning, and perhaps Joseph will be home by then, and he can come with you. He will not be able to keep away from Esther, and he has but a short time to remain in England. Nothing really ails me except a little weakness which I shall soon overcome. If Ruth is happy in Portsmouth let her remain there if she wishes. We are growing old, love, you and I, and we must not tie our children too closely to our sides. They will fly away as the young birds do, and make nests of their own. May their homes be as happy as ours has been--may their lives be as happy as you have made mine!"

In such-like tender converse the minutes flew by, and as the train steamed out of the station Rachel's face, with a bright smile upon it, was turned towards her husband.

On the road home Aaron telegraphed to Ruth in Portsmouth, addressing his telegram to Mr. Moss's house; he desired her to return to London to-day or to-morrow. He felt that he must speak to her with as little delay as possible respecting the disclosure which Mr. Dillworthy had made to him; it would be playing the coward's part, indeed, if he did not immediately ascertain the nature of her feelings for the Honourable Percy Storndale. Thus far the first step of his duty; what steps were to follow he had not yet determined upon.

Arriving at his house, he found Mr. Moss waiting to see him. Esther had left a letter for her father acquainting him with their departure for the seaside, and giving him their address in Bournemouth, which she was enabled to do because Aaron had made arrangements by telegraph for their reception in a Jewish house there. After a few words of explanation of the cause of Rachel and Esther leaving so suddenly, Aaron informed his friend that he had telegraphed to Ruth to come home at once. Mr. Moss started.

"You sent the telegram to my house?" he said.

"Certainly. I am sorry to break her visit, which she must have enjoyed, but there is a necessity for it. As my oldest friend you should not be kept in ignorance of this necessity, and we will agree that it is not to be spoken of outside ourselves without my consent."

Thereupon he related the part of his interview with Mr. Dillworthy that affected Ruth and the son of Lord Storndale.

"There is another matter," he said, "of great importance which was mentioned during the interview, and which we may speak of presently. You now know my reason for sending to Ruth to come home. I must learn the truth from her own lips."

"Strangely enough," said Mr. Moss, nervously, "I have come to say something about Ruth myself."

"Surely not in connection with this matter?" exclaimed Aaron.

"You must be the judge of that, Cohen. Did you notice whether Esther was looking well?"

"She looked tired. Dr. Roberts said she had passed a bad night, and that the change would do her good."

"A bad night. No wonder, poor child! I scarcely slept an hour with what is on my mind. You will be surprised at what I have to tell you. But first--Esther said nothing about Ruth?"

"Nothing whatever."

"You must not blame her; she acted by my directions, and her lips are sealed."

"Why should I blame her? She is a dear good child; I have implicit faith and confidence in her. You alarm me, Mr. Moss. Speak plainly, I beg of you."

"Yes, I will do so, but I would have liked to break it gradually. Cohen, Ruth is not in Portsmouth."

"Not in Portsmouth! Where, then?"

"If what she writes and my eyes are to be believed, she is in London, and has been there all the week. She remained with us two days, and then left, saying she was going to pay a visit to some other friends. We naturally thought, though we expected her to make a longer stay, that you were aware of it, and that the plan of her visit had been altered with your concurrence. Last night, as I passed through Regent Street, I saw a lady in a hansom in the company of a gentleman, and I could have sworn it was Ruth; but the cab was driving at a quick pace, and I thought I must have been deceived. I came on here to Esther, and the poor child was in deep distress. She had received a letter from Ruth, which she gave me to read. I do not offer any excuse for taking the letter from her; she is

but a child, and is quite unfit for a responsibility which, without her consent, was imposed upon her. Here is the letter; it explains itself."

Aaron read it with conflicting feelings. His first thought was that Ruth had taken her fate into her own hands. He had done his duty zealously by her in the past, whatever might be his duty in the present. If, as was his fervent hope, no dishonour to her was involved in her flight--for it was no less than flight, and desertion of the home in which she had been reared--if there had been a secret marriage, new contingencies of the future loomed dimly before him, contingencies in which the stern task it was his duty to perform was not so terrible in its import. The past could never be condoned, but in his consideration of the future one figure towered above all others, the figure of his wife. If for her the suffering could be made less--if the fact of Ruth taking her course without his prompting, even in defiance of the lessons he had endeavoured to inculcate, would mitigate the severity of the blow, was it not something to be grateful for? If, he argued mentally, she and the son of Lord Storndale were married, they had little to hope for from the Storndale family. Their dependence, then, rested upon him, and he resolved that he would not fail the rash couple. His hope of an honourable, though secret, marriage was based upon his knowledge of Ruth's character. She was not given to exaggerated sentiment, he had never known her to go into heroics, she possessed certain sterling qualities of strength and determination. Granted that she was led away by the glamour of wedding the son of a peer, he was convinced she would not so far forget herself as to bring shame upon herself and her connections. She was Christian born, and she had the right to marry a Christian; by her own unprompted act she had cut the Gordian knot. That the Honourable Percy Storndale had a double motive in pursuing her was likely enough; love, Aaron hoped, being one, the fact of her reputed father being a wealthy man the other. Well, he would fulfil the young man's expectations; there was nothing in the shape of worldly atonement which he was not ready and anxious to make.

In the midst of his musings a servant presented himself with a telegram and a card. The card bore the name of The Hon. Percy Storndale, the telegram was from Mrs. Moss in Portsmouth.

"Wait outside," Aaron said to the servant, who left the room.

The telegram was to the effect that Ruth was not in Portsmouth, and that Mrs. Moss, in her absence, had taken the liberty of reading the message, under the idea that it might contain something which required an immediate answer. "Is Ruth coming to us again?" Mrs. Moss asked.

Aaron passed the telegram and the card to Mr. Moss.

"Keep in the house," he said, "while I have an interview with this gentleman. Wait in the library, and tell the servant to show Mr. Storndale into this room."

In a few moments the young man was ushered in and Aaron motioned him to a seat.

It is a human failing to run into extremes. No man is quite so good or bad as he is represented to be by his admirers or detractors. In his anxiety to prejudice Aaron against Lord Storndale's son Mr. Dillworthy had done the young man an injustice. A scapegrace he was, without doubt, but he had been educated into his vices and extravagances--it may be said with truth carefully reared into them--and he was certainly no worse than hundreds of other men who are brought up with no definite aim in life, and are educated without any sensible and serious effort being made to impress them with life's responsibilities. He had, indeed, the advantage of many, for although he considered it perfectly excusable to get into debt with tradesmen and to borrow from moneylenders without an expectation of being able to pay either one or the other, he would not have descended so low as to pick a pocket or to cheat at cards. More of the pigeon than the gull, he looked always to his family to get him out of his scrapes; he believed it to be their duty; and it was upon him, not upon them, that injustice was inflicted when he was thrown entirely upon his own resources and he was given to understand that for the future he would have to settle his own liabilities.

He was fair-haired and blue-eyed, and passably good-looking; beyond this there was nothing remarkable in his appearance; but there was that air of good humour and careless ease about him which generally wins favour with women who do not look beneath the surface. Just now he was manifestly ill at ease, for he had never before been engaged upon a mission so awkward and embarrassing. That he was impressed by Aaron's dignified manner was evident; he had expected to meet a man of a different stamp. Each waited for the other to speak, and Aaron was not the first to break the silence.

"I have taken the liberty of visiting you upon a rather delicate matter," said the young gentleman, "and it is more difficult than I anticipated."

"Yes?" said Aaron, and said no more.

The monosyllable was uttered in the form of a question, and did not lessen the difficulties in the young man's way.

"Yes," he replied, and was at a loss how to continue; but again Aaron did not assist him.

"Upon my honour," he said at length, "I would not undertake to say whether I would rather be in this room than out of it, or out of it than in it." He gave a weak laugh here, with a half idea that he had said something rather clever; but still he met with no encouragement from Aaron. "It is so difficult, you see," he added. "I do not suppose you know me."

"No," said Aaron; "I do not know you."

"I thought it possible that your daughter, Miss Cohen, you know, might have mentioned me to you."

"She has never done so."

"It was my fault entirely. I said, on no account; and naturally she gave in."

"Did she wish to mention you to me?"

"Oh yes; but I insisted. I don't exactly know why, but I did, and she gave in. I daresay I was a blockhead, but I hope you will find excuses for me."

"At present I can find none. We shall understand each other if you come to the point."

"I will try to do so, but it is not easy, I assure you Mr. Cohen, after the way I have behaved. Upon second thoughts I do not see, upon my honour I do not see, how you can be expected to find excuses for me. But it does happen sometimes that a fellow meets another fellow who helps a lame dog over the stile. I am the lame dog, you know."

"It may assist you," said Aaron, "if I ask you one question, and if you frankly answer it. Are you a married man?"

"Upon my soul, sir," exclaimed the Honourable Percy Storndale, "I cannot be sufficiently thankful to you. Yes, sir, I am a married man."

"Long married?"

"Four days, Mr. Cohen."

"Can you show me proof of it?"

"I thank you again, sir. But it wasn't my idea; it was my wife's. 'Take the marriage certificate with you,' she said. She has wonderful ideas."

"Let me see the certificate."

The young man instantly produced it, and Aaron, with a deep-drawn breath of relief, saw recorded there the marriage of Miss Ruth Cohen and the Honourable Percy Storndale.

"You married my--my daughter, I see," said Aaron, "in a registrar's office."

"I don't know how to apologise to you, sir," said the young man, as relieved by Aaron's calm attitude as Aaron was himself at this proof of an honourable union. "I can't conceive anything meaner; but what could I do? Ruth--Miss Cohen, you know--being a Jewess, could not well have been married in a church, and I, being a Christian, could not well have been married in a synagogue. It was a very delicate point; I am not acquainted with the law on the subject, but no fellow can deny that it was a delicate point. Then there was another difficulty. Bridesmaids, bridesmaids' presents, and general expenses, to say nothing of the publicity when the parties principally concerned wanted to get it over quietly and quickly. Ruth said you would never consent; I said my family would never consent; so what else was there for it? Pray forgive me if I am expressing myself clumsily."

"Your family did not encourage the match?"

"Dead against it; from the first dead against it. Bullied and threatened me. 'What!' they cried, 'marry a Jewess!' 'As good as any Christian,' I retorted. But did you ever know a Storndale listen to reason, Mr. Cohen?"

"You are a Storndale," said Aaron, quietly.

"Had me there," chuckled the young man. "'Gad, sir, you had me there. Well, sir, that is how it stands, and if you show me the door I'll not say I don't deserve it."

"I will not show you the door, but it is not correct to say that is how it stands, as if there were nothing more to explain. Mr. Storndale, if the lady you have married were a Christian, would your family have objected?" The young man laughed in a weak awkward way. "Answer me frankly, this and other questions it is my duty to put."

"My family would not have objected," said the Honourable Percy Storndale, "if there had been settlements. You see, sir, we are not exactly rolling in money, and I am a younger son. No expectations, sir. A poor gentleman."

"An imprudent marriage, Mr. Storndale."

"No denying it, sir; and it has only come home to me the last day or two. Marriage in such circumstances pulls a fellow up, you see, makes him reflect, you know. My wife's an angel, and that makes it cut deeper. A married fellow thinks of things. As a bachelor I never thought of to-morrow, I give you my word on it. So long as I had a five-pound note in my pocket I was happy. To-morrow! Hang to-morrow! That was the way of it. I've only just woke up to the fact that there is a to-morrow."

"Was it a love match, Mr. Storndale?"

"On both sides, sir. Without vanity--and I don't deny I've got my share of that--I may speak for her as well as for myself."

"From the first, a love match, Mr. Storndale? Did it never occur to you that I was a rich man?"

"You drive me hard, sir, but I'm not going to play fast and loose with you. 'Be prepared, Percy,' Ruth says to me. 'My father is a wise as well as a just and kind man, and I don't know whether he will ever forgive me; but you will make a sad mistake if you don't speak the honest truth to him.' The truth it shall be, as I am a gentleman. I did think of Ruth's father being a rich man, and seeing us through it. But after a little while I got so over head and heels that I thought only of her. I give you my word, sir, I never had the feelings for any woman that I have for Ruth, and that, I think, is why I'm rather scared when I think of to-morrow. If I hadn't been afraid of losing her I might have come straight to you before we went to the registrar, but I didn't care to run the risk. What would you do, sir, for a woman you loved?"

"Everything--anything."

"You would stake everything against nothing, with a certainty of losing, rather than give her up?"

"I would make any earthly sacrifice for her."

"Well, sir, you know how I feel. I don't set myself up as a good man; I've done foolish things, and I dare say shall do more foolish things, but not half nor quarter as many with a clever woman by my side to keep me straight. What some of us want, sir, is ballast; I never had it till now, and even now perhaps it's of no use to me. Until a week ago I had to think for one; now I have to think for two. But thinking won't help me through, I'm afraid."

Never before had the Honourable Percy Storndale expressed himself in so manly a fashion; it was as though contact with Aaron were bringing out his best qualities.

"Was it your intention, Mr. Storndale, to come to me so soon after your marriage?"

"I had no settled intention when to come, sir, but I have been forced to it sooner than I expected."

"What has forced you to it?"

"Writs. I give you my word they are flying about, and I am afraid I shall have to fly too. When needs must, you know, sir."

"Are you heavily in debt?"

"To the tune of three thousand, sir."

"When a question of this kind is asked, the answer is generally below the mark."

"True enough, sir, but I am pretty close to it this time. Ruth's an angel, but she's a sensible woman as well. She made me put everything down."

"If I settle the claims against you"--the young man looked up with a flush on his face--
"you will get into debt again."

"I'll try not to, sir."

"Honestly, Mr. Storndale?"

"Honestly, Mr. Cohen. Ruth will keep me straight."

"Leave me your address. I will come and see you to-night at eight o'clock. Make out a clear and truthful list of your debts; omit nothing. Meanwhile----"

He wrote a cheque, and handed it to the young man, who received it in astonishment, which deepened when he saw the amount for which it was drawn. He was in no way prepared for such liberality and such a reception as he had met with.

"I don't know how to thank you, sir."

"Take care of Ruth. Be kind and considerate to her."

"I will do my best, sir."

He shook hands gratefully with Aaron, and with a light heart went to gladden his young wife with the good news.

CHAPTER XL.

A DUTY PERFORMED.

Before Mr. Moss rejoined him, Aaron had repented of his promise to call and see the young couple in the evening. This vacillation was a proof of the effect recent events had had upon his mind; it was really unbalanced; the prompt decision of all matters, whether great or small, which presented themselves for consideration, seemed to have deserted him. He felt that he could not depend upon himself in the promised interview with Ruth, and that he might precipitate a discovery, the proper time for which, he believed, had not yet arrived. That it would have to be made eventually was certain; truth and justice demanded it, and the claim should be met, but not to-day, not until other plans with respect to his future were settled. For there had already grown in his mind a conviction that he was not worthy of the position he held among his co-religionists, that it was his duty to retire into obscurity, and not presume to teach what should be done in important issues where he himself had so signally failed. He mentally asked why had he not recognised this earlier; and the answer that trod upon the heels of the question brought a pitiful smile of self-despisal to his lips. He had been living deliberately in an atmosphere of deceit, trusting to chance to avoid detection and exposure. He could lay blame upon no other shoulders than his own; he, and he alone, was responsible for the consequences of his acts. Well, he would not shrink from them, he would accept them humbly, and rest his hopes in the mercy of God. If, when the hour arrived for open confession--and arrive it must before many weeks were past--he could still retain the love of his wife, if she would forgive him for the deception he had practised, he would be content, he might even be happy again, fallen as he would be from his high estate. Meanwhile there lay upon him the obligation of lifting Ruth and her husband from poverty, of placing them in an honourable and independent position, and this task he would ask his friend Mr. Moss to undertake for him.

"All is explained," he said, when that gentleman re-entered the room. "Ruth has done what cannot be undone. She and Mr. Storndale are married."

"Married!" exclaimed Mr. Moss. He was startled at the news, but no less startled at the calm voice in which it was communicated to him. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Accept it," replied Aaron; "there is no alternative."

"It is an outrage. He should be made to suffer for it."

"He must not be made to suffer for it, nor must Ruth. Apart from the personal consideration of the matter so far as it affects myself, and from another consideration which doubtless is in your mind, Mr. Storndale has acted as honourably as we could expect from one in his position. There has been concealment and deception, but it is not for me to cast a stone against him. The young man is in difficulties, and I have resolved to clear him from them, and to provide for Ruth's future. They will expect to see me to-night; but I cannot trust myself. I wish you to undertake the task for me, and to carry the whole matter through. Mr. Moss, all through my life you have been my sincere friend, and I value your friendship; you will not fail me now?"

"No, Cohen, no; I will do whatever you wish me to do; but it is hardly what I expected of you."

"You are surprised that I do not show anger at this marriage, that I do not express resentment against Mr. Storndale?"

"I am."

"Before long," said Aaron, placing his hand on his friend's shoulder, "you will understand why I am so calm. I can trust you, and when I confess that there was in my life an hour when temptation assailed me and I fell before it, I feel that my confidence will be respected until the time arrives when all the world will know what is hidden in my breast, what has been hidden for the last twenty years."

"For the last twenty years! Cohen, that takes us back to the old Gosport days!"

"It does. But ask me no questions now, for I am not prepared to answer them. Great changes are coming in my life, and I must arm myself to meet them. If only Rachel will forgive!"

He covered his eyes with his hand, and turned away.

"Cohen," said Mr. Moss presently, "I see that you are unstrung, that you are suffering. You are doing yourself an injustice; I am sure of it, I am sure of it. I do not pretend to understand what it is that distresses you, but I would like to say that you may depend upon me in any difficulty. You may turn against yourself, but you are not going to turn an old friend like me against you."

Aaron pressed Mr. Moss's hand, and then explained the task he wished performed. Mr. Moss was to call upon Ruth and her husband, and obtain from them an honest and faithful account of their position. This done, he was to pay every shilling the young man

owed; after which a settlement of a thousand pounds a year was to be made upon Ruth as a marriage portion, the money to be absolutely at her own disposal.

"It is not a great deal," said Aaron, "for a gentleman, the son of a peer, to live upon; but his family in a little while, when they learn the truth about Ruth"--he paused, and Mr. Moss nodded gravely; a strange suspicion was beginning to haunt him--"may be disposed to forgive him, and through their influence he may obtain a lucrative appointment. From the way in which he spoke I am disposed to think that he may turn over a new leaf, and that an honourable future may lie before him and Ruth. Give her my love, and say that circumstances render it impossible for me to see her for a few days, and that when we meet I shall have something of great importance to disclose to her. Be patient with me, Mr. Moss. My words point to a mystery which will soon be public property. What you are about to do for me can scarcely be finished before the end of the week, but I cannot rest until it is finished. My own affairs will entirely occupy me, and I must run down to Bournemouth to see Rachel."

"I will not waste a moment," said Mr. Moss. "How about the money necessary for the settlement and the payment of Mr. Storndale's debts? Have you calculated how much it will cost you? A large sum, Cohen."

"It will be forthcoming; the means will be placed in your hands to-morrow. Do not return here tonight. Come and breakfast with me at nine in the morning."

Aaron sat up till long past midnight, making calculations, and arranging his affairs. He was quite resolved to retire from public life, and altogether from business; and to effect this there was much to do. He had uncompleted contracts in hand which he would transfer to employers of whose methods he approved, and he had just obtained another which a dozen contractors would be eager to take off his hands. He thought of Mr. Poynter, and shook his head. To such a man he could not entrust any of his responsibilities. Then he devoted himself to an examination of his private financial position.

After providing for Ruth he calculated that he could realise a sum of about ninety thousand pounds, in addition to which there were his house and furniture, which would realise another ten thousand. One third of this would be sufficient to provide for Ruth and her husband, one third should be divided among the Jewish charities, and one third should be invested for himself and Rachel. This would produce an income of between eight and nine hundred pounds, amply sufficient for the maintenance of a comfortable home either in London or the country.

"Rachel will be content," he thought; "and the years that are left to us shall be passed in peace, away from the turmoil and fever of life. If she will but forgive me--if she will but forgive!"

All depended upon that.

He held offices of honour in the synagogue which he would immediately resign; there and then he wrote his letters of resignation. There had been a time when he was called upon to support a movement in respect of these honourable offices. A man who had grown rich by usury and fraud had succeeded in getting himself nominated for a high position in the synagogue, and this had aroused the displeasure of the more respectable members of the community, who had enlisted Aaron on their side. His all-powerful influence had settled the question, and the usurer was taught a salutary lesson. From that time a strict watch was kept upon these dignities, which were conferred upon none whose past lives would not bear strict scrutiny. Aaron thought of this as he drew forth the address upon modern Judaism he had undertaken to deliver, hoping thereby to counteract the loose views of religious obligations which threatened to sap the foundations of the old faith. He read the powerful arguments he had written to this end, and sighed as he read.

"Not for me the task," he murmured. "Not for me. I am not worthy. It is for me to learn, not to teach."

He tore the manuscript and burned it; he had forfeited the right to show his brethren the path of duty.

At length he came to the end of his labours. Before he retired to rest he prayed long and fervently, and offered up supplications for forgiveness.

At nine o'clock in the morning Mr. Moss presented himself, and reported what he had done.

"Everything is in such straight order," he said, "that the whole business can be finished to-morrow."

"It will be a great weight off my mind," said Aaron, "when all the papers are signed. I have letters from Rachel and Esther." He passed the young girl's letter to Mr. Moss. "She says there is no change in Rachel, but that she thinks the air and change of scene are doing her good. If you write to Esther do not hint at any impending trouble, and do not mention Ruth's name, lest Rachel should suspect that something was wrong. I ought to tell you, Mr. Moss, that I have resolved to retire into private life; I shall be much

happier, and I am sure Rachel will be. It is a sudden resolution, and I daresay my friends will be surprised; but I am fixed, nothing can induce me to change my mind."

"And your contracts, Cohen?" asked Mr. Moss, who was sufficiently familiar with Aaron's character to know that remonstrance at present would be thrown away.

"I shall transfer them. My earnest wish is that I shall be forgotten, and allowed to live in peace. I am growing old; let my place, which I unworthily hold, be occupied by a better man."

"That is hardly likely to come to pass," said Mr. Moss, gravely. "You are not old; you are in the prime of life, with very many years of usefulness before you. But I will not argue with you; when you have recovered from your depression, when Rachel is well again, you will think better of it. We need you; no other man can fill your place, and you will not be allowed to retire without remonstrance. But we will wait till Sunday, when you are to deliver your address upon 'Judaism, its Duties and Obligations.' After it is delivered it will be printed in pamphlet form, will it not?"

"No; it will be neither delivered nor printed."

"Cohen!" exclaimed Mr. Moss, amazed at this statement.

"It is as I say, Mr. Moss," said Aaron, firmly.

"But it is expected; it is looked forward to, and the best results are anticipated from it. You will not go from your word?"

"I must. The address is destroyed. I must bear whatever is said of me; I accept it as part of my punishment."

"Of your punishment! I do not understand you."

"You will by-and-by. Mr. Moss, the man who presumes to set down laws of right and wrong should be above reproach. Can a thief preach honesty? Can a liar lift his voice in praise of truth?"

"These are strange utterances, Cohen, from your lips."

"There is a sad foundation for them. To know yourself--that is the height of human wisdom; and I have learned too late. Pray do not continue the subject; you stand in the dark, I in the light."

"Well, well," said Mr. Moss, with a sigh, "we will speak of this another time. But I do not see what you can have to reproach yourself with."

"Let every man search his own heart," replied Aaron, and his voice was very mournful. "He will find the answer there. And now we will waste no more time in idle conversation. We must go to the lawyers and the bank. Have you a list of Mr. Storndale's debts? Ah, thank you." He looked at the total, and drew a cheque for the amount. "The payment of these claims will keep you busy during the day. I will give instructions to the lawyers to prepare the deed of settlement, and tomorrow it can be signed. You will be a trustee; I will call upon a gentleman who will be the other. I shall spend to-night at Bournemouth, and will come back by an early train in the morning."

"Will you not see Ruth before you leave?" asked Mr. Moss.

"No, not till everything is finished. How is she?"

"Well and happy, and overjoyed that you are not angry with her. Between ourselves, Cohen, it is not what she expected." Under his breath he added, "Nor what I expected, either."

"She has all the more reason for contentment," said Aaron. "I wish her to be happy."

They had a busy time with lawyers, stockbrokers, bank managers, and creditors, and Aaron just managed to catch the two-twenty train for Bournemouth. He passed a quiet evening with Rachel and Esther, and answered such questions put by his wife concerning Ruth in a manner which seemed to satisfy her, for she did not press him upon the subject. With Esther he had a private conversation, and cautioned her to preserve silence as to the letter she had received. On the following morning he took train for London, and arriving before noon, found everything prepared for a final settlement of his plans for Ruth's worldly future. When the deeds were signed, and the consols bought and deposited in the Bank of England, Aaron breathed more freely. He had made some small atonement to Ruth for the deception of which he had been guilty.

"We have had no honeymoon trip," said the Honourable Percy Storndale to him, "and I am thinking of taking Ruth to the Continent tomorrow."

"Yes," said Aaron, absently.

"But," added Mr. Storndale, "the trip will have no pleasure for her if she does not see you before we go."

"I will come with you now," said Aaron.

They met and parted without any warm expression of affection. Such a demonstration from Ruth towards one whom she believed to be her father, but for whom she had never entertained a strong love, would have been a new feature in her character, and grateful as she was for his generosity she was held back by the feeling that she had given him a poor return for his life-long kindness towards her, and by her fear that he was quietly angry with her; while Aaron was held back by the consciousness of his wrong-doing. And so the young couple went forth to commence their new life, and the secret of Ruth's birth was still unrevealed.

CHAPTER XLI.

THERE IS A PROVIDENCE THAT SHAPES OUR ENDS.

Two weeks had passed away. Joseph had come and gone. In the company of Esther and his parents he had spent three sad and happy days in Bournemouth, happy because he was in the society of those he loved, sad because he was so soon to part from them. Rachel's health was improved, and it touched Aaron deeply to observe how she clung to her son and Esther, as though she were seeking in them a recompense for what she was losing in Ruth. He exerted himself to be bright and cheerful, and flattered himself that he was succeeding; but, indeed, during these days he was not the only one who was playing a part. Rachel was also exerting herself to hide the cloud which was hanging over her spirits because of the prolonged absence of Ruth, as to whom both she and Aaron seemed now to have entered into a loving conspiracy of silence.

With Joseph Aaron was compelled to be more open, and to the young man and his affianced he imparted the news of Ruth's secret marriage.

"I have not yet broken it to your dear mother," said Aaron, "in consequence of the state of her health. But she is growing stronger every day, and when you are gone I will break it to her gently." He turned to Esther, and said, "You stand now in Ruth's place, and in you I also have gained a daughter. Do not let this news distress you. Be true to each other, be steadfast to the old faith, and all will be well. And be careful to say nothing to the dear mother. Leave that task to me."

The carrying out of his intention to retire into private life, and to entirely give up the important business transactions in which he had been engaged for so many years, rendered it necessary that he should be in London the greater part of these two weeks; and Mr. Moss, who was endeavouring to get his own affairs in order, was his constant companion during this time. The private distribution of so large a sum of money as Aaron had set apart for charity was no easy matter, and the officers of the institutions which were the richer for his benevolence used much persuasion to induce him to make his benefactions public; but on this point he was resolved. The other important matter which occupied him was the transference of his existing contracts. His great rival, Mr. Poynter, was especially anxious to obtain a share of this business, and with that object in view he called upon Aaron. But the two men could not agree; it was not a question of terms, but a question as to certain stipulations with respect to wages and hours of labour which Aaron insisted upon.

"Surely," protested Mr. Poynter, "you do not arrogate the right to dictate to other employers what they shall pay their workmen?"

"Not at all," Aaron replied, "where I am not concerned. But these contracts are mine; numbers of the workmen have been in my employ for years, and I must protect them."

"Protect them!" exclaimed Mr. Poynter, angrily. "Against me!"

"Against all," said Aaron, firmly, "who would pay workmen less than a fair living wage, and would put too severe a strain upon bone and muscle."

"Bone and muscle!" cried Mr. Poynter. "Bone and fiddlesticks! You are talking common cant, Mr. Cohen."

The interview grew stormy, and did not last much longer. When Mr. Poynter departed it was with a burning anger against Aaron, and with a burning desire for revenge. From that moment he looked about for the means of compassing this revenge. "If I could only bring him down!" he thought, "if I could only bring him down!"

At the end of the fortnight Aaron was in London, his labours over, and at this time his own fortune amounted to something over forty-five thousand pounds, a larger sum than he had anticipated would be left to him.

It must be mentioned that Ruth and her husband had just returned to London, as he was informed by letter, their honeymoon trip having come suddenly to an end in consequence of Ruth's indisposition. It was she who wrote to him, and she was so earnest in the expression of her wish that he would come and see her, that he had sent her a telegram saying that he would call at eight or nine o'clock, by which time he expected to be free. He would have called earlier, but he had an appointment with Mr. Moss at six, his intention being to make to his old friend a full disclosure of his secret respecting Ruth. On the following day Rachel and Esther were coming back to London, as Rachel did not wish to remain longer in Bournemouth.

Aaron was waiting now in his study for Mr. Moss. The cares and sorrows of the past few months had left their mark upon him. The grey hairs had multiplied fast, the lines in his face had deepened, and in the kind eyes and benevolent countenance there was a touch of childlike pathos, as though the strong man had suddenly grown weak, and was mutely appealing for mercy.

Mr. Moss's face was flushed with excitement as he entered the room with an evening paper in his hand.

"Have you heard the rumour, Cohen?" he asked, excitedly.

"What rumour?" inquired Aaron, rising to meet his friend.

"About your bank, the Colonial Alliance?"

"No, I have heard nothing. I have not been out of the house since the morning."

"It came on me like a thunderclap, but it cannot be true."

"What cannot be true, Mr. Moss?" Aaron spoke quite calmly.

"Well, there's nothing definite, but you know there has been something like a panic in the City."

"I am aware of it, but it cannot affect me. I have no investments now, with the solitary exception of my bank shares. All my affairs are settled, and what is left of my fortune is in the bank until I decide how to invest it."

Mr. Moss groaned "I wish you had it safely tied up in consols. Is all your money there?"

"Every shilling. The only investments I have not realised are the shares I hold in the bank."

"That makes it all the worse. The shareholders are liable to the depositors?"

"Certainly--to the extent of the unpaid portion of their shares. Perhaps beyond that--I am not quite sure."

The flush had died out of Mr. Moss's face, which was now white with apprehension. "They're calling it out in the streets; but here's the paper."

He pointed to a paragraph, which stated that one of the largest banks in the City had closed its doors half an hour before its time, and that the panic had in consequence reached an alarming height.

"There is no name mentioned, Mr. Moss."

"No, Cohen, no; but I passed through the City on my way here, and the name of the bank was on every one's lips. If your bank stops payment tomorrow how will you stand?"

"If it stops payment for sufficient cause," said Aaron, in a steady voice, "I shall be a ruined man."

"Good heavens! And you can speak of it so calmly!"

"Why not? To work myself into a frenzy will not help me. There are worse misfortunes."

"I cannot imagine them, Cohen. Ruined? Absolutely ruined?"

"Absolutely ruined," answered Aaron, with a smile.

"And it is only yesterday that you were----" He could not continue, and Aaron took up his words.

"It is only yesterday that I was on the top of the tree. A dangerous height, Mr. Moss, but I must bear the fall. If, when they climb the ladder of fortune, men would but be careful to make the lower rungs secure! But prosperity makes them reckless. Do not look so mournful. Happiness is as easily found in poverty as in riches."

"It may be, after all, a false alarm," groaned Mr. Moss.

"Let us hope so; though there is no smoke without a fire. We will wait till to-morrow."

"Will you not come with me to the City now to ascertain whether it is true or false?"

"No. It will only trouble me, and it will not affect the result. I will wait till to-morrow."

So marked was the contrast between his cheerful and Mr. Moss's despondent mood that it really seemed as if it were his friend's fortune that was imperilled instead of his own. He was standing by the door, and hearing a knock he opened it.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the servant, "but this gentleman is below, and wants to see Mr. Moss."

Aaron took the card without looking at it, and handed it to Mr. Moss, who exclaimed,--

"Dr. Spenlove! What can he want here?"

"Show the gentleman up," said Aaron to the servant, after a moment's consideration.

"Had I not better see him alone?" asked Mr. Moss.

"If you have no objection," replied Aaron, "I should prefer that you receive him here in my presence."

They both seemed to scent a coming danger, but Aaron appeared to hail it gladly, while Mr. Moss would rather have avoided it.

"A thousand apologies," said Dr. Spenlove to Aaron upon his entrance, "for intruding upon you; but hearing that Mr. Moss had come to your house I took the liberty of following him. My errand is an urgent one."

"I am happy to see you, Dr. Spenlove," Aaron responded; "if your business with Mr. Moss is not quite private you can speak freely before me."

"I think," said Dr. Spenlove, half hesitating, "that it is quite private."

"I have a distinct reason," continued Aaron, as though Dr. Spenlove had not spoken, "for making the suggestion; it is more than likely that I have a distinct connection with your business, and this must be my excuse for wishing to be present. If it is of an incident in the past you wish to speak, when you and Mr. Moss were acquainted in Portsmouth----"

"How singular that you should have guessed it!" exclaimed Dr. Spenlove. "It is such an incident that brings me here."

"The time was winter," pursued Aaron, "the season an inclement one. I remember it well. For some days the snow had been falling----"

"Yes, yes. It was a terrible season for the poor."

"For one especially, a lady driven into misfortune, and who had no friend but a stern and honourable gentleman who would only lift her from the depths into which she had fallen on the condition that she submitted to a cruel sacrifice. His demand was that she should give her infant into the care of strangers, and that only in the event of his death should she be free to seek to know its fate. Is that the incident, Dr. Spenlove?"

"It is. I see you know all, and with Mr. Moss's consent I will speak openly." Mr. Moss looked at Aaron, who nodded, and Dr. Spenlove continued. "There is no need to recall all the particulars of that bitter night when you so kindly assisted me in the search for the unhappy mother and her child."

"None at all," said Mr. Moss; "they are very vivid in my memory."

"And in mine. Your kindness has not been forgotten either by me or by the lady whose life, and whose child's life, were saved by you. He shakes his head in deprecation, Mr. Cohen, but what I say is true. Had he not, out of the kindness of his heart, accompanied me, these two hapless human beings would have perished in the snow. I had a motive to serve; he had none. On the night we parted in Portsmouth, Mr. Moss, you were on the point of seeking a home for the poor babe, for whom"--he turned to Aaron--"a liberal provision was made."

"I am acquainted with every detail of the strange story," said Aaron. "I was residing in Gosport at the time."

Dr. Spenlove gave him a startled look. "It was in Gosport he hoped to find this home, with a friend of whom he spoke in the highest terms. The commission entrusted to me by Mr. Gordon--I perceive you are familiar with the name--ended on that night, and what remained to be done was in the hands of Mr. Moss and Mr. Gordon's lawyers. The following morning I came to London, where I have resided ever since. From that day until two or three weeks ago Mr. Moss and I have not met. It was here in your house, Mr. Cohen, that, seeing him for the first time after so long an interval, I made inquiries concerning the infant entrusted to him. He informed me that she died very shortly, as I understood, after she entered her new home. I was not surprised to hear it; the exposure on that bitter night was sufficiently severe to kill a child much older. In order that my visit to Mr. Moss to-night may be properly understood I will relate in a few words the subsequent history of the mother. She married Mr. Gordon, and accompanied him to Australia, where she has resided for twenty years. She has had no children by him, and is now a widow, and very wealthy. Unknown to Mr. Gordon she, in her last interview with me, entrusted to me a small iron casket--it was one I gave her, and I can identify it--in which she deposited some articles, of the nature of which I was ignorant. She entreated me to take steps that this box should be delivered to the people who received her child into their home, and to obtain from them a promise that if the child lived till she was twenty-one years of age it was to be handed over to her, or, in the event of her child dying or of herself claiming the box at any future time, to be handed over to her. I informed Mr. Moss of the mother's desire, and he promised that it should be attended to. I have looked over some old papers, and I find that, had the child lived, she would be twenty-one in the course of a couple of months. But the child is dead, and the mother has appealed to me to obtain the box which she delivered into my charge."

"The mother has appealed to you!" exclaimed Aaron. "In person?"

"In person," replied Dr. Spenlove. "She has returned to England, and is at this moment awaiting me in my carriage below. It is not the only appeal she has made to me. She is overwhelmed with grief at the news of her child's death, and I have the sincerest pity for her. She desires to know where her child is buried. Mr. Gordon's lawyers, it appears, were so bound to secrecy by their client that they do not feel warranted in giving her any information or assistance. She has communicated with another firm of lawyers in London, who are unable to assist her. As a last resource she has come to me to entreat my aid, which, in the circumstances, I cannot refuse to give her. My errand is now fully explained. Mr. Moss, will you see the poor lady, and give her the information she has a right to demand?"

"I will reply for my friend," said Aaron. "Dr. Spenlove, I was the person to whose care the child was entrusted. The casket is in this house, and it is for me to satisfy her. Will you step down and ask her to come up, or shall I send a servant to her?"

"It will be best for me to go," said Dr. Spenlove. "How strangely things turn out! It is fortunate that I came here to seek Mr. Moss."

"I must speak to Mrs. Gordon alone, without witnesses," said Aaron. "You and Mr. Moss will not mind waiting in the adjoining room for a few minutes? The poet's words are true: 'There is a Providence that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will.' The mother may have cause to bless this night."

He bent his head humbly and solemnly as Dr. Spenlove and Mr. Moss left the room together.

CHAPTER XLII.

A MOTHER'S JOY.

For the first time in their lives these two beings, whose fates were so strangely linked together, faced each other--the mother who believed her child to be dead, the father who had brought up that child in ignorance of her birthright. It was a solemn moment, as trying to the man who had erred as to the woman who had fallen. To him the truth was as clear as though it were proclaimed with a tongue of fire, to her it had yet to be revealed. How feeble was the human act when brought into juxtaposition with destiny's decree!

Aaron's sin had been ever before him; the handwriting had been ever on the wall. Scarcely for one day during the last twenty years had the voice of conscience been stilled, and it had been part of his punishment that the inherited instincts of the child had worked inexorably against all his efforts; her silent resistance to the lessons he would have inculcated had been too powerful for him; and in the end she had turned resolutely from the path into which, with inward reproaches, he had endeavoured to lead her, and had obeyed the promptings of her nature in mapping out her own future.

Keen as were Aaron's sufferings, he experienced a sense of relief that the bolt had fallen, and that the hour of retribution had arrived; the agony of suspense had been almost unbearable, and he accepted with mournful resignation the decree which ordained that he should pass judgment upon himself.

A difficult task lay before him; the revelation he had to make must be made with tact and delicacy, in consideration for the mother's feelings. Joy, as well as sorrow, has its fears.

Forgetful for the moment of his own domestic grief, a sympathetic pity for the bereaved woman stirred Aaron's heart. Her tribulation was expressed in her face, which was pale with woe; her eyes were suffused with tears; her limbs trembled as she sank into the chair which he placed for her. It was not he alone who was experiencing the tortures of remorse.

Mrs. Gordon was in mourning, and Aaron knew it was as much for her child as for her husband. Except that time had told its tale there was little change in her, and few persons who had known her in her springtime would have failed to recognise her in her middle age. Her union with Mr. Gordon had not been entirely unhappy; he had performed his duty towards her, as she had done towards him, and though he had a

suspicion that through all the long years she never lost sight of her secret sorrow, he made no reference to it, and she, on her part, did not intrude it upon him. Only on his deathbed had he spoken of her child, and had given her an imperfect clue, which she was now following up. Bitter was the knowledge she had gained. Her child was dead. Free, and in possession of great wealth, she was alone, without a tie in the world. All her bright dreams had faded. She had indulged the hope that her child still lived, and as she travelled back to England had raised up mental pictures of her daughter which filled her with joy. The presumption was that the young girl was living in a poor home, and was perhaps working for a livelihood. To lift her from poverty to wealth, to make a lady of her, to load her with gifts, to educate her for the new and higher station in life in which she was now to move, to love and caress her, to travel with her through the pleasure grounds of Europe--these were the dreams in which she had indulged. Innumerable were the pictures she had raised on her voyage home of the joy and delight of her daughter, and of the happy days in store for them. The information she received from Dr. Spenlove had killed these hopes, and her yearning desire now was to visit the grave of the babe she had deserted, and to weep over it tears of bitter repentance. It was not so much to reclaim the iron box containing the clue to a shameful episode in her youthful life, as to learn where her babe was buried, that she wished to learn into whose care her child had been given. There was a time when she nursed a fierce desire for revenge upon the man who had betrayed her, but this desire had burnt itself away, and she would be content that the melancholy memories of the past should be buried in oblivion. No good result would accrue from rekindling the smouldering ashes of an experience so mournful. She had lived down the shame; no word of reproach had been uttered against her; let the dead past bury its dead.

For a few moments there was silence between her and Aaron, and she was the first to speak.

"Dr. Spenlove has told me all," she said.

"He has told you what he knows," said Aaron, "but you have something more to hear. Mrs. Gordon, it was I who undertook the charge of your child. Mr. Moss brought her to me in Gosport, and delivered to me also the casket which you entrusted to Dr. Spenlove. I return it to you now, in the same condition as it was handed to me. You will oblige me by convincing yourself that it has not been tampered with."

She unlocked the box with a key she carried in her purse, and taking from it the letters she had deposited therein, glanced over them with a bitter smile, then replaced them in their hiding-place, and relocked the casket.

"There was nothing else in it?" asked Aaron.

"Nothing else," she replied; "it is as I delivered it to Dr. Spenlove. Tell me about my child. Did she live long? Was she buried in Gosport? You will tell me the truth; you will conceal nothing from me?"

"I will tell you the truth; I will conceal nothing from you; but what I have to say must be said in my own way. Prepare yourself for a strange story, but have no fear. You are the first person to whom it will be revealed. When Mr. Moss left your child with me there were two babes in my house of the same age, and we were in deep poverty and distress. My wife--my beloved wife lay at the point of death"--he covered his eyes with his hands. "Bear with me; these recollections overcome me." Presently he resumed. "But a short time before her confinement she had been stricken with blindness. Her own child, whose face she had never seen, lay quiet and still in her arms. The doctor who attended her feared the worst, and said that her life depended upon the life of her babe. If our child died on the morrow the mother would die; if our child lived, the mother would live. Temptation assailed me, and to save the life of my beloved wife I yielded to it. How can I expect you to forgive me for what I did in the agony of my heart?"

Again he paused, and tears gushed from his eyes. Mrs. Gordon sank back in her chair; there was not a vestige of colour in her face.

"My God! My God!" she murmured. "Have I not suffered enough?"

The words recalled him to himself. He begged her to have courage, to be strong; there was no new suffering in store for her, he said; what he had to relate would bring joy into her life. He gave her wine, and when she had recovered he proceeded with his story, and gradually and tenderly revealed to her the truth. As he proceeded her face shone with incredulous joy, her heart beat tumultuously with the prospect of this unexpected happiness; and when his story was finished, and he sat before her with bowed head, there was a long, long silence in the room. He dared utter no further words; in silent dread he waited for his condemnation.

He felt a hand upon his knee, and looking down he saw her kneeling at his feet. She was transfigured; the spirit of youth shone in her countenance, and she took his hand, and kissed it again and again, bedewing it with happy tears. He gazed at her in wonder. He had expected revilings, and she was all tenderness.

"Is it true?" she murmured. "Oh! is it true? At such a time as this you would not deceive me!"

"Heaven forbid!" he answered. "What I have related is the solemn truth."

"And my child lives?"

"She lives."

"God in heaven bless you! She lives--my daughter lives!"

"And you do not blame me--you do not reproach me?"

"I shall bless you to my dying day! Oh, my heart, my heart! It will burst with happiness!"

He entreated her to be composed, and in a little while she was calmer. Then for the first time he wrested himself from the environment of his own selfish sorrows; he put himself in her place, and understood the sacred joy which animated her. She was all eagerness to see her child, but Aaron bade her restrain her impatience; he had much more to relate which it was necessary she should hear.

"But I must see her to-night!" she cried.

"You shall see her to-night. I will take you to her."

She was fain to be satisfied with this assurance, but she would not be content till she saw a portrait of Ruth. He gave her a cabinet photograph, and she gazed at it longingly, yearningly.

"She is beautiful, beautiful!"

"Yes, she is a beautiful girl," said Aaron; and then proceeded with the story, saying nothing, however, of what he had done for the young couple. At first she was grieved to hear that Ruth was married, but she found some consolation in the reflection that she had married into an honourable family. When Aaron related the particulars of the lawyer's visit to him, commissioned by Lord Storndale because of his stern objection to his son marrying a Jewess, she exclaimed,--

"But Ruth is not a Jewess!" and was appalled by the thought that her daughter was not born in wedlock. A child of shame! How would she be received? It was her turn now to fear, and Aaron, whose native shrewdness had returned to him, divined her fear; but it was not for him to moot the subject.

"My child," she said, with hot blushes on her face, "believes herself to be your daughter?"

"She does. It was my intention to undeceive her to-night."

"You know my story?"

"It was imparted to me," he replied, with averted head, "when I was asked to receive your child."

"Who knows the truth," she asked, trembling and hesitating, "about me?"

"I, Mr. Moss, Dr. Spenlove, and your husband's lawyers."

"No other persons?"

"No other persons." He took her hand. "Dear lady, from my heart I pity and sympathise with you. If I can assist you in any way----"

"You can--you can!" she cried. "For God's sake do not destroy the happiness that may be mine!"

"As Heaven is my judge, no word shall pass my lips. Be comforted, be comforted. The lawyers' lips are sealed, as you have already learned, and I will answer for Mr. Moss and Dr. Spenlove. Say to her and to her husband's family what you will--it will be justified. Your secret is safe."

She thanked him humbly and gratefully; it was she who was abashed; it was she who had to implore for mercy; and it was due to his wisdom that her aching heart was eased.

"If I can repay you--if I can repay you!" she murmured.

"You can repay me by saying you forgive me for the sin I committed."

"Your sin!" she cried, in amazement. "You, who have brought up my child in virtue and honour! At my door lies the sin, not at yours."

"You forget," he groaned; "I have sinned against my wife, whom I love with a love dearer than life itself, and she has yet to receive the confession I have made to you. It was my love for her that led me into the error."

"An error," said Mrs. Gordon, in tender accents, "that has saved a daughter from regarding her mother with abhorrence. Dear friend, God sees and judges, and surely He will approve what you have done. A grateful mother blesses you!"

"Remain here," said Aaron. "I will speak to my friends and yours, and then I will conduct you to your daughter."

CHAPTER XLIII.

A PANIC IN THE CITY.

On the following morning Aaron was up earlier than usual, and in the daily papers he read the confirmation of the intelligence which Mr. Moss had imparted to him. The panic on the Stock Exchange had grown to fever heat, and fortunes were already being won and lost. The bank in which his money was deposited, and in which he held a large number of shares, was tottering, and he knew that he was ruined if it could not weather the storm.

Mr. Moss found him reading the news over his breakfast-table. Business, as we know, had not prospered with Mr. Moss of late years; his investments had turned out badly, and he was in low water himself. He had placed his dependence upon Aaron to pull him through, and the rock he had depended upon was crumbling away.

"You are also in trouble, Mr. Moss," said Aaron, as his friend made his appearance.

"I have brought the second edition of the morning papers," replied Mr. Moss, with a white face. "The Stock Exchange is in a blaze, and the world is coming to an end."

"There will be misery in many homes," said Aaron. "It is the innocent who will chiefly suffer. I pity them sincerely."

"Everything is going to the dogs," groaned Mr. Moss.

"Have you breakfasted?"

"Had breakfast at seven o'clock. Couldn't sleep a wink all night, and could hardly eat a mouthful!"

"Why?"

"Why?" exclaimed Mr. Moss. "What a question to ask when ruin stares a man in the face!"

"I hope," said Aaron, gravely, "that you are not deeply involved."

"I am up to my neck. But what is my position compared with yours? Cohen, you are a mystery."

"Because I accept the inevitable? Can you show me how I can improve matters?"

"No, I can't," answered Mr. Moss, with a deep groan; "only if I had capital I could make a fortune."

"In what way?"

"By joining the bears. Cohen, you have a grand chance before you. Your credit is good. There is nothing for it but a plunge. It will set you right. Luck has been with you all your life; it will be with you now."

"How if it goes the other way, Mr. Moss?"

"What if it does? You will be no worse off than a thousand men who are plunging."

"The majority of whom, before another sun rises, will find themselves disgraced. No, Mr. Moss, no. I have never dabbled in stocks and shares at the risk of my good name, and I never will. There is but one way to meet misfortune, and that is the straight way. We will go to the City and ascertain, if we can, exactly how matters stand. Rachel and Esther do not return from Bournemouth till the afternoon."

In the City they learned the worst, and Aaron realised that he was beggared.

"Can you save nothing from the wreck?" asked Mr. Moss.

"Nothing," replied Aaron. "It may be that all I possess will not be sufficient to clear me. I think you had better take Esther back with you to Portsmouth; you have been absent from your business too long."

"I must go this evening," said Mr. Moss; "but Esther can stay. She will be a comfort to Mrs. Cohen."

"No, take her with you. In this crisis Rachel, I know, would prefer to be alone with me. Besides," he added, with a sad smile, "I have to provide another home, and I must be careful of my shillings."

"Another home, Cohen! What do you mean?"

"With certain ruin staring me in the face, and with claims coming upon me which I may not be able to meet, I must begin immediately to retrench. Our establishment is an

expensive one, and I dare not carry it on a day longer than is necessary. Rachel and I will sleep in the house to-night for the last time. To-morrow I will pay off the servants, and we shall move into humbler quarters. So tumble down all our grand castles. Well, it has happened to better men, who, after many years of toil, have to begin life all over again. Rachel will not mind; we have faced poverty before to-day, and will face it again cheerfully."

"It drives me wild to hear you speak like that," exclaimed Mr. Moss. "You are looking only on the black side. If you had the money you have got rid of the last two or three weeks----"

"Hush, Mr. Moss, hush!" said Aaron, interrupting him. "It is a consolation to me to know that the greater part of my legitimately earned fortune has been so well bestowed. I am glad I did not wait to make reparation for the great error of my life. Rachel has yet to hear my confession. If I obtain her forgiveness I can face the future bravely and cheerfully."

Under the seal of confidence Aaron had made Mr. Moss and Dr. Spenlove acquainted with the particulars of the story of the two babes, and of the deception he had practised in his home in Gosport. Mr. Moss was not greatly astonished, for the hints lately dropped by his friend had prepared him for some disclosure of a strange nature. "Besides," he said inwardly to himself, "Ruth bears no likeness to either Mr. or Mrs. Cohen. It is a mercy she fell in love with that Storndale fellow; it would never have done for her to marry a Jew. Cohen would not have permitted it. But how blind we have all been!" In his weak moments Mr. Moss was rather inclined to be wise after the event. Both he and Dr. Spenlove had pledged themselves to secrecy, but when they proceeded to commend Aaron for the act and to find justification for it he stopped them. "It is a matter between me and my conscience," he said, and added mentally, "and between me and my beloved."

On this disastrous morning, as they walked from the City, Mr. Moss asked Aaron when he intended to reveal the secret to his wife.

"As soon as I can summon courage to speak," Aaron answered. "She has first to hear that we are beggared; it will be as much, perhaps, as she can bear in one day, but in any case I must not delay too long."

"If I were in your place," said Mr. Moss, "I should not delay at all. There are women who become strong through misfortune, and Mrs. Cohen is one. I wish Mrs. Moss were like her--don't think I am complaining of her. She is the best wife in the world, but she breaks down under reverses. If only I could be of some assistance to you, Cohen----"

"Your friendship counts for much, Mr. Moss," responded Aaron, pressing his companion's hand, "but every man must fight his own battle. I am not without hope, hard as is the trial through which I am passing. It is kind of you to be so solicitous about my affairs when you have such heavy troubles of your own to contend with. Are things very bad with you?"

"Oh, I shall weather the storm, but it will leave me rather crippled. What matters? Nil desperandum. And there is just one ray which may become a perfect sunbeam."

"Ah, I am glad to hear that."

"My eldest boy has started in business as a dentist, and has commenced well. Once a dentist makes his name the money rolls in. It is a favourite business with our people."

"Yes," said Aaron, somewhat absently, "I have observed it."

"It is a kind of revenge, Cohen."

"A kind of revenge!" echoed Aaron. "How so?"

"Well, you know, in old times the Christians used to extract our teeth to get our money from us, and now it's our turn. We extract theirs at a guinea a tooth. See?"

Aaron could not help smiling at the joke, and the friends parted with mutual expressions of goodwill.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE CONFESSION.

On the evening of the same day Aaron and Rachel were alone in their house in Prince's Gate, which was soon to know them no more. Esther had taken an affectionate leave of them, and she and her father were travelling to Portsmouth. Esther was bright and cheerful, but Mr. Moss's heart was heavy; he was older than Aaron, and confident as he was in speech he was not inwardly so courageous in the hour of adversity. Ordinarily, when he and his daughter were travelling together, his blithe spirits found vent in song; on this occasion, however, he was moody and silent. Esther looked at him in surprise, and asked what made him so melancholy.

"When you reach my age," he replied, "I hope you will not discover that life is a dream."

The remark seemed to him rather fine and philosophical, and afforded him some kind of melancholy satisfaction; but had he been asked to explain its precise meaning he would have found it difficult to do so.

"I hope I shall, father," said Esther, as she leant back and thought of her lover; "a happy dream."

"I am glad to get back to you and to our dear home," Rachel was saying to her husband at the same moment. "You must not send me away again. Indeed, dear Aaron, if you ever have such an intention I shall for once in my life be rebellious, and shall refuse to go. I am happiest by your side."

She spoke tenderly and playfully, and held his hand in hers, as in the olden days.

"Nevertheless, my love, your short visit to the seaside has done you good."

"Yes, dear, I am almost well; I feel much stronger."

"There is the justification," said Aaron. "Neither am I happy away from you, but there are occasions when it is our duty to make sacrifices. This is the longest separation there has been between us in the twenty-six years of our married life."

"How time has flown!" she mused. "Twenty-six years of peace and joy. It has always been the same, dear husband, whether we were poor or rich. I cannot recall a day in the past without its flower of dear remembrance which money could not purchase."

"You make my task easier, Rachel," said Aaron. "I have something to disclose to you."

"And it is not good news, love," she said, in a tone of much sweetness.

"It is not good news, Rachel. By what means have you divined that?"

"I see without eyes. In the early days of my blindness I used to tell you that I was acquiring new senses. It is true. Some accent in your voice, the touch of your hand, conveys the message to my mind, and I wait in patience, as I am waiting now. Aaron, my dear husband, I have known for some time past that you have a sorrow which one day you would ask me to share. How have I known it? I cannot tell, but it is clear to me. You have not had a joy in your life apart from me. It is my right, is it not, to share your sorrows?"

"It is your right, Rachel, and you shall share them. I have not been without my errors; once in the past my footsteps strayed, but in the straying I inflicted suffering upon no human being."

"Of that I am sure, my love. It is human to err, but it is not in your nature to inflict suffering or commit an injustice. I am not pressing you to confide in me before in your judgment the proper time arrives. Nothing can shake my faith and trust in you."

He regarded her in silence awhile. The turn the conversation had taken favoured the disclosure of his secret respecting Ruth, but he still feared to speak of that and of his ruin in the same hour. The latter was the more imperative, because it demanded immediate action, and he nerved himself to the task.

"Your loving instinct, Rachel, has not misled you. For many years I have had a secret which I have concealed from you."

"Fearing to give me pain, dear husband?"

"Yes; and fearing that it would disturb the faith you have in me. I place so high a value upon it that my life would be dark indeed were I to lose it."

"That is impossible, dear. Banish the fear from your mind. Were the hands of all men raised against you I would stand before you as your shield, and they would not dare to strike. So long as we are together I am happy and content."

"Dear life of my life, you inspire me with hope. But it is not of this secret I must speak first. There is another trouble which has come upon me quite suddenly, and which demands immediate action. Rachel, for twenty years Heaven has showered prosperity upon me; not a venture I have made has failed, and many of my undertakings have succeeded far beyond my expectations. I have heard it said, 'Everything Aaron Cohen touches turns to gold.' It really has been so. I accumulated a large fortune, and--with humbleness I say it--no man, however high or low his station, was the loser by it. But a breath may destroy what the labours of a lifetime have created. If such a reverse has come to me, Rachel, how would you accept it?"

"Without murmuring, love," she said, drawing him close to her, and kissing his lips. "I should have but one regret--that I could not work for you as you have worked for me. But that, also, was God's will, and I have never repined. Who would presume to question His wisdom? His name be praised for ever and ever!"

"Amen. In our old home in Gosport you were happy."

"I have never been happier, Aaron. I have sometimes felt pride in your successes, but surely that is pardonable. Many and many a time have I thought of our early life and struggles with gratitude, because of the love which sustained us and gave us strength. It is the most precious gift that life can bestow. All else is nought. It is our soul-life, and dies not with the body."

"You do not value money, Rachel?"

"For the good it may do to others, not for the good it can do to the possessor; for the suffering it may be made the means of relieving, for the blessings it may bring into the lives of the afflicted and unfortunate. Then it becomes God-like, and when so used the angels smile approval."

"Dear love, you lighten my burden. When I won you my life was blessed. Listen, Rachel. This is a dark day for many men who find themselves fallen from their high estate. Despair sits in many homes at this hour."

"But not in ours, Aaron, whatever has happened."

"Thank God! It is my happy belief that this hour is not dark for us. It was my intention, Rachel, to retire altogether from business and public life, and to that end I took advantage of your absence from London to settle my affairs. My resolution was prompted by the secret, the burden of which, although I have not yet disclosed it to you, you have made lighter for me to reveal. Brought to public knowledge, which I fear its

peculiar nature will render inevitable, it will be immediately said that I am unfitted to retain my position as a leader and teacher. To tarry until that judgment was pronounced upon me would be to aggravate the disaster, and I resolved to anticipate the verdict by resigning the honours which have been conferred upon me. I have done so, and I have withstood the pressure that has been put upon me to withdraw my resignation. An examination of my worldly affairs resulted in my finding myself in possession of nearly a hundred thousand pounds. I divided this into three portions, one of which I intended to retain in order that we might pass what years of life remained to us in comfort; the second portion I devoted to charity, and it has thus been distributed; the third portion was devoted to repairing to some extent the error of which I have been guilty."

He looked at Rachel after he uttered these words, which he had spoken with averted head. There was no change in her. Sweetness and sympathy were expressed in her beautiful face, and it seemed as if her soul's light dwelt thereon.

"Do you approve, Rachel?"

"Entirely, love. Let me hold your hand."

He continued. "The money I intended for our private use was lodged in a City bank, and in this bank I hold shares for which I am liable to the depositors. Yesterday Mr. Moss brought me news of a commercial crisis in which I discerned----"

"Go on, dear husband. I am prepared for the worst."

"In which I discerned my ruin. This morning I convinced myself that the news was true."

"And we are poor again," said Rachel, in a gentle voice.

"And we are poor again. Everything is lost. I do not know the extent of my liabilities upon the shares I hold in the bank, but it is certain that my property--even down to the smallest possession--will scarcely be sufficient to meet them. I have nothing more to tell of my worldly trouble, Rachel."

"Dear love," said Rachel, sweetly, with her arms around him, "it is a small trouble, and we will meet it bravely. With all my heart and strength I will help you to meet it, and it will not make the future less happy. We cannot remain in this house; the expenses are too great."

"You echo my thought, Rachel. I have already discharged the servants, and have paid what is due to them. They expressed their sorrow, for I think they have an affection for

us, but the separation is unavoidable. To-morrow they take their departure, and to-morrow, dear love, we must move into humbler quarters."

"I am content," said Rachel, "I am happy. We have each other. Do all the servants go--all?"

"No; one insists upon remaining. I could not convince her that it would be for her good to leave us."

"Prissy!" cried Rachel.

"Yes, Prissy, the foolish woman. With or without my consent she insists upon sharing our poverty."

"Dear, faithful Prissy! Do you remember the first night she came to us in Gosport? What changes there have been since that time! Let it be as she wishes, love; I know her constant, devoted nature. She will be a comfort to both of us."

"It shall be as you say, Rachel; a faithful heart like hers is a treasure."

Rachel paused before she spoke again, and Aaron, gazing upon her, held his breath, for he divined what was coming. She took his hand, and held it between her own.

"Kiss me, love," she said, her voice trembling from emotion. He pressed his lips to hers in silence. "I have been a great trouble to you, dear."

"You have been the blessing of my life, Rachel," he said in a low tone.

"Not only your love, dear, but the thought that you believed me worthy of your confidence, has brought great sweetness into mine. You have made me truly happy; and yet, dear husband, my heart is aching--not for myself, not because we are poor again, but for you, for you; for your heart, also, is charged with sorrow. We commence a new life to-morrow, and it affects not ourselves alone, but those who are dear to us. Let this night end your sorrows, and let me share them now, before I sleep. Aaron, not once have you mentioned the name of Ruth. Is it the thought of her that oppresses you? It oppresses me, too, and it is no new grief. For a long time past I have felt as if something had come between us, weakening the tie which should unite mother and child. If anything has been hidden from me which I should know, let it be hidden no longer. I am well, I am strong. Give me all your confidence. There is nothing I cannot bear for your dear sake."

He could not resist the appeal. In a voice as tremulous as her own he related the story of his sin. He recalled all the incidents of their life in Gosport, of the calamities which had trodden upon each others' heels, of the desperate state of poverty he was in when the fire occurred which deprived her of sight, of the birth of their child, of the doctor's words that Rachel's life depended upon the life of her babe and upon his taking her away to a warmer clime, of his giving her the sleeping draught and leaving her, wrapt in slumber, to admit Mr. Moss who had come from Portsmouth charged with a startling commission, the acceptance of which would be the saving of Rachel, of his reluctance to accept the guardianship of a strange child, and of his requesting time to consider it. Here he faltered; he stood, as it were, upon the threshold of his sin, and but for Rachel's tender urging he would have been unable to proceed.

"Dear love, dear love," she said, "my heart bleeds for you! Ah, how you must have suffered! Be strong, dear husband, and tell me all. I am prepared--indeed, indeed I am!"

In hushed and solemn tones he told her of the death of their offspring, of the desperate temptation that assailed him, of his yielding to it, of the transposition of the babes, and of his agony and joy as he watched her when she awoke and pressed the stranger to her breast.

"By my sin you were saved," he said.

"By your agony was I saved," she murmured, and still retained and fondled his hand while the tears ran down her face. But love was there in its divinest aspect, and tenderest pity; and thus fortified, he continued to the end, and waited for the verdict that was to mar or make his future. He had not long to wait. Rachel held him close in her embrace, and mingled her tears with his.

"Can you forgive me, Rachel?"

"It is for me to bless, not to forgive," she sobbed. "For me you strayed, for me you have suffered. Comfort his bruised heart, O all-merciful God, who sees and judges! And, Aaron, dear and honoured husband, we have still a son to bless our days!"

CHAPTER XLV.

A POISONED ARROW.

Had it not been that public attention was directed mainly to events of greater importance Aaron Cohen's affairs would have furnished a liberal theme for the busy hunters of sensational and personal journalism, but to a certain extent he was protected by the fever of the financial panic in which numbers of unfortunate families were caught and ruined, and the fortunes of famous historic houses imperilled. He would have been grateful to slip into obscurity unnoticed, but this could scarcely be expected. He had occupied too high a station to be passed over in complete silence, and he had one bitter enemy, Mr. Poynter, who rejoiced in his downfall and neglected no opportunity to wing a poisoned arrow against his old rival. This man was furious with disappointment at having been unable to secure his rival's contracts, and when the excitement of the panic was over these arrows became more numerous, and Aaron's name was frequently mentioned in a slighting manner in those second- and third-class journals whose columns are too freely open to personal spite and malice. He saw but few of the paragraphs in which he was attacked, and those he read did not wound him; they made his friends angry (for he was not deserted by all), and they urged him to reply to them; but he shook his head, and said, "I shall not assist my enemies to stir up muddy waters. To every word I wrote they would reply with twelve. Let them do their worst." He was, however, greatly concerned lest the slanders should reach Rachel's knowledge; and here her blindness aided him. Either he or the faithful Prissy was ever by her side, and if his traducers hoped to make him suffer through the being whose love was the most precious jewel in his life, they were doomed to disappointment. Perhaps Aaron had never been happier than he was during these dark days of adversity. Now that the weight of a secret sin was lifted from his heart he had no fears of poverty. He had full confidence in his being able to obtain some employment which would keep the wolf from the door; however lowly it might be he was ready to accept it thankfully. He was not immediately free to enter a situation, for the whole of his time was occupied in settling his affairs. He had left his home in Prince's Gate, and was living in lodgings in Brixton. Everything he had in the world was given up to the creditors of the bank, and when he quitted the house, neither he nor Rachel had taken from it a single article of the slightest value. Small personal gifts which had been given by one to the other, articles of dress which they might legitimately have retained, mementos of little value, endeared to them by some affectionate association, even the old silver-mounted pipe in its jeweled case--all were left behind. Simply dressed, without a piece of jewellery about them, they turned their faces towards the new home and the new life without a murmur, and, hand in hand, walked to their humble rooms with contented hearts.

Prissy, who had gone before to get the place ready, received them with a smiling face. Grandeur was nothing to Prissy, so long as she could be with those whom she loved to serve. As happy in a cottage as in a palace, she proved herself to be a true philosopher, accepting fortune's rubs with equanimity, and making the best of them with a cheerful willingness it were well for loftier folk to emulate. Bird never trilled more happily than Prissy as she moved hither and thither, upstairs and down, setting things to rights, shifting the furniture and studying each new arrangement with a critical eye, interrupting herself every minute by running to the window to see if her master and mistress were coming. The rooms were sweet and clean, there were flowers about, and blooming flowers in pots on the window-sill. The fragrance of the flowers greeted Rachel as she entered, and her bright face was Prissy's reward.

"Where did the flowers come from, Prissy?" asked Aaron, when Rachel was out of hearing.

"From the flower-man, sir," she answered.

"Surely not a gift?"

"Yes, sir," said the unblushing Prissy; "wasn't it good of him?"

"Prissy!" said Aaron, with warning finger uplifted.

"Well, sir, they cost next to nothing, and they're paid for."

"But, Prissy----"

"Please don't, sir," she interrupted, and there were tears in her eyes and a pleading rebellion in her voice. "I know what you're going to say, Mr. Cohen, but please don't. You'd like me to keep good, wouldn't you, sir?"

"Why, of course, Prissy," said Aaron, astonished at the question.

"Well, sir, I can't, if you blow me up now you're in misfortune; I can't keep good if you don't let me have my way in little things. I'll be very careful, I will, indeed, Mr. Cohen. It's almost the first time in my life I've bought any flowers at all for any one else, and it ain't in you, sir, to take away pleasure from anybody--and did you see, sir, how happy missis looked when she came in?"

Thus inconsequentially Prissy, mixing her arguments in the strangest manner.

"But, my good girl," said Aaron, kindly, "you have no business to waste your money; you must think of your future."

"It's what I am thinking of, sir; I don't want to grow wicked, and flowers are the only things that will prevent me. It's the honest truth, sir; they make me feel good. Mr. Cohen, if it hadn't been for you, where should I have been? In the gutter, I daresay. You took me out of it, sir. I don't forget the first night I come to you with Victoria Regina in Gosport; if I lived to be as old as Methusalem I couldn't never forget it. And then when missis got me the gillard water to bathe my eyes--I should be the ungratefulest woman that ever drew breath if I could forget those things. Do, please, sir, let me have my way. You've paid me a lot more wages than I was worth, and all my money is in the post office savings bank, and it ain't mine at all, it's yours----"

"My good Prissy," said Aaron, much affected, for Prissy could not continue, her voice was so full of tears, "do as you wish, but be very careful, as you have promised. Perhaps fortune will turn again, and then----"

"And then, sir," said Prissy, taking up his words, "you shall give it all back to me--and I'll take it then, sir, you see if I don't. It will turn, if there's any fairness anywhere. And now, if you'll forgive me, sir, I must go and look after the dinner."

Aaron was very busy for several days after this making a careful inventory of his possessions in the house in Prince's Gate, which he sent to the appointed liquidators of the bankrupt bank. Of all the debtors he was the only one who did not wait for the law's decree to give up his fortune to the last farthing, and perhaps he was the only one whose conscience was free of the intention of wrong.

He had his gleams of sunshine. First, the sweet contentment and happiness of his beloved wife. The affection she lavished upon him was of so tender and exalted a nature that it made their humble home a paradise. She listened for his footstep, she stood at the door to meet him, she drew him to her side, as a young maiden in the springtime of life might have done to the lover she adored. Spiritual flowers grew about her feet, and everything and every one was made purer and better by contact with her. Then, as ill news travels fast, his son Joseph, when his ship stopped at a not-distant port to take in cargo, was made acquainted through the public journals with the condition of affairs; and, divining that his father was in need of money, he cabled home advices which assisted Aaron in his extreme need. The young man had saved some money, and he placed it all at the disposal of his parents, who derived an exquisite pleasure from this proof of affection. As in Gosport twenty years before, Rachel did not know the stress to

which her husband was put; he kept from her knowledge everything of a distressing nature, and in this loving task he was silently assisted by Prissy, whose thoughtfulness and devotion were not to be excelled. She watched her mistress's every movement, and anticipated her lightest wish. The dishes she liked best were always on the table, and everything she wanted was ready to her hand. Prissy was no less attentive to her master, brushing his clothes, and polishing his boots till she could see her face in them.

"What should we do without you, Prissy?" said Rachel.

"I hope you'll never want to do without me, ma'am," answered Prissy.

Another gleam of sunshine came to him in the offer of a situation from a merchant who had known him in his days of prosperity. He was not asked to occupy a position of responsibility, and the offer was conveyed to him in apologetic terms.

"I cannot displace men who have been long in my employ," the merchant said, "but a desk is vacant which you can have if you think it worthy of you."

Aaron accepted it gladly, and expressed his thanks.

"Fortune has not deserted us," he said to his wife. "I shall not only be able to pay our expenses, but I shall even be able to save a little. The hours are short, the labour is light; and in time I may rise to something better."

So, like a young man commencing life, he went every morning to his new duties, and returned in the evening to a peaceful and happy home.

During all this time he had heard no word of Ruth or Mrs. Gordon, and the sin of which he had been guilty had not reached the public ear. His house and furniture still remained unsold, law's process being proverbially slow and tedious. At length, passing his house one evening, he saw bills up, announcing that the mansion and its contents were to be sold by auction in the course of the following week. He was not a stoic, and it gave him a pang, but the pain soon passed away. "What have I to repine at," he thought, "with heavenly love awaiting me at home?" It was his intention to attend the auction for the purpose of purchasing two or three small mementos, towards which he had saved a few pounds. The sale was to take place on Thursday, and on Wednesday night he was looking through the catalogue, and talking with Rachel about his intended purchases.

"There are dumb memorials," he said, "which from long association become like living friends. Something of our spirit seems to pass into them, imbuing them with life. I shall not be quite happy till I get back my silver-mounted pipe; of all my possessions it was

my dearest. Tobacco has lost its flavour since I left it behind me; but I had no right to bring away anything of value, and I have always looked forward to possessing it again. Great misfortunes are really easy to bear in comparison with such-like trifles."

Aaron seldom indulged now in those touches of humour to which Rachel in the old days loved to listen. The Aaron of to-day and the Aaron of yesterday were the same in everything but that; the tender gaiety was replaced by a tender sadness, and Rachel often thought with regret of the play of fancy which used to stir her to mirth.

On this night they expected a visit from Mr. Moss, who was coming to London on business; and at about nine o'clock he made his appearance. An hour afterwards Rachel retired to bed, and left the friends together. Aaron had observed that Mr. Moss looked anxious and uneasy, but he was careful not to refer to it in the presence of his wife.

"You have something on your mind," he now said. "No new misfortune, I hope?"

"Not to me personally," replied Mr. Moss, with a reluctant air.

"To none of your family, I trust."

"No; they are all quite well. My dentist son is getting along famously; I saw him before I came here, and he told me that he had pulled out three Christian teeth to-day. Isaac of York is avenged!"

Dolefully as he spoke, Aaron could not help smiling. "But what is it?" he asked.

"I am the harbinger of trouble, it seems," groaned Mr. Moss, "and to my best friend. I was the first to bring you the news of the panic, and now----"

"Yes," said Aaron, gently, "and now? Speak low, or Rachel may overhear us."

"You do not see many papers, Cohen?"

"Not many."

"I hardly like to tell you," said Mr. Moss, "but you will be sure to hear of it to-morrow. They never spare a man who is down, For God's sake, Cohen, don't blame me! I've never opened my lips--I'd have cut my tongue out first."

"Let me know the worst," said Aaron. "It relates to me, I see. As for blaming you, set your mind at ease. You have been too good a friend to me to do anything to distress me.

Come, shake hands. Whatever it is, I can bear it like a man, I hope. I have passed through the fire, and it has left me humble and patient."

In silence Mr. Moss took a newspaper from his pocket, and handed it to Aaron. It was folded in a particular place, and there Aaron read an article headed "A Strange Revelation," in which the whole story of his sin was circumstantially detailed. He was not referred to by name, nor was Ruth's name or Mrs. Gordon's mentioned; but the name of the place in which the incident occurred and the year of the occurrence were accurately set down, and certain allusions to himself could not be mistaken. He was spoken of as a Jew who, until lately, had occupied an eminent position in society, who had posed as a friend of the working man, and had been instrumental in putting an end to the late great strike in the building trade.

"Ostensibly this may be said to have been of service to society, but in our judgment of a man's character the public issue must be set aside. The question of private motive has to be considered: if it be worthy it reflects credit upon him; if unworthy, it passes to his dishonour."

From this argument was drawn the conclusion that there was not a public act performed by "the eminent Jew" that was not undertaken with a view to self-interest and self-aggrandisement. He was a dealer in fine phrases, which, with a stock of empty professions and mock moralities which he kept always on hand, had helped to set him on the pedestal from which he had toppled down. For years he had been successful in throwing dust into the eyes of the multitude whom he had cajoled into sounding his praises; but at length the sword had fallen, and the life of duplicity he had led both publicly and privately was laid bare to view. His charities were so many advertisements, and were undoubtedly turned to profit; his religious professions, unceasingly paraded, served as a cloak for his greed and self-seeking.

"This man's life of hypocrisy points a moral. He was in affluence, he is in want; he was a leader, he has become a drudge. He has been justly served, and we hold him up as a warning and an example to all pretenders of his class and creed."

Then followed a promise of further revelations to be furnished by a competent authority, and probably by the publication of the delinquent's name, for the benefit of society at large.

As Aaron read this scandalous article the colour deserted his cheeks, his hands and mouth trembled, his heart sank within him. What could he say in his defence? Nothing. The deductions and conclusions were false, but the story was true. There was but one answer to the question whether he had perpetrated a domestic fraud, and had brought

up as a Jewess a child whom he had allowed to grow to womanhood in ignorance of her parentage and rightful faith. This answer would be fatal, and would give the impress of truth to the entire article. How could he show himself in public after such an exposure? His intended appearance at the sale to-morrow must be relinquished: he would be pointed at with scorn and contempt. Not for him the open paths where he would meet his fellowman face to face; he must creep through the byways, close to the wall. It seemed to him as if his life were over. His head drooped, his arms sank listlessly down, his whole appearance was that of a man who had received a mortal stroke.

"It is abominable, abominable!" cried Mr. Moss. "Is there no law to punish such a slander? Is there no protection for such a man as you?"

"For such a man as I?" echoed Aaron, sadly. "Ah, my friend, you forget. There is no grave deep enough for sin and wrong-doing; you may bury it fathoms deep, but the hour will arrive when the ghost rises and points at you with accusing hand. The punishment meted out to me is just."

"It is not--it is not!"

"Hush! You will disturb Rachel."

He stepped softly into the bedroom; Rachel was slumbering, with a smile on her lips. As he stood by her side, contemplating her sweet and beautiful face, she awoke.

"Aaron!"

"Yes, my life!"

"Is it late? Has Mr. Moss gone?"

"He is still here, Rachel. It is quite early."

She encircled his neck with her arms, and drew him to her. "I have had such happy dreams, dear love! Some good fortune is going to happen to us."

"What would life be without its delusions?" he said, in a sad tone.

"Do not speak sadly, dear. You have borne up so bravely; you must not break down now. Come, come--for my sake, love!"

"For your sake, beloved," he said; and as he spoke the tormenting demon which had been torturing him lost its power.

"What made you sad, love?" said Rachel. "Surely not because we are poor?"

"No, love; it was not that. But if your dreams should not come true"

"Why, then," she answered, and her voice was like music in his ears, "we have faced trouble before, and can face it again. It will make no difference so long as we are together. Aaron, with you by my side I would walk barefoot through the world, and bless the gracious Lord that made me. He is all-merciful and all-powerful, and in Him I put my trust. To the last, to the last, dear and honoured husband, we will not lose our trust in Him! Do not be sad again. All will come right--I feel it will. It is as if a Divine voice is whispering to me."

When Aaron rejoined his friend the colour had returned to his face, his step was firmer, his eye brighter.

"There is an angel in my home," he said. "Let my enemies do their worst. I am armed against them. Does this article make any change in our friendship?"

"It binds me closer to you, Cohen."

Aaron pressed Mr. Moss's hand.

"Love and friendship are mine," he said simply. "What more can I desire?"

CHAPTER XLVI.

RETRIBUTION.

The following morning Aaron went to the office as usual, and quickly discovered that the poisoned arrow had found its mark. He was received with coldness, and the principals of the firm passed his desk without speaking to him. He observed the older employes whispering together, and looking at him furtively, avoiding his eye when he returned their gaze. His mind was soon made up; sending in his name to his employers he requested an interview with them. Upon entering the private room he saw upon the table a copy of the paper containing the scandalous attack; he did not change colour, he thought of Rachel's love, and his voice was firm and resigned.

"You have read this article, Mr. Cohen?" said the principal member of the firm.

"Yes, sir; I read it last night."

"And you have come to explain----"

He interrupted his employer mildly.

"No, sir; I have not come to explain anything. I am here to tender my resignation."

"You save us from a difficulty, Mr. Cohen. It was our intention to speak to you before the day was over. But still, if the story we have seen in the paper is not true--if it does not, after all, refer to you----"

"The story is true," he said, "and it refers to me."

"In that case," was the reply, "there is nothing more to be said. We regret the necessity, but it appears unavoidable. The cashier will pay you a month's salary in lieu of notice."

"I can accept only what is due to me," said Aaron; and shortly afterwards he left the office.

Not one of his fellow-clerks offered to shake hands with him as he went away; but the pang he felt was momentary.

"Patience, patience," he murmured, raising his eyes to heaven. "To Thy decree, O God, I humbly submit. My punishment is just."

He did not return home until evening, and then he said nothing to Rachel of his dismissal. The next day he went out and wandered aimlessly about the streets, choosing the thoroughfares where he would be least likely to be recognised. So the days passed, and still he had not the courage to speak to Rachel.

"Perhaps in another country," he thought, "I may find rest, and Rachel and I will be allowed to pass the remainder of our life in peace."

On Tuesday, in the ensuing week, he went forth, and with bowed head was walking sadly on, when, with a sudden impulse, he wheeled round in the direction of his home. The feeling that impelled him to do this was, that he was behaving treacherously to Rachel in keeping the secret from her. He would make her acquainted with his disgrace and dismissal, and never again in his life would he conceal anything from her knowledge. This resolution gave him the courage he had lacked.

"It is as if I were losing faith in her," he murmured. "Love has made me weak where it should have made me strong."

He hastened his steps, and soon reached his home. As he stood for a moment at the door of the sitting-room he heard a voice within which he recognised as that of his old rival, Mr. Poynter, and upon his entrance he found that gentleman and his wife together.

Rachel was standing in a dignified attitude, as though in the presence of an enemy; her face was pale and scornful, and Mr. Poynter was manifestly ill at ease. Hearing her husband's footsteps she extended her hand, and taking his, pressed it to her lips. In this position they must be left for a brief space while an explanation is given of another incident which was to bear directly upon the scene, and to bring into it a startling colour.

Prissy had conducted Mr. Poynter into the presence of her mistress, and had scarcely done so when she was called down to a lady, who had inquired for Mr. and Mrs. Cohen.

"Mr. Cohen is out," said Prissy, "and Mrs. Cohen is engaged."

"I wish to see them particularly," said the lady, giving Prissy a card, upon which the name of Mrs. Gordon was engraved. "Are you Prissy?"

"Yes, ma'am," Prissy answered in wonder; "but I don't remember ever having seen you."

"You have never seen me before," said Mrs. Gordon with a smile, "but I have heard of you. Can I wait until your mistress's visitor is gone? I bring good news."

"You can sit in my room, if you don't mind, ma'am," said Prissy, who was greatly excited at the promise of good news.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Gordon; and she followed the servant upstairs to a room next to that in which Mr. Poynter and Rachel were conversing, and where, the wall being thin, she could hear every word that was being spoken in the adjoining apartment.

"This gentleman," said Rachel to her husband, pointing in the direction of Mr. Poynter, "has called to see you on business, and has taken advantage of your absence to offer me a bribe."

"One moment, Rachel," said Aaron; "let me first hear the nature of Mr. Poynter's business."

"I will explain it," said Mr. Poynter. "I have not been fortunate enough to win Mrs. Cohen's favour, but ladies are not accustomed to discuss business matters."

"Did you come here to discuss a business matter with my wife?" inquired Aaron, calmly.

"Well, hardly; but as you were absent I thought I might mention the matter to her."

"What matter?"

"The business I came upon," said Mr. Poynter, irritated by Aaron's composure. "I am ready to hear it, sir."

"Very well. We will not beat about the bush, but will come straight to the point. You are down in the world, Mr. Cohen?"

"Yes, sir; I am, as you say, down in the world."

"The newspapers," continued Mr. Poynter, "have been saying uncomplimentary things of you, and I have heard a threat of further revelations. I considered it my duty--in the interests of truth, Mr. Cohen--to make your wife acquainted with these public disclosures."

Rachel pressed her lips again upon Aaron's hand, which she held in a firm and loving grasp. His face brightened.

"You have rendered me a service," he said. "Possibly I have you to thank, also, for the statements which have been made in the papers concerning me."

"Possibly," said Mr. Poynter.

"Nay," said Aaron, "you suggested just now the advisability of not beating about the bush, and you proclaim that you are here in the interests of truth. Have I, or have I not, to thank you for this unfavourable publicity?"

"I have never shrunk from the truth," replied Mr. Poynter, with a lofty air, "nor from a duty, however distressing the truth or the duty might be. Society has to be considered, and we must ignore the feeling of the individual. I became possessed of certain information, and I considered it my imperative duty not to withhold it from the public ear."

"I thank you. Without further circumlocution I must ask you to come straight to the business which brings you here."

"It is very simple, and will put money in your pocket, of which, it seems to me, you stand in need."

"I do stand in need of money."

"Then the matter can be arranged. Some little while since we had a conversation concerning certain contracts which you were not in a position to complete."

"You solicited a transference of those contracts to your firm," said Aaron, "and I declined to grant your request."

"You use high-sounding words for one in your position," said Mr. Poynter, with a frown, "but I will not quarrel with you. You gave the worst of all bad reasons for your refusal."

"Whether my reasons were good or bad, you have taken your revenge."

"God-fearing men do not seek revenge, but justice. To continue. The firm to which you transferred the most important of these contracts happens at the present time to need some assistance, and hearing of it, I offer what it needs. But it appears that you have hampered them, and that in the deed of transference you expressly stipulate that no part of the contracts shall be executed by me unless I bind myself to a scale of wages and hours which you have tabulated."

"I considered it fair to the men," said Aaron, "and it is as you have stated."

"It is my belief," pursued Mr. Poynter, "that the firm will accept my aid if I adhere to the scale, which I decline to do. I know what is right, and I will not be dictated to. My business here is to make you the offer of a sum of money--I will go as far as a hundred pounds--if you will cancel this stipulation by which my friends are bound. A hundred pounds is a large sum, Mr. Cohen; it would come in useful to you just now."

"It would. It is likely you would increase the sum."

"Oh, you Jews, you Jews!" exclaimed Mr. Poynter, jocosely, thinking he had gained his point. "Always on the look-out for the main chance--always screwing out the last penny. Well, I am not a mean man, Mr. Cohen. We will say a hundred and twenty."

Aaron turned to Rachel, and asked, "Is this the bribe you spoke of?"

"It is not," she replied. "Mr. Poynter will explain it to you in his own words."

"I haven't the smallest objection," said Mr. Poynter. "You see, Mr. Cohen, it is sometimes necessary to put the screw on. Who knows that better than you? There is a material screw, and a moral screw, in this particular case. The material screw is money; the moral screw is an iron safe, of which, as yet, no mention has been made in the newspapers."

"Ah!" said Aaron.

"It is almost a waste of words to speak of it to you, who are so familiar with the circumstances. This iron safe, it appears, was given into your charge when you received the infant into your house in Gosport. You were a pauper at the time, and from that day you prospered. In a manner of speaking you became suddenly rich. Well, well, the temptation was too strong for you. You could not resist opening the safe, and appropriating what it contained--undoubtedly treasure of some sort in money or jewels. But, Mr. Cohen, there is an all-seeing Eye."

"I acknowledge it In the event of my refusing your money, you threaten to accuse me through the columns of the press of breaking open the safe and stealing the contents."

"You have expressed it clearly, Mr. Cohen. The moral screw, you know."

"And of further blackening my character."

"It can scarcely be made worse than it is. In the event of your refusal I shall certainly do my duty."

"Mr. Poynter," said Aaron, with dignity, "I refuse your offer."

"It is not enough?"

"Were you to multiply it a hundred times, it would not be enough."

Through Aaron's veins ran the sweet approval conveyed in Rachel's close clasp upon his hand. "You beggar!" exclaimed Mr. Poynter. "You hypocrite! You defy me?"

"I do not defy you; I simply tell you to do your worst."

"It shall be done!" cried Mr. Poynter, furiously. "You are ruined; I will ruin you still more; I will bring you to your knees; you shall lie in the gutter and beg for mercy! You paragon of sanctity, all the world shall know you for what you are!"

"You can use no harsher words," said Aaron. "Relieve me now of your presence."

As he said this the communicating door between the rooms opened, and Mrs. Gordon appeared on the threshold.

"Yes, I will go," said Mr. Poynter, but fell back when Mrs. Gordon advanced.

"Not yet," she said, and turned to Aaron. "I have a word to say to this gentleman. Your servant admitted me, and allowed me to wait in the adjoining apartment till you were disengaged. I have heard all that has passed between you, and I am thankful for the chance that enabled me to do so. Mr. Cohen, look upon that man, and mark how changed he is from braggart to coward. It is not the infamous falsehoods he has spoken, it is not the cowardly threats to which he has dared to give utterance in the presence of a lady, that cause him to shrink, that blanch his face, and bring terror into his eyes. It is because he sees me stand before him, the woman he betrayed and deserted long years ago. He believed me dead, driven to death by his treachery and baseness; he beholds me living, to cover him, if I wish, with shame and ignominy. Heaven knows I had no desire to seek him, but Heaven directed me here in a just moment to expose and baffle him. It is my turn now to threaten, it is my turn to dictate. You unutterable villain, you shall make some sort of retribution for the infamy of the past!"

"Psha!" said Mr. Poynter, with white lips. "Who will believe you? You have no proofs."

"I have. God's justice has turned your weapon against yourself. The safe entrusted to this noble gentleman, and which he delivered to me intact, untampered with, when I came to claim it, contained no treasure in money or jewels. When I parted with my child--and yours--I was too poor to deposit even one silver coin in it, but in its stead I placed there the letters you wrote to me, in your own hand, signed in your own name, the name by which you are known. These letters are now in my possession. How would you stand in the eyes of the world if I published them, you God-fearing man, with the story attaching to them? I will do it, as Heaven is my judge, if you do not repair the injury you have done this gentleman, whom, with all my heart and soul, I honour and revere. It is him you have to thank that your child has been reared in honour and virtue. Go! I never wish to look upon your face again; but as you are a living man I will bring the good name you falsely bear to the dust if you do not make reparation!"

As he slunk past her, uttering no word, she held her dress so that it should not come in contact with him. His power for evil was at an end, and Aaron had nothing more to fear from his malice.

Then, after Aaron had introduced her to Rachel, she poured glad tidings into their ears. She had not sought them earlier, she said, because she wished first to execute a plan which was in her head respecting them, and she had also to reconcile Lord Storndale to his son's marriage with Ruth. Her great wealth had enabled her, after much labour, to succeed in this endeavour, and Ruth was recognised by her husband's family. The fortune which Aaron had settled upon Ruth had not been used in the carrying out of her desire; it was deposited in the bank, where only Aaron's signature was needed to prove his right to it. And now she begged them to accompany her; she wished to show them something, and her carriage was at the door. It conveyed them to a handsome house in a good neighbourhood, which they supposed to be Mrs. Gordon's residence. A neatly dressed maid answered the bell, and to their surprise Mrs. Gordon immediately left them, and saying she would call on the morrow, drove away before they could reply. The maid, holding the door open to allow them to enter, handed Aaron a letter and a packet, both addressed to him. The letter was from Mrs. Gordon, and upon reading it the mystery was explained. The house had been purchased by her in the name of Aaron Cohen, and the packet contained the deeds. "In furnishing the house," Mrs. Gordon wrote, "Ruth has been the guiding spirit; she knew what was most precious to you and your dear wife." Aaron's heart throbbed with gratitude as he and Rachel walked through the rooms, and he saw all the memorials of their old home which they held most dear. On the walls were the portrait of himself and the picture of Rachel in the garden in France, which had been presented to him on the day when all his friends had assembled to do him honour. Joyful tears ran down Rachel's face as he described these treasures to her; the love she had lavished on Ruth met now with its return. In the study Aaron paused, and lifting something from the table, placed it in Rachel's hands.

"Your silver-mounted pipe!" she exclaimed.

"My silver-mounted pipe," he answered. "My life, with this pipe, and the dear picture of you sitting under the cherry tree, and holding your dear hand, I can pass my days in perfect happiness and content."

"O Lord of the Universe," said Rachel, clasping her hands, and raising her lovely face, "I thank Thee humbly for all Thy goodness to me and mine!"

THE END