

has secretly married; perhaps a woman beneath him in station. At any rate, his choice is one which his uncle would inevitably disapprove. He hides his young wife in some quiet Devonshire village, where his friend, your son, visits him. There, during your son's visit, the old man appears. By some means or other he has tracked his nephew to this retreat. One mode of escape only suggests itself. Ferdinand Sivewright assumes the character of the husband and father, while the delinquent leaves the place at his uncle's desire, and accompanies him back to London. Out of this incident arises the rest. Ferdinand Sivewright takes charge of the child, the wife retires to her native country, where she has, no doubt, friends who can give her a home. The whole business is thus, as it were, dissolved. The husband is free to play the part of a bachelor till his kinsman's death. That is my reading of the story."

"I do not think you can be far out," answered Mr. Sivewright. "You can look over the rest of the letters at your leisure. They are less important than those you have read, but may contain some stray scraps of information which you can piece together. There is one letter in which Madame Dumarques speaks of the miniature. She sends it in order that the little girl may learn to know her mother's features; and in this, as in other letters from this lady, there appears a foreboding of early death. 'We may never meet on earth,' she writes. 'I like to think that she will know my face if ever I am so blest as to meet her in heaven.'"

"You think, then, that this poor mother died young?" inquired Lucius.

"That is my idea. The husband speaks of her failing health in one of his letters. He has been to Rouen to see her, and has found her sadly changed. 'You would hardly know that lovely face, Sivewright, could you see it now,' he writes."

Lucius folded and tied up the letters with a careful hand.

"May I have these to keep?" he asked.

"You may. They are the only document which your wife will receive from her parents."

"I don't know that," answered Lucius; "her father may still live, and if he does, he shall at least give her his name."

"What, you mean to seek out this nameless father?"

"I do. The task may be long and difficult, but I am determined to unravel this tangled skein."

"Do what you like, so long as you and Lucille do not leave me to die alone," said the old man sadly.

"Have no fear of that," replied Lucius. "This investigation can wait. I will not desert my post in your sick room, until you are on the high road to recovery."

"You are a good fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Sivewright, with unusual warmth; "and I do not regret having trusted you."

CHAPTER X.

MYSTIC MUSIC.

It was now nearly dark, and Lucius was anxious to obtain a speedy release from the sick room, lest the time should creep on towards the hour at which Mr. Otranto's minions were to seek for admittance at the little back door. He made some excuse therefore for bidding his patient 'good-night' soon after this. There would be time for him to see that the coast was clear, and to keep watch for the coming of the two men.

He met Lucille in the corridor, coming upstairs for the night, at least two hours earlier than usual—a most opportune retirement.

She gave a little start at meeting him, and her look was more of surprise than pleasure.

"You here, Lucius!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, dear; I have been with your grandfather. I heard you were lying down, and would not disturb you. I hope you feel refreshed by that long rest."

"As much refreshed as I can be while I have such cause for anxiety. I am going to my room early, so as to be near my grandfather."

"That is wise; only remember you must try to sleep. You must not be watching and listening all night. If Mr. Sivewright wants anything he will call to you. Good-night, my dearest."

He folded her in his arms, and pressed a tender kiss upon the sad lips; but her only response to his caress was a weary sigh. There was something amiss here; what he knew not; but he felt she had some sorrow which she refused to share with him, and the thought wounded him to the quick. He left her perplexed and unhappy.

The old clock on the staircase struck eight as Lucius passed it. He had an hour to wait before the arrival of the detectives. What to do with himself during that time, he knew not. The lower part of the house was wrapped in darkness, save for the feeble glimmer of a candle in the great kitchen, where Mr. and Mrs. Wincher were seated at their frugal supper. Lucius looked and beheld them regaling themselves on a stony-looking Dutch cheese and an overgrown lettuce—a gigantic vegetable, which they soused with vinegar.

From Mrs. Wincher, Lucius obtained a candle, which he carried to the parlour—a room that looked empty and desolate without Lucille. There was the sofa upon which she had lain; there her book; there her work-basket.

He sat down amidst these tokens of her presence, and stared at the flame of the candle, sorely troubled in mind. What was this gulf between them, this feeling of severance that

was so strange to his heart? Why was it that there returned to him ever and anon a suspicion formless, inexplicable, but which troubled him beyond measure? He strove to escape from gloomy thoughts by the aid of an old enchanter. He took his violin from its hiding-place, and began to play a tender *sotto-voce* strain, which soothed his troubled mind. His thoughts drifted into a smoother channel. He thought of that grand discovery made to-night—a discovery which, at another time, he would have deemed all-sufficient for happiness: Lucille was not the child of the wretch his hand had slain. The comfort of that thought was measureless.

Could he do wrong in accepting the evidence of those letters—in giving them this interpretation? Surely not. They seemed to point but to one conclusion. They told a story in which there were few missing links. It remained for him to trace the father who had thus abandoned his child. It would be a more pleasing task than that which Lucille had imposed upon him when she bade him seek for Ferdinand Sivewright.

But why had this father—who from the tone of his letters seemed to have been fond of his child—abandoned her entirely to her fate, and made no effort to reclaim her in after-years? That question might be answered in two ways. The father might have died years ago, carrying his secret with him to the grave. Or it is just possible that this man, in whom weakness might be near akin to wickedness, had made some advantageous alliance after the death of Lucille's mother, and had deemed it wise to be silent as to his first marriage, even at the cost of his daughter's love.

Thus reasoned Lucius as he played a slow pensive melody, always *sotto voce*.

Thought and music together had beguiled him into forgetfulness of time. The clock struck nine while he was still playing.

He put down his violin immediately, left the lighted candle on the table, and went out to the back door. Mr. Wincher was there before him, the door open, and two men standing on the threshold.

"We've got our orders from Mr. Otranto, sir," said the elder of the two. "I'm to stop all night in the room that contains the valibles, and my mate is to be in and out and keep a hi upon the back premises. But if you have anything you'd like to suggest, sir, we're at your service."

"No," said Lucius; "I've no doubt Mr. Otranto knows his business; a great deal better than I do. Come with me, Mr.—"

"Simcox, sir. My mate is Joe Cleaver."

"Come with me then, Mr. Simcox, and I'll show you the room that needs watching. Mr. Cleaver can stay in the kitchen. I daresay he can make himself comfortable there."

"Provided he isn't timid of beetles," interjected Mrs. Wincher; "which the crickets are that tame they play about the table while we're at supper."

Mr. Cleaver pronounced himself indifferent as to beetles or crickets.

"They won't hurt me," he said; "I've had to deal with worse than black-beetles in my time."

Mr. Simcox followed Lucius to the room that contained the Sivewright collection—that curious chaos of relics and fragments which represented the knowledge and labour of a lifetime. The detective surveyed these works of art with a disparaging eye.

"There doesn't seem to be much for the melting-pot here!" he exclaimed; "or much portable property of any kind."

"There's a good deal of curious old china," answered Lucius, "which is, I believe, more valuable than silver. The thief who stole the old plate might return for that."

"He might," answered Mr. Simcox with a sceptical air; "but he must be a cut above the common run of thieves if he knows much about old china; the sterling metal is what most of 'em go in for. However, here I am, sir, and I know my duty. I'm ready to watch as many nights as you please."

"Very good," said Lucius; "and then I'll wish you good-night, Mr. Simcox; and if you want a mattress and a blanket, I daresay Mr. Wincher—the old man who opened the door to you—will give you them. I don't live in the house, but I shall be here early to-morrow morning to learn the result of your watch. Good-night."

He had his hand upon the door, when a sound from the other side of the hall—low, but still sufficiently audible—startled him as if it had been the fall of a thunderbolt. It was his own violin, played softly—a wild minor strain, dirge-like and unearthly. Scarcely had he heard the notes when they died away. It was almost as if he had dreamed them. There was not time for him to utter an exclamation before all was dumb. Then came a muffled sound, like the cautious closing of a heavy door; but that strange strain of melody possessed the soul and ears of Lucius, and he did not hear that stealthy closing of the hall door.

"Did you hear that?" he asked the detective eagerly.

"Hear what, sir?"

"A violin played in the opposite room."

"Well, no, sir, I can't say as I did. Yet I fancy I did hear something in the way of music—a barrel-organ, perhaps, outside."

"Strange!" muttered Lucius; "my senses must be growing confused. I have been too long without sleep, or I have thought too much. My brain has been unceasingly on the rack; no wonder it should fail. Yet I could have sworn I heard a wild unearthly strain—like—like other music I heard once."

It was a foolish thing, he felt, to be disturbed

by such a trifle. A mere fancy, doubtless, but he was disturbed by it nevertheless. He hurried across to the parlour where he had left his violin. There it lay, just as he had put it down. The room was empty.

"What if my violin were enchanted now, and could play of itself?" he thought idly. "Or what if the furies who torment me with the slow tortures of remorse had invented a new agony, that I should hear ghostly strains—mere phantasmal sounds—reminding me of the music I heard in the American forest?"

He put the violin back into its case, locked it, and put the key in his waistcoat-pocket. The lock was a Chubb.

"Neither mortals nor fiends shall play upon you any more to-night, my little Amati," he said.

He was glad to escape from the house presently, having no farther business there. He felt that Lucille and the old man were securely guarded for that night at least. To-morrow might furnish a clue to the mystery—to-morrow might reveal the thief.

The thought set his brain on fire. Who opened that door? Who admitted the midnight plunderer? Would to-morrow's light bring with it the answer to that question?

CHAPTER XI.

AT FAULT.

Geoffrey Hossack rushed down to Stillmington as fast as a recklessly-driven hansom and an express train could take him. His heart seemed to sing aloud as he went, "I am coming, my love, I am coming; and we will part no more."

How sweet, how rustic, how peaceful, the little uncommercial town seemed to him to-day in its verdant setting; the low hills, on whose grassy slopes tall chestnuts spread their wide branches, and the dark foliage of the beech gleamed silvery as the warm breezes ruffled it; fertile pastures where the aftermath grew deep, green tinged with russet—over all the land late summer's vanishing glory.

"I could live here with her for ever," he thought; "ay, in the humblest cottage half hidden among those green lanes, which seem to lead nowhere. I could live all my life with her, cut off from all the rest of the world, and never languish for its hollow pleasures, and never sigh for change. God grant I may find her reasonable! God grant that she may accept my simple assurance of her release, and make me happy!"

On the very threshold of Mrs. Bertram's modest dwelling a sudden fear seized him. Something in the aspect of the house to-day struck him as unfamiliar. The window was shut—an unusual circumstance, for Janet loved air. The flowers in the little rustic stand that screened the window had a neglected look. There were dead leaves on the geraniums, which had wont to be so carefully tended. The care of those flowers had been her early morning task. How often had he walked this way before breakfast, for the sake of catching one chance glimpse of the noble face bending over those flowers!

"Good Heavens, can she be ill?" he thought with agonising fear. He knocked softly, lest she should be indeed lying ill up-stairs and the sound of the knocker disturb her.

The maid who opened the door had come straight from the washtub, breathless, with bare steaming arms.

"Is Mrs. Bertram at home—and—and well?" asked Geoffrey eagerly.

"Mrs. Bertram, sir? O dear, no; she left us three days ago, and the apartments are to let. Missus doesn't put up any bill, because she says it gives such a low look; but there's a card at the grocer's."

"Mrs. Bertram has moved!" said Geoffrey, his heart beating very fast. "Where has she gone?"

It might be to the next street only. She had found the rooms small perhaps, as her pupils increased. Yet even a few minutes' delay dashed his high hopes. It seemed hard to meet any kind of hindrance at the outset.

"She didn't leave no address," answered the girl; she's left Stillmington for some time. She said the air was relaxing at this time of year, and the little girl didn't seem quite well. So she went. She means to come back in the winter, she told us, and go on with her pupils; but she was going somewhere by the sea."

"But surely she must have left some address with your mistress, in order that letters might be forwarded to her?"

"No, she didn't, sir. I heard missus ast her that very question about the letters, and she says to missus that it didn't matter—there wouldn't be no letters for her, not of any consequence, as she would write and tell her friends her new address. She didn't exactly know where she was going, she says."

"When did she leave?" asked Geoffrey in despair. How could the Fates treat him so hardly?

"Three days ago—last Wednesday."

The very day of his journey down to Hampshire. She had lost no time in taking flight. She had gone almost immediately after he left Stillmington. Could he doubt that her motive had been to avoid him—to flee temptation? For did he not know that she loved him?

"Mrs. Bertram left very suddenly, did she not?" he asked of the maid-of-all work, who was breathing hard with impatience to be gone, knowing that her mistress awaited her in the washhouse, and would assuredly lecture her for gossiping.

"Yes, sir, it was quite sudden. She gave missus a week's rent instead of the regular notice."

"And you have really no idea where she went when she left you?"

"No, sir. She went away by the London train. That's all I can tell you."

"Thanks," said Geoffrey with a sigh.

He rewarded the girl with a half-crown, almost mechanically, and departed heartsore. How could she be so cruel as to hide herself from him—to put a new barrier between them! Was she afraid of his importunity—afraid that she would lack strength to resist his pleading?

By the sea! She had gone to the sea-side. That was information of the vaguest character.

"If I have to scour the English coast, I will find her," he said to himself desperately.

But it was just possible she might leave England—that she might hide herself in some obscure village in Normandy or Brittany, where the cockney-tourist had not yet penetrated. The field was wide, to say the least of it.

"She will surely let her brother know where she is?" he thought presently; and with that thought came a brief moment of hopefulness, which quickly changed again to despair. If she wanted to avoid him, Geoffrey, she would scarcely trust her secret to his bosom friend Lucius.

There was that ever-ready medium—that universal go-between—the second column of the *Times*. He might advertise. He wrote a long appeal, so worded that, to the stranger, it was an absolute hieroglyphic, telling her that she was free—the very barrier that could divide them had been long removed—and entreating her to communicate with him immediately. This appeal he headed "*Voi che sapete*"—the opening words of her favourite song. She could hardly fail to understand.

But what if she did not see the *Times*? And if she were out of England, or even buried deep in some remote English watering-place, the chances against her seeing it were as ten to one. He sent the same advertisement to Gallian, and to a dozen provincial newspapers, chosen almost at random, but covering a wide area. He sent cheques to pay for a month's insertions in every paper. He felt himself transformed into a man of business, and went to work as actively as if he had been advertising a new oocoo or a new hair-dye.

This done, and there being nothing to detain him at Stillmington, he went back to Hillerston, much to the delight of his cousins Belle and Dessie, who had in no wise expected this prompt return of the deserter. There was some comfort to him in the idea of being amidst the scenes of Janet's youth. He went over to the cathedral town, saw the Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, and found the entry of that fatal union which stood between him and happiness.

Yes, there it was: "Frederick Vandeleur, gentleman, &c. &c., to Janet Davoren." The ceremony had been legal enough. Nothing but some previous contract could invalidate such a marriage; and was it not very probable that this villain's assertion of a previous marriage was but a lie, invented to release him from a union that had become troublesome to him?

"I wish to Heaven I had as good a certificate of the scoundrel's death," thought Geoffrey; "but even if I find her and tell her that he is dead, I doubt if my bare assertion will satisfy her scruples."

He made a pilgrimage to Wykhamston, prowled about the gray old church, talked to the sexton, who had been an old man twenty years ago, and who calmly survived all changes like a being over whom Time had no power. From him Geoffrey heard a great deal about the old rector and his beautiful daughter, who had played the organ, and how a stranger had come to Wykhamston, who took a great fancy to playing the organ, and played wonderfully; and how Miss Davoren used oftentimes to be in the church practising when the stranger came in; and how not long after she ran away from home, as some folks said, and he, the sexton, was afraid no good had come of those meetings in the church.

To this Geoffrey listened silently, wounded, as he always was, by the thought that she whom he loved so dearly had left her home under a cloud, were it but the lightest breath of suspicion.

Even to this sexton he must needs defend his idol.

"I have reason to know that Miss Davoren was married to that gentleman before he came to Wykhamston," he said. "It was a secret marriage, and she was foolish enough to leave her home without informing her parents of the step she had taken; but she was that man's wife, and no shadow of dishonor can tarnish her name."

"Deary me?" exclaimed the sexton; "and our poor dear rector took it so to heart. Some folks think it was that as killed him, though the doctors called it heart-disease of long standing."

Geoffrey went from the church to the rectory, an overgrown thatched cottage, quaint and old, with plastered walls and big chimney-stacks; the garden all abloom with late roses—the new incumbent evidently a prosperous gentleman.

He loitered by the tall privet-hedge a little while, gathered a rose from a bush that grew within reach—a rose which he put carefully in his pocket-book—frail memorial of her he loved.

This pilgrimage occupied an entire day; for the young man lingered about Wykhamston as