

## CHAPTER XL.

## AT THE INN.

NEITHER of the young men had heard Mr. Walcot's step in the passage, or his hand on the door, yet there he stood in the middle of the room, with his keen face fixed on Gresham. He was dressed in rough sailor garb, having just landed from the sailing boat, and it contrasted strangely with the delicacy, nay, almost the effeminacy of his features. His cheeks, for all the buffeting of the wind, showed no trace of colour; and the tone of his first words, 'So you have come at last, Mr. Gresham,' although somewhat reproachful, was as gentle as a woman's.

'I started as soon as I got your note, which was this morning,' answered Gresham, coldly, and without taking the least notice of the other's outstretched hand. 'Its delay is unaccountable to us.'

'Not more so than it is to me,' was the calm reply. 'I think you saw me write it and post it also, Mr. Howard.'

'Yes, by Jove, and so I did,' said the surgeon, quickly. 'I had forgotten about the posting, but now I remember you dropped it in the box in my presence, and remarked on the time it would take to reach Halcombe.'

'The envelope was dated Salton 24th,' observed Gresham, coldly. 'As it happens, I brought it with me, and here it is.'

'That's curious, indeed,' said Walcot, examining it. 'The only explanation possible is that it must have stuck in the box; these country postmasters are so careless. However, unhappily, haste could not have mended matters.'

Gresham turned upon his heel, and poked the fire. It made him mad to hear this man discourse so oilily, and the more so because the oil allowed no chance of friction; if he would only

say something he could 'take hold of,' that would have given him the opportunity to exhibit the contempt that consumed him!

While his back was turned Walcot cast a glance of interrogation at the surgeon, who replied to it with a significant nod. Then he went on in still lower and more gentle tones. 'Have you taken your friend, Mr. Howard, to pay his last sad visit to——'

'Yes, yes, I have,' said Howard, hastily, 'it is not necessary to refer to that.'

'Just so; I have ventured in your absence, Mr. Gresham, to take all necessary steps with regard to our proposed sad journey to-morrow—if to-morrow suits you.'

'Of course it does,' answered Gresham, with irritation; 'the sooner we get away from this hateful place the better. Why did you ever bring him to it?'

'Because otherwise he would have died on board the *Meduse*,' answered Walcot, calmly.

'My uncle was well enough when he left Halcombe.'

Mr. Walcot smiled a pitying smile, and looked at Mr. Howard as though he would say, 'Did I not tell you so?'

'I am bound to say, Gresham,' said the young surgeon, in answer to his silent appeal, 'that your uncle must have been very far from well at the date you speak of. He must have had in fact the seeds of death in him for many months.'

Here the landlord came in to lay the cloth for dinner.

'It is a fine night after all, gentlemen,' he said, in chirpy tones; 'and there will be a lovely moon. Salton by moonlight is much admired, is it not, Mr. Howard?'

'It looks better than by daylight,' answered that gentleman unsympathetically; 'but best of all, to my thinking, in a fog.'

'Dear me,' said the landlord, 'now that's curious. Though indeed I have known some who say "Give them a