

engaged just then with his approaching visit to Mrs. Winch. On leaving the *Hand and Dagger*, he had referred to Mr. Edwin's note again, in order to ascertain whether any particular hour had been named by the old gentleman for his visit. What effect the perusal of the postscript had on him, the reader has already seen.

On leaving the *Hand and Dagger* for the second time, John English set off in the direction of Belair. He had made up his mind during the last few minutes to call upon Lady Spencelaugh, and seek from her some explanation as to the contents of Mrs. Winch's note, which seemed to connect him in some mysterious way with her Ladyship; for he no longer gave any credence to the landlady's version of the affair. "Mrs. Winch may perhaps be playing a hidden game on her own account, and without Lady Spencelaugh's knowledge; my seeing her Ladyship may therefore be of service both to herself and me. If, on the contrary, her Ladyship is leagued with Mrs. Winch against me, I shall at least know the forces against which I have to fight." The reading of the postscript had decided him not to leave Normanford for the present.

When he reached Belair, he sent in his card, with a remark pencilled on it, that his business was urgent and private. "Her Ladyship is not at home," said the large footman, returning after an interval of three minutes with John's card still on his salver. And so John was politely bowed out of the great house.—"I will write to Lady Spencelaugh to-night," said John to himself, as he sauntered back through the park; "she shall have my statement of the facts, as well as Mrs. Winch's; and she must then judge for herself between the two."

He wrote accordingly; but his letter was returned to him the following morning in a sealed envelope, without a word of any kind. "We are to be enemies, then, I suppose," said John sadly, as he flung his missive into the fire, and watched it shrivel into ashes.

CHAPTER XVII.—MR. BRACKENRIDGE'S NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE.

Cliff Cottage, as the reader is already aware, formed one of two small semi-detached houses standing on the outskirts of Normanford. The remaining house was dignified with the title of Beech Lodge, and was the residence of Mr. Brackenridge the chemist. Mr. Brackenridge's little establishment was supervised by his sister Hannah, a light-complexioned, demure-faced young woman, with quiet, sly manners, thoroughly devoted to her brother. Hannah's little scraps of local gossip, which she used to retail to Brackenridge over his meals, were generally regarded by that worthy as so much empty jabber, and treated with a contempt which he was at no pains to conceal; but of late, Hannah had found a subject for gossip in the sayings and doings of their new neighbour, Mr. John English, as retailed her daily, with sundry amplifications and exaggerations, by Mrs. Jakeway, and as noted by her own sharp eyes and ears, which never seemed to fail in interesting her brother. It was a subject, too, on which Hannah herself was never weary of dilating; for, to reveal a little secret, she had fallen in love, in her quiet, self-possessed way, with the handsome young photographer, and every little circumstance connected with him had a special interest in her eyes.

Gurney Brackenridge was sitting over his tea one evening, a few days after John English's interview with Mrs. Winch, as related in the last chapter, and Hannah was sitting opposite to him, replenishing his cup as often as it was empty, and keeping him supplied with fresh slices of toast. The chemist detested both his shop and his profession, as indeed he did anything that necessitated labour, either of head or hands; and he generally contrived to reach home between seven and eight o'clock, leaving later customers to the tender mercies of his assistant. He had lately been prescribing for Mrs. Jakeway, whose health was somewhat out of repair.

"Let her go on with the mixture as before," said Mr. Brackenridge, in reply to a remark by

his sister, that the old lady was worse rather than better to-day.

"I was in to see her about an hour ago," said Hannah, "and found her quite nervous at the idea of having to pass the night all alone in the house."

"All alone! How's that?" said the chemist, looking up with sudden interest.

"Oh, she contrived to quarrel with her servant this morning, and sent her about her business at a moment's notice."

"That's Mother Jake all over," remarked the chemist; "always quarrelling with her servants, and always getting fresh ones. But where's Mr. E.?"

"Oh, he went out on business this morning by the train, and left word that he should not be home till some time to-morrow."

"Not home till to-morrow?" said the chemist, quickly. Then, after a thoughtful pause, during which he sat gazing intently into the fire, he said: "You will be going in to see Mother Jake again, I suppose before the evening is over?"

"Yes," said Hannah; "I promised to go in at half-past nine, and give the old lady her medicine, and see the premises all safe for the night."

"And quite right too," said her brother. "But, before you go in, Hannah, I will give you a pill, which you must strictly enjoin her to take the last thing before getting into bed: and, Hannah, while you are there, just contrive to leave unfastened the shutters and window of the back sitting-room. Do you understand?"

The eyes of brother and sister met in a long, steady gaze. "I understand," said Hannah, slowly. "It shall be done."

It never entered into the mind of Hannah Brackenridge to question any order of her brother. Implicit obedience to his slightest wish was the rule of her life. Had Gurney said to her: "Hannah, oblige me by giving Mother Jake a quarter of an ounce of prussic acid," I think it probable that she would have complied with his request without demur.

Gurney, meanwhile, sat brooding at home in company with his pipe. Mrs. Winch's refusal to reveal to him the nature of the hidden bond that united her to Lady Spencelaugh in a common grudge against the young photographer, still preyed an undigested wrong, upon his mind. "Curse you both!" he muttered, shaking his fist at a china shepherd and shepherdess fixed in permanent loving embrace on the chimney-piece. "I'll find out the secret for myself, without any help from you, Martha, my dear; and then won't I make her Ladyship pay through the nose to keep me quiet! Mother Jake says her lodger is always writing—that he keeps a journal—more fool he!—so there ought to be something among his papers, if I could only get at 'em, which would give me the clue to what I want to know. At all events, I'll try. Nothing risk, nothing have. I shall be a gentleman yet—I know I shall."

Presently, he heard his sister letting herself in at the front-door. "Well, have you made all square?" he said, as she entered the room.

"I have done as you wished me to do," replied Hannah.

"Has the old woman taken her pill?"

"Yes I stayed with her while she took it."

"Get me out the brandy bottle, and then you can go to bed as soon as you like."

"Yes, Gurney," said the obedient Hannah; and having set out the favourite black bottle, together with hot water and sugar, she kissed her brother on the forehead; and next minute he heard her going softly up-stairs to bed.

The chemist sat smoking and drinking till the clock struck eleven. "Old mother Jake ought to be as sound as a top by this time, or else there's no virtue in my pill," he muttered to himself; and putting down his pipe, he rose, and went quietly into the next room, taking the candle with him. Having unlocked the drawer, he took out of it a pair of list slippers, a dark lantern, a bunch of skeleton keys, a small life-preserver, a black overcoat, and a sort of skull-cap, made of the skin of some animal, with the hair outside, and having long flaps to come low down over the ears, and tie under the chin.

After inducting himself into the overcoat, slippers, and cap—and so disguised, Hannah herself would hardly have known him at the first glance—he put the lantern, the keys, and the life-preserver into his pocket, blew out the candle, and let himself noiselessly out by a door which opened into the garden at the back of the house. The gardens of Beech Lodge and Cliff Cottage ran parallel one to the other, with only a low wall between them, than which the outer walls, shutting them in at sides and back, were considerably higher. The houses stood by themselves, with fields on three sides of them, which sloped gently up from the backs of the two gardens to where a thick plantation of young trees crowned the prospect.

The night was cold, calm, and overcast; and Hannah, sitting at her bedroom window shrouded in a thick shawl, could barely distinguish the black ominous shadow gliding stealthily over the sward below. At length it stopped for a moment, as if to reconnoitre, she still watching it with straining eyes; then, satisfied apparently that it was unseen, it leaped quickly over the dividing wall, and half crouching, half running, passed swiftly out of sight, doubling back towards the rear of Cliff Cottage. Hannah had taken the precaution to open her window an inch or two at the bottom; and after listening intently for a short time, she heard a slight creaking noise, which she knew to be produced by the opening of Mrs. Jakeway's window; followed by another and fainter creak, as the intruder closed it behind him; and then Hannah knew that so far her brother had safely accomplished his purpose, whatever that purpose might be.

The heart of Gurney Brackenridge failed him a little when he found himself standing alone in the dark in the little room which he had entered in so felonious a manner; but a hearty pull at a spirit flask, which he had not failed to bring with him, revived in some measure his fainting courage; and after a further stimulus of a double-distilled oath, muttered discreetly in his throat, he set about his perquisition with something of his old confidence. As a friend of Mrs. Jakeway, he was well acquainted with the interior of Cliff Cottage, and knew the position of the furniture; so that a very slender ray of light from his lantern sufficed to guide him safely to the door of the room in which he then was. This room was on the ground floor, and at the back of the house; but the object of which he was in search would be found, if anywhere, in the first-floor front, that being Mr. John English's sitting-room. So up the stairs in his list slippers, Mr. Brackenridge stole lightly, scarcely venturing to breathe till he found himself safe on the landing at the top. Three doors opened on to this landing—namely, that of Mrs. Jakeway's bedroom, that of John English's bedroom, and that of the latter's sitting-room. Mr. Brackenridge, applying his ear to the keyhole of Mrs. Jakeway's door, could hear the old lady breathing stertorously as she lay asleep; and a grim smile stole over his face as he listened. Softly he turned the handle, and softly he opened the door—a little way, just far enough to enable him to insert his arm, and draw the key from the inside. In another minute, Mrs. Jakeway was safely locked up in her own room.

Mr. Brackenridge's next proceeding was to enter John English's bedroom; but a brief glance round it, with the full light of his lantern turned on, was sufficient to satisfy his curiosity. Next into the sitting-room, where his first act was to draw the thick moreen curtains carefully across the windows, so that no ray of light could penetrate to the outside. Having closed the door, and feeling perfectly secure from intrusion, he lighted one of the two mould-candles on the table, and then refreshed himself with another drain from his flask. His scheme, so far, had succeeded admirably; but the most difficult part of it was yet to come. John English's brass bound mahogany writing-desk lay on the table before him, but fast locked; and if none of the skeleton keys he had brought with him were capable of opening it, he would still be as far as ever from the object of his search. One after the other he tried them carefully and knowingly, in a style