

— whether he has ever pursued the straight path! It strikes me very forcibly that in many respects he has been every bit as weak as others. Is it not so, my mentor?"

"That is not the question at the present instant, Des. I want to be informed wherefore you cannot marry Miss Calthorpe."

"No, I cannot be so black a villain as to do so," burst forth the younger brother.

"Heyday!"

"I cannot make up my mind to commit such a piece of wicked injustice—such a cruel sin."

"Wicked, injustice—cruel sin!" echoed Percy Symure, in great astonishment. "You are delivering yourself in riddles, my dear fellow."

"Yes, yes; I dare say I am," replied Desmore, through his closed teeth. "Well, never mind that; I can't help doing so. I've been a dolt, and I am to suffer for having been such, and there's an end of the matter, I reckon!"

"I fancy not, Des," answered the other, shaking his head. "If you're not in the very quagmire of the quagmire, you may yet be extricated from it."

"But I am not only in the middle of the quagmire, but up to my ears in it, and unable to stir one way or the other in order to free myself."

"Make me your confidant, Des; you cannot do a better thing than that."

"I—dare not!" was the faltering rejoinder.

"Tush, nonsense! Two heads are sometimes better than one. As a commencement, give me a peep at that letter."

"No, no, Percy; that I cannot—will not do. In heaven's name, let us drop this subject, and turn to some other."

Then there ensued a pause of some few moments, during which time Percy Symure sipped his chocolate in cold indifference, having no suspicion of how seriously his brother had involved himself.

Desmore was sitting with his elbows resting on the table, his chin supported in the palm of his left hand, the letter still clutched in the other. His mind was in a perfect tumult, and he was wholly at a loss to know what to do or what to leave undone in the business now before him. At length his tightened fingers gave way, and the crumpled missive was tossed across the board close to Percy Symure, who immediately took it up, smoothed out its creases, and commenced to peruse its irregularly traced characters.

With a loud-beating heart, Desmore watched his brother's changing features as he read. Desmore was dreading Percy's anger and reproaches. He knew that he was deserving of all his brother's wrath, and that he should not be able to find any words wherewith to justify either himself or his conduct.

"Well!" cried Percy, severely frowning. "Well! you have prettily disgraced yourself and our old family name. Whom have you married? Who is this woman who thus writes to you, calling you her husband?" he asked abruptly.

"Her father is a schoolmaster at—a place near which I was quartered some twelve months ago," was the stammering reply.

"And you are really married to the schoolmaster's daughter?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, Percy, the truth is, I was desperately in love with the girl, and—"

"And seeing the simoleon she had to deal with, she made the best of the opportunity—um?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Percy."

"Confound her, and you too, Des!" exclaimed he. "But you were surely mad, knowing that another woman legally claims you, to enter into an engagement to wed Miss Calthorpe."

"I think I have been mad, Percy; but I was fancying that I could get out of the other affair."

"Get out of it! How, I should like to be informed?"

"Well, you must know, Percy, that I didn't marry her in my own name, and—and—"

"Go on," said the other, in a low tone, as he glanced towards the door of the apartment.

"She, herself, knows neither my name, nor the regiment to which I belong, and, what is more, I do not think that she will ever succeed in finding me out. She is only a simple country girl, possessed of very little knowledge of any kind."

"And dare you venture upon taking a second wife, your first being still alive?"

"I have been thinking that I might do so," hesitated Desmore, half-abashed at his wicked confession. "But now, I—I am losing my courage. There's a child you see; and possibly, I don't know what to do at all! I wish to heaven I could be spirited away, somewhere, out of this bother and difficulty! I've repented and repented the deed over and over again, until I'm fairly tired of repenting, and that's the plain truth of the matter, Percy!" he added, tremulously.

Mr. Symure was sitting biting his nails, deep in reflection. "Look here, Des," he commenced; "if this projected marriage of yours with Miss Calthorpe be broken off, I shall also lose my chance. In her sister Lucy, whom I lose, in the present state of my finances, would be the absolute ruin of me."

"I'm deuced sorry, Percy; I am, upon my honour! But I really think if we were to put our heads together, we might keep that mistake of mine in the dark, and hush her voice entirely. She might be told that I'm dead; she'd not be able to prove to the contrary. Of course, I'd have to give her a sum of money; then she'd go back to her father, and all the danger would be over."

"I'll undertake the work," returned Mr. Symure, with sudden alacrity. "Give me this

woman's address, and leave me to manage all the rest."

"She is living at Noleman's Hill."

"And where is that, in the name of wonder?"

"In Yorkshire; about two hundred miles distant from London."

"A nice journey for me to have to take in this abominable wintry weather. Why, I shall not reach the place in less than nine or ten days. The letter, I perceive, is a fortnight old."

"Yes; but I suppose it has been lying some time at the London post-office (where all her communications have been addressed), and I have neglected to tell Ranson to call for it," explained this very honorable young gentleman.

"Ay, ay, I understand! And how am I to inquire after this person; what does she call herself?"

"Mrs. Desmore Desmore."

Percy laughed; and his brother proceeded to instruct him respecting the locality of Noleman's Hill, and on other important points for his particular observance.

While the brothers were yet concocting their wicked plans, Ranson, Desmore Symure's valet, presented himself.

"If you please, sir, I'm so sorry," he began, twirling 'twixt his fingers a silver salver on which was lying a clumsily folded letter, fastened with a large black wafer, and a little patch of sealing-wax of the same hue, "but I forgot to give you this. There were two letters waiting for you at the post-office."

"Careless fellow!" exclaimed his master, snatching the missive from the salver.

"I hope, sir, you'll be so good as to overlook my neglect of duty," returned the man.

"Yes, yes; only be more careful another time! That will do."

"Thank you, sir," and the valet was gone.

"What on earth is that?" exclaimed Percy Symure. "Is that also a communication from the person at Noleman's Hill?"

"Wait a moment, and I'll tell you. The superscription certainly is not in her hand," Desmore answered, as he tore open the sheet, and prepared to examine its contents. "Great heavens, Percy, I do think she's dead!" he continued, his eyes devouring the written characters, his face becoming pale as ashes. "Yes, she is dead!"

"What! Mrs. Desmore Desmore?"

"Ay; read—read it for me, for I am unable to do so; my head is reeling round and round."

Percy took the communication out of his brother's trembling hand, and perused the following lines, which were penned in a flourishing copy-book style:

Noleman's Hill, Yorkshire,  
February 31, 1815.

"To Desmore Desmore, Esq."

"SIR,—

"I am both shocked and grieved to be the communicator of unhappy tidings to you. Your dear wife, whom I, her medical attendant, imagined to be progressing most favorably, fell a sudden chill, from which she never recovered. She died this morning very peacefully, and with but little suffering, I am glad to say. The enclosed note, which was found in the deceased lady's desk, addressed to yourself, instructed me how to forward to you this sad intelligence.

"The infant, I rejoice to tell you, is doing remarkably well without maternal nurse, and, such being the case, if I might presume to offer unasked-for advice, I should recommend you to leave him for a while in the kind hands into which he has fallen.

"I have taken the liberty of writing to Mrs. Desmore Desmore's parents, living at Sheffington Moor, to inform them of this sudden and sorrowful event. To them, also, I have enclosed a letter, found in the before-mentioned desk. I hope that I have acted in accordance with your wishes, and that you will hasten hither as soon as possible, as I do not like to take upon myself any further arrangements in this matter.

"Obediently yours,  
"JAMES BROWNLOW."

"Well, Des, I must say that you're one of the luckiest fellows alive! Here you are as free as air again, with nothing to apprehend from any one!"

"Poor girl!" sighed Desmore, his eyes cast upon the ground. "She was wondrously pretty, Percy, with such a beautiful head of hair, of a color I can scarcely describe."

"Well, then, don't trouble yourself to do so, I beg," laughed the elder brother, quite elated at the late news. "Pshaw! how rattled I feel! That journey to Noleman's Hill would have been no joke for me to perform."

"How do you counsel me to act in this business, Percy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Respecting the—funeral, and the child's future?"

"Will you promise to do exactly as I shall instruct you?"

"Certainly."

"Then take no notice whatever of this communication, and endeavor to forget, as soon as possible, all about Noleman's Hill."

"But, Percy—"

"Not a word more," interrupted the brother, abruptly rising from the table. "Come, it's past twelve o'clock, Miss Calthorpe will be expecting us to accompany her in her morning ride."

"And Lucy, likewise, Percy," added Desmore, forcing a smile.

"Precisely."

And away these two gentlemen went, to prepare themselves for a ride on horseback in St. James's Park.

CHAPTER II.

Poor Anna was consigned to the grave by her parents, who carried the motherless infant home to take the place left vacant in their hearts by their departed daughter, who had been their only child, their only joy on earth.

And years and years passed on, but no father came to claim the little boy, who thrived amazingly, and made the wintry days seem all sunshine beneath his grandfater's roof.

How the old couple loved him, and how he was caressed and petted, to be sure! Sheffington Moor had not another boy like Desmore Desmore!

When Desmore was just fourteen years old, his good grandmother died; and soon after that event another woman took her place at the schoolmaster's fireside, and dominated over his humble household. She was many years younger than her husband, and rather a showy-looking woman, but a perfect vixen in disposition.

Poor Desmore soon began to experience a sad alteration in everything at home, and he was learning to dread the very sight of his new grandmother, who was ever scolding and bulleting him whenever he came within her reach. She appeared to have taken a positive dislike to the boy and she seized on every opportunity she could catch to vent her malice on him; and she put him to tasks of "actual drudgery," to which he had hitherto been a complete stranger, and called him ugly names, the most offensive of which was "Red Hand."

But the lad made no complaint at all this, nor did he even utter a murmur, although the injustice and insolence he was daily enduring galled his proud little spirit, and wounded it to the quick.

His grandfather noted the treatment to which Desmore was subjected at the hands of the virago; but the old man dared not utter a word pro or con; he could only sigh in secret over the mistake he had made in choosing such a woman to control his home, and his dead daughter's child.

Desmore was an industrious and apt scholar, the cleverest in his grandfather's school; and the old man was exceedingly proud of the boy's knowledge, and was always endeavoring to instruct him further, for Matthew Petersham, notwithstanding that he was only a village schoolmaster, was profoundly learned, and, being so, was worthy of holding a much higher position than his present one.

Whenever she saw Desmore over his book or his slate, it was Mrs. Petersham's peculiar delight to disturb him, to call him away from it, in order to make him perform some mental office for herself. She seldom addressed him by his name; she was innately a vulgar-minded woman, and she felt a cruel pleasure in repeating the *soubriquet* she had applied to him, and which she knew had a hateful sound in his ears. And her shrill voice being so often heard calling out "Red Hand," the boys in the school had caught up the significant appellation, when they were wont to use on all occasions, as if poor Desmore owned none other.

Many and many a time had Desmore thrashed a senior scholar for applying to him the objectionable nickname which had been bestowed upon him by his grandfather's spiteful wife.

My hero now grew thoughtful and gloomy, avoided all his former companions, sought solitude, and clung closer than ever to his books. His young heart was so brimful of unhappiness that he knew not what to do. He loved his grandfather too dearly to trouble him with a relation of his heavy sorrows which he kept locked up in his own bosom, hidden away from every one. He walked about the village with his left hand thrust deep in his trousers-pocket, a threatening scowl upon his handsome face, his acute ears straining to catch every sound, thinking that he heard the whispered syllables of "Red Hand" on every passing breath of wind.

One day, Desmore secretly sought the surgery of the village doctor, and, showing him his marked hand, asked his advice about it.

"Can the redskin be removed by any means, sir? I don't care for the pain of the operation; I could bear anything, rather than this terrible red hand," said Desmore, very earnestly.

The medico laughed at the boy's face, saying, "And what harm is there in the color of the limb, so long as it is well-formed, and you have the perfect use of it? I suppose it never fails to do its duty when called upon, it assists you quite as well as the other?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, in the name of heavens, what can you desire more?"

"I want the stain removed, as I said before, sir."

"But wherefore? The mark, being only on the inner part of the hand, will seldom be seen."

Desmore was silent for a few seconds. He was longing to open his whole soul to some one, but shrank from doing so. Why did the doctor think so lightly of that disfigurement which appeared as hideous in the lad's own eyes and which had obtained for him such an unwelcome and singular *soubriquet*?

"Can't it be done, sir?" persisted Desmore, in eager accents, his open palm held forth again.

"I'm sure, boy, I do not know," the doctor returned, lightly. "You are really the oddest youngster I ever came across! Go home again, and thank heaven that you have a good appetite, healthful digestion, straight limbs, and the use of all your senses, and never more come

here concerning that trumpety mother's mark of yours!"

Abashed and hurt, our sensitive Desmore made his bow, and quitted the medico's presence.

A whole year had now passed away, when, one day, Mrs. Petersham ordered Desmore to sweep the kitchen-chimney for her, an office which had hitherto been performed by the sweep of the village.

"No, ma'am, I can't do that!" was the lad's sturdy reply. "I have brushed your shoes for you; but I will not become a climbing-boy for you or any one!"

At this, down came Mrs. Petersham's broad, heavy hand upon the luckless speaker's countenance, upon which she left the swollen impress of her five spiteful and cruel fingers.

Desmore staggered backwards under the force of the blow; but he uttered not a cry, though blood was issuing from his nostrils, and one of his eyes was sadly smarting.

No, he uttered no cry; but he breathed an inward vow that his grandfather's roof should not shelter his motherless young head another night.

With this fixed resolve in his breast, Desmore sought his little chamber, where, after having bathed his hot, tingling visage in cool spring water, he sat down, and indited a farewell letter to his kind grandfater, who had been his best and only earthly friend. Then the boy made a bundle of his small possessions, left the house secretly, and sallied forth he knew not whither; nor did he seem to care; his first object being to put distance betwixt himself and Mrs. Petersham.

It was late in December, bitterly cold, and the leaden-colored clouds over the wanderer's houseless head betokened an approaching snow-storm. But he heeded not the threatening aspect of the heavens; he was thinking of the blow he had so recently received, and his youthful indignation knew no bounds as he reflected on it.

On he trudged through the gathering gloom of eve, without any definite purpose in his mind, and with only two copper coins in his pocket.

Sheffington Moor was a couple of miles behind him when the snow-flakes first began to fall, whitening the earth, the trees, and every object around. Thicker and thicker descended the pure crystallized drops, and colder and colder grew the piercing blast as it whistled by the lad's inflamed cheeks, and howled through the leafless branches near him.

Nothing daunted by the tempest, Desmore strode onwards, an entire stranger to the road he was pursuing—onwards and onwards, until the snow was knee-deep, and the hour was that of midnight.

He was now waxing hungry, and his feet being quite cumbered with the biting frost, he did not proceed so quickly as heretofore. By-and-by, feeling drowsy and weary, and unable to go on any further, he sank down on a hillock by the roadside, and at once fell fast asleep.

On the brow of the hill, at a very short distance from the slumberer, there was now discernible a heavy, cumbersome caravan, drawn by a poor, jaded horse, by the side of which two men were tramping with tired footsteps.

But despite their evident bodily fatigue, they appeared to be a couple of light-hearted fellows, for one of them was whistling loudly, and the other was spouting Shakespeare to the air.

"I wonder how far we are from the town, Ralph?" said the whistler, suddenly breaking off in the middle of a strain. "I'm getting considerably hungry and sleepy."

"Pshaw! What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time, be but to sleep and feed? A beast—no more!" answered the travelling companion.

"Thank you. You're not over-complimentary, I must say!" laughed the other.

"The words were not mine own, friend Jellico," Ralph returned, with a grand theatrical air.

"I don't care whose they were—they were far from pleasant to me," retorted the other.

"That they were not so, blame the divine William, not the humble Ralph Thetford."

"I wish to gracious there had never been such a fellow as that Shakespeare!" answered Jellico, somewhat fretfully. "I declare he seems to be driving you all mad! Come on, Bobby, you lazy brute!" he continued, breaking off suddenly, and addressing the lagging animal.

"If your master, who is an older chap than you, by many a long year, can manage to trudge it on, so likewise must you!"

"Jog on, jog on, the footpath-way, And merrily hent the stile—; A merry heart goes all the day, Your sad tires in a mile-o," sang Ralph, gaily.

"Ay, ay, ay, ay, my lad, I like that better than the spouting; for thou hast a voice that would charm the birds from the trees."

Ralph Thetford laughed, made a careless step forward, slipped, and fell headlong in the road.

"Stop, Bobby!" cried Jellico, checking the horse, and preparing to assist his companion, who was now endeavoring to pick himself up.

"Hurt yourself, my lad?" added he.

"Hurt myself!" echoed the fallen man. "By the mass, I verily believe I shall never walk straight again—never more be a gallant Romeo!"

"Why, what's the matter, Ralph?"

"A broken leg, my master, nothing more, was the light rejoinder.

"A broken riddlestick!"