

RHODA FLEMING

By

George Meredith

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***Free*editorial** 

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CHAPTER XXI

Mrs. Boulby's ears had not deceived her; it had been a bet: and the day would have gone disastrously with Robert, if Mrs. Lovell had not won her bet. What was heroism to Warbeach, appeared very outrageous blackguardism up at Fairly. It was there believed by the gentlemen, though rather against evidence, that the man was a sturdy ruffian, and an infuriated sot. The first suggestion was to drag him before the magistrates; but against this Algernon protested, declaring his readiness to defend himself, with so vehement a magnanimity, that it was clearly seen the man had a claim on him. Lord Elling, however, when he was told of these systematic assaults upon one of his guests, announced his resolve to bring the law into operation. Algernon heard it as the knell to his visit.

He was too happy, to go away willingly; and the great Jew City of London was exceedingly hot for him at that period; but to stay and risk an exposure of his extinct military career, was not possible. In his despair, he took Mrs. Lovell entirely into his confidence; in doing which, he only filled up the outlines of what she already knew concerning Edward. He was too useful to the lady for her to afford to let him go. No other youth called her "angel" for listening complacently to strange stories of men and their dilemmas; no one fetched and carried for her like Algernon; and she was a woman who cherished dog-like adoration, and could not part with it. She had also the will to reward it.

At her intercession, Robert was spared an introduction to the magistrates. She made light of his misdemeanours, assuring everybody that so splendid a horseman deserved to be dealt with differently from other offenders. The gentlemen who waited upon Farmer Eccles went in obedience to her orders.

Then came the scene on Ditley Marsh, described to that assembly at the Pilot, by Stephen Bilton, when she perceived that Robert was manageable in silken trammels, and made a bet that she would show him tamed. She won her bet, and saved the gentlemen from soiling their hands, for which they had conceived a pressing necessity, and they thanked her, and paid their money over to Algernon, whom she constituted her treasurer. She was called "the man-tamer," gracefully acknowledging the compliment. Colonel Barclay, the moustachioed horseman, who had spoken the few words to Robert in passing, now remarked that there was an end of the military profession.

"I surrender my sword," he said gallantly.

Another declared that ladies would now act in lieu of causing an appeal to arms.

"Similia similibus, &c.," said Edward. "They can, apparently, cure what they originate."

"Ah, the poor sex!" Mrs. Lovell sighed. "When we bring the millennium to you, I believe you will still have a word against Eve."

The whole parade back to the stables was marked by pretty speeches.

"By Jove! but he ought to have gone down on his knees, like a horse when you've tamed him," said Lord Suckling, the young guardsman.

"I would mark a distinction between a horse and a brave man, Lord Suckling," said the lady; and such was Mrs. Lovell's dignity when an allusion to Robert was forced on her, and her wit and ease were so admirable, that none of those who rode with her thought of sitting in judgement on her conduct. Women can make for themselves new spheres, new laws, if they will assume their right to be eccentric as an unquestionable thing, and always reserve a season for showing forth like the conventional women of society.

The evening was Mrs. Lovell's time for this important re-establishment of her position; and many a silly youth who had sailed pleasantly with her all the day, was wrecked when he tried to carry on the topics where she reigned the lady of the drawing-room. Moreover, not being eccentric from vanity, but simply to accommodate what had once been her tastes, and were now her necessities, she avoided slang, and all the insignia of eccentricity.

Thus she mastered the secret of keeping the young men respectfully enthusiastic; so that their irrepressible praises did not (as is usual when these are in acclamation) drag her to their level; and the female world, with which she was perfectly feminine, and as silkenly insipid every evening of her life as was needed to restore her reputation, admitted that she belonged to it, which is everything to an adventurous spirit of that sex: indeed, the sole secure basis of operations.

You are aware that men's faith in a woman whom her sisters discountenance, and partially repudiate, is uneasy, however deeply they may be charmed. On the other hand, she maybe guilty of prodigious oddities without much disturbing their reverence, while she is in the feminine circle.

But what fatal breath was it coming from Mrs. Lovell that was always inflaming men to mutual animosity? What encouragement had she given to Algernon, that Lord Suckling should be jealous of him? And what to Lord Suckling, that Algernon should loathe the sight of the young lord? And why was each desirous of showing his manhood in combat before an eminent peacemaker?

Edward laughed—"Ah-ha!" and rubbed his hands as at a special confirmation of his prophecy, when Algernon came into his room and said, "I shall fight that fellow Suckling. Hang me if I can stand his impudence! I want to have a shot at a man of my own set, just to let Peggy Lovell see! I know what she thinks."

"Just to let Mrs. Lovell see!" Edward echoed. "She has seen it lots of times, my dear Algy. Come; this looks lively. I was sure she would soon be sick of the water-gruel of peace."

"I tell you she's got nothing to do with it, Ned. Don't be confoundedly unjust. She didn't tell me to go and seek him. How can she help his whispering to her? And then she looks over at me, and I swear I'm not going to be defended by a woman. She must fancy I haven't got the pluck of a

flea. I know what her idea of young fellows is. Why, she said to me, when Suckling went off from her, the other day, 'These are our Guards.' I shall fight him."

"Do," said Edward.

"Will you take a challenge?"

"I'm a lawyer, Mr. Mars."

"You won't take a challenge for a friend, when he's insulted?"

"I reply again, I am a lawyer. But this is what I'll do, if you like. I'll go to Mrs. Lovely and inform her that it is your desire to gain her esteem by fighting with pistols. That will accomplish the purpose you seek. It will possibly disappoint her, for she will have to stop the affair; but women are born to be disappointed—they want so much."

"I'll fight him some way or other," said Algernon, glowering; and then his face became bright: "I say, didn't she manage that business beautifully this morning? Not another woman in the world could have done it."

"Oh, Una and the Lion! Mrs. Valentine and Orson! Did you bet with the rest?" his cousin asked.

"I lost my tenner; but what's that!"

"There will be an additional five to hand over to the man Sedgett. What's that!"

"No, hang it!" Algernon shouted.

"You've paid your ten for the shadow cheerfully. Pay your five for the substance."

"Do you mean to say that Sedgett—" Algernon stared.

"Miracles, if you come to examine them, Algy, have generally had a pathway prepared for them; and the miracle of the power of female persuasion exhibited this morning was not quite independent of the preliminary agency of a scoundrel."

"So that's why you didn't bet." Algernon signified the opening of his intelligence with his eyelids, pronouncing "by jingos" and "by Joves," to ease the sudden rush of ideas within him. "You might have let me into the secret, Ned. I'd lose any number of tens to Peggy Lovell, but a fellow don't like to be in the dark."

"Except, Algy, that when you carry light, you're a general illuminator. Let the matter drop. Sedgett has saved you from annoyance. Take him his five pounds."

"Annoyance be hanged, my good Ned!" Algernon was aroused to reply. "I don't complain, and I've done my best to stand in front of you; and as you've settled the fellow, I say nothing; but, between us two, who's the guilty party, and who's the victim?"

"Didn't he tell you he had you in his power?"

"I don't remember that he did."

"Well, I heard him. The sturdy cur refused to be bribed, so there was only one way of quieting him; and you see what a thrashing does for that sort of beast. I, Algy, never abandon a friend; mark that. Take the five pounds to Sedgett."

Algernon strode about the room. "First of all, you stick me up in a theatre, so that I'm seen with a girl; and then you get behind me, and let me be pelted," he began grumbling. "And ask a fellow for money, who hasn't a farthing! I shan't literally have a farthing till that horse 'Templemore' runs; and then, by George! I'll pay my debts. Jews are awful things!"

"How much do you require at present?" said Edward, provoking his appetite for a loan.

"Oh, fifty—that is, just now. More like a thousand when I get to town. And where it's to come from! but never mind. 'Pon my soul, I pity the fox I run down here. I feel I'm exactly in his case in London. However, if I can do you any service, Ned—"

Edward laughed. "You might have done me the service of not excusing yourself to the squire when he came here, in such a way as to implicate me."

"But I was so tremendously badgered, Ned."

"You had a sort of gratification in letting the squire crow over his brother. And he did crow for a time."

"On my honour, Ned, as to crowing! he went away cursing at me. Peggy Lovell managed it somehow for you. I was really awfully badgered."

"Yes; but you know what a man my father is. He hasn't the squire's philosophy in those affairs."

"'Pon my soul, Mr. Ned, I never guessed it before; but I rather fancy you got clear with Sir Billy the banker by washing in my basin—eh, did you?"

Edward looked straight at his cousin, saying, "You deserved worse than that. You were treacherous. You proved you were not to be trusted; and yet, you see, I trust you. Call it my folly. Of course (and I don't mind telling you) I used my wits to turn the point of the attack. I may be what they call unscrupulous when I'm surprised. I have to look to money as well as you; and if my father thought it went in a—what he considers—wrong direction, the source would be choked by paternal morality. You betrayed me. Listen."

"I tell you, Ned, I merely said to my governor—"

"Listen to me. You betrayed me. I defended myself; that is, I've managed so that I may still be of service to you. It was a near shave; but you now see the value of having a character with one's father. Just open my writing-desk there, and toss out the cheque-book. I confess I can't see why you should have objected—but let that pass. How much do you want? Fifty? Say forty-five, and five I'll give you to pay to Sedgett—making fifty. Eighty before, and fifty—one hundred and thirty. Write that you owe me that sum, on a piece of paper. I can't see why you should wish to appear so uncommonly virtuous."

Algernon scribbled the written acknowledgment, which he despised himself for giving, and the receiver for taking, but was always ready to give for the money, and said, as he put the cheque in his purse: "It was this infernal fellow completely upset me. If you were worried by a bull-dog, by Jove, Ned, you'd lose your coolness. He bothered my head off. Ask me now, and I'll do anything on earth for you. My back's broad. Sir Billy can't think worse of me than he does. Do you want to break positively with that pretty rival to Peggy L.? I've got a scheme to relieve you, my poor old Ned, and make everybody happy. I'll lay the foundations of a fresh and brilliant reputation for myself."

Algernon took a chair. Edward was fathoms deep in his book.

The former continued: "I'd touch on the money-question last, with any other fellow than you; but you always know that money's the hinge, and nothing else lifts a man out of a scrape. It costs a stiff pull on your banker, and that reminds me, you couldn't go to Sir Billy for it; you'd have to draw in advance, by degrees anyhow, look here:—There are lots of young farmers who want to emigrate and want wives and money. I know one. It's no use going into particulars, but it's worth thinking over. Life is made up of mutual help, Ned. You can help another fellow better than yourself. As for me, when I'm in a hobble, I give you my word of honour, I'm just like a baby, and haven't an idea at my own disposal. The same with others. You can't manage without somebody's assistance. What do you say, old boy?"

Edward raised his head from his book. "Some views of life deduced from your private experience?" he observed; and Algernon cursed at book-worms, who would never take hints, and left him.

But when he was by himself, Edward pitched his book upon the floor and sat reflecting. The sweat started on his forehead. He was compelled to look into his black volume and study it. His desire was to act humanely and generously; but the question inevitably recurred: "How can I utterly dash my prospects in the world?" It would be impossible to bring Dahlia to great houses; and he liked great houses and the charm of mixing among delicately-bred women. On the other hand, lawyers have married beneath them—married cooks, housemaids, governesses, and so forth. And what has a lawyer to do with a dainty lady, who will constantly distract him with finicking civilities and speculations in unprofitable regions? What he does want is a woman amiable as a surface of parchment, serviceable as his inkstand; one who will be like the wig in which he closes his forensic term, disreputable from overwear, but suited to the purpose.

"Ah! if I meant to be nothing but a lawyer!" Edward stopped the flow of this current in Dahlia's favour. His passion for her was silent. Was it dead? It was certainly silent. Since Robert had come down to play his wild game of persecution at Fairly, the simple idea of Dahlia had been Edward's fever. He detested brute force, with a finely-witted man's full loathing; and Dahlia's obnoxious champion had grown to be associated in his mind with Dahlia. He swept them both from his recollection abhorrently, for in his recollection he could not divorce them. He pretended to suppose that Dahlia, whose only reproach to him was her suffering, participated in the scheme to worry him. He could even forget her beauty—forget all, save the unholy fetters binding him. She seemed to imprison him in bare walls. He meditated on her character. She had no strength. She was timid, comfort-loving, fond of luxury, credulous, preposterously conventional; that is, desirous more than the ordinary run of women of being hedged about and guarded by ceremonies—"mere ceremonies," said Edward, forgetting the notion he entertained of women not so protected. But it may be, that in playing the part of fool and coward, we cease to be mindful of the absolute necessity for sheltering the weak from that monstrous allied army, the cowards and the fools. He admitted even to himself that he had deceived her, at the same time denouncing her unheard-of capacity of belief, which had placed him in a miserable hobble, and that was the truth.

Now, men confessing themselves in a miserable hobble, and knowing they are guilty of the state of things lamented by them, intend to drown that part of their nature which disturbs them by its outcry. The submission to a tangle that could be cut through instantaneously by any exertion of a noble will, convicts them. They had better not confide, even to their secret hearts, that they are afflicted by their conscience and the generosity of their sentiments, for it will be only to say that these high qualities are on the failing side. Their inclination, under the circumstances, is generally base, and no less a counsellor than uncorrupted common sense, when they are in such a hobble, will sometimes advise them to be base. But, in admitting the plea which common sense puts forward on their behalf, we may fairly ask them to be masculine in their baseness. Or, in other words, since they must be selfish, let them be so without the poltroonery of selfishness. Edward's wish was to be perfectly just, as far as he could be now—just to himself as well; for how was he to prove of worth and aid to any one depending on him, if he stood crippled? Just, also, to his family; to his possible posterity; and just to Dahlia. His task was to reconcile the variety of justness due upon all sides. The struggle, we will assume, was severe, for he thought so; he thought of going to Dahlia and speaking the word of separation; of going to her family and stating his offence, without personal exculpation; thus masculine in baseness, he was in idea; but poltroonery triumphed, the picture of himself facing his sin and its victims dismayed him, and his struggle ended in his considering as to the fit employment of one thousand pounds in his possession, the remainder of a small legacy, hitherto much cherished.

A day later, Mrs. Lovell said to him: "Have you heard of that unfortunate young man? I am told that he lies in great danger from a blow on the back of his head. He looked ill when I saw him, and however mad he may be, I'm sorry harm should have come to one who is really brave. Gentle means are surely best. It is so with horses, it must be so with men. As to women, I don't pretend to unriddle them."

"Gentle means are decidedly best," said Edward, perceiving that her little dog Algy had carried news to her, and that she was setting herself to fathom him. "You gave an eminent example of it yesterday. I was so sure of the result that I didn't bet against you."

"Why not have backed me?"

The hard young legal face withstood the attack of her soft blue eyes, out of which a thousand needles flew, seeking a weak point in the mask.

"The compliment was, to incite you to a superhuman effort."

"Then why not pay the compliment?"

"I never pay compliments to transparent merit; I do not hold candles to lamps."

"True," said she.

"And as gentle means are so admirable, it would be as well to stop incision and imbruing between those two boys."

"Which?" she asked innocently.

"Suckling and Algy."

"Is it possible? They are such boys."

"Exactly of the kind to do it. Don't you know?" and Edward explained elaborately and cruelly the character of the boys who rushed into conflicts. Colour deep as evening red confused her cheeks, and she said, "We must stop them."

"Alas!" he shook his head; "if it's not too late."

"It never is too late."

"Perhaps not, when the embodiment of gentle means is so determined."

"Come; I believe they are in the billiard room now, and you shall see," she said.

The pair were found in the billiard room, even as a pair of terriers that remember a bone. Mrs. Lovell proposed a game, and offered herself for partner to Lord Suckling.

"Till total defeat do us part," the young nobleman acquiesced; and total defeat befell them. During the play of the balls, Mrs. Lovell threw a jealous intentness of observation upon all the strokes made by Algernon; saying nothing, but just looking at him when he did a successful thing. She winked at some quiet stately betting that went on between him and Lord Suckling.

They were at first preternaturally polite and formal toward one another; by degrees, the influence at work upon them was manifested in a thaw of their stiff demeanour, and they fell into curt dialogues, which Mrs. Lovell gave herself no concern to encourage too early.

Edward saw, and was astonished himself to feel that she had ceased to breathe that fatal inciting breath, which made men vindictively emulous of her favour, and mad to match themselves for a claim to the chief smile. No perceptible change was displayed. She was Mrs. Lovell still; vivacious and soft; flame-coloured, with the arrowy eyelashes; a pleasant companion, who did not play the woman obtrusively among men, and show a thirst for homage. All the difference appeared to be, that there was an absence as of some evil spiritual emanation.

And here a thought crossed him—one of the memorable little evanescent thoughts which sway us by our chance weakness; "Does she think me wanting in physical courage?"

Now, though the difference between them had been owing to a scornful remark that she had permitted herself to utter, on his refusal to accept a quarrel with one of her numerous satellites, his knowledge of her worship of brains, and his pride in his possession of the burdensome weight, had quite precluded his guessing that she might haply suppose him to be deficient in personal bravery. He was astounded by the reflection that she had thus misjudged him. It was distracting; sober-thoughted as he was by nature. He watched the fair simplicity of her new manner with a jealous eye. Her management of the two youths was exquisite; but to him, Edward, she had never condescended to show herself thus mediating and amiable. Why? Clearly, because she conceived that he had no virile fire in his composition. Did the detestable little devil think silly duelling a display of valour? Did the fair seraph think him anything less than a man?

How beautifully hung the yellow loop of her hair as she leaned over the board! How gracious she was and like a Goddess with these boys, as he called them! She rallied her partner, not letting him forget that he had the honour of being her partner; while she appeared envious of Algernon's skill, and talked to both and got them upon common topics, and laughed, and was like a fair English flower of womanhood; nothing deadly.

"There, Algy; you have beaten us. I don't think I'll have Lord Suckling for my partner any more," she said, putting up her wand, and pouting.

"You don't bear malice?" said Algernon, revived.

"There is my hand. Now you must play a game alone with Lord Suckling, and beat him; mind you beat him, or it will redound to my discredit."

With which, she and Edward left them.

"Algy was a little crestfallen, and no wonder," she said. "He is soon set up again. They will be good friends now."

"Isn't it odd, that they should be ready to risk their lives for trifles?"

Thus Edward tempted her to discuss the subject which he had in his mind.

She felt intuitively the trap in his voice.

"Ah, yes," she replied; "it must be because they know their lives are not precious."

So utterly at her mercy had he fallen, that her pronunciation of that word "precious" carried a severe sting to him, and it was not spoken with peculiar emphasis; on the contrary, she wished to indicate that she was of his way of thinking, as regarded this decayed method of settling disputes. He turned to leave her.

"You go to your Adeline, I presume," she said.

"Ah! that reminds me. I have never thanked you."

"For my good services? such as they are. Sir William will be very happy, and it was for him, a little more than for you, that I went out of my way to be a matchmaker."

"It was her character, of course, that struck you as being so eminently suited to mine."

"Can I tell what is the character of a girl? She is mild and shy, and extremely gentle. In all probability she has a passion for battles and bloodshed. I judged from your father's point of view. She has money, and you are to have money; and the union of money and money is supposed to be a good thing. And besides, you are variable, and off to-morrow what you are on to-day; is it not so? and heiresses are never jilted. Colonel Barclay is only awaiting your retirement. *Le roi est mort; vive le roi!* Heiresses may cry it like kingdoms."

"I thought," said Edward, meaningly, "the colonel had better taste."

"Do you not know that my friends are my friends because they are not allowed to dream they will do anything else? If they are taken poorly, I commend them to a sea-voyage—Africa, the North-West Passage, the source of the Nile. Men with their vanity wounded may discover wonders! They return friendly as before, whether they have done the Geographical Society a service or not. That is, they generally do."

"Then I begin to fancy I must try those latitudes."

"Oh! you are my relative."

He scarcely knew that he had uttered "Margaret."

She replied to it frankly, "Yes, Cousin Ned. You have made the voyage, you see, and have come back friends with me. The variability of opals! Ah! Sir John, you join us in season. We were talking of opals. Is the opal a gem that stands to represent women?"

Sir John Capes smoothed his knuckles with silken palms, and with courteous antique grin, responded, "It is a gem I would never dare to offer to a lady's acceptance."

"It is by repute unlucky; so you never can have done so.

"Exquisite!" exclaimed the veteran in smiles, "if what you deign to imply were only true!"

They entered the drawing-room among the ladies.

Edward whispered in Mrs. Lovell's ear, "He is in need of the voyage."

"He is very near it," she answered in the same key, and swam into general conversation.

Her cold wit, Satanic as the gleam of it struck through his mind, gave him a throb of desire to gain possession of her, and crush her.

CHAPTER XXII

The writing of a letter to Dahlia had previously been attempted and abandoned as a sickening task. Like an idle boy with his holiday imposition, Edward shelved it among the nightmares, saying, "How can I sit down and lie to her!" and thinking that silence would prepare her bosom for the coming truth.

Silence is commonly the slow poison used by those who mean to murder love. There is nothing violent about it; no shock is given; Hope is not abruptly strangled, but merely dreams of evil, and fights with gradually stifling shadows. When the last convulsions come they are not terrific; the frame has been weakened for dissolution; love dies like natural decay. It seems the kindest way of doing a cruel thing. But Dahlia wrote, crying out her agony at the torture. Possibly your nervously organized natures require a modification of the method.

Edward now found himself able to conduct a correspondence. He despatched the following:—

"My Dear Dahlia,—Of course I cannot expect you to be aware of the bewildering occupations of a country house, where a man has literally not five minutes' time to call his own; so I pass by your reproaches. My father has gone at last. He has manifested an extraordinary liking for my society, and I am to join him elsewhere—perhaps run over to Paris (your city)—but at present for a few days I am my own master, and the first thing I do is to attend to your demands: not to write 'two lines,' but to give you a good long letter.

"What on earth makes you fancy me unwell? You know I am never unwell. And as to your nursing me—when has there ever been any need for it?

"You must positively learn patience. I have been absent a week or so, and you talk of coming down here and haunting the house! Such ghosts as you meet with strange treatment when they go about unprotected, let me give you warning. You have my full permission to walk out in the Parks for exercise. I think you are bound to do it, for your health's sake.

"Pray discontinue that talk about the alteration in your looks. You must learn that you are no longer a child. Cease to write like a child. If people stare at you, as you say, you are very well aware it is not because you are becoming plain. You do not mean it, I know; but there is a disingenuousness in remarks of this sort that is to me exceedingly distasteful. Avoid the shadow of hypocrisy. Women are subject to it—and it is quite innocent, no doubt. I won't lecture you.

"My cousin Algernon is here with me. He has not spoken of your sister. Your fears in that direction are quite unnecessary. He is attached to a female cousin of ours, a very handsome person, witty, and highly sensible, who dresses as well as the lady you talk about having seen one day in Wrexby Church. Her lady's-maid is a Frenchwoman, which accounts for it. You have not forgotten the boulevards?

"I wish you to go on with your lessons in French. Educate yourself, and you will rise superior to these distressing complaints. I recommend you to read the newspapers daily. Buy nice picture-books, if the papers are too matter-of-fact for you. By looking eternally inward, you teach yourself to fret, and the consequence is, or will be, that you wither. No constitution can stand it. All the ladies here take an interest in Parliamentary affairs. They can talk to men upon men's themes. It is impossible to explain to you how wearisome an everlasting nursery prattle becomes. The idea that men ought never to tire of it is founded on some queer belief that they are not mortal.

"Parliament opens in February. My father wishes me to stand for Selborough. If he or some one will do the talking to the tradesmen, and provide the beer and the bribes, I have no objection. In that case my Law goes to the winds. I'm bound to make a show of obedience, for he has scarcely got over my summer's trip. He holds me a prisoner to him for heaven knows how long—it may be months.

"As for the heiress whom he has here to make a match for me, he and I must have a pitched battle about her by and by. At present my purse insists upon my not offending him. When will old men understand young ones? I burn your letters, and beg you to follow the example. Old letters are the dreariest ghosts in the world, and you cannot keep more treacherous rubbish in your possession. A discovery would exactly ruin me.

"Your purchase of a black-velvet bonnet with pink ribands, was very suitable. Or did you write 'blue' ribands? But your complexion can

bear anything.

"You talk of being annoyed when you walk out. Remember, that no woman who knows at all how to conduct herself need for one moment suffer annoyance.

"What is the 'feeling' you speak of? I cannot conceive any 'feeling' that should make you helpless when you consider that you are insulted. There are women who have natural dignity, and women who have none.

"You ask the names of the gentlemen here:—Lord Carey, Lord Wipperin (both leave to-morrow), Sir John Capes, Colonel Barclay, Lord Suckling. The ladies:—Mrs. Gosling, Miss Gosling, Lady Carey. Mrs. Anybody—to any extent.

"They pluck hen's feathers all day and half the night. I see them out, and make my bow to the next batch of visitors, and then I don't know where I am.

"Read poetry, if it makes up for my absence, as you say. Repeat it aloud, minding the pulsation of feet. Go to the theatre now and then, and take your landlady with you. If she's a cat, fit one of your dresses on the servant-girl, and take her. You only want a companion—a dummy will do. Take a box and sit behind the curtain, back to the audience.

"I wrote to my wine-merchant to send Champagne and Sherry. I hope he did: the Champagne in pints and half-pints; if not, return them instantly. I know how Economy, sitting solitary, poor thing, would not dare to let the froth of a whole pint bottle fly out.

"Be an obedient girl and please me.

"Your stern tutor,

"Edward the First."

He read this epistle twice over to satisfy himself that it was a warm effusion, and not too tender; and it satisfied him. By a stretch of imagination, he could feel that it represented him to her as in a higher atmosphere, considerate for her, and not so intimate that she could deem her spirit to be sharing it. Another dose of silence succeeded this discreet administration of speech.

Dahlia replied with letter upon letter; blindly impassioned, and again singularly cold; but with no reproaches. She was studying, she said. Her head ached a little; only a little. She walked; she read poetry; she begged him to pardon her for not drinking wine. She was glad that he burnt her letters, which were so foolish that if she could have the courage to look at them after they were written, they would never be sent. He was slightly revolted by one exclamation: "How ambitious you are!"

"Because I cannot sit down for life in a London lodging-house!" he thought, and eyed her distantly as a poor good creature who had already accepted her distinctive residence in another

sphere than his. From such a perception of her humanity, it was natural that his livelier sense of it should diminish. He felt that he had awakened; and he shook her off.

And now he set to work to subdue Mrs. Lovell. His own subjugation was the first fruit of his effort. It was quite unacknowledged by him: but when two are at this game, the question arises—"Which can live without the other?" and horrid pangs smote him to hear her telling musically of the places she was journeying to, the men she would see, and the chances of their meeting again before he was married to the heiress Adeline.

"I have yet to learn that I am engaged to her," he said. Mrs. Lovell gave him a fixed look,—

"She has a half-brother."

He stepped away in a fury.

"Devil!" he muttered, absolutely muttered it, knowing that he fooled and frowned like a stage-hero in stagey heroics. "You think to hound me into this brutal stupidity of fighting, do you? Upon my honour," he added in his natural manner, "I believe she does, though!"

But the look became his companion. It touched and called up great vanity in his breast, and not till then could he placably confront the look. He tried a course of reading. Every morning he was down in the library, looking old in an arm-chair over his book; an intent abstracted figure.

Mrs. Lovell would enter and eye him carelessly; utter little commonplaces and go forth. The silly words struck on his brain. The book seemed hollow; sounded hollow as he shut it. This woman breathed of active striving life. She was a spur to black energies; a plumed glory; impulsive to chivalry. Everything she said and did held men in scales, and approved or rejected them.

Intoxication followed this new conception of her. He lost altogether his right judgement; even the cooler after-thoughts were lost. What sort of man had Harry been, her first husband? A dashing soldier, a quarrelsome duellist, a dull dog. But, dull to her? She, at least, was reverential to the memory of him.

She lisped now and then of "my husband," very prettily, and with intense provocation; and yet she worshipped brains. Evidently she thirsted for that rare union of brains and bravery in a man, and would never surrender till she had discovered it. Perhaps she fancied it did not exist. It might be that she took Edward as the type of brains, and Harry of bravery, and supposed that the two qualities were not to be had actually in conjunction.

Her admiration of his (Edward's) wit, therefore, only strengthened the idea she entertained of his deficiency in that other companion manly virtue.

Edward must have been possessed, for he ground his teeth villanously in supposing himself the victim of this outrageous suspicion. And how to prove it false? How to prove it false in a civilized age, among sober-living men and women, with whom the violent assertion of bravery

would certainly imperil his claim to brains? His head was like a stew-pan over the fire, bubbling endlessly.

He railed at her to Algernon, and astonished the youth, who thought them in a fair way to make an alliance. "Milk and capsicums," he called her, and compared her to bloody mustard-haired Saxon Queens of history, and was childishly spiteful. And Mrs. Lovell had it all reported to her, as he was-quite aware.

"The woman seeking for an anomaly wants a master."

With this pompous aphorism, he finished his reading of the fair Enigma.

Words big in the mouth serve their turn when there is no way of satisfying the intelligence.

To be her master, however, one must not begin by writhing as her slave.

The attempt to read an inscrutable woman allows her to dominate us too commandingly. So the lordly mind takes her in a hard grasp, cracks the shell, and drawing forth the kernel, says, "This was all the puzzle."

Doubtless it is the fate which women like Mrs. Lovell provoke. The truth was, that she could read a character when it was under her eyes; but its yesterday and to-morrow were a blank. She had no imaginative hold on anything. For which reason she was always requiring tangible signs of virtues that she esteemed.

The thirst for the shows of valour and wit was insane with her; but she asked for nothing that she herself did not give in abundance, and with beauty super-added. Her propensity to bet sprang of her passion for combat; she was not greedy of money, or reckless in using it; but a difference of opinion arising, her instinct forcibly prompted her to back her own. If the stake was the risk of a lover's life, she was ready to put down the stake, and would have marvelled contemptuously at the lover complaining. "Sheep! sheep!" she thought of those who dared not fight, and had a wavering tendency to affix the epithet to those who simply did not fight.

Withal, Mrs. Lovell was a sensible person; clearheaded and shrewd; logical, too, more than the run of her sex: I may say, profoundly practical. So much so, that she systematically reserved the after-years for enlightenment upon two or three doubts of herself, which struck her in the calm of her spirit, from time to time.

"France," Edward called her, in one of their colloquies.

It was an illuminating title. She liked the French (though no one was keener for the honour of her own country in opposition to them), she liked their splendid boyishness, their unequalled devotion, their merciless intellects; the oneness of the nation when the sword is bare and pointing to chivalrous enterprise.

She liked their fine varnish of sentiment, which appears so much on the surface that Englishmen suppose it to have nowhere any depth; as if the outer coating must necessarily exhaust the stock, or as if what is at the source of our being can never be made visible.

She had her imagination of them as of a streaming banner in the jaws of storm, with snows among the cloud-rents and lightning in the chasms:—which image may be accounted for by the fact that when a girl she had in adoration kissed the feet of Napoleon, the giant of the later ghosts of history.

It was a princely compliment. She received it curtsying, and disarmed the intended irony. In reply, she called him "Great Britain." I regret to say that he stood less proudly for his nation. Indeed, he flushed. He remembered articles girding at the policy of peace at any price, and half felt that Mrs. Lovell had meant to crown him with a Quaker's hat. His title fell speedily into disuse; but, "Yes, France," and "No, France," continued, his effort being to fix the epithet to frivolous allusions, from which her ingenuity rescued it honourably.

Had she ever been in love? He asked her the question. She stabbed him with so straightforward an affirmative that he could not conceal the wound.

"Have I not been married?" she said.

He began to experience the fretful craving to see the antecedents of the torturing woman spread out before him. He conceived a passion for her girlhood. He begged for portraits of her as a girl. She showed him the portrait of Harry Lovell in a locket. He held the locket between his fingers. Dead Harry was kept very warm. Could brains ever touch her emotions as bravery had done?

"Where are the brains I boast of?" he groaned, in the midst of these sensational extravagances.

The lull of action was soon to be disturbed. A letter was brought to him.

He opened it and read—

"Mr. Edward Blancove,—When you rode by me under Fairly Park, I did not know you. I can give you a medical certificate that since then I have been in the doctor's hands. I know you now. I call upon you to meet me, with what weapons you like best, to prove that you are not a midnight assassin. The place shall be where you choose to appoint. If you decline I will make you publicly acknowledge what you have done. If you answer, that I am not a gentleman and you are one, I say that you have attacked me in the dark, when I was on horseback, and you are now my equal, if I like to think so. You will not talk about the law after that night. The man you employed I may punish or I may leave, though he struck the blow. But I will meet you. To-morrow, a friend of mine, who is a major in the army, will be down here, and will call on you from me; or on any friend of yours you are pleased to name. I will not let you escape. Whether I shall face a guilty man in you, God knows; but I know I have a right to call upon you to face me.

"I am, Sir,

"Yours truly,

"Robert Eccles."

Edward's face grew signally white over the contents of this unprecedented challenge. The letter had been brought in to him at the breakfast table. "Read it, read it," said Mrs. Lovell, seeing him put it by; and he had read it with her eyes on him.

The man seemed to him a man of claws, who clutched like a demon. Would nothing quiet him? Edward thought of bribes for the sake of peace; but a second glance at the letter assured his sagacious mind that bribes were powerless in this man's case; neither bribes nor sticks were of service. Departure from Fairly would avail as little: the tenacious devil would follow him to London; and what was worse, as a hound from Dahlia's family he was now on the right scent, and appeared to know that he was. How was a scandal to be avoided? By leaving Fairly instantly for any place on earth, he could not avoid leaving the man behind; and if the man saw Mrs. Lovell again, her instincts as a woman of her class were not to be trusted. As likely as not she would side with the ruffian; that is, she would think he had been wronged—perhaps think that he ought to have been met. There is the democratic virus secret in every woman; it was predominant in Mrs. Lovell, according to Edward's observation of the lady. The rights of individual manhood were, as he angrily perceived, likely to be recognized by her spirit, if only they were stoutly asserted; and that in defiance of station, of reason, of all the ideas inculcated by education and society.

"I believe she'll expect me to fight him," he exclaimed. At least, he knew she would despise him if he avoided the brutal challenge without some show of dignity.

On rising from the table, he drew Algernon aside. It was an insufferable thought that he was compelled to take his brainless cousin into his confidence, even to the extent of soliciting his counsel, but there was no help for it. In vain Edward asked himself why he had been such an idiot as to stain his hands with the affair at all. He attributed it to his regard for Algernon. Having commonly the sway of his passions, he was in the habit of forgetting that he ever lost control of them; and the fierce black mood, engendered by Robert's audacious persecution, had passed from his memory, though it was now recalled in full force.

"See what a mess you drag a man into," he said.

Algernon read a line of the letter. "Oh, confound this infernal fellow!" he shouted, in sickly wonderment; and snapped sharp, "drag you into the mess? Upon my honour, your coolness, Ned, is the biggest part about you, if it isn't the best."

Edward's grip fixed on him, for they were only just out of earshot of Mrs. Lovell. They went upstairs, and Algernon read the letter through.

"Midnight assassin," he repeated; "by Jove! how beastly that sounds. It's a lie that you attacked him in the dark, Ned—eh?"

"I did not attack him at all," said Edward. "He behaved like a ruffian to you, and deserved shooting like a mad dog."

"Did you, though," Algernon persisted in questioning, despite his cousin's manifest shyness of the subject "did you really go out with that man Sedgett, and stop this fellow on horseback? He speaks of a blow. You didn't strike him, did you, Ned? I mean, not a hit, except in self-defence?"

Edward bit his lip, and shot a level reflective side-look, peculiar to him when meditating. He wished his cousin to propose that Mrs. Lovell should see the letter. He felt that by consulting with her, he could bring her to apprehend the common sense of the position, and be so far responsible for what he might do, that she would not dare to let her heart be rebellious toward him subsequently. If he himself went to her it would look too much like pleading for her intercession. The subtle directness of the woman's spirit had to be guarded against at every point.

He replied to Algernon,—

"What I did was on your behalf. Oblige me by not interrogating me. I give you my positive assurance that I encouraged no unmanly assault on him."

"That'll do, that'll do," said Algernon, eager not to hear more, lest there should come an explanation of what he had heard. "Of course, then, this fellow has no right—the devil's in him! If we could only make him murder Sedgett and get hanged for it! He's got a friend who's a major in the army? Oh, come, I say; this is pitching it too stiff. I shall insist upon seeing his commission. Really, Ned, I can't advise. I'll stand by you, that you may be sure of—stand by you; but what the deuce to say to help you! Go before the magistrate.... Get Lord Elling to issue a warrant to prevent a breach of the peace. No; that won't do. This quack of a major in the army's to call to-morrow. I don't mind, if he shows his credentials all clear, amusing him in any manner he likes. I can't see the best scheme. Hang it, Ned, it's very hard upon me to ask me to do the thinking. I always go to Peggy Lovell when I'm bothered. There—Mrs. Lovell! Mistress Lovell! Madame! my Princess Lovell, if you want me to pronounce respectable titles to her name. You're too proud to ask a woman to help you, ain't you, Ned?"

"No," said Edward, mildly. "In some cases their wits are keen enough. One doesn't like to drag her into such a business."

"Hm," went Algernon. "I don't think she's so innocent of it as you fancy."

"She's very clever," said Edward.

"She's awfully clever!" cried Algernon. He paused to give room for more praises of her, and then pursued:

"She's so kind. That's what you don't credit her for. I'll go and consult her, if positively you don't mind. Trust her for keeping it quiet. Come, Ned, she's sure to hit upon the right thing. May I go?"

"It's your affair, more than mine," said Edward.

"Have it so, if you like," returned the good-natured fellow. "It's worth while consulting her, just to see how neatly she'll take it. Bless your heart, she won't know a bit more than you want her to know. I'm off to her now." He carried away the letter.

Edward's own practical judgement would have advised his instantly sending a short reply to Robert, explaining that he was simply in conversation with the man Sedgett, when Robert, the old enemy of the latter, rode by, and, that while regretting Sedgett's proceedings, he could not be held accountable for them. But it was useless to think of acting in accordance with his reason. Mrs. Lovell was queen, and sat in reason's place. It was absolutely necessary to conciliate her approbation of his conduct in this dilemma, by submitting to the decided unpleasantness of talking with her on a subject that fevered him, and of allowing her to suppose he required the help of her sagacity. Such was the humiliation imposed upon him. Further than this he had nothing to fear, for no woman could fail to be overborne by the masculine force of his brain in an argument. The humiliation was bad enough, and half tempted him to think that his old dream of working as a hard student, with fair and gentle Dahlia ministering to his comforts, and too happy to call herself his, was best. Was it not, after one particular step had been taken, the manliest life he could have shaped out? Or did he imagine it so at this moment, because he was a coward, and because pride, and vanity, and ferocity alternately had to screw him up to meet the consequences of his acts, instead of the great heart?

If a coward, Dahlia was his home, his refuge, his sanctuary. Mrs. Lovell was perdition and its scorching fires to a man with a taint of cowardice in him.

Whatever he was, Edward's vanity would not permit him to acknowledge himself that. Still, he did not call on his heart to play inspiriting music. His ideas turned to subterfuge. His aim was to keep the good opinion of Mrs. Lovell while he quieted Robert; and he entered straightway upon that very perilous course, the attempt, for the sake of winning her, to bewilder and deceive a woman's instincts.

CHAPTER XXIII

Over a fire in one of the upper sitting-rooms of the Pilot Inn, Robert sat with his friend, the beloved friend of whom he used to speak to Dahlia and Rhoda, too proudly not to seem betraying the weaker point of pride. This friend had accepted the title from a private soldier of his regiment; to be capable of doing which, a man must be both officer and gentleman in a sterner and less liberal sense than is expressed by that everlasting phrase in the mouth of the military parrot. Major Percy Waring, the son of a clergyman, was a working soldier, a slayer, if you will, from pure love of the profession of arms, and all the while the sweetest and gentlest of men. I call him a working soldier in opposition to the parading soldier, the coxcomb in uniform, the hero by accident, and the martial boys of wealth and station, who are of the army of England. He

studied war when the trumpet slumbered, and had no place but in the field when it sounded. To him the honour of England was as a babe in his arms: he hugged it like a mother. He knew the military history of every regiment in the service. Disasters even of old date brought groans from him. This enthusiastic face was singularly soft when the large dark eyes were set musing. The cast of it being such, sometimes in speaking of a happy play of artillery upon congregated masses, an odd effect was produced. Ordinarily, the clear features were reflective almost to sadness, in the absence of animation; but an exulting energy for action would now and then light them up. Hilarity of spirit did not belong to him. He was, nevertheless, a cheerful talker, as could be seen in the glad ear given to him by Robert. Between them it was "Robert" and "Percy." Robert had rescued him from drowning on the East Anglian shore, and the friendship which ensued was one chief reason for Robert's quitting the post of trooper and buying himself out. It was against Percy's advice, who wanted to purchase a commission for him; but the humbler man had the sturdy scruples of his rank regarding money, and his romantic illusions being dispersed by an experience of the absolute class-distinctions in the service, Robert; that he might prevent his friend from violating them, made use of his aunt's legacy to obtain release. Since that date they had not met; but their friendship was fast. Percy had recently paid a visit to Queen Anne's Farm, where he had seen Rhoda and heard of Robert's departure. Knowing Robert's birthplace, he had come on to Warbeach, and had seen Jonathan Eccles, who referred him to Mrs. Boulby, licenced seller of brandy, if he wished to enjoy an interview with Robert Eccles.

"The old man sent up regularly every day to inquire how his son was faring on the road to the next world," said Robert, laughing. "He's tough old English oak. I'm just to him what I appear at the time. It's better having him like that than one of your jerky fathers, who seem to belong to the stage of a theatre. Everybody respects my old dad, and I can laugh at what he thinks of me. I've only to let him know I've served an apprenticeship in farming, and can make use of some of his ideas—sound! every one of 'em; every one of 'em sound! And that I say of my own father."

"Why don't you tell him?" Percy asked.

"I want to forget all about Kent and drown the county," said Robert. "And I'm going to, as far as my memory's concerned."

Percy waited for some seconds. He comprehended perfectly this state of wilfulness in an uneducated sensitive man.

"She has a steadfast look in her face, Robert. She doesn't look as if she trifled. I've really never seen a finer, franker girl in my life, if faces are to be trusted."

"It's t' other way. There's no trifling in her case. She's frank. She fires at you point blank."

"You never mentioned her in your letters to me, Robert."

"No. I had a suspicion from the first I was going to be a fool about the girl."

Percy struck his hand.

"You didn't do quite right."

"Do you say that?"

Robert silenced him with this question, for there was a woman in Percy's antecedent history.

The subject being dismissed, they talked more freely. Robert related the tale of Dahlia, and of his doings at Fairly.

"Oh! we agree," he said, noting a curious smile that Percy could not smooth out of sight. "I know it was odd conduct. I do respect my superiors; but, believe me or not, Percy, injury done to a girl makes me mad, and I can't hold back; and she's the sister of the girl you saw. By heaven! if it weren't for my head getting blind now when my blood boils, I've the mind to walk straight up to the house and screw the secret out of one of them. What I say is—Is there a God up aloft? Then, he sees all, and society is vapour, and while I feel the spirit in me to do it, I go straight at my aim."

"If, at the same time, there's no brandy in you," said Percy, "which would stop your seeing clear or going straight."

The suggestion was a cruel shock. Robert nodded. "That's true. I suppose it's my bad education that won't let me keep cool. I'm ashamed of myself after it. I shout and thunder, and the end of it is, I go away and think about the same of Robert Eccles that I've frightened other people into thinking. Perhaps you'll think me to blame in this case? One of those Mr. Blancoves—not the one you've heard of—struck me on the field before a lady. I bore it. It was part of what I'd gone out to meet. I was riding home late at night, and he stood at the corner of the lane, with an old enemy of mine, and a sad cur that is! Sedgett's his name—Nic, the Christian part of it. There'd just come a sharp snowfall from the north, and the moonlight shot over the flying edge of the rear-cloud; and I saw Sedgett with a stick in his hand; but the gentleman had no stick. I'll give Mr. Edward Blancove credit for not meaning to be active in a dastardly assault.

"But why was he in consultation with my enemy? And he let my enemy—by the way, Percy, you dislike that sort of talk of 'my enemy,' I know. You like it put plain and simple: but down in these old parts again, I catch at old habits; and I'm always a worse man when I haven't seen you for a time. Sedgett, say. Sedgett, as I passed, made a sweep at my horse's knees, and took them a little over the fetlock. The beast reared. While I was holding on he swung a blow at me, and took me here."

Robert touched his head. "I dropped like a horse-chestnut from the tree. When I recovered, I was lying in the lane. I think I was there flat, face to the ground, for half an hour, quite sensible, looking at the pretty colour of my blood on the snow. The horse was gone. I just managed to reel along to this place, where there's always a home for me. Now, will you believe it possible? I went out next day: I saw Mr. Edward Blancove, and I might have seen a baby and felt the same to it. I didn't know him a bit. Yesterday morning your letter was sent up from Sutton farm. Somehow, the moment I'd read it, I remembered his face. I sent him word there was a matter to be settled between us. You think I was wrong?"

Major Waring had set a deliberately calculating eye on him.

"I want to hear more," he said.

"You think I have no claim to challenge a man in his position?"

"Answer me first, Robert. You think this Mr. Blancove helped, or instigated this man Sedgett in his attack upon you?"

"I haven't a doubt that he did."

"It's not plain evidence."

"It's good circumstantial evidence."

"At any rate, you are perhaps justified in thinking him capable of this: though the rule is, to believe nothing against a gentleman until it is flatly proved—when we drum him out of the ranks. But, if you can fancy it true, would you put yourself upon an equal footing with him?"

"I would," said Robert.

"Then you accept his code of morals."

"That's too shrewd for me: but men who preach against duelling, or any kind of man-to-man in hot earnest, always fence in that way."

"I detest duelling," Major Waring remarked. "I don't like a system that permits knaves and fools to exercise a claim to imperil the lives of useful men. Let me observe, that I am not a preacher against it. I think you know my opinions; and they are not quite those of the English magistrate, and other mild persons who are wrathful at the practice upon any pretence. Keep to the other discussion. You challenge a man—you admit him your equal. But why do I argue with you? I know your mind as well as my own. You have some other idea in the background."

"I feel that he's the guilty man," said Robert.

"You feel called upon to punish him."

"No. Wait: he will not fight; but I have him and I'll hold him. I feel he's the man who has injured this girl, by every witness of facts that I can bring together; and as for the other young fellow I led such a dog's life down here, I could beg his pardon. This one's eye met mine. I saw it wouldn't have stopped short of murder—opportunity given. Why? Because I pressed on the right spring. I'm like a woman in seeing some things. He shall repent. By—! Slap me on the face, Percy. I've taken to brandy and to swearing. Damn the girl who made me forget good lessons! Bless her heart, I mean. She saw you, did she? Did she colour when she heard your name?"

"Very much," said Major Waring.

"Was dressed in—?"

"Black, with a crimson ribbon round the collar."

Robert waved the image from his eyes.

"I'm not going to dream of her. Peace, and babies, and farming, and pride in myself with a woman by my side—there! You've seen her—all that's gone. I might as well ask the East wind to blow West. Her face is set the other way. Of course, the nature and value of a man is shown by how he takes this sort of pain; and hark at me! I'm yelling. I thought I was cured. I looked up into the eyes of a lady ten times sweeter—when?—somewhen! I've lost dates. But here's the girl at me again. She cuddles into me—slips her hand into my breast and tugs at strings there. I can't help talking to you about her, now we've got over the first step. I'll soon give it up.

"She wore a red ribbon? If it had been Spring, you'd have seen roses. Oh! what a stanch heart that girl has. Where she sets it, mind! Her life where that creature sets her heart! But, for me, not a penny of comfort! Now for a whole week of her, day and night, in that black dress with the coloured ribbon. On she goes: walking to church; sitting at table; looking out of the window!

"Will you believe I thought those thick eyebrows of hers ugly once—a tremendous long time ago. Yes; but what eyes she has under them! And if she looks tender, one corner of her mouth goes quivering; and the eyes are steady, so that it looks like some wonderful bit of mercy.

"I think of that true-hearted creature praying and longing for her sister, and fearing there's shame—that's why she hates me. I wouldn't say I was certain her sister had not fallen into a pit. I couldn't. I was an idiot. I thought I wouldn't be a hypocrite. I might have said I believed as she did. There she stood ready to be taken—ready to have given herself to me, if I had only spoken a word! It was a moment of heaven, and God the Father could not give it to me twice The chance has gone.

"Oh! what a miserable mad dog I am to gabble on in this way.—Come in! come in, mother."

Mrs. Boulby entered, with soft footsteps, bearing a letter.

"From the Park," she said, and commenced chiding Robert gently, to establish her right to do it with solemnity.

"He will talk, sir. He's one o' them that either they talk or they hang silent, and no middle way will they take; and the doctor's their foe, and health they despise; and since this cruel blow, obstinacy do seem to have been knocked like a nail into his head so fast, persuasion have not a atom o' power over him."

"There must be talking when friends meet, ma'am," said Major Waring.

"Ah!" returned the widow, "if it wouldn't be all on one side."

"I've done now, mother," said Robert.

Mrs. Boulby retired, and Robert opened the letter.

It ran thus:—

"Sir, I am glad you have done me the favour of addressing me temperately, so that I am permitted to clear myself of an unjust and most unpleasant imputation. I will, if you please, see you, or your friend; to whom perhaps I shall better be able to certify how unfounded is the charge you bring against me. I will call upon you at the Pilot Inn, where I hear that you are staying; or, if you prefer it, I will attend to any appointment you may choose to direct elsewhere. But it must be immediate, as the term of my residence in this neighbourhood is limited.

"I am,

"Sir,

"Yours obediently,

"Edward Blancove."

Major Waning read the lines with a critical attention.

"It seems fair and open," was his remark.

"Here," Robert struck his breast, "here's what answers him. What shall I do? Shall I tell him to come?"

"Write to say that your friend will meet him at a stated place."

Robert saw his prey escaping. "I'm not to see him?"

"No. The decent is the right way in such cases. You must leave it to me. This will be the proper method between gentlemen."

"It appears to my idea," said Robert, "that gentlemen are always, somehow, stopped from taking the straight-ahead measure."

"You," Percy rejoined, "are like a civilian before a fortress. Either he finds it so easy that he can walk into it, or he gives it up in despair as unassailable. You have followed your own devices, and what have you accomplished?"

"He will lie to you smoothly."

"Smoothly or not, if I discover that he has spoken falsely, he is answerable to me."

"To me, Percy."

"No; to me. He can elude you; and will be acquitted by the general verdict. But when he becomes answerable to me, his honour, in the conventional, which is here the practical, sense, is at stake, and I have him."

"I see that. Yes; he can refuse to fight me," Robert sighed. "Hey, Lord! it's a heavy world when we come to methods. But will you, Percy, will you put it to him at the end of your fist—'Did you deceive the girl, and do you know where the girl now is?' Why, great heaven! we only ask to know where she is. She may have been murdered. She's hidden from her family. Let him confess, and let him go."

Major Waring shook his head. "You see like a woman perhaps, Robert. You certainly talk like a woman. I will state your suspicions. When I have done so, I am bound to accept his reply. If we discover it to have been false, I have my remedy."

"Won't you perceive, that it isn't my object to punish him by and by, but to tear the secret out of him on the spot—now—instantly," Robert cried.

"I perceive your object, and you have experienced some of the results of your system. It's the primitive action of an appeal to the god of combats, that is exploded in these days. You have no course but to take his word."

"She said"—Robert struck his knee—"she said I should have the girl's address. She said she would see her. She pledged that to me. I'm speaking of the lady up at Fairly. Come! things get clearer. If she knows where Dahlia is, who told her? This Mr. Algernon—not Edward Blancove—was seen with Dahlia in a box at the Playhouse. He was there with Dahlia, yet I don't think him the guilty man. There's a finger of light upon that other."

"Who is this lady?" Major Waring asked, with lifted eyebrows.

"Mrs. Lovell."

At the name, Major Waring sat stricken.

"Lovell!" he repeated, under his breath. "Lovell! Was she ever in India?"

"I don't know, indeed."

"Is she a widow?"

"Ay; that I've heard."

"Describe her."

Robert entered upon the task with a dozen headlong exclamations, and very justly concluded by saying that he could give no idea of her; but his friend apparently had gleaned sufficient.

Major Waring's face was touched by a strange pallor, and his smile had vanished. He ran his fingers through his hair, clutching it in a knot, as he sat eyeing the red chasm in the fire, where the light of old days and wild memories hangs as in a crumbling world.

Robert was aware of there being a sadness in Percy's life, and that he had loved a woman and awakened from his passion. Her name was unknown to him. In that matter, his natural delicacy and his deference to Percy had always checked him from sounding the subject closely. He might be, as he had said, keen as a woman where his own instincts were in action; but they were ineffective in guessing at the cause for Percy's sudden depression.

"She said—this lady, Mrs. Lovell, whoever she may be—she said you should have the girl's address:—gave you that pledge of her word?" Percy spoke, half meditating. "How did this happen? When did you see her?"

Robert related the incident of his meeting with her, and her effort to be a peacemaker, but made no allusion to Mrs. Boulby's tale of the bet.

"A peacemaker!" Percy interjected. "She rides well?"

"Best horsewoman I ever saw in my life," was Robert's ready answer.

Major Waring brushed at his forehead, as in impatience of thought.

"You must write two letters: one to this Mrs. Lovell. Say, you are about to leave the place, and remind her of her promise. It's incomprehensible; but never mind. Write that first. Then to the man. Say that your friend—by the way, this Mrs. Lovell has small hands, has she? I mean, peculiarly small? Did you notice, or not? I may know her. Never mind. Write to the man. Say—don't write down my name—say that I will meet him." Percy spoke on as in a dream. "Appoint any place and hour. To-morrow at ten, down by the river—the bridge. Write briefly. Thank him for his offer to afford you explanations. Don't argue it with me any more. Write both the letters straight off."

His back was to Robert as he uttered the injunction. Robert took pen and paper, and did as he was bidden, with all the punctilious obedience of a man who consents perforce to see a better scheme abandoned.

One effect of the equality existing between these two of diverse rank in life and perfect delicacy of heart, was, that the moment Percy assumed the lead, Robert never disputed it. Muttering simply that he was incapable of writing except when he was in a passion, he managed to produce what, in Percy's eyes, were satisfactory epistles, though Robert had horrible misgivings in regard to his letter to Mrs. Lovell—the wording of it, the cast of the sentences, even down to the character of the handwriting. These missives were despatched immediately.

"You are sure she said that?" Major Waring inquired more than once during the afternoon, and Robert assured him that Mrs. Lovell had given him her word. He grew very positive, and put it on his honour that she had said it.

"You may have heard incorrectly."

"I've got the words burning inside me," said Robert.

They walked together, before dark, to Sutton Farm, but Jonathan Eccles was abroad in his fields, and their welcome was from Mistress Anne, whom Major Waring had not power to melt; the moment he began speaking praise of Robert, she closed her mouth tight and crossed her wrists meekly.

"I see," said Major Waring, as they left the farm, "your aunt is of the godly who have no forgiveness."

"I'm afraid so," cried Robert. "Cold blood never will come to an understanding with hot blood, and the old lady's is like frozen milk. She's right in her way, I dare say. I don't blame her. Her piety's right enough, take it as you find it."

Mrs. Boulby had a sagacious notion that gentlemen always dined well every day of their lives, and claimed that much from Providence as their due. She had exerted herself to spread a neat little repast for Major Waring, and waited on the friends herself; grieving considerably to observe that the major failed in his duty as a gentleman, as far as the relish of eating was concerned.

"But," she said below at her bar, "he smokes the beautifullest—smelling cigars, and drinks coffee made in his own way. He's very particular." Which was reckoned to be in Major Waring's favour.

The hour was near midnight when she came into the room, bearing another letter from the Park. She thumped it on the table, ruffling and making that pretence at the controlling of her bosom which precedes a feminine storm. Her indignation was caused by a communication delivered by Dick Curtis, in the parlour underneath, to the effect that Nicodemus Sedgett was not to be heard of in the neighbourhood.

Robert laughed at her, and called her Hebrew woman—eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth woman.

"Leave real rascals to the Lord above, mother. He's safe to punish them. They've stepped outside the chances. That's my idea. I wouldn't go out of my way to kick them—not I! It's the half-and-half villains we've got to dispose of. They're the mischief, old lady."

Percy, however, asked some questions about Sedgett, and seemed to think his disappearance singular. He had been examining the handwriting of the superscription to the letter. His face was flushed as he tossed it for Robert to open. Mrs. Boulby dropped her departing curtsey, and Robert read out, with odd pauses and puzzled emphasis:

"Mrs. Lovell has received the letter which Mr. Robert Eccles has addressed to her, and regrets that a misconception should have arisen from anything that was uttered during their interview. The allusions are obscure, and Mrs. Lovell can only remark, that she is pained if she at all misled Mr. Eccles in what she either spoke or promised. She is not aware that she can be of any service to him. Should such an occasion present itself, Mr. Eccles may rest assured that she will not fail to avail herself of it, and do her utmost to redeem a pledge to which he has apparently attached a meaning she can in no way account for or comprehend."

When Robert had finished, "It's like a female lawyer," he said. "That woman speaking, and that woman writing, they're two different creatures—upon my soul, they are! Quick, sharp, to the point, when she speaks; and read this! Can I venture to say of a lady, she's a liar?"

"Perhaps you had better not," said Major Waring, who took the letter in his hand and seemed to study it. After which he transferred it to his pocket.

"To-morrow? To-morrow's Sunday," he observed. "We will go to church to-morrow." His eyes glittered.

"Why, I'm hardly in the mood," Robert protested. "I haven't had the habit latterly."

"Keep up the habit," said Percy. "It's a good thing for men like you."

"But what sort of a fellow am I to be showing myself there among all the people who've been talking about me—and the people up at Fairly!" Robert burst out in horror of the prospect. "I shall be a sight among the people. Percy, upon my honour, I don't think I well can. I'll read the Bible at home if you like."

"No; you'll do penance," said Major Waring.

"Are you meaning it?"

"The penance will be ten times greater on my part, believe me."

Robert fancied him to be referring to some idea of mocking the interposition of religion.

"Then we'll go to Upton Church," he said. "I don't mind it at Upton."

"I intend to go to the church attended by 'The Family,' as we say in our parts; and you must come with me to Warbeach."

Clasping one hand across his forehead, Robert cried, "You couldn't ask me to do a thing I hate so much. Go, and sit, and look sheepish, and sing hymns with the people I've been badgering; and everybody seeing me! How can it be anything to you like what it is to me?"

"You have only to take my word for it that it is, and far more," said Major Waring, sinking his voice. "Come; it won't do you any harm to make an appointment to meet your conscience now and then. You will never be ruled by reason, and your feelings have to teach you what you learn. At any rate, it's my request."

This terminated the colloquy upon that topic. Robert looked forward to a penitential Sabbath-day.

"She is a widow still," thought Major Waring, as he stood alone in his bed-room, and, drawing aside the curtains of his window, looked up at the white moon.

CHAPTER XXIV

When the sun takes to shining in winter, and the Southwest to blowing, the corners of the earth cannot hide from him—the mornings are like halls full of light. Robert had spent his hopes upon a wet day that would have kept the congregation sparse and the guests at Fairly absent from public devotions.

He perceived at once that he was doomed to be under everybody's eyes when he walked down the aisle, for everybody would attend the service on such a morning as this.

Already he had met his conscience, in so far as that he shunned asking Percy again what was the reason for their going to church, and he had not the courage to petition to go in the afternoon instead of the morning.

The question, "Are you ashamed of yourself, then?" sang in his ears as a retort ready made.

There was no help for it; so he set about assisting his ingenuity to make the best appearance possible—brushing his hat and coat with extraordinary care.

Percy got him to point out the spot designated for the meeting, and telling him to wait in the Warbeach churchyard, or within sight of it, strolled off in the direction of the river. His simple neatness and quiet gentlemanly air abashed Robert, and lured him from his intense conception of abstract right and wrong, which had hitherto encouraged and incited him, so that he became more than ever crestfallen at the prospect of meeting the eyes of the church people, and with the trembling sensitiveness of a woman who weighs the merits of a lover when passion is having one of its fatal pauses, he looked at himself, and compared himself with the class of persons he had outraged, and tried to think better of himself, and to justify himself, and sturdily reject comparisons. They would not be beaten back. His enemies had never suggested them, but they were forced on him by the aspect of his friend.

Any man who takes the law into his own hands, and chooses to stand against what is conventionally deemed fitting:—against the world, as we say, is open to these moods of degrading humility. Robert waited for the sound of the bells with the emotions of a common culprit. Could he have been driven to the church and deposited suddenly in his pew, his mind would have been easier.

It was the walking there, the walking down the aisle, the sense of his being the fellow who had matched himself against those well-attired gentlemen, which entirely confused him. And not exactly for his own sake—for Percy's partly. He sickened at the thought of being seen by Major Waring's side. His best suit and his hat were good enough, as far as they went, only he did not feel that he wore them—he could not divine how it was—with a proper air, an air of signal comfort. In fact, the graceful negligence of an English gentleman's manner had been unexpectedly revealed to him; and it was strange, he reflected, that Percy never appeared to observe how deficient he was, and could still treat him as an equal, call him by his Christian name, and not object to be seen with him in public.

Robert did not think at the same time that illness had impoverished his blood. Your sensational beings must keep a strong and a good flow of blood in their veins to be always on a level with the occasion which they provoke. He remembered wonderingly that he had used to be easy in gait and ready of wit when walking from Queen Anne's Farm to Wrexby village church. Why was he a different creature now? He could not answer the question.

Two or three of his Warbeach acquaintances passed him in the lanes. They gave him good day, and spoke kindly, and with pleasant friendly looks.

Their impression when they left him was that he was growing proud.

The jolly butcher of Warbeach, who had a hearty affection for him, insisted upon clapping his hand, and showing him to Mrs. Billing, and showing their two young ones to Robert. With a kiss to the children, and a nod, Robert let them pass.

Here and there, he was hailed by young fellows who wore their hats on one side, and jaunty-fashioned coats—Sunday being their own bright day of exhibition. He took no notice of the greetings.

He tried to feel an interest in the robins and twittering wrens, and called to mind verses about little birds, and kept repeating them, behind a face that chilled every friendly man who knew him.

Moody the boat-builder asked him, with a stare, if he was going to church, and on Robert's replying that perhaps he was, said "I'm dashed!" and it was especially discouraging to one in Robert's condition.

Further to inspirit him, he met Jonathan Eccles, who put the same question to him, and getting the same answer, turned sharp round and walked homeward.

Robert had a great feeling of relief when the bells were silent, and sauntered with a superior composure round the holly and laurel bushes concealing the church. Not once did he ponder on the meeting between Major Waring and Mr. Edward Blencove, until he beheld the former standing alone by the churchyard gate, and then he thought more of the empty churchyard and the absence of carriages, proclaiming the dreadful admonition that he must immediately consider as to the best way of comporting himself before an observant and censorious congregation.

Major Waring remarked, "You are late."

"Have I kept you waiting?" said Robert.

"Not long. They are reading the lessons."

"Is it full inside?"

"I dare say it is."

"You have seen him, I suppose?"

"Oh yes; I have seen him."

Percy was short in his speech, and pale as Robert had never seen him before. He requested hastily to be told the situation of Lord Elling's pew.

"Don't you think of going into the gallery?" said Robert, but received no answer, and with an inward moan of "Good God! they'll think I've come here in a sort of repentance," he found himself walking down the aisle; and presently, to his amazement, settled in front of the Fairly pew, and with his eyes on Mrs. Lovell.

What was the matter with her? Was she ill? Robert forgot his own tribulation in an instant. Her face was like marble, and as she stood with the prayer-book in her hand, her head swayed over it: her lips made a faint effort at smiling, and she sat quietly down, and was concealed. Algernon and Sir John Capes were in the pew beside her, as well as Lady Elling, who, with a backward-turned hand and disregarding countenance, reached out her smelling-bottle.

"Is this because she fancies I know of her having made a bet of me?" thought Robert, and it was not his vanity prompted the supposition, though his vanity was awakened by it. "Or is she ashamed of her falsehood?" he thought again, and forgave her at the sight of her sweet pale face. The singing of the hymns made her evident suffering seem holy as a martyr's. He scarce had the power to conduct himself reverently, so intense was his longing to show her his sympathy.

"That is Mrs. Lovell—did you see her just now?" he whispered.

"Ah?" said Major Waring.

"I'm afraid she has fainted."

"Possibly."

But Mrs. Lovell had not fainted. She rose when the time for rising came again, and fixing her eyes with a grave devotional collectedness upon the vicar at his reading-desk, looked quite mistress of herself—but mistress of herself only when she kept them so fixed. When they moved, it was as if they had relinquished some pillar of support, and they wavered; livid shades chased her face, like the rain-clouds on a grey lake-water. Some one fronting her weighed on her eyelids. This was evident. Robert thought her a miracle of beauty. She was in colour like days he had noted thoughtfully: days with purple storm, and with golden horizon edges. She had on a bonnet of black velvet, with a delicate array of white lace, that was not suffered to disturb the contrast to her warm yellow hair. Her little gloved hands were both holding the book; at times she perused it, or, the oppression becoming unendurable, turned her gaze toward the corner of the chancel, and thence once more to her book. Robert rejected all idea of his being in any way the cause of her strange perturbation. He cast a glance at his friend. He had begun to nourish a slight suspicion; but it was too slight to bear up against Percy's self-possession; for, as he understood the story, Percy had been the sufferer, and the lady had escaped without a wound. How, then, if such were the case, would she be showing emotion thus deep, while he stood before her with perfect self-command?

Robert believed that if he might look upon that adorable face for many days together, he could thrust Rhoda's from his memory. The sermon was not long enough for him; and he was angry with Percy for rising before there was any movement for departure in the Fairly pew. In the doorway of the church Percy took his arm, and asked him to point out the family tombstone. They stood by it, when Lady Elling and Mrs. Lovell came forth and walked to the carriage, receiving respectful salutes from the people of Warbeach.

"How lovely she is!" said Robert.

"Do you think her handsome?" said Major Waring.

"I can't understand such a creature dying." Robert stepped over an open grave.

The expression of Percy's eyes was bitter.

"I should imagine she thinks it just as impossible."

The Warbeach villagers waited for Lady Elling's carriage to roll away, and with a last glance at Robert, they too went off in gossiping groups. Robert's penance was over, and he could not refrain from asking what good his coming to church had done.

"I can't assist you," said Percy. "By the way, Mr. Blancove denies everything. He thinks you mad. He promises, now that you have adopted reasonable measures, to speak to his cousin, and help, as far as he can, to discover the address you are in search of."

"That's all?" cried Robert.

"That is all."

"Then where am I a bit farther than when I began?"

"You are only at the head of another road, and a better one."

"Oh, why do I ever give up trusting to my right hand—" Robert muttered.

But the evening brought a note to him from Algernon Blancove. It contained a dignified condemnation of Robert's previous insane behaviour, and closed by giving Dahlia's address in London.

"How on earth was this brought about?" Robert now questioned.

"It's singular, is it not?" said Major blaring; "but if you want a dog to follow you, you don't pull it by the collar; and if you want a potato from the earth, you plant the potato before you begin digging. You are a soldier by instinct, my good Robert: your first appeal is to force. I, you see, am a civilian: I invariably try the milder methods. Do you start for London tonight? I remain. I wish to look at the neighbourhood."

Robert postponed his journey to the morrow, partly in dread of his approaching interview with Dahlia, but chiefly to continue a little longer by the side of him whose gracious friendship gladdened his life. They paid a second visit to Sutton Farm. Robert doggedly refused to let a word be said to his father about his having taken to farming, and Jonathan listened to all Major Waring said of his son like a man deferential to the accomplishment of speaking, but too far off to hear more than a chance word. He talked, in reply, quite cheerfully of the weather and the state of the ground; observed that the soil was a perpetual study, but he knew something of horses and dogs, and Yorkshiremen were like Jews in the trouble they took to over-reach in a bargain. "Walloping men is poor work, if you come to compare it with walloping Nature," he said, and explained that, according to his opinion, "to best a man at buying and selling was as wholesome an occupation as frowzlin' along the gutters for parings and strays." He himself preferred to go to the heart of things: "Nature makes you rich, if your object is to do the same for her. Yorkshire fellows never think except of making themselves rich by fattening on your blood, like sheep-ticks." In fine, Jonathan spoke sensibly, and abused Yorkshire, without hesitating to confess that a certain Yorkshireman, against whom he had matched his wits in a purchase of horseflesh, had given him a lively recollection of the encounter.

Percy asked him what he thought of his country. "I'll tell you," said Jonathan; "Englishmen's business is to go to war with the elements, and so long as we fight them, we're in the right academy for learnin' how the game goes. Our vulnerability commences when we think we'll sit down and eat the fruits, and if I don't see signs o' that, set me mole-tunnelling. Self-indulgence is the ruin of our time."

This was the closest remark he made to his relations with Robert, who informed him that he was going to London on the following day. Jonathan shook his hand heartily, without troubling himself about any inquiries.

"There's so much of that old man in me," said Robert, when Percy praised him, on their return, "that I daren't call him a Prince of an old boy: and never a spot of rancour in his soul. Have a claim on him—and there's your seat at his table: take and offend him—there's your seat still. Eat and drink, but you don't get near his heart. I'll surprise him some day. He fancies he's past surprises."

"Well," said Percy, "you're younger than I am, and may think the future belongs to you."

Early next morning they parted. Robert was in town by noon. He lost no time in hurrying to the Western suburb. As he neared the house where he was to believe Dahlia to be residing, he saw a man pass through the leafless black shrubs by the iron gate; and when he came to the gate himself the man was at the door. The door opened and closed on this man. It was Nicodemus Sedgett, or Robert's eyes did him traitorous service. He knocked at the door violently, and had to knock a second and a third time. Dahlia was denied to him. He was told that Mrs. Ayrton had lived there, but had left, and her present address was unknown. He asked to be allowed to speak a word to the man who had just entered the house. No one had entered for the last two hours, was the reply. Robert had an impulse to rush by the stolid little female liar, but Percy's recent lesson to him acted as a restraint; though, had it been a brawny woman or a lacquey in his path, he would certainly have followed his natural counsel. He turned away, lingering outside till it was dusk and the bruise on his head gave great throbs, and then he footed desolately farther and farther from the house. To combat with evil in his own country village had seemed a simple thing enough, but it appeared a superhuman task in giant London.

CHAPTER XXV

It requires, happily, many years of an ordinary man's life to teach him to believe in the exceeding variety and quantity of things money can buy: yet, when ingenuous minds have fully comprehended the potent character of the metal, they are likely enough to suppose that it will buy everything: after which comes the groaning anxiety to possess it.

This stage of experience is a sublime development in the great souls of misers. It is their awakening moment, and it is their first real sense of a harvest being in their hands. They have begun under the influence of the passion for hoarding, which is but a blind passion of the finger-ends. The idea that they have got together, bit by bit, a power, travels slowly up to their heavy brains. Once let it be grasped, however, and they clutch a god. They feed on everybody's hunger for it. And, let us confess, they have in that a mighty feast.

Anthony Hackbut was not a miser. He was merely a saving old man. His vanity was, to be thought a miser, envied as a miser. He lived in daily hearing of the sweet chink of gold, and loved the sound, but with a poetical love, rather than with the sordid desire to amass gold pieces.

Though a saving old man, he had his comforts; and if they haunted him and reproached him subsequently, for indulging wayward appetites for herrings and whelks and other sea-dainties that render up no account to you when they have disappeared, he put by copper and silver continually, weekly and monthly, and was master of a sum.

He knew the breadth of this sum with accuracy, and what it would expand to this day come a year, and probably this day come five years. He knew it only too well. The sum took no grand leaps. It increased, but did not seem to multiply. And he was breathing in the heart of the place, of all places in the world, where money did multiply.

He was the possessor of twelve hundred pounds, solid, and in haven; that is, the greater part in the Bank of England, and a portion in Boyne's Bank. He had besides a few skirmishing securities, and some such bits of paper as Algernon had given him in the public-house on that remarkable night of his visit to the theatre.

These, when the borrowers were defaulters in their payments and pleaded for an extension of time, inspired him with sentiments of grandeur that the solid property could not impart. Nevertheless, the anti-poetical tendency within him which warred with the poetical, and set him reducing whatsoever he claimed to plain figures, made it but a fitful hour of satisfaction.

He had only to fix his mind upon Farmer Fleming's conception of his wealth, to feel the miserable smallness of what seemed legitimately his own; and he felt it with so poignant an emotion that at times his fears of death were excited by the knowledge of a dead man's impotence to suggest hazy margins in the final exposure of his property. There it would lie, dead as himself! contracted, confined, contemptible!

What would the farmer think when he came to hear that his brother Tony's estate was not able to buy up Queen Anne's Farm?—when, in point of fact, he found that he had all along been the richer man of the two!

Anthony's comfort was in the unfaltering strength of his constitution. He permitted his estimate of it to hint at the probability of his outlasting his brother William John, to whom he wished no earthly ill, but only that he should not live with a mitigated veneration for him. He was really nourished by the farmer's gluttonous delight in his supposed piles of wealth. Sometimes, for weeks, he had the gift of thinking himself one of the Bank with which he had been so long connected; and afterward a wretched reaction set in.

It was then that his touch upon Bank money began to intoxicate him strangely. He had at times thousands hugged against his bosom, and his heart swelled to the money-bags immense. He was a dispirited, but a grateful creature, after he had delivered them up. The delirium came by fits, as if a devil lurked to surprise him.

"With this money," said the demon, "you might speculate, and in two days make ten times the amount."

To which Anthony answered: "My character's worth fifty times the amount."

Such was his reply, but he did not think it. He was honest, and his honesty had become a habit; but the money was the only thing which acted on his imagination; his character had attained to no sacred halo, and was just worth his annual income and the respect of the law for his person. The money fired his brain!

"Ah! if it was mine!" he sighed. "If I could call it mine for just forty or fifty hours! But it ain't, and I can't."

He fought dogged battles with the tempter, and beat him off again and again. One day he made a truce with him by saying that if ever the farmer should be in town of an afternoon he would steal ten minutes or so, and make an appointment with him somewhere and show him the money-bags without a word: let him weigh and eye them: and then the plan was for Anthony to talk of politics, while the farmer's mind was in a ferment.

With this arrangement the infernal Power appeared to be content, and Anthony was temporarily relieved of his trouble. In other words, the intermittent fever of a sort of harmless rascality was afflicting this old creature. He never entertained the notion of running clear away with the money entrusted to him.

Whither could an aged man fly? He thought of foreign places as of spots that gave him a shivering sense of its being necessary for him to be born again in nakedness and helplessness, if ever he was to see them and set foot on them.

London was his home, and clothed him about warmly and honourably, and so he said to the demon in their next colloquy.

Anthony had become guilty of the imprudence of admitting him to conferences and arguing with him upon equal terms. They tell us, that this is the imprudence of women under temptation; and perhaps Anthony was pushed to the verge of the abyss from causes somewhat similar to those which imperil them, and employed the same kind of efforts in his resistance.

In consequence of this compromise, the demon by degrees took seat at his breakfast-table, when Mrs. Wicklow, his landlady, could hear Anthony talking in the tone of voice of one who was pushed to his sturdiest arguments. She conceived that the old man's head was softening.

He was making one of his hurried rushes with the portage of money on an afternoon in Spring, when a young female plucked at his coat, and his wrath at offenders against the law kindled in a minute into fury.

"Hands off, minx!" he cried. "You shall be given in charge. Where's a policeman?"

"Uncle!" she said.

"You precious swindler in petticoats!" Anthony fumed.

But he had a queer recollection of her face, and when she repeated piteously: "Uncle!" he peered at her features, saying,—

"No!" in wonderment, several times.

Her hair was cut like a boy's. She was in common garments, with a close-shaped skull-cap and a black straw bonnet on her head; not gloved, of ill complexion, and with deep dark lines slanting down from the corners of her eyes. Yet the inspection convinced him that he beheld Dahlia, his remembering the niece. He was amazed; but speedily priceless trust in his arms, and the wickedness of the streets, he bade her follow him. She did so with some difficulty, for he ran, and dodged, and treated the world as his enemy, suddenly vanished, and appeared again breathing freely.

"Why, my girl?" he said: "Why, Dahl—Mrs. What's-your-name? Why, who'd have known you? Is that"—he got his eyes close to her hair; "is that the ladies' fashion now? 'Cause, if it is, our young street scamps has only got to buy bonnets, and—I say, you don't look the Pomp. Not as you used to, Miss Ma'am, I mean—no, that you don't. Well, what's the news? How's your husband?"

"Uncle," said Dahlia; "will you, please, let me speak to you somewhere?"

"Ain't we standing together?"

"Oh! pray, out of the crowd!"

"Come home with me, if my lodgings ain't too poor for you," said Anthony.

"Uncle, I can't. I have been unwell. I cannot walk far. Will you take me to some quiet place?"

"Will you treat me to a cab?" Anthony sneered vehemently.

"I have left off riding, uncle."

"What! Hulloo!" Anthony sang out. "Cash is down in the mouth at home, is it? Tell me that, now?"

Dahlia dropped her eyelids, and then entreated him once more to conduct her to a quiet place where they might sit together, away from noise. She was very earnest and very sad, not seeming to have much strength.

"Do you mind taking my arm?" said Anthony.

She leaned her hand on his arm, and he dived across the road with her, among omnibuses and cabs, shouting to them through the roar,—

"We're the Independence on two legs, warranted sound, and no competition;" and saying to Dahlia: "Lor' bless you! there's no retort in 'em, or I'd say something worth hearing. It's like poking lions in cages with raw meat, afore you get a chaffing-match out o' them. Some of 'em know me. They'd be good at it, those fellows. I've heard of good things said by 'em. But there they sit, and they've got no circulation—ain't ready, except at old women, or when they catch you in a mess, and getting the worst of it. Let me tell you; you'll never get manly chaff out of big bundles o' fellows with ne'er an atom o' circulation. The river's the place for that. I've heard uncommon good things on the river—not of 'em, but heard 'em. T' other's most part invention. And, they tell me, horseback's a prime thing for chaff. Circulation, again. Sharp and lively, I mean; not bawl, and answer over your back—most part impudence, and nothing else—and then out of hearing. That sort o' chaff's cowardly. Boys are stiff young parties—circulation—and I don't tackle them pretty often, 'xcept when I'm going like a ball among nine-pins. It's all a matter o' circulation. I say, my dear," Anthony addressed her seriously, "you should never lay hold o' my arm when you see me going my pace of an afternoon. I took you for a thief, and worse—I did. That I did. Had you been waiting to see me?"

"A little," Dahlia replied, breathless.

"You have been ill?"

"A little," she said.

"You've written to the farm? O' course you have!"

"Oh! uncle, wait," moaned Dahlia.

"But, ha' you been sick, and not written home?"

"Wait; please, wait," she entreated him.

"I'll wait," said Anthony; "but that's no improvement to queerness; and 'queer's your motto. Now we cross London Bridge. There's the Tower that lived in times when no man was safe of keeping his own money, 'cause of grasping kings—all claws and crown. I'm Republican as far as 'none o' them'—goes. There's the ships. The sun rises behind 'em, and sets afore 'em, and you may fancy, if you like, there's always gold in their rigging. Gals o' your sort think I say, come! tell me, if you are a lady?"

"No, uncle, no!" Dahlia cried, and then drawing in her breath, added: "not to you."

"Last time I crossed this bridge with a young woman hanging on my arm, it was your sister; they say she called on you, and you wouldn't see her; and a gal so good and a gal so true ain't to be got for a sister every day in the year! What are you pulling me for?"

Dahlia said nothing, but clung to him with a drooping head, and so they hurried along, until Anthony stopped in front of a shop displaying cups and muffins at the window, and leprous-

looking strips of bacon, and sausages that had angled for appetites till they had become pallid sodden things, like washed-out bait.

Into this shop he led her, and they took possession of a compartment, and ordered tea and muffins.

The shop was empty.

"It's one of the expenses of relationship," Anthony sighed, after probing Dahlia unsatisfactorily to see whether she intended to pay for both, or at least for herself; and finding that she had no pride at all. "My sister marries your father, and, in consequence—well! a muffin now and then ain't so very much. We'll forget it, though it is a breach, mind, in counting up afterwards, and two-pences every day's equal to a good big cannonball in the castle-wall at the end of the year. Have you written home?"

Dahlia's face showed the bright anguish of unshed tears.

"Uncle—oh! speak low. I have been near death. I have been ill for so long a time. I have come to you to hear about them—my father and Rhoda. Tell me what they are doing, and do they sleep and eat well, and are not in trouble? I could not write. I was helpless. I could not hold a pen. Be kind, dear uncle, and do not reproach me. Please, tell me that they have not been sorrowful."

A keenness shot from Anthony's eyes. "Then, where's your husband?" he asked.

She made a sad attempt at smiling. "He is abroad."

"How about his relations? Ain't there one among 'em to write for you when you're ill?"

"He... Yes, he has relatives. I could not ask them. Oh! I am not strong, uncle; if you will only leave following me so with questions; but tell me, tell me what I want to know."

"Well, then, you tell me where your husband banks," returned Anthony.

"Indeed, I cannot say."

"Do you," Anthony stretched out alternative fingers, "do you get money from him to make payments in gold, or, do you get it in paper?"

She stared as in terror of a pit-fall. "Paper," she said at a venture.

"Well, then, name your Bank."

There was no cunning in her eye as she answered: "I don't know any bank, except the Bank of England."

"Why the deuce didn't you say so at once—eh?" cried Anthony. "He gives you bank-notes. Nothing better in the world. And he a'n't been givin' you many lately—is that it? What's his profession, or business?"

"He is...he is no profession."

"Then, what is he? Is he a gentleman?"

"Yes," she breathed plaintively.

"Your husband's a gentleman. Eh?—and lost his money?"

"Yes."

"How did he lose it?"

The poor victim of this pertinacious interrogatory now beat about within herself for succour. "I must not say," she replied.

"You're going to try to keep a secret, are ye?" said Anthony; and she, in her relief at the pause to her torment, said: "I am," with a little infantile, withering half-smile.

"Well, you've been and kept yourself pretty secret," the old man pursued. "I suppose your husband's proud? He's proud, ain't he? He's of a family, I'll be bound. Is he of a family? How did he like your dressing up like a mill'ner gal to come down in the City and see me?"

Dahlia's guile was not ready. "He didn't mind," she said.

"He didn't mind, didn't he? He don't mind your cutting of your hair so?—didn't mind that?"

She shook her head. "No."

Anthony was down upon her like a hawk.

"Why, he's abroad!"

"Yes; I mean, he did not see me."

With which, in a minute, she was out of his grasp; but her heart beat thick, her lips were dry, and her thoughts were in disorder.

"Then, he don't know you've been and got shaved, and a poll like a turnip-head of a thief? That's something for him to learn, is it?"

The picture of her beauty gone, seared her eyes like heated brass. She caught Anthony's arm with one firm hand to hold him silent, and with the other hand covered her sight and let the fit of weeping pass.

When the tears had spent themselves, she relinquished her hold of the astonished old man, who leaned over the table to her, and dominated by the spirit of her touch, whispered, like one who had accepted a bond of secrecy: "Th' old farmer's well. So's Rhoda—my darkie lass. They've taken on a bit. And then they took to religion for comfort. Th' old farmer attends Methody meetin's, and quotes Scriptur' as if he was fixed like a pump to the Book, and couldn't fetch a breath without quotin'. Rhoda's oftenest along with your rector's wife down there, and does works o' charity, sicknussin', readin'—old farmer does the preachin'. Old mother Sumfit's fat as ever, and says her money's for you. Old Gammon goes on eatin' of the dumplings. Hey! what a queer old ancient he is. He seems to me to belong to a time afore ever money was. That Mr. Robert's off...never been down there since he left, 'cause my darkie lass thought herself too good for him. So she is!—too good for anybody. They're going to leave the farm; sell, and come to London."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Dahlia; "not going to leave the dear old farm, and our lane, and the old oaks, leading up to the heath. Are they? Father will miss it. Rhoda will mourn so. No place will ever be like that to them. I love it better than any place on earth."

"That's queer," said Anthony. "Why do you refuse to go, or won't let your husband take you down there; if you like the place that raving-like? But 'queer's your motto. The truth is this—you just listen. Hear me—hush! I won't speak in a bawl. You're a reasonable being, and you don't—that's to say, you do understand, the old farmer feels it uncomfortable—"

"But I never helped him when I was there," said Dahlia, suddenly shrinking in a perceptible tremble of acute divination. "I was no use. I never helped him—not at all. I was no—no use!"

Anthony blinked his eyes, not knowing how it was that he had thus been thrown out of his direct road. He began again, in his circumlocutory delicacy: "Never mind; help or no help, what th' old farmer feels is—and quite nat'ral. There's sensations as a father, and sensations as a man; and what th' old farmer feels is—"

"But Rhoda has always been more to father than I have," Dahlia cried, now stretching forward with desperate courage to confront her uncle, distract his speech, and avert the saying of the horrible thing she dreaded. "Rhoda was everything to him. Mother perhaps took to me—my mother!"

The line of her long underlie drawn sharp to check her tears, stopped her speaking.

"All very well about Rhoda," said Anthony. "She's everything to me, too."

"Every—everybody loves her!" Dahlia took him up.

"Let 'em, so long as they don't do no harm to her," was Anthony's remark. There was an idea in this that he had said, and the light of it led off his fancy. It was some time before he returned to the attack.

"Neighbours gossip a good deal. O' course you know that."

"I never listen to them," said Dahlia, who now felt bare at any instant for the stab she saw coming.

"No, not in London; but country's different, and a man hearing of his child 'it's very odd!' and 'keepin' away like that!' and 'what's become of her?' and that sort of thing, he gets upset."

Dahlia swallowed in her throat, as in perfect quietude of spirit, and pretended to see no meaning for herself in Anthony's words.

But she said, inadvertently, "Dear father!" and it gave Anthony his opening.

"There it is. No doubt you're fond of him. You're fond o' th' old farmer, who's your father. Then, why not make a entry into the village, and show 'em? I loves my father, says you. I can or I can't bring my husband, you seems to say; but I'm come to see my old father. Will you go down to-morrow wi' me?"

"Oh!" Dahlia recoiled and abandoned all defence in a moan: "I can't—I can't!"

"There," said Anthony, "you can't. You confess you can't; and there's reason for what's in your father's mind. And he hearin' neighbours' gossip, and it comes to him by a sort of extractin'—'Where's her husband?' bein' the question; and 'She ain't got one,' the answer—it's nat'ral for him to leave the place. I never can tell him how you went off, or who's the man, lucky or not. You went off sudden, on a morning, after kissin' me at breakfast; and no more Dahly visible. And he suspects—he more'n suspects. Farm's up for sale. Th' old farmer thinks it's unbrotherly of me not to go and buy, and I can't make him see I don't understand land: it's about like changeing sovereigns for lumps o' clay, in my notions; and that ain't my taste. Long and the short is—people down there at Wrexby and all round say you ain't married. He ain't got a answer for 'em; it's cruel to hear, and crueller to think: he's got no answer, poor old farmer! and he's obliged to go inter exile. Farm's up for sale."

Anthony thumped with his foot conclusively.

"Say I'm not married!" said Dahlia, and a bad colour flushed her countenance. "They say—I'm not married. I am—I am. It's false. It's cruel of father to listen to them—wicked people! base—base people! I am married, uncle. Tell father so, and don't let him sell the farm. Tell him, I said I was married. I am. I'm respected. I have only a little trouble, and I'm sure others have too. We all have. Tell father not to leave. It breaks my heart. Oh! uncle, tell him that from me."

Dahlia gathered her shawl close, and set an irresolute hand upon her bonnet strings, that moved as if it had forgotten its purpose. She could say no more. She could only watch her uncle's face, to mark the effect of what she had said.

Anthony nodded at vacancy. His eyebrows were up, and did not descend from their elevation. "You see, your father wants assurances; he wants facts. They're easy to give, if give 'em you can. Ah, there's a weddin' ring on your finger, sure enough. Plain gold—and, Lord! how bony your fingers ha' got, Dahly. If you are a sinner, you're a bony one now, and that don't seem so bad to me. I don't accuse you, my dear. Perhaps I'd like to see your husband's banker's book. But what your father hears, is—You've gone wrong."

Dahlia smiled in a consummate simulation of scorn.

"And your father thinks that's true."

She smiled with an equal simulation of saddest pity.

"And he says this: 'Proof,' he says, 'proof's what I want, that she's an honest woman.' He asks for you to clear yourself. He says, 'It's hard for an old man'—these are his words 'it's hard for an old man to hear his daughter called...'"

Anthony smacked his hand tight on his open mouth.

He was guiltless of any intended cruelty, and Dahlia's first impulse when she had got her breath, was to soothe him. She took his hand. "Dear father! poor father! Dear, dear father!" she kept saying.

"Rhoda don't think it," Anthony assured her.

"No?" and Dahlia's bosom exulted up to higher pain.

"Rhoda declares you are married. To hear that gal fight for you—there's ne'er a one in Wrexby dares so much as hint a word within a mile of her."

"My Rhoda! my sister!" Dahlia gasped, and the tears came pouring down her face.

In vain Anthony lifted her tea-cup and the muffin-plate to her for consolation. His hushings and soothings were louder than her weeping. Incapable of resisting such a protest of innocence, he said, "And I don't think it, neither."

She pressed his fingers, and begged him to pay the people of the shop: at which sign of her being probably moneyless, Anthony could not help mumbling, "Though I can't make out about your husband, and why he lets ye be cropped—that he can't help, may be—but lets ye go about dressed like a mill'ner gal, and not afford cabs. Is he very poor?"

She bowed her head.

"Poor?"

"He is very poor."

"Is he, or ain't he, a gentleman?"

Dahlia seemed torn by a new anguish.

"I see," said Anthony. "He goes and persuades you he is, and you've been and found out he's nothin' o' the sort—eh? That'd be a way of accounting for your queerness, more or less. Was it that fellow that Wicklow gal saw ye with?"

Dahlia signified vehemently, "No."

"Then, I've guessed right; he turns out not to be a gentleman—eh, Dahly? Go on noddin', if ye like. Never mind the shop people; we're well-conducted, and that's all they care for. I say, Dahly, he ain't a gentleman? You speak out or nod your head. You thought you'd caught a gentleman and 'taint the case. Gentlemen ain't caught so easy. They all of 'em goes to school, and that makes 'em knowin'. Come; he ain't a gentleman?"

Dahlia's voice issued, from a terrible inward conflict, like a voice of the tombs. "No," she said.

"Then, will you show him to me? Let me have a look at him."

Pushed from misery to misery, she struggled within herself again, and again in the same hollow manner said, "Yes."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Seein's believin'. If you'll show him to me, or me to him..."

"Oh! don't talk of it." Dahlia struck her fingers in a tight lock.

"I only want to set eye on him, my gal. Whereabouts does he live?"

"Down—down a great—very great way in the West."

Anthony stared.

She replied to the look: "In the West of London—a long way down."

"That's where he is?"

"Yes."

"I thought—hum!" went the old man suspiciously. "When am I to see him? Some day?"

"Yes; some day."

"Didn't I say, Sunday?"

"Next Sunday?"—Dahlia gave a muffled cry.

"Yes, next Sunday. Day after to-morrow. And I'll write off to-morrow, and ease th' old farmer's heart, and Rhoda 'll be proud for you. She don't care about gentleman—or no gentleman. More do th' old farmer. It's let us, live and die respectable, and not disgrace father nor mother. Old-fashioned's best-fashioned about them things, I think. Come, you bring him—your husband—to me on Sunday, if you object to my callin' on you. Make up your mind to."

"Not next Sunday—the Sunday after," Dahlia pleaded. "He is not here now."

"Where is he?" Anthony asked.

"He's in the country."

Anthony pounced on her, as he had done previously.

"You said to me he was abroad."

"In the country—abroad. Not—not in the great cities. I could not make known your wishes to him."

She gave this cool explanation with her eyelids fluttering timorously, and rose as she uttered it, but with faint and ill-supporting limbs, for during the past hour she had gone through the sharpest trial of her life, and had decided for the course of her life. Anthony was witless thereof, and was mystified by his incapability of perceiving where and how he had been deluded; but he had eaten all the muffin on the plate, and her rising proclaimed that she had no intention of making him call for another; which was satisfactory. He drank off her cup of tea at a gulp.

The waitress named the sum he was to pay, and receiving a meditative look in return for her air of expectancy after the amount had been laid on the table, at once accelerated their passage from the shop by opening the door.

"If ever I did give pennies, I'd give 'em to you," said Anthony, when he was out of her hearing. "Women beat men in guessing at a man by his face. Says she—you're honourable—you're legal—but prodigal ain't your portion. That's what she says, without the words, unless she's a reader. Now, then, Dahly, my lass, you take my arm. Buckle to. We'll to the West. Don't th' old farmer pronounce like 'toe' the West? We'll 'toe' the West. I can afford to laugh at them big houses up there.

"Where's the foundation, if one of them's sound? Why, in the City.

"I'll take you by our governor's house. You know—you know—don't ye, Dahly, know we been suspecting his nephew? 'cause we saw him with you at the theatre.

"I didn't suspect. I knew he found you there by chance, somehow. And I noticed your dress there. No wonder your husband's poor. He wanted to make you cut a figure as one of the handsomes, and that's as ruinous as cabs—ha! ha!"

Anthony laughed, but did not reveal what had struck him.

"Sir William Blancove's house is a first-rater. I've been in it. He lives in the library. All the other rooms—enter 'em, and if 'taint like a sort of, a social sepulchre! Dashed if he can get his son to live with him; though they're friends, and his son'll get all the money, and go into Parliament, and cut a shine, never fear.

"By the way, I've seen Robert, too. He called on me at the Bank. Asked after you.

"Seen her?" says he.

"No," I says.

"Ever see Mr. Edward Blancove here?" he says.

"I told him, I'd heard say, Mr. Edward was Continentalling. And then Robert goes off. His opinion is you ain't in England; 'cause a policeman he spoke to can't find you nowhere.

"Come," says I, 'let's keep our detectives to catch thieves, and not go distracting of 'em about a parcel o' women.'

"He's awfully down about Rhoda. She might do worse than take him. I don't think he's got a ounce of a chance now Religion's set in, though he's the mildest big 'un I ever come across. I forgot to haul him over about what he 'd got to say about Mr. Edward. I did remark, I thought—ain't I right?—Mr. Algernon's not the man?—eh? How come you in the theatre with him?"

Dahlia spoke huskily. "He saw me. He had seen me at home. It was an accident."

"Exactly how I put it to Robert. And he agreed with me. There's sense in that young man. Your husband wouldn't let you come to us there—eh? because he...why was that?"

Dahlia had it on her lips to say it "Because he was poorer than I thought;" but in the intensity of her torment, the wretchedness of this lie, revolted her. "Oh! for God's sake, uncle, give me peace about that."

The old man murmured: "Ay, ay;" and thought it natural that she should shun an allusion to the circumstance.

They crossed one of the bridges, and Dahlia stopped and said: "Kiss me, uncle."

"I ain't ashamed," said Anthony.

This being over, she insisted on his not accompanying her farther.

Anthony made her pledge her word of honour as a married woman, to bring her husband to the identical spot where they stood at three o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday week. She promised it.

"I'll write home to th' old farmer—a penny," said Anthony, showing that he had considered the outlay and was prepared for it.

"And uncle," she stipulated in turn, "they are not to see me yet. Very soon; but not yet. Be true to me, and come alone, or it will be your fault—I shall not appear. Now, mind. And beg them not to leave the farm. It will kill father. Can you not," she said, in the faded sweetness of her speech, "could you not buy it, and let father be your tenant, uncle? He would pay you regularly."

Anthony turned a rough shoulder on her.

"Good-bye, Dahly. You be a good girl, and all 'll go right. Old farmer talks about praying. If he didn't make it look so dark to a chap, I'd be ready to fancy something in that. You try it. You try, Dahly. Say a bit of a prayer to-night."

"I pray every night," Dahlia answered.

Her look of meek despair was hauntingly sad with Anthony on his way home.

He tracked her sorrowfulness to the want of money; and another of his terrific vague struggles with the money-demon set in.

CHAPTER XXVI

Sir William Blancove did business at his Bank till the hour of three in the afternoon, when his carriage conveyed him to a mews near the park of Fashion, where he mounted horse and obeyed the bidding of his doctor for a space, by cantering in a pleasant, portly, cock-horsey style, up and down the Row.

It was the day of the great race on Epsom Downs, and elderly gentlemen pricked by the doctors were in the ascendant in all London congregations on horseback.

Like Achilles (if the bilious Shade will permit the impudent comparison), they dragged their enemy, Gout, at their horses' heels for a term, and vengeance being accomplished went to their dinners and revived him.

Sir William was disturbed by his son's absence from England. A youth to whom a baronetcy and wealth are to be bequeathed is an important organism; and Sir William, though his faith reposed in his son, was averse to his inexplicably prolonged residence in the French metropolis, which, a school for many things, is not a school for the study of our Parliamentary system, and still less for that connubial career Sir William wished him to commence.

Edward's delightful cynical wit—the worldly man's profundity—and his apt quotations of the wit of others, would have continued to exercise their charm, if Sir William had not wanted to have him on the spot that he might answer certain questions pertinaciously put by Mama Gosling on behalf of her daughter.

"There is no engagement," Edward wrote; "let the maiden wait and discern her choice: let her ripen;" and he quoted Horace up to a point.

Nor could his father help smiling and completing the lines. He laughed, too, as he read the jog of a verse: "Were I to marry the Gosling, pray, which would be the goose?"

He laughed, but with a shade of disappointment in the fancy that he perceived a wearing away of the robust mental energy which had characterized his son: and Sir William knew the danger of wit, and how the sharp blade cuts the shoots of the sapling. He had thought that Edward was veritable tough oak, and had hitherto encouraged his light play with the weapon.

It became a question with him now, whether Wit and Ambition may dwell together harmoniously in a young man: whether they will not give such manifestation of their social habits as two robins shut in a cage will do: of which pretty birds one will presently be discovered with a slightly ruffled bosom amid the feathers of his defunct associate.

Thus painfully revolving matters of fact and feeling, Sir William cantered, and, like a cropped billow blown against by the wind, drew up in front of Mrs. Lovell, and entered into conversation with that lady, for the fine needles of whose brain he had the perfect deference of an experienced senior. She, however, did not give him comfort. She informed him that something was wrong with Edward; she could not tell what. She spoke of him languidly, as if his letters contained wearisome trifling.

"He strains to be Frenchy," she said. "It may be a good compliment for them to receive: it's a bad one for him to pay."

"Alcibiades is not the best of models," murmured Sir William. "He doesn't mention Miss Gosling."

"Oh dear, yes. I have a French acrostic on her name."

"An acrostic!"

A more contemptible form of mental exercise was not to be found, according to Sir William's judgement.

"An acrostic!" he made it guttural. "Well!"

"He writes word that he hears Moliere every other night. That can't harm him. His reading is principally Memoirs, which I think I have heard you call 'The backstairs of history.' We are dull here, and I should not imagine it to be a healthy place to dwell in, if the absence of friends and the presence of sunshine conspire to dullness. Algy, of course, is deep in accounts to-day?"

Sir William remarked that he had not seen the young man at the office, and had not looked for him; but the mention of Algernon brought something to his mind, and he said,—

"I hear he is continually sending messengers from the office to you during the day. You rule him with a rod of iron. Make him discontinue that practice. I hear that he despatched our old porter to you yesterday with a letter marked 'urgent.'"

Mrs. Lovell laughed pleadingly for Algernon.

"No; he shall not do it again. It occurred yesterday, and on no other occasion that I am aware of. He presumes that I am as excited as he is himself about the race—"

The lady bowed to a passing cavalier; a smarting blush dyed her face.

"He bets, does he!" said Sir William. "A young man, whose income, at the extreme limit, is two hundred pounds a year."

"May not the smallness of the amount in some degree account for the betting?" she asked whimsically. "You know, I bet a little—just a little. If I have but a small sum, I already regard it as a stake; I am tempted to bid it fly."

"In his case, such conduct puts him on the high road to rascality," said Sir William severely. "He is doing no good."

"Then the squire is answerable for such conduct, I think."

"You presume to say that he is so because he allows his son very little money to squander? How many young men have to contain their expenses within two hundred pounds a year!"

"Not sons of squires and nephews of baronets," said Mrs. Lovell. "Adieu! I think I see a carrier-pigeon flying overhead, and, as you may suppose, I am all anxiety."

Sir William nodded to her. He disliked certain of her ways; but they were transparent bits of audacity and restlessness pertaining to a youthful widow, full of natural dash; and she was so

sweetly mistress of herself in all she did, that he never supposed her to be needing caution against excesses. Old gentlemen have their pets, and Mrs. Lovell was a pet of Sir William's.

She was on the present occasion quite mistress of herself, though the stake was large. She was mistress of herself when Lord Suckling, who had driven from the Downs and brushed all save a spot of white dust out of his baby moustache to make himself presentable, rode up to her to say that the horse Templemore was beaten, and that his sagacity in always betting against favourites would, in this last instance, transfer a "pot of money" from alien pockets to his own.

"Algy Blancove's in for five hundred to me," he said; adding with energy, "I hope you haven't lost? No, don't go and dash my jolly feeling by saying you have. It was a fine heat; neck-and-neck past the Stand. Have you?"

"A little," she confessed. "It's a failing of mine to like favourites. I'm sorry for Algy."

"I'm afraid he's awfully hit."

"What makes you think so?"

"He took it so awfully cool."

"That may mean the reverse."

"It don't with him. But, Mrs. Lovell, do tell me you haven't lost. Not much, is it? Because, I know there's no guessing, when you are concerned."

The lady trifled with her bridle-rein.

"I really can't tell you yet. I may have lost. I haven't won. I'm not cool-blooded enough to bet against favourites. Addio, son of Fortune! I'm at the Opera to-night."

As she turned her horse from Lord Suckling, the cavalier who had saluted her when she was with Sir William passed again. She made a signal to her groom, and sent the man flying in pursuit of him, while she turned and cantered. She was soon overtaken.

"Madam, you have done me the honour."

"I wish to know why it is your pleasure to avoid me, Major Waring?"

"In this place?"

"Wherever we may chance to meet."

"I must protest."

"Do not. The thing is evident."

They rode together silently.

Her face was toward the sunset. The light smote her yellow hair, and struck out her grave and offended look, as in a picture.

"To be condemned without a hearing!" she said. "The most dastardly criminal gets that. Is it imagined that I have no common feelings? Is it manly to follow me with studied insult? I can bear the hatred of fools. Contempt I have not deserved. Dead! I should be dead, if my conscience had once reproached me. I am a mark for slander, and brave men should beware of herding with despicable slanderers."

She spoke, gazing frontward all the while. The pace she maintained in no degree impeded the concentrated passion of her utterance.

But it was a more difficult task for him, going at that pace, to make explanations, and she was exquisitely fair to behold! The falling beams touched her with a mellow sweetness that kindled bleeding memories.

"If I defend myself?" he said.

"No. All I ask is that you should Accuse me. Let me know what I have done—done, that I have not been bitterly punished for? What is it? what is it? Why do you inflict a torture on me whenever you see me? Not by word, not by look. You are too subtle in your cruelty to give me anything I can grasp. You know how you wound me. And I am alone."

"That is supposed to account for my behaviour?"

She turned her face to him. "Oh, Major blaring! say nothing unworthy of yourself. That would be a new pain to me."

He bowed. In spite of a prepossessing anger, some little softness crept through his heart.

"You may conceive that I have dropped my pride," she said. "That is the case, or my pride is of a better sort."

"Madam, I fully hope and trust," said he.

"And believe," she added, twisting his words to the ironic tongue. "You certainly must believe that my pride has sunk low. Did I ever speak to you in this manner before?"

"Not in this manner, I can attest."

"Did I speak at all, when I was hurt?" She betrayed that he had planted a fresh sting.

"If my recollection serves me," said he, "your self-command was remarkable."

Mrs. Lovell slackened her pace.

"Your recollection serves you too well, Major Waring. I was a girl. You judged the acts of a woman. I was a girl, and you chose to put your own interpretation on whatever I did. You scourged me before the whole army. Was not that enough? I mean, enough for you? For me, perhaps not, for I have suffered since, and may have been set apart to suffer. I saw you in that little church at Warbeach; I met you in the lanes; I met you on the steamer; on the railway platform; at the review. Everywhere you kept up the look of my judge. You! and I have been 'Margaret' to you. Major Waring, how many a woman in my place would attribute your relentless condemnation of her to injured vanity or vengeance? In those days I trifled with everybody. I played with fire. I was ignorant of life. I was true to my husband; and because I was true, and because I was ignorant, I was plunged into tragedies I never suspected. This is to be what you call a coquette. Stamping a name saves thinking. Could I read my husband's temper? Would not a coquette have played her cards differently? There never was need for me to push my husband to a contest. I never had the power to restrain him. Now I am wiser; and now is too late; and now you sit in judgement on me. Why? It is not fair; it is unkind."

Tears were in her voice, though not in her eyes.

Major Waring tried to study her with the coolness of a man who has learnt to doubt the truth of women; but he had once yearned in a young man's frenzy of love to take that delicate shape in his arms, and he was not proof against the sedate sweet face and keen sad ring of the voice.

He spoke earnestly.

"You honour me by caring for my opinion. The past is buried. I have some forgiveness to ask. Much, when I think of it—very much. I did you a public wrong. From a man to a woman it was unpardonable. It is a blot on my career. I beg you humbly to believe that I repent it."

The sun was flaming with great wings red among the vapours; and in the recollection of the two, as they rode onward facing it, arose that day of the forlorn charge of English horse in the Indian jungle, the thunder and the dust, the fire and the dense knot of the struggle. And like a ghost sweeping across her eyeballs, Mrs. Lovell beheld, part in his English freshness, part ensanguined, the image of the gallant boy who had ridden to perish at the spur of her mad whim. She forgot all present surroundings.

"Percy!" she said.

"Madam?"

"Percy!"

"Margaret?"

"Oh, what an undying day, Percy!"

And then she was speechless.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Park had been empty, but the opera-house was full; and in the brilliance of the lights and divine soaring of the music, the genius of Champagne luncheons discussed the fate of the horse Templemore; some, as a matter of remote history; some, as another delusion in horse-flesh the greater number, however, with a determination to stand by the beaten favourite, though he had fallen, and proclaim him the best of racers and an animal foully mishandled on the course. There were whispers, and hints, and assertions; now implicating the jockey, now the owner of Templemore. The Manchester party, and the Yorkshire party, and their diverse villanous tricks, came under review. Several offered to back Templemore at double the money they had lost, against the winner. A favourite on whom money has been staked, not only has friends, but in adversity he is still believed in; nor could it well be otherwise, for the money, no doubt, stands for faith, or it would never have been put up to the risks of a forfeit.

Foremost and wildest among the excited young men who animated the stalls, and rushed about the lobby, was Algernon. He was the genius of Champagne luncheon incarnate. On him devolves, for a time, the movement of this story, and we shall do well to contemplate him, though he may seem possibly to be worthless. What is worthless, if it be well looked at? Nay, the most worthless creatures are most serviceable for examination, when the microscope is applied to them, as a simple study of human mechanism. This youth is one of great Nature's tom-fools: an elegant young gentleman outwardly, of the very large class who are simply the engines of their appetites, and, to the philosophic eye, still run wild in woods, as did the primitive nobleman that made a noise in the earlier world.

Algernon had this day lost ten times more than he could hope to be in a position to pay within ten years, at the least, if his father continued to argue the matter against Providence, and live. He had lost, and might speedily expect to be posted in all good betting circles as something not pleasantly odoriferous for circles where there is no betting. Nevertheless, the youth was surcharged with gaiety. The soul of mingled chicken and wine illumined his cheeks and eyes. He laughed and joked about the horse—his horse, as he called Templemore—and meeting Lord Suckling, won five sovereigns of him by betting that the colours of one of the beaten horses, Benloo, were distinguished by a chocolate bar. The bet was referred to a dignified umpire, who, a Frenchman, drew his right hand down an imperial tuft of hair dependent from his chin, and gave a decision in Algernon's favour. Lord Suckling paid the money on the spot, and Algernon pocketed it exulting. He had the idea that it was the first start in his making head against the flood. The next instant he could have pitched himself upon the floor and bellowed. For, a soul of chicken and wine, lightly elated, is easily dashed; and if he had but said to Lord Suckling that, it might as well be deferred, the thing would have become a precedent, and his own debt might

have been held back. He went on saying, as he rushed forward alone: "Never mind, Suckling. Oh, hang it! put it in your pocket;" and the imperative necessity for talking, and fancying what was adverse to fact, enabled him to feel for a time as if he had really acted according to the prompting of his wisdom. It amazed him to see people sitting and listening. The more he tried it, the more unendurable it became. Those sitters and loungers appeared like absurd petrifications to him. If he abstained from activity for ever so short a term, he was tormented by a sense of emptiness; and, as he said to himself, a man who has eaten a chicken, and part of a game-pie, and drunk thereto Champagne all day, until the popping of the corks has become as familiar as minute-guns, he can hardly be empty. It was peculiar. He stood, just for the sake of investigating the circumstance—it was so extraordinary. The music rose in a triumphant swell. And now he was sure that he was not to be blamed for thinking this form of entertainment detestable. How could people pretend to like it? "Upon my honour!" he said aloud. The hypocritical nonsense of pretending to like opera-music disgusted him.

"Where is it, Algy?" a friend of his and Suckling's asked, with a languid laugh.

"Where's what?"

"Your honour."

"My honour? Do you doubt my honour?" Algernon stared defiantly at the inoffensive little fellow.

"Not in the slightest. Very sorry to, seeing that I have you down in my book."

"Latters? Ah, yes," said Algernon, musically, and letting his under-lip hang that he might restrain the impulse to bite it. "Fifty, or a hundred, is it? I lost my book on the Downs."

"Fifty; but wait till settling-day, my good fellow, and don't fiddle at your pockets as if I'd been touching you up for the money. Come and sup with me to-night."

Algernon muttered a queer reply in a good-tempered tone, and escaped him.

He was sobered by that naming of settling-day. He could now listen to the music with attention, if not with satisfaction. As he did so, the head of drowned memory rose slowly up through the wine-bubbles in his brain, and he flung out a far thought for relief: "How, if I were to leave England with that dark girl Rhoda at Wrexby, marry her like a man, and live a wild ramping life in the colonies?" A curtain closed on the prospect, but if memory was resolved that it would not be drowned, he had at any rate dosed it with something fresh to occupy its digestion.

His opera-glass had been scouring the house for a sight of Mrs. Lovell, and at last she appeared in Lord Elling's box.

"I can give you two minutes, Algy," she said, as he entered and found her opportunely alone. "We have lost, I hear. No interjection, pray. Let it be, for l'honneur, with us. Come to me to-morrow. You have tossed trinkets into my lap. They were marks of esteem, my cousin. Take

them in the same light back from me. Turn them into money, and pay what is most pressing. Then go to Lord Suckling. He is a good boy, and won't distress you; but you must speak openly to him at once. Perhaps he will help you. I will do my best, though whether I can, I have yet to learn."

"Dear Mrs. Lovell!" Algernon burst out, and the corners of his mouth played nervously.

He liked her kindness, and he was wroth at the projected return of his gifts. A man's gifts are an exhibition of the royalty of his soul, and they are the last things which should be mentioned to him as matters to be blotted out when he is struggling against ruin. The lady had blunt insight just then. She attributed his emotion to gratitude.

"The door may be opened at any minute," she warned him.

"It's not about myself," he said; "it's you. I believe I tempted you to back the beastly horse. And he would have won—a fair race, and he would have won easy. He was winning. He passed the stand a head ahead. He did win. It's a scandal to the Turf. There's an end of racing in England. It's up. They've done for themselves to-day. There's a gang. It's in the hands of confederates."

"Think so, if it consoles you," said Mrs. Lovell, "don't mention your thoughts, that is all."

"I do think so. Why should we submit to a robbery? It's a sold affair. That Frenchman, Baron Vistocq, says we can't lift our heads after it."

"He conducts himself with decency, I hope."

"Why, he's won!"

"Imitate him."

Mrs. Lovell scanned the stalls.

"Always imitate the behaviour of the winners when you lose," she resumed. "To speak of other things: I have had no letter of late from Edward. He should be anxious to return. I went this morning to see that unhappy girl. She consents."

"Poor creature," murmured Algernon; and added "Everybody wants money."

"She decides wisely; for it is the best she can do. She deserves pity, for she has been basely used."

"Poor old Ned didn't mean," Algernon began pleading on his cousin's behalf, when Mrs. Lovell's scornful eye checked the feeble attempt.

"I am a woman, and, in certain cases, I side with my sex."

"Wasn't it for you?"

"That he betrayed her? If that were so, I should be sitting in ashes."

Algernon's look plainly declared that he thought her a mystery.

The simplicity of his bewilderment made her smile.

"I think your colonies are the right place for you, Algy, if you can get an appointment; which must be managed by-and-by. Call on me to-morrow, as I said."

Algernon signified positively that he would not, and doggedly refused to explain why.

"Then I will call on you," said Mrs. Lovell.

He was going to say something angrily, when Mrs. Lovell checked him: "Hush! she is singing."

Algernon listened to the prima donna in loathing; he had so much to inquire about, and so much to relate: such a desire to torment and be comforted!

Before he could utter a word further, the door opened, and Major Waring appeared, and he beheld Mrs. Lovell blush strangely. Soon after, Lord Elling came in, and spoke the ordinary sentence or two concerning the day's topic—the horse Templemore. Algernon quitted the box. His ears were surcharged with sound entirely foreign to his emotions, and he strolled out of the house and off to his dingy chambers, now tenanted by himself alone, and there faced the sealed letters addressed to Edward, which had, by order, not been forwarded. No less than six were in Dahlia's handwriting. He had imagination sufficient to conceive the lamentations they contained, and the reproach they were to his own subserviency in not sending them. He looked at the postmarks. The last one was dated two months back.

"How can she have cared a hang for Ned, if she's ready to go and marry a yokel, for the sake of a home and respectability?" he thought, rather in scorn; and, having established this contemptuous opinion of one of the sex, he felt justified in despising all. "Just like women! They—no! Peggy Lovell isn't. She's a trump card, and she's a coquette—can't help being one. It's in the blood. I never saw her look so confoundedly lovely as when that fellow came into the box. One up, one down. Ned's away, and it's this fellow's turn. Why the deuce does she always think I'm a boy? or else, she pretends to. But I must give my mind to business."

He drew forth the betting-book which his lively fancy had lost on the Downs. Prompted by an afterthought, he went to the letter-box, saying,—

"Who knows? Wait till the day's ended before you curse your luck."

There was a foreign letter in it from Edward, addressed to him, and another addressed to "Mr. Blancuv," that he tore open and read with disgusted laughter. It was signed "N. Sedgett."

Algernon read it twice over, for the enjoyment of his critical detection of the vile grammar, with many "Oh! by Joves!" and a concluding, "This is a curiosity!"

It was a countryman's letter, ill-spelt, involved, and of a character to give Algernon a fine scholarly sense of superiority altogether novel. Everybody abused Algernon for his abuse of common Queen's English in his epistles: but here was a letter in comparison with which his own were doctoral, and accordingly he fell upon it with an acrimonious rapture of pedantry known to dull wits that have by extraordinary hazard pounced on a duller.

"You're 'willing to forgeit and forgeive,' are you, you dog!" he exclaimed, half dancing. "You'd forge anything, you rascal, if you could disguise your hand—that, I don't doubt. You 'expeck the thousand pound to be paid down the day of my marriage,' do you, you impudent ruffian! 'acording to agremint.' What a mercenary vagabond this is!"

Algernon reflected a minute. The money was to pass through his hands. He compressed a desire to dispute with Sedgett that latter point about the agreement, and opened Edward's letter.

It contained an order on a firm of attorneys to sell out so much Bank Stock and pay over one thousand pounds to Mr. A. Blancove.

The beautiful concision of style in this document gave Algernon a feeling of profound deference toward the law and its officers.

"Now, that's the way to Write!" he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Accompanying this pleasant, pregnant bit of paper, possessed of such admirable literary excellence, were the following flimsy lines from Edward's self, to Algernon incomprehensible.

As there is a man to be seen behind these lines in the dull unconscious process of transformation from something very like a villain to something by a few degrees more estimable, we may as well look at the letter in full.

It begins with a neat display of consideration for the person addressed, common to letters that are dictated by overpowering egoism:—

"Dear Algy,—I hope you are working and attending regularly to office business. Look to that and to your health at present. Depend upon it, there is nothing like work. Fix your teeth in it. Work is medicine. A truism! Truisms, whether they lie in the

depths of thought, or on the surface, are at any rate the pearls of experience.

"I am coming home. Let me know the instant this affair is over. I can't tell why I wait here. I fall into lethargies. I write to no one but to you. Your supposition that I am one of the hangers-on of the coquette of her time, and that it is for her I am seeking to get free, is conceived with your usual discrimination. For Margaret Lovell? Do you imagine that I desire to be all my life kicking the beam, weighed in capricious scales, appraised to the direct nicety, petulantly taken up, probed for my weakest point, and then flung into the grate like a child's toy? That's the fate of the several asses who put on the long-eared Lovell-livery.

"All women are the same. Know one, know all. Aware of this, and too wise to let us study them successfully, Nature pretty language this is for you, Algy! I can do nothing but write nonsense. I am sick of life. I feel choked. After a month, Paris is sweet biscuit.

"I have sent you the order for the money. If it were two, or twenty, thousand pounds, it would be the same to me.

"I swear to heaven that my lowest cynical ideas of women, and the loathing with which their simply animal vagaries inspires a thoughtful man, are distanced and made to seem a benevolent criticism, by the actualities of my experience. I say that you cannot put faith in a woman. Even now, I do not—it's against reason—I do not believe that she—this Dahlia—means to go through with it. She is trying me. I have told her that she was my wife. Her self-respect—everything that keeps a woman's head up—must have induced her to think so. Why, she is not a fool! How can she mean to give herself to an ignorant country donkey? She does not: mark me. For her, who is a really—I may say, the most refined nature I have ever met, to affect this, and think of deceiving me, does not do credit to her wits—and she is not without her share.

"I did once mean that she should be honourably allied to me. It's comforting that the act is not the wife of the intention, or I should now be yoked to a mere thing of the seasons and the hours—a creature whose 'No' to-day is the 'Yes' of to-morrow. Women of this cast are sure to end comfortably for themselves, they are so obedient to the whips of Providence.

"But I tell you candidly, Algy, I believe she's pushing me, that she may see how far I will let her go. I do not permit her to play at this game with me." The difficulty is in teaching women that we are not constituted as they are, and that we are wilfully earnest, while they, who never can be so save under compulsion, carry it on with us, expecting that at a certain crisis a curtain will drop, and we shall take a deep breath, join hands, and exclaim, 'What an exciting play!'—weeping luxuriously. The actualities of life must be branded on their backs—you can't get their brains to apprehend them.

"Poor things! they need pity. I am ready to confess I did not keep my promise to her. I am very sorry she has been ill. Of course,

having no brains—nothing but sensations wherewith to combat every new revolution of fortune, she can't but fall ill. But I think of her; and I wish to God I did not. She is going to enter her own sphere—though, mark me, it will turn out as I say, that, when it comes to the crisis, there will be shrieks and astonishment that the curtain doesn't fall and the whole resolve itself to what they call a dream in our language, a farce.

"I am astonished that there should be no letters for me. I can understand her not writing at first; but apparently she cherishes rancour. It is not like her. I can't help thinking there must be one letter from her, and that you keep it back. I remember that I told you when I left England I desired to have no letter forwarded to me, but I have repeatedly asked you since if there was a letter, and it appears to me that you have shuffled in your answer. I merely wish to know if there is a letter; because I am at present out in my study of her character. It seems monstrous that she should never have written! Don't you view it in that light? To be ready to break with me, without one good-bye!—it's gratifying, but I am astonished; for so gentle and tender a creature, such as I knew her, never existed to compare with her. *Ce qui est bien la preuve que je ne la connaissais pas!* I thought I did, which was my error. I have a fatal habit of trusting to my observation less than to my divining wit; and La Rochefoucauld is right: *'on est quelquefois un sot avec de l'esprit; mais on ne Pest jamais avec du jugement.'* Well! better be deceived in a character than doubt it.

"This will soon be over. Then back to the dear old dusky chambers, with the pick and the axe in the mine of law, till I strike a gold vein, and follow it to the woolsack. I want peace. I begin to hate pleading. I hope to meet Death full-wigged. By my troth, I will look as grimly at him as he at me. Meantime, during a vacation, I will give you holiday (or better, in the February days, if I can spare time and Equity is dispensed without my aid), dine you, and put you in the whirl of Paris. You deserve a holiday. *Nunc est bibendum!* You shall sing it. Tell me what you think of her behaviour. You are a judge of women. I think I am developing nerves. In fact, work is what I need—a file to bite. And send me also the name of this man who has made the bargain—who is to be her husband. Give me a description of him. It is my duty to see that he has principle; at least we're bound to investigate his character, if it's really to go on. I wonder whether you will ever perceive the comedy of, life. I doubt whether a man is happier when he does perceive it. Perhaps the fact is, that he has by that time lost his power of laughter; except in the case of here and there a very tremendous philosopher.

"I believe that we comic creatures suffer more than your tragic personages. We, do you see, are always looking to be happy and comfortable; but in a tragedy, the doomed wretches are liver-complexioned from the opening act. Their laughter is the owl: their broadest smile is twilight. All the menacing horrors of an eclipse are ours, for we have a sun over us; but they are born in shades, with the tuck of a curtain showing light, and little can be taken from them; so that they find scarce any terrors in the inevitable final stroke. No; the comedy is painfulest. You and I, Algy, old bachelors, will earn the right just to chuckle. We will

take the point of view of science, be the stage carpenters, and let the actors move on and off. By this, we shall learn to take a certain pride in the machinery. To become stage carpenter, is to attain to the highest rank within the reach of intellectual man. But your own machinery must be sound, or you can't look after that of the theatre. Don't over-tax thy stomach, O youth!

"And now, farewell, my worthy ass! You have been thinking me one through a fair half of this my letter, so I hasten to be in advance of you, by calling you one. You are one: I likewise am one. We are all one. The universal language is hee-haw, done in a grievous yawn.

"Yours,

"Edward B.

"P.S.—Don't fail to send a letter by the next post; then, go and see her; write again exactly what she says, and let me know the man's name. You will not lose a minute. Also, don't waste ink in putting Mrs. Lovell's name to paper: I desire not to hear anything of the woman."

Algernon read this letter in a profound mystification, marvelling how it could possibly be that Edward and Mrs. Lovell had quarrelled once more, and without meeting.

They had parted, he knew or supposed that he knew, under an engagement to arrange the preliminaries of an alliance, when Edward should return from France; in other words, when Edward had thrown grave-dust on a naughty portion of his past; severing an unwise connection. Such had certainly been Edward's view of the matter. But Mrs. Lovell had never spoken to Algernon on that subject. She had spoken willingly and in deep sympathy of Dahlia. She had visited her, pitied her, comforted her; and Algernon remembered that she had looked very keen and pinched about the mouth in alluding to Dahlia; but how she and Edward had managed to arrive at another misunderstanding was a prodigious puzzle to him; and why, if their engagement had snapped, each consented to let Dahlia's marriage (which was evidently distasteful to both) go on to the conclusion of the ceremony, he could not comprehend. There were, however, so many things in the world that he could not comprehend, and he had grown so accustomed, after an effort to master a difficulty, to lean his head back upon downy ignorance, that he treated this significant letter of Edward's like a tough lesson, and quietly put it by, together with every recommendation it contained. For all that was practical in it, it might just as well not have been written.

The value of the letter lies in the exhibition it presents of a rather mark-worthy young man, who has passed through the hands of a—(what I must call her; and in doing so, I ask pardon of all the Jack Cades of Letters, who, in the absence of a grammatical king and a government, sit as lords upon the English tongue) a crucible woman. She may be inexcusable herself; but you for you to be base, for you to be cowardly, even to betray a weakness, though it be on her behalf,—though you can plead that all you have done is for her, yea, was partly instigated by her,—it will cause her to dismiss you with the inexorable contempt of Nature, when she has tried one of her creatures and found him wanting.

Margaret Lovell was of this description: a woman fashioned to do both harm and good, and more of harm than of good; but never to sanction a scheme of evil or blink at it in alliance with another: a woman, in contact with whom you were soon resolved to your component elements. Separated from a certain fascination that there was for her in Edward's acerbic wit, she saw that he was doing a dastardly thing in cold blood. We need not examine their correspondence. In a few weeks she had contrived to put a chasm between them as lovers. Had he remained in England, boldly facing his own evil actions, she would have been subjugated, for however keenly she might pierce to the true character of a man, the show of an unflinching courage dominated her; but his departure, leaving all the brutality to be done for him behind his back, filled this woman with a cutting spleen. It is sufficient for some men to know that they are seen through, in order to turn away in loathing from her whom they have desired; and when they do thus turn away, they not uncommonly turn with a rush of old affection to those who have generously trusted them in the days past, and blindly thought them estimable beings.

Algernon was by no means gifted to perceive whether this was the case with his cousin in Paris.

CHAPTER XXIX

So long as the fool has his being in the world, he will be a part of every history, nor can I keep him from his place in a narrative that is made to revolve more or less upon its own wheels. Algernon went to bed, completely forgetting Edward and his own misfortunes, under the influence of the opiate of the order for one thousand pounds, to be delivered to him upon application. The morning found him calmly cheerful, until a little parcel was brought to his door, together with a note from Mrs. Lovell, explaining that the parcel contained those jewels, his precious gifts of what she had insultingly chosen to call "esteem" for her.

Algernon took it in his hand, and thought of flinging it through the window; but as the window happened to be open, he checked the impulse, and sent it with great force into a corner of the room: a perfectly fool-like proceeding, for the fool is, after his fashion, prudent, and will never, if he can help it, do himself thorough damage, that he may learn by it and be wiser.

"I never stand insult," he uttered, self-approvingly, and felt manlier. "No; not even from you, ma'am," he apostrophized Mrs. Lovell's portrait, that had no rival now upon the wall, and that gave him a sharp fight for the preservation of his anger, so bewitching she was to see. Her not sending up word that she wished him to come to her rendered his battle easier.

"It looks rather like a break between us," he said. "If so, you won't find me so obedient to your caprices, Mrs. Margaret L.; though you are a pretty woman, and know it. Smile away. I prefer a staunch, true sort of a woman, after all. And the colonies it must be, I begin to suspect." This set

him conjuring before his eyes the image of Rhoda, until he cried, "I'll be hanged if the girl doesn't haunt me!" and considered the matter with some curiosity.

He was quickly away, and across the square of Lincoln's Inn Fields to the attorney's firm, where apparently his coming was expected, and he was told that the money would be placed in his hands on the following day. He then communicated with Edward, in the brief Caesarian tongue of the telegraph: "All right. Stay. Ceremony arranged." After which, he hailed a skimming cab, and pronouncing the word "Epsom," sank back in it, and felt in his breast-pocket for his cigar-case, without casting one glance of interest at the deep fit of cogitation the cabman had been thrown into by the suddenness of the order.

"Dash'd if it ain't the very thing I went and gone and dreamed last night," said the cabman, as he made his dispositions to commence the journey.

Certain boys advised him to whip it away as hard as he could, and he would come in the winner.

"Where shall I grub, sir?" the cabman asked through the little door above, to get some knowledge of the quality of his fare.

"Eat your 'grub' on the course," said Algernon.

"Ne'er a hamper to take up nowheres, is there, sir?"

"Do you like the sight of one?"

"Well, it ain't what I object to."

"Then go fast, my man, and you will soon see plenty."

"If you took to chaffin' a bit later in the day, it'd impart more confidence to my bosom," said the cabman; but this he said to that bosom alone.

"Ain't no particular colours you'd like me to wear, is there? I'll get a rosette, if you like, sir, and enter in triumph. Gives ye something to stand by. That's always my remark, founded on observation."

"Go to the deuce! Drive on," Algernon sang out. "Red, yellow, and green."

"Lobster, ale, and salad!" said the cabman, flicking his whip; "and good colours too. Tenpenny Nail's the horse. He's the colours I stick to." And off he drove, envied of London urchins, as mortals would have envied a charioteer driving visibly for Olympus.

Algernon crossed his arms, with the frown of one looking all inward.

At school this youth had hated sums. All arithmetical difficulties had confused and sickened him. But now he worked with indefatigable industry on an imaginary slate; put his postulate, counted

probabilities, allowed for chances, added, deducted, multiplied, and unknowingly performed algebraic feats, till his brows were stiff with frowning, and his brain craved for stimulant.

This necessity sent his hand to his purse, for the calling of the cab had not been a premeditated matter. He discovered therein some half-crowns and a sixpence, the latter of which he tossed in contempt at some boys who were cheering the vehicles on their gallant career.

There was something desperately amusing to him in the thought that he had not even money enough to pay the cabman, or provide for a repast. He rollicked in his present poverty. Yesterday he had run down with a party of young guardsmen in a very royal manner; and yesterday he had lost. To-day he journeyed to the course poorer than many of the beggars he would find there; and by a natural deduction, to-day he was to win.

He whistled mad waltzes to the measure of the wheels. He believed that he had a star. He pitched his half-crowns to the turnpike-men, and sought to propitiate Fortune by displaying a signal indifference to small change; in which method of courting her he was perfectly serious. He absolutely rejected coppers. They "crossed his luck." Nor can we say that he is not an authority on this point: the Goddess certainly does not deal in coppers.

Anxious efforts at recollection perplexed him. He could not remember whether he had "turned his money" on looking at the last new moon. When had he seen the last new moon, and where? A cloud obscured it; he had forgotten. He consoled himself by cursing superstition. Tenpenny Nail was to gain the day in spite of fortune. Algernon said this, and entrenched his fluttering spirit behind common sense, but he found it a cold corner. The longing for Champagne stimulant increased in fervour. Arithmetic languished.

As he was going up the hill, the wheels were still for a moment, and hearing "Tenpenny Nail" shouted, he put forth his head, and asked what the cry was, concerning that horse.

"Gone lame," was the answer.

It hit the centre of his nerves, without reaching his comprehension, and all Englishmen being equal on Epsom Downs, his stare at the man who had spoken, and his sickly colour, exposed him to pungent remarks.

"Hullo! here's another Ninepenny—a penny short!" and similar specimens of Epsom wit, encouraged by the winks and retorts of his driver, surrounded him; but it was empty clamour outside. A rage of emotions drowned every idea in his head, and when he got one clear from the mass, it took the form of a bitter sneer at Providence, for cutting off his last chance of reforming his conduct and becoming good. What would he not have accomplished, that was brilliant, and beautiful, and soothing, but for this dead set against him!

It was clear that Providence cared "not a rap," whether he won or lost—was good or bad. One might just as well be a heathen; why not?

He jumped out of the cab (tearing his coat in the act, minor evil, but "all of a piece," as he said), and made his way to the Ring. The bee-swarm was thick as ever on the golden bough. Algernon heard no curses, and began to nourish hope again, as he advanced. He began to hope wildly that this rumour about the horse was a falsity, for there was no commotion, no one declaiming.

He pushed to enter the roaring circle, which the demand for an entrance-fee warned him was a privilege, and he stammered, and forgot the gentlemanly coolness commonly distinguishing him, under one of the acuter twinges of his veteran complaint of impecuniosity. And then the cabman made himself heard: a civil cabman, but without directions, and uncertain of his dinner and his pay, tolerably hot, also, from threading a crowd after a deaf gentleman. His half-injured look restored to Algernon his self-possession.

"Ah! there you are:—scurry away and fetch my purse out of the bottom of the cab. I've dropped it."

On this errand, the confiding cabman retired. Holding to a gentleman's purse is even securer than holding to a gentleman.

While Algernon was working his forefinger in his waistcoat-pocket reflectively, a man at his elbow said, with a show of familiar deference,—

"If it's any convenience to you, sir," and showed the rim of a gold piece 'twixt finger and thumb.

"All right," Algernon replied readily, and felt that he was known, but tried to keep his eyes from looking at the man's face; which was a vain effort. He took the money, nodded curtly, and passed in.

Once through the barrier, he had no time to be ashamed. He was in the atmosphere of challenges. He heard voices, and saw men whom not to challenge, or try a result with, was to acknowledge oneself mean, and to abandon the manliness of life. Algernon's betting-book was soon out and in operation. While thus engaged, he beheld faces passing and repassing that were the promise of luncheon and a loan; and so comfortable was the assurance thereof to him, that he laid the thought of it aside, quite in the background, and went on betting with an easy mind.

Small, senseless bets, they merely occupied him; and winning them was really less satisfactory than losing, which, at all events, had the merit of adding to the bulk of his accusation against the ruling Powers unseen.

Algernon was too savage for betting when the great race was run. He refused both at taunts and cajoleries; but Lord Suckling coming by, said "Name your horse," and, caught unawares, Algernon named Little John, one of the ruck, at a hazard. Lord Suckling gave him fair odds, asking: "In tens?—fifties?"

"Silver," shrugged Algernon, implacable toward Fortune; and the kindly young nobleman nodded, and made allowance for his ill-temper and want of spirit, knowing the stake he had laid on the favourite.

Little John startled the field by coming in first at a canter.

"Men have committed suicide for less than this" said Algernon within his lips, and a modest expression of submission to fate settled on his countenance. He stuck to the Ring till he was haggard with fatigue. His whole nature cried out for Champagne, and now he burst away from that devilish circle, looking about for Lord Suckling and a hamper. Food and a frothing drink were all that he asked from Fortune. It seemed to him that the concourse on the downs shifted in a restless way.

"What's doing, I wonder?" he thought aloud.

"Why, sir, the last race ain't generally fashionable," said his cabman, appearing from behind his shoulder. "Don't you happen to be peckish, sir?—'cause, luck or no luck, that's my case. I couldn't see, your purse, nowheres."

"Confound you! how you hang about me! What do you want?" Algernon cried; and answered his own question, by speeding the cabman to a booth with what money remained to him, and appointing a place of meeting for the return. After which he glanced round furtively to make sure that he was not in view of the man who had lent him the sovereign. It became evident that the Downs were flowing back to London.

He hurried along the lines of carriages, all getting into motion. The ghastly conviction overtook him that he was left friendless, to starve. Wherever he turned, he saw strangers and empty hampers, bottles, straw, waste paper—the ruins of the feast: Fate's irony meantime besetting him with beggars, who swallowed his imprecations as the earnest of coming charity in such places.

At last, he was brought almost to sigh that he might see the man who had lent him the sovereign, and his wish was hardly formed, when Nicodemus Sedgett approached, waving a hat encircled by preposterous wooden figures, a trifle less lightly attired than the ladies of the ballet, and as bold in the matter of leg as the female fashion of the period.

Algernon eyed the lumpy-headed, heavy-browed rascal with what disgust he had left in him, for one who came as an instrument of the Fates to help him to some poor refreshment. Sedgett informed him that he had never had such fun in his life.

"Just 'fore matrimony," he communicated in a dull whisper, "a fellow ought to see a bit o' the world, I says—don't you, sir? and this has been rare sport, that it has! Did ye find your purse, sir? Never mind 'bout that ther' pound. I'll lend you another, if ye like. How sh'll it be? Say the word."

Algernon was meditating, apparently on a remote subject. He nodded sharply.

"Yes. Call at my chambers to-morrow."

Another sovereign was transferred to him: but Sedgett would not be shaken off.

"I just wanted t' have a bit of a talk with you," he spoke low.

"Hang it! I haven't eaten all day," snapped the irritable young gentleman, fearful now of being seen in the rascal's company.

"You come along to the jolliest booth—I'll show it to you," said Sedgett, and lifted one leg in dancing attitude. "Come along, sir: the jolliest booth I ever was in, dang me if it ain't! Ale and music—them's my darlings!" the wretch vented his slang. "And I must have a talk with you. I'll stick to you. I'm social when I'm jolly, that I be: and I don't know a chap on these here downs. Here's the pint: Is all square? Am I t' have the cash in cash counted down, I asks? And is it to be before, or is it to be after, the ceremony? There! bang out! say, yes or no."

Algernon sent him to perdition with infinite heartiness, but he was dry, dispirited, and weak, and he walked on, Sedgett accompanying him. He entered a booth, and partook of ale and ham, feeling that he was in the dregs of calamity. Though the ale did some service in reviving, it did not cheer him, and he had a fit of moral objection to Sedgett's discourse.

Sedgett took his bluntness as a matter to be endured for the honour of hob-a-nobbing with a gentleman. Several times he recurred to the theme which he wanted, as he said, to have a talk upon.

He related how he had courted the young woman, "bashful-like," and had been so; for she was a splendid young woman; not so handsome now, as she used to be when he had seen her in the winter: but her illness had pulled her down and made her humble: they had cut her hair during the fever, which had taken her pride clean out of her; and when he had put the question to her on the evening of last Sunday, she had gone into a sort of faint, and he walked away with her affirmative locked up in his breast-pocket, and was resolved always to treat her well—which he swore to.

"Married, and got the money, and the lease o' my farm disposed of, I'm off to Australia and leave old England behind me, and thank ye, mother, thank ye! and we shan't meet again in a hurry. And what sort o' song I'm to sing for 'England is my nation, ain't come across me yet. Australia's such a precious big world; but that'll come easy in time. And there'll I farm, and damn all you gentlemen, if you come anigh me."

The eyes of the fellow were fierce as he uttered this; they were rendered fierce by a peculiar blackish flush that came on his brows and cheek-bones; otherwise, the yellow about the little brown dot in the centre of the eyeball had not changed; but the look was unmistakably savage, animal, and bad. He closed the lids on them, and gave a sort of churlish smile immediately afterward.

"Harmony's the game. You act fair, I act fair. I've kept to the condition. She don't know anything of my whereabouts—res'dence, I mean; and thinks I met you in her room for the first time. That's the truth, Mr. Blancove. And thinks me a sheepish chap, and I'm that, when I'm along wi' her. She can't make out how I come to call at her house and know her first. Gives up guessing, I suppose, for she's quiet about it; and I pitch her tales about Australia, and life out there. I've got her to smile, once or twice. She'll turn her hand to making cheeses, never you fear. Only, this I

say. I must have the money. It's a thousand and a bargain. No thousand, and no wife for me. Not that I don't stand by the agreement. I'm solid."

Algernon had no power of encountering a human eye steadily, or he would have shown the man with a look how repulsive he was to a gentleman. His sensations grew remorseful, as if he were guilty of handing a victim to the wretch.

But the woman followed her own inclination, did she not? There was no compulsion: she accepted this man. And if she could do that, pity was wasted on her!

So thought he: and so the world would think of the poor forlorn soul striving to expiate her fault, that her father and sister might be at peace, without shame.

Algernon signified to Sedgett that the agreement was fixed and irrevocable on his part.

Sedgett gulped some ale.

"Hands on it," he said, and laid his huge hand open across the table.

This was too much.

"My word must satisfy you," said Algernon, rising.

"So it shall. So it do," returned Sedgett, rising with him. "Will you give it in writing?"

"I won't."

"That's blunt. Will you come and have a look at a sparring-match in yond' brown booth, sir?"

"I am going back to London."

"London and the theayter that's the fun, now, ain't it!" Sedgett laughed.

Algernon discerned his cabman and the conveyance ready, and beckoned him.

"Perhaps, sir," said Sedgett, "if I might make so bold—I don't want to speak o' them sovereigns—but I've got to get back too, and cash is run low. D' ye mind, sir? Are you kind-hearted?"

A constitutional habit of servility to his creditor when present before him signaled Algernon. He detested the man, but his feebleness was seized by the latter question, and he fancied he might, on the road to London, convey to Sedgett's mind that it would be well to split that thousand, as he had previously devised.

"Jump in," he said.

When Sedgett was seated, Algernon would have been glad to walk the distance to London to escape from the unwholesome proximity. He took the vacant place, in horror of it. The man had hitherto appeared respectful; and in Dahlia's presence he had seemed a gentle big fellow with a reverent, affectionate heart. Sedgett rallied him.

"You've had bad luck—that's wrote on your hatband. Now, if you was a woman, I'd say, tak' and go and have a peroose o' your Bible. That's what my young woman does; and by George! it's just like medicine to her—that 'tis! I've read out to her till I could ha' swallowed two quart o' beer at a gulp—I was that mortal thirsty. It don't somehow seem to improve men. It didn't do me no good. There was I, cursin' at the bother, down in my boots, like, and she with her hands in a knot, staring the fire out o' count'nance. They're weak, poor sort o' things."

The intolerable talk of the ruffian prompted Algernon to cry out, for relief,—

"A scoundrel like you must be past any good to be got from reading his Bible."

Sedgett turned his dull brown eyes on him, the thick and hateful flush of evil blood informing them with detestable malignity.

"Come; you be civil, if you're going to be my companion," he said. "I don't like bad words; they don't go down my windpipe. 'Scoundrel 's a name I've got a retort for, and if it hadn't been you, and you a gentleman, you'd have had it spanking hot from the end o' my fist. Perhaps you don't know what sort of a arm I've got? Just you feel that ther' muscle."

He doubled his arm, the knuckles of the fist toward Algernon's face.

"Down with it, you dog!" cried Algernon, crushing his hat as he started up.

"It'll come on your nose, if I downs with it, my lord," said Sedgett. "You've what they Londoners calls 'bonneted yourself.'"

He pulled Algernon by the coat-tail into his seat.

"Stop!" Algernon shouted to the cabman.

"Drive ahead!" roared Sedgett.

This signal of a dissension was heard along the main street of Epsom, and re-awakened the flagging hilarity of the road.

Algernon shrieked his commands; Sedgett thundered his. They tussled, and each having inflicted an unpleasant squeeze on the other, they came apart by mutual consent, and exchanged half-length blows. Overhead, the cabman—not merely a cabman, but an individual—flicked the flanks of his horse, and cocked his eye and head in answer to gesticulations from shop-doors and pavement.

"Let 'em fight it out, I'm impartial," he remarked; and having lifted his little observing door, and given one glance, parrot-wise, below, he shut away the troubled prospect of those mortals, and drove along benignly.

Epsom permitted it; but Ewell contained a sturdy citizen, who, smoking his pipe under his eaves, contemplative of passers-by, saw strife rushing on like a meteor. He raised the waxed end of his pipe, and with an authoritative motion of his head at the same time, pointed out the case to a man in a donkey-cart, who looked behind, saw pugnacity upon wheels, and manoeuvred a docile and wonderfully pretty-stepping little donkey in such a manner that the cabman was fain to pull up.

The combatants jumped into the road.

"That's right, gentlemen; I don't want to spile sport," said the donkey's man. "O' course you ends your Epsom-day with spirit."

"There's sunset on their faces," said the cabman. "Would you try a by-lane, gentlemen?"

But now the donkey's man had inspected the figures of the antagonistic couple.

"Taint fair play," he said to Sedgett. "You leave that gentleman alone, you, sir?"

The man with the pipe came up.

"No fighting," he observed. "We ain't going to have our roads disgraced. It shan't be said Englishmen don't know how to enjoy themselves without getting drunk and disorderly. You drop your fists."

The separation had to be accomplished by violence, for Algernon's blood was up.

A crowd was not long in collecting, which caused a stoppage of vehicles of every description.

A gentleman leaned from an open carriage to look at the fray critically, and his companion stretching his neck to do likewise, "Sedgett!" burst from his lips involuntarily.

The pair of original disputants (for there were many by this time) turned their heads simultaneously toward the carriage.

"Will you come on?" Sedgett roared, but whether to Algernon, or to one of the gentlemen, or one of the crowd, was indefinite. None responding, he shook with ox-like wrath, pushed among shoulders, and plunged back to his seat, making the cabman above bound and sway, and the cab-horse to start and antic.

Greatly to the amazement of the spectators, the manifest gentleman (by comparison) who had recently been at a pummelling match with him, and bore the stains of it, hung his head, stepped on the cab, and suffered himself to be driven away.

"Sort of a 'man-and-wife' quarrel," was the donkey's man's comment. "There's something as corks 'em up, and something uncorks 'em; but what that something is, I ain't, nor you ain't, man enough to inform the company."

He rubbed his little donkey's nose affectionately.

"Any gentleman open to a bet I don't overtake that ere Hansom within three miles o' Ewell?" he asked, as he took the rein.

But his little donkey's quality was famous in the neighbourhood.

"Come on, then," he said; "and show what you can do, without emilation, Master Tom."

Away the little donkey trotted.

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