

THE HEARTHSTONE.

IN BONDAGE.

BY MAX.

Ambition entered in my heart.
And took her seat on a throne;
She held her place, she kept her part,
And claimed the kingdom for her own:
And day and night she asked of me
To bow to her on bended knee.

She lured me first with winning smiles,
She reigned with ease and debonair,
I could not free me of her wiles,
She was so beautiful and fair:
When once she feigned to go, I laid
My hand on hers and so she stayed.

She stayed and I cried out "tis well,"
And counted her my dearest prize—
Forgetting why the angels fell
So long ago from Paradise:
While my enchantress sat in state,
Saying "Thou shalt be rich and great."

Her voice was music in my ear.
I did what she bade me do;
First willingly and all sincere,
Because my task was wholly new:
I did not know that she would be
A very tyrant unto me.

The lovely summer came and went,
And still she reigned upon her throne,
Till nearly all my strength was spent,
And I would fain be free alone:
But my enchantress held her part,
And kept the place within my heart.

And kept the place, ay, many a day,
And made me bow the knee to her;
Till I was changed to pass that way,
And saw my sorrow and despair:
Then bringing help she came to me,
And left me not till I was free.

Free to pursue my lowly way,
To love as I had loved before;
To sleep by night, to toil by day,
And give from out my humble store.
O life! O love! how fair to me,
All things are grown now I am free.

THE DISCARDED WIFE.

A Romance of the Affections.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE CHIMES."

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

Phoebe was afraid of Jabez Rourke—very much afraid of him, since that little scene in the fields, when he had shown his teeth.

She had, up to then, treated him as a sort of jocular lover—a sort of Cat-in-the-hat—to be flirted with when it took her fancy so to do. She had taken him up when it pleased her, and dropped him again with very little ceremony; but now she began to be afraid that she had made a great mistake in the character of her plaything.

She had hitherto taken him to be a stupid lout; but he was, withal, a dangerous lout—morose, savage, revengeful; capable indeed of acts of violence which awhile ago she would not have believed to be possible.

Yes, this ugly face, which forced itself unbidden upon her attention, caused her some considerable uneasiness.

How must he be disposed of?
Of course, his threats had been but empty air.

She was certain of that. He never dare lay a finger upon her.
And yet, somehow, although she was so positive upon this point, she did not feel at all comfortable.

The ill-conditioned blacksmith had throughout the day been skulking round about the "Blue Dragon"; and when Percy Hardwicke, overnight, had been amusing himself by playing a game at studdies with some mysterious horse-dealer stopping at the inn, the blacksmith had made himself very officious in picking up the pins, and had been very thankful and obsequious for such stray halfpences as were thrown to him by the fine gentleman thus disporting himself.

He was a very fine gentleman, indeed, in the estimation of such as frequented the hostelry where he had taken up his abode.

"Who is he?"
"Where does he come from?"
"What's he call himself?"

These were the questions which the admiring rustics asked one another.

There was no very satisfactory information obtainable upon any of these hints; and even the best-informed—there are always some persons who are mighty wise in every small village, the wisest in the smallest, of course—were obliged to confess, when pressed upon the subject, that they knew nothing at all about it.

But what was known was this:
"He's a mighty fine gentleman!"
"He must be somebody!"
"Oh, that's certain—sure!"

"Any one could tell that, with half an eye, at the first glance!"
"He looks it!"

"And he has lots of brass!"
By this they meant money, of course, not impudence; though, for that matter, the new arrival had plenty of the latter, and to spare.

He was a great favourite before he had remained there very long, because he was very liberal, and willingly stood treat to all who would drink at his expense; and you may be sure that he found very little trouble in gathering together a crowd of persons who were that way of thinking.

There soon collected a number of hangers-on, who eagerly watched for his coming, laid in wait for him, and sponged upon him at every turn.

A body guard of mercenary vagabonds followed him about, and kept their eye fixed upon him, ready to obey his wishes in the slightest particular.

He had a somewhat imperative style of address, which was not a little insulting; but they bore with this very contentedly, and were willing to take his kicks in the hopes of receiving a share of his halfpence.

He was greatly admired, too, by good Mrs. Miles, who was never weary of singing his praises.

What were pretty Phoebe's sentiments respecting him we know already; and Mr. Miles, who was a mild man, very henpecked and humble, was in duty bound to admire what his good lady admired, and ask no questions, or form no opinion of his own upon the subject.

Percy Hardwicke, then, having shown that he was a man of money, soon found the "Blue Dragon" a very comfortable inn, and had little to desire in a small way that was not provided for him.

He made up his mind to stop for a time, anyhow, until he was weary of his flirtation with pretty Phoebe.

"If I ran away with her," he thought, "there would be a great bother about it, I suppose. But then, surely, she is worth a little trouble and vexation."

He was thus reflecting, when, having concluded his morning meal, he stood by the inn

door, gazing idly down the quiet street, which lay basking in the sun, very still and drowsy-looking.

Raising his eyes, he saw a gloomy visage scowling at him from the tap-room window.

It was the face of the blacksmith, who, catching his eye, made a rough sort of bow.

"Come here, dizen," said Mr. Hardwicke, "I want to speak to you."

"The man came slouching heavily forth, and stood cringing before him, pulling his forelock."

"What an ill-looking beggar you are," said Hardwicke, candidly. "Do you ever wash yourself?"

"When I've time," replied the other.

"That's not often, I should think, by the look of you."

"My trade's a dirty one, sir."

"Trade, eh? What many that be?"

"I'm a blacksmith."

"Yes, yes, so I've heard; but you never seem to be at work."

"There is not much work in these parts."

"Not much, I suppose. A deadly, lively sort of hole."

"You're right there, master."

"Your native village, I presume?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. It's the first place I recollect, anyhow."

"Parents live here?"

"No, I can't say who it is for, I am sure; some person or other at the inn. My wife wanted it delivered to him."

"Allow me to take it?"

"No, no! You are coming home with me to have lunch."

"I am afraid I cannot do that, as I have made an engagement for this afternoon."

"What, found some friend?"

"Yes—yes. Made an acquaintance, that is."

"I wish you could have thrown it over," said Jerrald, though it must be confessed that he did not persist very earnestly in the invitation.

Percy Hardwicke would not be persuaded, and, after a few brief sentences on either side, he turned to depart.

"If you will kindly take this letter, and it will not trouble you," said the Captain. "I did not know that my wife wanted to send any message, or, of course, I would have taken it when I went at first. But as I was coming back, I met the girl carrying the letter, and asked where she was going. I suppose it is of vital importance," he said, with a smile, "for she wrote it directly I was gone, and sent it immediately."

"I am glad to hear that she was well enough to sit up and write," said Hardwicke, to whom only a few moments before Jerrald had been

and also that Jerrald was very much vexed at hearing of the circumstance, as the trees had been associated with many of his earliest and happiest recollections.

It would, indeed, have been a cruel thing to have them cut down without there was some pressing necessity for so doing.

Perhaps, after all though, the man was mistaken.

"Are you quite positive?" he asked.

"Positive of what, sir?"

"That those trees were not struck by lightning?"

"Quite, sir."

"Now, be quite sure, for I have a most particular reason for wishing to know."

"I would stake my life on it, sir."

Jerrald turned away without another word. There could be no doubt on the matter.

For some reason or other, Eleanor had told him a lie.

CHAPTER X.

UPON THE BRINK OF A DISCOVERY.

Percy Hardwicke, upon his way back to the Blue Dragon, turned over and over in his hand the letter with which Edward Jerrald had entrusted him.



ON THE BRINK OF A DISCOVERY.

giving an account of his wife's illness, wherein he represented that she could not raise her head from the pillow, so great were her sufferings.

The worthy Captain, who, until then, had never noticed anything curious in these rather contradictory circumstances, felt rather confused, and looked even more so.

"I daresay she had written it before," he stammered; and then twisting the letter over and over, continued, "I wonder who she wants to write to at a public-house. However, if you will be so kind—"

The smiling gentleman was only too delighted, and straightway departed.

"Poor fool!" he said to himself, as he glanced back at the house. "He's let her do just what she likes. She seems to twist him round her finger any way she chooses. I don't know how it is, but upon my word I would willingly give a good round sum for the sake of getting up a little disorder in that worthy household. And if she was not a dreadful dolly provincial, I should feel half inclined to venture on a mild flirtation. By the way, I wonder what she is like? How was it I did not look at her portrait when I was there the other evening? I suppose there is one."

The Captain, on his way back to the house, certainly did think more of the little circumstance of the letter than he had done hitherto.

It was rather odd that his wife should not have mentioned her desire to send a letter when he was going to the inn.

The girl's manner, too, when he had met her, seemed to imply some sort of attempt at secrecy.

How, again, was it that his wife should write to some one at a public-house? And what was it about?

It was altogether very odd, indeed; and again did a feeling of gathering uneasiness creep over him.

Of course, there were a hundred and one reasons why she should have acted as she did; but yet he felt somewhat uncomfortable, in spite of his efforts not to do so.

Somehow, during the last two or three days so many odd circumstances had occurred, all of which might probably have been explained with the greatest ease, but yet were not explained, and left a rather unpleasant impression behind them.

Thoughts such as these I have described ran through his brain, and puzzled and vexed him more than would be readily believed.

But he was doomed to greater vexation still, before the end of his walk.

Falling into conversation with an old labouring man, who, recognizing him, bade him good day, they began to talk about various matters connected with the sea, for the labourer had at one time been a sailor.

"You have storms on land, too, now and then," said Jerrald; "even down in such a sheltered nook as this."

"A storm here, sir?" repeated the man, in surprise.

"Yes, you had a bad thunder storm, had you not, some time ago? Why, the lightning struck those great trees at the corner of the garden?"

The man smiled incredulously.

"When, sir?" he asked.

"I don't know when, but it did occur, did it not?"

"Not as I've heard of," said the man. "I was one that helped to cut them down. They were as fine a piece of timber as you could wish to see, but they were not injured in the least."

Jerrald listened in amazement.

Could he be dreaming? Did he hear aright? He felt quite positive that Eleanor had told him that the reason why the trees had been felled was that they had been struck by lightning.

The reader will recollect this circumstance,

With one of his bluntest smiles, he read the superscription.

"Mr. Slider," it said.

"Slider," he repeated to himself. "I have heard the name, I fancy, but I can't exactly say who it belongs to. One of those lazy, horse-looking fellows hanging about the inn-yard, and carousing in the tap-room. Slider, Slider, I am certain I ought to know him."

He could not, however, settle it to his satisfaction, as he walked along, pondering upon the subject.

"It is rather strange, though," he thought, "that she should write to one of those fellows at the inn. What can it be about? I'll find out which the fellow is, and have a good look at him before I give him the letter. If I were only to light upon some little bit of scandal. But, no, I am afraid there is no such luck."

He walked on at a more rapid pace, and soon reached the inn door.

There he found Miles ready, as usual, to accord him a gracious welcome.

Hardwicke began chatting about the fine weather and the number of guests at the inn.

"Was that Mr. Slider I was playing with last night?" he asked.

"I forget, sir. Ah, though, I remember, but I don't know the gentleman's name, Mr. Slider is in the parlour. He wears a white hat."

"Will you bring me a glass of ale into the parlour?" said Hardwicke. "I want to sit and rest awhile."

A white hat! What incident connected with a white hat was it that flashed across his mind when he heard the words?

He found a rather shabby-looking gentleman seated before the fire, whose hat had evidently done him good service, for it was weather-stained and indented in several places.

Hardwicke took a seat in the corner and observed the stranger quietly.

He was a man about twenty-eight years of age, tall and well-made, but with anything but a pleasing cast of countenance.

The expression of his eyes was anything but a good one, and they were a great deal too close together. They were very restless eyes, too, which wandered to and fro in all directions save that of the face of the speaker whom their owner addressed.

His jaw was cut very square, and was ornamented by a dirty beard of several days' growth.

He had a very ugly scar, too, crossing his nose, with the beauty of the outline of which it had very seriously interfered.

No, he was not a nice-looking gentleman, this Mr. Slider; and there was written on his face, in unmistakable characters, blackguard and thief.

He was very slantly attired, and with a great affectation of smartness; but he was, withal, very dirty and squallid.

Percy Hardwicke had plenty of time to notice all these particulars, for Mr. Slider was deeply engaged with the *Sporting Life*, and did not turn his eyes towards the new-comer, after one brief glance of scrutiny.

"Why on earth can Jerrald's wife want to write to that fellow?" Hardwicke asked himself, and could find no ready answer to the query.

"Perhaps," he thought, "she may want to buy a dog of him. He looks to be something in the dog-stealing way, or a horse copier, or does the pickpocket or cut-throats, when professionally engaged? It would be rather hard to tell what is his particular line, but it's something felonious, that's certain."

The object of his thoughts was pulling at a large cigar. His dirty fingers were ornamented with showy, but not too costly jewellery.

"I wonder whether he owes a long bill?" thought Hardwicke.

He held the letter in his hands, but he hesitated about giving it. He felt extraordinarily curious about his disreputable acquaintance, and resolved upon finding out as much as pos-

sible before he delivered over the epistle with which he had been entrusted.

How, though, was this information to be obtained?

Perhaps the best way to begin with was to make a few more enquiries of the landlady, and then delicately to question Mr. Slider himself, and see how their statements agreed.

With this intention he left the room, and went to the bar to purchase some cigars.

He was a very ingenious gentleman, and so very easily brought the conversation round to the desired point.

"I didn't know that gentleman was Mr. Slider," he said. "I thought it was the name of another gentleman."

"That is Mr. Slider, sir, I believe."

"He wasn't here yesterday, was he?"

"He was away at the fair, sir, I believe."

"Something in the horse way, I suppose?"

"Most gentlemen are down this way, sir. I don't know what he calls himself, I'm sure. He doesn't seem to do much."

"Not a favourite of yours, Mrs. Miles?"

"Persons who keep an inn, sir, have no right to likes and dislikes."

"No, no; you mustn't talk about them, at any rate, except among friends."

"To be sure, sir. I know you would not repeat what I said."

"My dear madam!"

"I don't half like that Mr. Slider, then, sir, if you must know the truth, and I'm not over comfortable about it; but, then, Mr. Miles is so easy about every thing, and is really no more use in the house than a child unborn."

"Made rather a long stay, I presume?" said Hardwicke.

"We have been some time, certainly, sir, without seeing the colour of his money; but then, I'm sure, I've no right to say anything, only I really don't like the look of Mr. Slider."

"How long has he been here?"

"It's more than a fortnight now."

"I suppose he has friends in the neighbourhood?"

"I suppose he knows somebody, such as you are, I never heard of anybody having such him with anyone unless it was—"

"Yes, Mrs. Miles."

"Some one said they met him in company with some well-dressed female one night, on the fields leading to the valley; but, then, they weren't quite sure that it was him after all."

"In the fields, was it?" asked Hardwicke, with gathering interest. "You don't know who the female was, though, I suppose?"

"No, sir; a stranger, I believe. Anyhow, she had on a thick veil, and though the party who told me tried all what she could to catch a glimpse of her face, or hear her voice, she could not succeed."

"And so you don't know what trade or profession he is?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"Captain Jerrald's house is down in the valley you speak of, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought that was the valley you meant; and that reminds me I must go down and make another inquiry respecting Mrs. Jerrald."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but is anything the matter?"

"She is seriously ill, I believe."

"I am very sorry to hear it, I am sure. She is a very nice lady. One of the kindest-hearted and most charitable; but you know her, sir?"

"I have never seen her."

"She is as good as beautiful, and that is saying a good deal too."

"Beautiful, eh? How old is she?"

"Quite a girl; twenty-two at most."

"You don't mean that? Dear me, I had formed quite another idea respecting her."

"Has Captain Jerrald never spoken of her, sir?"

"Oh, yes—of course. But he never said whether she was old or young, or pretty or plain."

"It was a love match, sir, I believe," continued the landlady. "They met one another somewhere at the seaside. Mrs. Jerrald was an orphan, living with an elderly aunt. She had no family, and very few friends, I believe, and they lived very quietly. The country families hereabouts are very proud and exclusive, and so—"

"So what?"

"So that may be why they have shown her the cold shoulder to some extent, though how they could find in their hearts to do so puzzles me."

"Very good looking, is she," said Hardwicke, musing, "and tall?"

"About the middle height, sir."

"Soft voice?"

"Very soft and musical."

Hardwicke turned away, having learnt all that he could from this quarter.

When he returned to the parlour, he found Mr. Slider had finished his newspaper, and was smoking hard at his cigar.

"Fine day," said Hardwicke.

"Very tidy, sir," replied Mr. Slider.

"At the fair yesterday?"

"Yes—an hour or so."

"Dolling?"

"No—pleasure."

"I went there myself to try and pick up a mug, but couldn't find anything to my fancy," said Hardwicke.

"Pack of screws all I saw," replied Slider.

"Pretty country about these parts. I'm staying here for a few days, and have been much taken by it."

"Yes, it's pretty enough," said Slider, glancing out of the window. "No judge myself of that sort of thing."

"You came more for field sports, I dare say, than landscapes."

"Don't care for either."

"Fishing then?"

"Waste of time."

"You must find it rather dull work then, I should think, sir, down here."

"I do," replied Slider, "but I'm obliged to stop for a time."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, on business of course."

"On my private business," replied Slider, and with those words walked out of the room, thus cutting short the conversation.

"He owes his bill, and is waiting for a remittance," thought Hardwicke, "that is the reason of his long stay. And now about this letter. Ought he to have it?"

Decidedly he ought to have had it long ago, yet Mr. Hardwicke still kept it in his possession. He had put it away in his pocket, but now he brought it out and looked attentively at its superscription.

"Mr. Slider."

These two words alone were written on the cover.

"I'd give five pounds to know what was inside," thought Hardwicke, as he twisted the letter over and over between his fingers.

But he need not have given half the sum, for he had only—

Only what?

He was alone. Nobody was looking.

No one was near to interrupt him.

Who would be the wiser? Could he not say he dropped the letter if any question was ever raised.

"I'll do it," he said.

Then, without any further hesitation, he broke the seal.