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LIVING OR DEAD BY HUGH CONWAY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

By the same Author,

CALLED BACK	1 vol.
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LIVING OR DEAD.

A NOVEL.

BY

HUGH CONWAY
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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ
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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME I.

		Page
CHAPTER I.	Solitude	7
— II.	Recognition and Denial	9
— III.	I am so lonely	27
— IV.	A new Life	44
— V.	"Child of the Sun"	59
— VI.	A successful Artist	74
— VII.	New Friends	97
— VIII.	Distraction with a Vengeance	121
— IX.	Confessions and Explanations	144
— X.	Loafing on scientific Principles	164
— XI.	A terrible old Man	177
— XII.	A deserted Home	198
— XIII.	Through good and evil Report	222
— XIV.	Travelling Companions	239
— XV.	The Hand of Fate	250
— XVI.	"Here he comes!"	265

LIVING OR DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

SOLITUDE.

How little did Philip Norris, a solitary boy, who dreamed for hours by the sea of tragedies and tales he would one day write, imagine that the first, and perhaps the last tale he will ever tell, would be his own—that of all subtle plots he wove—plots, for the greater part, unconscious thefts from the books he had already assimilated—the tangled threads of his own life and belongings, when unravelled, would lead him to stranger events, more marvellous coincidences, and greater surprises than anything his ingenuity could suggest—and his life at that time seemed so prosaic and commonplace!

For I, the Philip aforesaid, had lived all my

life, or at least since I could remember anything, in one house, in one place. Why that house was built has been a mystery to everybody; but as so few people know of its existence, the word "everybody" must be taken in a very limited sense. It lies miles from the main road, and as no land to speak of has ever been held with it, it cannot have been designed to do duty as a farm-house. Indeed, its appearance tells you at once it is a gentleman's residence, although whoever built his residence there cared little about easy access. High tors rise to the left and the right of it, the valley in which it lies terminates in a steep hill, which stretches away in a table-land of moor. These are three sides of the frame, the fourth is the sea, on which every window of the front—the north side of the house—gazes point-blank.

CHAPTER II.

RECOGNITION AND DENIAL.

WHEN I was fourteen my father gave me a boat. He had evidently no wish that I should become a recluse like himself, and encouraged me in every way to spend my leisure hours out of doors, in such sport or pastime as I liked best. For years, when the weather was anything like tempting, I had spent two or three hours each day on the water. The fishermen and I were sworn allies, and their boats were always at my disposal. They taught me all their craft, so that at the age of fourteen I could handle a boat with any of them. I knew every inch of the coast, I was strong for my age, and fearless. Moreover, I could swim like a duck, so to my great delight, on my birthday I became the possessor of a staunch, safe, yawl-rigged boat. She was an open boat about eighteen feet long, easily managed by one person; and, proud of my new treasure, I spent the greater part of what time I had to spare during

the next few months afloat, generally alone. One morning, when a brisk westerly breeze sent me along, wet but gloriously happy, under jib and foresail, I saw a small schooner-rigged yacht stretching in towards shore on a long winning tack. A yacht being always an object of curiosity and pleasure to me, and besides, not very often seen off the North Devon coast, I went about, and beat down as near to her as I could. For some reason which I could not divine, she hove to about a quarter of a mile from the shore, exactly opposite our little bay. As I flew past her, admiring her white sails, tapering spars, and beautiful lines, some one on the deck hailed me, asking if I could get alongside. The breeze was very fresh, and the sea lively, but I saw nothing to prevent my doing so. I got up to windward, took down my easily-managed sails, put out a pair of sculls, and in a few minutes had hold of a rope thrown from the yacht. Two gentlemen looked over the side and spoke to me, as I kept my boat at a respectful distance from their craft.

"Can we get ashore there?" asked one, pointing to the bay.

"Yes, very well," I replied.

"We want to put a sick friend ashore. He

insists upon leaving us." Here the two men laughed heartily.

"I will take him, if he can get on board," I said.

"Thanks, you are very kind. Now, Dunstable," said one, turning inboard, "tumble up; deliverance is at hand!"

In a short time a face appeared beside them. It was the picture of abject misery—sea-sickness written in every line. But with all his suffering Mr. Dunstable still valued life.

"Is it safe?" he gasped—"such a sea! such a small boat—and only a lad to manage it!"

I said nothing, but waited his decision, justly indignant.

"Safe! Of course it's safe! He can manage his boat like a top. He's been out in worse than this little breeze, I can see! Here, jump in with you, if you can manage it; but you will have to be quick about it!"

The sufferer looked askance at my boat, which was pitching merrily—thump, thump, thumping the green waves—then a spasm of his malady decided him.

"But you two fellows might come with me,"

he said, beseechingly; "be good-natured, and see me safe on dry land again!"

They laughed at his piteous appeal. "I don't mind," said the younger one, "if Rothwell likes to come. If our young friend will put us off again, I shouldn't mind going with you and seeing you on the right way home."

Rothwell consented. They gave their captain instructions to stand off and on until they signalled him; then I drew the boat close alongside, and, watching their chance, they bundled in Mr. Dunstable, who immediately subsided—a breathing, but inanimate mass of matter—in the stern-sheets, jumped in after him, hoisted sail, and away we went.

It was not until we ran into the little sandy bay where, at the expense of wet feet, we drew my boat up, and extracted Mr. Dunstable from its recesses, that I was able to find time to look properly at my passengers. When alongside their yacht I had been too busy in keeping from collision to notice their appearance, and the passage to land required great nicety of steering, if I wished to confirm the yachtsman's favourable opinion, and show the absurdity of Mr. Dunstable's fears. We hauled the boat up high and

dry, and then, as the two yachtsmen thanked me for my aid, and complimented me upon my nautical skill, I looked at them. They were both good-looking men, bronzed with wind and sun. Both wore serviceable yachting suits, meant for work and comfort, not show. Even with my contracted knowledge I realized they were gentlemen. The elder may have been about forty-five, his friend some ten years younger. Mr. Dunstable I do not attempt to describe, as it would be unfair under his present disadvantageous circumstances. The poor man was still almost without life or motion. It is a common idea with people who suffer from the sport of the sea, that the moment their foot touches firm land all sorrow leaves them; but in an unusually severe attack like Mr. Dunstable's it is not so—it is sometimes hours before happiness is re-established. I have seen victims for as long as a couple of days yaw about when walking with the giddiness still lingering in their brains. Mr. Dunstable's friends told me they had left Ilfracombe early that morning for a run up channel, persuading him to accompany them. The sea had risen since they had started, and the poor gentleman's sufferings had been so acute that he had begged, even com-

manded, that they should land him at the first place they could, no matter where, or how far from civilization. Only let him get on dry land again! His request would have been unheeded, and hours of agony must yet have been his, had it not been for my lucky appearance.

"And now," said the elder of the two, whose name I knew was Rothwell, "what's to be done? Dunstable isn't in walking trim. Can we get a conveyance anywhere?"

When I was on the sea, with the tiller in my hand, I felt almost a man, and spoke accordingly. Now, on shore, I was a shy boy again; but I managed to tell them they were three miles from the main road. Farmer Lee, our nearest neighbour, who owned such a thing as a gig, lived about four miles off. They heard my news with dismay.

"The devil!" said the younger man. "And Dunstable still in a state of collapse! Poor old chap, you will have to come back with us after all."

"Not for a thousand pounds!" said the invalid, with a shudder.

"There must be some way out of this," said

Mr. Rothwell. "How do they get to the house just above?"

The mention of our house reminded me of the rites of hospitality. "That is our house," I said, "but there is no road to it, only a bridle-path, if you wouldn't mind coming up to it. Mr. Dunstable can lie down for an hour or two and get better, then he can have my pony, and I will show him the way to go."

"You are a very kind young man," said Dunstable; "it would do me good to lie down."

"But we may be intruding," said Rothwell.

"Not at all," I said eagerly; "only my father and I live there; please come—this is the way."

Feeling quite proud of my unexpected guests, I turned up the valley—they each gave Dunstable an arm, and followed me.

As we neared the house the elder said, "You had better know what names to present us to your father by—mine is Rothwell."

"And mine is Stanton," said his companion, "and this is Mr. Dunstable of the Albany—a very amusing, high-spirited gentleman when quite himself."

"My name is Norris," I said, seeing that they looked at me inquiringly.

"Please, Mr. Norris," said Rothwell, "we will thank you and your father beforehand for the hospitality you are showing us. Now, let us get on and put our poor friend to bed."

I conducted them to our house, summoned the housekeeper, and placed Mr. Dunstable under her care to show him to a room where he could lie down and sleep away his sufferings. "I will have something ready for you to eat, sir, when you awake," I heard her say as they went upstairs.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't mention food to me!" groaned Dunstable.

"Ah, but you will have a right good appetite when you coom tu," answered his guide, opening the door of a bed-room, in which he hid himself and his woes.

My father was, as usual, in his library. I begged my guests to be seated and I would call him. Before I could do so the door opened and he entered. I just began, "This is Mr. Rothwell and Mr. Stanton, who—" when the former gentleman stepped quickly forward, with signs of great astonishment on his face, and both his hands extended towards my father.

"You!" I heard him say, as he crossed the

room. "You, of all people, in this lonely place! How I have sought you for years and years!"

But my father betrayed no sign of recognition. He drew himself up to his full height, and moved neither hand nor foot. The surprise caused by his visitor's strange greeting soon faded from his face, and was succeeded by a faint smile.

"You are mistaking me for some one else, I think," he said calmly.

Mr. Rothwell appeared quite staggered by his reply. He looked my father full in the face for a couple of seconds. "I cannot be mistaken. You are greatly changed, it is true; but it is so long since we have met! You are, you must be, the man I mean!"

"That is a very indefinite description," answered my father, languidly and indifferently. "My name, as I dare say my son has told you, is Norris."

Mr. Rothwell, still looking at him attentively, scarcely seemed to hear the last word.

"Can there be two men so alike?" he said. "But do you not remember me? Do you not know me? I am Rothwell."

My father made a courtly bow. "I know Lord Rothwell by name and by his clever books

of travel, and am pleased to see so famous a person beneath my roof."

"It is strange you know my title intuitively, Mr. Norris," said his lordship, upon whom I now gazed with feelings of great curiosity, never having conversed with a lord before; "I do not carry information of my rank in my personal appearance."

My father looked annoyed. "I should have added, by sight also," he said curtly. "You have been pointed out to me, and I never forget a face, or confound identities, as your lordship appears to do.

"But now, gentlemen," he continued, "pray be seated. It is so seldom visitors honour us that we have almost forgotten how to treat them."

Lord Rothwell looked very dissatisfied, but was obliged to be content with his host's denial. My father seated himself by his guests, and talked pleasantly and volubly to them. The chief burden of their share of the conversation fell upon Stanton, as Lord Rothwell seemed moody, ill-at-ease, and suspicious. He talked to me, it is true, and told me of several curious adventures he had gone through, not recorded in his popular books.

Wine and cigars were offered the visitors, and a couple of hours passed rapidly.

"We must think about going," said Stanton. "The tide will soon be running up strong, and we shall scarcely get to our anchorage to-night unless we start now."

Lord Rothwell agreed, and they prepared to walk down to the sea and signal the yacht. They thanked my father politely, and again apologized for the trouble Mr. Dunstable was giving us.

"Not at all," answered my father. "If he will stay here to-night so much the better. Philip shall see him safely on his way to-morrow."

They rose to depart. Stanton shook my father's hand—Lord Rothwell followed his example. His lordship had a strong, large, brown hand, and I was noticing how white and thin my father's fingers looked in his. I saw the brown grip close tightly; and then Lord Rothwell, in spite of an effort of my father's to release himself, bent over, and for a moment, I fancied, was going to kiss the hand within his own. But it was not so—he looked at it closely for a second, then, releasing it, said firmly and gravely, "Mr. Norris, I must have the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation with you alone."

My father bowed. "Certainly, if it is your wish I must submit. Kindly follow me." And the two men went across the hall and entered the library.

Whatever Lord Rothwell had to say, or whether my father listened willingly or unwillingly, the few minutes lasted almost hours. So long that Mr. Stanton grew quite disgusted at the delay in getting off, prophesying that they would have to spend the night in the open channel. To pass the time away, we went up-stairs and crept into Mr. Dunstable's room to see how he was getting on. We found him sleeping heavily, although now and again a slight contortion passed over his face, as dreams, most likely, brought back his agonies. Considering it would be a sin to disturb him, we stole away, and wandered round the garden, up the valley, and finally down to the beach. The yacht was beating about in the distance, the crew doubtless as impatient to be off as Mr. Stanton himself. That gentleman threw stones in the water disconsolately.

"We shall never get back," he said. "The wind has veered round due west. We shall have to beat the whole way, against tide, too. What

the devil can Rothwell want all this time with your father?"

I expressed my ignorance, but suggested it might be some scientific subject they were discussing, as my father was a great man at science.

"Science," he said. "What can Rothwell want with science? Here's a fellow with twenty thousand a year, more or less, who rushes off at a moment's notice to shoot buffaloes in the far north or ostriches in Africa. Why can't he stay at home and keep a good stud and win the Derby?"

"It must be very jolly to travel like he does," I ventured to say.

"He calls it jolly. Every one to his tastes, I say. But he's an out-and-out good fellow, only rather long-winded at times. He's giving your governor a good spell of it now."

As he spoke Mr. Stanton looked up at the house, and seemed struck anew with its loneliness and inaccessibility.

"I say," he said, "do you two live there all the year round?"

"Yes, all the year round. I have never lived anywhere else."

"Well, don't you find it quiet, not to say dull, at times?"

I laughed. "You would call it so in winter, when the snow is on the ground."

"I should call it so summer and winter. Whatever do you do with yourself?"

"Oh, I boat, and fish, and read."

"Don't you go to school?"

"No; my father teaches me."

"Why, you ought to be at Rugby or Eton—a great strong fellow like you—playing cricket or football. What are you going to be?"

"I don't know. I have never thought of it."

"Then you ought to think of it. You can't be buried alive here all your life! I was going to do splendid things at your age, only some old fool of an uncle left me a thousand a year! Just enough to spoil a man, and not enough to make him! Ah! here they come at last," he said, with a sigh of relief, as Lord Rothwell and my father emerged from the gate.

They were talking earnestly, as they came down the path. Rothwell looked to me as if he were making some appeal to my father, who shook his head sadly several times.

"Is Lord Rothwell married?" I asked Mr. Stanton, before they came within earshot.

"Married! No! He's never been at home long enough to get married. I think he's disappointed in love, as they call it; but it was before I knew him."

"Now then, Rothwell," cried his friend, as they approached. "Let us be off at once; we have no more time to lose."

"I beg your pardon, Stanton, for keeping you waiting, but our host's books were so interesting, I could not tear myself away. I had no idea it was so late."

"One hour and fifty minutes have I been kicking my heels here. Now, Captain Philip, our boat and away!"

Before he lent his aid to launch the boat, Lord Rothwell laid his hand on my shoulder, and looking at me almost affectionately, said, "I have been trying to persuade your father to let you go for a cruise with me—a good long cruise; but he says he cannot spare you."

My heart leapt at the delightful idea; and I turned eagerly to my father.

"No," he said; "I cannot spare the boy—not yet."

I knew it was no good preferring any request of mine. We launched the yawl, and with a second adieu, away we went from land, my father standing on the beach and watching us until he could no longer distinguish features.

"Whom did you mistake my father for?" I asked Lord Rothwell, with, I fear, rather impertinent boyish curiosity.

"For a very dear old friend of mine—lost sight of for many years; but I seem to have been mistaken."

"You don't often make a mistake," said his friend; "and the confab you have been holding has been long enough to have confessed or compared all the iniquities you have been guilty of since you last met!"

"We all make mistakes sometimes," said his lordship, sententiously.

As we neared the yacht he turned to me: "Whenever you come to London, call on me, my boy. I should like to see you if I happen to be at home. My address will always be known to my bankers, Messrs. Coutts,—write that name down when you get back. Don't forget to come."

I promised obedience; but saw at present little chance of keeping my promise. Then we got

alongside the yacht, and after cordially shaking my hand, the two men sprang on board, and in a minute three hundred yards of green water separated us.

"Don't forget," I heard Lord Rothwell shout, as he waved his hand to me for the last time.

I got back, eager to talk to my father about our visitors, as it was not often we had such a topic of conversation; but found he had retired to his room, not feeling well. He had left every instruction for Mr. Dunstable's comfort, and word for me to apologize for his absence, and play the host as best I could.

As I never saw Mr. Dunstable, except on this occasion, I need only say that shortly after my return he made his appearance, quite restored to health; and, as predicted by our housekeeper, in possession of a splendid appetite, which, however, he was anxious to get rid of as soon as possible. He kept me laughing all the evening with a comic description of his sufferings — a more amusing companion on dry land it must have been hard to find. He readily agreed to stay the night, and the next morning we trudged up the hills, across the moor, until we got hold of a light spring-cart,

which no doubt in due time safely deposited him at Lynton.

I found my father did not seem disposed to talk upon the subject of Lord Rothwell and his friends. Indeed he displayed so little interest in the matter that I soon gave up speaking of it, and my life continued to run on in its old accustomed groove.

CHAPTER III.

I AM SO LONELY.

YET the chance visit of the yachtsmen and Mr. Stanton's half-jesting remarks exercised an influence upon me. If for some time longer my life was the same outwardly, a great change was at work within me. I date it from the moment that I saw the white sails of the schooner filling out and bearing my new friends away—away to other scenes, other lands it may be. Then it was, I think, I began to realize the solitude and strangeness of my lot—to wonder why I should be bound to one small neglected spot of earth, and whether such a state of things must last for ever. Why should others go to and fro in the world, mix with people, work and compete for its prizes, and I, although but a boy as yet, be condemned to take no part in the joys and sorrows, the successes and reverses of my fellows? My range of vision contracted to a few miles of seaboard, a few miles of valley and moorland. The

fellow-creatures of my own degree only seen at long intervals, and even then, looking upon me as something different from themselves on account of my monotonous life and secluded home. I began to dream of great cities, of a whirl of men, of many faces. I longed to plunge into the ever-moving stream of humanity. The sight of an ocean-going steamer away in the distance with a long ribbon of smoke stretching from her funnels, made me sigh, as I sat gazing over the sea. Was she not full of people, carrying them to some great city teeming with busy life and industry? Day after day these thoughts grew stronger till I grew peevish and thoroughly unhappy. I did not suppose I should be obliged to grow old in this place like my father. I knew that the time comes when a man must fare away on his own account, but I trembled to think what I should be like by that time, if nothing changed in the mode of my existence till then. All my experience of the ways of the world would be gathered from books alone, all I knew about men and women would be from the same source. Day after day I resolved not to sleep again until I had spoken to my father and told him what troubled me—day after day my heart failed me as I saw his me-

lancholy face, and felt that any step I took away from him must cause him grief and greater loneliness. These thoughts may seem too old for a boy of little more than fourteen, but when thoughts are his sole companions, they grow, expand, and pass on before his years.

Brooding in this manner, yet endeavouring to conceal my longings from my father, I believe I was within an ace of a severe bodily or mental ailment. I found I was losing my nerve; I began to shun launching my boat in the windy weather, which formerly I preferred; I began to grow dizzy as I walked the high tors and tremble at the consequences a slip of my foot would entail—a matter I had hitherto thought so out of the range of probability that I had never considered it. I almost feared to swim out of my depth, shuddering as I remembered that I might sink without any one to stretch out a hand to save me. All this was not cowardice, but the craving for companionship.

My father must have noticed my changed looks and manner. At times I saw him looking at me wistfully, and once or twice he asked me if he should write for any fresh books, or was there anything else I wanted. If so, I should

have it. I could not find courage to tell him what ailed me.

September was with us now—the evenings were drawing in. I was sitting with my father, who was at the piano—I have told you before that music was the pursuit that occupied him most after his literary and scientific studies. He would play for hours, whilst I read and listened at intervals. I know now what a true musician he was; what a brilliant performer. But at that time, for all I knew, everybody in the world save myself might have played as well as he did. I could play after a fashion; my father had been teaching me for years, patiently and kindly—but the difference between the sounds I drew forth and those which followed his touch was disgusting to me. This evening, as the twilight faded, he sat playing. It was growing too dark to read, and, unwilling to disturb him by ringing for lights, I sat and listened till it grew so dark that the only things I saw plainly were the white keys and his whiter hands flitting from one to the other. The night was sombre, the sky full of driving clouds—a fierce north-east wind was blowing directly on to the land, and above the music I could hear the dash of the surf. My father was

playing sweet, but most melancholy strains. He may have been improvising—he may have been playing his own compositions, or those of some great master. Only, as I sat there, hearing bar after bar of plaintive harmony, in which the player seemed so engrossed that he had even forgotten my presence—somehow I felt the solitude of the situation more than ever. The dark, drifting skies, the sound of the wind and sea, the pathetic music seemed to completely overpower me, and all my thoughts and craving culminated and expressed themselves in a burst of passionate sobs. I felt thoroughly ashamed of my breakdown, but I could not help it.

My father was at my side in a moment. He put his arms round me. "My boy, what is it? What is the matter?" he cried.

"Let us go away! Let us leave this horrible place," I sobbed. "If we don't I shall die or go mad."

"Wait a moment, Philip," he said. "Let us have lights, then we can talk about it all."

He rang, and the lamp was brought. He took it from the servant's hand at the door that my agitation might not be seen. Then he drew

the dark curtains across the window, and reseated himself at my side.

I soon recovered myself in a great measure. My hysterical sobs ceased. The light, no doubt, drove away my despondency. I began to feel ashamed of my outburst, even attempting to meet his eyes with a smile. He looked at me gravely and sadly.

"You are unhappy, Philip; I have noticed it for some time, but I have been selfish, and hoped it would pass away for the present. Tell me what you wish, my boy."

"I am happy with you," I answered, "because I love you; but oh, father, I am so lonely and wretched at times."

"You want to see other faces, make friends and companions of those of your own age? Don't be afraid to tell me; I am not angry."

But he was sorrowful. I could see it; yet I could not help repeating, "I am so lonely." He laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, I have been wrong," he said dreamily. "Rothwell told me so, and predicted this; but I fancied you were perhaps different from others—had enough of my blood in you to feel happy

away from the world. You shall leave me, but you will forgive me, my boy?"

Somehow separation had not exactly entered my thoughts.

"But you will come too," I cried aghast.

He smiled almost wearily. "No, my home is chosen; it is here."

"Then I will not go, father. Forget all I have said. I have not been feeling quite well lately. I shall soon be all right again."

"No, you are not well, Philip; I have known it, but would not see it. I have been selfish, I told you. But the remedy is easily found. The day after to-morrow you will go to London."

My heart bounded. "But not alone," I said; "you will come too."

The look against which I knew there was no appeal crossed his face. "I shall never set foot in London again," he said. "You will have your desire, Philip; and if separation from me grieves you, it will teach you the lesson early that no desire fulfilled approaches expectation. Something always mars it more or less. Now, my boy," he added kindly, "say no more. Wish me good-night, and sleep if you can. To-morrow I will arrange everything."

I left him half-glad, half-sorry. Is it any wonder that morning broke before I closed my eyes?

My father was very calm and undemonstrative the next day. Although once or twice I thought his eyes followed me, he betrayed no emotion, but gave me instructions as to the course I was to adopt, as though my going to London were the most ordinary thing in the world. For my part, I could scarcely look at him without tears in my eyes; picturing his absolute loneliness in my absence, forgetting that what seems misery to one temperament may be comfort to another; forgetting that, as far as I knew, he was immured in his out-of-the-way home by his own free will and choice; that he might leave it any moment it pleased him to do so.

I was busy all day packing—it was such a new experience that I lingered over it lovingly, although the amount of luggage I should muster would be very small. "Put the Greek and Latin books in," said my father. "You must not be quite idle." I did so, and by dinner-time my box was packed to my satisfaction and corded in a knowing, seaman-like style. Then I sat down rather dolefully to my last dinner with my father.

He talked to me kindly and cheerfully during the meal, told me what to see and what to admire in London, giving me to understand that my stay was to be of some duration.

"But where am I to go; where am I to stay when I get there?" I asked, descending from my dreams to everyday necessities.

"I shall give you a letter to Mr. Grace, my solicitor. You will take a cab and drive straight to his house. It will be late when you get up, but he will not mind that. He will look after you and take care of you. He is under some obligations to me, so you need not be afraid of trespassing on him."

Then I mentioned my promise of calling upon Lord Rothwell. My father was silent a short time. He appeared to be thinking earnestly.

"I see no harm in it," he said at last; "but I do not expect you will find him in London. From what he told me, half his life is spent abroad. Still, as he wished it, you can call."

"You can either tell one of the fishermen to carry your box this evening up to Lee's farm, and get them to meet you to-morrow and drive you to Minehead, or you can be off at daybreak

and go down to Lynmouth in your boat and catch the Bristol packet."

As I thought the jolting of the sea would be merciful compared to that of Farmer Lee's so-called spring-cart, I decided on the latter course.

I received my letter and an ample supply of money before we parted for the night. I bade my father good-bye then, thinking I should not see him in the morning; but early as the hour was, he was up, breakfasted with me and saw me start, with a fine breeze, and old Dan the fisherman to bring the boat back. I reached Lynmouth in good time, and safely boarded the steamer bound for Bristol.

As we passed our house, I borrowed the captain's glass, for I could see a dark figure standing out against the sky on the summit of one of the tors. It was a good glass, and I could note with its aid the bent head, and as I fancied dejected attitude—a white handkerchief fluttered for a second, and then something threw a film over my eyes, or the captain's powerful binocular prevented my seeing more. When I had rectified this defect, the figure had disappeared.

"After all," I said, "it is but a few weeks' absence. One would think we were never going

to meet again." But in spite of this a feeling of sadness clung to me until I landed at Portishead pier, and the train whirled me away alongside of the muddy stream that flows through Bristol.

At the capital of the west I had a couple of hours to wait—the packet having been longer than usual on her journey, and the train we were supposed to catch having left some time. I walked into the smoky city, looked at the outside of many and the inside of a few of the churches, whose spires seemed starting up in every direction. I watched the busy people thronging the streets with the greatest interest, and although I could have lingered for hours gazing into the shop-windows, you may be sure, with the greater glories of London in prospective, I tore myself away in time to catch the evening train.

How I revelled in the noise and the headlong speed of that journey to London. It seems almost ridiculous to write it, but although I had seen trains, as yet I had never been in one; the little railway tributary from Portishead to Bristol had seemed wonderful to me, but the great broad gauge main line, along which we sped at some sixty miles an hour, was an experience I had never dreamed of. The fierce rush of the mighty

engine on and on through the dark night, the flying telegraph-poles seen dimly, the sparks scattered on either side as we sped on, the ghost-like double of myself sitting in the phantom carriage which always ran side by side with us—all these were to me such absolute novelties that no traveller yet ever found the journey less wearisome and shorter than I did. I did not attempt to realize the magnitude of Paddington—I contented myself with following my instructions to the letter in calling for a porter, telling him to find my box and see me safely installed in a cab, whose driver was directed to shape his course to No. —, Russell Square.

Never shall I forget my first impressions of those long, wide, gas-lit streets we passed. So endless they seemed to me, that I thought my charioteer must be driving me all round London. Mathematicians tell us that the human mind is only capable of conceiving certain quantities; that glibly as we talk of billions and trillions, we cannot understand what they mean. So it is with other things besides numerals. Till you have really seen it, or have been accustomed to great cities, you cannot imagine the size of London. I could write page and page expressing my wonder-

ment, but it would be absurd; so few are placed like I was, that my audience who would understand and enter into my feelings must be too limited to trouble about.

And yet Russell Square is not so very far from Paddington. In less than half an hour the cab stopped, and I laid a vigorous hand upon the knocker of a door which bore No. — upon it. A respectable-looking man-servant answered my summons. He informed me that Mr. Grace was at home, and upon my expressing a wish to see him, showed me into a small room, lit the gas, and went off to inform his master that a young gentleman from the country was waiting an audience. I did not discharge my cab, as failing Mr. Grace, the driver of that conveyance would be the only one in London I could ask aid from, and I was feeling almost frightened at the immensity of the town of which, as yet, I had seen only a corner.

Very soon Mr. Grace appeared—a portly, close-shaven gentleman, with a dignified appearance, but kind look; a man of sixty or sixty-five years of age. He gave me a quick inquisitive glance through his spectacles, bowed and waited my commands. The unexpected appearance at

eleven o'clock at night of a boy and a hansom cab, with a large box on top of it, certainly demanded explanation.

"Will you please to read this letter?" I said, handing him the introductory lines.

He broke the seal, glanced, naturally, first at the signature, and then looked at me with unmistakable interest. Several times during the perusal of the epistle he turned and looked at me. Then he folded the letter longwise, placed it carefully in his breast-pocket, and shook me cordially by the hand.

"Mr. Philip," he said, "I am extremely glad to see you, and in saying extremely glad I mean glad to the extreme. Indeed, I may add there is no young gentleman in the world whose acquaintance I was more anxious to make."

Mr. Grace had a sententious manner. He pronounced every word slowly and with great distinctness, but even then appeared to think that repetition of words and a paraphrase of sentences was needful to make his meaning quite clear.

I thanked him, wondering why he should desire my acquaintance; then I added a hope, ex-

pressed in boyish words, that I should cause him no inconvenience.

"You will cause us no inconvenience, Mr. Philip; not the least inconvenience. We have a roomy abode, and in calling it a roomy abode I mean a house with ample accommodation for visitors even less welcome than yourself. Well, Twining?" For the respectable man-servant at that moment entered the room respectfully.

"The gentleman's cab, sir? The man wants to know if he must wait."

"Pay him, Twining—fairly, even liberally—but not ostentatiously. Then carry this gentleman's luggage to the spare room, and order some supper for him at once. Mr. Philip, please to follow me."

He led me up-stairs to a large drawing-room, heavily and handsomely furnished. A lady about his own age was there, knitting busily.

"My dear," he said, rather ceremoniously, "this is Mr. Philip Norris, the son of an old friend and client of mine, whose name you have often heard me mention."

Mrs. Grace greeted me kindly, but looked at me with an even more evident curiosity than her precise husband had shown. I began to blush

and wonder if my appearance was so terribly boorish and countrified.

"Mr. Philip, my dear," continued Mr. Grace, "has lived, as I believe you know, all his life in great seclusion—I may say, utter solitude, with the exception of his father's company—in a romantic valley on the Devon coast."

"Poor boy!" said Mrs. Grace, kindly. "Young people ought to mix with young people."

"Precisely so," said Mr. Grace. "His father now sees that, and has sent him to spend a week or two with us."

"But we are not young people, Joshua," and Mrs. Grace seemed to enjoy her husband's slip.

"When I lay claim to that happy distinction it will be time to correct me," said Mr. Grace. "Mr. Norris wishes Mr. Philip to enjoy a few sights of London in the first place. We must lay down a programme for him."

"The first item in my programme must be supper, the second bed," said the kind lady. "The boy looks tired to death. What time did you start?"

"As soon as it was light," I answered, feeling, now that such an idea was suggested, that I was very tired, and from the pleasure I felt at hear-

ing Twining at that moment announce that supper was ready, judging that I was extremely hungry. Indeed, I might well be so, as in the excitement of the journey I had neither cared for nor thought of eating.

So I made a hearty supper and went to rest, longing for morning and the wonders it would bring. The only things on my mind were the pictured loneliness of my father and the curiosity my appearance seemed to excite. Yet, as I looked at myself in the long mirror, I fancied I was neither an ill-looking nor altogether unpresentable youth.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW LIFE.

At breakfast next morning I found in addition to the host and hostess two sons of the house. They were both grown up men with whiskers and moustaches. Probably they had not returned home before I went to bed on the night before. It was a relief to me to find that they appeared to greet me as if I were an ordinary personage. As both seemed interested in trout-fishing and boating I talked to them without shyness, and felt flattered when, on departing to their offices, the younger promised to take me to the opera in the evening. Mr. Grace, who was probably beginning to take life easily, lingered over the breakfast-table. He drew out the letter of the preceding night and re-opened it.

"How old are you, Mr. Philip?" he asked, laying it beside his plate for reference in case of need.

"I was fourteen last spring."

"Fourteen only! You look older—I thought your father was making a mistake. And so you are to go to Harrow?"

This was news to me—welcome news, I am ashamed to say. I told Mr. Grace so. He referred to the letter.

"Yes, he says so plainly enough; this term, if it can be managed. I must see what can be done. No doubt it may be difficult to arrange, but we must try."

"But am I not to go home first?"

"I do not read his instructions so: 'Let Philip enjoy himself and see what is fit; then send him to Harrow.' That is how I read it."

"Then I shall not see him for months. Oh! I must go home first."

Mr. Grace looked at me gravely. "Your wish is very creditable, highly becoming, I may say. But I think, Mr. Philip, you had better follow your father's commands to the letter. Speaking for myself, I should prefer to do so, as Mr. Norris —as I remember him—is a man who, when he says 'Go,' expects that the recipient of the mandate goeth."

I quite agreed with him, and made no further objection.

"Your father is a strange man," continued Mr. Grace, stirring the coffee-grounds in his cup in a meditative way; "a strange man, and in using that expression I wish to imply that I think him an uncommon man. You will find, as you grow older, that he is different in many ways from most people—by most people I mean the generality of mankind. Still, I should say from his letter"—unfolding it again and referring for precision's sake—"that he was extremely fond of you. So it may be he wishes to save you both the pain of another parting."

For the want of a better I accepted this explanation, but my eyes were tearful. "Now," said Mr. Grace, with his usual impressive pause at the conjunction, "now—I will desire Twining to attire himself in his best, and accompany you to the objects of interest which you will first of all wish to visit, and, of course, inspect. We can spare Twining very well to-day, and he is a respectable man, not without education. I would come myself, but have appointments I cannot well break without causing inconvenience—even annoyance—to others."

Then Mr. Grace went about his business, and shortly afterwards Twining appeared and took me

under his wing—a most irreproachable, correctly-plumaged wing it was. So well dressed and respectable did he appear, that any one who noticed us must have supposed us to be a town-bred uncle showing a country nephew what was worth seeing in London. Twining was polite, but patronising—civil, but condescending. The expression his face bore of having thoroughly done this long ago somewhat marred my enjoyment until I became used to it, whilst the lions of London most worthy of inspecting seemed, in his opinion, the Gaiety and Criterion Restaurants, and other promising cubs of the same breed. To the credit of his head and heart, I must say that, as far as I was concerned, he strongly recommended lemonade or ginger beer as the most refreshing and palatable beverage; regretting that an unfortunate disposition to flatulence, which he expressed by a monosyllabic term, prevented him from indulging in a like exhilarating and harmless draught, and compelled him, against his will, to imbibe more nourishing fluids for his stomach's sake. Knowing, in theory, the action of alcohol on the human frame, and having read a scientific discourse on the various stages of intemperance, I was not surprised, upon our return to Russell Square, to learn

that Mr. Twining had found himself so knocked up by his unusual exertions that he felt compelled to retire to bed, and depute his duty of waiting at dinner to a female servant. On the whole, I fancied my sight-seeing had better be done without his respectable aid.

One way and another, I managed to see all the stock sights. Sometimes with Mr. Grace, sometimes with Mrs. Grace, sometimes with the good-natured young men, their sons; but oftener by myself. Pleased as I was to have a companion, being alone was such a natural state of things for me that I was happy in my solitary investigations. But the greatest sight of all to me was the people. The wonderful, never-ceasing stream of men and women; each going his own way, each with his own little interests and objects —whatever these may be, or however great, to the individual, so small and petty when compared with the aggregate man. Sometimes I watched the thousands passing me, without a thought in common with mine, sometimes I felt more lonely than I did on that sea-washed spot that was home to me. My father was indeed wise in sending me to London.

Perhaps if I had stayed at home much longer

I should have become a precocious philosopher, a juvenile cynic, with the theory that, as the world is composed of units, the happiness of each unit is all that need be considered, and the prime end of a man should be to study his own well-being, and so add an atom to the general comfort. But I was a boy yet, and must live in a boy's world before I judged of that peopled by men. Harrow was my destination, and Mr. Grace having found some way to compass it, at the end of September I made my first appearance at any school.

It was a new life to me—a revelation. I grew younger all the time I was there, instead of growing older. New ties, new ambitions, new interests, and new ideas thronged upon me. I had friends and companions. The trouble my father had taken with my education left me not a whit behind any one of my own age, as far as learning was concerned. If I knew little or nothing of public schools' sports, when I first went to Harrow, I could outrun, outclimb, or outdo in feats of strength any of my contemporaries. Tall and strong as I was nimble and fearless, I soon picked up the technical knowledge of cricket and football, whilst in the "runs" I made my mark at once.

After all, although I said so as I commenced it, my tale is not my own history—it is the history of others—but of others whose lives are so bound up in mine that my life seems a part of theirs. So I need say little of my school life, except that I was popular with my schoolmates, favourably looked on by my tutors, equal if not before all of my own age, both indoors and outdoors. All who have been to a public school will know that this means a happy career.

With the exception of a few days in London and a couple of short visits at a school friend's, I spent the whole of the holidays during the time I was at Harrow in Devonshire. How could I do otherwise, knowing that my father wished me to be with him? He was undemonstrative as ever, still deep in his scientific and literary pursuits, still holding communication with the world only at intervals, and then chiefly through scientific societies and their publications; but I knew he looked forward to the day of my arrival with longing, and to the day of my departure with sorrow, and as I grew older I felt that the time must come at last, when we should be separated for much longer periods than now, so I gave him all the time I could without grudging it. Besides

I was more cheerful now in the old house. The sons of the neighbouring gentry—although few and far between—were within riding distance, and in their eyes, the fact of my being now a public schoolboy like themselves was sufficient to atone for all my early shortcomings. I had a horse now, and a ride of ten or twelve miles was nothing to me, when it gave me a day's shooting or some other sport, in company with those of my own age. But for the greater part I spent the days at home, much in the old way. My father and I read together, walked together, and lived much as we had always lived. I boated, bathed, fished, and dreamed away the hours as of yore. I think latterly I took to studying my father's character, for, as I grew older, and was able to contrast him with other men, I could not fail to observe and wonder at his peculiarities—his melancholy, his utter lack of interest in the doings of the world, his stern and almost repellent manner at times, his great accomplishments so wasted and hidden. All these things I now began to realize and wonder at; even beginning to grow anxious to know the true history of his life. Could it have been the death of his young wife, my mother, that had made him shun man-

kind? Scarcely so, for he never mentioned her name—or carried memento or relic of her. Had the world treated him unkindly? Had he failed in his ambition? I could not bring myself to think so, feeling that he was a man born to succeed, if he chose to enter into the strife of the world. Yet, although, comparatively speaking, now a young man, he had been buried for years in this lonely spot, and, it seemed, was resolved to end his days alone and friendless. Each time I returned to him, months older than when I last saw him, the strangeness of his life struck me with renewed force.

It was after my first visit to a friend's, whose father's house had been filled with uncles, aunts, and cousins, that the peculiarity of my being without relatives came home to me. It was winter; my father and I were reading, or rather, he was cutting and glancing at a large batch of new books I had brought down with me. Some he threw aside almost contemptuously, others he placed aside, to be read in due time. When he had gone through the pile of volumes, and appeared hesitating which of the approved works to attack first in a serious manner, I laid down my book and turned to him.

"There was such a houseful at the Bennets'. I never knew a fellow with so many relatives."

"Indeed," said my father, without evincing much interest; "but you enjoyed yourself, you say?"

"Famously! But I wanted to ask you, father —Have we no relations?"

"None you need trouble yourself about, Philip."

"Had you no brothers or sisters?"

"No; like yourself, I am an only son, and any cousins I had have long been lost sight of."

"But my mother," I said timidly. "Had she no relations?" He looked at me searchingly, and seemed almost displeased. I felt uncomfortable under his gaze.

"You need not trouble about your mother's connections, Philip," he said coldly. "They are not mine. I am afraid you must content yourself with what friends you may hereafter make. After all, you will find them less troublesome than relations."

I was bound to conclude from his words that my mother's station in life had been different to his own; but I longed to know something about her.

"It seems so strange to have no one in the world except you," I said. "Tell me about my mother; tell me all about her."

"What shall I tell you about her?" he said in a constrained voice.

"All about her; all you can. Was she like me?"

"No, Philip; fortunately for you, you are my counterpart."

"Was she pretty? Did she love me? Where did she die?" I asked, growing bolder as I talked.

"She was very beautiful. She loved you dearly. She died far away in the North of England, when you were three years old."

"And you loved her, and grieved at her death?" I asked, feeling quite uneasy at the categorical answers he gave to my questions.

"By God! Yes, I loved her!" he exclaimed, with a fierceness of expression I had never seen him display before. "I loved her and grieved for her, as you say."

"Then you came here to live, I suppose?"

"Then I came here to live; now you know all."

But I was not satisfied. I waited a while,

and then asked—"Have you no likeness of her?"

"None that I care to show you, Philip," he answered, speaking in his usual quiet manner.

I knew from past experience it was no use to press any request, so took up my book again, and, under pretence of reading, sat musing and thinking sad thoughts. It seemed so hard to be unable to learn anything of one's own mother, dead so many years, and dying so young. I guessed from the short but violent display of emotion my father had shown, that his disinclination to speak of her was from a wish to let old sorrows sleep—old annoyances perhaps. He may have been ashamed of his wife, but I, her son, would have held her memory dear, no matter what her station in life might have been originally. I returned to the subject no more, but resolved, when I was a man, to ask my father for full information. I felt I had a right to expect it.

Terms and vacations slipped by, until I was of an age to leave school. My mates were talking of the Universities, and of their future plans in life, and I felt that it was time I settled how I should bestow myself. Before I ventured to

Harrow for my last term, I spoke to my father on the subject of my future career.

"Yes," he said, as though it mattered little, after all, "I think you had better adopt some profession. I suppose you intend to go to college?" he asked, as though the decision entirely rested with me.

"I used to dream of the navy—then the army," I replied; "but now I have ceased to care about either. I think I had better go to Oxford."

"By all means—and then?"

"You have nothing to suggest, sir?" I asked.

"No, you must choose for yourself."

"Then, I think, the bar."

"So be it—if you are ambitious, there is room to gratify your ambition—I think you have gifts that will help you in that profession. You are in earnest, your presence and your voice are good, and you can reason logically and soundly—yes, the bar will do very well."

To Oxford I went. My life there needs no description. I worked hard and rewarded my exertions—I made many friends, and grew very wise in the world, according to my own estimate.

Then I prepared to go to work and make fame and fortune.

Like all right-minded young men, the thought of living an idle life had never entered my head. I had no idea what my father's means were. As far as I knew, he owned no lands, houses, or property that one could point at and say, "This is Norris's." He could scarcely be poor, as my college allowance was a handsome one, and although I was not encouraged in extravagance and our living at Torwood was so simple, nothing seemed to be denied on the score of expense. Yet I had never looked upon my father as a rich man, and felt that it was my lot to work for my living.

I spent a few months on the Continent, seeing the places I most wished to see, then I returned to Devonshire, and, after a fortnight's rest and quiet, started for London, eager to commence work.

Mr. Grace, whose advice I had sought as to the best way of proceeding, appeared quite amused when he heard I was to practise at the bar.

"An uphill career, Mr. Philip," he said; "and by an uphill career, I mean an arduous ascent.

If there are more briefs than formerly, there are more to divide them among. But you must take your chance with the rest."

By his good offices I was installed at the feet of an eminent legal Gamaliel, to acquire some smattering of my future profession, by the time I had eaten the dinners needful to admit my wearing the wig and gown.

I made one more effort to induce my father to quit his seclusion and accompany me to town. I could reason and argue with him now—I was a man, or nearly one. But it availed nothing. His refusal was decisive.

"You had better take chambers somewhere," he said, "and furnish them after your own taste. Join a respectable club. Grace will see to all that."

"Chambers will be very expensive," I said, doubtfully, not quite reconciling such possessions with my position.

"Mr. Grace will honour your drafts to any reasonable amount. If you overstep the mark he will pull you up."

"Can you afford it, father?"

A smile crossed his face. "Yes, I can well afford it, Philip. I have been saving money for

years, so you need not be afraid. And I have no one else but you, my boy."

So to town I went.

CHAPTER V.

"CHILD OF THE SUN."

THE chambers that pleased me most were a set in Albemarle Street, but the rent seemed so high that I thought it better to consult Mr. Grace before taking them. I named the amount, and was surprised to find he made no demur. Growing bolder at this I spoke about the matter of furniture.

"It will cost a great deal if I fit them up as I like," I said as a feeler.

"Young men have more expensive tastes than formerly," said Mr. Grace.

"What sum do you think I am justified in spending?" I asked, coming to the point.

"Mr. Norris specified no particular amount."

"No, he told me anything in reason. What do you understand by that, Mr. Grace?" Mr. Grace seemed for a moment almost nonplussed. Yet he was equal to the occasion.

"I should say," he replied, with much care in his speech, "I should say that anything in reason meant a sum which was not unreasonable. For instance, I should not pay twenty thousand pounds for you."

I laughed at this explanation.

"I am placed in a difficult position," he continued. "Your father's instructions are not quite as explicit as usual. As you appear to know nothing of his means, I am afraid I shall betray his confidence when I tell you he is very well off, and does not nearly spend his income. So under the circumstances, Mr. Philip, I think you may please yourself in the matter of furniture."

It was satisfactory to know that my father was well-to-do, but it made him a greater puzzle than ever to me. It struck me that perhaps Mr. Grace could give me the key to the enigma.

"Mr. Grace," I said, "I wish you would tell me all you know about my father."

He started slightly—then looked at me. He must have seen I was in real earnest and made the request from no motive of idle curiosity.

"I will tell you what I can. What do you wish to know?"

"Something about his early days, why he has

lived for the last twenty years in such a miserable place. Why he sees no one, or has no friends or relations. And tell me about my mother."

He, Grace, waited a few moments, thinking—then he spoke. He spoke slowly and carefully as ever, weighing each word, but I noticed the stilted manner and repetition of sentences was absent now. Probably I was now hearing him as he spoke to clients, when important matters were at stake. Till this moment I had never understood how he could have gained such a reputation as a clever lawyer.

"Mr. Philip," he said, "I have often thought the time would come when you would ask me these questions, and I have wondered how I should reply. I think it is better to speak openly and candidly to you, as far as my relations with your father permit. I am only at liberty to tell you the broad facts, the details you must fill in as you think fit. Your father's mode of life is as incomprehensible to me as it is to you, and in order to explain it at all, we must start with the assertion that Mr. Norris is a strange man—different in many respects from his fellows. His numerous good qualities I so fully recognize and admire, that you will not think me disparaging

him, when I mention those peculiarities which, to my mind, have spoilt his life. A certain amount of sternness, and a determination to have his own way, and tread his own path, regardless of all advice, and yet, under that a sensitive nature, feeling acutely every breath of the world's opinion. A man who, in spite of a morbid predisposition to suspicion and mistrust, would trust implicitly, because his reason told him that trust was due—yet, when once deceived, would never forget or forgive. A proud man, to whom defeat means death, and yet wanting strenth of mind to face the world and retrieve his misfortunes. I am speaking very plainly, Mr. Philip, but I believe correctly."

I recognized some of the traits he described, and was willing to take his word for the others, so I made a motion of assent.

"Well then, we will suppose—I only say suppose, for you must fill in the details—a man as I have described Mr. Norris, making what he considered a great failure in early life; finding what he had counted as bringing him happiness, a shipwreck. He is too proud to complain; too weak, shall we say, to face the world with his misfortune overshadowing him; too dispirited to

struggle any more. He turns his heel upon the world disgusted; but his susceptibility to its voice makes him bring himself where he shall hear it no longer. He lets the world pass him, cares no more for it, leaves it to its own devices, and, in fact, lives that lonely, uncomfortable life, the thought of which makes me, as a busy man, shudder. Now I have told you all I can without saying things I should not."

I sat very thoughtful. I wondered what could have been the bitter disappointment and failure that ruined such a man's life. Mr. Grace said no more.

"But my mother?" I asked.

"Your mother I never knew."

"Who was she? what was her name?"

"That I cannot tell you," said Mr. Grace shortly.

"Did my father love her?"

"Very dearly, I believe. Their short married life was happiness until the end."

"Until she died?"

"Until she died," repeated Mr. Grace.

How strange it seemed that no one could or would give me information about my mother, who had died so young. I left Mr. Grace's office

not much the wiser for my interview. I had listened to a metaphysical description of my father, and had ascertained that he was a rich man. That was all.

But I had other and pleasanter things to think about than the enigma of my father's life. I was commencing London life and manhood under favourable auspices. The chambers in Albemarle Street were taken, and with the aid and advice of a most refined and accomplished gentleman from one of the large furniture establishments, who had all the new theories of domestic art at his finger ends, they soon presented a highly satisfactory appearance. A few people were just at this time beginning to creep out of the abominations of the nineteenth century style, and I pride myself upon being one of the first to recognize the new truths. I was rather frightened at the amounts for which I had to draw upon Mr. Grace, but that gentleman made no sign of disapproval. His eldest son, now a man about forty, and a rising barrister, brought about my election as a member of a highly respectable club of unimpeachable morality, where the legal element predominated; and under the auspices of an old college friend I found myself nominated

for another, whose constitution was composed of lighter, pleasanter, and perhaps more dangerous elements. In a few weeks I was thoroughly established in my new home.

Reading for the bar is not very hard work, and though I kept my conscience clear by doing all that seemed necessary in this way, I yet had ample time for amusing myself. I soon made plenty of acquaintances and a few friends. Amongst the latter was one named Vigor—a young man about two years my senior—with whom I had many tastes in common, and whom I envied as having already made two or three successful literary attempts which gave promise of greater things some day. One night, about half-past eleven, I was with him in his room, enjoying his clever conversation, when the door opened, and Mr. Estmere was announced.

Vigor welcomed his visitor heartily. "Why, Valentine, my boy, I am glad to see you—radiant and beautiful as ever! Where have you been?"

A tall young man entered, and the two shook hands cordially.

"Just come from the theatre," said the new

arrival, whose evening dress was covered by a light coat.

"I saw your lamp lit, so thought you'd give me a cigar and a drink."

"Your conclusions are correct; I will. But first let me make you two known to each other. Mr. Estmere—Mr. Norris."

Estmere turned his pleasant face to me, and held out his hand. Then throwing off his coat and curling up his hat, he settled down in the most comfortable chair he could find, evidently quite at home.

He was a tall, well-built young man of about twenty; his hair was light; his eyes were blue. I have often wondered what was the peculiar charm about Valentine Estmere which made his presence bring instantaneously gaiety and kindly thoughts even to perfect strangers. I can tell you he was handsome. I can describe his hair, eyes, nose, forehead, complexion, and general appearance, but his manner is indescribable. It may be that the key to it was his being so perfectly natural. The smile he greeted you with seemed more truthful than other people's; if you were his friend, it was true because he loved you—if you were a stranger, it was true because he loved

mankind as a body, and was pleased to meet any member of it. As for enemies, I never heard he had any. I have met hundreds more brilliant men whose words were more worth listening to—hundreds of men whose accomplishments were far greater—but there was something in Valentine Estmere that no one else I have encountered possessed in so great a degree—the power of at once winning men's affection and liking. After all this is the true triumph if we would but understand it so—to win men's love; that of women is comparatively an easier conquest. His voice was the pleasantest voice I have ever heard, and his airy and unrestrained style of conversation—alike to high, low, young or old—to me at least was a source of perpetual delight.

Of course in this feeble delineation I anticipate considerably. At this present moment, when he entered Vigor's room, I could duly feel drawn, as every one else was, towards him, and I remember thinking that Vigor's laughing exclamation of "radiant and beautiful" was not much too exalted a phrase to address to him. Indeed, my thoughts went back to that delightful book, "Prescott's Conquest of Mexico," and I pictured

Alvarado as just such another, and quite understood why the Aztecs at once called him the "Child of the Sun."

Yet the young fellow was attired in the faultless and inevitable black and white, and sat puffing a large cigar with the usual after-theatre zest. He was nothing different in his attire to his fellows, except that he wore more jewellery than is usual now-a-days—several fine rings glittering on his fingers. Somehow jewellery looked more in its proper place, and less objectionable on Valentine Estmere than on others. All the Esterhazy diamonds would not have made him look a snob or a petroleum prince.

"Now, Estmere," said Vigor, "let us know what you have been doing all these months."

"Robbing from one mistress to adorn another. Trying to get wrinkles from the attire of one to beautify the other."

"Talk more prosaic if you can, poetry and hansom-cabs don't go together. Besides, you are frightening Norris with your glowing metaphors."

"I have been with nature for the sake of art —yet trying to turn art into nature."

"That sounds even more obscure."

"Then in words suited to your capacity, I have been down in Cornwall sketching the coast."

"You really mean to be an artist, then?"

"Of course I do. Have I not to-day been to Mr. Soloman, the dealer, and requested permission to bring him some of my sketches with a view to a mutually advantageous arrangement?"

"That was kind to Soloman. What did he say?"

Estmere laughed merrily. "Said he was never so disappointed in his life!"

"Were the sketches so awfully bad?"

"No; he didn't see them. I couldn't go lugging a bundle about with me, so thought it better to make an appointment with him. The old rogue was bowing and scraping, and begged me to walk up-stairs; called me 'my lord,' I think. You should have seen his face when I told him I was a young artist. 'I'm deceived,' he murmured; 'I should have thought, sir, you was more in the habit of buying pictures than painting them.'"

"Flattering, but discouraging. So you couldn't trade?"

"No, we couldn't trade. Very good thing, too. I hate Jews. You are looking at my rings, Mr. Norris," he said, turning to me.

I coloured, feeling rather foolish. He had waved his hand, as if to banish all Jews, and the gems glittered through the cloud of tobacco-smoke.

"Valentine's hands look just like a struggling artist's, don't they?" said Vigor, with good-tempered sarcasm.

"I know; I am awfully ashamed of it," said Valentine, almost humbly. "But I can't help it. It is a constitutional weakness, or an inordinate love for bright things. After all, what can be more beautiful than a sapphire?"

He looked at the fine stone on his fourth finger with great affection.

"A woman's eyes," suggested Vigor.

"Perhaps so; but I haven't seen them yet. When I do, I will fall down and worship them. Till then I shall continue to impoverish myself to wear what Vigor calls 'glittering gewgaws.'"

"Anybody else would look an awful cad," grumbled Vigor, "and suggest thoughts of how much he might be pawned for; but somehow such adornments seem natural to you. They suit your peculiar style of beauty."

Estmere took his friend's banter in the best possible spirit, owning, and not defending, his weakness.

"Now, sing us something," said Vigor, who was fond of music, and whose rooms boasted a piano.

He obeyed without any amateurish apologies for threatened shortcomings. He sang a couple of ballads with great taste and feeling. His voice, if nothing wonderful, was well trained. Then, after playing a few snatches of popular operas, he twisted round on the music-stool and told us some amusing anecdotes of his sketching tour. His descriptions and imitations were so fresh and original that I began to envy Vigor and his friend.

"I must be off now," he said; "my mother waits for me. Are you coming my way, Mr. Norris? If so, I can give you a lift."

"You extravagant young beggar!" exclaimed Vigor. "A cab all this time! You must be rolling in money. Get out at once!"

I was half amused to hear him talk about his mother waiting up for him. Few young fellows of his age would have mentioned the fact. Estmere spoke as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

I did not go with him; my rooms were very near to Vigor's, and I was so interested in my new acquaintance, I wanted to learn something

about him. He left us, promising Vigor to see him again very soon, and, to me at least, the room seemed darker as the door closed behind him.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Valentine Estmere—a great favourite with every one. You can't help liking the fellow. He lives with his mother, Lady Estmere, in St. John's Wood."

"Are they rich?"

"Well off, I should think. Valentine has more money than is good for him, if he intends to do anything in art."

"Is his father living?"

"Dead—years ago, I think. Sir Somebody Estmere, he was."

"Why doesn't he get the title?"

"There's an elder brother, I suppose. But I know nothing of the family; I only know Valentine. By the bye, Norris, I should think he was just the fellow to suit you. Not a bit of harm in him; and I defy your melancholy humours to show themselves in his presence."

"I wish you'd bring him to my rooms."

"I will. Ask me to dinner or tea or something, and I will bring Estmere with me."

But I happened to fall across Estmere the next day in the park, so I asked him on my own account. He accepted the invitation readily, and after that often dropped in of an evening. Vigor was right—he did suit me exactly—and it may be I suited him. Perhaps the many different points in the character of each attracted us one to another. I had spoken of myself as being a happy man; so I was, but doubtless the solitary life I had led during my boyish days had made me thoughtful and melancholy at times in my manner. Gradually I believed I was growing out of it, but I still had fits of what I called dreaming, or, in other words, remembrances of my former solitude, or realization of my present loneliness; for after all, with the exception of my father, there was no one in the world, as far as I knew, with whom I could claim kith or kin.

Valentine Estmere supplied a great want of mine at that particular time, always gay and hopeful, and with that strange power of imparting his good spirits to others—a more desirable acquaintance I could not have made. He had a host of friends, but after a short time I was happy in believing that he had singled me out among them, and that I was the chosen receptacle

of his confidences. All mine he had directly. As soon as Valentine was your friend you trusted him in everything. In a few weeks I began to realize that I had contracted my first, and perhaps a life's, friendship, and when with Estmere understood something of the relations between David and Jonathan.

CHAPTER VI.

A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST.

It must have been about a fortnight after I made Estmere's acquaintance, before we had cemented our friendship, that I was lingering over my breakfast in Albemarle Street. I was growing quite a connoisseur in breakfasts by now. It is all very well to talk about the country, but my experience is that you can get newer milk, richer cream, fresher eggs, nicer butter, and altogether more palatable things in the West End of London than anywhere else—if you like to pay for them. The best of everything goes to the metropolis, and the relish with which you eat the boasted productions of the country is due more to the fresh air than to their own inherent virtues.

I am certainly country-bred, so have a right to speak on the subject.

I was lingering over my breakfast, sipping my cup of tea, and thinking of a cigarette, but now and again looking at a letter which lay before me—a letter which had filled me with unqualified amazement. To understand my feelings you must read it with me.

"My dear Philip,

"Ailments are so unusual with me that you will be surprised to hear I have been far from well lately—indeed, I was obliged to see the doctor. But you will not be surprised at hearing his opinion that change of scene and mode of life was the only treatment he could advise, for my ailments have been mental. He must have been right, for I began at once to long for a sight of other lands again. Perhaps I am beginning to feel somewhat like you felt before you went to school. Perhaps I am growing wiser; any way, I have resolved to follow the doctor's course and travel for a while. I think I shall go round the world. I shall start for New York on Wednesday next. Will you meet me in Liverpool to say

good-bye? I shall be at the Adelphi Hotel on Monday.

"Yours affectionately,

"NORRIS."

I think the first thing I did when I clearly understood the wonderful intelligence conveyed in the letter was to laugh aloud. The absurdity of the situation struck me with irresistible force. A man who for nearly twenty years had not been more than ten miles from his secluded home, all at once taking it into his head to circumnavigate the globe! To say the least of it, it was running from one extreme to the other. I was both glad and sorry. I was glad that he at last thought fit to emerge from his retirement, but sorry and even alarmed that mental ailments should have necessitated such a course. For some time past I had dreaded whether such a melancholy existence as my father's must not, sooner or later, show its effect upon his mind. Still, if evil was to be apprehended I felt the step he was going to take was the right one to escape it. I was sorry to think of such a long separation, for I read between the lines of his letter, and knew he had not the slightest intention of asking me to accom-

pany him. I determined to suggest it, although I felt the suggestion would not be entertained. Had he wished for my companionship he would have given me more time than a few days to prepare for a journey of such a duration. No, it was clear he meant to go alone, and perhaps it would be two years before I saw him again. I thought it was well to consult Mr. Grace on the subject of such a surprising communication; so, after breakfast, I walked across to Bedford Row.

"Good morning, Mr. Philip," said the old gentleman as I entered his office; "you are the very man I was just thinking about."

"Then you have heard from my father, Mr. Grace?"

"I have heard from your father, as you say."

"He talks of taking a long journey, he tells me."

"Yes, a long journey—indeed, a protracted journey. I am glad to hear it. I hope he may return cured in more ways than one."

"Does he say whether he wishes me to go with him?"

"He does not say so, but I should be inclined to think, or rather I gather from his letter,

he does not. There is a certain paragraph referring to you which I can only read in one way."

"He is going quite alone?"

"Quite alone," said Mr. Grace in his most perspicacious manner.

"But in saying alone, I do not mean that he will be the only passenger in steam-boats or railway trains. I mean he will be unaccompanied by friend or relative."

"Has he any friend or relative except me?" I asked sadly.

"I think not, or none he cares for. But you will go to Liverpool to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course I shall."

I went to Liverpool as arranged, and met my father. He was looking thin and worn—so ill, indeed, that I begged earnestly to be allowed to accompany him. He refused me kindly but firmly.

"I shall be away nearly two years," he said—"years you might always look back upon as wasted if you left London and your future career now. Besides, I wish to go alone. I am trying a physical and psychological experiment, Philip. If it succeeds I shall upon my return live once more in the world. Then we shall be more together, and perhaps better friends."

His manner had never been so affectionate since that evening when I found the solitude of my younger days greater than I could bear. I felt my eyes grow dim.

"Oh that it may be so!" I cried. "That you will come back and take your true place among men—I see so few to compare with you, father!"

I spoke the truth. My father would have been a man of mark in any circle. I was learned enough to appreciate his great knowledge and scholarly acquirements—to measure them by my own standard and know how they excelled. I could see, as none could fail to see, the well-bred, refined gentleman in every feature, line, and movement. He was young yet, and I hoped that the rest of his life might not be wasted. I felt the sinfulness of a man of his stamp burying his talents as he had hitherto done.

He smiled at the boyish warmth of my compliment.

"Well, we shall see, Philip, what time and change will do. Old dreams and ambitions may be revived—old sorrows at last forgotten—old shame even lived down—old love and old hate vanished. If not, there is always Torwood to return to."

"But before you go," I faltered, "will you not tell me something about yourself? I am a man now, and could understand, and you are going away for so long—so far. If anything should happen shall I never know more about you than I know now?"

I trembled at my presumption, but he was not offended.

"Mr. Grace has papers which will tell you all that is necessary in the event of my death. By the bye, I have given him full instructions to furnish you with all you need. I trust you, Philip, implicitly. Live as you like, and how you will. Follow your chosen profession if it suits you; but you may as well know it is not absolutely necessary you should work. On my return we will decide about your future. Now, good-bye."

I saw him on board the mighty Cunard steamer. I waved the last adieu, then returned to London, feeling very miserable and lonely. What would happen before we met again?

His movements were quite uncertain. He promised to write, and told me to send letters to certain places on the chance of his getting them. He was going unfettered by any laid down course

of travel, just where his spirit moved him to go, so I could not help feeling it was possible that I might be dead, buried, and forgotten long before his return home. This was not at all a pleasant thought.

Then it was that I opened my heart to Valentine Estmere, that I began to look and long for his company, that his friendship—his entire and unreserved friendship—seemed absolutely necessary to my happiness. I scarcely know how to put into words the affection I began to feel for this bright boy, this "child of the sun," as I playfully called him. Such feelings between men are rare; very young schoolboys at times experience them, but when the struggle for success and self-advancement has commenced there are few to whom it is given to feel that another man's success gives greater pleasure and happiness than one's own—that his failure is more bitter than any miscarriage of your own schemes and ambitions. Yet this was how I felt with Valentine. I must confess, had it been necessary, I would have sought and schemed to win his love as I might that of a woman. Fortunately such a course was not needed—he met me half way. His friendship and soon his love were mine, and foolish as

I knew my weakness was, I rejoiced to know I was not alone in it. Confidence, hopes, thoughts, ambitions, and what cares we might have were joint property, or so I was glad to believe.

He was a strange character, and its study was to me an unfailing source of pleasure and amusement. In some things his simplicity was almost childlike, in others he displayed an amount of shrewdness it was hard to imagine he could possess. The same peculiarity which led him to bedeck his hands with rings inclined him to gay apparel. Yet in garments I dared not have worn, Estmere seemed to be most properly and fittingly clad. If extravagant in some things he was prudent in others—almost economical at times. He was both lazy and hard-working. He would work hard at the drudgery of his art, but for days and days would not do a stroke to attain the results he wished for as the reward of that drudgery. Ideas and executions were not to be forced, he said.

Whether Valentine would eventually succeed as an artist I was unable to predict. He was deliberately adopting art as a profession. He rented a studio at Chelsea, where I spent many pleasant hours with him, watching him work when

he was in the humour, sitting and chatting at our ease at other times. His sketches made out of doors showed considerable power—the question was, what would his greater and finished painting be like. At times he was hopeful and satisfied with his progress, at times discontented and disparaging of his own efforts. I gave him what praise I could. It pleased him, but he knew it was partial, so did not carry the conviction he wanted. Yet Estmere's despondency was merrier and more amusing than many another man's high spirits.

One evening, after what he considered an unsatisfactory day, he was consoling himself with my sympathy, and soothing his spirits by playing the music he loved best on my piano. I sat listening and smoking my cigar in great contentment, for Estmere's performances were well worth listening to. By-and-by he finished up a composition which I knew was his own with a great bang on the notes, closed the piano, and wheeled round to me.

"I almost wonder you never thought of music as a road to fame and fortune," I remarked.

"But I did once—some years ago I almost determined to go to Leipsic and study for three

years. Indeed, to tell the truth, I think I tossed up which it should be, music or painting."

"Happy man to be able to choose between the two!—and happier in being rich enough to be independent of either."

"But I am not rich. What gave you that idea?"

"I think Vigor must have conveyed it somehow."

"Well, you had better get it conveyed away again. My mother has a fair income now, but only a life-interest—at her death it nearly all goes from me. You don't know my mother, Philip—but you shall soon."

I thanked him.

"She is away now," he said. "She went to Malvern about ten days ago—I am afraid she will not return for six weeks. Then you must come and see her. You will like my mother, and I think she will like you. Dark, grave-looking fellows like you suit her."

"You are very fond of her?" I asked.

Valentine laughed his pleasantest laugh. "Fond of her is not the word. You see we are alone, and everything to each other. I ought to

be with her now, but she would not let me come."

"What is she like—tell me?"

"How can a son describe his mother? To me she is the fairest and noblest of women—but any woman who loves you like she loves me must seem that. But my eulogies make you look sad. I ought to have remembered you have never known a mother. Let us talk of something less exclusive. Art, for instance."

I was feeling sad, and he observed I envied him his mother as much as I did other gifts of his. So I changed the subject.

"The great work is not going as well as you wish?" I said.

"No; I took out my knife resolved to rip it up to-day; but I resisted the temptation."

"Every wise man striveth for an excellence he cannot hope to attain," I quoted, loosely.

"Yes, but he does not like to fail, all the same."

"How far high failure overleaps the bounds of low success," I continued.

"Keep that second-hand wisdom to yourself, Philip; you don't know how pictures are made.

If you want to see a successful artist, come with me to-morrow and I will show you one."

The next morning I called at Valentine's studio, and we sallied forth together to find the successful artist.

After a brisk walk of half an hour we stopped at a small but respectable-looking house, and inquired for Mr. Baker. I did not know the name in modern art, but was willing to take Valentine's word for its owner's merits. The artist, quite a young man, soon made his appearance. He received Valentine with affability and condescension.

"I told you," said Valentine, "that with your permission I would bring a friend some day to call on you and see you at work. Men of your standing are always glad to let beginners take what hints they can."

"Quite so, Mr. Estmere, quite so—no one should grudge assistance in the technical parts of art. The inspiration, of course, cannot be given —that is the artist's sole possession."

"Precisely so," answered Valentine; "the sacred fire that burns in one's own grate cannot be induced to glow in another by imitation."

The artist looked highly gratified. "Please follow me, gentlemen." He conducted us up a

couple of flights of stairs in a very dignified manner. Estmere looked full of amusement, but I was puzzled where the joke lay. Mr. Baker ushered us into a large room on the top of the house. In one corner stood a large pile of new canvasses, and the usual accessories of the painter's art were scattered about. Arranged in line at a short distance apart were three easels, each bearing a large canvas. Two men very much like our guide in general appearance were standing idle before them. As we entered they touched their caps respectfully to Mr. Baker, who acknowledged the salutation slightly.

"You are come at a good time," he said to us. "I was just going to commence a fresh work."

"Mr. Baker is a creator, I must tell you," explained Valentine, with a suspicion of laughter in his voice. "His only sketches are mental ones. You will be astonished at the facility of his work."

I was astonished. The gifted artist, with a bold, free hand, drew a semblance to the outlines of mountains, trees, and lake on his virgin canvas, and in five minutes his brush and colours were in full work. The amusing part of it was

that the men stationed on each side of him followed him stroke by stroke on their canvases, and showed us the surprising spectacle of three pictures alike in every detail and colour coming into existence at once. At the rate they all painted it looked as if the pictures would be finished in a few hours. I watched them with great curiosity for a long time, until the fugleman stopped and turned to us for the meed of praise he evidently considered his due.

"It is very wonderful," said Valentine, gravely.

He could not have chosen a better word, so I echoed it.

"Now let us see some finished work," said Valentine.

Thereupon Mr. Baker showed us some score or two of large paintings all fresh from the easel. All of the same class—mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and trees; with figures fishing, deer drinking, or cows reclining, to break the monotony. We thanked him for the interesting sight; but imagine my disgust when Valentine said,

"My friend would like to carry away a specimen of your art; which shall it be, Philip?"

"You must choose for me," I said rather ruefully, thinking if Mr. Baker charged me fifteen or

twenty pounds for a picture I could not hang, I should feel grieved I ever made his acquaintance.

"This one, then, I think," said Valentine, picking out one of the soberest productions. "It is very broad, and full of atmosphere. How much, Mr. Baker?"

I trembled. The painting was 48 by 36 at least. Any artist appraising his own ware must, for the sake of his self-esteem, ask fifty pounds for a work of such dimensions.

"You have made a good choice, Mr. Estmere," said Mr. Baker. "That picture cost me much thought and work. I am under an obligation not to sell any pictures under a certain price, so I cannot say less than two guineas."

The relief I experienced at this modest demand was worth all the money. I pulled the guineas out with alacrity.

"Shall I get it framed for you?" asked Mr. Baker.

"No, thank you," said Valentine quietly. "I don't think you need trouble to get it framed. Mr. Norris will send round for it some day."

But the some day is not yet come, and I dare say my purchase went back into stock again.

"What do you mean by calling a fellow like that a successful artist?" I asked when we were outside the door.

"A successful artist is one that makes money; he makes money."

"How?"

"Those men turn out some fifteen pictures a week, which they sell to an enterprising dealer at thirty shillings a piece — equalling twenty-two pounds ten a week; not a bad income!"

"Who are the two men who copy him?"

"That's the joke of the matter; they are his brothers. He is the creator,—the man with the sacred fire, — and of course ranks high above them. In recognition of the immense superiority of this gifted being, the two brothers, although permitted to share the emoluments, are expected to touch their hats to him on every occasion, as a slight token of respect to his genius."

"How did you pick up such queer acquaintances?"

"I forget; I met him somewhere. You see I talk to every one, and somehow they all seem kindly disposed to me."

It was true enough—Valentine Estmere talked to everybody, high or low. He troubled little

what sort or condition of man it was. That strange charm of manner he possessed won the goodwill of every one.

As we walked along New Bond Street I saw a tall, bronzed, bearded man standing at the door of Long's—a distinguished-looking man, although not dressed in the height of fashion. Although nearly ten years had passed since I had seen his face, I knew him at once—it was Lord Rothwell.

It was not my fault that we had not met before; I had inquired about him on my first visit to London, but he was away at the other end of the world. For several years I had repeated my inquiries whenever I was in town, but without success. He was never there at the time I was. Latterly I had given up the hope of ever seeing him—and after all, I felt that I must be quite forgotten by now, and did not care to trouble him. He had seen me when I was a boy for a couple of hours—not sufficient grounds for expecting a welcome after long lapse of years, and I hated the slightest appearance of wishing to make grand or titled acquaintances. I had scarcely made up my mind what to do—indeed, I think I should have passed without making myself known—when Estmere caught sight of him.

"By Jove!" he cried, "there's Lord Rothwell; I did not know he was back!"

Before I could speak he had darted from my side, and was across the road shaking hands heartily with the great traveller. I followed more leisurely. As I reached them I heard Lord Rothwell say,

"Why, Valentine, you are grown! you look just the man I expected you would be; so like your mother too. I am glad to see you, my boy." They were evidently old friends.

Seeing me pause beside them, Lord Rothwell looked at me curiously. "A friend of yours, Valentine?" he asked courteously.

I laughed, and answered before Valentine could speak: "You have forgotten me, Lord Rothwell. Don't you remember your sea-sick friend, Mr. Dunstable, and Mr. Stanton, and the boy who took you all ashore in the yawl?"

"What, Captain Philip!" he cried, holding out his hand. "You have grown and changed too; who could remember the boy in the whiskered man? Yet I ought to have known your eyes. But," he continued, looking from Estmere to me, whilst a serious yet astonished look came over his face,

"how is it I see you together? How long have you known each other?"

We both laughed at these questions.

"Not very long," I answered, "a few weeks, I should think. A mutual friend introduced me in the usual way."

"If there is anything vicious in his character, or anything about him that won't bear daylight, please tell me, Lord Rothwell, so that I can cut him in time," said Valentine, with mock gravity.

"I make the same request," I added.

Lord Rothwell said nothing for a few moments. Then he spoke quite seriously, as if he had been weighing pros and cons in his mind.

"No, I can see no reason why you should not establish a lasting friendship—you seem to suit each other. No, there is no reason against it."

"Thank you," said Valentine, who utterly lacked the organ of reverence. "That is kind of you, and our minds are now at ease!"

His lordship took the joke in good part.

"All right," he said; "now come in and have a cigar and some champagne—all you boys want champagne now. Come along."

We followed him, and spent an hour chatting with him. He had only arrived in London the

night before. He had been exploring the interior of Asia, and informed us his travels were over. Of course, he had a book in prospect, detailing in amusing and instructive terms his last experiences. Any way, he would be in England for a long time now, and hoped that he should see a good deal of us.

When we rose to leave him, he shook hands with Estmere—"Yes, you go now, Valentine; but I want Philip to stop a little longer—I have something to say to him."

"The new friend pushes out the old—but, never mind, I am above jealousy"—and Valentine nodded and left us.

I felt much pleased with Lord Rothwell's friendliness. It was unmistakable, and the easy and natural way in which he addressed me by my Christian name, showed that I was not intruding upon him when I had made myself known.

He lit another cigar, and asked me many questions about myself. I told him of my intention of going to the bar. Although he seemed interested in my plans, he offered neither advice nor suggestions.

"And your father," he asked at last. "Is

he still living in that lonely place where I saw him?"

I laughed. "No, he took a fancy into his head to travel. He has just started on a voyage round the world."

"When does he return?"

"Not for two years, I believe. Perhaps he wants to emulate you." Then I spoke of something else—thinking that my father's proceedings could not be an interesting topic to a man who had only seen him once, and that eight years ago.

"Have you seen Valentine's mother yet?" he asked.

"Not yet. She has been at Malvern for some time. Valentine has promised to introduce me when she returns."

"Yes, that is right. Go and see Lady Estmere. You will find her a very pleasant friend."

"Valentine is passionately fond of her."

"You won't wonder at that when you know her." And from the tone of his voice I knew that Lord Rothwell either loved Lady Estmere or had loved her; and as he sat silent for a few minutes I was building up romances, and wonder-

ing whether his years of travel were due to something of this kind."

"I am going to my lawyer's now," he said, rising. "You see I make no ceremony with you. Good-bye; I shall see you again soon. In a few days I shall have some quarters of my own here. Make Estmere take you to see his mother as soon as she returns. Good-bye."

I was growing quite anxious to see Lady Estmere. I left Lord Rothwell, feeling I had made a pleasant friend, and had, if I found favour in Lady Estmere's eyes, another in prospect.

CHAPTER VII.

NEW FRIENDS.

A FORTNIGHT after my meeting with Lord Rothwell, I was driving across to St. John's Wood in a hansom, looking forward with some curiosity to making the acquaintance of Valentine's mother. I was not too sanguine as to the results of the introduction. People know each other so differently and from so many different points, that I have always found it best when on the eve of making a fresh and highly lauded acquaintance to be prepared for disappointment.

Lady Estmere had returned sooner than Valentine expected. Two days after her arrival in London he begged me to waive ceremony, and dine with them that evening. He had asked Rothwell, but he was going away on a short visit to an old friend, so we should be alone. I accepted the invitation readily.

"What chums you and the noble traveller seem to be!" said Valentine. "He was at our

house yesterday, and could talk of nothing else but your perfection. My mother as a rule does not show much curiosity about people, but after his lordship's praise she is anxious to see you—so don't disappoint us."

I promised not to fail, and at seven o'clock that evening I entered the drawing-room of Lady Estmere's house in St. John's Wood.

Valentine, who was usually behindhand in such matters as dressing for dinner and such minor details of civilization, was not there, but as a lady rose and came towards me with her hand outstretched, I knew that I was face to face with Lady Estmere.

If not tall, above middle height, and graceful as her son, to whom she bore a strong, though refined, delicate, and feminine likeness, Lady Estmere's great beauty was the first thing that impressed me. She was fair and slight, her figure almost girlish. For a moment it seemed ludicrous to suppose her to be the mother of my tall friend, yet a second glance made one aware that the idea she gave of extreme youth was but a transient one—due perhaps to her graceful carriage and erect bearing. Without knowing Valentine's age, on examination I should have judged

her to be past forty. Her complexion was pale but clear, her features most regular and finely cut, and I noticed at once the smallness and beautiful shape of the hand she placed in mine. There was a softness in her eyes which I can best describe by comparing it to the look in the eyes of some of Romney's portraits of beautiful women. Yet her eyes met yours fully, frankly, but I must also add proudly. The most noticeable feature of all I describe last—it was Lady Estmere's hair. This was thick, luxuriant, but by some trick of nature or constitution, whilst retaining its youthful abundance it had turned to a snowy white. As she wore no widow's cap or head-dress of any sort, the effect was at first startling; but in a few minutes the idea came over you that nothing could be more beautiful, more out of the common, more thoroughly suited to her style of face than this framework of pure white hair. This was Lady Estmere, and if her disposition were in keeping with her outward charms, Valentine's expression of "fairest and noblest of women" might not be much too exalted.

She greeted me with perfect courtesy and ease of manner, and entirely relieved me by a

few well-chosen words from any awkwardness I might have felt in the absence of my sponsor. She welcomed me, and placed me in a chair near to her. Her voice was low and sweet, but under the sweetness lay a suspicion of melancholy. Indeed I may at once say that Lady Estmere's appearance and manner altogether gave an acute observer the impression that her lot had been a sad one.

"I have heard a great deal about you, Mr. Norris," she said, "both from Valentine and Lord Rothwell. I am very glad to see you. Valentine calls you his closest friend. As we are almost one in thought, you must try to take two friends instead of one."

I was framing a suitable reply, when the door opened and Valentine entered. He was not alone; a tall girl came through the doorway with him, and if I say his arm was round her waist I shall be saying no wrong, unless truth is a crime.

The lady was the only one who appeared at all discomposed at being detected by a stranger in such an unconventional attitude. Valentine came forward with his ordinary natural bright manner.

"You here, Philip! I never heard you knock.

I am very sorry, but I have no doubt both my mother and you were equal to the occasion. Claudine and I were in the garden trying to find a rose that had survived London smoke," he added, turning to Lady Estmere.

"Claudine, Miss Neville, is my niece, Mr. Norris," said Lady Estmere, and the young lady and I made proper salutations.

Valentine had told me something in his airiest manner about a cousin who was coming back with his mother, but I had not given his words much attention. Claudine Neville therefore came upon me like a surprise, but such an agreeable surprise, that towards the end of the evening I was beginning to feel interested in ascertaining whether the manner in which the young relatives entered the drawing-room was a simple demonstration of cousinly affection, an assertion of cousinly rights on the part of Valentine, or something more.

There were no other guests at dinner. We dined in a cosy, pleasant way at a round table. Everything was quiet and simple, but in the best possible taste. Valentine faced his mother, and I had the pleasure of sitting at her right hand, and studying Miss Neville's handsome face across

the flowers between us. It was not long before I discovered that her face was well worth study.

Valentine was of course the life of the party, but Miss Neville and I bore our share in the pleasant chat. Lady Estmere spoke frequently, but her words had naturally a more sober tendency than those of the younger members of the party. Rothwell and his eccentricities was a very fruitful subject of conversation. Lady Estmere was curious to know how I became acquainted with him, and why he seemed to be so fond of me. This occasioned the recital of the facts of our first meeting, and I described as well as I could the comic side of it, and Mr. Dunstable's distressing condition and dismay. My mention of the lonely place he landed at, which was moreover my own, drew forth personal inquiries from Lady Estmere, and somehow I began to talk freely and unrestrainedly of my boyish days. The elder lady's soft, kind eyes looked at me with great interest, and encouraged me to proceed. Valentine seemed pleased to hear me so eloquent, and Miss Neville looked shyly, and as I was pleased to think, sympathetically across the scarlet geraniums on several occasions. So I was drawn on to tell them nearly all I have endeavoured to say

in these pages about my early life. I said nothing about any mystery of my father's life, or my utter ignorance concerning my dead mother. Naturally, they asked me about my father, and I described him as well as I could, praised him, and spoke affectionately of him.

"What a strange boyhood!" said Lady Estmere, laying her beautiful white hand for a second on my arm. "You must be much happier now."

"I wonder you did not develop into a poet, Mr. Norris," said Miss Neville. "But perhaps you are one!" she added, seeing Valentine glance at me meaningly, and an absurd blush cross my cheek as I caught the glance.

"A poet! Of course he is. Look at his massive brow," said Valentine. "Why, my dear Claudine, he has written reams — tragedy, comedy, and all the rest. Ask him to bring a bagful over and read to you. He only wants encouragement to give me the benefit of them all. But I am firm and never press him."

I felt inclined to kick him, for all the world knows that a hidden smile lurks in every heart when a man is called a poet.

"But after all, Philip," said Valentine, coming

back to the original subject, "your father must be a queer bird—excuse slang, mother. Claudine, how would you like to live in such a place? No new bonnets, no fashions, no shops, Claudine—fancy!"

"Substitute hats and coats for bonnets, and I can picture your desolation," said Miss Neville, quietly.

The action was cousinly after all I thought with some satisfaction.

"Exactly," said Valentine, "I should die without them. I saw a glorious sapphire in Bond Street to-day, Claudine. I asked the man to put it aside for a twelvemonth. Then, when you come of age, you shall give it to me."

Miss Neville laughed, and promised to gratify him. The ladies then left us, and Valentine and I adjourned to a snuggery for one small cigar before joining them.

I may as well confess that even at that early hour I had been greatly struck by Claudine Neville. I can say so with a clear conscience, for as yet I have not breathed a word of love in these pages. Yet I had met women at various times and had been troubled in my heart a little by one or two, but my fate had not come yet, so

I spare you the usual boyish rhapsodies, hopes, disappointments, disdain and forgetfulness. Till now I have never met so beautiful a girl as Valentine's cousin, so I wanted to know all about her. That was all.

"How do you like my mother?" asked Valentine, almost anxiously.

"I can only say I understand your words when you speak of her. I can say no more, except to thank you for making me known to her. You never told me how nice your cousin was."

"Didn't I? Fellows get so used to their cousins, they don't talk much about them."

"Why, bless the man! she is lovely. Can't you see it?"

"Yes, of course I can. We are very fond of one another. I admire her immensely."

"You don't seem to know your own luck. I suppose it's all settled between you?"

"I suppose it is," he answered carelessly.

"Then I have to congratulate you, and there's an end of it!"

"Yes, we are to be married some day—in two years or so, I think. Is your cigar out? Let us go in and have some music."

We joined the ladies. Valentine and Claudine

sang together, and as they were accustomed to such joint performances, the effect was artistic and pleasing. They were evidently the best of friends, but with the exception of the manner in which they entered the drawing-room during my whole visit I had detected no sign of that love which I fancied a girl of the type of Claudine Neville would expect from the man she chose as her husband. Lady Estmere talked to me, and I noticed looked with quiet satisfaction upon her son and his betrothed. So kind and natural were they all that I felt quite like one of their own family, and vexed at contributing so little to the general enjoyment, did all I could to make my conversation entertaining. The evening slipped away very quickly. When I bade them good-night Lady Estmere, in a manner the sincerity of which was not diminished by its sweet politeness, begged me to come often and see Valentine and herself. Claudine made some merry and unaffected remark, and I wended my way back to Albemarle Street, thinking I had spent the pleasantest evening in my life with the kindest and most attractive people, and that Claudine Neville was the loveliest girl I had ever seen. Lucky, lucky Valentine.

I did not go to bed for some time after my return home. I sat smoking and thinking of my new friends. I was making so many now—Valentine, Rothwell, Lady Estmere, Claudine Neville, besides others in a lesser degree whose mention my tale does not require. It is a pleasant feeling for a young fellow with a tendency to melancholy to find that people like him. I thought of Lady Estmere, and how nearly perfection she must have been in her younger days. I tried to imagine her regular and pensive features wearing the brightness of youth, and her hair, that wonderful white hair, a mass of gold. Yes, she must have been one of the loveliest girls of her day. Then I thought of Valentine, and with Valentine Claudine Neville came to my mind. I found myself trying to recollect all she had said during the evening, to recall the songs she had sung in her rich contralto voice, to determine the exact colour of her eyes and hair, and to decide to my own satisfaction what she had worn. This, of course, was entirely for Valentine's sake. I was bound to be interested in his future wife. But as I went at last to bed, I could not help wishing he had told me what relations existed between his cousin and himself, so that from the first I might have

been prepared to look upon Claudine as his particular property.

Not only did I go to the Estmeres' house several times during the next few weeks, but I was delighted to find that my visits were looked upon as a matter-of-course, and I was, in fact, soon on the footing of a child of the house. But, in spite of the hearty welcome given me, every time I left Lady Estmere's I vowed I would go there no more, at least for a while. Every time I found myself more and more attracted by Claudine, and felt that in allowing her to disturb my thoughts I was doing my friend a wrong. Yet without some better reason than I could invent I could not avoid coming in contact with her. She was about nearly all day with Valentine. There were concerts, flower-shows, and cricket-matches in the daytime, and the theatre in the evening. Valentine, who I suppose had plenty of opportunities for love-making, was always anxious I should accompany them to these places of amusement. Once or twice when some other engagement clashed he deputed me to fill his place and perform his duties of escort. I felt ashamed and false at the thrill of pleasure these requests gave me. To be able to sit for hours at Claudine's

side, to feel that she was under my care, to anticipate all her wants, to pay her the usual little attentions, and to receive her thanks for the pleasure of the evening was joy only equalled by the bitterness of knowing that no thought of love should enter my heart. Sometimes Lady Estmere accompanied her son and niece. She also was pleased when I made a fourth. It was not long before she confirmed Valentine's words, and told me that the cousins had been engaged for some years.

"It has always been my dearest wish to see them married," she said; "perhaps, after Valentine, I love Claudine the best in the world. They are engaged, if an understanding that they are to marry some day means engaged. But they have known each other so long, and been the best of friends since childhood, that their behaviour is often more like brother and sister than sweethearts."

So I went to work to crush all thoughts of Claudine, except as a friend, in the bud. I pride myself on a certain strength of character, and I called this to my aid. It was a fair opportunity to try what it was worth. As is usually the case the boasted weapon failed at need. Laugh at, condemn, despise myself as I would, I could not

keep from Claudine's side. I could not keep from admiring her above every one; in fact, I could not keep from growing more hopelessly in love with her every day.

I scarcely think it necessary to say that I breathed no word of what I felt. Even my passion had not brought me to such a depth as that. I could still meet Valentine's eyes and know I had neither wronged him in thought or deed. If there was a wrong done I was the only sufferer, and I would not complain. After a bit I began to pride myself on my self-control. So certain did I feel of my power of concealing my feelings that I put no check upon my hidden love. I made no more promises of not seeing Claudine again. I could see her, love her, and keep my own counsel, or I thought I could do so.

Yet in about three weeks' time I noticed a change in Claudine's manner. It had no longer that of frank amiability. She seemed to shun me, and did not answer so freely and unrestrainedly. I fancied she seemed afraid of me. So different was she from when I first knew her, that the painful thought crossed my mind that my secret, veiled with such care from all, had become known to the girl, who despised me for my

treachery. At any cost now I must conquer myself. If I could not conquer, fly! My cheek flushed with shame at my position—Valentine's friend, his mother's friend, and yet unable to fulfil one of the first obligations of friendship. Claudine alone knew my weakness, and I felt that she would not betray me, but I must fly, no matter where, so long as I went speedily. Yet how undignified and childish such an extreme measure seemed! I knew that in a week's time her visit would be at an end, and she was going away for an indefinite time. Surely I had strength of mind to avoid her during those few days. I could excuse myself on the score of work, engagements, anything; and Claudine once gone, the spell would be removed and I should be myself again. So be it.

For four days I was adamant. Valentine in vain begged me to come to St. John's Wood, to accompany him to one place or another. I could not plead work or engagements to him, so I was obliged to excuse myself on the score of not feeling well. There was truth in the excuse. The uneasiness of my mind was acting on my body. I felt ill as well as miserable.

"You do look bad," said Valentine; "but I

have an infallible prescription for you. My mother and I are going to Bournemouth next week. It's not fashionable this time of the year, but very jolly; you must come with us. We shall stay a month."

Sea air was exactly what I wanted. Claudine would be away. I felt nothing would suit me better, so I accepted his invitation readily. I made up my mind that, unless it was unavoidable, I would not see Claudine, even to say good-bye. She, if the true woman I thought her, would know why I kept away; and yet, as I made the resolve, I longed to be compelled to break it.

I was compelled to break it. In the morning a telegram came from Valentine. "Meet us at the Floral Hall. You must take Claudine to the concert." My heart leapt. It was impossible to refuse. I should see her again, sit for nearly three hours at her side; then I could say adieu, and for ever.

At three o'clock I was waiting at the Floral Hall. Lady Estmere's brougham drove up and out stepped Valentine and Claudine. She started, I fancied, as she caught sight of me, but shook hands with quiet composure. Valentine put on a penitential look, and turned to his cousin.

"Claudine, you must forgive me this once. I am awfully sorry, but I am bound to see a man on business this afternoon. So I have asked Philip to take my place and take charge of you."

For the first time I saw Claudine looked vexed and angry. She looked at Valentine, and then after the retreating carriage. Had it not driven off by Valentine's orders, she would, no doubt, have at once re-entered it. She drew herself up and looked very stately as she turned to Valentine.

"Had I known you were engaged, I could have stayed at home; certainly I should not have allowed Mr. Norris to be troubled in this way."

"That's just it, my dear Claudine," said the culprit, not appearing in the least ashamed; "that's just it, you would have stayed at home and lost the last concert, so I telegraphed to Philip; now thank me for my consideration, and be off with you. Here are the tickets, Philip."

Claudine took my arm without another word. Valentine nodded airily, and went his way. In a few minutes we were side by side in our places in the centre of the concert-hall.

We were early, or the performers were not

punctual. As soon as ensconced and supplied with a programme Claudine turned to me.

"I need not tell you that I am innocent of this trespass on your politeness," she said, quietly.

I did not disclaim any trespass. I simply said, "I hope you will enjoy the concert."

"Valentine has no right to do such things," she continued. "He is too thoughtless, and even frivolous at times."

"Yes, but not always. Perhaps it is that carelessness and lightness about trifles that makes him so charming."

"You are his friend, so you support him in his shortcomings."

"I am his friend, or I hope so," I said, with a meaning in my words.

"I am only his cousin, and dearly as I love him, I have the courage to tell him of his faults."

"From what I understand, Miss Neville, 'cousin' scarcely conveys the proper idea of the standing between you and Valentine."

For the life of me, although I tried to speak calmly, even banteringly, I could not help a ring of bitterness and sadness in my voice. Claudine's lashes fell, a blush rose upon her cheek, she

looked at her programme, and appeared as if she had not heard my remark.

"Hush!" she whispered, "we must listen. The trio is just beginning."

As she spoke, the opening bars sounded, and the tenor, a tall thin man with black eyes and a small moustache; the baritone, a short stout man with black eyes and a large moustache; and the contralto, a very stout lady with blacker eyes and a noticeable moustache, plunged into "I Naviganti."

Many a star brought from Italian skies, of greater or lesser magnitude, shone that afternoon, but I noticed the music but little, or only held it as an accessory to the dream I was dreaming as I glanced at the perfect profile of the beautiful young face by my side. The sense of hearing could give me nothing to compare to the delight of looking at the little ear and the bit of white neck that gleamed between the collar and the bright brown hair above. No woman, I was certain, in that vast assembly could compare with Claudine; no figure was so entrancing and divine, no hand so small and well-shaped, and no one dressed with such taste and refinement; and she and all her glories were Estmere's; and in a couple

of hours' time I should be cursing my folly and my treachery to my friend in even dreaming such a hopeless dream about her. Oh! if I had but seen her before she was betrothed to Valentine! or even if Valentine had not been my friend!

Did Claudine listen to the music any more than I did. I cannot tell. We talked volubly about it on our way back, but somehow were not quite clear as to the names of many of the singers, or even the songs they condescended to sing. Claudine was an active young woman who much preferred to walk after a concert.

"I always get a headache after such a stupendous performance as that unless I walk," she said. "It's a long way, I know, to St. John's Wood, but if you don't mind I would rather walk. I wonder where Valentine is?"

Valentine put in no appearance, so we waited a very few minutes for him, and started side by side on our way home.

We were not the most talkative of companions. I could not trust myself to say more than every-day commonplaces, and Claudine helped me very little. When we reached the quieter thoroughfares

of St. John's Wood, and nearer the place of parting, our tongues grew a little looser.

"Why have we not seen you for so many days?" asked Claudine.

I stammered out something about hard work. She looked incredulous. "Valentine says you are not well. Is that true?"

"I suppose I am only sighing for a sea breeze —that is what is wrong with me. I have promised Valentine to go to Bournemouth with them next week."

"So he told us. Aunt was very glad to hear it. She has taken a great fancy to you, Mr. Norris; you ought to feel flattered."

"I do," I said. "She is one of the sweetest women I ever met."

"She is, indeed, Mr. Norris—the sweetest, I think. She has had great trouble in her time; you can guess that by her look and her voice. There is a great deal of character in a voice, is there not?"

I assented, and said something more in praise of Lady Estmere.

"She has so few friends," continued Claudine, "that I am so happy in seeing her make a new one, and, I hope, a true one. For you will be a

true friend to her, will you not, Mr. Norris, through good and evil report?"

"Evil report is scarcely likely to trouble Lady Estmere," I answered, wondering at her earnest manner.

"Perhaps not," she said. "But here we are at the house. You will come in and have a cup of tea with her?"

"No, thank you," I said decidedly; "not this evening."

She did not press me, and I knew she guessed the reason of my apparent discourtesy.

As we reached the gate I said, "I must take this chance of saying good-bye, Miss Neville. I am afraid I shall not see you again before you go. It may be years before we meet again. You will think of me sometimes!"

I hated myself for the accent with which I spoke the last few words, but I could not help it. I was parting with Claudine.

"What part of the world are you going into after your visit to your friends in Shropshire?" I asked, feeling I should like to be able to think of her in some particular spot.

"I am not going to Shropshire," she said very

quietly. "One of my friends is ill; I only heard it last night, so all my plans are changed."

"Where do you go on Saturday when you leave?" I asked.

"I am not going on Saturday. Aunt has persuaded me to stay with her at the seaside; so, Mr. Norris, if you come to Bournemouth we shall soon see each other again."

I was thunderstruck. The hand of Fate was inexorable. My pulses were beating wildly; I scarcely knew what I said. I was wrecked in sight of land, but I struck out wildly, for the sake of safety and honour.

"I cannot come—I will not come!" I cried. "It is too much, too cruel!"

Claudine's eyes fell. She did not ask me for an explanation of my strange remarks.

"Then I suppose it must be good-bye," she said very softly, and holding out her hand.

"Yes, good-bye," I exclaimed; "good-bye! You know why I cannot come to Bournemouth, Claudine. I am Valentine's friend, and, I hope, a gentleman and man of honour. Claudine, if I spent another day in your company I should forget friendship, honour, all save your love. Forgive me—and good-bye!"

I wished no answer, I waited for none. I grasped her hand for a second, then dropped it, and strode as fast as I could along the dusty road, never turning my head until their house was hidden from sight. And a more unhappy man than Philip Norris never cursed his fate. After all, had I even been true to my word and to my friend?

CHAPTER VIII.

DISTRACTION WITH A VENGEANCE.

"It's the liver," said Valentine, who called the next day, and noticed my pale face and dark-rimmed eyes, "it's the liver; I know the feeling exactly. A pain under the shoulder-blade; I always get it myself in October, when nuts are in season. You'll get all right next week, when you join us at Bournemouth. By the bye, Claudine will be with us. She is not going to her friends."

"I know it. She told me so yesterday. I had better not come—I shall be one too many."

"Nothing of the sort. It will be dull without you. Claudine and I are exemplary sweethearts, and no annoyance to anybody. When may we expect you?"

"About the end of the week," I replied, thinking it better to break the engagement by a letter than be called on for explanations which would not hold water with Valentine.

On the Monday they all left London. Valentine was the only member of the family I saw before their departure. Lady Estmere sent me a kindly-worded note, urging me to join them as soon as possible, and expressing her sorrow at learning how ill and jaded I looked. As soon as I knew they were all gone I breathed more freely, and set about to find a cure for love. It must and should be cured, but as I said and determined, so I found myself for ever thinking of Claudine. I found myself sitting for hours, musing and intensely miserable. At last I roused myself. The first thing must be distraction—this I must have at any price.

I mentioned that besides the heavy and respectable club to which I had been introduced by Mr. Grace, I had joined another and more lively one. It was a small club, known familiarly as "The Juveniles," and comprised many elements attractive to young men like myself. Gay, pleasant men belonged to it. The greater number of its members were men of the same standing. The cooking was good and the wines excellent. There was always amusing chat and repartee going on in the smoking-room, and in whist and piquet several of the older members

were authorities. I had always been fond of scientific games at cards, and often played a few rubbers at this club. The usual stakes were not out of the bounds of propriety, and my gains and losses had not been worth mentioning. Of course there was a clique of gamblers in the body, and now and again rumours passed round of large, very large sums having changed hands; but as yet I had seen nothing to alarm me. Valentine and our mutual friend Vigor were both members, also several other men whom I liked, and was always glad to meet.

When I made the resolve to seek distraction, it was to the Juvenile bosom I went. As the simplest and easiest way, I threw myself eagerly into the science of whist. After a few nights' play I found I was beginning to be looked upon as a freemason by the habitual gamblers, and considered a desirable acquisition to their circle. So I went night after night, and in the face of the cards, the combinations of the game, and the excitement of winning and losing, flattered myself that I was forgetting Claudine.

I had written to Valentine, telling him it was impossible I could keep my promise of joining him. The hurried and indignant scrawl he sent

me on receipt of my letter I had not found heart yet to reply to.

Some ten days after the Estmeres left London I entered the smoking-room at the Juveniles about ten at night. Some half a dozen men I knew and one man I did not know were there. With a general nod to my friends I seated myself among them. They were all laughing at something said by the stranger, who appeared to be talking for the general benefit. He was a man of about five-and-forty, well-dressed, and evidently, from his bearing, an army man. His features were good, but the expression of his face not in keeping with them. He was a fair man, with chilly blue eyes—eyes, I thought, without warmth or without truth. He seemed well-known to the men present, and was talking very freely about things he had recently seen and done on the Continent. His voice was clear and metallic, every word was plainly enunciated, and his sentences were well put together. Certainly his talk was interesting in its particular way, but, in speaking of ordinary subjects, it has never been my lot to hear a man display so much cynicism. The cool, contemptuous way he spoke of everything, the motives he attributed to every

action, the covert ridicule that lay in his words of all that most of us hold in some degree sacred, would have been amusing had it not been for its heartlessness. That the man had lived one could see by his face; that he had exhausted life's pleasures his talk showed you. Although I instinctively disliked the man, I could not help listening and laughing with the others at some of his bitter but clever remarks.

"Who is he?" I whispered to the man next to me.

"Chesham," he replied; "a pleasant enough fellow at times, but a beast when put out."

"So I should think," I said.

Just then Harding, one of the best and most indefatigable of our whist-players, entered, looking for me to make up a rubber.

"What! Chesham? Back again?" he said. "Now we shall have a decent rubber. Come to the card-room—or is it too early for you? Freeman is waiting there."

"Who's the fourth?" asked Chesham.

Harding glanced around. "Norris is the man; he is beginning to play very decently."

"I don't like beginners," said Chesham.

"Nonsense, come along. You must be sick of *écarté* with Frenchmen!"

Chesham rose and followed Harding. I noticed he rose rather awkwardly, and as I walked behind him I saw he was very lame. He did not use a stick, but he walked slowly and with difficulty. His right leg seemed the culprit.

"He carries out his resemblance to Asmodeus, even to his bodily defect," I thought, as we entered the snug card-room, where the green table and the two unbroken packs of cards lay ready.

Of course, like all young men, I was conceited, and fancied my game at whist. I was amazed at the new-comer's rude remark about beginners; but more so when, in cutting for partners, and finding fate had thrown us together, he shrugged his shoulders slightly. The deal was his.

"Do you still play the same ridiculously low stakes?" he asked Harding as the cards fell quickly from his habile fingers.

"I don't know what you call low," said Harding. "We are playing pounds now, but I expect you can get what you like on when some more men come in."

Chesham played a fine game. There was no

doubt about that. In the course of several rubbers he played with and against me. When I was a partner he found plenty of fault with my play, and moreover expressed himself by gesture even more annoying than words. On one or two occasions I held my own opinion against his. He did not condescend to argue with me; he simply sorted his fresh hand, shrugged his shoulders, and went on playing. His manner nettled me so much that I began to hate him thoroughly, and wish I could win his money. Men had dropped in now, and were overlooking the game, and Chesham could get bets to his heart's content. He was clearly a bold gambler.

In one of the pauses of the game, some one said to me, "Has Rothwell returned from Somersetshire yet?"

"Is that fool back in England again?" asked Chesham, without raising his eyes from his cards, or noticing to whom the speaker had addressed the question.

"Ah, I forgot!" said the man. "He had something to do with this unlucky affair, had he not?" As he spoke he touched his hip with his hand.

"Yes, curse him," answered Chesham, scowl-

ing, "he and that bigger fool, his friend. But I have been even with them!"

There was such meaning in the last words that no one spoke.

"Captain Chesham," I said, "will you please remember that Lord Rothwell is my intimate friend."

"Indeed," he answered, with perfect coolness; "then I can only say you are at perfect liberty to repeat my words to him. It is your lead, Mr. Norris."

We went on playing without further comment. The luck had run pretty evenly. I was playing for much higher stakes than usual, but no harm had as yet come of it. The hour was growing late, and one by one the spectators began to drop off.

Our table now consisted of five. During the rubber I was cut out. Vigor came to me and said, "Good night. I should be careful of Chesham," he whispered; "he is a noted gambler."

"All right," I said. "Don't be afraid!"

That rubber over, the man who went out to make room for me wished us good night. He was a moderate player, like myself, and no doubt went away happy with some thirty pounds in his

pocket. With the exception of Chesham and myself, the players had changed more than once. Our companions now were two middle-aged men, who would play whist all night for the sake of the game, and who never raised their stakes for any one. Chesham had lost money. I was glad of it, although it had not come to me—having been carried away by the outside bettors. We cut against each other. My partner and myself won the first game.

"What a nuisance!" grumbled Chesham; "I wanted to take the odds, and every man has gone. I call it waste of time going on like this." He began to take up his cards with that superior, indifferent air which so annoyed me.

"What do you want?" I said on the impulse. "I will accommodate you."

He put down the cards, which he had not yet looked at.

"I want two hundred and fifty to a hundred."

"Very well," I answered.

They won the rubber, and Chesham made a memorandum that I owed him two hundred and fifty pounds.

He was a different man the moment he found me fool enough to bet with him. He became at

once polite, pleasant, and smiling. He sympathized with my bad luck and blamed my partner, who could scarcely believe his ears. Then we cut again—Chesham and I together.

"This won't do," he said. "Mr. Norris wants a chance of winning his money back; we must cut against each other."

I did not want to win my money back. It was a serious moment, so we cut many rubbers more against each other. To do Chesham justice, he gave me every opportunity of redeeming or augmenting my misfortune. But I lost and lost. The cards fought against us, and the inevitable claim at the end of each hand of two or four by honours grew quite monotonous. I was frightened at looking at the sums which I pencilled on the blank card on which I kept the account. I dared not make a total of them, but went on wildly, betting against my luck, and longing for the change that never came.

"You must be very lucky in love," said my partner, grimly, as our opponents scored a bumper in two hands, "for you are a regular Jonah at cards!"

I said nothing. His words brought Claudine's face to my mind; but I thrust it away. My hand

trembled, as with feverish haste I shuffled the pack and spread it out for a new cut.

Chesham was yawning. He glanced at his watch. It was seven o'clock. The carpet beneath our feet was strewn with cigar ends and ashes. Remnants of sodas and brandies were standing on adjacent tables. A ray of sunlight crept in between the thick curtains. We had been playing for eight hours!

"I am afraid this must be the last then," he said, as he drew a card. "I am getting older than I was, and can't stand so much of this sort of thing. You must have your revenge some other night, Mr. Norris."

He cut with the best of the two other players.

"Let me see," he said, running up his column of figures, "you owe me twenty-seven hundred pounds. What frightful luck you have had! Would you like to bet the odd seven hundred on this last rubber?"

A few hours ago, had any one told me I should be betting seven hundred pounds on a game of cards, I should have laughed in scorn of my own conceit—now I accepted the offer readily. I had found distraction with a vengeance!

We lost the first game, as usual. "Three by

tricks and two by honours," said Chesham quietly. I resigned myself to the worst. The next game we were four to our opponents' three. They had honours, we knew. It was all over, I thought, as six symmetrical tricks lay before the Captain; but my partner, with a desperate *finesse* of a nine, which made Chesham grit his teeth, gained the odd trick and game. I breathed more freely.

But it was no use. In spite of the fair hand which I held, the next game was barely saved. "Two cards, two honours," said Chesham, clicking up the cavendish markers with quiet satisfaction.

I am almost ashamed to say what came next, but I am not the first, nor shall I be the last man who loses his head after such a run of ill-luck. As I sorted my hand, and card after card appeared, and the highest of all a nine, I forgot my partner's interests in the magnitude of my own wagers, and, throwing the hand face upwards on the table, rose in disgust.

"Take up your cards," said my partner, "and play the hand out!"

"Excuse me," said Chesham, "no one knows better than you that every card is exposed." So

all my cards were laid open, and, with a look of great annoyance on his face, my partner led.

How is it such things happen at such times? On the first and only occasion that evening we were four by honours—all in my partner's hand. As they appeared, one by one, I began to hope that, in spite of my indiscretion, the game might be ours. We had five tricks each. With my hand lying open on the table, both antagonists and partner thought and considered a great deal.

"I think," said Chesham, playing a winning eight of diamonds, "my calling that exposed nine of clubs makes up for your *finesse* in the last game."

It was all over. "Mr. Norris has only himself to blame," said my partner; "but under the circumstances I think you should have allowed him to pick his hand up—under the circumstances, I say."

"Whist is whist," answered Chesham, laconically. "We are not playing for sugar-plums, you know. You owe me three thousand four hundred, Mr. Norris."

"I suppose the day after to-morrow will do?" I said dreamily and wearily.

"Certainly; or next Monday, if more convenient to you."

Three thousand four hundred pounds! Thirty-four hundred pounds! This is what kept ringing in my ears as I walked in the light morning sunshine back to Albemarle Street, utterly disgusted with myself. It was not that I blamed myself so much for gambling,—that was a fool's act only,—but it was for gambling for stakes I had no means of paying. As far as I could see, there was little to choose between me and a card-sharper. I had no means except what my father allowed me—no way of raising money. The few hundreds I might sell my furniture and belongings for would be a mere nothing. My father was thousands of miles away, and it seemed too ludicrous to suppose that Mr. Grace would pay such a sum without his special authority. Reeking with the fumes of stale tobacco, my finger-nails sore from the perpetual dealing of the cards, my feet cold as icicles, and my head in a whirl, I threw myself into bed and tried to get sleep and forgetfulness. Dimly in my mind the fearful idea was forming itself, that unless I could get this large sum, as promised, in a couple of days' time, the alternative was a pistol bullet through

my head. If I must be a defaulter, at least I should not survive it.

Sleep came at last; false, unrefreshing sleep—Chesham was a limping devil, pursuing me with kings, queens, and knaves in his train. I went on playing thousands of rubbers, I dealt millions of cards, and I awoke with red eyes and a splitting headache.

It was two o'clock. Mr. Grace was seldom at his office after four; so I must start soon and know my fate. A bath revived me a little, so far as the body went. I ate and drank something; then, the picture of inward humility and misery, I went to Bedford Row.

It was a bitter fall to me to have to tell my errand and confess my folly. He listened without comment, save an occasional "Tut! tut! tut!" I did not mention the amount lost until I came to the end of my confession.

"Three thousand four hundred pounds, Mr. Philip!" he exclaimed. "I thought you would have said a hundred or two, at the most! How could you have lost it?"

His manner gave me little hope.

"I know nothing about such things," he continued. "But I must ask you if it was won fairly

—or, I should say, what gamblers call fairly—leaving extra skill, age, and experience out of the question?"

"I have every reason to think so," I answered. "It was my own fault."

"To whom do you owe it? When I say owe, I mean in a social, not a legal sense, as doubtless you know such debts are not recoverable."

"It is a debt of honour; and if I don't pay I shall shoot myself."

"Tut! tut! I have heard many young fools say that before. Who is the man?"

"I scarcely think I am at liberty to say," I answered, doubtfully.

"You must tell me, or I can do nothing in the matter."

"His name is Chesham—Captain Chesham," I said reluctantly.

"Chesham?" repeated Mr. Grace. "Chesham is an uncommon name. What is he like, Mr. Philip?"

"A light man with a limp."

"It is the same; it must be the same! Is he a friend of yours?" he asked earnestly.

"No; I never saw him until last night. I hate him. He puts me in mind of the devil!"

The old gentleman seemed much relieved at my expressions of disgust.

"Yes; but the devil must have his due. Your father will be greatly vexed; but he would be more vexed if I left this man unpaid. No, don't thank me; it is your father you must account to. When do you want this large, this enormous sum?"

"To-day, if possible," I said humbly. "I cannot feel any rest whilst I am in his debt!"

"It is too late to-day. Call to-morrow afternoon. You would like it in notes, I suppose? After you have paid this Captain Chesham, go and tell Lord Rothwell everything. He is a client of mine, you know, and was talking about you the last time he was here. In paying this money I bind you by no promises, except that of telling his lordship of your folly."

I should have preferred to have kept the matter a secret; but Mr. Grace was bent upon it, so I promised.

I spent that evening, the night, and the next morning in contrition, thankfulness, and vows of amendment. The next afternoon Mr. Grace gave me a sealed envelope containing the price of my folly. I hurried home and placed it under lock

and key. In the evening I intended to take it to the Juveniles, and pay the man with the limp his due.

I dined quietly, and with a reserved appetite. I had made no vow to quit the club, only to gamble no more; so I took the meal at the Juveniles. To my annoyance, Chesham was also dining there. I had not expected to see him so early, and regretted I had left the money wherewith I could discharge his claim at home, not liking to carry such an amount about longer than needful. He looked at me, I fancied, rather curiously. Perhaps he was getting nervous, for it was a large sum of money to be paid by a young man. So I stepped across to his table.

"Will you be here about ten to-night, Captain Chesham?" I asked.

"I will if you wish it; but I have another engagement."

"I have your money at home." The Captain bowed. "I will go and fetch it as soon as I have dined. Unless you are coming my way. Then I would give it to you."

"Albemarle Street, isn't it?" I nodded.

"I am going that way. So if it saves you trouble, will call."

"We can go together when you are ready," I said, returning to my dinner.

Chesham's dinner was more elaborate than mine, so I waited in the smoking-room for him. About eight o'clock in he limped. I rose, and we went to the door of the club together.

"Call a hansom," he said to the hall porter. "This confounded leg of mine costs me pounds and pounds in cab hire."

He was very suave during the short drive to my chambers—wished I would have revenge, and all the rest of it; but I have no doubt he was gratified when he found I intended to pay and end the transaction.

I led the way to my rooms. He followed up the stairs slowly with his stiff leg.

As I opened the door of my sitting-room the fragrant odour of good tobacco was perceptible. Valentine Estmere was lounging in my easiest chair and smoking one of my best cigars.

Chesham paused at the threshold on seeing the room occupied. I advanced towards the intruder and shook his hand.

"You are engaged, I see," he said, with a glance at Asmodeus. "Shall I go?"

"Oh, no," I said; "Captain Chesham will not keep me a moment."

Therefore, Valentine deliberately turned his back to us, and began examining the etchings on my walls with great interest. Chesham, who had dropped into a chair, looked far from sweetly upon his broad back.

I unlocked my secretaire and gave Chesham the envelope. He put it into his pocket as though the transaction was scarcely worth mentioning. I asked him, more as a compliment than anything else, if he would take a glass of sherry. Rather to my surprise, he accepted the offer.

I brought out the sherry and glasses. He put his filled glass untasted on the table, and made a few ordinary remarks to me. All the time Valentine was moving round the room from picture to picture, enveloped in his cigar smoke, and studiously keeping his face from my visitor. There was no doubt but that his avoidance was intentional. Chesham's steely-blue eyes glistened; a cruel look came in them, whilst a most unpleasant smile crossed his face.

"Mr. Estmere," he said, in his metallic, hard voice, "you do not appear to know me?"

Valentine faced round at once. There was something in his face I had never seen there before.

"Oh, yes, Captain Chesham," he said, quietly, "I know you thoroughly."

Asmodeus' eyes looked crueller than before; but he appeared to ignore the meaning of Valentine's last and emphasized word.

"Then why not speak to me?"

"Do we ever speak?" asked Valentine.

"No, we never do," said Chesham, rising and supporting himself with his stick, which I found he carried when out of doors. "But as your mother and I are relations, I have a perfect right to expect recognition, at least from you!"

Valentine looked at him in his most supercilious manner. "Kindly leave Lady Estmere's name out of the conversation," he said. "That you are some distant connection of her family, I know; but I reserve the right to ignore it."

Asmodeus made a step or two nearer Valentine. His face was very unpleasant as it turned towards the young man. He spoke with cruel distinctness, so that every word was bound to reach my ear.

"There may be other relations between you

and me, Mr. Estmere—nearer relations, that others will not ignore."

Valentine looked at him with immense contempt. "I fail to understand you, Captain Chesham."

"If some day you meet with Sir Laurence Estmere, and call him father, he will probably inform you that he claims no right to that endearing title, which belongs to a gentleman of the name of Chesham!"

"That," said Valentine, "is a lie." His voice was scarcely raised more than usual, but, as he spoke, he struck out full and fair with his right arm, and Chesham fell, stunned and bleeding, his head rattling against the centre panel of my cabinet, and bringing about his prostrate form at least twenty pounds' worth of valuable old china.

I was so distressed, so surprised at the whole scene, that I did not move for a few moments.

"Pick the fellow up," said Valentine.

I picked him up, put him in a chair, restored his stick, and waited events. He was not seriously damaged, and in the course of a few minutes began to look about him. His first action was to feel his breast pocket and know that my

envelope was safe. His next was to take his hat and prepare to depart.

"I am sorry this should have occurred under my roof, Captain Chesham," I said.

He took no notice of my remark. At the door he turned and said to Valentine, "Ten years ago I would have shot you like a dog for that blow. There are better ways of revenge than that. You will find it so before long!"

"The hound!" said Estmere, as Asmodeus stumped down the stairs. "The hound! If you caught his meaning, Philip, you, who know my mother, will understand the blackness of his lie. My mother, the purest and holiest—ay, one of the proudest women in the world! The libel is ludicrous!"

I could only agree with him, although my ignorance of his family history prevented me from saying more. It was evident from Chesham's villainous assertion that Lady Estmere's husband was still alive.

CHAPTER IX.

CONFESSIONS AND EXPLANATIONS.

VALENTINE soon recovered his natural manner. Perhaps his belief in his mother's goodness was so great that Chesham's vile insinuation troubled him little. Perhaps, like others, he had learnt to hide his feelings under the cloak of a gay exterior. Any way he assisted me to pick up the broken china, and then we took our usual seats.

"Why have you come back, Valentine?" I asked.

"To watch you, of course," he replied, for the first time looking at me attentively. "What is the matter with you? What have you been doing?"

The best thing I could do was to tell him the truth about my gambling exploit. He listened very gravely until I had finished.

"And that beast has gone off with all that money of yours? It is disgusting. But why do you do it, Philip?"

"Do what?" I said, to gain time.

"Gamble. It is utterly beneath you—utterly contemptible for a man like you. I am a fool in lots of things, but I don't play cards."

"I shan't play any more," I said, impressed by Valentine's serious words.

"I should think not. What lots of good fellows I have seen spoilt by it. You are not the same you were a few weeks ago. Why did you begin it?"

"For the sake of excitement, I suppose."

"What do you want with excitement? Any way, a little more of it will kill you. You look wretched. That was why you kept away from us, then. It's precious dull at Bournemouth, but you would have found it a long way cheaper."

"How are your people?"

"Both very well, but Claudine is in a horrid temper. She scolds me from morning to night. If that young woman doesn't take care our little arrangement will come to an end."

Valentine's light words jarred upon me.

"I think the way in which you speak of Miss Neville neither well-bred nor respectful," I said testily.

He gave me a quick glance. "Oh, we under-

stand each other perfectly, and neither expect too much. But I promised to bring you back with me to-morrow. So make your arrangements."

"I will not come to Bournemouth."

"Then," said Valentine, "you will tell me the reason why. Perhaps you want another shy after your money."

"I told you I did not; and how could I play with that cur again?"

"Then tell me why. The true reason, Philip!"

He was speaking very gravely, and waited for my reply. I resolved to fence no more. I would tell him.

"If you do not know, Valentine, I can only say, with Schiller, that the gods themselves fight in vain against stupidity."

"I am not so stupid as you think, Philip, neither are you quite a god. But go on, tell me!"

"I have a friend the dearest in the world, and I love a woman the best in the world. You are the friend, and Claudine is the woman."

I expected a torrent of reproaches, but none came.

"I guessed as much," said Valentine, in his ordinary voice. "I tried to get at the truth from Claudine, but it was no good, so I was bound to come to you."

"Well, you know it now," I said shortly.

"Yes, I know it now. I suppose you are awfully in love with her—that her image is with you always, that you dream by night, and sigh by day? Is it so?"

I was getting quite angry at these unfeeling questions. "Yes, I do," I answered, determined to let him know the depths of my treachery.

"It's very funny now," continued Valentine meditatively, "but I have never felt like that either for Claudine or any other girl. There was a girl once at a roadside inn in North Wales. She drew the beer, I remember. For a couple of days I felt a ghost of a resemblance to your symptoms, but it soon was laid. It is very strange I never feel as you do towards Claudine, and stranger still, when I come to think of it, that she doesn't feel so towards me. I asked her not long ago if she did, and her reply quite satisfied me on this score."

Claudine was right in her estimate of Valentine. He was frivolous and thoughtless, or he

could never have jested so. I quite lost command over my temper, and for the first and last time in my life was furious with Valentine.

"Mr. Estmere," I said with great dignity, "you have forced from me a secret which, as a man of honour, I was bound to reveal to you at whatever cost to myself. I can only say your manner in receiving it has greatly disappointed me."

I had risen to give my words due effect. Valentine heard me finish, then followed my example.

"You old fool," he said playfully, laying his hand affectionately on my shoulder, "you thick-headed old fool. Can't you see against whose utter stupidity the gods are struggling now?"

What could he mean! My heart gave a great bound.

"Claudine and I decided six months ago, long before she ever saw your handsome, dark, dismal face, that on the first favourable opportunity we would break our life-long engagement. That was why I never spoke to you about her. We are only waiting until we can summon up the courage to tell my mother of our determination. Her heart is so set upon it; she has always so wished for it, that we don't know

what she will say. Indeed, Claudine and I love her so much that even now if she will have it so we shall get married, and I dare say be happy enough, so don't you go rushing to the extreme of hope and joy."

I am not sure, but I think I fell upon Valentine's neck. I could have worshipped him, but in my heart I despised him. How could any man speak so carelessly of transferring such a being as Claudine to another? But I was in love, and Valentine was not.

"You see, Philip, what it has cost you not telling me the whole truth. In money alone three thousand four hundred pounds, for of course you gambled on that account. Let this be a warning to you."

What did I care for money now? Who was happier than I was?

"Does she care for me, do you think, Valentine?" I asked.

"You must settle all that yourself, Philip. I shall have enough to do with my mother. Besides, I am a gentleman, although you didn't think so a short time ago, and will betray no confidences."

But we settled I should not go back with him

to Bournemouth. I must come under no false pretences. Lady Estmere must know exactly how matters stood. Valentine promised to do his utmost to bring her to his way of thinking, and then——

"You will telegraph?" I said anxiously.

"I will telegraph at once. Now let us have a pipe and a sensible chat, and then you go to bed like a reformed character."

So we talked till he insisted upon going, saying it was wearisome to find that, however the subject started, it was bound to work round to Claudine Neville. He said no more about the unpleasant events of the evening until he rose to leave me. Then glancing at the shattered panel of my cabinet, a stern hard look crossed his face.

"I wish I had hit hard enough to kill that dog," he said, in such a harsh voice I scarcely knew it.

I could make no reply. He turned to me and clasped my hand. "Philip, I think you will marry Claudine. Before then you will hear more about us. Promise me through good and evil report you will not only love but believe in my mother!"

Through good and evil report! The very phrase I had heard Claudine make use of.

I returned the pressure of his hand. "Through good and evil report I swear it," I said. Then we parted for the night.

I had too much to think about to go to sleep easily, too much joy to picture, too many castles to build, and every one of these airy structures tenanted by Claudine and myself. Valentine's refusal to give me any opinion as to the state of her feelings towards me raised my hopes, and I augured well from his account of what he chose to call her bad temper. The happiness I felt at the turn affairs had taken made me think little of, or almost forget, my catastrophe at whist. Somehow I did not trouble much about the money lost. The fact of Mr. Grace having paid it so readily showed me my father could afford it. I was ashamed and willing to pay any penalty he might demand, but it would be a long time before I should see him, and meanwhile there was Claudine to be won. All minor considerations sank before this, and I longed for the moment when I might meet, and with a clear conscience look into her true sweet eyes and read what fate had in store for me.

Valentine left early next morning. With true selfishness I begged him not to delay his departure. He left me laughing, and promising again to send me word directly he had smoothed matters. I was restless whilst he was with me, and even more so when he had left. I scarcely expected the telegram that day, so time must be killed somehow. Then I remembered my pledge to Mr. Grace that Lord Rothwell should know all my folly. I would have given something to be able to recall the promise, but that being an impossibility, I thought I had better get the unpleasant task over as soon as possible, so about midday I went in search of the distinguished traveller.

He was still at Long's Hotel, and appeared inclined to stay there. It was too much bother, he said, to take either a house or chambers, so he chartered a long bed-room on the top of the hotel, cleared out all the furniture it originally possessed, and sat down to write the book of travels which his publishers were eagerly awaiting. This improvised study was only free to one or two persons, amongst whom were Valentine and myself.

I climbed the stairs, rapped at the door, and

heard his lordship's deep voice bidding me enter. He was hard at work, and both in garb and surroundings looked as unlike a British peer as can be imagined. The furniture of the room consisted of a couple of chairs—good, strong, wooden-seated, and comfortable—a couple of boxes of cigars, a large tobacco jar, several pipes, and two deal tables, so gigantic that it is a marvel how they were got up-stairs. One of these stood in a corner, the other in the centre of the room. Both, with the exception of a small space in the centre of the one he wrote at, were littered with maps, charts, books, papers, and sketches. An open memorandum book and a pile of ruled paper lay in front of him; the floor at his left side was strewn with pages of manuscript which, as finished, he dropped there to await sorting and fastening together. The noble author's attire was unconventional, to say the least. A pair of trousers, a flannel shirt, and a delightfully comfortable-looking old velveteen shooting coat, absolutely out at elbows, formed, with socks and slippers, the whole of his raiment, as far as eye could see. A short pipe was the only ornamental thing about him. He nodded as I entered.

"Chuck those books off the chair, Philip, and sit down. I am in the middle of a sentence."

I obeyed and watched his pen forming the big, bold, characteristic letters, and trying to calculate the consumption of ink and paper such penmanship must entail. At least it had the merit of being legible, and knowing it was intended for publication I had no scruple in reading as he wrote.

"There was no help for it. Finding neither scolding nor persuasion would induce my guide to risk his life in the fast-running stream, I bade him hold the frightened mule, and divested myself of my garments. Till then I had no idea that water could be so cold. I shiver now as I think of it. I ducked, dived, and groped with varying success in the bed of the stream, and when compelled from numbness and exhaustion to cease, I found I had recovered most of the heavier articles which had fallen from the carelessly-fastened pack, but alas! that solace during weary days, that companion during lonely nights, my tobacco, although packed in what I believed was a water-tight can, was a soddened mass."

"Yes, it was devilish cold, I can tell you,"

he said, seeing I had read his words. "The pack slipped as we crossed the ford, or the cord broke or something, and I had the pleasure of seeing all my little comforts of life tumble one by one into the river. All my luxuries were lost utterly."

"You seem to dispense with luxuries even now," I said, looking round at the barely-furnished room.

"I've got all I want. No one can be more luxurious than that. There's true philosophy for you, my sybarite of Albemarle Street."

"Are you too busy to spare me a few minutes?" I asked.

"No; I was just thinking of finishing up and attiring myself more as a civilized being should. Say on, oh Philip! what is your errand, business or pleasure?"

"Business, or rather I have an unpleasant confession to make you."

"Are you speaking in earnest, Philip?"

"Unfortunately I am," I said dolefully.

"Then tell me what you have to tell quite unrestrainedly, not as to a man old enough to be your father, but as to a friend of your own age. Do you want money?"

"I did yesterday; not now."

"Why not have come to me? I have more than I can spend. Tell me all about it."

I told him all about it very shortly and circumstantially. I mentioned no names at first. Lord Rothwell looked very grave, and stroked his long brown beard thoughtfully.

"It was not right, Philip. I am vexed to hear about it. How did you know you could possibly find money to pay the loss? A gentleman should not forget this even in the excitement of the game."

I hung my head. "I must have shot myself, I suppose."

"Of course you must. I don't see what else you could have done. It is that alternative I was thinking of. I would have paid the money had you come to me, but you were quite right in applying to Grace for it first. I am glad you told me about it."

"Mr. Grace made me promise to do so."

"Oh, Grace made you promise, did he? Why was that?"

"The money was lost to a Captain Chesham. He said you knew all about him."

"Chesham!" exclaimed Rothwell. "Have you

come in contact with that rascal? It is a small world, Philip."

"Do you know anything about him?" I asked.

"Yes, I know something about Richard Chesham, and I want to know something more about him —something I fear I shall never find out," he added. "Shun that man, Philip, as you would a serpent. He has done mischief enough already."

"He speaks as though he hates you, Lord Rothwell."

"He has no cause to do so. His only grievance against me is that I was second to a friend of mine who shot him through the hip years ago."

Things were explaining themselves, and I was growing curious.

"Will you tell me your friend's name?" I asked.

Rothwell pulled away at his beard, and considered for a while.

"Yes," he said, "there's no secret about it. Any one about town can tell you. It was Sir Laurence Estmere."

"Valentine's father."

"Valentine's father, and my dearest friend."

"He insulted Valentine in my rooms last night when he came to be paid, and Valentine knocked him down."

"What did the villain say?" asked Rothwell, eagerly.

"Shall I be right in telling you, Lord Rothwell?" I asked, doubtfully.

"Yes, everything, every word," he said, authoritatively. "There are no secrets between Valentine and me."

I took him at his word, and described the whole interview, even repeating the scandalous assertion made by Chesham. Rothwell grew much excited. He rose and paced the room, regardless of the manuscripts scattered about.

"He said it himself," I heard him mutter. "Yet I will never believe it—never, never. It must be a lie! She was pure, noble, and holy. She could not have stooped to such a fellow even if she had loved him. Oh, if I could wring the truth out of his black heart!"

"And Valentine knocked him down, you say?" he inquired, turning to me.

"Flat as a pancake—a beautiful hit. His head almost went through my sideboard."

"I am sorry for some things, although I don't

blame Valentine. I wonder he did not kill him. You would in his place, Philip."

"I think I should," I answered.

"So would Laurence Estmere—Valentine's father. He tried hard to kill him that day when they stood a few paces apart on that bit of green sward in Belgium. Even now I think if he meets him again he will kill him."

"But Lady Estmere?" I said.

"Lady Estmere, sir, is as pure as the day," said Rothwell, with unusual excitement. "I swear it—I knew her and loved her even before Laurence and she met, and I am not ashamed to tell even you that I love her now. Lady Estmere stoop to such a cur as Chesham! The thing is impossible. You know her; go and see her, look at her, talk to her, learn to love her, study her character, and say whether, if all the world averred the truth of the hideous scandal, you could bring yourself to credit it."

"I could never believe it," I said truthfully.

Lord Rothwell strode about the room for a short time, evidently a prey to great emotion. Then he seated himself and looked at me very earnestly. Somehow, Lord Rothwell's clear gaze always gave me the impression that no false man

could stand before it. I was only speaking truth, so had no need to shun it.

"No," he said, "of course you do not believe it. You love her, or will love her soon. It is as well that I should tell you all I know of the lamentable affair. Laurence and his wife were happy to all outward appearances as any two people could be. If certain traits in their characters clashed, their love appeared to counterbalance this. One day Laurence came to me like a madman. His wife had been unfaithful to him, he said. I laughed the idea to scorn, for I had loved her before he had. I was then a poor man with no hope of succeeding to this title, so I never even told her I loved her. But I laughed at Laurence's ravings, although I trembled, not for her truth, but in the fear that my friend's peculiarly constituted mind was unhinged—yet he was sane as I was—and when at last I condescended to argue with him, and was met and defeated by his assertion of having had ocular and indisputable proof of her treachery to him, what could I do but believe him for the time. Certain trivial circumstances confirmed his words to a great extent. He never saw his wife again—perhaps she never asked for an interview, for

Lady Estmere was as proud as her husband. A month or two afterwards he took me abroad with him, to meet Richard Chesham. I give that devil his due, he faced the penalty bravely enough. He denied nothing, but offered satisfaction with heartless cynicism. He has limped ever since, but that is a poor exchange for the ruin of two lives. Now you know all that I know."

"Yet how could Lady Estmere's name get coupled with Chesham's?"

"Richard Chesham," said Rothwell, with some reluctance, "was a sort of cousin of Lady Estmere's. At one time, I believe, they were engaged to be married. She never could have seen his true side, or when she saw, broke the engagement. That was before she met Laurence Estmere. Laurence knew this, and, perhaps as some sort of compensation for Chesham's disappointment, was kind to the man, helped him with his interest, and frequently invited him to his house. He was staying there when the explosion occurred."

"It is very inexplicable," I said, "yet you are convinced of her innocence."

"Convinced, yes; I would stake my life on it, or should I be her friend now? I wavered when

Laurence Estmere asserted so positively the contrary; but I saw her again. I tell you, Philip, had it all been true, had she ever deceived my best friend, had she ever stooped to that cur Chesham—repudiated as she was by her husband—even then I would have taken that woman to my arms, and if not honoured her, could have loved her as no woman yet was loved. Perhaps such a thought crossed my mind—I was young then, and she was alone—but if so, one glance from those pure eyes of hers would have driven the thought away, never to return. But if I felt this, you at least may believe in her innocence against everybody. You must forget my ravings," he added. "Years of travel have sobered me, and the past is the past. Lady Estmere and I are simply dear old friends, and as such we shall end our lives. When will you see her again, Philip?"

"I hope to go to Bournemouth to-morrow," I answered, colouring as I thought of the real object of my visit.

"That's right; remember me to her. I may run down for a day or two. Don't get making love to Claudine Neville, for Lady Estmere has appropriated her long ago for Valentine."

"Valentine has all the luck," I said, stooping to pick up my hat and hide my blushes.

"Not all," said Rothwell, with meaning. "Good-bye, then, if you are going now. Don't gamble again, there's a good boy."

CHAPTER X.

LOAFING ON SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES.

It was only "Come," four letters on a slip of pink paper. Nineteen spaces that might have been filled for a shilling, yet Valentine only sent the word "Come." It was quite enough for me. I bundled my things together, wrote to the eminent conveyancer, whose instructions I had been sadly neglecting for some days, telling him I was going to commence the long vacation at once. Why should I not do so? To qualify for the bar you are only asked to spend the last year in chambers, and if I chose I might take nearly two years' holiday and not do much harm. And was not Claudine at Bournemouth, perhaps waiting for me? Opposition, if opposition might once have been feared, was overcome, and I spun along in the train thinking how, when, and where I should dare to ask Claudine for the answer I wanted. The slowness of the train was disgraceful. I determined when I could find time to think

of anything else except a beautiful girlish figure, a pair of grey eyes and a classical profile, to concoct a letter to the *Times*, or to the Board of Trade, or Railway Commissioners, or some one, and complain of the scandalous way in which the line was worked. Yet, strange to say, we were timed to run forty miles an hour, and, stranger yet, steamed into Bournemouth punctual to the moment. I had a foolish hope that some one would meet me, but it was hardly likely to be realized, as no one knew what train I should come by. If the train seemed slow, what shall I say about the cab? It crept along no faster than an infirm snail; the wheels seemed stiff and rheumatical, the body of the vehicle lead; but it did at last deposit me at the door of the pretty little fir-tree-hidden house taken by Lady Estmere during her stay at the seaside. I don't know what I paid the cabman, but he seemed contented; in fact, I am not very clear about anything until I found myself in a drawing-room talking to Lady Estmere, who welcomed me kindly, almost affectionately. Even then, as I was looking round for Claudine, I could not help noticing her sweet appearance, and thought, with Lord Rothwell, that to couple shame and un-

truthfulness with her was profanity. But Claudine! Where was Claudine?

"Valentine and Claudine are out," said Lady Estmere. "They did not expect you so early. You will find them on the sands or the pier. But you must have a cup of tea first, and, Mr. Norris, I want to say a few words to you."

I blushed to the roots of my hair. She looked very sad, and there was regret in her last sentence.

"Oh, Lady Estmere!" I exclaimed impulsively, "I could not help it—who could after seeing Claud—Miss Neville? I tried all I could to conquer it, but it was no use!"

"Poor boy!" she said with a faint smile. "I know you did, Valentine told me. He has persuaded me, you know his way, Philip, that it is all for the best. People always tell you that, when your dearest hopes go wrong. But I blame no one, least of all you, for Claudine is very lovely."

"She is," I cried enthusiastically. "Ah! Lady Estmere, you will gain another son, for, if you will let me, I will love you as the mother I never knew."

Then I took her beautiful hand and kissed it. She seemed pleased at my act of homage.

"So be it," she said; "I will try and grow content. But, after all, we are settling everything without consulting the principal person. Does Claudine love you?"

"I have no idea," I said ruefully.

"Neither have I; neither has Valentine. But don't despair, Philip. I call you Philip, now, you see. You are earnest and true, and, alas for the weakness of woman, a handsome boy. You should have no difficulty in winning her heart, if you have not done so already."

"Now that you encourage me, I hope," I replied.

"Yes, the young can always hope. Ah! here is our tea; then you can go and find them."

I am afraid I drank my tea at the risk of scalding myself—at any rate I refused a second cup. Lady Estmere, who guessed my impatience, soon set me free.

I hurried down to the beach—the most likely place, I thought, to find the cousins. It was a glorious summer afternoon, and all the usual amusements of the seaside were in full swing.

The Punch and Judy, the strong man, the negro minstrels, the open air preachers, all at the height of their entertainment, and from the end of the pier came faint sounds suggestive of the inevitable brass band. Hundreds of children dabbling, paddling, splashing, and digging. I passed through the *mêlée*, and some distance up the beach I saw a gentleman in summer attire, lying on his back, with a broad hat over his eyes. Seated by him, on a hillock of sand, was Claudine. I knew her a quarter of a mile away, and noticed with joy her start and look of pleasure as she recognized me. I was close by them, even holding her hand, before Valentine was aware of my presence. How delicious Claudine looked with her face a trifle sunburnt! How fresh and young! Does she guess why I have come?

Valentine greeted me affectionately, but without rising. "I can't get up," he said. "I have just managed to get fitted into the sand, an operation which takes some time. Lie down beside me, Philip; put your hat over your eyes so that you only catch the blue rim of the sea in the distance, and you shall know true happiness."

But fair as the sea was I had something fairer yet to look upon.

"You are the picture of laziness, Valentine," I said.

"No; I am loafing on scientific principles; the man who does not understand loafing doesn't enjoy life. All this last week of fine weather I have lain like this with Claudine, and her umbrella beside me. Sometimes she reads to me, and then I sleep softly and sweetly."

"Don't you do anything else all day?"

"Yes, when I feel inclined, I go to the end of the pier and catch little fishes with a hook and a shrimp, but I find that too exciting. Then I get a good deal of benefit from the children's service held on the beach. It is delightful to hear one little girl, a chubby dimpled thing with golden hair, sing the hymns. How is it one runs, Claudine? Ah! I know—

> 'When carking cares corrode my heart,
> And fiery passions strive,

It is most instructive, I assure you."

I sat down beside Valentine at Claudine's feet. She had said little as yet; indeed, I found her strangely silent. Valentine rattled on merrily, and the time slipped by until we decided that dinner must be thought of. It was only when we reached

Lady Estmere's house that I found a chance of saying a word for Claudine's ear alone. Valentine had passed on.

"Claudine," I said, as I turned the handle of the gate, "you remember how we last parted; you know why I have come. Shall I go or stay?"

She answered nothing, but a vivid blush was on the girl's cheek as she passed through the open gate. Altogether, I thought it better to decide to stay.

All happy love passages are the same, and monotonous and uninteresting enough to all, save two persons. Claudine did not keep me long in suspense. I scarcely remember where it was I summoned up courage to ask her if she loved me; but from the fact that the odour of pines seems to mingle with my recollections of that moment, I fancy it must have been in one of the many evergreen groves that Bournemouth boasts. I asked her simply and earnestly, as a true man should ask a woman, if she loved me, and raising her clear eyes to mine, she answered frankly, as a true woman should; but she added—

"I think I have loved you ever since we first met, Philip."

Then hand in hand we went to Lady Estmere,

and received her good wishes and Valentine's unaffectedly hearty congratulations. He was happy in our happiness, but how any man who had a chance of winning Claudine could have given it up so easily I have never yet been able to comprehend.

A fortnight soon passed away—the happiest time my life had as yet known. Bournemouth is essentially an artificial place—its tame coast, its well-arranged gardens, its woods of tall, straight trees, all so different from the rocky coast of North Devon; but no place, Claudine and I agreed, could be more beautiful—certainly none to us. And now a fortnight's dreaming was over; Lady Estmere would return to town; Claudine was due at a friend's. Valentine and I were planning a second holiday together, and had accepted an invitation to stay with Lord Rothwell at a place of his in the North, where he promised us good shooting. It was now the middle of August, so we had a fortnight to kill. Valentine inclined to a short sketching pedestrian tour which should finish at Lord Rothwell's place in Derbyshire. But I had much to do before I could commence it. True, that Claudine and I were engaged; but that engagement must be ratified by persons in author-

ity. She was an orphan, but there was a trustee and guardian whose consent was needed to make things pleasant. We were both so happy in the revelation of our love that we troubled little about this gentleman, although I had resolved to wait upon him very shortly and apprise him of my intentions towards his ward. As to my own prospects, I would see Mr. Grace and endeavour to extract some more information from him. Any way, consent or no consent, it was but a matter of waiting for a year, until Claudine came of age, and until my father returned from his travels. How he would welcome and love my beautiful bride! how she would twine herself round his heart and brighten life for him! These were my happy visions. I felt instinctively that Claudine Neville was exactly the woman he would have chosen for me. Well born, beautiful, intellectual, and, if such a consideration were needed, I understood from hints thrown out by Valentine, rich. No one's happiness seemed so well secured as mine at that moment.

Strange to say, it was Lord Rothwell who first cast a shadow of a doubt upon the sunshine of my future. Lady Estmere had written to him and informed him how matters had arranged them-

selves, and how she had resigned her cherished plans in my favour. Two days afterwards he paid us a visit. Valentine greeted his advent rapturously, for I dare say that young gentleman found that Claudine and I engrossed each other's thoughts too much; contrasting our selfishness unfavourably with his own conduct under similar circumstances. Our noble friend congratulated us with a coldness and soberness which I felt was quite uncalled for. He was then closeted for some time with Lady Estmere, whose eyes bore traces of tears when she reappeared amongst us. He returned to town the same evening, and asked me to accompany him to the railway-station. From his manner I fancied he wanted me alone, so I tore myself away from Claudine.

"I am very sorry to hear about this," he said, as we walked together.

"You mean you are glad, Lord Rothwell."

"No, I mean what I say—very sorry. I foresee trouble and entanglements."

"You are thinking of Valentine, and Lady Estmere's disappointment?" I said.

"No; I am thinking about you—and Claudine —the match is neither desirable nor suitable."

"For which?" I said rather haughtily, I fear.

"For neither. Now, don't catch on fire like that, Philip. I am only speaking as a friend. I know it's not much use, for on some things you are as obstinate as—well, as a pig—I have found that out already."

I bowed at the compliment.

"You're not thinking of getting married yet, I hope," he continued.

"No," I said with a sigh. "I don't see how I can till my father returns."

"Hardly; you can scarcely have the face to marry a girl like Miss Neville, who has about a thousand a-year, without a half-penny of your own to keep it company."

This was the truth; but he put it with undisguised clearness, so it looked very unpleasant.

"Yes, I must wait until I know that my father will guarantee an income, or until I make one for myself."

"Precisely. Do not count on anything till you see your father. He is peculiar on some points, if I remember correctly."

"He is rather; but he cannot help loving Claudine."

"Fathers don't see with their sons' eyes, Philip. Don't think I am blaming you for your choice,

my boy. Claudine is very beautiful. I am only bidding you prepare against disappointment. Few get their heart's desire in this world, Philip.

"I have told Claudine all I have told you," he added.

"Nothing you can say to her will make her change or retract."

"Nothing. She is about as obstinate as you are—well, I am afraid I shall prove a true prophet. Yet, if circumstances permitted, I would sooner see you two married than any two people I know."

He spoke so kindly that my momentary anger vanished, although the very kindness of his last words gave me more disquietude than I had felt before.

"You are speaking in enigmas, Lord Rothwell," I said. "I cannot guess your meaning. All I know is that Claudine and I love each other!"

"Yes, I am speaking in enigmas. But life, love, and the rest are enigmas for the most part. Who is happy and who is unhappy when fate reveals the answer remains to be seen. Now, good-bye; I dare say I shall see you in town—if not, you and Valentine have promised to help me with the partridges on the 1st."

Then he took his seat in the train, and I walked slowly back to Lady Estmere's, wondering what he meant by his gloomy forebodings and mysterious sayings, and determined to consult Claudine on the matter.

She was as much puzzled as I was. He had spoken in a similar way to her, and, naturally, his words had affected and troubled her more than they had me. He was such a valued friend of all, that the girl's disappointment was great when she found his congratulations were tempered with melancholy prophecies. Any way, after looking at the subject in every light, we could only decide one thing—that we loved each other as no two people have loved yet—and in spite of unknown evils the world could work to mar our joy, we would defy all and everything.

CHAPTER XI.

A TERRIBLE OLD MAN.

AFTER pleasure, duty—a convenient and not uncommon reversal of an old saying.

Claudine has gone to pay long-promised visits. Gone, after the usual vows, promises, and adieus. Gone, but leaving me the dearest recollection of the truest, most trusting look of the sweetest eyes in the world, that ever in some degree consoled an absent lover. It may be two or three months before we meet again, but I shall write—every day of course—and better still, Claudine will write. How I shall look forward to and cherish her letters! Sweetheart, how did I exist until I knew and loved? Exist is the word, not live; I never lived until now, Claudine.

But duty, duty. There is a retired General or Major-general—anyhow, I shall call him General when I see him, so must be right. There is this distinguished military officer living at Cheltenham, him I must see, and speedily. He is Clau-

dine's guardian, and for twelve months, until she comes of age, the arbiter of her fate. How far his power may extend over her I have no means of knowing, but terrible as he sometimes appears in visions to me, I comfort myself by the thought that Claudine will scarcely be deterred by any one's authority from seeing me, or at least writing. That she would obey if commanded not to love me is absurd, and does not enter into my calculations. All the Generals or Major-generals, drawn up in line and storming at her, would have no effect in that direction.

I must go down to Cheltenham and face him, tell him I have won his ward's heart; but what am I to say to him? He will ask me what means I possess, what family I come of, who are my relatives, what is my profession, and what pretensions I have to aspire to the hand of Claudine. I can only answer one, or at the most two, of these natural questions. I can tell him I am going to be a barrister, and that I love her—that is all. It is clear to me before I venture to beard this man in authority I must pay Mr. Grace a visit and talk to him seriously. It was time I knew something about my father's position in the world, and what I had to give (or offer) as cre-

dentials when I demand the guardian's consent to my engagement.

My disgust and surprise at finding Mr. Grace of the same way of thinking as Lord Rothwell was great. He did not speak so plainly as his able client, but I could see he was vexed and annoyed at my communication, and endeavoured to throw cold water upon it. Of course he had no right to dictate, he could only advise; but as an old friend of my father's he would suggest that I should take no rash step—indeed, hamper myself with no obligations until the wanderer returned. His manner told me that he expected my father would at once forbid the step I was contemplating. These absurd objections made me very cross.

"Will you be kind enough," I said, "to tell me candidly what objection there can be to my marrying Miss Neville? Lord Rothwell said something of the same sort; but I should like a definite reason."

"His lordship feels like I do, and like I expect your father will feel, that it is not a suitable match."

"Good heavens, Mr. Grace, what do you

mean? Is there anything against me, or against Miss Neville's family?"

"Miss Neville's family is irreproachable; her antecedents will bear the strictest scrutiny, the severest examination. Her father was a colonel in the army; her mother a Miss Vipont, a member of an old county family. It is from her she inherits her fortune."

"As all you know about her is favourable, perhaps you will further enlighten me about myself."

"I can only tell you what I have told you before. You bear the name of Philip Norris. Your father is a rich man, and a man of peculiar temperament, habits, and views. Wait until his return."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," I said, angrily. "I suppose he can afford to allow me an income if I married?"

"Yes; if he chose, he could well afford it."

"Then I shall write to Melbourne—he must go there at some time—on the chance of his getting the letter. I shall tell him I am engaged to Miss Neville, and upon his return I hope that he will let me arrange for a speedy marriage."

"Quite right," said Mr. Grace, "that is the proper course."

"Meanwhile," I continued, "as I intend going to Cheltenham to see her guardian to-morrow, I must be able to answer those questions he will naturally ask."

"Naturally he will ask questions if he is a careful man," said Mr. Grace.

"Well, Mr. Grace, as you will not give me any more information I suppose I may refer him to you for an answer."

"Certainly not, Mr. Philip; or I qualify my refusal by saying I can answer no questions. If Mr. Norris, your father, has not told you the extent of his means, and what he purposes to do for you, I can only conclude he has some object for concealment, and I, as his legal adviser, will give no man any hint of his affairs. He is the proper person to refer an inquirer to. In fact, my dear young sir, I decline to be mixed up in the matter. Refer him to the proper person, your father."

My whole interview with Mr. Grace was most unsatisfactory. I departed in great dudgeon, feeling I was an ill-used man, and more and more uneasy as to the result of my impending meeting

with the general. Somehow the impression was growing upon me that there was some sort of a mystery connected with my life, and eager as I was to sweep it away, at times I trembled at what revelations might come to light. But I would not go on like this. Even at the risk of offending my father I would ascertain something definite as soon as we met again.

I wrote three letters, each a counterpart of the other, saying in sensible and unmistakable terms that I had met with my future wife. I used no exaggerated forms of praise. I penned no rapturous descriptions of her charms, but endeavoured to show beyond doubt that my happiness was at stake in the matter. These letters I posted to three places which were on my list as likely ones for letters to reach the traveller. But I found afterwards it was trouble wasted, as his erratic movements left them uncalled for and undelivered. Having eased my mind by this proceeding, I nerved myself for the General.

Down to Cheltenham I went the next morning. During the journey I thought over the best way of opening operations, and concocted dignified yet amatory sentences suitable to the occasion. General Gore was the foe's name. I had often

jested with Claudine about the appropriateness of this surname to an officer who had seen such a lot of fighting. Now I wished it was a less bloodthirsty sort of a patronymic—it sounded very terrible and murderous. I tried to remember what Claudine had said about him, but could only call to mind a way he had, according to her description, of shaking his cane at hotel-waiters and cabmen, which sometimes led to uncomfortable scenes. Evidently he was a dreadful old man. Then I racked my brain to recall what service he had been such a distinguished member of. Was he an old Indian? If so I must not call too early. Old Indians are peculiarly yellow and cantankerous in the morning. Their much abused and rebellious livers are up in arms until they are soothed or crushed by mulligatawny, curries, and chilis. Yes, he was an Indian. I remembered that Claudine wore on her watch-chain a curious oval coin he had given her. So after dinner was the hour. No, there is a meal they love better than dinner, a meal they call "tiffin." Between two and three will I beard this choleric old guardian. This I decided fully by the time I reached Cheltenham.

I walked about the fashionable watering-place,

saw, in an absent careless way, the lions I could discover; lunched frugally at the "Plough," and timed myself to arrive at General Gore's at half-past two.

I was shown into a drawing-room, and from the fact that every window was shut, and from an odour of sandal-wood which stole from a variety of carved knick-knacks scattered about, I knew I had guessed correctly when I said the General was Indian. In a few minutes he made his appearance.

The first thing that struck everybody in General Gore's appearance was his spectacles; for a time it was impossible to go further, the glasses were the most convex I ever saw. With the snatching of science I had acquired, I began calculating in how many seconds the sun's rays focused through them would fuse iron. His eyes, or the parts of his eyes you could see through the magnifying medium, looked so large that if any recollections of childhood's tales are floating about in a man's mind they must crystallize round Andersen's magic tinder-box and compare the General with the dog who brought the copper. If the circle could be seen complete it would be as large as a tea-cup. Between such spectacles,

and a dog with a string, there can be but a step; yet the General supplemented them with a double eye-glass which he held, as the law of optics taught him, midway between these terrific convexities and my visiting-card. My heart sank as I realized that all advantages of personal appearance would be nullified by his infirmity. He was a terrible old man! His face showed he had no liver, and my instinct told me he had no heart. A tall, weather-beaten old man, with an aquiline nose, bushy eyebrows, and a most determined-looking mouth and chin, with the sternness of an old soldier and the precision of a martinet. Oh Claudine! Claudine! this is too much.

"Mr. Philip Norris, Jermyn Street, as I read it," he said, raising his eyes and their accompaniments from my card.

I bowed. If he had chosen to read "Mr. Peter Nokes, St. Giles'," I should not have ventured to contradict him.

"One of the Hampshire Norrises," he continued.

"No," I said; "my family live in Devonshire."

"Norris is not a Devonshire name," said the General severely. "Now, sir, what is your pleasure with me?"

The General's enormously magnified eyes looked at me in such a searching manner that I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"I have been spending the last fortnight at Lady Estmere's with Miss Neville—your ward, I believe, sir."

"She is my ward, sir. Do you bring a message from her?"

"Not exactly a message. I should perhaps call it a communication," I replied, attempting to smile in spite of the General's dazzling eyes. "In fact, General Gore, we have seen a great deal of each other, and I have called to speak to you upon a matter in which my happiness—indeed, I believe I may say her happiness—is concerned."

The General rose and deliberately rang the bell. I was aghast. Surely he could not be going to order me out of the house without even hearing what I had to say.

"Excuse me, General Gore," I began, "I was going to tell you—"

"I know exactly, sir, what you are going to tell me. I have heard the same on several occasions. Thompson"—to a man-servant who ap-

peared in answer to his summons—"tell Miss Gore I want her at once.

"I know so little about headstrong girls and their ways that I am always guided in these matters by a woman. Selina, this is Mr. Norris—a Devonshire Norris, not Hampshire, he informs me. He calls with some request respecting Claudine. I have sent for you to hear him. My sister, Miss Gore, Mr. Norris."

The lady who obeyed his summons so readily was not unlike her brother in appearance, but her face bore a kinder expression, and her spectacles were not so obtrusive. Altogether I was not sorry at her advent. She bowed and seated herself.

"Now," said the General, "you can recommence—Sister Selina."

"I have little to say," I began, "except that having been thrown a great deal in Miss Neville's society I have learned to love her dearly, and I am proud to say she returns my love. We both thought it right that you, her guardian, should be at once made acquainted with our intentions, and I trust you will give your approval."

I spoke earnestly, and fancied that Selina looked appreciative and sympathetic. A woman

is always a woman, at least even if she be fifty-five and a spinster, and with a terrible old retired General for a brother. I hoped——

"Is that all you have to say?" asked the General.

"Yes, sir, I think that is all; I must leave you to say the rest."

"You are sure there is nothing else?" and as he spoke his dreadful eyes transfixed me.

"Nothing, except to repeat that I will do all in my power to make her happy."

"Very well, sir, then it is now my turn. I shall ask you a series of questions which you will be good enough to reply to. As you answer them so our decision may be soon arrived at. Selina, listen carefully."

I felt horribly foolish, and like a criminal before a judge.

"Is your father alive, and if so, what is his profession or means?"

"He is a man of property—large property, I believe."

"And your mother?"

"She has been dead many years."

"What was her name?"

"I never knew her maiden name," and I

blushed as I saw the General look astonished at my answer.

"What is your profession?"

"I am studying for the bar."

"What do you live upon now? Have you money?"

"Only what my father allows me."

"How much is that?"

"There is no specified sum. I draw all I want."

"Then at his pleasure he might withdraw it, and leave you penniless."

"Yes, I suppose so." I was getting annoyed at these searching and mercenary inquiries.

"Where does your father live? In Devonshire, did you say?"

"Yes," I answered sullenly.

"Has he a large estate there?"

"He has a house there."

"Then of what does this large property consist?" The General's accent was getting more and more alarming, it was sarcastic now.

"I don't know," I answered sharply.

"Where can I write to your father?"

"He is on the other side of the world now—he will not be back for a year—but I do not

want to marry Claudine at once," I continued; "I will wait until his return. All we want now is your consent to our engagement. Are there any more questions you wish me to answer?"

"None at all, thank you," replied the General, "I am quite satisfied." By the way in which he spoke I knew that all hope of General Gore's consent was at an end. I had been fuming mentally during the whole inquiry—I was annoyed at my undignified position and inability to answer his queries in a more satisfactory manner. I thought I might as well perish gloriously, so I rose and made him a bow, and copied, as far as I could remember, his own words.

"You are sure there is nothing else, General Gore?"

"Nothing else, sir."

"If you would care to know my height, it is five feet ten, my weight eleven stone six; I have been vaccinated, and, I believe, baptized, and my health is remarkably good. Perhaps now you will give me your answer."

The General was bristling in his wrath. "If I had you in the army I'd flog you as an answer —yes, Selina, I will be calm—I am calm. Now, sir, listen before I ring for you to be shown out.

My ward, Miss Neville, will in twelve months' time succeed to a fortune of eleven hundred pounds a year. She is well born, beautiful, and accomplished. And in exchange for all this you offer yourself. A young man going to be a barrister, named Norris; but what family of Norris no one knows. You say you have a rich father in the Antipodes, or somewhere, if you ever had a father at all. You don't know who your mother was, if you ever had a mother, and you have no means. And moreover, sir, you insult me. It is my belief, sir, you are an adventurer, and as long as I have authority over Miss Neville, she shall neither see nor correspond with you. Good morning, sir."

"I am not an adventurer, General Gore," I answered quietly, for I knew I was in the wrong, and had brought this storm on my own head. "I should be sorry for you to fall into that error. Will you write to Lady Estmere and to Lord Rothwell? They will undeceive you on that score. I am sorry also that Claudine and I must correspond and see each other against your wish. Good morning."

For he had rung the bell and the servant had opened the door. I departed without further dis-

cussion. Miss Gore was shaking her head sadly, and the last glare of the General's spectacles was so overpowering that the broad sunshine outside seemed twilight in comparison.

I returned to London as soon as I could, and wrote a long account of the interview to Claudine. It was half-penitent, half-indignant, but as far as she was concerned wholly affectionate. We could survive a year of separation, although I had little fear but that we might occasionally see one another, and letters could often pass.

Valentine was highly amused at my failure. "How glad I am I never faced the ordeal," he said. "If I had gone through what you have, I must have kept Claudine as payment. But old Gore isn't such a bad sort when you come to know him. He rules his household with a rod of iron or a rattan. He didn't shake his cane at you, did he, Philip?"

"Not quite so bad as that."

"He's very fond of Claudine. I dare say she'll make it all right; if not, you must wait until this mysterious father of yours comes back again, or until Claudine is of age, when you can set fate and Major-generals at defiance. Don't forget in

your love affairs that we start on our walk the day after to-morrow."

Although Valentine and I laughed at my misadventure, although Claudine wrote a consoling letter at once, every word of which implied love and earnestness, I was much vexed and annoyed. My ignorance of my family belongings was becoming unbearable; whether the history of my people, whoever they might be, was good, bad, or indifferent, I wanted to know it. On reflection, I could not blame the General so much after all. If I knew nothing about my own affairs how could I expect him to take me upon trust. Yet I was helpless until my father returned from his wanderings.

But Claudine would trust me; Claudine would be true, and let the station to which I rightly belonged be high or low, Claudine would yet be mine; so in spite of annoyances life was full of brightness.

And I was not the only person who had something to annoy him. Valentine, with all his gay exterior and happy manner, at times grew quiet and thoughtful when talking to me, and I knew he was thinking of his mother and the stain on her fair fame. For I had found by this time that

it was generally known: the facts of the case most people were ignorant of, but all knew that Lady Estmere had not seen her husband for years, and, with a few exceptions, the world looked upon her as a woman who had sinned in her time. At any rate, her husband, Sir Laurence, had left her, so there must be something wrong. Yet she lived her sweet, quiet, but as it seemed sad life, and no one who knew her as I did, or loved her as I was learning to love her, could bring himself to think of Lady Estmere as aught but what was good and true in woman. But Valentine felt the slander, the apparently uncontradicted slander, keenly. He spoke to me about it, for he guessed I must have heard the tale by now. He knew no more of his mother's history than Lord Rothwell did; but he asserted she was the victim of some dreadful mistake or delusion on the part of his father. So many years had passed that he feared it would never be set right.

"Why not find your father and hear his version?" I asked.

"I would," said Valentine, "but I don't know where to look for him; no one knows. He has disappeared for years and years; all we know is that he is alive; Rothwell told me he had seen

him once since—somewhere abroad, I think—but he found him with his hallucination stronger than ever; it was hopeless he said. I believe he must be in a lunatic asylum now."

"What about your elder brother?"

"I don't know, and I don't care, he is two years older than I am; and a fellow who would never come and see his mother—even if all had been true—must be a cur. I never want to see him."

"Does Lady Estmere never see him?"

"She has never seen him since she parted with my father; she grieved deeply for years, and was always talking to me about the brother I should see some day; now she never mentions his name."

"But she must wish to see her eldest son?"

"I don't know. My mother is very proud, and she thinks he has reached man's estate now, and is his own master. He knows where to find me, for I have not hidden myself; I can face the world in spite of all the slander. But he does not come to see me, so he believes the lie his father has told him. Better we should never meet than he should be ashamed of me."

"It is very sad, very sad, Valentine," I said, impulsively, clasping his hand; "you know that I

honour your mother as much as you and Rothwell do; you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you, Philip, or we should not be friends a day longer; and as for Claudine, she would spurn you."

Although Valentine talked to me freely about the unexplained circumstances connected with his mother, he never mentioned Chesham's name or the cruel assertion he had made in my room. He felt such a lie was beneath his contempt, and with Lady Estmere before my eyes I agreed with him. I rather dreaded the form Chesham's promised vengeance might take, for I surmised that the knock-down blow would neither be forgiven nor forgotten. We saw him still at the Juveniles. Valentine was too haughty to keep away from his chosen resorts on account of his enemy. The men took no notice of each other; indeed, it was but once or twice they met before we started on our expedition. I felt compelled to bow coldly to the man, or he would have attributed absence of all recognition to ill-feeling caused by my losses, for I soon knew that my folly had been whispered about.

But all these matters must wait. Valentine and I start the day after to-morrow. We are

going to North Wales, and shall get gradually, either walking or in some quicker way, to Derbyshire, somewhere in the north of which county is Lord Rothwell's place, and where we are due not later than August 31.

CHAPTER XII.

A DESERTED HOME.

THE weather was glorious when we left London. We decided to go to Llandudno by rail, and start from there on our easy journey to Lord Rothwell's. Our guns and heavy baggage we despatched to await our arrival, and contented ourselves with a knapsack apiece, Valentine only adding a colour-box and sketching-book. He had been over the ground before, but was quite willing to see its beauties again. We started in high spirits, resolved to do exactly as we thought fit—to walk, ride, saunter, or stay in one place as the mood took us. Valentine was radiant, both in apparel and spirits, and I was as happy as I could be without Claudine. The days passed rapidly and pleasantly. We steamed through the Menai Straits, we explored Conway, we lingered about Bettws-y-coed, and we drove round Snowdon, raved at the effects of light and shade in the Nant Françon Pass with its purple slate quarries, dreamed some

time at Capel Curig, and then started to make easy stages across Denbigh, Flint, and Cheshire until we reached our ultimate destination. Some days we walked, some days we drove. We were neither of us enthusiastic pedestrians, so felt no shame in chartering a conveyance when we could find one, and throwing our knapsacks under the seat, jogging along comfortably to our next resting-place for the night.

It was the 13th of August. Time was running short, but we had not much further to go, so, the morning being fine, we decided to walk that day, or part of the day. If we changed our minds we trusted to getting a vehicle of some sort from a farmhouse or village on the road. We were now almost on the borders of Derbyshire. The road was good, and the country round about smiling. Harvesting was in full swing, and every one we met looked merry, contented, and busy. Valentine was in the highest spirits. He trolled out snatches of songs as we walked, regardless of the passers-by or the reapers at work across the hedge, who paused in astonishment and admiration as his gay voice carried the liveliest numbers of the liveliest operas to their untutored ears. We strode along at some three and a half miles an

hour, stoppages excluded, for Valentine was always stopping, now to gather a flower, now to admire a bit of landscape, and even once or twice to sketch with rapid fingers some unusually pretty country child we chanced to meet, whose elder sister or mother, as the case might be, stood by us and gazed open-mouthed at the operation. As he sketched he always talked to the child's companion, and finished by sending her away with a smile of content and pleasure on her face, for never did the boy deserve my title of "Child of the Sun" better than when he talked to humble members of society. He must have felt interested in them, or he never could have designed the questions he put to them about their families, belongings, income, mode of living, and other domestic topics. I expect they talked for days afterwards of the young gentleman with the bright hair and eyes, and whose fingers flashed with shining gems.

We had walked some hours, and were beginning to think of a halt, when we came to a park-wall which bounded one side of the road, and hid all prospects in that direction from us. We walked on for the best part of a mile, and still that wall was on our right land. As a wall

it was well enough, but as a companion monotonous. We grew very tired of it, and inveighed in terms that savoured of Radicalism against the selfishness and injustice of landed magnates in shutting so much of the earth away from the public gaze. We felt an immense respect for the owner of such a wall, but we blamed him soundly. By the time we reached a lodge, which broke the dreary uniformity of the stone obstacle, we were curious as to the place it had hidden so long from our eyes. The lodge was an ordinary stone-built affair, such as forms the entrance to many grand houses. An old man in his shirt-sleeves was languidly digging in the garden that surrounded it. Valentine hailed him. The old fellow stuck his spade into the ground, left it there, and came down to the gate. Even his surly countenance relaxed as Valentine stood smiling before him.

"So sorry to trouble you," he said, "but tell me who lives here?"

"Nobody aint lived here for many a year," answered the labourer.

"Worse and worse," said Valentine, turning to me, "an absentee. I shall turn communist.

Can we go over the place?" he asked of the old man.

"Nobody goes over this place, they don't."

"Not even one of those great sirs who give up their parks a dozen times a year to let the people breathe," said Valentine for my benefit. "But we can come inside and look round, I suppose?"

"Not as I know of," answered the son of toil.

"I wonder if half a crown would make you change your views on the subject."

The old fellow held out his hand. "The gate aint locked," he said, "and I am hard of hearing. I sha'n't stop you if you like to come in." He pocketed the coin, went back to his spade, and turning his back to us dug away as before.

Valentine laid his hand on the handle, but I held back. "I hate going into places where I've no right," I said.

"So do I, but somehow I have taken a fancy to look at this particular place. Let us be Cockneys for once, and hold nothing sacred. A park-wall which, judging from the portion we have seen, must be some miles in extent, is worth looking at from the park side. Then I never waste

money, and want the value of that half-crown. Come along."

And together we passed through the gate and walked up the winding road to the house we saw in the distance.

It was a lovely place—a place to make the best regulated mind feel envious. Acres and acres of undulating sward, spotted here and there with clumps of fine old elms. But sheep were grazing all over, and even at the distance away we were we could see that all the windows of the large house were sightless with closed shutters.

"Let us walk across and see how far the park extends," I said.

"No," said Valentine, "I want to see the house. The inside if possible, anyway the outside."

So we walked up to the house. It was a large pile of buildings, a part evidently very old. Apparently it had been added to at different periods. It was a low house with a long front. A terrace ran the whole length. A tower, scarcely an ornament, rose from the right, and no doubt commanded fine views of the country round. Except the park, which was evidently used as

farm land, there was a neglected look about the whole place, and with the closed shutters and deserted appearance the house presented I should have thought it uninhabited had I not seen a thin stream of smoke arising from one of the back chimneys.

"Who does it belong to, I wonder?" I said.

"Can't tell," answered Valentine. "In Chancery, I should say. Some of your beastly lawyer's work, Philip. Look at the marble pots on the terrace, without a flower in them for years."

Just then a figure emerged from the back of the house. It looked like that of a middle-aged woman attired in sombre garments. She came towards us.

"Now we shall find out who is the happy or unhappy owner," said Valentine. "The genius of the place is approaching."

"Most likely we shall be ordered out of the place as two intruding excursionists. What with your rings and wonderful appearance altogether, there is no knowing what we may be taken for."

"Never fear, Philip. I have a way; mark the ultimate result, Philip. I have a way with people."

His way was a cunning one. The lady ap-

proached us. Then she was a lady no longer. A good homely sort of a body, housekeeper or something. But Valentine ignored this. He raised his hat and apologized most gracefully for our intrusion. We had passed that way, the gate was open, so we had taken advantage. The house being shut as it seemed had given us the idea that the family were from home. We had ventured nearer to look at such an interesting old building. Had we known we were disturbing the privacy of one of the ladies of the house nothing would have induced us, &c. &c. I suppose nothing would have been more unlikely than one of the ladies of such a house as that we stood before appearing in her own person to chase a couple of intruders, or that an ordinary creature like the one before us could possibly be a lady of the house. No one knew this better than Valentine, but he knew that the apparent mistake would not be unpleasant; that no servant lives who does not feel a glow of satisfaction at being taken for her mistress. Not servants only. I remember a waiter at a seaside hotel telling me he had made about fifty pounds a year more than his companions from a habit he had of calling all commercial travellers, clerks, and young men

generally who were spending their holidays at his hotel captain or colonel as most befitting their age.

The lady in black was mollified. "These are private grounds," she said, "but you are at liberty to walk round if you please, although there is not much to see."

"But the house must be most interesting. May we not go over it?"

"Impossible, gentlemen. It has been shut up for years. No one is allowed inside."

"That makes us all the more anxious," said Valentine with a smile. "Could you not strain a point in our favour? We are friends of Lord Rothwell, whose name I dare say you know about these parts."

The housekeeper curtseyed at the name. "Yes, I know his lordship well. I have known him for years. Has he returned from his travels?"

"Yes, we are due at Mirfield to-morrow. Now, will you show us over the house?"

"I would oblige you if I could, but my orders are so strict, gentlemen. Please walk through the grounds and gardens. They used to be very fine when they were properly kept, but now there is little to see."

Valentine tried further persuasion, but the guardian of the deserted castle was inexorable. Finding his efforts unavailing he laughed pleasantly.

"Then, madame, we must content ourselves with the outdoor beauties. Who did you say owned this place?"

"It is the property of Sir Laurence Estmere," answered the housekeeper, with dignity.

I glanced at Valentine. He had turned white as a sheet, and betrayed such emotion that I hastened to ask question after question in order to distract the attention of the lady in black.

"Does not Sir Laurence live here?" I asked.

"He has not lived here for many years."

"How strange! Such a beautiful place, too. He prefers travelling about, I suppose."

"I suppose he does, sir."

"Is he a young man?"

"A middle-aged man. He must be about fifty by now."

Valentine had recovered his self-possession, and reassumed somewhat of his airy manner. He took my arm. "Let us walk round, Philip," he said. "Thank you for your permission, Mrs. ——"

"My name is Payne, sir," said the housekeeper, seeing he appeared to expect the information.

"I like to know the names of the people I talk to," he said. "Thank you, Mrs. Payne, we will walk round the grounds. Perhaps we shall see you again as we go out."

"I dare say you will, gentlemen," answered Mrs. Payne, with perhaps a dream of gratuity in her head.

Valentine said nothing until we had strolled to some little distance from the house, and had seen Mrs. Payne's sombre figure disappear. Then he turned to me, and, with a bitter accent in his voice, said:—

"No wonder I was drawn to look over this place; I must have been born here, Philip. This is Estmere Court, where, some twenty-five years ago, my mother came, a fair young girl, with every prospect of a happy life before her. This is the house my father left for the sake of some wicked doubt which grew and grew in his brain. He has never been here since. Philip, it is hard, very hard, to come to one's rightful home an entire stranger. Oh, if I could find out the truth of all, and set my mother right in my

father's eyes! If I could find out why he ever doubted her! How strange it is to think that if Sir Laurence Estmere were to meet me now—here in this very place—we should not know we were father and son any more than I knew that this was his home, and, by rights, mine. He must be mad, Philip!"

"Have you ever tried to find him, to see him and convince him of his error?"

"Never—two years ago I swore I would. I went to Rothwell, the only man who could tell me anything about his whereabouts. Rothwell knew why I wanted to know it, and refused to give me any information about him. I pressed him for the reasons for his refusal, and when he told me at last, I felt I hated my father, and cared little whether I ever met him."

"What were his reasons?"

"You are the only man I could tell, Philip; and only you, because you believe in my mother's innocence. Rothwell told me that assuredly Sir Laurence Estmere would revile me, chase me from his presence—would curse me and bid me begone, would say in fact what that villain Chesham hinted at in your rooms that night."

We had now walked down to a clump of trees which concealed us from every one's view. I took Valentine's hand and pressed it; he returned my grasp.

"It is all a lie; told by that devil and used by his master's angels to wreck two, or it may some day be three, of the noblest lives in Christendom. For I have heard of my father, Philip. My mother talks to me about him at times. Rothwell has told me about him. He was a young man before this wicked slander crept into his brain and warped it, one of the noblest of his time, now he is a wanderer on the face of the earth, and my mother's life has been sadness and shame. Oh Philip! the kindest prayer I could offer for my father, is that he may never know the truth."

"Does your mother ever hear of him, even indirectly? Are there no money affairs between them?"

"Money from him! No, my mother would have starved rather than take a penny from the man, the husband, who thought that she could wrong him. No doubt he offered money, and that offer was rejected with scorn. She had her

fortune which was settled on herself, so had no need to stoop, if she could have done so, to take money from Sir Laurence Estmere."

We walked on from point to point in silence, pausing now and then to look at the fine expanse of park. If Sir Laurence's estate could be measured by the park he must be a wealthy man. I pitied Valentine from my heart, and wondered how I should feel under the like circumstances. A stranger on my father's land, and disowned and repudiated by him.

"And this," said Valentine, with biting scorn, "will all be my brother's one day. That cur of a brother whom I have never seen; who has never seen or written to his mother! At least he can have no doubt as to his parentage," he added, bitterly.

We walked across the park and into the neglected gardens. There were vases in which no flowers had grown for years; moss and lichen hiding and staining what had once been white marble; fountains that never played, and fish-ponds without fish. It was a miserable, unhappy-looking place to any one, and much more so to one who knew the reason of its neglect and

decay. We studied the house from all points of view.

"I must—I will go over it," said Valentine; "let us find Mrs. Payne again, and make another effort; she looked a good-tempered woman."

Mrs. Payne, who had probably been on the look-out for us, again appeared. We praised the park and condoled with her on the terrible state the gardens were in. Again and again we urged our request to walk through the house. Valentine pleaded, flattered, and made skilful use of Lord Rothwell's name, for we knew by some remarks she made that he stood high in her esteem. I threw out delicate hints of pecuniary benefit which might accrue to her, and presently we saw signs of surrender.

"I don't think I can," she said doubtfully; "you see my husband is away—gone to Flatcham market; he would be so vexed with me if he knew it."

"But we only want to walk through the rooms, Mrs. Payne."

"There really is nothing to see, gentlemen. The furniture is all covered up, the china and ornaments all mostly locked away. I don't think

I could open the shutters to give you light enough."

"Oh, we'll open the shutters," said Valentine. "Now, Mrs. Payne, come along, there's a dear lady, and I'll send you a black silk dress from London, and I'll give you a kiss when we leave if your husband hasn't come back from market."

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Payne, laughing; "I haven't had such a thing as that said to me for years and years. You are the most persistent young gentleman I ever saw."

"I am; I am noted for it, Mrs. Payne. I always get my own way. Come along, lead the way; through the back door, I suppose. I feel as though you were quite an old friend of mine, Mrs. Payne. After we have looked at the house you shall make us some tea. Come along, it's all settled now; a black silk dress any way, and a kiss, if you like."

Mrs. Payne was conquered. She turned and led the way to the back of the house. We followed her through a yard which led to the servants' quarters. She opened a stout iron clamped door, and Valentine Estmere stood within the walls, or rather the kitchen walls, of his ancestors.

It was a sorry entrance for a child of the house.

Along darkened stone passages, which seemed interminable and intricate, we followed our guide —past doors that had not been opened for years. Our foot-falls rang through the silence of the house. Then through a wooden door, with a faded baize one next to it, and we stood in the large hall of Estmere Court. As we followed Mrs. Payne, Valentine whispered to me, "Find out if she has been long in the family. I will make some excuse by-and-by. Say I want to rest or something; then talk to her alone, and learn all you can. This visit may be fatality, Philip."

The hall was a dreary place, it was spacious and floored with tesselated pavement. The rafters and woodwork were of dark carved oak, looking gloomy and heavy in the dusk. High-backed chairs, spectral and large in their white unshapely bags, were ranged round an oak-table of gigantic dimensions which filled the centre. Various doors opened from the hall into their respective apartments, and from one end of it the grand-staircase started.

Mrs. Payne had resigned herself to our intru-

sion, and was adopting the manner of the regular custodian of show places.

"This, gentlemen, is the large drawing-room," she said rather pompously, throwing open the door and revealing a cavern of darkness into which she plunged boldly. We heard a struggle with a refractory bolt, the swing of a falling bar, a creaking sound, and one of the heavy shutters opened and the darkness became light.

The drawing-room was a lofty and noble apartment, but its furniture, like all the rest, clad in unsightly pinafores, the chandeliers swathed in the same way, hanging like gigantic onions from the ceiling. The carpet rolled up in one corner. Certainly, as our guide warned us, there was not much to see in Estmere Court. Mrs. Payne unveiled the beauties of one or two fine old cabinets for our benefit, and even uncovered partially a chair, that we might form some idea as to the hidden charms of itself and its brethren. There was a musty, close, unwholesome smell about the room, and if, as our informant averred, it was more than twenty years since it had been inhabited, it was not to be wondered at. As with the drawing-room, so with the dining-room, billiard-room, and library, except that in the latter, by lifting up the

winding-sheets which covered the tall oak cases from top to bottom, I could ascertain that a noble library of rare and costly volumes lined its walls.

The dining-room and the picture-gallery contained many fine works of art, and of course the portraits of Valentine's ancestors, handsome, dark-browed men and fair women and dark women. Over these we lingered, reading the names on the frames, or hearing all our voluble conductor could tell us about them. I, who knew nothing of my own lineage, felt a thrill of envy as I listened to her histories of my friend's forbears. But ancestors are little good to any man whilst his most immediate one denies his right to them. Valentine moved from room to room mechanically. He spoke little, and if he laughed at any of Mrs. Payne's remarks his laugh was harsh and forced. Having looked at all the portraits, he said—

"Is there no portrait of Sir Laurence Estmere —the present Sir Laurence?"

"No, sir; none among these."

"But there must be some one, somewhere in the house. Let me see it."

He spoke so peremptorily that the worthy Mrs. Payne looked astonished and annoyed.

"There is a portrait, of course. It is of Sir Laurence and Lady Estmere—Millais painted it soon after their marriage."

"Where is it? Let me see it at once!"

"You cannot see it, sir," answered Mrs. Payne, coldly.

"Mrs. Payne," said Valentine, "listen to me. I will give you fifty pounds—I am not joking—fifty pounds, if you will let me see that picture by Millais. You doubt me? Philip, what money have you?"

I handed him my pocket-book. He took out thirty pounds, then from his own pocket took twenty more.

"There, Mrs. Payne, let me see that picture, and I will give you all that money. It is a large sum for such a little thing, but I don't mind that."

Her face flushed. To a woman in her position it was a great sum of money.

"I can't earn it, sir," she said sorrowfully. "I wish I could."

"It is only to let me look at a picture for five minutes."

"Yes, but I can't get at it."

"Where is it, then? In the house, I suppose?"

"In the strong-room."

"How could a picture get in the strong-room?"

"When Sir Laurence left home last he ordered that picture to be taken down from its place. At first he said it was to be burnt. Then he changed his mind, and ordered it to be put in the strong-room. You see, gentlemen, Sir Laurence went away on account of a misunderstanding with her ladyship. That was why the picture was taken down and locked away."

Valentine saw by her manner it was hopeless, so thrust the bribe back into his pocket.

"Who has the key?" he asked.

"Sir Laurence, I expect; I never heard. But why are you so anxious to see it?" she asked, almost suspiciously.

"Don't ask me, there's a dear, good woman. You may know some day!"

"If you want to see a likeness of her ladyship I could show you a little drawing—her ladyship and the children."

"Yes, let me see it!" said Valentine eagerly.

Mrs. Payne left us, and in a minute returned

with a small framed drawing. "Sir Laurence forgot about it, I suppose," she said, as she cleared the dust from the glass. It was but a sketch, but drawn by a master, probably Millais; perhaps a preparatory sketch for the larger work. It was Lady Estmere, a girl and a young wife at twenty-one. Just as I had always imagined she must have looked! Her hair, bright golden, and a look of joy and sweetness of life in her whole bearing. Who, save a madman, could have associated her with sin! She held a baby in her arms, and a dark-eyed chubby boy was leaning on her knee. There was a bitter smile on Valentine's face as he pointed with his jewelled finger to the infant in her arms—himself!

We both looked long and earnestly at this sketch, but made no remark. It was Sir Laurence's likeness we wanted to see. Mrs. Payne seemed surprised at the little interest the picture excited. When we returned it to her, she laid it down on some piece of furniture. "They were two beautiful boys," she said. "I wonder when I shall see either of them again?"

"Have you been long in Sir Laurence's service?" asked Valentine.

"I began as a girl of fourteen. That's a long time ago," said Mrs. Payne, with the usual sigh at the flight of time.

Valentine drew me aside to look at a picture. "She must know all," he said. "See her alone, and ask her. I cannot trust myself."

"Would you like to see the upper rooms and the tower?" asked Mrs. Payne. "You may as well see everything now."

"I don't care much about it," answered Valentine. "I dare say my friend would. I will stop here and rest, I am rather tired."

Mrs. Payne looked doubtful.

"I sha'n't steal anything, although I wanted to get into the strong-room just now. You would like to go up-stairs, Philip?"

"Very much," I replied, "if Mrs. Payne will trust you here alone."

"I want to study those two Dutch pictures, and look at the portraits again. I am an artist, you know, Mrs. Payne!"

"Indeed, sir. Well, I fancied you must be something of the kind!" No doubt she attributed Valentine's eccentric behaviour to the fact of his being an artist, and thought she might venture to

leave him alone. "Please follow me, sir," she said, and we went up the grand staircase together to the first floor, which contained the principal bed-rooms.

CHAPTER XIII.

THROUGH GOOD AND EVIL REPORT.

THERE was little in the up-stair rooms of Estmere Court to attract attention. Except for the fine view they commanded over park and country round they were without particular interest. But I lingered in them, as I wanted to extract what information I could from Mrs. Payne. It was my first attempt at cross-examination.

"Sir Laurence is separated from his wife, you say?" I commenced.

"Yes, sir."

"Lady Estmere must have been very beautiful when that portrait was taken. Have you ever seen her?"

"I was in Sir Laurence's service when he married, so of course I have seen her."

"Who was to blame for the unfortunate disagreement, Mrs. Payne?"

She pursed up her lips. "You are very in-

quisitive, sir, for a stranger. Old servants never pass opinions about their masters' business."

"Quite right," I said; "but I feel so interested after seeing that picture of Lady Estmere and her children—besides, I have heard Lord Rothwell speak of them."

"Then, sir, you had better ask his lordship what you want to know. Would you like to go up to the tower, or shall we return to the young gentleman, your friend?"

"One moment, Mrs. Payne. Lord Rothwell cannot know what you know about it at all. I should like to hear your account of it."

"It can be no business of yours, sir. This is the way down."

Mrs. Payne was immovable, so I determined on a bold stroke.

"Did you like Lady Estmere?" I asked.

"Her ladyship was loved by every one; she was the kindest and best of mistresses."

"Then I may tell you, to account for my questions, that she is a dear friend of mine. I saw her in London a few days ago."

Mrs. Payne looked at me with more interest than she had hitherto displayed.

"Indeed, sir, and how is her ladyship?—how is she looking?"

"She must have changed greatly, but is still very beautiful. Her hair is as white as snow."

"Poor lady! When you see her again will you give her my respects? Hannah Jones I was then. She will remember me by that name."

"I will. And now, Mrs. Payne, tell me something more about her and Sir Laurence."

"There is little to tell, sir."

"That gentleman down-stairs is her youngest son—so you see I am not asking from idle curiosity."

"Oh, sir! that Master Valentine! No wonder he was so pressing to see Sir Laurence's picture. Poor young gentleman! Poor Lady Estmere! If she sinned, she has suffered for it."

"But did she sin, Mrs. Payne? Was it not all a fatal mistake?"

Mrs. Payne shook her head sadly.

"Tell me all you know," I urged. "Those who know Lady Estmere can never believe the slander. You who were with her at the time can tell where the fault lay."

"Better let sleeping dogs lie," said Mrs. Payne sadly.

"No, let us know the truth, as far as you can tell it, once and for all. You loved her—tell me for the sake of her son. Tell me the exact facts."

"I would much rather not, sir."

"Tell me, bad or good; we must know, or how can we prove it a lie? Who were the slanderous tongues that poisoned Sir Laurence's mind?"

"Oh, sir! it was not what people said—no one ever breathed a word against her till that moment. It was what Sir Laurence saw himself. He was too noble to listen, even if people had brought him tales. Oh, how could she? how could she? I never would have believed it. But he saw it."

Mrs. Payne was weeping bitterly.

"He fancied he saw whatever aroused his suspicions, that is what you mean, Mrs. Payne."

"No; he saw it, and I saw it too. Oh, why was I ever there! If I had not been there that night, I could believe, as you believe, that her ladyship is a cruelly wronged woman. If he had not seen, I could have fancied I was dreaming, but we could not both have dreamt it."

She was much agitated, so I begged her to sit down.

"You have told me too much, yet not enough," I said. "Now collect yourself, and tell me everything that occurred."

"I will, sir. But don't judge her harshly—perhaps she meant no harm. They were old lovers, I believe—perhaps she still loved him, yet never meant to wrong Sir Laurence. But Sir Laurence was a proud man, and a severe man, and never forgave deceptions."

She rambled on a little longer. I said nothing, but waited for the thread of the story. I was very sad; it was so clear that Mrs. Payne believed in Lady Estmere's guilt. If I wavered for a moment in my faith, the thought of her sweet refined face, with its true sad eyes, rose before me, and I was steadfast again.

"Oh, it was a dreadful thing, sir; death would have been nothing to it. Till my last day I shall never forget Sir Laurence's face that night, when he found the wife he loved was false to him. But I must tell you how it all happened, or you will not understand. They were staying then at the Dower House, a little place belonging to Sir Laurence, about twenty miles from here. It is a

sweet little house, a mere cottage compared to this, but they were so fond of each other that I think they loved it better than Estmere Court. For the most part they were alone there, whilst here there were nearly always visitors coming and going. They fancied the air at the Dower House was better for the children than at Estmere Court, so they would go there and stay for weeks together. Master Laurence, the heir, was about three years old, and Master Valentine a baby in arms. I was under-nursemaid then, and a giddy girl enough, but I was fond of the children and her ladyship. There was a cousin of her ladyship's used to come on visits, both at the big house and the little one. He was a fair man and in the army. People said that at one time he had been engaged to Lady Estmere."

"That was Chesham, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. Chesham was his name. A pleasant-spoken man enough when it suited him, but a bad man. Servants find out a man's true character long before their masters and mistresses do, and we all knew he was a wicked fellow. To Sir Laurence and to Lady Estmere he was as mild and sweet as he could be, but I have seen him watching them both with the devil looking

out of his eyes, and his teeth set against each other. He must have been good company, I suppose, for he often stayed with them, and at this time was at the Dower House. One day Sir Laurence was obliged to go over to the Court on some business. He started in the morning, intending to sleep there and return the next day. The children were brought down to wish him good-bye, and see him ride off. He kissed them and Lady Estmere, and away he went, as proud and gallant a gentleman as ever crossed a horse.

"I am almost ashamed to tell you, sir, but, you see, girls and boys will be girls and boys. There was a young man—he has been my husband now for nearly twenty years—who was looking after me. He lived in a small house on the Dower Estate, and his father farmed it for Sir Laurence. I had promised to meet him that night, if I could manage it, in the garden, so about half-past ten I slipped out. The children were fast asleep, and Lady Estmere had gone to her room. It was in the front of the house, and Sir Laurence's dressing-room adjoined it. A carriage-drive, with shrubberies each side, led to the house. The stables were some distance off. Well, I met John, and talked to him for about

half-an-hour, then wished him good-night. He did not go out by the carriage-drive, but from the side of the garden, a short cut to his house. I came back again, after seeing him go off. When I got to the front of the house, I heard footsteps coming down the drive—a man's footsteps. I was afraid it was Captain Chesham, so hid myself in the shrubs until he should pass by. But it was not the Captain—it was Sir Laurence. He had come back, instead of sleeping at the Court. He must have left his horse at the stables and walked from there to the house. The moon was shining, so I could see him plainly. I was afraid of being caught, so I glanced at the house to see it I could venture to make a run for it before he passed me. There was a light burning in Sir Laurence's dressing-room, the blind was up, and standing in the full light, visible to every one outside, were Lady Estmere and Captain Chesham. Oh, sir! if I had not seen it myself I would never have believed it."

And Mrs. Payne quite sobbed. I said nothing, I felt so bewildered at this direct and unwilling testimony.

"Her face was hidden on his shoulder, sir—her back turned to the window—her arms were

round him and his arms round her, and he was kissing her forehead. I would have screamed to warn them, but I seemed deprived of my senses for a minute, and then it was too late. Sir Laurence passed me, and saw what I saw. Oh! I pray I shall never see a face change as his face changed in a moment! All the life and brightness faded from it. It became stone, and the look in his eyes was awful. He stood watching them for at least five minutes. Had that villain Chesham looked our way he must have seen him. His tall figure stood out in the moonlight, and cast a dark shadow on the white road. Yes, he must have stood there for five or ten minutes looking at the lighted window and the figures standing there. Then Lady Estmere left that wicked man, and I saw him take the light in his hand, and in a moment the room grew dark. But outside all was light as day, and Sir Laurence still stood a few paces from me like a statue."

"Oh, Mrs. Payne!" I said vehemently, "you must have been mistaken. It was a servant, not Lady Estmere!"

"I wish I could think so. But it was her ladyship. Her wonderful long golden hair was

streaming down her back. And she wore the dress she wore that evening at dinner. She always dressed in a style of her own, in peculiar colours; and I heard the Captain ask her that day to wear that particular dress in the evening; he said he admired it so. I thought nothing of that; you see, they were cousins and old friends."

It was very sad and distressing; but again I thought of Lady Estmere as I knew her, and Claudine's words, "through good and evil report," came into my mind. Anyway, I must hear all Mrs. Payne had to say.

"What did Sir Laurence do?"

"He seemed to come to life at last. Then he gave a hopeless sort of sigh, but I saw his eyes blazing. He started forward, and I thought that murder would be the end of that night's work. But he seemed to restrain and check himself, and walked up and down in front of the house for at least half-an-hour. I could not take my eyes off his face."

"And then?"

"Then the front door opened, and the Captain came out, and stood in the porch with a lighted cigar in his mouth. I thought—I almost

hoped—Sir Laurence would kill him, but he strode up to him, and looked him in the face—I suppose gentlemen don't rush at each other's throats like common people."

"Why, Estmere, back again already!" said the Captain.

"'You villain! you utter villain!' said Sir Laurence.

"Then I hoped he would have killed him—I would—but he did not. Gentleman can restrain themselves, I suppose. It's in the blood, perhaps."

She paused, probably considering the matter.

"Go on, please," I said. "What next?"

"He knew at once what Sir Laurence meant. 'I can give you the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another,' he said.

"'Yes,' said Sir Laurence, 'I can shoot you through the heart by-and-by; but that is a pitiful satisfaction.'

"'You will hear of me at my club,' said the Captain; 'but remember, Estmere, she was mine long before you came and stole her from me.'

"'Go, at once,' said Sir Laurence, 'or I shall kill you now. Go!' Captain Chesham raised his hat and went away in the moonlight. He must

have walked ten miles to the nearest town. I have never seen him since. After he had disappeared Sir Laurence clenched his fists and went a few steps after him; then he returned, and after walking to and fro some time longer, he threw himself down on a grassy bank, and I heard him sob as I never heard human being sob before. Then I ran into the house and went to bed."

"Is that all you have to tell?"

"All, except that I don't think he entered the house at all that night; he was there in the morning, and the other servants told me afterwards that her ladyship, who was the first to greet him, went to her own room looking as they never saw her look before, and shortly afterwards Sir Laurence ordered the head nurse to get the eldest boy's things ready for a journey, then he drove away with him. The next morning her ladyship and the baby went away by themselves, to London, she said. From that day to this I have never seen either of them. The servants were all paid off, the houses shut up, and my John's father put in charge of the Court. Then I married John, and ten years ago the old man died, and we were told to go on as before, living here and seeing it was kept from harm. I heard that Sir Laurence

did try to shoot Captain Chesham afterwards, but did not quite kill him."

"He lamed him for life, at least."

"Yes, I heard that, and was glad of it, for of all villains that ever lived that Chesham was the worst."

I was much distressed at hearing the good woman's tale. What should I tell Valentine? That Mrs. Payne was speaking in all sincerity, and merely related what she saw or seemed to see, I could not doubt. It was no gossip of the servants' hall she retailed. By chance she had been a witness of what had made Sir Laurence Estmere repudiate his young wife. I questioned her to the best of my ability, but found always the same clear narration of the facts. It was what she had seen herself. There could be no mistake about that. Yet, in spite of this, she spoke in terms of great affection of her late mistress, whom she willingly credited with every other virtue under the sun.

"What other servants were in the house at the time?" I asked.

"There were three maid-servants besides the head nurse and myself, and her ladyship's maid.

It is but a small house, so only a few servants were needed."

"What was her ladyship's maid's name? Can she throw any light on it?"

"Mary Williams was her name. I have not heard anything of her for years—she went to the bad, I think. But she knew nothing about it. No one knew except me. I kept my own counsel, and should never have told you, sir, if you had not pressed so, and said, as Master Valentine's friend, you would know. I have never been a scandal-monger."

"I am sure you have not, Mrs. Payne."

"No, sir; all the servants gossiped, of course, but I told them nothing. You will give my respects to poor Lady Estmere, sir? Hannah Jones, remember."

"But can you believe she forfeited her husband's love and the position she held as his wife for such a wretch as Chesham? You say she was everything that was good."

"So she was, sir. Everything. I could have believed nothing except my own eyes. I have told you what I saw."

"I have reason to believe that Lady Estmere

has never spoken to Chesham since then. That does not look like a mad infatuation."

"No, sir, it doesn't. But the Captain was a wicked, wicked man. Whatever he persuaded her ladyship to was for the sake of revenge, not for love of her."

"Revenge?"

"Yes, because he was engaged to be married to her once. It was all broken off before she met Sir Laurence, yet he revenged himself for it by ruining her. He was a devil! I believe he stood at that window with her, knowing that Sir Laurence might return any moment."

"How could he know that? Was Sir Laurence suspicious?"

"Suspicious! No, sir. He trusted her ladyship entirely until that moment. This is what makes me say it was revenge. A few days afterwards John—my husband now—told me a strange thing, which I have often thought of since. In the morning, when Sir Laurence started, he met John's father about three miles from home. He stopped and asked him something about the farm; then, as he rode off, he called out, 'if you go up to the house tell them I have changed my mind, and shall ride back to-night. I shall be home

about half-past ten or eleven.' The old man was going up to give the message, when he met the Captain. To save his old legs the walk, he told him what Sir Laurence had said about returning, and Chesham promised to make it known at the house. Now, sir, he never said a word of this to any one—certainly not to her ladyship, or she never would have stood at the open window with him just when her husband should return. Yet he knew it, and brought her there for, I believe, the very purpose that Sir Laurence should see them."

"It is impossible; it would be the act of a fiend, not a man!"

"That Chesham was a fiend. Oh, I could tell you things I heard about him afterwards; but it would do no good."

I should have scouted the tale as absurd, had I not remembered the bitter, cold-blooded malignity the man had shown during his interview with Valentine.

"But Sir Laurence should have been told this," I said.

"He was gone, sir. We did not know where to find him. Besides, as far as I could see, it would have done her ladyship no good. It might,

if possible, have made Sir Laurence more bitter against the Captain, but I expect that was not needed, sir."

I was greatly relieved by the last piece of information extracted from Mrs. Payne. Wild as the thought was, it pointed to some diabolic plot on the part of Asmodeus. It was hard to imagine a nature so remorseless or a motive so strong as to have successfully worked out such a scheme. All speculation failed as to surmising how any ingenuity could have made Lady Estmere an unwilling participator in it, but to my mind nothing was so impossible or improbable as the idea of her stooping from her height for the love, the momentary love, of a Captain Chesham. There was something yet to be discovered, and as I rose and followed Mrs. Payne down-stairs, I vowed I would, for Valentine's sake, and for his mother's sake, devote myself to the elucidation of the mystery; and how delighted Claudine would be if, eventually, I discovered the truth!

CHAPTER XIV.

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS.

VALENTINE was waiting for us in the picture-gallery, among the portraits of his ancestors whose acquaintance he made for the first time to-day. He looked at me anxiously, and I fear saw little in my eyes to encourage him. He assumed a gay manner.

"I thought you and Mrs. Payne had eloped," he said. "My friend must have seen every nook and corner in the house, I am sure."

Mrs. Payne smiled, and looked at him with great interest.

"Well, Philip," he said, "we must be off now. Thank you, and good-bye, Mrs. Payne. You will please accept this."

So saying, he offered her a bank-note. She waved it aside.

"Then I shall send you the silk dress from town. I sha'n't forget it. Good-bye."

"There was something else you promised me, sir."

"So there was," said Valentine, really laughing. "To think of a lady being obliged to remind me of such a debt as that."

He leant down and gave her the salute she asked for.

"Ah, Mr. Valentine!" said the good woman, "I have kissed you thousands of times before, when you didn't know it. I was your nurse, sir."

"My friend has told you my name then. I hope you have given him good news for me."

"I am afraid not, sir. But, Mr. Valentine, things may come right for you yet. Sir Laurence may relent, and want to have his youngest son with him."

"If Sir Laurence wished to give me the whole place, and all within and around it, I would never set foot here until he has repaired the cruel wrong he has done my mother."

Valentine spoke fiercely, and poor Mrs. Payne was almost crying. He was longing, no doubt, to hear my news; so our good-byes were cut short, and we stood on the main road, with the gate at which we had entered behind us.

"Now, Philip," he said, "tell me all you have learned. Is it good or bad?"

"It is bad. I had better not tell you."

"You will tell me every word, Philip. That there must have been reason for suspicion as far as appearances went I know, or my father would never have acted as he did. It is where the mistake arose I must find out."

So I told him. I told him all, and was both astonished and glad to find he was not so much affected by the news as I feared he might be. Valentine's faith in his mother was a sacred and beautiful thing.

He laughed scornfully.

"My mother, the Lady Estmere you know, standing at an open window embracing a Captain Chesham! The idea is too absurd, Philip."

"May she not have had some reason for it? They were relations, you know, and Chesham may have been very different when a young man."

"No, Philip, never—had she done so she would have known where the mistake arose and would have set things right. She never knew why my father left her—never."

"She must have heard of the duel."

"Yes, and then understood that Chesham was

in some way mixed up with it. Since then she has never spoken to him."

"Whom could Sir Laurence and Mrs. Payne have seen at the window?"

"I don't know—whoever it was, it was not my mother, Philip," he continued, turning to me almost fiercely. "Do you believe in my mother's innocence—freely and unreservedly?"

"I do—freely and unreservedly," I said, holding out my hand to him.

"It was a plot of that cur," said Valentine; "I will wring the truth out of him some day."

Valentine jumped at the same conclusion as Mrs. Payne, although I had not yet told him about Chesham's concealment of Sir Laurence's expected return. Indeed, I thought it better to say nothing about this until I had taken counsel with Lord Rothwell. If information of any kind could be forced or extracted from Asmodeus, Valentine should be the last person to attempt to obtain it. A knock-down blow scarcely predisposes a man to open his lips and confess his crimes for the benefit of his assailant. I wondered whether upon my return to town I could bring myself to make a show of friendship towards Chesham, and reap any advantage for

Valentine from any casual boast or hint I might hear whilst in conversation. That Chesham spoke freely enough about his exploits I knew, having heard him that evening at the Club. Yet even an assumed appearance of friendship with such a man would be a heavy price to pay for such a slender chance of attaining the end I desired. Any way, I had plenty of time to think the matter over. We should stay some weeks at Mirfield. . . When I returned to London I could make my mind up how to act.

We had spent so much time at Estmere Court that we resolved to put up for the night at the first decent inn we came to. We found the accommodation we needed at the little village we passed through, and in the morning some sort of vehicle—its friends would call it a carriage, its enemies a cart—took us the twenty remaining miles, and deposited us at our ultimate destination.

Its noble owner welcomed us heartily, and apologized laughingly for the defective accommodation of his bachelor establishment.

"I haven't set foot in the place for two years," he said, "although I call it my home. The rooms

in this wing are habitable and fairly comfortable, but I dread to look elsewhere. I let the shooting until this year, but I did not care to have strangers in the house, so it has practically been shut up."

Strange it seemed that two of the best houses in the country-side should for the sake of one woman be deserted. For I knew that his early attachment to Lady Estmere had been the motive which had sent Lord Rothwell wandering through strange countries, and to which the public owed several of the pleasantest books of travel ever written.

Whatever might be the state of the rest of the large house, we had enough snug rooms for our party, which was augmented in the evening by the arrival of my old acquaintance, Mr. Stanton, and our mutual friend, Vigor. I had introduced the latter to Lord Rothwell, and they had become very friendly. Stanton I had not seen since the yachting episode. The new-comers came from London together, strangers when they started, but by some chance occupying the same carriage. Their account of their journey was most amusing, and furnished us with merriment all dinner-time.

"I hate any one in the carriage with me," began Stanton, telling us about it.

"So do I," chimed in Vigor, "I hated you like poison as soon as I saw you."

"I had just settled down, waiting for the train to start, when our energetic friend rushed in, knocking my traps about, and generally disturbing my solitude."

"He put up an infernal eye-glass, looked me up and down, sighed plaintively, and then began reading his paper," complained Vigor; "it was enough to set a man's back up."

"He bounced down on a seat, pulled out a lot of filthy-looking printed matter—proofs you call it—this he began correcting with a stumpy lead pencil, put it into an envelope, and gave it to some one to post at the next station. Then he stretched his long legs out, put his hands in his pockets, and said audibly, 'Laus Deo! my work's over for a month.'"

"He shrugged his shoulders and looked so supercilious and such an ass generally that I studied his appearance and took mental notes of it for a character in a tale I intend writing."

"How long did this pleasant state of things go on?" asked Rothwell.

"Hours by time—hundreds of miles by distance," chuckled Vigor. "I hated a fellow who gave himself such airs, so I persecuted him."

"I tried to shake him off, but he stuck to me like Sinbad's old man," said Stanton.

"Wherever we changed," went on Vigor, "I waited till I saw him get into a carriage—then I followed him like his shadow. He pretended to ignore my presence, but he felt it."

"I did, indeed," sighed Stanton, "I thought you were a reporter to a paper come down to describe a murder."

"I thought until I saw your gun-case you were a haughty commercial traveller, who despised second-class."

"How did it end?" I asked.

"Just about fifty miles from our journey's end, I found to my horror all my cigars were gone. I cherished the end of the last one until it burnt my lips; then I resigned myself to misery."

"Like the wise virgins, I had metaphorical oil in my figurative vessel," said Vigor.

"The beast! he had. As I threw the little glowing remnant away, he pulled out a well-stuffed case, and deliberately lit a long cigar. I said nothing."

"But he looked pathos—the mute appeal in his eyes was more than words. I passed him my case."

"He did," said Stanton; "I took it, and wondered whether I ought to offer to pay him. Grateful as I felt at his foresight in coming amply provided, I thought I would rather pay a sovereign for that cigar than be drawn into conversation with the donor."

"If I give to a beggar, I don't expect him to be too familiar in his gratitude."

"I said, 'This is a cabbage-leaf; but cabbage-leaves are better than nothing.' Lo! the cigar my enemy gave me had known the sun of Havana."

"Then you cottoned up?" suggested Valentine.

"Not a bit of it," said Vigor. "He began to patronize me, and ask me a series of questions."

"I asked him where he was going. He told me to Ditchett Road. Then I asked what took him there. He told me, shooting. I didn't believe the beggar. 'Where's your gun?' I said. 'Haven't got one,' he answered; 'my friend has plenty, and will lend me one.' I congratulated

myself that I wasn't going to shoot with a man who doesn't own a gun of his own, and wondered who the deuce his friend was."

"He told me some wonderful tales of long shoots he had made with his friend, Lord Rothwell. They were so long that I can't repeat them."

Stanton looked rather uncomfortable.

"Then I found out where he was going," continued Vigor. "I laughed, but said nothing. You should have seen his face when I got on your dog-cart, Lord Rothwell, and he knew I was one of your guests."

"It was a dreadful shock, but I made the best of it, and am now quite resigned," said Stanton.

"We got so thick at last," said Vigor, "that we feel like old friends. He knows some one I knew; and I knew some one he knows. We cut my last cigar in two about two miles from here. A dog-cart makes all men equal; so we have sworn friendship."

A merrier party never sat round a table. Valentine was quite himself again, and joining readily in the combat of wit between Stanton and Vigor. Rothwell was in good spirits, and

bent on making our visit a pleasant one; and I, what had I to trouble? Little more than the troubles of others. I found a letter from Claudine was waiting for me when I arrived at Mirfield. She was well, and she loved me; a year or two will soon pass away; my father will return; he will see her, love her, and all will be right. Now to bed and dream of Claudine, and the great bags of partridges we shall make to-morrow, for Rothwell's keepers tell him birds were never so plentiful.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE next day was the "First," and we were all too busy among the turnips and stubble, wherever there was stubble, to think of anything else but partridges. We had a most successful day. Rothwell, who had shot almost every creature in the world whose destiny is to be shot for man's sport, benefit, or safety, handled his gun like a master. Stanton, who had in his time killed as many partridges as any man in England, was not far behind his host. My performances met with favourable criticism, and even the gunless Vigor added his share to the spoil. Valentine was the worst shot of the party, or the most careless. A pretty bit of landscape would quite take his thoughts away from the duty of the day, and his inattention would expose him to the laughing taunts of his companions. But we had a successful day, and Rothwell's face beamed

with pleasure as we expressed our gratification at the sport he had shown us.

During the rest for luncheon Vigor and I found ourselves together. Valentine had walked to a little distance to look with an artist's eye on an unusually attractive bit of scenery. Rothwell and Stanton were still busy with the luncheon-basket.

"Did you go to the club the last time you were in town, Philip?" asked Vigor, as we lit our cigars and stretched ourselves out for half an hour of rest and digestion.

"Only for a few minutes; I saw no one there."

"There is a most unpleasant piece of gossip floating about with respect to our young friend," continued Vigor, nodding towards Valentine.

"What do they say about him? Has he defaulted, or gone mad, or committed forgery?"

"Nobody knows how reports of this kind begin. They fly from mouth to mouth. 'Have you heard?' says Jones; and then, delighted to find that Smith has not heard, he tells him. If Smith has heard, the two compare notes, and are convinced of the truth of it."

"Well, what is it? I'll be Smith—I haven't heard."

"Every one says that our Valentine is in reality Captain Chesham's son. How the report was started, no one can tell; but fellows talk and joke about it, and find out a marvellous likeness between the two men. Except that both are fair, I cannot see it. It's a nuisance for Valentine."

"Some reports are too ridiculous to come under the head of nuisances," I said, feeling very vexed.

"Yes, that's all very fine; but all the world knows that Lady Estmere and her husband live apart, and most of them know that your expensive friend Chesham's limp was brought about by Sir Laurence's bullet, shortly after the husband and wife separated. People take all this up, and put things together; so I am right in saying it is a nuisance for Valentine."

"Let it be a nuisance, then. Where is Chesham now?"

"Went abroad, they tell me, some ten days ago. There has been wailing and gnashing of teeth among our friends the gamblers at the way in which he has mulcted them."

"Look here, Vigor, I'll tell you how the report originated. Chesham spread it for his own purposes."

"Men don't, as a rule, do such things as that."

"Chesham did—he wants to annoy Estmere. He is a revengeful man, and some time back, in my own rooms, he tried to force his acquaintance on Valentine. Valentine declined it, and then Chesham insulted him."

"Insulted him! What did Valentine do then?"

"Hit out like a steam-hammer, and Chesham's head went through my sideboard. Valentine is muscular, you know."

"It must have been a great insult to make Valentine hit a cripple."

"It was, an intolerable insult; but Valentine was quite right."

"Still, it's a nuisance for him," said Vigor, thoughtfully. "I don't think it would make matters better if people heard about the row."

"Not a bit. Least said, soonest mended."

Then we resumed our guns and sallied forth on destruction bent. I was much annoyed at what Vigor had told me, and saw already this report passing from mouth to mouth was the beginning of Chesham's revenge. It could not harm Valentine

much, except that it necessarily brought his mother's name into the scandal; and that, I knew, would touch him on his most sensitive part. Annoyed as I was at the matter, I gathered some comfort from the reflection that this new venomous action on the part of our Asmodeus rendered more probable the suggestion that Lady Estmere's ruin had been the outcome of some diabolical plot of his. I was now as keen on the discovery of whatever treachery might have been used as Valentine himself, and was anxious to hear of Chesham's return to town, as I felt little could be unravelled in the absence of the arch-schemer.

As soon as I found a suitable opportunity, I told Lord Rothwell of our visit to Estmere Court, and the information I had extracted from Mrs. Payne. He listened silently, and his kind brown eyes looked full in my face as I spoke. There was a half-wondering, half-serious expression in them.

"You have told me more than Laurence ever did," he said. "Some things grow darker, some lighter. Is there such a thing as fate, I wonder, Philip? Valentine went to Estmere Court not knowing it was his father's house."

"He must have known we were in the neigh-

bourhood; but I am sure he had no idea it was the house when we entered."

"And Valentine, and you with him, rambled over the whole place, and actually found an eye-witness to what made Sir Laurence ruin his life and his wife's? It seems like fate. Did you see any pictures, Philip?"

"The usual array of noble ancestors."

"None of Sir Laurence Estmere?"

"No; the good woman told me there was one by Millais in the strong-room. Valentine offered fifty pounds to be allowed to look at it. He was most anxious. Is there any way of getting the key, Lord Rothwell?"

"None that I know of, and better not. If Valentine should meet his father in the world let them be as strangers whilst this cloud is between them."

I told him more than I had told Valentine, for I gave him Mrs. Payne's last statement as to Chesham's knowledge of Sir Laurence's impending return. A look of great joy swept into his face as he heard me. I had never seen him so excited. "Fate!" he cried. "Fate! The purest, sweetest woman will be righted, if not in the

eyes of the cruel world, at least in her husband's eyes, and he will be all the world to her. And now to find the end of the coil and to trace it back to Chesham's villainy. I am beginning to grow superstitious, Philip, and to believe that your hand is destined to unveil the plot."

"How far do you think a gentleman may stoop for this end?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I have no quarrel as yet with Chesham. He is a man who talks of the sins of his youth with cynical indifference. If I counterfeited friendship for him, and trusted to some day getting a clue from a boasting remark of his, would the end justify the means?"

Rothwell looked at me, and his eyes were full of a tenderness almost womanly. He laid his hand on my arm.

"Anything you can do with respect to Chesham, anything short of actual crime, will be justifiable. I say it distinctly. Counterfeit friendship if you can; make yourself a companion of his cups and his carouses; lose your money to him at cards—I will pay the losses cheerfully; win his confidence, if you can, by admiring his evil deeds. You will

be justified in all by the end in view. Philip, I say again, there is fate in this.

"Now, Philip," he continued more quietly, "I am going to give you a letter to read. It is from Lady Estmere. She wrote it soon after I saw her for the first time after the catastrophe, when I looked at her pure eyes, and knew that the slander was a lie—a devil's lie—when I told her that I, for one, knew she was wronged."

We were sitting in a small room he called a study. He rose and unlocked a despatch-box in which he kept important papers, and which went with him everywhere. He drew forth a letter and handed it to me.

"Read it when you are alone," he said. "It gives, as I believe, and as you will believe, an account of all she knows of the affair. It was written to me, to give to her sons in case she died before me."

It seemed to me such a sacred charge, this letter, that I hesitated as I took it.

"After all I am a comparative stranger," I said. "Shall I be right in reading it? Would Lady Estmere be pleased if she knew you showed it to me?"

"I am the best judge of that," answered Rothwell. "Take the letter; read it, and copy it if you think fit; you can return it to me to-morrow."

I placed the letter in my pocket, and we then joined the others, who were very merry in the smoking-room at some jest of Valentine's.

How strangely other people's troubles enter into one's life. Here was I, who had only known Valentine for a few months, with a letter in my pocket which he was to see only at his mother's death. Lord Rothwell no doubt knew best, but in spite of his decided words I felt he was betraying Lady Estmere's confidence to a stranger; but perhaps my relation with Claudine, although disapproved by his lordship, made me as one of the family.

It was when I retired to rest that I drew my candle in front of me and sat down to read the letter Lord Rothwell had handed me. It seemed a sort of sacrilege, as I unfolded the faded paper, for it was written many years ago, and, with the exception of Rothwell, only meant to be perused by the writer's nearest and dearest after her death. It ran so:—

"My dear Lord Rothwell,—Some day one, it may be both, of my sons will come to you as my only friend, and ask you to enlighten them as to my husband's conduct towards me, seeking, perhaps, to know whose fault it is that two lives, as far as can be seen at present, are ruined. I have thought it better to put in writing what I briefly told you the last time we met. I can merely tell you of our parting; the reason for that parting must be told by Sir Laurence Estmere. When he bade me good-bye on the fatal morning that he left the Dower House to visit Estmere Court on business, we were, I believe, the happiest and most affectionate pair in the world. There was not a cloud between us. I went to bed that night longing for the next day to break, for I sorrowed at even such a short separation. Early in the morning he returned, and as I met him I saw a change in his face that frightened me. The moment we were alone he told me he had discovered all, had witnessed my infidelity towards him. All my entreaties, my commands even, for an explanation of his strange words and unworthy suspicions were met with bitter sneers, fresh insults, and reproaches at the duplicity he saw I displayed. I humbled myself

before him. I knelt and conjured him by the love he bore me, by our children, to let me know how I had wronged him in word, thought, or deed. May God forgive him! He stood there with the bitter sneer on his lip, and spurned my prayers. How could a man's love, and such a love as his, have turned to hate in a few short hours? At last my pride and the wrong I had suffered came to my aid, and my love seemed lost in the indignation I felt that he should even suspect me of faithlessness. I rose and faced him with a bearing haughty as his own. I told him that a man who believed his wife to be faithless could not wish to live with her longer, and perhaps he would now tell me his wishes and intentions for the future. 'I shall leave to-day,' he said, coldly; 'we shall meet no more. My lawyers will in due course communicate with you.' 'And the children?' I asked. 'The eldest boy,' he replied, with a cruel smile, 'who fortunately owns my complexion and features, will accompany me; the younger I disown and leave with you. We will have no open scandal; simply agree to live apart.'

"He left the room as he spoke these words, and I have never seen him since. That day he

left the Dower House, taking my darling boy with him; and the next day, with my youngest child, I went to London.

"This is all I know. I do not stoop to protestations of innocence—I do not even pray that time may show Laurence how he has wronged me. Rather would I pray that he may never know it, never learn that his wife had no thought that was not centred in him. What I suffer now —what he suffers—would be as nothing to the anguish his keenly sensitive nature would feel if he learned that he had given the cruellest blow to a woman who in no way deserved it—and that woman the wife he once loved.

"Thanking you again for your kind sympathy, believe me, dear friend, yours sincerely,

"MARGARET ESTMERE."

I read the letter again and again. I availed myself of Lord Rothwell's permission, and took a copy of it. I sat thinking of Lady Estmere and her wrongs until I worked myself up to such a pitch of indignation that I shook my fist vigorously at an imaginary Sir Laurence. Thanks to

this letter and Mrs. Payne's narration, I had the facts before me as related by both the principal actors. More and more that pointed to some revengeful machination of Chesham's, and firmer and firmer grew my resolve to find out the truth. Had Chesham been in London I think I should have returned there the next day to commence operations. As it was, I must await his return. I went to bed and dreamed I was a knight of old, and champion of Lady Estmere, just about to engage with Chesham in a deadly fray. As I was in full armour and my antagonist in plain evening dress, the result of the encounter would probably have been highly satisfactory to me if the breakfast bell had not rung so loudly and put an end to it.

I returned the letter to Rothwell, and told him that after reading it I felt no one could have a doubt upon the subject. Had I not heard what Mrs. Payne knew of the matter I should have thought Sir Laurence Estmere was a victim to monomania.

We said little more about the matter during our stay at Mirfield, which lasted until the middle of October. It was a visit I have always remem-

bered with pleasure. The weather was fine, the sport good, and the companions entertaining. After a few days Valentine's shooting grew languid, and his colour-box and canvas took the place of gun and cartridge. He made a number of outdoor sketches, and I began to prophesy fame and success more decidedly than I had ever done yet. Rothwell praised and encouraged his efforts. Vigor picked them to pieces as became an authority, and Stanton abused him for doing so. Valentine took praise or blame with his usual airy good temper. Save that one sorrow, there was little in life that troubled him. He laughed the loudest and oftenest of all, and he kept us up to unearthly hours with his songs and merriment; his gems and general splendour were an untiring topic of conversation and banter, and his good humour was unassailable.

Yet, in spite of all the pleasant and congenial society, no man turned his face towards London with greater delight than I did, for Claudine had written that she expected to be in London for a few days, when we might meet and renew those everlasting vows of affection. Valentine was talking about his big picture; so we packed our portmanteaus and gun-cases and returned to the great

city, braced up by the fresh air, browned by the sun, our muscles hard as iron from the six weeks' good exercise, and altogether feeling fit to meet whatever fate might have in store for us.

CHAPTER XVI.

"HERE HE COMES!"

I MAY pass rapidly over some eighteen months of my life, during which little has occurred to sway the destiny of myself and others of whom I write. In spite of truculent Generals, Claudine has been true to her word. She is, in my eyes, more beautiful than ever; my love for her grows and grows. Yet we have not fixed the wedding-day, although some months ago she came of age, and her guardian, with military exactness and promptitude, rendered up his account, and left her absolute mistress of something over a thousand a year. He supplemented his financial statement with an exhortation as to adventurers in general, and fortune-hunters in particular, entreating her, by the memory of her father, to bring her ill-advised engagement with that young man named Norris to an end.

Claudine listened respectfully, and after thanking him for his care and kindness during many

years, assured him that his suspicions were groundless, and that she purposed to bestow herself upon me whenever I was ready to receive her. Then, with many evil prophecies, the old gentleman washed his hands of his ward and her affairs.

She is now staying at Lady Estmere's for an indefinite time, and is half-offended that I do not wish to marry her at once. Has she not plenty of money for both? But I am proud, and cannot bring myself to live entirely upon my wife, however sweet and generous she may be. So far as I know, I am but a pensioner on my father's bounty, and, although I feel it a piece of the greatest self-denial, am resolute as to postponing my marriage until his return. Every one who has a right to advise me applauds my determination. Each speaks glibly enough about its only being a matter of waiting some six, nine, or twelve months. Each forgets it is Claudine Neville I am waiting for; so I do not get the credit my self-abnegation deserves. However, as I have the right to see her whenever I choose, I may manage to wait patiently until the return of the wanderer, my father.

Where is he? It is nearly two years since he started on his travels, yet only two short letters

have reached me. They are dated from some outlandish place in the Antipodes, and tell me little about his doings. He says he is improved, both in mind and body, but can as yet fix no definite time for his return. Some day, he trusts, he shall grow tired of foreign lands, and sigh for England; then he will return at once. He does not mention having received any letters from me. Perhaps he has shunned the beaten tracks. Certainly my father is a strange man, and my dearest hope is that this prolonged round of voyaging will cure him of some of his eccentricities. I shall not write again; it will be but waste of time. The probabilities are that, when least expecting it, I shall get a letter or a telegram announcing his safe return. May it be soon, for Claudine is as anxious to see him as I am.

Lady Estmere too, for Claudine's and, I know, my sake, looks forward to the news of his arrival in England. I am longing to bring about a meeting between the two, feeling sure that their refined natures will find much in common. My father, I know, is of too noble a disposition to heed the world's slander. Like myself, he will read in Lady Estmere's face the absolute impossibility of there being any truth in the tale.

She is the same as ever—sweet, calm, kind, yet sad withal. My friendship for her has grown into affection, an affection, I am proud to say, she returns. The day I can find Sir Laurence Estmere and hand him clear proof of his wife's innocence will be one of the brightest in my life.

Alas! In face of the promise I made to Lord Rothwell, and the wild Jesuitical plan I formed, how little I have been able to do towards this end! My hope of worming something out of Chesham has not been realized. True, I have not yet had a fair chance, as the rogue has been in England only a few days since that excursion of mine to the North. I found time enough during his short stay to make a few preliminary advances. I lost a little, not much, money to him; then he went back to the Continent. I had half a mind to follow him, but, reconsidering the matter, decided to await his return to town. As yet this had not taken place, although I was informed he might be back before the autumn.

Lord Rothwell is also abroad. After seeing his book into a second edition he was seized by the old roaming, exploring passion, and away he went to conquer fresh lands and endure fresh

hardships. We parted with a little coolness—not on his side, but on mine. I was annoyed by his exacting a fresh promise from me—not to marry Claudine until my father returned. Friends, dear friends though we were, I failed to see why he should be so anxious to take into consideration the utterly improbable idea of my father objecting to my marrying a girl who was rich, and certainly my equal by birth. That, in my position, I should be wrong in marrying without consulting my father I granted; but what concern was that of Rothwell's? So, although I went down to Southampton to see him embark, I said good-bye with a coldness for which my heart smote me as I saw his kind face turned towards me, and his true, brave eyes gazing at me as I went back in the tender, and endeavoured by the warmth of my waved adieu to repair for my show of annoyance.

He has written to me several times, and in his last letter promises to be back in time for the partridges.

And Valentine Estmere? He is not quite the Valentine of two years ago. Yet if I miss something of his airiness and gay carelessness of things in general, I know that he is in many ways im-

proved. The irresistible charm of manner is still there, but he is more sedate, less frivolous, and altogether looking upon life as a more serious matter than he fancied it was. Valentine has had experiences. Some pleasant, some the reverse. He has succeeded fairly well as an artist. Last year his large landscape gained admission to the Academy. It was not well hung, but, as we know, landscape painters are unkindly treated by those R.A.s who sit in judgment. However, he found a purchaser for his picture, although not until years afterwards did he or I know that the gentleman who bought and paid for it was an agent of Lord Rothwell's.

Valentine bought gems and fine raiment, and shone with greater external brilliancy than before. We laughed at his weaknesses, and perhaps loved him the more for them.

This year he had two pictures on the walls of Burlington House. One of them found a *bonâ fide* purchaser, and we all prophesied that the boy was on the high road to fame.

These were his pleasant experiences; now for the reverse.

Do what I would to contradict it, there was no doubt but a belief existed among the men we

knew that Chesham had not lied when he said Valentine was his son. Even our friend Vigor would shrug his shoulders when I tried to ridicule him out of the idea. He did not care a jot whose son Valentine was, but not knowing Lady Estmere, the slander did not to him seem so outrageous.

"Look here, Philip," he said, "we know this. The husband and wife live apart. Sir Laurence shot Chesham. Cad though he is to bruit it about, most likely it is true."

It was no good my expressing indignation at this unbelief. Fond as he was of Valentine, he would say no more. He still shrugged his shoulders.

As with Vigor, so with others. When Chesham was in London for those few days, and Valentine, who was too proud to keep out of his way, entered the room in which he was, I could see men throwing meaning glances at one another. Once I heard a man remark to another that there was a resemblance between Valentine and Chesham which settled any doubt.

Were they alike? They were both fair men, and as Chesham was cousin several times removed to Lady Estmere, it is not extraordinary

that people who looked for it could find a resemblance—but a resemblance which would never, except under the circumstances, have been noticed.

Valentine, who knew perfectly what people were saying about him, raged at the report which Chesham had spread about; but what could he do? His hands were bound. To call Chesham to account would be to rake up old scandal; to drag the name of the mother he all but worshipped into the mire. No; he must bear it in silence. I was the only one to whom he could open his heart on the subject.

This, I knew, was Chesham's revenge for the blow he had received—a revenge which he hoped would dog Valentine Estmere through life.

It was about this time that Valentine fell in love. He who had so coolly resigned Claudine to me, fell a victim to the tender passion as completely as it was my fate to do. His choice was charming enough to bear comparison with any one—Claudine, of course, excepted. She was the daughter of a man of good family—not well off, but proud as Lucifer. Nevertheless Valentine won him over, and announced his happiness to

his friends. Alas! it was a short-lived bliss. A few weeks after giving his consent, Mr. Moberley, Valentine's wished-for father-in-law, wrote him that in consequence of painful facts which had come to his knowledge, he must cancel the engagement and forbid Mr. Estmere the house.

Mr. Estmere, of course, sought an explanation, and was informed that the slur upon his birth justified Mr. Moberley in the course he had adopted. For the time, Valentine was half distracted. It was true that Miss Moberley vowed to remain faithful and wait for ever and ever, but he knew she was as wax in her father's hands.

Valentine poured out his woes to me, and I knew that Chesham's malice had brought this thing about—knew it before the post brought Valentine a letter. A few lines running so:

"Even if a son strikes his father, he should ask his consent before he enters into a matrimonial engagement."

There was a strange glitter in Estmere's blue eyes as he handed me the letter. On receipt of it he had gone in search of his enemy, but found he had left England that day.

"I shall follow and kill him," said Valentine; "that will stop the slander."

It needed all the influence I possessed over him to stay his steps. I had to implore him in his mother's name; to urge upon him the utter folly of meeting the man; to show him it would make matters ten times worse. At last he acquiesced sullenly, but he was very miserable.

Not one word did he breathe to his mother of the reason for the termination of the engagement which promised so fair. He concealed his grief even from her. I alone knew how deeply he had been wounded. I alone saw him in his sad moods.

With others, even at times with me, the natural gaiety and brightness of his disposition still asserted itself. Perhaps, as Claudine said, his sweet nature was frivolous and his wounds soon healed.

Having now recapitulated the principal events of the last eighteen months I can start my tale afresh.

One day in July—a July which made the London pavements red-hot, and those who trod them languid, and beginning to hate the sight of

bricks and mortar—Valentine and I were trying to find a cool spot, and grumbling at the blazing weather.

"I sha'n't stand it any longer," said Valentine. "There's nothing to wait for. The season has come to its fag end. I shall go to the seaside to-morrow."

Now, as it happened, for the last half-hour I had been drawing mental pictures, and imagining myself sitting in a cool cavern I knew of on the North Devon coast, and watching the fresh green waves break in lines of hissing foam against the grey crags at my feet. About a hundred yards away from where my imagination led me, I remembered a strip of firm, brown sand, down which many and many a time I had rushed into the delicious, fresh, clear sea. I seemed to feel the sharp, keen sting of the waves as I battled my way through, and, like with Valentine, a great longing to leave the hot city was coming over me.

I answered Valentine by putting these thoughts into practical language, and commended his idea of leaving town. I was ready to go with him. Where should it be? I suggested one place after

another, but could not make a happy selection. One was too fashionable, another was ugly. Above all, Valentine wanted some fine coast scenery.

"You must go to Cornwall or Devon for that," I said.

"Why not?" cried Valentine. "I have an inspiration. Let us go down to your ancestral towers, my Philip. Let us visit the scene of your innocent boyhood, where you grew poetical, and communed with the sea-gulls, and felt like a juvenile Alexander Selkirk."

"You will be bored, Valentine."

"Was I ever bored in my life? Write—telegraph—say we are coming to-morrow or the next day."

He was quite in earnest, and I, who had a hankering to see my strange old home again, humoured him. We went down to the lonely house, and for some ten days amused ourselves as best we could.

The place was little changed. The servants were the same, the fishermen still lived in their huts at the top of the little beach. My boyish belongings were still in their places in my old

room, from the window of which I had so often gazed on the changeless, yet ever changing sea.

Yet there was one thing missing, lacking which the house could never feel like home—my father's presence. It seemed unnatural to look into the library and not see him in his round-backed chair, bending over the large table which groaned under accumulated heaps of books and papers. It seemed strange to sit at the dinner-table without him—strange not to hear his music as twilight crept into the room. The whole place was so identified with him that I could not call it home.

Valentine and I passed the days pleasantly enough. He found some charming bits of scenery, and spent hours sketching. Often I lay beside him talking or reading. Then there was boating and fishing to occupy us. My old boat had died a natural death, but we had a bigger one sent round from Ilfracombe, and I proved to my old friends, the fishermen, that Master Philip's hand had not lost its cunning from his long sojourn in London town.

Valentine was the personal friend of every one in two days' time. Our comely old housekeeper gave him the whole history of her early

days up to the time when her man was lost at sea. She gave him also a full and particular account of my childhood's days. This I overheard through the open window as I sat in the garden splicing a fishing-rod. I do not repeat it, as the account was more flattering than I deserved. When the good, broad, musical Devonshire words came to a stop, I peeped through the window, and saw my guest sitting on Mrs. Lee's ironing-table with a great dish of raspberries at his side; his face radiant with good temper and amusement as he listened to the certainly uninteresting narration of my small exploits.

And the apple-cheeked, healthy Devonshire lass who assisted Mrs. Lee gazed at him open-mouthed, as if my brilliant friend were some gorgeous tropical bird which had strayed into this secluded spot. The cross-grained old gardener, my boyhood's terror, stuck his spade into the ground, and without a frown, watched him rifle the garden of its fairest fruit, although he knew the greater portion of that booty would be distributed among the small tribe of flaxen-haired boys and girls who ran in and out of the fishermen's cottages, and came without fear to the gay young fellow's call.

So the days passed, until we began to think of returning to town; in fact, had settled to do so the next day.

Valentine was finishing a sketch—a bit of purple moorland—I was taking my last sail, for the boat was to be sent back to-morrow. When I had had enough of beating about I landed, and went back to the house. Valentine had not returned, so I started in search of him. I could not miss him, there being only one road from the moor to Torwood. I walked some way along the path, until I could see where it joined the moor. Feeling lazy, I lay down on the sweet, springy turf, waiting for Valentine to make his appearance. "Here he comes!" I said, as I saw a figure come over the edge of level and descend the path. No, it is not Valentine. It is an older man, but enough resembling him in figure to be mistaken for him at this distance. Who is it coming down the path which can only lead to our destination? I sprang to my feet, shaded my eyes with my hand, and scarcely believing my senses, looked and looked again. Nearer and nearer he came, until I knew that I was not dreaming—that I was not mistaken. Then, fast as my limbs would take me, I ran towards the

new-comer, and I am not ashamed to say that tears were in my eyes as, like a boy of twelve years old, I threw my arms round my father, and in words broken by joy welcomed him home.

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