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THE UNSEEN BRIDEGROOM;

OR,

WEDDED FOR A WEEK.

BY

MAY AGNES FLEMING.

CHICAGO:
M. A. DONOHUE & CO.

THE UNSEEN BRIDEGROOM.

CHAPTER I.

THE WALRAVEN BALL.

A DARK November afternoon—wet, and windy, and wild. The New York streets were at their worst—sloppy, slippery, and sodden; the sky lowering over those murky streets one uniform pall of inky gloom. A bad, desolate, blood-chilling November afternoon.

And yet Mrs. Walraven's ball was to come off to-night, and it was rather hard upon Mrs. Walraven that the elements should make a dead set at her after this fashion.

The ball was to be one of the most brilliant affairs of the season, and all Fifth Avenue was to be there in its glory.

Fifth Avenue was above caring for anything so commonplace as the weather, of course; but still it would have been pleasanter, and only a handsome thing in the clerk of the weather, considering Mrs. Walraven had not given a ball for twenty years before, to have burnished up the sun, and brushed away the clouds, and shut up that icy army of winter winds, and turned out as neat an article of weather as it is possible in the nature of November to turn out.

Of course, Mrs. Walraven dwelt on New York's stateliest avenue, in a big brown-stone palace that was like a palace in an Eastern story, with its velvet carpets, its arabesques, its filigree work, its chairs, and tables, and sofas touched up and inlaid with gold, and cushioned in silks of gorgeous dyes.

And in all Fifth Avenue, and in all New York City, there were not half a dozen old women of sixty half so rich, half so arrogant, or half so ill-tempered as Mrs. Ferdinand Walraven.

On this bad November afternoon, while the rain and sleet lashed the lofty windows, and the shrill winds whistled around the gables, Mrs. Ferdinand Walraven's only son sat in his chamber, staring out of the window, and smoking no end of cigars.

Fifth Avenue, in the raw and rainy twilight, is not the sprightliest spot on earth, and there was very little for Mr. Walraven to gaze at except the stages rattling up the pave, and some belated newsboys crying their wares.

Perhaps these same little ill-clad newsboys, looking up through the slanting rain, and seeing the well-dressed gentleman behind the rich draperies, thought it must be a fine thing to be Mr. Carl Walraven, heir to a half a million of money and the handsomest house in New York.

Perhaps you might have thought so, too, glancing into that lofty chamber, with its glowing hangings of ruby and gold, its exquisite pictures, its inlaid tables, its twinkling chandelier, its perfumed warmth, and glitter, and luxury.

But Carl Walraven, lying back in a big easy-chair, in slippers and dressing-gown, smoking his costly cheroots, looked out at the dismal evening with the blackest of bitter, black scowls.

"Confound the weather!" muttered Mr. Walraven, between strong, white teeth. "Why the deuce does it always rain on the twenty-fifth of November? Seventeen years ago, on the twenty-fifth of this horrible month, I was in Paris, and Miriam was—Miriam be hanged!" He stopped abruptly, and pitched his cigar out of the window. "You've turned over a new leaf, Carl Walraven, and what the demon do you mean by going back to the old leaves? You've come home from foreign parts to your old and doting mother—I thought she would be in her dotage by this time—and you're a responsible citizen, and an eminently rich and respectable man. Carl, my boy, forget the past, and behave yourself for the future; as the copy-books say: 'Be virtuous and you will be happy.'"

He laughed to himself, a laugh unpleasant to hear, and taking up another cigar, went on smoking.

He had been away twenty years, this Carl Walraven, over the world, nobody knew where. A reckless, self-willed, headstrong boy, he had broken wild and run away from home at nineteen, abruptly and without warning. Abruptly and without warning he had returned home, one fine morning, twenty years after, and walking up the palatial steps, shabby, and grizzled, and weather-beaten, had strode straight to the majestic presence of the mistress of the house, with outstretched hand and a cool "How are you, mother?"

And Mrs. Walraven knew her son. He had left her a fiery, handsome, bright-faced lad, and this man before her was gray and black-bearded and weather-beaten and brown,

but she knew him. She had risen with a shrill cry of joy, and held open her arms.

"I've come back, you see, mother," Mr. Carl said, easily, "like the proverbial bad shilling. I've grown tired knocking about this big world, and now, at nine-and-thirty, with an empty purse, a light heart, a spotless conscience, and a sound digestion, I'm going to settle down and walk in the way I should go. You are glad to have your ne'er-do-well back again, I hope, mother?"

Glad! A widowed mother, lonely and old, glad to have an only son back! Mrs. Walraven had tightened those withered arms about him closer and closer, with only that one shrill cry:

"Oh, Carl—my son! my son!"

"All right, mother! And now, if there's anything in this house to eat, I'll eat it, because I've been fasting since yesterday, and haven't a stiver between me and eternity. By George! this isn't such a bad harbor for a shipwrecked mariner to cast anchor in. I've been over the world, mother, from Dan to—What's-her-name! I've been rich and I've been poor; I've been loved and I've been hated; I've had my fling at everything good and bad under the shining sun, and I come home from it all, subscribing to the doctrine: 'There's nothing new and nothing true.' And it don't signify; it's empty as egg-shells, the whole of it."

That was the story of the prodigal son. Mrs. Walraven asked no questions. She was a wise old woman; she took her son and was thankful. It had happened late in October, this sudden arrival, and now, late in November, the fatted calf was killed, and Mrs. Walraven's dear five hundred friends bidden to the feast.

And they came. They had all heard the story of the widow's heir, so long lost, and now, dark and mysterious as Count Lara, returned to lord it in his ancestral halls. He was a very hero of romance—a wealthy hero, too—and all the pretty man-traps on the avenue, baited with lace and roses, silk and jewels, were coming to-night to angle for this dazzling prize.

The long-silent drawing-rooms, shrouded for twenty years in holland and darkness, were one blaze of light at last. Flowers bloomed everywhere; musicians, up in a gilded gallery, discoursed heavenly music; there was a conservatory where alabaster lamps made a silver moonlight in a modern Garden of Eden; there was a supper-table spread and waiting, a feast for the gods and Sybarites; and there was Mrs. Wal-

raven, in black velvet and point lace, upright and stately, despite her sixty years, with a diamond star of fabulous price ablaze on her breast. And there by her side, tall, and dark, and dignified, stood her only son, the prodigal, the repentant, the wealthy Carl Walraven.

"Not handsome," said Miss Blanche Oleander, raising her glass, "but eminently interesting. He looks like the hero of a sensation novel, or a modern melodrama, or one of Lord Byron's poems. Does he dance, and will he ask me, I wonder?"

Yes, the dusky hero of the night did dance, and did ask Miss Blanche Oleander. A tall, gray-eyed, imperious sort of beauty, this Miss Blanche, seven-and-twenty years of age, and frightfully *passée*, more youthful belles said.

Mr. Walraven danced the very first dance with Miss Oleander, to her infinite but perfectly concealed delight.

"If you can imagine the Corsair, whirling in a rapid redowa with Medora," Miss Oleander afterward said, "you have Mr. Walraven and myself. There were about eighty Guinares gazing enviously on, ready to poniard me, every one of them, if they dared, and if they were not such miserable little fools and cowards. When they cease to smell of bread and butter, Mr. Walraven may possibly deign to look at them."

It seemed as if the dashing Blanche had waltzed herself straight into the affections of the new-found heir, for he devoted himself to her in the most *prononcé* manner for the first three hours, and afterward led her in to supper.

Miss Blanche sailed along serene, uplifted, splendidly calm; the little belles in lace, and roses, and pearls, fluttered and twittered like angry doves; and Mme. Walraven, from the heights of her hostess-throne, looked aslant at her velvet and diamonds with uneasy old eyes.

"The last of all you should have selected," she said, waylaying her son after supper. "A woman without a heart, Carl—a modern Minerva. I have no wish to interfere with you, my son; I shall call the day happy that brings me your wife, but not Blanche Oleander—not that cold-blooded, bold-faced, overgrown grenadier."

Madame hissed out the words between a set of spiteful, false teeth, and glared, as women do glare, upon the gray-eyed Blanche. And Carl listened, and laughed sardonically.

"A woman without a heart. So much the better, mother; the less heart the more head; and I like your clever, dashing women, who are big and buxom, and able to take care of themselves. Don't forget, mother mine, I haven't proposed

to the sparkling Blanche, and I don't think I shall—to-night. You wouldn't have me fall at the feet of those mealy-winged moths fluttering around us, with heads softer than their poor little hearts—you wouldn't, I hope?"

With which Mr. Walraven went straight back to Miss Oleander and asked her to dance the lancers.

Miss Oleander, turning with ineffable calm from a bevy of rose-robed and white-robed young ladies, said, "Yes," as if Mr. Walraven was no more than any other man, and stood up to take his arm.

But there is many a slip. Miss Oleander and Mr. Walraven never danced that particular set, for just then there came a ring at the door-bell so pealing and imperious that it sounded sharply even through the noisy ball-room.

"The Marble Guest, surely," Blanche said, "and very determined to be heard."

Before the words were well uttered there was a sound of an altercation in the hall—one of the tall footmen pathetically protesting, and a shrill female voice refusing to listen to those plaintive protests. Then there suddenly fell peace.

"After a storm there cometh a calm," Mr. Walraven said. "Miss Oleander, shall we move on? Well, Johnson, what is it?"

For Johnson, the taller of the two tall footmen, stood before them gazing beseechingly at his master.

"It's a woman, sir, all wet and dirty, and horrid to look at. She says she will see you, and there she stands, and Wilson nor me we can't do nothing with her. If you don't come she says she'll walk up here and make you come. Them," said Johnson, plaintively, "were her own language."

Blanche Oleander, gazing up at her companion's face, saw it changing to a startled, dusky white.

"Some beggar—some troublesome tramp, I dare say." But he dropped her arm abruptly as he said it. "Excuse me a moment, Miss Oleander. I had better see her to prevent noise. Now, then, Johnson."

Mr. Johnson led the way down a grand, sweeping staircase, rich in gilding and carving, through a paved and vaulted hall, and out into a lofty vestibule.

There a woman stood, dripping wet and wretchedly clad, as miserable-looking a creature as ever walked the bad city streets. The flare of the gas-jets shone full upon her—upon a haggard face lighted up with two blazing eyes.

"For God's sake! Miriam!"

Carl Walraven started back, as if struck by an iron hand. The woman took a step forward and confronted him.

"Yes, Carl Walraven—Miriam! You did well too come at once. I have something to say to you. Shall I say it here?"

That was all Messrs. Johnson and Wilson ever heard, for Mr. Walraven opened the library door and waved her in, followed, and shut the door again with a sounding slam

"Now, then," he demanded, imperiously, "what do you want? I thought you were dead and—"

"Don't say that other word, Mr. Walraven; it is too forcible. You only hoped it. I am not dead. It's a great deal worse with me than that."

"What do you want?" Mr. Walraven repeated, steadily, though his swarth face was dusky gray with rage or fear, or both. "What do you come here for to-night? Has the master you serve helped you bodily, that you follow and find me even here? Are you not afraid I will throttle you for your pains?"

"Not the least."

She said it with a composure the best bred of his mother's guests could not have surpassed, standing bolt upright before him, her dusky eyes of fire burning on his face.

"I am not afraid of you, Mr. Walraven (that's your name, isn't it?—and a very fine-sounding name it is), but you're afraid of me—afraid to the core of your bitter, black heart. You stand there dressed like a king, and I stand here in rags your kitchen scullions would scorn; but for all that, Carl Walraven—for all that, you're my slave, and you know it!"

Her eyes blazed, her hands clinched, her gaunt form seemed to tower and grow tall with the sense of her triumph and her power.

"Have you anything else to say?" inquired Mr. Walraven, sullenly, "before I call my servants and have you turned out?"

"You dare not," retorted the woman, fiercely—"you dare not, coward! boaster! and you know it! I have a great deal more to say, and I will say it, and you will hear me before we part to-night. I know my power, Mr. Carl Walraven, and I mean to use it. Do you think I need wear these rags? Do you think I need tramp the black, bad streets, night after night, a homeless, houseless wretch? No; not if I chose, not if I ordered—do you hear?—*ordered* my aristocratic friend, Mr. Walraven, of Fifth Avenue, to empty his plethoric purse in

my dirty pocket. Ah, yes," with a shrill laugh, "Miriam knows her power!"

"Are you almost done?" Mr. Walraven replied, calmly. "Have you come here for anything but talk? If so, for what?"

"Not your money—be sure of that. I would starve—I would die the death of a dog in a kennel—before I would eat a mouthful of bread bought with your gold. I come for justice!"

"Justice"—he lifted a pair of sullen, inquiring eyes—"justice! To whom?"

"To one whom you have injured beyond reparation—Mary Dane!"

She hissed the name in a sharp, sibilant whisper, and the man recoiled as if an adder had stung him.

"What do you mean?" he asked, with dry, parched lips. "Why do you come here to torment me? Mary Dane is dead."

"Mary Dane's daughter lives not twenty miles from where we stand. Justice to the dead is beyond the power of even the wealthy Carl Walraven. Justice to the living can yet be rendered, and shall be to the uttermost farthing."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to find Mary Dane, and bring her here, educate her, dress her, treat as your own child."

"Where shall I find her?"

"At K——, twenty miles from here."

"Who is she? What is she?"

"An actress, traveling about with a strolling troupe; an actress since her sixth year—on the stage eleven years to-night. This is her seventeenth birthday, as you know."

"Is this all?"

"All at present. Are you prepared to obey, or shall I—"

"There!" interrupted Mr. Walraven, "that will do. There is no need of threats, Miriam—I am very willing to obey you in this. If I had known Mary Dane—why the deuce did you give her that name?—was on this continent, I would have hunted her up of my own accord. I would, upon my honor!"

"Swear by something you possess," the woman said, with a sneer; "honor you never had since I first knew you."

"Come, come, Miriam," said Mr. Walraven, uneasily, "don't be cantankerous. Let by-gones be by-gones. I'm sorry for the past—I am indeed, and am willing to do well for

the future. Sit down and be sociable, and tell me all about it. How came you to let the little one go on the stage first?"

Miriam spurned away the proffered chair.

"I spurn it as I would your dead body if it lay before me, Carl Walraven! Sit down with you? Never, if my life depended on it! The child became an actress because I could keep her no longer—I couldn't keep myself—and because she had the voice and face of an angel—poor little wretch! The manager of a band of strolling players, passing through our village, heard her baby voice singing some baby song, and pounced upon her on the instant. We struck a bargain, and I sold her, Mr. Walraven—yes, sold her."

"You wretch! Well?"

"Well, I went to see her occasionally afterward, but not often, for the strolling troupe were here, there, and everywhere—from pillar to post. But I never lost sight of her, and I saw her grow up a pretty, slender, bright-eyed lass, well dressed, well fed, and happy—perfectly happy in her wandering life. Her great-grandmother—old Peter Dane's wife—was a gypsy, Mr. Walraven, and I dare say the wild blood broke out. She liked the life, and became the star of the little band—the queen of the troupe. I kept her in view even when she crossed the Atlantic last year, and paid her a visit a week ago to-night."

"Humph!" was Carl Walraven's comment. "Well, Mistress Miriam, it might have been worse; no thanks to you, though. And now—what does she know of her own story?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing, I tell you. Her name is Mary Dane, and she is seventeen years old on the twenty-fifth of November. Her father and mother are dead—poor but honest people, of course—and I am Aunt Miriam, earning a respectable living by washing clothes and scrubbing floors. That is what she knows. How much of that is true, Mr. Walraven?"

"Then she never heard of me?"

"She has never had that misfortune yet; it has been reserved for yourself. You are a rich man, and you will go to K——, and you will see her play, and will take a fancy to her, and adopt her as your daughter. There is the skeleton for you to clothe with flesh."

"And suppose she refuses?"

"She will not refuse. She likes handsome dresses and jewelry as well as any other little fool of seventeen. You make her the offer, and my word for it, it will be accepted."

"I will go, Miriam. Upon my word I feel curious to see the witch. Who is she like, Miriam—mamma or me?"

The woman's eyes flashed fire.

"Not like you, you son of Satan! If she was I would have strangled her in her cradle! Let me go, for the air you breathe chokes me! Dare to disobey at your peril!"

"I will start for K—— to-morrow. She will be here—my adopted daughter—before the week ends."

"Good! And this old mother of yours, will she be kind to the girl? I won't have her treated badly, you understand."

"My mother will do whatever her son wishes. She would be kind to a young gorilla if I said so. Don't fear for your niece—she will be treated well."

"Let it be so, or beware! A blood-hound on your track would be less deadly than I! I will be here again, and yet again, to see for myself that you keep your word."

She strode to the door, opened it, and stood in the illuminated hall. Johnson just had time to vanish from the key-hole and no more. Down the stair-way pealed the wild, melancholy music of a German waltz; from the dining-room came the clink and jingle of silver, and china, and glass. The woman's haggard face filled with scorn and bitterness as she gave one fleeting, backward glance.

"They say there is a just and avenging Heaven, yet Carl Walraven is master of all this. Wealth, love, and honor for him, and a nameless grave for her; the streets, foul and deadly, for me. The mill of the gods may grind sure, but it grinds fearfully slow—fearfully slow!"

They were the last words Carl Walraven heard her utter. She opened the house door, gathered her threadbare shawl closer around her, and fluttered away in the wild, wet night.

CHAPTER II.

"CRICKET."

THE little provincial theater was crowded from pit to dome—long tiers of changing faces and luminous eyes. There was a prevalent odor of stale tobacco, and orange-peel, and bad gas; and there was bustle, and noise, and laughter, and a harsh collection of stringed instruments grinding out the overture.

There were stamps and calls for the tawdry curtain to rise, when a gentleman entered, sauntered up to a front seat, took up a bill and began to read it—a tall, middle-aged, rather dis-

tinguished-looking man, black and bearded, with piercing eyes, superfine clothes, and a general aristocratic air about him.

People paused to look again at him—for he was a stranger there—but nobody recognized him, and Mr. Carl Walraven read his bill undisturbed.

The play was "Fanchon the Cricket," and the bill announced, in very big capitals, that the part of Fanchon was to be played by that "distinguished and beautiful young English actress, Miss Mollie Dane."

Mr. Walraven saw no more; he sat holding the strip of paper before him, and staring at the one name as if the fat letters fascinated him—"Fanchon, Miss Mollie Dane."

A shrill-voiced bell tinkled, and the drop-curtain went up, and the household of Father Barbeaud was revealed. There was a general settling into seats, hats flew off, the noises ceased, and the play began.

A moment or two, and, in rags and tatters, hair streaming, and feet bare, on the stage bounded Fanchon, the Cricket.

There was an uproarious greeting. Evidently it was not Miss Dane's first appearance before that audience, and still more evidently she was a prime favorite.

Mr. Walraven dropped his bill, poised his lorgnette, and prepared to stare his fill.

She was very well worth looking at, this clear-voiced Mollie Dane—through the tatters and unkempt hair he could see that. The stars in the frosty November sky without were not brighter than her dark, bright eyes; no silvery music that the heir of all the Walravens had ever heard was clearer or sweeter than her free, girlish laugh; no golden sunburst ever more beautiful than the waving banner of wild, yellow hair. Mollie Dane stood before him a beauty born.

Every nerve in Carl Walraven's body thrilled as he looked at her. How lovely that face! How sweet that voice, that laugh! How eminently well she acted!

He had seen women of whom the world raved play that very part; but he had never, no, never seen it better played than he saw it to-night.

"She will make the world ring with her name if she adheres to the stage," Carl Walraven said to himself, enthusiastically; "and she never will play anything better than she plays the 'Cricket.' She is Fanchon herself—saucy, daring, generous, irresistible Fanchon! And she is beautiful as the angels above."

The play went on; Fanchon danced, and sobbed, and sung,

and wept, and was mischievous as a scratching kitten, and gentle as a turtle-dove; took all the hearts by storm, and was triumphantly reunited to her lover at last.

I don't know how many young men in that audience were left without an atom of heart, how many would have given their two ears to be in handsome Landry Barbeaud's boots.

The roof nearly rose with the thunders of applause when the curtain fell, and Carl Walraven got up with the rest, his head whirling, his brain dizzy.

"Good Heaven!" he thought, stumbling along the dark, chilly streets to his hotel, "what a perfectly dazzling little witch she is! Was there ever such another sparkling, bewildering little fairy in the world before?"

Mr. Walraven spent the night in a fever of impatience. He was one of those men who, when they set their hearts on anything, find no peace, no rest, until they obtain it. He had come here partly through curiosity, partly because he dare not refuse Miriam; he had seen Mary Dane, and lo! at first sight he was dazzled and bewitched.

Next morning, at breakfast, Mr. Walraven obtained all the information he desired concerning Miss Mollie Dane. Some half dozen of the actors were stopping at the hotel, and proved very willing, under the influence of brandy and water, to give the free-handed stranger Miss Dane's biography as far as they knew it.

She was just as charming off the stage as on; just as pretty, just as saucy, just as captivating. She was wild and full of tricks as an unbroken colt; but she was a thoroughly good girl, for all that, lavish of her money to all who needed, and snubbing lovers incontinently. She was stopping up the street at another hotel, and she would in all probability be easily accessible about noon.

The seedy, strolling players drank their diluted brandy, smoked their cigars, and told Mr. Walraven all this. They rather laughed at the New York millionaire when he was out of sight. He had fallen in love with pretty, blue-eyed Mollie, no doubt, and that was a very stale story with the shabby players.

Noon came, and, speckless and respectable to the last degree, Mr. Walraven presented himself at the other hotel, and sent up his card with a waiter to Miss Dane.

The waiter ushered him into the hotel parlor, cold and prim as it is in the nature of hotel parlors to be. Mr. Walraven sat down and stared vaguely at the papered walls, rather at a loss

as to what he should say to this piquant Mollie, and wondering how he would feel if she laughed at him.

"And she will laugh," he thought, with a mental groan; "she's the sort of girl that laughs at everything. And she may refuse, too; there is no making sure of a woman; and then what will Miriam say?"

He paused with a gasp. There was a quick patter of light feet down the stairs, the last two cleared with a jump, a swish of silken skirts, a little gush of perfume, and then, bright as a flash of light, blue-eyed Mollie stood before him. She held his card in her fingers, and all the yellow hair fell over her plump shoulders, like amber sunshine over snow.

"Mr. Carl Walraven?" Miss Dane said, with a smile and a graceful little bow.

Mr. Carl Walraven rose up and returned that pretty courtesy with a salute stiff and constrained.

"Yes, Miss Dane."

"Pray resume your seat, Mr. Walraven," with an airy wave of a little white hand. "To what do I owe this visit?"

She fluttered into a big black arm-chair as she spoke, folded the little white hands, and glanced across with brightly expectant eyes.

"You must think this call, from an utter stranger, rather singular, Miss Dane," Mr. Walraven began, considerably at a loss.

Miss Dane laughed.

"Oh, dear, no! not at all—the sort of thing I am used to, I assure you! May I ask its purport?"

"Miss Dane, you must pardon me," said Mr. Walraven, plunging desperately head first into his mission, "but I saw you play last night, and I have—yes, I have taken a violent fancy to you."

Miss Mollie Dane never flinched. The wicked sparkle in the dancing eyes grew a trifle wickeder, perhaps, but that was all.

"Yes," she said, composedly; "go on."

"You take it very coolly," remarked the gentleman, rather taken aback himself. "You don't appear the least surprised."

"Of course not! I told you I was used to it. Never knew a gentleman of taste to see me play yet and not take a violent fancy to me. Pray go on."

If Miss Dane wished, in her wickedness, to utterly disconcert her middle-aged admirer, she could not have adopted a

surer plan. For fully five minutes he sat staring in hopeless silence.

"Have you anything more to say?" queried the dauntless Mollie, pulling out her watch. "Because, if you have, you will please say it at once. My time is precious, I assure you. Rehearsal is at three, and after rehearsal there are the spangles to sew on my dress, and after that—"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Dane; I have a great deal more to say, and if you will listen you need never attend rehearsal again, and never sew on spangles any more."

"Indeed!"

The blue eyes opened very wide in a fixed, unwinking stare.

"I like you very much, Miss Dane—so much that I think it is a thousand pities you should waste your youth, and beauty, and genius on desert air. So—"

"Yes," said Miss Dane—"so you have fallen in love with me at first sight. Is that what you are trying to say?"

"No!" responded Mr. Walraven, emphatically. "I am not in the least in love with you, and never mean to be—in that way."

"Oh, in what way, then, Mr. Walraven?"

"I am a rich man, Miss Dane, and a lonely man very often, and I should like to have a daughter to cheer my old age—a daughter like you, Mistress Cricket, saucy and bright, and so pretty that it will be a pleasure only to look at her."

"And a very complimentary papa you will make. Have you no daughters of your own, Mr. Walraven?"

"None, Miss Mollie. I have the misfortune to have no wife."

"And never mean to have?"

"Can't say about that. I may one day."

"And you are quite sure you will never want me to fill that vacant honor?"

"Surer than sure, my dear little girl. I want you only for my adopted daughter."

"And you never saw me before last night?"

"Never," said Carl Walraven, unflinchingly.

"You are a very rich man, you say?"

"Very rich—a millionaire—and you shall be my heiress when I die."

"I am afraid I shall be a very long time out of my inheritance, then. Well, this is a surprise, and you are the oddest gentleman I have met for some time. Please let me catch my

breath! You are quite certain you are not playing a practical joke at my expense all this time?"

"No! upon my word and honor, no! I mean precisely what I say."

"And supposing I say yes—supposing I agree to go with you, for the fun of the thing, what do you mean to do with me, Mr. Walraven?"

"To treat you as I would a Miss Walraven of seventeen years old, if there were such a person; to fill your pockets with money, and your wardrobe with fine clothes; to give you a horse to ride, and a piano to play, a carriage to drive in, and a waiting-maid to scold. What more can I do? I will give you masters to teach you everything under the sun. Balls, parties, and the opera at will—everything, in short, your heart can desire."

The starry eyes sparkled, the rose-tinted cheeks flushed with delight.

"I can not believe it; it is too good to be true. Oh, you can't mean it, Mr. Walraven. No one ever had their wildest flight of fancy realized in this manner."

"You shall if you will become my daughter. If my promise proves false, are you not free to return? There are no ogres nowadays to carry young ladies off to enchanted palaces and eat them. Come with me to my home in New York. If I fail in aught I have promised, why, return here."

Mollie brought her two little palms together with an enthusiastic slap.

"I'll do it, Mr. Walraven! I know it's all a dream and an illusion, but still I'll see the dream to the end; that is, if you can make it all right with Mr. Harkner, the manager."

"I can make it all right!" exclaimed Mr. Walraven. "Money can do anything under the sun. He has his price, like other men, and I can pay it. If Mr. Harkner and I come to terms, will you be ready to start with me to-morrow, Mollie?"

"Quite ready. But you won't make it right. He will never let me go; you will see."

"I am not afraid. I will call upon him at once, and after the interview I will let you know the result. He is in the house now, is he not?"

"Down at the bar, very likely. I will wait for you here."

Mr. Walraven took his hat and left, delighted with his success.

The manager was at the bar, as Miss Dane had predicted,

and eyed Mr. Walraven suspiciously from head to foot when he found his business concerned his star actress.

He was accustomed to gentlemen falling in love with her, and quite willing to take little bribes from them; but he stared in angry amazement when he heard what Carl Walraven had to say.

"Carry off Mollie!" exclaimed Mr. Harkner, "and adopt her as your daughter! What do you take me for, to believe such a story as that?"

Mr. Harkner was pretty far gone, and all the more inclined to be skeptical. Mr. Walraven saw it, and knew that appearances were dead against him, and so swallowed his wrath.

"It is the truth, upon my honor. Miss Dane believes me and has consented. Nothing remains but to settle matters with you."

"I won't settle matters! I won't hear of it! I won't part with my best actress!"

"Yes you will for a fair price. Come, name the sum; I'll pay it."

Mr. Harkner opened his eyes. Mr. Walraven opened his check-book.

"You do mean it, then?"

"Don't I look as if I meant it? Quick, I say! If you don't look sharp I will take her without any price!"

"She's a priceless treasure!" hiccoughed the manager—"worth her weight in gold to me, and so—"

He named a sum that made even Carl Walraven wince; but he was a great deal too reckless to draw back.

"It is a most cold-blooded extortion," he said; "but you shall have it. And at your peril you ever interfere with my adopted daughter afterward."

He signed the check and flung it to the manager, turned and went out, and left that individual staring in blank bewilderment.

Golden-haired Mollie was pacing impatiently up and down the parlor when Mr. Walraven walked in again, his face aglow with triumph.

"It is all right, Mollie. I told you I was more than a match for your manager. You have trod the boards for the last time."

"Excuse me, Mr. Walraven; I am going to tread the boards again to-night. It is Cricket still. Don't you want to be enchanted once more?"

"Just as you please. Once is neither here now there.

But you will be ready for the eight A. M. train to-morrow, Mollie?"

"I have promised, Mr. Walraven, and I always keep my word. So Mr. Harkner has consented? Now, that is not flattering, is it? What winning ways you must possess to make all the world do as you say!"

Mr. Walraven held up his purse, gold shining through its silken meshes.

"Behold the magic key to every heart, Cricket! Here, you shall be my purse-bearer now."

He tossed it into her lap. Mollie's blue eyes sparkled. She was only seventeen, poor child, and she liked money for what money brought.

"I shall leave you now," Mr. Walraven said, looking at his watch. "Three o'clock, Mollie, and time for rehearsal. I shall go and see Cricket to-night, and to-morrow morning Cricket must be ready to go with me. Until then, my adopted daughter, adieu!"

That night, when the green curtain went up, the strange gentleman sat in the front seat for the second time, and gazed on the antics of Fanchon, the Cricket.

The girl played it well, because she played her own willful, tricky self, and she kissed her taper fingers to the enraptured audience, and felt sorry to think it might be for the last time.

Next morning, as demure as a little nun, in her traveling suit of gray, Miss Cricket took her seat beside her new-made guardian, and was whirled away to New York.

"Pray, what am I to call you?" she asked, as they sat side by side. "Am I to keep at a respectful distance, and say 'Mr. Walraven,' or, as I am your adopted daughter, is it to be papa?"

"Well, Cricket, personally I have no objection, of course; but, then, 'papa'—don't you think 'papa' might set people asking questions, now?"

"Very true; and some clever person might get investigating, and find out you were my papa in reality."

"Mollie!" said Mr. Walraven, wincing.

"That's the way in the melodramas, you see, and you are very like the hero of a five-act melodrama. Well, Mr. Walraven, decide what I shall call you!"

"Suppose you say guardian. That will hit the mark, I think. And we will tell people who ask troublesome questions that you are the orphan daughter of a dead cousin of mine. What do you say?"

"As you please, of course. It is all one to me."

The train thundered into the depot presently, and there was the usual turmoil and uproar. Mr. Walraven called a cab, and half an hour's rattling over the stony streets brought them to the Walraven mansion.

Mollie Dane, accustomed all her life to dingy hotels and lodgings, glanced up at the grand staircase and imposing hall in rapturous surprise. Mme. Walraven stood graciously waiting to receive her.

"Here's a granddaughter for you, mother," said Mr. Walraven—"a companion to cheer and brighten your future life. My adopted daughter—Mollie Dane."

The stately old lady bent and kissed the bright, fresh face.

"I am very happy to welcome you, my dear, and will try heartily to make your new home pleasant. You are tired, of course? Here, Margaret, show Miss Dane to her room."

A spruce waiting-maid appeared at the old lady's summons, and led Miss Dane, through carpeted corridors, into the daintiest of dainty bed-chambers, all blue silk and white lace drapery, and rich furniture, and exquisite pictures.

In all her life long, Mollie had never beheld anything half so beautiful, and she caught her breath with one little cry of delight.

"Shall I help you, miss?" very respectfully asked the girl. "I'm to be your maid, please, and luncheon will be ready by the time you are dressed."

Miss Dane permitted her to remove her traveling-dress in ecstatic silence, and robe her in azure silk, just a shade less blue than her eyes.

Very, very pretty she looked, with all her loose golden ringlets, and that brilliant flush on either cheek; and so Mrs. Walraven and her son thought when she appeared, like a radiant vision, in the dining-room.

The afternoon and evening went like a swift dream of delight in viewing the house and its splendors. She retired early, with a kiss from guardian and grandmamma, her head in a whirl with the events of the day.

Margaret's tasks were very light that night; her little mistress did not detain her ten minutes. When she had gone, and she was fairly alone, Mollie sprung up and went whirling round the room in a dance of delight.

"To think of it!" she cried—"to think all my wildest dreams should come true like this, and my life go on like a fairy tale! There is Mr. Walraven, the good genii of the story; Mrs. Walraven, the old but well-meaning fairy godmother; and I'm Cinderella, with the tatters and rags turned

to cloth of gold, and nothing to do but wait at my ease for the fairy prince, and marry him when he comes. Cricket! Cricket! you're the luckiest witch's granddaughter that ever danced to her own shadow!"

CHAPTER III.

MR. WALRAVEN'S WEDDING.

MOLLIE DANE made herself very much at home at once in the magnificent Walraven mansion. The dazzle of its glories scarcely lasted beyond the first day, or, if it did, nobody saw it. Why, indeed, should she be dazzled? She, who had been Lady Macbeth, and received the Thane of Cawdor at her own gates; who had been Juliet, the heiress of all the Capulets; who had seen dukes and nobles snubbed unmercifully every night of her life by virtuous poverty, on the stage. Before the end of the first week Mollie had become the light of the house, perfectly indispensable to the happiness of its inmates.

Miss Dane was launched into society at a dinner-party given for the express purpose by "grandmamma." Wondrously pretty looked the youthful *débutante*, in silvery silk and misty lace and pearls, her eyes like blue stars, her cheeks like June roses.

In the wintery dusk of the short December days, Mrs. Walraven received her guests in the library, an imposing room, oak-paneled, crimson-draped, and filled from floor to ceiling with a noble collection of books. Great snow-flakes fluttered against the plate glass, and an icy blast howled up the avenue, but in the glittering dining-room flowers bloomed, and birds sung, and tropical fruits perfumed the air; and radiant under the gas-light, beautiful Miss Dane flashed the light of her blue eyes, and looked like some lovely little sprite from fairy-land.

Miss Blanche Oleander, darkly majestic in maize silk and jewels, sat at Miss Dane's right hand, and eyed her coldly with jealous dislike. Mollie read her through at the first glance.

"She hates me already," thought Mr. Walraven's ward; "and your tall women, with flashing black eyes and blue-black hair, are apt to be good haters. Very well, Miss Oleander; it shall be just as you like."

A gentleman sat on her other hand—a handsome young artist—Mr. Hugh Ingelow, and he listened with an attentive face, while she held her own with the sarcastic Blanche, and rather got the best of the battle.

"The little beauty is no dunce," thought Mr. Hugh Ingelow. "Miss Blanche has found a foe worthy of her best steel."

And coming to this conclusion, Mr. Ingelow immediately began making himself agreeable to his fair neighbor. Miss Oleander was a pet aversion of his own, and this bond of union drew him and her saucy little antagonist together at once.

"Rather a sharp set-to, Miss Dane," the artist remarked, in his lazy voice. "Miss Oleander is a clever woman, but she is matched at last. I wonder why it is? You two ought to be good friends."

He glanced significantly at Mr. Walraven, devoting himself to Miss Oleander, and Mollie gave her white shoulders a little shrug.

"If we ought, we never will be. Coming events cast their shadows before, and I know I shall detest a guardianess. Who is that brigandish-looking gentleman over there, Mr. Ingelow? He has been staring at me steadily for the last ten minutes."

"Lost in speechless admiration, no doubt. That gentleman is the celebrated Doctor Oleander, own cousin to the fair Blanche."

The gentleman in question certainly was staring, but his staring was interrupted at this moment by a general uprising and retreat to the drawing-room. Mr. Ingelow, on whose arm she leaned, led her to the piano at once.

"You sing, I know—Mrs. Walraven has told me. Pray favor us with one song before some less gifted performer secures this vacant seat."

"What shall it be?" Mollie asked, running her white fingers over the keys.

"Whatever you please—whatever you like best. I shall be sure to like it."

Mollie sung brilliantly, and sung her best now. There was dead silence; no one had expected such a glorious voice as this. Hugh Ingelow's rapt face showed what he felt as Mollie rose.

"Miss Dane ought to go upon the stage; she would make her fortune," said a deep voice at her elbow.

She turned sharply round and met the dark, sinister eyes and pale face of Dr. Oleander.

"Miss Dane forgets me," he said, with a low bow, "among so many presentations. Will you kindly reintroduce me, Mr. Ingelow?"

Mr. Ingelow obeyed with no very good grace; the sparkling,

blue-eyed coquette had made wild work with his artist heart already.

"Mrs. Walraven desired me to bring you to her for a moment," the suave doctor said, offering his arm. "May I have the honor?"

Mr. Ingelow's eyes flashed angrily, and Mollie, seeing it, and being a born coquette, took the proffered arm at once.

It was the merest trifle grandmamma wanted, but it served the doctor's turn—he had got the beauty of the evening, and he meant to keep her.

Mollie listened to his endless flow of complimentary small-talk just as long as she chose, and then glided coolly away to flirt with a third adorer, the eminent young lawyer, Mr. Joseph Sardonyx.

Mollie hovered between those three the livelong evening; now it was the handsome artist, now the polished doctor, now the witty, satirical lawyer, flirting in the most unpardonable manner.

Even Mr. Walraven was a little shocked, and undertook, in the course of the evening, to expostulate.

"Flirting is all very well, Mollie," he said, "but it really mustn't be carried too far. People are beginning to make remarks."

"Are they?" said Mollie; "about which of us, pray? for really and truly, guardy, you have been flirting the worst of the two."

"Nonsense, Mollie! You mean Miss Oleander, I suppose? That is no flirtation."

"Indeed! then it is worse—it is serious?"

"Yes, if asking her to marry me be serious. And she has said yes, Mollie."

Miss Dane looked at him compassionately.

"You poor, unfortunate guardy! And you are really going to marry Blanche Oleander! Well, one comfort is, you will be ready to blow your brains out six months after; and serve you right, too! Don't let us talk about it to-night. I am sorry for you, and if you have any sense left you will soon be sorry for yourself. Here comes Doctor Oleander, and I mean to be as fascinating as I know how, just to drive the other two to the verge of madness."

She danced away, leaving Mr. Walraven pulling his mustache, a picture of helpless perplexity.

"I wonder if I have put my foot in it?" he thought, as he looked across the long room to where Blanche stood, the brilliant center of a brilliant group. "She is very handsome

and very clever—so clever that I don't for the life of me know whether I made love to her or she to me. It is too late now for anything but a wedding or heavy damages, and of the two evils I prefer the first."

Mrs. Walraven's dinner-party broke up very late, and Blanche Oleander went home with her cousin.

"A pert, forward, bold-faced minx!" Miss Oleander burst out, the moment they were alone in the carriage. "Guy, what on earth did you mean by paying her such marked attention all evening?"

"What did Carl Walraven mean by paying *you* such marked attention all evening?" retorted her cousin.

"Mr. Walraven is no flirt—he means marriage."

"And I am no flirt—I mean marriage also."

"Guy, are you mad? Marry that nameless, brazen creature?"

"Blanche, be civil! Most assuredly I will marry her if she will marry me."

"Then you will repent it all the days of your life."

"Probably. I think I heard Miss Dane making a similar remark to your affianced about you."

"The impertinent little wretch! Let her wait until I am Mr. Walraven's wife!"

"Vague and terrible! When is it to be?"

"The wedding? Next month."

"Poor Walraven! There, Blanche, don't flash up, pray! When you are married you will want to get blue-eyed Mollie off your hands, so please transfer her to me, little flash of lightning that she is! I always did like unbroken colts for the pleasure of taming them."

Mrs. Walraven was told of her son's approaching marriage the day after the dinner-party; disapproved, but said nothing. Mollie disapproved, and said everything.

"It's of no use talking now, Mollie!" her guardian exclaimed, impatiently. "I must and will marry Blanche."

"And, oh! what a pitiable object you will be twelve months after! But I'll never desert you—never strike my flag to the conqueress. 'The boy stood on the burning deck.' I'll be a second Casi—what you may call him? to you. I'll be bride-maid now, and your protector from the lovely Blanche in the future."

She kept her word. In spite of Miss Oleander's dislike, she was first bride-maid when the eventful day arrived.

But fairer than the bride, fairest of the rosy bevy of bride-

maids, shone blue-eyed Mollie Dane. A party of speechless admirers stood behind, chief among them Hugh Ingelow.

The bridal party were drawn up before the surpliced clergyman, and "Who giveth this woman?" had been asked and answered, and the service was proceeding in due order when there was a sudden commotion at the door.

Some one rushed impetuously in, and a voice that rang through the lofty edifice shouted:

"Stop! I forbid the marriage!"

Carl Walraven whirled round aghast. The bride shrieked; the bride-maids echoed the bride in every note of the gamut—all save Mollie; and she, like the bridegroom, had recognized the intruder.

For, tall and gaunt as one of Macbeth's witches, there stood the woman Miriam!

CHAPTER IV.

MOLLIE'S CONQUEST.

THERE was a blank pause; every eye fixed on the towering form of the specter-like woman.

"I forbid the marriage!" exclaimed Miriam. "Clergyman, on your peril you unite those two!"

"The woman is mad!" cried Carl Walraven, white with rage. "Men, turn her out!"

"Stop!" said Mollie—"stop one moment. I know this woman, and will see what she means."

No one interfered; every one gazed in breathless interest as Miss Dane quitted her post and confronted the haggard apparition. The woman uttered a cry at sight of her, and caught her impetuously by the arm.

"Mad girl! have you forgotten what I told you? Would you marry that man?"

"Marry what man? What do you mean? I am not going to marry any man to-day. It is you who have gone mad, I think."

"Why, then, do you wear those bridal robes?"

"Bride-maid robes, if you please. Gracious me, Miriam, you didn't think I was going to marry Mr. Walraven, did you?"

Miriam passed her hand over her brow with a bewildered air.

"Whom, then, is it, if not you?"

"Miss Blanche Olcander, of course, as any one could have

told you, if you had taken the trouble to ask before rushing in here and making a scene."

"I only heard last night he was to be married," Miriam said, with a bewildered face, "and took it for granted that it must be you."

"Then you must have had a poorer opinion of my taste than I should have thought it possible for you to have. Come in and beg everybody's pardon, and tell them it was all a shocking mistake."

"One word first: Are you well and happy?"

"Perfectly well, and happy as a queen. Come on; there is no time to lose. People are staring dreadfully, and the bride is glaring with rage. Quick—come!"

She flitted back to her place, and Miriam, stepping forward, addressed the assembly:

"I ask your pardon, ladies and gentlemen. I have made a mistake. I thought the bride was Miss Dane. I beg the ceremony will proceed."

She pulled a veil she wore down over her gaunt face, and with the last word hurried out and disappeared. Mr. Walraven, suppressing his rage, turned to the minister.

"Proceed!" he said, impatiently, "and make haste."

The bride, very white with anger and mortification, resumed her place; the ceremony recommenced. This time there was no interruption, and in ten minutes the twain were one flesh.

Half an hour later they were back at the Walraven mansion to eat the wedding-breakfast, and then the new-made Mrs. Walraven, with an eye that flashed and a voice that rang, turned upon her liege lord and demanded an explanation. Mr. Walraven shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"My dearest Blanche, I have none to give. The woman must be mad. Speak to Mollie."

"Carl Walraven, do not dare to deceive me on my wedding-day. You know more of this than you choose to say."

"Mrs. Walraven, do not raise your angel voice to such a pitch for nothing. I said before, speak to Mollie. I say again, speak to Mollie; and here she is."

"So she is," said Miss Dane, sauntering in. "Do you want me to allay a post-nuptial storm already? Auspicious beginning! What is it?"

"Who was that woman?" demanded the bride.

"A very old friend of mine, madame."

"Why did she come to the church and try to stop the marriage?"

"Because she thought I was the bride. She said so, didn't

she? And being very well acquainted with me, she was moved with compassion for the deluded man and came to warn him in time. I explained her little mistake, as you saw, and she apologized handsomely, and—exit, Miriam. Isn't that satisfactory?"

"Are you speaking the truth?"

Miss Dane laid her hand upon her heart, and bowed profoundly.

"Doesn't Mr. Walraven know her?"

"That is a question I can not take it upon myself to answer. Mr. Walraven is of age. Let him speak for himself."

"I told you before," said the bridegroom, angrily. "Let us have no more about it, Blanche, or I may chance to lose my temper."

He turned on his heel and walked off whistling, and the bride, in her snowy robes and laces, went down to breakfast, trying vainly to clear her stormy brow. Mollie puckered up her rosy lips into a shrill whistle.

"And this is their wedding-day! I told him how it would be, but of course nobody ever minds what I say. Poor guardy! what ever would become of him traveling alone with that woman! How thankful he ought to be that he has me to go along and take care of him!"

For Mollie had made it an express stipulation, contrary to all precedent, that she was to accompany the happy pair on their bridal tour. Miss Oleander's ante-nuptial objections had been faint; Mrs. Walraven, less scrupulous, turned upon her husband at the eleventh hour, just previous to starting, and insisted that she should be left at home.

"It will be ridiculous in the extreme," exclaimed the bride, "having your ward traveling with us! Let her remain at home with your mother."

Mr. Walraven looked his bride steadfastly in the eye for a moment, then sat down deliberately.

"Look here, Mrs. Walraven," said Mr. Walraven, perfectly cool, "you have made a little mistake, I fancy. Permit me to rectify it. Wearing the breeches is a vulgar expression, I am aware, and only admissible in low circles; still, it so forcibly expresses what I am trying to express, that you will allow me to use it. You are trying to don the inexpressibles, Blanche, but it won't do. My ward goes with us on our bridal tour, or there shall be no bridal tour at all. There! you have it in plain English, Mrs. Carl Walraven!"

Five minutes later Mr. and Mrs. Walraven descended to the carriage, Mrs. Walraven with her veil drawn down, and mak-

ing her adieus in a smothered sort of voice. Mr. Walraven handed in his ward next, then followed; the coachman flourished his whip and they were gone.

The happy pair were merely going to Washington. Mr. Walraven had had a surfeit of Europe, and Washington, this sparkling winter weather, was at its gayest and best. The Walraven party, with plethoric purses, plunged into the midst of the gayety at once.

"I like this sort of thing," said Mollie to her guardian; "the theater, and the opera, and a ball, and two or three parties every night. I like dancing until broad daylight, and going to bed at six in the morning, and getting up to breakfast at one. I like matinées at three in the afternoon, and dinners with seventeen courses, and going to the White House, and shaking hands with the President, and sailing around the East Room, and having people point me out as the beauty of the season. It's new and it's nice, and I never get tired, or pale, or limpy, like most of the girls. I never enjoyed myself so much in my life, and you would say the same thing, guardy, only you're in your honey-moon, and not capable of enjoying anything."

"But, Mollie," Mr. Walraven remonstrated, "it isn't right to flirt so much as you do. There's young Ingelow. The way you devoted yourself to that young man last night set everybody talking."

"Let 'em talk," responded Miss Dane, loftily. "When Mr. Ingelow followed me all the way from New York, I think it was the very least I could do in common politeness. He found it a waste and howling wilderness without me—yes, he did; he said so. And then, Mr. Walraven, I like him."

"You like him?"

"Yes, ever and ever so much; and I'm dreadfully sorry for him, because I know he'll break his heart when I refuse him."

"He hasn't proposed yet, then?"

"Not yet, but I expect it shortly. I know the symptoms. He looked almost as sheepish last night as you used to before you proposed to Miss Oleander."

It was quite true; the handsome young artist had followed Miss Dane to Washington. He had hardly known how much he was in love with her until she was gone, and all young-ladydom grew flat, stale, and insipid as dish-water.

Mr. Ingelow, of rather an indolent temperament, disposed to take things easy and let the world slide, was astonished

himself at the sudden heat and ardor this little girl with the sunny smile had created within him.

"It isn't her beauty," thought the handsome artist, "although she is pretty as an angel; it isn't her blue eyes and her golden hair, for I see blue eyes and golden hair every day of my life, and never give them a second thought; it isn't her singing or dancing, for half the girls I know sing and dance as well; and it can't be her spirited style of conversation, for that's not so very new, either. Then what is it?"

Mr. Ingelow, at this point, always fell into such a morass of pros and cons that his brain grew dazed, and he gave the problem up altogether. But the great, incontrovertible fact remained—he was headlong in love with Mollie, and had followed her to Washington expressly to tell her so.

"For if I wait, and she returns to New York," mused Mr. Ingelow, "I will have Oleander and Sardonyx both neck and neck in the race. Here there is a fair field and no favor, and here I will try my luck."

But Mr. Ingelow was mistaken, for here in his "fair field" appeared the most formidable rival he could possibly have had —a rival who seemed likely to eclipse himself and Oleander and Sardonyx at one fell swoop.

At the presidential levees, on public promenades and drives, Miss Dane had noticed a tall, white-haired, aristocratic-looking gentleman attentively watching her as if fascinated. Every place she appeared in public this distinguished-looking gentleman hovered in the background like her shadow.

"Who is that venerable old party," she demanded, impatiently, "that haunts me like an uneasy ghost? Can I be a lost daughter of his, with a strawberry mark somewhere, or do I bear an unearthly resemblance to some lovely being he murdered in early life? Who is he?"

And the answer came, nearly taking away Cricket's breath: "Sir Roger Trajenna, the great Welsh baronet, worth nobody knows how many millions, and with castles by the dozen in his own land of mountains."

It was Mr. Ingelow who gave her the information, and the occasion was a brilliant ball. Mollie had often heard of the Welsh baronet, but this was the first time she had encountered him at a ball or party.

"I thought that Sir Roger Trajenna never accepted invitations," she said, opening and shutting her fan. "This is the first time I ever saw him at a private party."

"I think I know the reason," responded Mr. Ingelow.

"Rumor sets him down as the last in Miss Dane's list of killed and wounded."

"So I have heard," said Mollie, coolly; "but it is too good to be true. I should dearly love to be my lady and live in a Welsh castle."

"With sixty-five years and a hoary head for a husband?"

"How painfully accurate you are! With his countless millions and his ancestral castles, what does a little disparity of years signify?"

"Miss Dane," asked Mr. Ingelow, very earnestly, "would you accept that old man if he asked you?"

"My dear Mr. Ingelow, what a dreadfully point-blank question! So very embarrassing! I thought you knew better!"

"I beg your pardon. But, Miss Dane, as a sincere friend, may I ask an answer?"

"Well, then, as a friend, I can't say for certain, but I am afraid—I am very much afraid I would say—"

"Miss Dane, permit me!" exclaimed a voice at her elbow—"Sir Roger Trajenna, Miss Dane."

Miss Dane turned calmly round to her hostess and *the* guest of the evening, and graciously received the venerable baronet's profound bow. At the same instant the music of a waltz struck up, to the jealous artist's infinite relief.

"Now, then, Miss Dane, if you are ready," said Mr. Ingelow, rather imperiously.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ingelow," replied Miss Dane, with infinite calm; "I am really too much fatigued for this waltz. Sir Roger, some one is singing yonder. I should like to hear him."

And under Mr. Ingelow's angry eyes, she took the enraptured old baronet's arm and walked away.

"The hoary dotard!" muttered the artist, glaring and grinding his teeth; "the sixty-five-year-old imbecile! It is the first time I ever heard her decline a waltz under the plea of fatigue. She's a heartless coquette, that Mollie Dane, and I am a fool to waste a second thought upon her."

Miss Dane danced no more that evening, and Sir Roger never left her side. She talked to him until his old eyes sparkled; she smiled upon him until his brain swam with delight.

And that was but the beginning. The torments Mr. Hugh Ingelow suffered for the ensuing two weeks words are too weak to describe. To cap the climax, Dr. Oleander suddenly ap-

peared upon the scene and glowered under bent black brows at coquettish Mollie.

"The idea of being civil to anything so commonplace as a mere doctor," Miss Dane said to her guardian, when taken to task for the airs she assumed, "when Welsh baronets are ready to go down on their knees and worship the ground I walk on! If he doesn't like the way he is treated, he knows the way back to New York. I never sent for him to come here."

Sir Roger's devotion was inexpressible. No wonder Mollie was dazzled. The city was on the *qui vive*. The piquant little New York beauty, whom the men adored and the women abused, had caught the golden prize. Would he really ask her to become Lady Trajenna, or would the glamour wear off and leave the saucy little flirt stranded high and dry?

The last night of Mr. Walraven's stay in Washington settled that question. They were at a grand reception, Mrs. Walraven magnificent in moiré and diamonds, and Mollie floating about in a cloud of misty pink, and sparkling pearls, and amber tresses. There, of course, was Sir Roger, and there (also, of course) were Dr. Oleander and Hugh Ingelow in a state of frantic jealousy.

It had come, long ere this, to be a settled thing that the Welsh baronet should never leave her side, except while she was dancing. So that when, a little before supper, they strolled out on the piazza, it was nothing surprising or remarkable.

The winter night was windless and mild. Sir Roger's asthmatic and rheumatic afflictions were quite safe in the warm atmosphere. Moonlight flooded everything with its misty glory, stars spangled the sky, music came softened by distance from the ball-room—all was conducive to love and to love-making. Sir Roger Trajenna, inspired by the music, the moonlight, and the charming little beauty beside him, there and then laid name, heart, and fortune at Miss Dane's fair feet.

There was a pause. Even Mollie felt a little fluttered, now that the time had come.

"I know the disparity of years is great," the baronet said, quite trembling in his eagerness; "but my whole existence will be devoted to you; every pleasure wealth can purchase shall be yours; every wish that I can anticipate shall be anticipated. You will be my darling, my idol. I love you passionately. Say not, then, I am too old."

"I don't," said Mollie—"I don't mind your age in the

least. I rather dislike young men; I've had such a surfeit of them."

"Then I may hope?" breathlessly.

"Oh, yes, Sir Roger, you may hope. I am not in love with anybody else that I know of."

"And you will be my wife?"

"Ah, that's another thing! I don't seem to care about being married, somehow. You must give me time, Sir Roger. Come, let us go in to supper. I will tell you by and by."

"As you please, my beautiful Mollie. Only don't keep me waiting too long, and let your answer be 'yes' when it comes."

Miss Dane partook of supper with a very good appetite, accepted Mr. Ingelow for a waltz and Dr. Oleander for a quadrille, smiled sweetly and graciously upon both, and took Sir Roger's arm, at the close of the ball, for the carriage.

"Well, Miss Dane—Mollie!" the baronet said, eagerly, "have you decided? What is it to be—yes or no?"

And Mollie looked up in his face with those starry, azure eyes, and that bewildering smile, and answered sweetly:

"Yes!"

CHAPTER V.

MOLLIE'S MISCHIEF.

MISS DANE returned to New York "engaged," and with the fact known to none save herself and the enraptured Welshman.

"There is no need to be in a hurry," the young lady said to her elderly adorer; "and I want to be safely at home before I overwhelm them with the news. There is always such fussing and talking made over engagements, and an engagement is dreadfully humdrum and dowdyish anyhow."

That was what Miss Dane said. What she thought was entirely another matter.

"I do want Doctor Oleander and Mr. Sardonyx to propose; and if they discover I've accepted the baronet, they won't. I am dying to see the wry faces they will make over 'No, thanks!' Then there is Hugh Ingelow—"

But Mollie's train of wicked thoughts was apt to break off at this point, and a remorseful expression cloud her blue eyes.

"Poor Hugh! Poor fellow! It's a little too bad to treat him so; and he's dreadfully fond of me, too. But, then, it's impossible to help it; of course it is. I want to be rich, and

wear diamonds, and travel over the world, and be 'My Lady!' and poor, dear Hugh couldn't keep a cat properly. Ah! what a pity all the nice men, and the handsome men, must be poor!"

Faithfully in the train of the Walraven party returned Mollie's adorers. No one was surprised at the continued devotion of Messrs. Ingelow and Oleander; but every one was surprised at Sir Roger Trajenna.

"Is it possible that proud old man has really fallen seriously in love with that yellow-haired, flighty child?" asked Mrs. Carl Walraven in angry surprise. "He was attentive at Washington, certainly; but I fancied his absurd old eyes were only caught for the moment. If it should prove serious, what a thing it will be for her! and these antediluvians, in their dotage, will do such ridiculous things. My Lady Trajenna! Detestable little minx! I should like to poison her!"

Miss Dane carried on her flirtations, despite her engagement, with her three more youthful admirers.

Now and then Sir Roger, looking on with doting, but disapproving eyes, ventured on a feeble remonstrance.

"It is unfair to yourself and unfair to me, my darling," he said. "Every smile you bestow upon them is a stab to me. Do let me speak to Mr. Walraven, and end it at once."

But still Mollie refused to consent.

"No, no, Sir Roger; let me have my own way a little longer. There is no need of your being jealous. I don't care a straw for the three of them. Only it is such fun. Wait a little longer."

Of course the fair-haired despot had her way.

The second week of their return Mr. and Mrs. Walraven were "at home" to their friends, and once more the spacious halls and stair-ways were ablaze with illumination, and the long ranges of rooms, opening one into another, were radiant with light, and flowers, and music, and brilliant ladies.

Mrs. Walraven, superb in her bridal robes, stood beside her husband, receiving their guests. And Miss Mollie Dane, in shimmering silk, that blushed as she walked, and clusters of water-lilies drooping from her tinseled curls, was as lovely as Venus rising from the sea-foam.

Here, there, everywhere, she flashed like a gleam of light; waltzing with the dreamy-eyed artist, Hugh Ingelow, hanging on the arm of Dr. Oleander, chattering like a magpie with Lawyer Sardonyx, and anon laughing at all three with Sir Roger Trajenna.

You might as well have tried to regulate the vagaries of a

comet—as well guess from what quarter the fickle wind would next blow.

"Women are all puzzles," said Dr. Oleander, in quiet despair to Mrs. Walraven. "That is a truism long and tried; but, by Jove! Miss Mollie Dane puts the toppers on the lot. I never met with such a bewildering sprite."

"Odious, artful creature!" hissed the bride of Carl Walraven. "It is all her crafty scheming to attract the attention of that hoary-headed simpleton, Sir Roger Trajenna. If you are in love with her, Guy (and how you can is a mystery to me), why don't you propose at once?"

"Because I am afraid, madame."

"Afraid!" scornfully—"afraid of a goosey girl of seventeen! I never took you for a born idiot before, Guy Oleander."

"Thanks, my fair relative! But it is quite as disagreeable to be refused by a 'goosey girl of seventeen' as by a young lady of seven-and-twenty. Your age, my dear Blanche, is it not?"

"Never mind my age!" retorted Mrs. Walraven, sharply. "My age has nothing to do with it. If you don't ask Mollie Dane to-night, Hugh Ingelow or James Sardonyx will to-morrow, and the chances are ten to one she accepts the first one who proposes."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Oh, for the sake of being engaged, being a heroine, being talked about. She likes to be talked about, this bewildering fairy of yours. She isn't in love with any of you; that I can see. It isn't in her shallow nature, I suppose, to be in love with anybody but her own precious self."

"My dear Mrs. Walraven, are you not a little severe? Poor, blue-eyed Mollie! And you think, if I speak to-night, I stand a chance?"

"A better chance than if you defer it. She may say 'yes' on the impulse of the moment. If she does, trust me to make her keep her word."

"How?"

"That is my affair. Ah! what was that?"

The cousins were standing near one of the long, richly draped windows, and the silken hangings had fluttered suddenly.

"Nothing but the wind," replied Dr. Oleander, carelessly. "Very well, Blanche, I take you at your word. I will ask Mollie to-night."

Mrs. Walraven nodded, and turned to go.

"Ask her as quickly as possible. You are to dance the polka quadrille with her, are you not? After the polka quadrille, then. And now let us part, or they will begin to think we are hatching another Gunpowder Plot."

"Or Mr. Carl Walraven may be jealous," suggested Dr. Oleander, with an unpleasant laugh. "I say, Blanche, the golden-haired Mollie couldn't be his daughter, could she?"

Mrs. Walraven's black eyes flashed.

"Whoever she is, the sooner she is out of this house the better. I hate her, Doctor Oleander—your Fair One with the Golden Locks, and I could go to her funeral with the greatest pleasure!"

The plotting pair separated. Hardly were they gone when the silken curtains parted and a bright face, framed in yellow ringlets, peeped out, sparkling with mischief.

"Two women in one house, two cats over one mouse, never agree," quoth Mollie. "Listeners never hear any good of themselves, but, oh! the opportunity was irresistible. So Doctor Guy Oleander is going to propose, and Mollie Dane is to say 'yes' on the impulse of the moment, and Mamma Blanche is to make her stick to her word! And it's all to happen after the polka quadrille! Very well; I'm ready. If Doctor Oleander and his cousin don't find their match, my name's not Mollie!"

Miss Dane consulted her jeweled tablets, and discovered that the polka quadrille was the very next in order.

Shaking out her rosy skirts, she fluttered away, mercilessly bent on manslaughter. Every one made way for the daughter of the house, and in a moment she was beside Dr. Oleander, holding up the inlaid tablets, and smiling her brightest in his dazzled eyes.

"Such disgraceful conduct, Doctor Oleander! I have been searching for you everywhere. I appeal to you, Colonel Marshland; he engaged me for this quadrille. There is the music now, and he leaves me to hunt the house for him."

"Unpardonable," said the gallant colonel. "At his age I should have known better. Oleander, make your peace if you can."

The colonel made his bow, and then he walked away.

Dr. Oleander drew her arm inside his own, bending very low over the sparkling sprite.

"You are not implacable, I trust, Miss Mollie. It was all the colonel's fault, I assure you."

Mollie shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course you say so. Oh, don't wear that imploring

face! I forgive you; but sin no more. There! they are waiting—come!"

All through the dance Miss Dane sparkled as she had never sparkled before. Ere the quadrille was over, Dr. Oleander was ten fathoms deeper in love than ever.

"It is so very hot here!" Mollie exclaimed, impatiently—"perfectly stifling! Do let us go somewhere and get cool."

"Let us go into the conservatory," said Dr. Oleander, delightedly, quite unconscious that his fair enslaver was playing into his hand. "We are sure to find solitude and coolness there."

The conservatory was delightfully cool, after the African temperature of the ball-room. Alabaster lamps shed a pale sort of moonlight over the sleeping flowers, and plashing fountains, and marble goddesses.

Miss Dane sunk down under a large orange-tree and began fanning herself languidly.

"How nice—this half light, these perfumed roses, those tinkling water-falls, music, and solitude! Do I look like Love among the Roses, Doctor Oleander?"

"Yes; like Love, like Venus, like everything that is bright, and beautiful, and irresistible, Miss Dane!"

"Monsieur overwhelms me! Why, good gracious, sir! What do you mean?"

For Dr. Oleander had actually caught her in his arms and was pouring forth a passionate declaration of love.

"Goodness me! Release me instantly! How dare you, sir? Have you taken leave of your senses, Doctor Oleander?"

"I am mad for love of you, beautiful Mollie! I adore you with my whole heart!"

"Do you, indeed?" said Mollie, looking angrily at her ruffled plumage. "See my dress—not fit to be seen! I'm surprised at you, Doctor Oleander!"

"Mollie, I love you!"

"I don't care—that's no reason why you should spoil my lovely dress, and make me a perfect fright. You had no business going on in that outrageous manner, sir!"

"But, Mollie! Good heavens! will you listen to me? Never mind your dress."

"Never mind my dress?" cried Miss Dane, shrilly. "Doctor Oleander, you're a perfect bear, and I've a good mind never to speak to you again as long as I live! Let us go back to the ball-room. If I had known you were going to act so, I'd have seen you considerably inconvenienced before I came with you here."

"Not until you answer me, Mollie."

"Answer you? Answer you what? You haven't asked me any question."

"I told you I loved you."

"Well," testily, "you don't call that a question?"

"Mollie, will you love me?"

"No—of course not! Oh, what a torment you are! Do let us go back!"

"Never!" exclaimed Dr. Oleander, gathering hope—"never, Mollie, until you answer me!"

He caught both her hands and held them fast, Mollie struggling in vain.

"Oh, dear, dear, what will I say? And there—if there isn't some one coming in! Let me go, for pity's sake, and I'll answer you—to-morrow."

"To-night, Mollie—to-night!"

"I won't—there!" wrenching her hands free and springing up. "Come to-morrow, between twelve and one, and you shall have your answer."

She darted away, and almost into the arms of Mr. Hugh Ingelow. That gentleman looked suspiciously from her to Dr. Oleander, emerging from the shadow of the orange-tree.

"Am I *de trop*, Miss Dane? I thought to find the conservatory deserted."

"And so it will be, in a minute," said Mollie, familiarly taking his arm. "They are going to supper out yonder, and I am almost famished. Take me down."

"And, if I can, I will make you follow Guy Oleander's lead before I release you," was the mental addition of the naughty coquette.

It was no difficult task to accomplish. A powder magazine with the train laid could not have needed a smaller spark to cause its explosion. Those few words elevated the young artist at once to the loftiest pinnacle of bliss.

"She has just refused Oleander, and I may stand a chance," he thought. "I'll ask her, by Jove! after supper."

Mr. Ingelow kept his word. He paid Miss Dane the most marked attention throughout the repast, filled her plate with delicacies and her ears with compliments. And Mollie was sweet as summer cherries, and took his arm when it was over, and let him lead her into a retired nook where amber curtains shut them in; and there, pale and agitated, the poor fellow said his say and waited for his sentence.

Mollie's wicked heart smote her. She liked this handsome

young artist more than she was aware of, and the first twinge of remorse for her merciless coquetry filled her mind.

But it was too late to pause in her mischief-making, and the fun ahead was too tempting.

"Speak, Miss Dane," Mr. Ingelow implored; "for pity's sake, don't say you have led me on only to jilt me in cold blood at the last!"

"Rather strong language, Mr. Ingelow," said Mollie, coolly pulling to pieces a rose. "I have not led you on, have I? I have been friendly with you because I liked you—as I have been with a dozen others."

"Then I am to consider myself rejected, Miss Dane?"

He stood up before her, very white, with eyes of unspeakable reproach.

"What a hurry you are in!" said Mollie, pettishly. "Give me until to-morrow. I will think it over. Between twelve and one I will be at home; come then and you shall have your answer. There! let us go back to the ball-room. I have promised this redowa to Mr. Sardonyx."

Mr. Ingelow, in profound silence, led Miss Dane back to the ball-room, where they found the elegant lawyer searching for his partner.

"I thought you had forgotten me, Miss Dane," he said, taking her off at once.

"Impossible, Mr. Sardonyx," laughed Mollie. "So sorry to have kept you waiting; but better late than never."

That dance was the old story over again. At its close the lawyer was so bewitched that he hardly knew whether he stood on his head or heels.

"It is coming!" thought wicked Mollie, looking sideways at him, "and only wants a proper place to come in." Aloud: "It is so warm here—I feel quite faint, really. Suppose we step out on the piazza a moment?"

An instant later and they emerged through the drawing-room window to the piazza, Mollie wrapped in a scarlet shawl, along which her bright curls waved like sunshine. The night was still, warm, and moonlight; the twinkling lights of the great city shone like a shower of stars.

And here, for the third time that eventful night, Mollie Dane listened to an ardent avowal of love. For the third time the long lashes drooped over the mischievous eyes.

"This is so sudden—so unexpected—Mr. Sardonyx! I feel highly complimented, of course; but still you must pardon me if I do not reply at once. Give me until to-morrow, at noon. Come then and you will be answered."

She fluttered away like a spirit with the last words, leaving the hopeful lawyer standing in ecstasy. Of course she meant to accept him, or she would have refused him on the spot.

For the rest of the time Miss Dane was exclusively the Welsh baronet's, and listened with unruffled serenity to his reproaches.

"You are driving me distracted, Mollie," he said, piteously. "You must let me speak to your guardian without further delay. I insist upon it."

"Very well," replied Miss Dane, calmly. "As you please, certainly. You may tell him to-morrow. Let me see: at noon Mr. Walraven will be at home and alone. Come at noon."

The party was over—a brilliant success.

Mrs. Walraven had been admired, and Miss Dane had scandalized the best metropolitan society worse than ever.

"And, oh!" thought that wicked witch, as she laid her curly head on the pillow in the gray dawn, "won't there be fun by and by?"

Mrs. Walraven descended to breakfast at half past ten, and announced her intention of spending the remainder of the morning shopping.

Mollie, in a charming demi-toilet, and looking as fresh as though she had not danced incessantly the whole night before, heard the announcement with secret satisfaction.

"Are you going, too, Mollie?" asked her guardian.

"No," said Mollie; "I'm going to stay at home and entertain Sir Roger Trajenna. He is coming to luncheon."

"Seems to me, Cricket," said Mr. Walraven, "Sir Roger Trajenna hangs after you like your shadow. What does it mean?"

"It means—making your charming ward Lady Trajenna, if he can, of course."

"But he's as old as the hills, Mollie."

"Then I'll be a fascinating young widow all the sooner."

"Disgusting!" exclaimed Mrs. Carl Walraven. "You are perfectly heartless, Mollie Dane!"

She swept from the room to dress for her shopping expedition. It was almost twelve when she was fairly off, and then Mollie summoned her maid and gave her sundry directions with a very serious face.

"I am going to spend the morning in the blue room, Margaret," she said; "and I expect four gentlemen to call—Sir Roger Trajenna, Mr. Ingelow, Doctor Oleander, and Mr. Sardonyx."

"Yes, miss," said Margaret.

"Sir Roger you will show at once into the blue room," pursued the young lady; "Mr. Ingelow into the library; Doctor Oleander into the drawing-room, and Mr. Sardonyx into the breakfast-parlor. Do you understand?"

"Yes, miss," said Margaret.

"Very well, then; that will do. I am going to the blue room now, and don't you forget my directions, or I shall box your ears."

Miss Dane sailed off. Margaret looked after her with a queer face.

"She'd do it, too! I wonder what all this means? Some piece of mischief, I'll be bound!"

The baronet arrived, prompt to the hour, and was ushered at once into the presence of his enchantress. Fifteen minutes after came Dr. Oleander, shown by demure Margaret into the drawing-room; and scarcely was he seated when ting-a-ling! went the bell, and the door was opened to Mr. Hugh Ingelow. Mr. Ingelow was left to compose himself in the library. Then there was a pause, and then, last of all, arrived Mr. Sardonyx.

The blue room bell rang. Margaret ran up and met her mistress at the door.

"Are they all down-stairs, Margaret?" in a whisper.

"Yes, miss."

"Then show them up in the order they arrived. I don't want Sir Roger to know they've been kept waiting."

Margaret obeyed. In two minutes she opened the blue-room door, and announced Dr. Oleander.

The doctor advanced with an expectant smile; recoiled, a second later, at sight of the baronet, with a frown.

"Good-day, doctor," said Miss Dane, politely. "Happy to see you. Lovely morning, is it not?"

The doctor dropped into a seat. Hardly had he taken it, when—"Mr. Ingelow!" exclaimed Margaret, opening the door.

Mr. Ingelow started, and stared at sight of the trio, where he had looked for but one.

Miss Dane greeted him with smiling cordiality, and there was nothing for it but to sink into a chair.

Before Mollie's last word of welcome was uttered, the door opened for the third time, and enter Mr. Sardonyx.

The tableau was indescribably ludicrous. The four men glared at one another vengefully, and then four pairs of eyes turned indignantly upon Miss Dane for an explanation. They had it.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Dane, with her sweetest smile, "I invited you here this morning because you are very particular friends, and I wished to give you an agreeable surprise before all the avenue knows it. Doctor Oleander, Mr. Ingelow, Mr. Sardonyx, allow me to present to you my plighted husband, Sir Roger Trajenna."

CHAPTER VI.

MOLLIE'S BRIDAL.

IMAGINE that tableau!

For an instant there was dead silence; a bomb bursting in their midst could hardly have startled them more. Mollie dared not look in their faces, lest the inward laughter that convulsed her should burst forth.

Sir Roger Trajenna, a little surprised, yet bowed with gentlemanly ease, while the three young men sat perfectly thunder-struck.

The dead blank was broken by Dr. Oleander.

"Permit me to congratulate Sir Roger Trajenna," he said, bowing to that gentleman; "and permit me to thank Miss Dane for this exceedingly unexpected mark of preference. If it is ever in my power to return your condescension, Miss Mollie, believe me you will find my memory good. I wish you all good-morning."

His immovable face had not changed, but his gray eyes flashed one bright, fierce glance at Mollie, that said, plainly as words, "I will have revenge for this insult as sure as my name is Guy Oleander!"

But saucy Mollie only answered that sinister look by her brightest glance and smile; and taking his hat, Dr. Oleander strode away.

Then Mr. Sardonyx arose. He had been sitting like a statue, but the words and departure of his fellow-victim seemed to restore consciousness.

"Am I to understand, Miss Dane, that this is the answer you meant when you invited me here to-day?" he sternly asked.

"Did I really invite you? Oh, yes! Of course, Mr. Sardonyx, it must have been. I purposely kept my engagement secret since my return from Washington in order to give you an agreeable surprise."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you. Believe me, I will prove my gratitude if ever opportunity offers."

Miss Dane bowed and smiled. Sir Roger looked hopelessly bewildered. Mr. Sardonyx took his hat.

"Farewell, Miss Dane, and many thanks."

He was gone. Hugh Ingelow alone remained—Hugh Ingelow, white and cold as a dead man. Mollie's heart smote her cruelly for the second time at sight of him. He arose as the lawyer disappeared.

"You have nothing more to say to me, Miss Dane?"

Mollie lifted her eyebrows.

"My dear Mr. Ingelow, what should I possibly have to say to you, except that we will always be most happy to see you—Sir Roger and I?"

"Always," echoed the baronet, with a stately bend.

"You are very kind. Good-day, Sir Roger Trajenna. Congratulations on so eminently suitable a match would be preposterous. Farewell, Miss Dane. I, too, know how to remember!"

With the words he passed out. Sir Roger turned with something like a frown to his bride-elect.

"What does it mean, Mollie?"

Mollie laughed—such a gay, girlish laugh!

"Can't you see, Sir Roger? They are nearly frantic with jealousy, the three of them. What fun it was to see them sitting there and scowling at one another!"

"But they threatened, did they not?" the baronet asked, still frowning.

"Did they? They said they would remember, and I think it is very likely they will. Poor fellows! It was natural, and I don't mind."

"And when am I to speak to your guardian now?"

"As soon as you please—after luncheon, if you like. I don't suppose he'll object."

"Certainly not," Sir Roger said, proudly; "and then, my dearest, when am I to have my lovely little wife?"

"Oh, I don't know! It isn't well to be in any hurry. Wait a year or two."

"A year or two!" cried Sir Roger, in much the same tone as if she had said a century or two. "Impossible—utterly impossible, Mollie!"

"Well, then, a month or two. I am not in any hurry to be married, and I don't see why you should be."

"My darling little Mollie, if you loved me half as much as I love you, you would understand. And you will really be mine in a month?"

"Or two. Yes, if you insist upon it. If I am to be Lady Trajenna first or last, it may as well be first, I suppose."

"And you will not change your mind?"

"Of course not," said Mollie, indignantly. "When Mollie Dane gives her word, the laws of the Medes and—what's their names?—are nothing to it. Don't tease, Sir Roger. When I promise a thing, it's as good as done."

Mollie danced away to the piano, and held her infatuated baronet spell-bound until luncheon time.

At table Mr. and Mrs. Walraven met them, and immediately after the meal the baronet formally requested the pleasure of a private interview.

"Can he really be going to ask for Mollie?" thought Mr. Walraven. "Upon my word, if he is, this is quite a new rôle for me—playing the part of venerable parent, and that to a white-haired gentleman who numbers a round score more years than myself."

He led the way to his study, followed by the baronet. And Sir Roger came to the point at once, calmly, proudly, with grave dignity.

"The disparity of years is great, I know," he said. "But if she is willing to overlook that objection, you surely may. There is no other drawback that I am aware of. A Trajenna, of Trajenna, might mate with the highest in England."

He lifted his white, erect head haughtily, and looked Carl Walraven full in the face. Mr. Walraven held out his hand and grasped the baronet's cordially.

"My dear Sir Roger, I am proud and happy beyond expression. Mollie may consider herself a fortunate girl to escape the wild young scapegraces who dangle after her, and find a husband in a man like you. She stands alone in the world, poor child, without father or mother. You, Sir Roger, must be all the world to her now."

"Heaven helping me, I will!" the old man said, earnestly. "My whole life shall be devoted to her happiness."

"And when is it to be?" Mr. Walraven asked, with a smile. "I presume you and Mollie have settled that?"

"In two months. It will be spring then; and we can start at once for Wales. I long to show my fairy bride old Trajenna Castle."

"We shall miss her very much;" and Carl Walraven sighed in good earnest as he said it. "She has been the sunlight of our home. My poor old mother will almost break her heart; but it is for Mollie's good, and all selfish considerations must give way. You are aware, Sir Roger, she has no dower?"

"She needs none," Sir Roger said, proudly. "My fortune is princely; her settlements shall be as ample as though she were heiress to millions. I believe there is nothing more, Mr. Walraven, and so let us rejoin the ladies."

The news spread like wildfire—the avenue was electrified. Mollie Dane—little, coquettish Mollie Dane—sprung from nobody knew where, to carry off the great Welsh baronet, in spite of them all. The man must be in his dotage!

Mr. Walraven's antecedents were mysterious enough, in all conscience; but the antecedents of this wild ward of his were ten times more so. But, in spite of all, the engagement was an accomplished fact.

Every day, beneath the baleful glare of angry female eyes, Mollie Dane went riding and driving and walking with the stately, white-haired old millionaire, who bent over her as obsequiously as though she were a duchess born.

The women might go wild with envy, the men go mad with jealousy; but the days and the weeks went on, and the fairy grew more radiantly beautiful with each. And the wedding-day came, and the guests were bidden, and all was ready, on a scale of unparalleled magnificence. And who was to know the wedding would never be?

Mollie's bridal night! The big brown-stone mansion was one blaze of light. The ceremony was to take place in the lofty drawing-room, and be followed by a ball. This somewhat obsolete way of doing things was by the express desire of Sir Roger, and on the morrow they were to start by steamer for the old land. It was all one to Mollie, and Mr. and Mrs. Walraven acquiesced in every wish of the Welshman.

The hour fixed for the ceremony was ten o'clock. It was nearly nine, and up in her own room the bride stood, under the hands of her maid, robed for the sacrifice.

It was a sacrifice, though giddy Mollie had never thought it so before. Now, when it was too late, her heart began to fail her.

He was dreadfully old, this stately Sir Roger. She didn't care for him in the least, except as she might care for some nice old grandfather; and then there was Hugh Ingelow—handsome Hugh!

But at this point Cricket caught her breath and her thoughts with a gasp.

"Mollie, Mollie, Mollie! How dare you, you wicked, crazy girl! Thinking of Hugh Ingelow, when you oughtn't to remember there's another man alive but Sir Roger Trajenna! I wouldn't marry poor Hugh when he wanted me—a lucky

escape for him—and I'm not going to pine away for him now, when it's high treason to do it."

"Hurry, Margaret," the bride said aloud. "Make me just as pretty as ever you can."

The three rejected suitors had been invited to the bridal hall, and, singular to relate, had come.

But their discomfiture had been so singular altogether that perhaps they thought it as well to match Mollie in coolness.

There they were at least, regarding one another in the oddest way, and Mrs. Walraven, gorgeous in amber moiré, sidled up to her cousin, and hissed venomously in his ear:

"So the vicious Guy Oleander has lost his little game, after all! Blue-eyed Mollie is destined to be 'My Lady,' in spite of his teeth."

"'There is many a slip'—you know the proverb, madame."

It was all he said; but his sinister smile, as he moved away, said a great deal.

Hugh Ingelow, very pale, stood leaning against a marble column, all wreathed with festal roses, not as white as his own handsome face.

"What are they plotting, I wonder?" he thought. "No good to her. They hate her, as I ought to, but as I can't, poor, pitiful fool that I am! But my time may come, too. I said I would not forget, and will not."

The bride-maids, a gay group of girls, came fluttering into the "maiden bower" to see if the bride was ready.

"For the clergyman is down-stairs, and the guests are assembled, and Sir Roger is waiting, and nothing is needed but the bride."

"A very essential need," responded Mollie. "I'm not going to hurry myself; they can't get along without me. A letter, Lucy? For me? From whom, I wonder?"

The girl had entered, bearing a note in a buff envelope, addressed, in a sprawling hand, to "Miss Mollie Dane."

"The young person that brought it is waiting in the hall, miss," said Lucy. "I didn't want to take it, and I told her you was just about getting married, but it was no use. She said it was a matter of life or death, and you'd be sure to pay attention to it if you were before the altar."

But Mollie had not listened. She tore open the buff envelope, and the gazers saw her turn deathly pale as she read.

She crushed the letter in her hand and turned impetuously to the girl.

"Where is the person who brought this? I must see her

at once. Bring her here; and you, young ladies, let me speak two words to her in private."

The young ladies trooped out, and the bride was left alone, paler than her snowy robes.

A moment, and Lucy was back with the bearer of the letter, a respectable-looking young person enough.

Lucy left her mistress and the girl standing together. Five minutes after the bell rang sharply. Lucy hastened back; on the threshold the bride met and stopped her, with a white, startled face.

"Tell them to postpone the ceremony for an hour, Lucy. Come back here then. For the next hour I wish to be left alone. Tell Mr. Walraven."

She shut the door in the amazed attendant's face. Lucy heard the key turn. A second she stood petrified, then she hastened off to deliver her message.

Mr. Walraven stood aghast. Lucy was plied with questions. Who was the girl? What was she like? What had she said? Where had she come from?

Sir Roger was wildly alarmed at first, but Mr. Walraven reassured him. The company waited, on the *qui vive*, for they knew not what. Eleven o'clock came. Lucy went up to the bride's room; the door was still fast; she knocked—there was no reply; she called—there was no answer. Then Lucy screamed, and in a twinkling a crowd was around the door. They shook it, they rapped, they called, all in vain. Dead silence reigned.

"Force the door!" exclaimed Carl Walraven, hoarsely.

Strong men forced it. There was a rush in, a recoil, a cry of consternation, for the apartment was empty; the bird had flown.

How the search began no one ever knew, but begin it did. The house was hunted from top to bottom; still in vain. Not a trace of the bride could be found.

The wedding party dispersed in wild confusion, but the search went on. Through the night it lasted; but morning broke, and still no trace. The bride had disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up!

CHAPTER VII.

WHERE THE BRIDE WAS.

THE letter in the buff envelope which had so startled Mollie was very brief. There were but eight or nine lines, wretchedly scrawled:

"MOLLIE DANE,—Come to me at once, if you want to find out who you are, who your parents were, what Carl Walraven is to you. This is your wedding-night; but come. I am very ill—dying; I may not see morning. If you delay, it will be too late. The bearer is my friend; she will conduct you to me. Tell no one. Carl Walraven will prevent you, if he can. I say to you, come—come—come.

"MIRIAM."

If there was one thing on earth that flighty Mollie was really in earnest about, it was in knowing her own history. Her marriage sunk into insignificance in comparison.

She dispatched Lucy at once for the bearer of the note, sent her friends to the right-about, and closeted herself with the young woman—a pale young woman, with dark eyes and an intelligent face.

"Who are you?" abruptly demanded the bride, looking curiously at her.

"Sarah Grant," answered the young woman—"a shop-girl."

"Who sent you with this note?"

"A woman who lodges in the same house—a tall, gaunt, half-crazed looking creature. She is dangerously ill."

The girl answered straightforwardly, gazing round her the while in open-eyed admiration.

"Do you know her name?"

"We call her old Miriam; she refuses to tell her name. I have done little things for her since she has been ill, and she begged me so hard to fetch you this letter that I could not refuse."

"Do you know its contents?"

"Only that you are expected to return with me. She told me that she had something to say to you that you would give half your life to hear."

"Is the house far from this?"

"Yes, miss, a long way; but I came in a carriage. It is waiting round the corner. Miriam told me to hurry; that it was a matter of life or death, and she gave me money to pay for the hack. It was absolutely necessary you should know, she said, before you married any one."

Mollie mused a moment. She never thought of doubting all this. Of course, Miriam knew all about her, and of course it was likely she would wish to tell her on her death-bed.

"I will go," she said, suddenly. "Wait one instant."

She summoned the servant, gave her the message that had

caused such consternation, locked the door, and threw over her glittering bridal robes a long water-proof cloak that covered her from head to foot. Drawing the hood over her head, she stood ready.

"Now," said Miss Dane, rapidly, "we will not go out by the front door, because I don't want any one to know I have quitted the house. Come this way."

She opened one of the long windows and stepped out on the piazza. Sarah followed.

Some distance on there was a flight of stairs leading to a paved back-yard. They descended the stairs, walked down the yard, passed through a little gate, and stood in the street, under the bright night sky.

"Now, Miss Grant," said Mollie, "where is your carriage?"

"At the corner of the avenue, miss. This way."

Two minutes brought them to the corner. There stood the hack.

Sarah made a motion for Miss Dane to precede her. Mollie stepped in; the girl followed, closing the door securely after her, and the hack started at a furious pace.

"How dark it is!" exclaimed Mollie, impatiently. "You should make your driver light up, Miss Grant."

"There is sufficient light for our work," a voice answered.

Mollie recoiled with a slight shriek, for it was not the voice of Sarah Grant.

A dark figure started out of the corner on the moment, her hands were grasped, and a handkerchief swiftly and surely bound round her mouth. It was no longer in her power to raise an alarm.

"Now bind her eyes, Sarah," said the voice. "I'll secure her hands. My pretty bird, it's of no use struggling. You're safely and surely snared."

Her eyes were bandaged, her hands bound, and Mollie sat utterly helpless and bewildered—a prisoner.

She could neither see, nor move, nor speak. The hack was rattling at a fearful pace over the stony streets. Its noise would have drowned her cries had it been in her power to utter any.

"Now, my dear Miss Dane," said that unknown voice, very close to her ear, and all at once, in French, "I'll answer all the questions I know you are dying to ask at this moment, and answer them truthfully. I speak in French, that the good Sarah beside us may not comprehend. You understand the language, I know."

He knew her, then! And yet she utterly failed to recognize that voice.

"In the first place, what does all this mean? Why this deception—this abduction? Who am I? Where are you being taken? When are you to be restored to your friends? This is what you would ask, is it not? Very well; now to answer you. What does this mean? Why, it means that you have made an enemy, by your atrocious flirting, of one whom you cruelly and shamefully jilted, who has vowed vengeance, and who knows how to keep that vow. Why this deception—this abduction? Well, without deception it was impossible to get you away, and we know just enough about you to serve our purpose. Miriam never sent that note; but Miriam exists. Who am I? Why, I am that enemy—if one can be your enemy who loves you to madness—a man you cruelly taught to love you, and then scornfully refused. Where are you being taken? To a safe place, my charming Mollie—safe as 'that deepest dungeon beneath the castle moat' which you have read of. When are you to be restored to your friends? When you have been my wife one week—not an instant sooner."

Mollie, bound and blindfolded, made one frantic gesture. The man by her side understood.

"That means you won't," he said, coolly. "Ah, my fairy Mollie, imprisonment is a hard thing to bear! I love you very dearly, I admire your high spirit intensely; but even eaglets have had their wings clipped before now. You treated me mercilessly—I am going to be merciless in my turn. You don't care for this old man I have saved you from marrying. I am young and good-looking—I blush as I say it—a far more suitable husband for you than he. You are trying to recognize my voice and place me, I know. Leave off trying, my dearest; you never will. I am perfectly disguised—voice, face, figure. When we part you will be no wiser than you are now."

He ceased speaking. The carriage rattled on and on through the shining, starlit night for endless hours, it seemed to Mollie.

Oh, where were they going, and what was to become of her? Was it a frightful reality, or only a dream? Was she really the same girl who this night was to have been the bride of a baronet? Was this the nineteenth century and New York City, or a chapter out of some old Venetian romance?

The carriage stopped at last; she heard the door open, she felt herself lifted out; there was a rush of cold air for an in-

stant, then they entered a house; a door closed behind them, and she was being borne upstairs and into a room.

"Now that we have arrived, Miss Mollie," said that strange voice, "we will unbind you, and you really must overlook the hard necessity which compelled so strong a course toward a lady. I give you fair warning that it will be of no use straining your lungs screaming: for if you shrieked for a month, no one would hear you through these padded walls. Now, then!"

He took the gag from her mouth, and Mollie caught her breath with a gasp. He untied the bandage round her eyes, and for a second or two she was dazzled by the sudden blaze of light. The instant she could see, she turned full upon her abductor.

Alas and alas! he wore a black mask, a flowing wig, a beard, and a long cloak reaching to the floor.

He was a tall man—that was the only thing Mollie could make out of the disguise.

"Miss Dane does not spare me; but it is all in vain. She may gaze until her lovely eyes drop from their sockets, and she will not recognize me. And now I will leave you. I will intrude upon you as little as is absolutely possible. If you need anything, ring the bell. Good-night, my beautiful Mollie, and happy dreams."

He bowed politely and moved toward the door. Mollie made a step toward him, with upraised arm:

"Stay!"

The man halted at once.

"How long am I to be imprisoned here?"

"My fair one, I told you before: until you consent to become my wife."

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Mollie, scornfully; "or do you think I am? Your wife! I am here in your power—kill me, if you dare, you cowardly abductor! I will die a thousand deaths—I'll live on here until my head is hoary—I'll dash my brains out against yonder wall, but I'll never, never, never become your wife!"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Strong language, my dear; but words, words, words! I won't kill you, and you won't live here until your head is hoary. Golden locks like yours are a long time turning gray. And you won't dash your brains out against the walls, because the walls are padded. Is there anything else you wish to say, Miss Dane?"

"Only this," with blazing eyes, "that whoever you are,

you are the vilest, basest, most cowardly wretch on the wide earth! Go! I would murder you if I was able!"

"Not a doubt of it, my angel! Once more, good-night!"

He bowed low, passed out, and locked the door. Mollie was alone in her prison.

Now, little Cricket, fairy that she was, was yet brave as any giantess. Not a drop of craven blood flowed in her spirited veins. Therefore, left alone, she neither wept, nor raved, nor tore her hair; but took a prolonged survey of her surroundings.

It was a large, lofty room, lighted by a single gas-jet, dependent from the ceiling. The four walls were thickly wadded, and there were no windows, only one door, no pictures, no mirror—nothing but a few stuffed chairs, a table, a lavatory, a bed. Day-time and night-time would be the same here.

"Well," said Mollie to herself, drawing a long breath, "if this does not cap the globe! Am I really Mollie Dane, and is this New York City, or am I playing private theatricals, and gone back to the Dark Ages? Who, in the wide world, is that mysterious man? And, oh! what will they say at home this dreadful night?"

She removed her cumbersome mantle and threw it upon the bed, looking ruefully about her.

"I wonder how long I am to be kept here? Of course, I'll never yield; but it's going to be frightful, if I am to be imprisoned for weeks and weeks. I won't ring for that deceitful Sarah Grant, and I'll never give in, if they keep me until the day of judgment."

She began pacing up and down the room. Death-like stillness reigned. Hours passed. Weary with the long drive, she threw herself upon the bed at last, and fell fast asleep.

A noise near awoke her after a prolonged slumber. She looked up; the gas still burned, but she was no longer alone. Sarah stood by the table, arranging a tempting breakfast.

"What's that?" abruptly demanded Mollie.

Sarah courtesied respectfully.

"Your breakfast, miss."

"It is to-morrow, then?" said Mollie.

"It is to-day, miss," responded the girl, with a smile.

"What's the hour?"

"Past eight, Miss Dane."

"Are you going to stay here with me?"

"No, miss."

"Why did you tell me such lies last night, you shameful girl?"

"I told you what I was ordered to tell you."

"By whom?"

"My master."

"Who is your master? Old Satan?"

"I hope not, miss."

"Who, then? What is his name?"

"Excuse me, Miss Dane," said the girl, quietly. "I must answer no questions."

"You are a hard-hearted creature, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" exclaimed Mollie, indignantly. "Where is your master? Here?"

"Miss Dane, I repeat it—I can answer no questions, and I must go. Here is your breakfast. I hope you will enjoy it."

"Yes," said Mollie, scornfully, "it is very likely I shall enjoy eating and drinking in this place! Take it away. I don't want victuals—I mean to starve myself to death."

But she looked at the table as she spoke, and was inwardly not at all displeased to see the golden coffee, the buckwheat cakes, the eggs, and ham, and toast.

"I shall bring you your dinner at noon, miss," said Sarah, moving toward the door, and not heeding her. "If you want me before noon, please to ring."

"Stop!" said Mollie. "And, oh, for goodness gracious sake, do tell me where I am!"

She held up her hands imploringly—poor, caged little starling!

"I am sorry, miss," Sarah said, and her face showed it; "but indeed—indeed I can't! I daren't! I've promised, and my master trusts me. I can't break my word."

She was gone as she spoke, locking the door again, and Mollie got up with a heavy sigh. She had taken off only her outer garments before lying down; and after washing, and combing out her bright silken hair, she resumed the glittering, bride-like finery of the evening before. Poor Mollie looked at the silver-shining silk, the cobweb lace, the gleaming, milky pearls, with a very rueful face.

"And I was to have been away on my bridal tour by this time," she thought; "and poor Sir Roger is half mad before this, I know. Oh, dear! it's very nice to read about young ladies being carried off in this way, but the reading is much nicer than the reality. I shall die if they keep me here four-and-twenty hours longer."

By way of preparing for death, Miss Vane promptly sat

down to the table and eat her breakfast with the hearty appetite of youth and good health.

"It's better than being fed on bread and water, anyhow," she reflected, as she finished; "but I should greatly prefer the bread and water, if sweetened with freedom. What on earth shall I do with myself? If they had only left me a book!"

But they hadn't, and the long, dull hours wore on—how long and how dull only prisoners know. But noon came at last, and with it came Sarah, carrying a second tray. Mollie was on the watch for the door to open. She had some vague idea of making a rush for it, but there stood a stalwart man on guard.

"Here is your dinner, Miss Dane. I hope you liked your breakfast."

But the sight of the sentinel without had made Mollie sulky, and she turned her back upon the girl with silent contempt.

Sarah departed, and Mollie suffered her dinner to stand and grow cold. She was too cross to eat, but by and by she awoke to the fact that she was hungry.

"And then it will help to pass the time," thought the unhappy prisoner, sitting down. "If I could eat all the time, I shouldn't so much mind."

After dinner she coiled herself up in one of the arm-chairs and fell asleep. She slept long, and awoke refreshed, but what time it was she could not judge; eternal gas-light and silence reigned in her prison.

"Oh, dear, dear! what will become of me if this sort of thing goes on?" cried Mollie, aloud, starting up and wringing her hands. "I shall go stark, staring mad! Oh, what crime did my father and mother ever commit, that their sin should be visited upon me like this? I will stab myself with the carving-knife to-morrow, after dinner, if this keeps on!"

Mollie paced up and down like a bedlamite, sobbing and scolding to herself, and quite broken down with one day's imprisonment.

"I thought I could stand it—I thought I could defy him; I had no idea being imprisoned was so awful. I wish I could die and make an end of it! I'd starve myself to death, only I get so dreadful hungry, and I daren't cut my throat, because the sight of blood makes me sick, and I know it must hurt. Oh, Mollie Dane, you miserable little wretch! I wish you had never been born!"

Another dreary interval, and then for the third time came Sarah bearing a tray.

"Your supper, miss," said Sarah, going through the formula. "I hope you liked your dinner."

"Oh, take it away!" cried Mollie, twisting her fingers. "I don't want any supper—I'm going crazy, I think! Oh, what a hard, flinty, unfeeling heart you must have, you wicked young woman!"

Sarah looked at her compassionately.

"It is hard, I know. But why didn't you do as master wished you, and get away?"

"Marry him! How dare you? I wish I could poison him! I'd do that with the greatest pleasure."

"Then you must stay here, miss, for weeks and weeks, months and months, and every day be like this. Your friends will never find you—never!"

"Sarah, look here! I shall be dead in a week, and I'll haunt you—I vow I will! I'll haunt you until I make your life a misery to you!"

Sarah smiled quietly.

"I am not afraid, miss. You're a great deal too young and too healthy to die; and you won't kill yourself, for life is too sweet, even in prison. The best thing you can do is to marry master, and be restored to your friends."

"Sarah Grant—if that be your name," said Mollie, with awful calmness—"go away! If you only come here to insult me like that, don't come here at all."

Sarah courtesied respectfully, and immediately left. But her words had made their mark. In spite of Mollie's appealing dignity, any avenue of escape—even that—was beginning to look inviting.

"Suppose I went through the form of a ceremony with this man?" mused Mollie. "It wouldn't mean anything, you know, because I did it upon compulsion; and, immediately I got out, I should go straight and marry Sir Roger. But I won't do it—of course, I won't! I'll be imprisoned forever before I yield!"

But you know it has got to be a proverb, "When a woman hesitates, she is lost." Mollie had begun to hesitate, and Mollie was lost.

All that long night she never slept a wink. She lay awake, tossing and tumbling on the bed, or pacing up and down the floor, in a sort of delirious fever. And—

"If I thought for certain sure he would let me go after the sham ceremony was performed, I would marry him," was the conclusion she had arrived at by morning. "No matter what happens, nothing can be half so bad as this."

It was morning, though Mollie did not know it, when she threw herself on the bed, and for the second time fell asleep. And sleeping, she dreamed. She was standing up before the minister, to be married to the masked man. The ceremony went on—Miriam was bride-maid and Sir Roger Trajenna gave her away. The ceremony ended, the bridegroom turned to salute the bride. "But first I must remove my mask," he said, in a strangely familiar voice; and lifting it off, Mollie saw smiling down upon her the most beautiful face ever mortal wore, familiar as the voice, yet leaving her equally unable to place it.

It may seem a little thing, but little things weigh with young ladies in their seventeenth year, and this dream turned the scale. Mollie thought about it a great deal that morning as she made her toilet.

"I wonder if he is so very handsome? I like handsome men," mused Mollie. "He told me he was, and I know he must be, if he ever was a flirtee of mine. Mr. Sardonyx is the plainest man I ever let make love to me, and even he was not absolutely plain. I shouldn't wonder if my captor were he, or else Doctor Oleander. Oh, why—why—why can't I recognize that voice?"

That day wore on, long, drearily, endlessly, it seemed to poor Mollie. Its dull course was broken, as usual, by Sarah fetching the daily meals; and it ended, and night came, and still Mollie had not spoken.

Another day dawned, and its dawning brought the climax. She had passed a sleepless night, and awoke feverish, unrefreshed, and utterly desperate.

"If it was death instead of marriage I had to undergo," said Mollie to herself, "I should prefer it to this slow torture. It's horrid to yield, but it's a great deal more horrid to hold out. I'll yield."

Accordingly, when Sarah came up with the morning meal, Miss Dane promptly addressed her:

"Sarah, is your master in the house?"

"Not at present, miss."

"Do you expect him?"

"Oh, yes, miss! He comes every day."

"Is he coming up here no more until I send for him?"

"I think not, miss. He is a great deal too polite to force himself upon a lady."

A glance of withering scorn from Mollie.

"He is a cowardly, contemptible tyrant, and you are a vile,

lost creature and tool! But that is not what I wanted to say. As soon as he comes, tell him I wish to see him."

"Very well, miss."

Sarah departed. The long hours dragged on—oh, so long! —oh, so long! Mollie could take no breakfast that morning. She could only walk up and down her prison-chamber in a frenzy of impatience for the coming of the man she hated.

He came at last—cloaked and masked, and wearing the false hair and beard—utterly unrecognizable.

"At last, Miss Dane," he calmly said, "you have sent for me. You are tired of your prison? You long for freedom? You accede to my terms?"

"Yes," said Mollie, with a sort of sobbing cry, for she felt utterly broken down. "Anything, anything under heaven for freedom! Another week like this, and I should go mad! But, oh! if you are a man—if you have any pity in your heart —don't ask this sacrifice! Let me go as I am! See, I plead to you!—I, who never pleaded to mortal before! Let me go, for pity's sake, now, as I came! Don't, don't, don't ask me to marry you!"

She held up her clasped hands—bright tears standing in her passionate eyes. But the tall, masked man loomed up like a dark, stern ghost.

"You were merciless to me, Mollie Dane."

"But I am only a girl—only a silly, flirting girl of sixteen! Oh, forget and forgive, and let me go!"

"I can not, Mollie, for—I love you!"

"Love me?" Mollie repeated, scorn and anguish in her voice. "Love me, and torture me like this!"

"It is because I love you. I torture you because you shall be my wife. Mine, Mollie, mine! Because you would never consent of your own free will. It goes to my heart to hear you plead; but I love you with my whole heart and soul, and I can not yield."

"I shall plead no more," said Mollie, proudly, turning away; "your heart is of stone."

"Will you consent to marry me, Mollie? Remember the terms. One week from the hour that makes you my wife will see you going forth free, if you wish it."

"Free! wish it!" she repeated, with unutterable scorn. "Free, and bound to you! Wish it, when for that privilege I sacrifice myself forever! Oh, you know well I love my liberty dearly, when I can not lie here and rot sooner than leave my prison your wife! But, man—demon—whatever you are," she cried, with a sort of frenzy, "I do consent—I will become

your wife, since my only chance of quitting this horrible dungeon lies that way!"

If Mollie could have seen the face behind the mask, she would have seen the red glow of triumph that overspread it at the words; but aloud he spoke calmly.

"My happiness is complete," he said. "But remember, Mollie, it will be no sham marriage, that you will be at liberty to break. A real clergyman shall unite us, and you must promise me to make no appeal to his sympathy—to make no attempt to converse with him. The attempt would be quite useless, but you must promise."

"I promise," she said, haughtily; "and Mollie Dane keeps her word."

"And I keep mine! A week from the ceremony you go forth free, never to be disturbed by me again. I love you, and I marry you for love and for revenge. It sounds inconsistent, but it is true. Yet, my promise of vengeance fulfilled, I shall retain you against your will no longer. I will love you always, and you will be my wife—my wife, Mollie. Nothing can ever alter that. I can always say hereafter, come what will, I have been blessed!"

There was a tremor in the steady voice. He paused an instant, and then went on:

"To-night the clergyman will be here. You will be ready? You will not retract your word?"

"I never retract my word," Mollie said, abruptly turning her back upon him. "I will not now. Go!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

THE Reverend Raymond Rashleigh sat before a blazing sea-coal fire, in his cozy study, in comfortable, after-dinner mood. He lay back in his cushioned and carved arm-chair, a florid, portly, urbane prelate, with iron-gray hair and patriarchal whiskers, a steaming glass of wine punch at his elbow, that day's paper open upon his lap, an overfed pussy purring at his knee, the genius of comfort personified in his own portly person.

The world went well with the Reverend Raymond. Silks rustled and diamonds flashed every Sunday in the cushioned pews of his "uptown" church; the *élite* of Gotham sat under his teaching, and his sixty years and the cares of life rested lightly on his broad shoulders.

It had been a very smoothly flowing life—those sixty years

—gliding along as sluggishly calm as the waters of a canal. But on this night the still surface was destined to be ruffled—on this night, so strange, so extraordinary an adventure was destined to happen to him, that it actually compensated, in five brief hours, for all the lack of excitement in those sixty years.

A wet and stormy night. The rain beat ceaselessly against the curtained windows; the wild spring wind shrieked through the city streets, icily cold; a bad, black night—starless, moonless.

The Reverend Raymond Rashleigh gave a little comfortable shiver as he listened to it. It was very pleasant to listen to it in that cozy little room. He poked the blazing coals, sipped his red port, stroked pussy, who bore a most absurd feline resemblance to himself, and took up his paper again.

For the second time he read over a brief paragraph among the "Personals:"

"LEFT HER HOME.—On the fifteenth instant—whether forcibly or of her own free will is unknown—a young lady of sixteen years, by name Mollie Dane. Is undersized, very slight of figure, a profusion of light, curling hair, large blue eyes, handsome features, and remarkably self-possessed and straightforward of manner. Was dressed as a bride, in white silk and lace. Any information concerning her will be thankfully received and liberally rewarded by her afflicted friends. Apply personally or by letter to MR. CARL WALRAVEN, No — Fifth Avenue, New York."

Very slowly the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh read this paragraph to its end. He laid down the paper and looked thoughtfully at the cat.

"Extraordinary!" murmured the Reverened Raymond, half aloud—"most extraordinary! Like a scene in a novel; like nothing in real life. Has the earth opened and swallowed her up? Has she gone off with some younger and handsomer lover? Or has she been decoyed from home by the machinations of some enemy? She had many, poor child! That unfortunate Sir Roger is like a man insane. He is offering half his fortune for her recovery. It is really very, very extraordinary. Quite a romance in real life. Come in!"

There had been a tap at the study door; a maid-servant entered.

"There's a young woman down-stairs, sir, wishes to see you most particular."

"Ah, indeed! Who is she? What is her business with me?"

"I don't know, sir. Something very important, she says."

"Show her up."

The girl departed, ran down-stairs, ran up again, followed by a respectable-looking young woman of pleasing aspect.

"Well, my child"—he was very fatherly and bland, was the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh—"and what may you want with me?"

"My mistress sent me, sir. I am Mrs. Holywell's maid."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Rashleigh, vividly interested at once; "and how is Mrs. Holywell?"

"Very poorly, sir. She thinks she's dying herself. She wants to make her will to-night; that's why she sent for you."

Mr. Rashleigh rose with very unwonted alacrity.

She was a distant relative of his, this dying Mrs. Holywell; ridiculously rich for a childless widow, and with no nearer heir than the reverend pastor of St. Pancras' Church.

"I will accompany you at once, my dear! Poor Mrs. Holywell! But it is the fate of all flesh! How did you come, pray? It rains, does it not?"

A fierce gust of wind rattled the double windows, and frantically beat the rain against them by way of answer.

"I came in a carriage, sir. It is at the door now."

"That is well. I will not detain you an instant. Ah! poor Mrs. Holywell!"

The parson's hat and overcoat hung in the room. In a moment they were on; in another he was following the very respectable young woman down-stairs; in a third he was scrambling after her into the carriage; in a fourth they were rattling wildly over the wet, stony streets; in a fifth the reverend gentleman was grasped in a vise-like grip, and a voice close to his ear—a man's voice—hissed:

"Speak one word, make the least outcry, and you are a dead man!"

The interior of the carriage was in utter darkness.

The Reverend Mr. Rashleigh gave one panting gasp, and fell back in his seat. High living and long indolence had made him a complete craven. Life was inestimably precious to the portly pastor of St. Pancras'. After that one choking gasp, he sat quivering all over, like calves'-foot jelly.

"Bandage his eyes, Sarah, while I tie his hands," said the man's voice. "My dear sir, don't shake so; it is almost impossible to do anything with you in this hysterical state. Now, bind his mouth, Sarah. There! I think that will do."

Bound hands, and eyes, and mouth, half suffocated, wholly blinded, the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh was a pitiable object at that instant. But there was no one to pity him, no one to see him, no one to help him.

The carriage whirled on, and on, and on at dizzy speed, the wind sighing by in long, lamentable gales, the rain dashing clamorously against the closed glass.

Paralyzed with intense terror, Mr. Rashleigh sat trembling to that extent that he threatened to topple off his seat.

"Pray calm yourself, my reverend friend," said that masculine voice beside him. "No personal harm is intended you, and I have no designs upon your watch and purse. I merely want the loan of you in your clerical capacity, to perform the ceremony of marriage over a runaway couple. I knew you wouldn't come of your own free will; therefore, I took the trouble to ascertain about those little expectations of yours from Mrs. Holywell, and used that good lady, whose health, I trust, is no worse than usual, as a cat's-paw. You must pardon the deception, dear sir, and you must perform the marriage ceremony without inconvenient scruples, or hesitation, or questions. Be thankful, for the sake of morality, we see the propriety of getting married at all. You are listening to me and paying attention to me, I hope?"

Paying attention! Yes, his whole soul was absorbed in listening.

"Where I take you, who I am, you will never find out. Don't try, my dear Mr. Rashleigh, even if you have the opportunity. Marry me—for I am to be the happy bridegroom—and don't utter another word, save and except the words of the ceremony, from the time you enter my house until you leave it. If you do your part like the prudent, elderly gentleman I take you to be, you will find yourself back in your pleasant study, safe and sound, before morning dawns. If not—"

There was an awful sound, the sharp click of a pistol. No words in any known language—and the parson knew all the languages, dead and alive—could have filled up the hiatus so eloquently or so convincingly.

The cold perspiration started from every pore, and each tooth in his clerical jaws clattered like pairs of castanets.

They drove, and they drove, and they drove through the wild, wet night, as if they meant to drive forever.

But they stopped, after a horribly long interval, and the parson was helped out into the rain, out of the rain into a house, led up a flight of stairs, and seated in a chair.

"Now, my dear sir, permit me to remove these uncomfortable incumbrances, and do, do try to overlook the painful necessity which compelled me to use them. It goes to my heart, I assure you. There!"

The last bandage dropped to the ground—eyes, hands, mouth were free. But Mr. Rashleigh could make no use of his freedom; he sat pale, benumbed, confounded, helpless.

"Rouse yourself, my dear sir," said his persecutor, giving him a gentle shake; "don't drop into a cataleptic trance. Look up and speak to me."

The reverend gentleman did look up, and uttered a sort of scream at sight of the ugly black mask frowning ghastly down upon him.

"Don't be alarmed," said the masked man, soothingly; "no harm is meant you. My mask won't hurt you. I merely don't want you to recognize me to-morrow, should we chance to meet. My bride will be masked, too, and you will marry us by our Christian names alone. Hers is Mary; mine is Ernest. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes!" responded Mr. Rashleigh, quaking with unutterable terror. Oh! was this a dreadful nightmare, induced by a too luxurious dinner, or was it a horrible reality?

"And you are ready to perform the ceremony? to ask no questions? to marry us, and be gone?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Oh, good heavens!" groaned the Reverend Raymond; "am I asleep or awake?"

"Very well, then," said this dreadful man in the mask; "I will go for the bride. She is Mary, remember; I am Ernest. I will return in a moment."

He quitted the room. Mr. Rashleigh stared helplessly about him, in a pitiable state of terror and bewilderment. The room was large, well, even elegantly, furnished, with nothing at all remarkable about its elegance; such another as Mr. Rashleigh's own drawing-room at home. It was lighted by a cluster of gas-jets, and the piano, the arm-chairs, the sofas, the tables, the pictures, were all very handsome and very common, indeed.

Ten minutes elapsed. The commonplace, every-day look of the mysterious room did more toward reassuring the trembling prelate than all the masked man's words.

The door opened, and the masked man stalked in again, this time with a lady hanging on his arm.

The lady was small and slender, robed in flowing white silk; a rich veil of rare lace falling over her from head to foot like a cloud; a wreath of orange-blossoms on her fair head;

jewels sparkling about her—everything just as it should be, save that the face was hidden. A mask of white silk, giving her a corpse-like and ghastly look, covered it from forehead to chin.

The very respectable young woman who had inveigled him out of his study, and a slouchy-looking young man followed, and took their places behind the masked pair.

"Begin," authoritatively commanded the bridegroom.

The Reverend Raymond Rashleigh stood up. It was a wild and lawless proceeding, and all wrong; but life is sweet to portly prelates of sixty, and he stood up and began at once.

Mr. Rashleigh needed no book—he knew the marriage service as pat as his prayers. The ring was at hand; the questions were asked; the responses made.

In five minutes the two masks were man and wife.

"Make out a certificate of marriage," said the bridegroom; "these two people will be witnesses. Their names are Sarah Grant and John Jones."

Pens, ink and paper were placed before him. Mr. Rashleigh essayed to write, as well as his trembling fingers would allow him, and handed a smeared and blotted document to the bridegroom.

"You will enter this marriage on your register, Mr. Rashleigh," said the man. "I am very much obliged to you. Pray accept this for your trouble."

This was a glistening rouleau of gold. Mr. Rashleigh liked gold, and in spite of his trepidation, managed to put it in his pocket.

"Now, my dear," the happy man said, turning to the little white bride, "you and Sarah had better retire. Our reverend friend will wish to return home. I must see him there."

The bride and her attendant left the room without a word. The bridegroom produced the bandages again.

"I regret the necessity, but I must bind you again. However, it will not be for long; in a couple of hours you will be at home."

With wonderful skill and rapidity, hands, eyes, and mouth were bound once more; the parson was led down-stairs, out into the wet night, and back to his seat in the carriage. The masked man took his place beside him. John Jones mounted to the driver's perch, and they were off like the wind.

The promised two hours were very long to the rector, but they ended at last. The carriage stopped abruptly; he was helped out, and the bandage taken from his eyes and hands.

"The other must remain for a moment or two," said the

mysterious man with the mask, speaking rapidly. "You are at the corner of your own street. Good-bye, and many thanks!"

He sprung into the carriage, and it was gone like a flash. And the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh, in the gray and dismal dawn of a wet morning, was left all agape in the deserted street.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE WEEK AFTER.

ON that eventful night of wind and rain upon which the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh performed that mysterious midnight marriage, Mr. Carl Walraven paced alone his stately library, lost in thought—painful thought; for his dark brows were contracted, and the Grecian heads in the brackets around him had no severer lines than those about his mouth.

While he paces up and down, up and down, like some restless ghost, the library door opens, and his wife, magnificently arrayed, with jewels in her raven hair, a sparkling fan dangling from her wrist, an odor of rich perfume following her, appears before him like a picture in a frame.

She is superbly handsome in that rose-colored opera-cloak, and she knows it, and is smiling graciously; but the swarth frown on her husband's face only grows blacker as he looks at her.

"You are going, then?" said Mr. Carl Walraven.

"Going?" Mrs. Walraven arches her black eyebrows in pretty surprise at the word. "Of course, my dear. I would not miss 'Robert le Diable' and the charming new tenor for worlds!"

"Nor would you obey your husband for worlds, madame. I expressly desired you to stay at home."

"I know it, my love. Should be happy to oblige you, but in this case it is simply impossible."

"Have you no regard for the opinion of the world?"

"Every regard, my dear."

"What do you suppose society will say to see you at the opera, dressed like a queen, while we are all mourning poor Mollie's loss?"

"Society will say, if society has common sense, that Mrs. Walraven scorns to play hypocrite. I don't care for Mollie Dane—I never did care for her—and I don't mourn her loss in the least. I don't care that"—the lady snapped her jeweled fingers somewhat vulgarly—"if I never see her

again. It is as well to tell you the truth, my dear. One should have no secrets from one's husband, they say."

She laughed lightly, and drew her opera-cloak up over her superb bare shoulders. Mr. Walraven's darkest scowl did not intimidate her in the least.

"Leave the room, madame!" ordered her husband, authoritatively; "and take you care that I don't assert my right and compel you to obey me, before long."

"Compel!" It was such a good joke that Mrs. Blanche's silvery laugh rang through the apartment. "You compelled me once, against my will, when you took your ward with you on your wedding-tour. I don't think it will ever happen again, Mr. Walraven. And now, how do you like my dress? I came in expressly to ask you, for the carriage waits."

"Leave the room!" cried Carl Walraven, in a voice of thunder. "Be gone!"

"You are violent," said Blanche, with a provoking shrug and smile, but prudently retreating. "You forget your voice may be heard beyond this room. Since you lost your ward you appear also to have lost your temper—never of the best, I must say. Well, my love, by-bye for the present. Don't quite wear out the carpet before I return."

With the last sneer and a sweeping bow, the lady quitted the library. As she closed the door, the house-bell rang violently.

"The devoted baronet, no doubt," she said to herself, with an unpleasant smile; "come to condole with his brother in affliction. Poor old noodle! Truly, a fool of forty will never be wise! A fool of seventy, in his case."

One of the tall footmen opened the door. But it was not the stately baronet. The footman recoiled with a little yelp of terror—he had admitted this visitor before. A gaunt and haggard woman, clad in rags, soaking with rain—a wretched object as ever the sun shone on.

"Is Carl Walraven within?" demanded this grisly apparition, striding in and confronting the tottering footman with blazing black eyes. "Tell him Miriam is here."

The footman recoiled further with another feeble yelp, and Blanche Walraven haughtily and angrily faced the intruder.

"Who are you?"

The blazing eyes burning in hollow sockets turned upon the glittering, perfumed vision.

"Who am I? What would you give to know? Who are you? Carl Walraven's wife, I suppose. His wife! Ha! ha!" she laughed—a weird, blood-curdling laugh. "I wish

you joy of your husband, most magnificent madame! Tell me, fellow," turning with sudden fierceness upon the dismayed understrapper, "is your master at home?"

"Y-e-e-s! That is, I think so, ma'am."

"Go and tell him to come here, then. Go, or I'll—"

The dreadful object made one stride toward the lofty servitor, who turned and fled toward the library.

But Mr. Walraven had heard loud and angry voices, and at this moment the door opened and he appeared on the threshold.

"What is this?" he demanded, angrily. "What the deuce do you mean, Wilson, by wrangling in the hall? Not gone yet, Blanche? Good Heaven! Miriam!"

"Yes, Miriam!" She strode fiercely forward. "Yes, Miriam! Come to demand revenge! Where is Mollie Dane? You promised to protect her, and see how you keep your word!"

"In the demon's name, hush!" cried Carl Walraven, savagely. "What you have to say to me, say to me—not to the whole house. Come in here, you hag of Satan, and blow out as much as you please! Good Lord! Wasn't I in trouble enough before, without you coming to drive me mad?"

He caught her by one fleshless arm in a sort of frenzy of desperation, and swung her into the library. Then he turned to his audience of two with flashing eyes:

"Wilson, be gone! or I'll break every bone in your body! Mrs. Walraven, be good enough to take yourself off at once. I don't want eavesdroppers."

And having thus paid his elegant lady-wife back in her own coin, Mr. Walraven stalked into the library like a sulky lion, banged the door and locked it.

Mrs. Carl stood a moment in petrified silence in the hall, then sailed in majestic displeasure out of the house, into the waiting carriage, and was whirled away to the Academy.

"Turn and turn about, Mr. Carl Walraven," she said, between set, white teeth. "My turn next! I'll ferret out your guilty secrets before long, as sure as my name is Blanche!"

Mr. Walraven faced Miriam in the library with folded arms and fiery eyes, goaded to recklessness, a panther at bay.

"Well, you she-devil, what do you want?"

"Mary Dane."

"Find her, then!" said Carl Walraven, fiercely. "I know nothing about her."

The woman looked at him long and keenly. The change in him evidently puzzled her.

"You sing a new song lately," she said, with deliberation. "Do you want me to think you are out of my power?"

"Think what you please, and be hanged to you!" howled Mr. Walraven. "I am driven to the verge of madness among you! Mollie Dane and her disappearance, my wife and her cursed taunts, you and your infernal threats! Do your worst, the whole of you! I defy the whole lot!"

"Softly, softly," said Miriam, cooling down as he heated up. "I want an explanation. You have lost Mollie! How was she lost?"

"Yes—how? You've asked the question, and I wish you would answer it. I've been driving myself wild over it for the past few days, but I don't seem to get to the solution. Can't your Familiar," pointing downward, "help you guess the enigma, Miriam?"

Miriam frowned darkly.

"Do you really intend to say you have not made away with the girl yourself?"

"Now what does the woman mean by that? What the deuce should I make away with her for? I liked Mollie—upon my soul I did, Miriam! I liked her better than any one in this house—the little, saucy, mischievous witch! She was on the eve of marrying a baronet, and going to her castle in Spain—I mean in Wales—when, lo! she vanishes like a ghost in a child's tale. I've scoured the city after her—I've paid detectives fabulous amounts. I've been worried, and harassed, and goaded, and mystified until I'm half mad, and here you come with your infernal nonsense about 'making away' with her. That means murdering her, I suppose. I always took you to be more or less mad, Miriam Dane, but I never before took you to be a fool."

The woman looked at him keenly—he was evidently telling the truth. Yet still she doubted.

"Who but you, Carl Walraven, had any interest in her, one way or the other? What enemies could a girl of sixteen have?"

"Ah! what, indeed? If a girl of sixteen will flirt with every eligible man she meets until she renders him idiotic, she must expect to pay the penalty. But I don't pretend to understand this affair; it is wrapped in blacker mystery than the Man in the Iron Mask. All I've got to say is—I had no hand in it; so no more of your black looks, Mistress Miriam."

"And all I've got to say, Mr. Walraven," said Miriam, steadfastly fixing her eyes upon him, "is that if Mollie Dane is not found before the month is out, I will publish your story

to the world. What will Madame Walraven, what will Mrs. Carl, what will the chief metropolitan circles say then?"

"You hag of Hades! Ain't you afraid I will strangle you where you stand?"

"Not the least," folding her shawl deliberately around her, and moving toward the door; "not in the slightest degree. Good-night, Carl Walraven—I have said it, and I always keep my word."

"Keep it, and—"

But Miriam did not hear that last forcible adjuration. She was out of the library, and out of the house, ere it was well uttered—lost in the wet, black night.

Left alone, Carl Walraven resumed his march up and down the apartment, with a gloomier face and more frowning brows than ever.

It was bad enough before, without this tiger-cat of a Miriam coming to make things ten times worse. It was all bravado, his defiance of her, and he knew it. He was completely in her power, to ruin for life if she chose to speak.

"And she will choose!" growled Carl Walraven, in a rage, "the accursed old hag! if Mollie Dane doesn't turn up before the month ends. By the Lord Harry! I'll twist that wizen gullet of hers the next time she shows her ugly black face here! Confound Mollie Dane and all belonging to her! I've never known a day's rest since I met them first."

There was a tap at the door. The tall footman threw it open and ushered in Sir Roger Trajenna. The stately old baronet looked ten years older in these few days. Anxiety told upon him more hardly than his seventy years.

"Good-evening, Sir Roger!" cried Mr. Walraven, advancing eagerly. "Any news of Mollie?"

He expected to hear "No," but the baronet said "Yes." He was deeply agitated, and held forth, in a hand that shook, a note to Carl Walraven.

"I received that an hour ago, through the post-office. For Heaven's sake, read, and tell me what you think of it!"

He dropped exhausted into a chair. Carl Walraven tore open the brief epistle, and devoured its contents:

"SIR ROGER TRAJENNA,—Give up your search for Mollie Dane. It is useless; a waste of time and money. She is safe and well, and will be at home in a week, but she will never be your wife.

"ONE WHO KNOWS."

Mr. Walraven read and reread these brief lines, and stood and stared at Sir Roger Trajenna.

"Good heavens! You got this through the post-office?"

"I did, an hour ago, and came here at once. Do you believe it?"

"How can I tell? Let us hope it may be true. It is of a piece with the rest of the mystery. The writing, as usual in these anonymous letters, is disguised. Can Mollie herself be the writer?"

"Mollie!" The baronet grew fearfully pale at the bare suggestion. "Why on earth should my affianced wife write like that? Don't you see it says there, 'She will never be your wife?' Mollie, my bride, would never say that."

Mr. Walraven was not so sure, but he did not say so. He had very little faith in Miss Dane's stability, even in a matter of this kind.

"It is the work of some enemy," said Sir Roger, "and, as such, to be disregarded. Like all anonymous letters, it is only worthy of contempt."

People always say that of anonymous communications; but the anonymous communications invariably have their effect, notwithstanding.

"I will continue my search," pursued Sir Roger, firmly. "I will offer yet higher rewards. I will employ still more detectives. I will place this letter in their hands. No stone shall be left unturned—no money shall be spared. If I lose Mollie, life is not worth the having."

He rose to go. Mr. Walraven folded up the mysterious epistle and handed it back.

"I see it is postmarked in the city. If the writer really knows aught of Mollie, she must be nearer at hand than we imagine. Would to Heaven the week were up."

"Then you have faith in this?" said the baronet, looking astonished.

"I have hope, my dear sir. It is very easy believing in what we wish to come true. There may be something in it. Who knows?"

The baronet shook his head.

"I wish I could think so. I sometimes fear we will never see her again. Poor child! Poor little Mollie! Heaven only knows what you may not have suffered ere this!"

"Let us not despair. Pray, resume your seat. I am quite alone this stormy night, Sir Roger. Mrs. Walraven has gone to the opera."

But the baronet moved resolutely to the door.

"Thanks, Mr. Walraven; but I am fit company for no one. I have been utterly miserable since that fatal night. I can find rest nowhere. I will not inflict my wearisome society upon you, my friend. Good-night!"

The week passed. As Sir Roger said, the inquiries and rewards were doubled—trebled; but all in vain. No trace—not the faintest shadow of trace—of the lost one could be found. The mystery deepened and darkened every day.

The week expired. On its last night there met at the Walraven mansion a few friends, to debate what steps had better next be taken.

"In the council of many there is wisdom," thought Mr. Carl Walraven; so that there were present, besides Sir Roger Trajenna, Dr. Oleander, Mr. Sardonyx, Hugh Ingelow, and one or two more wiseacres, all anxious about the missing bride.

The bevy of gentlemen were assembled in the drawing-room, conversing with solemn, serious faces, and many dubious shakes of the head.

Sir Roger sat the picture of pale despair. Mr. Walraven looked harassed half to death. The other gentlemen were preternaturally grave.

"It is of no use," Sir Roger was saying. "Those who abducted her have laid their plans too well. She will never be found."

"Are you sure she was abducted?" asked Dr. Oleander, doubtfully. "Is it not just possible, my dear Sir Roger, she may have gone off of herself?"

Everybody stared at this audacious suggestion.

"There is no such possibility, Doctor Oleander," said Sir Roger, haughtily. "The bare insinuation is an insult. Miss Dane was my plighted wife of her own free will."

"Your pardon, Sir Roger. Yet, please remember, Miss Dane was a highly eccentric young lady, and the rules that hold good in other cases fail here. She was accustomed to do most extraordinary things, for the mere sake of being odd and uncommon, as I take it. Her guardian will bear me out; therefore I still cling to the possibility."

"Besides, young ladies possessing sound lungs will hardly permit themselves to be carried off without raising an outcry," said Mr. Sardonyx; "and in this case there was none. The faintest cry would have been heard."

"Neither were there any traces of a struggle," put in Mr. Ingelow, "and the chamber window was found unfastened, as if the bride had loosed it herself and stepped out."

Sir Roger looked angrily around, with a glance that seemed to ask if they were all in a conspiracy against him; but, before he could speak, the door-bell rang loudly.

Mr. Walraven remembered the anonymous note, and started violently. An instant later, they heard a servant open the door, and then a wild, ringing shriek echoed through the house.

There was one simultaneous rush out of the drawing-room, and down-stairs. There, in the hall, stood Wilson, the footman, staring and gasping as if he had seen a ghost; and there, in the door-way, a silvery, shining vision, in the snowy bridal robes she had worn last, stood Mollie Dane!

CHAPTER X.

THE PARSON'S LITTLE STORY.

THERE was a dead pause; blank amazement sat on every face; no one stirred for an instant. Then, with a great cry of joy, the Welsh baronet sprung forward and caught his lost bride in his arms.

"My Mollie—my Mollie! My darling!"

But his darling, instead of returning his rapturous embrace, disengaged herself with a sudden jerk.

"Pray, Sir Roger, don't make a scene! Guardy, how d'ye do? Is it after dinner? I'm dreadfully tired and hungry!"

"Mollie! Good heavens, Mollie! is this really you?" gasped Mr. Walraven, staring aghast.

"Now—now!" cried Miss Dane, testily; "what's the good of your asking ridiculous questions, Guardy Walraven? Where's your eyesight? Don't you see it's me? Will you kindly let me pass, gentlemen? or am I to stand here all night on exhibition?"

Evidently the stray lamb had returned to the fold in shocking bad temper. The gentlemen barring her passage instantly made way, and Mollie turned to ascend the staircase.

"I'm going to my room, guardy," she condescended to say, with her foot on the first carpeted step, "and you will please send Lucy up with tea and toast immediately. I'm a great deal too tired to offer any explanation to-night. I feel as if I had been riding about in a hackney-carriage for a century or two, like Peter Rugg, the missing man—if you ever heard of Peter;" with which Miss Dane toiled slowly and wearily up the grand staircase, and the group of gentlemen were left in the hall below blankly gazing in one another's faces.

"Eminently characteristic," observed Mr. Ingelow, the first to break the silence, with a soft laugh.

"Upon my word," said Dr. Oleander, with his death's-head smile, "Miss Mollie's return is far more remarkable than her departure! That young lady's *sang-froid* requires to be seen to be believed in."

"Where can she have been?" asked Lawyer Sardonyx, helplessly taking snuff.

The two men most interested in the young lady's return said nothing; they were far beyond that. They could only look at each other in mute astonishment. At last—

"The anonymous letter did speak the truth," observed Mr. Walraven.

"What anonymous letter?" asked Lawyer Sardonyx, sharply.

"Sir Roger received an anonymous letter a week ago, informing him Mollie would be back a week after its date. We neither of us paid any attention to it, and yet, lo! it has come true."

"Have you that letter about you, Sir Roger?" inquired the lawyer. "I should like to see it, if you have no objection."

Mechanically Sir Roger put his hand in his pocket, and produced the document. The lawyer glanced keenly over it.

"'One Who Knows.' Ah! 'One Who Knows' is a woman, I am certain. That's a woman's hand, I am positive. Look here, Oleander!"

"My opinion exactly! Couldn't possibly be Miss Dane's own writing, could it?" once more with his spectral smile.

"Sir!" cried the baronet, reddening angrily.

"I beg your pardon. But look at the case dispassionately, Sir Roger. My previous impression that Miss Dane was not forcibly abducted is confirmed by the strange manner of her return."

"Mine also," chimed in Lawyer Sardonyx.

"Suppose we all postpone forming an opinion on the subject," said the lazy voice of the young artist, "until to-morrow, and allow Miss Dane, when she has recovered from her present fatigue and hunger, to explain for herself."

"Thanks, Ingelow"—Mr. Walraven turned a grateful glance upon the lounging artist—"and, meantime, gentlemen, let us adjourn to the drawing-room. Standing talking here I don't admire."

He led the way; the others followed—Sir Roger last of all, lost in a maze of bewilderment that utterly spoiled his joy at his bride's return.

"What can it mean? What can it mean?" he kept perpetually asking himself. "What is all this mystery? Surely —surely it can not be as these men say! Mollie can not have gone off of herself!"

It was rather dull the remainder of the evening. The guests took their departure early. Sir Roger lingered behind the rest, and when alone with him the master of the house summoned Lucy. That handmaiden appeared, her eyes dancing with delight in her head.

"Where is your mistress, Lucy?" Mr. Walraven asked.

"Gone to bed, sir," said Lucy, promptly.

"You brought her up supper?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say to you?"

"Nothing much, sir, only that she was famished, and jolted to death in that old carriage; and then she turned me out, saying she felt as though she could sleep a week."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more, sir."

Lucy was dismissed.

Mr. Walraven turned to the baronet sympathizingly.

"I feel as deeply mystified and distressed about this matter as even you can do, my dear Sir Roger; but you perceive there is nothing for it but to wait. Oleander was right this evening when he said the rules that measure other women fail with Mollie. She is an original, and we must be content to bide her time. Come early to-morrow—come to breakfast—and doubtless all will be explained to our satisfaction."

And so Mr. Walraven thought, and he fancied he understood Mollie pretty well; but even Mr. Walraven did not know the depth of aggravation his flighty ward was capable of.

Sir Roger did come early on the morrow—ridiculously early, Mrs. Carl said, sharply; but then Mrs. Carl was exasperated beyond everything at Mollie presuming to return at all. She was sure she had got rid of her so nicely—so sure Mistress Mollie had come to grief in some way for her sins—that it was a little too bad to have her come walking coolly back and taking possession again, as if nothing had happened.

Breakfast hour arrived, but Miss Dane did not arrive with it. They waited ten minutes, when Mrs. Carl lost patience and protested angrily she would not wait an instant longer.

"Eccentricity is a little too mild a word to apply to your ward's actions, Mr. Walraven," she said, turning angrily upon her husband. "Mollie Dane is either a very mad girl or a very wicked one. In either case, she is a fit subject for a

lunatic asylum, and the sooner she is incased in a strait-jacket and her antics ended, the better."

"Madame!" thundered Mr. Walraven, furiously, while the baronet reddened with rage to the roots of his silvery hair.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of you, Mr. Walraven," said Mrs. Walraven, coolly, "not afraid to speak my mind, either. None but a lunatic would act as she has acted, running away on her wedding-night and coming back a fortnight after. The idea of her being forcibly abducted is all stuff and nonsense. Heaven only knows where the past two weeks have been spent!"

"Mrs. Walraven," said the Welsh baronet, with awful, suppressed passion, "you forget you speak of my future wife."

"I forget nothing, Sir Roger Trajenna. When Miss Dane gives a satisfactory explanation of her conduct it will be quite time enough to take her part. Mr. Walraven are you going to eat your breakfast, or am I to take it alone?"

Mr. Walraven seized the bell-rope and nearly tore it down. A maid-servant appeared.

"Go up to Miss Dane's room and tell her we are waiting breakfast!" roared Mr. Walraven in a stentorian voice.

The girl obeyed in dire alarm. In an instant she was back.

"Miss Dane's not up yet, and says she doesn't expect to be for some time. She says you'd better not wait for her, as you will very likely be painfully hungry if you do."

"I thought so," remarked Mrs. Carl, shortly.

Mr. Walraven bit his lip, the baronet looked like a thunder-cloud, but both took their places. To all but the mistress of the mansion the breakfast business was a dead failure. Mrs. Carl eat with a very good appetite, finished her meal, arose, rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to be ready in an hour.

The gentlemen adjourned to the library to smoke and wait. The hour elapsed. Mrs. Walraven departed in state, and dead calm fell upon the house. Another hour—the waiting twain were growing fidgety and nervous, crackling their newspapers and puffing at their cigars.

"I vow that mad girl is making me as hysterical as a cranky old maid!" growled Mr. Walraven. "If she doesn't appear in half an hour, I'll go up to her room and carry her down willy-nilly!"

"Would you really be so cruel, guardy?" said a soft voice, and wheeling round, the astonished pair saw the culprit before them. "Have you no pity for your poor little Mollie, and

can't you let her be as lazy as she pleases? Good-morning, Sir Roger Trajenna."

How lovely Mollie looked! The golden curls fell in a shining shower over the dainty white cashmere robe, belted with blue velvet, soft white lace and a diamond pin sparkling at the rounded throat. She came forward with a bright smile and outstretched hand to greet them.

"I was cross last night, you know," she said, "and couldn't properly speak to my friends. Traveling steadily, for goodness knows how many hours, in a bumping coach, would wear out the patience of a saint—and you know I'm not a saint!"

"No," said Mr. Walraven; "very far from it. Nearer the other thing, I suspect."

"Now, guardy," said Mollie, reproachfully, "how can you? And after I've been lost, and you've been all distracted about me, too! Oh, how I should like to have seen the fuss and the uproar, and the dismay and distraction generally! Do tell me what you all thought."

"I'll tell you nothing of the sort," said her guardian, sternly. "Have you no feeling in that flinty heart of yours, Mollie Dane?"

"Well, now, guardy, if you'll believe me, I'm not so sure I've got a heart at all. There's something that beats in here"—tapping lightly on her white bodice—"but for going frantic with love or hate, or jealousy or sorrow, or any of those hysterical things that other people's hearts seem made for, I don't believe I have. I tell you this frankly"—glancing sideways at Sir Roger Trajenna—"in order to warn you and everybody not to be too fond of me. I'm not worth it, you see, and if you take me for more than my value, and get disappointed afterward, the fault's not mine, but yours."

Mr. Walraven looked at her in surprise.

"Rather a lengthy speech, isn't it, Mollie? Suppose you leave off lecturing, and tell us where you've been for the last two weeks."

"Where do you suppose I've been?"

"We can't suppose on such a question; it is impossible. I desire you to tell us."

"And if I don't, guardy?"

She looked up at him rather defiantly—seated on a low stool, her elfish chin in her elfish hand, her pretty little rose-bloom face peeping brightly out from the scented yellow curls.

"Mollie!"

"Guardy, see here: it's of no use getting cross. I can't tell you where I've been, because I don't know myself."

"Mollie!"

"It's true as preaching, guardy. You know I don't tell fibs—except in fun. I don't know where I was, and so I can't tell you, and I'd a good deal rather you wouldn't ask me."

"Mollie!"

"Oh, what's the use of Mollieing?" cried the young lady, waxing impatient. "I was taken somewhere, and I don't know where—'pon my word and honor, I don't—and I was kept a prisoner in a nasty room, by people I don't know, to punish me for flirting, I was told; and when I was there two weeks, and punished sufficiently, Heaven knows, I was fetched home. Guardy, there's everything I know or can tell you about the matter. Now, please be good, and don't bother with tiresome questions."

Mr. Walraven stood and looked at her, a petrified gazer. Such unheard-of impudence! Sir Roger Trajenna took up the catechism.

"Your pardon, Mollie, but I must ask you a few more questions. There was a young person brought you a letter on the night we were—" His voice failed. "May I ask who was that young person, and what were the contents of that letter?"

Mollie looked up, frowning impatiently. But the baronet was so pale and troubled asking his questions that she had not the heart to refuse.

"That young person, Sir Roger, called herself Sarah Grant. The letter purported to come from a woman who knew me before I knew myself. It told me she was dying, and had important revelations to make to me—implored me to hasten at once if I would see her alive. I believed the letter, and went with Sarah. That letter, Sir Roger, was a forgery and a trap."

"Into which you fell?"

"Into which I fell headlong. The greatest ninny alive could not have been snared more easily."

"You have no idea who perpetrated this atrocity?"

"No," said Mollie, "no idea. I wish I had! If I wouldn't make him sup sorrow in spoonfuls, my name's not Mollie! There, Sir Roger, that will do. You've heard all I've got to tell, and the better way will be to ask no more questions. If you think I am not sufficiently explicit—if you think I keep anything back that you have a right to know—why, there is only one course left. You can take it, and welcome. I re-

lease you from all ties to me. I shall think you perfectly justified, and we will continue the best possible friends." She said it firmly, with an eye that flashed and a cheek that burned. "There is only one thing can make us quarrel, Sir Roger—that is, asking me questions I don't choose to answer. And I don't choose to answer in the present case."

"But I insist upon your answering, Mollie Dane!" burst out Carl Walraven. "I don't choose to be mystified and humbugged in this egregious manner. I insist upon a complete explanation."

"Do you, indeed, Mr. Walraven? And how are you going to get it?"

"From you, Mollie Dane."

"Not if I know myself—and I rather fancy I do! Oh, no, Mr. Walraven—no, you don't! I sha'n't say another word to you, or to any other living being, until I choose; and it's no use bullying, for you can't make me, you know. I've given Sir Roger his alternative, and I can give you yours. If you don't fancy my remaining here under a cloud, why, I can go as I came, free as the wind that blows. You've only to say the word, Guardy Walraven!"

The blue eyes flashed as Carl Walraven had never seen them flash before; the pink-tinged cheeks flamed rose-red; but her voice never rose, and she kept her quaint seat on the stool.

"Cricket! Cricket! Cricket!" was "guardy's" reproachful cry.

"You dear old thing! You wouldn't like to lose your hateful little tom-boy, would you? Well, you sha'n't, either. I only meant to scare you that time. You'll ask me no more nasty questions, and I'll stay and be your Cricket the same as ever, and we'll try and forget the little episode of the past two weeks. And as for you, Sir Roger, don't you do anything rash. Just think things over, and make sure you're perfectly satisfied, before you have anything to do with me, for I don't intend to explain any more than I have explained. I'm a good-for-nothing, giddy little moth, I know; but I don't really want to deceive anybody. No; don't speak on impulse, dear Sir Roger. Take a week or two, and think about it."

She kissed her hand coquettishly to the two gentlemen, and tripped out of the room.

And there they sat, looking at each other, altogether bewildered and dazed, and altogether more infatuated about her than ever.

Society was electrified at finding Miss Dane back, and looked

eagerly for the sequel to this little romance. They got it from Mr. Walraven.

Mr. Walraven, bland as oil, told them his ward had received on her bridal night a summons to the bedside of a dying and very near relative. Miss Dane, ever impulsive and eccentric, had gone. She had remained with the dying relative for a fortnight, and merely for mischief—no need to tell them how mischievous his ward was—had kept the whole matter a secret. It was very provoking, certainly, but was just like provoking Mollie Dane.

Mr. Walraven related this little fable smiling sweetly, and with excellent grace. But society took the story for what it was worth, and shook its head portentously over Miss Dane and her mysteries.

Nobody knew who she was, where she came from, or what relation she bore to Mr. Walraven, and nobody believed Mr. Walraven and his little romance.

But as Mesdames Walraven, mother and wife, countenanced the extraordinary creature with the flighty way and amber curls, and as she was the ward of a millionaire, why, society smiled graciously, and welcomed Mollie back with charming sweetness.

A fortnight passed—the fortnight of probation she had given Sir Roger. There was a grand dinner-party at some commercial nabob's up the avenue, and all the Walraven family were there. There, too, was the Welsh baronet, stately and grand-seigneur-like as ever; there were Dr. Oleander, Lawyer Sardonyx, Hugh Ingelow, and the little witch who had thrown her wicked sorceries over them, brighter, more sparkling, more lovely than ever.

And at the dinner-party Mollie was destined to receive a shock; for, just before they paired off to the dining-room, there entered a late guest, announced as the "Reverend Mr. Rashleigh," and, looking in the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh's face, Mollie Dane recognized him at once.

She was standing at the instant, as it chanced, beside Hugh Ingelow, gayly helping him to satirize a magnificent "diamond wedding" they had lately attended; but at the sight of the portly, commonplace gentleman, the words seemed to freeze on her lips.

With her eyes fixed on his face, her own slowly whitening until it was blanched, Mollie stood and gazed and gazed. Hugh Ingelow looked curiously from one to the other.

"In Heaven's name, Miss Mollie, do you see the Marble Guest, or some invisible familiar, peeping over that fat gen-

tleman's shoulder? What do you see? You look as though you were going to faint."

"Do you know that gentleman?" she managed to ask.

"Do I know him—Reverend Raymond Rashleigh? Better than I know myself, Miss Dane. When I was a little chap in roundabouts they used to take me to his church every Sunday, and keep me in wriggling torments through a three-hours' sermon. Yes, I know him, to my sorrow."

"He is a clergyman, then?" Mollie said, slowly.

Mr. Ingelow stared at the odd question.

"I have always labored under that impression, Miss Dane, and so does the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh himself, I fancy. If you choose, I'll present him, and then you can cross-question him at your leisure."

"No, no!" cried Mollie, detaining him; "not for the world! I don't wish to make his acquaintance. See, they are filing off! I fall to your lot, I suppose."

She took her rejected suitor's arm—somehow, she was growing to like to be with Hugh Ingelow—and they entered the dining-room together. But Mollie was still very, very pale, and very unusually quiet.

Her face and neck gleamed against her pink dinner-dress like snow, and her eyes wandered furtively ever and anon over to the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh.

She listened to every word that he spoke as though they were the fabled pearls and diamonds of the fairy tale that dropped from his lips.

"Positively, Miss Dane," Hugh Ingelow remarked in his lazy voice, "it is love at first sight with the Reverend Raymond. Think better of it, pray; he's fat and forty, and has one wife already."

"Hush!" said Mollie, imperiously.

And Mr. Ingelow, stroking his mustache meditatively, hushed, and listened to a story the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh was about to relate.

"So extraordinary a story," he said, glancing around him, "that I can hardly realize it myself or credit my own senses. It is the only adventure of my life, and I am free to confess I wish it may remain so.

"It is about three weeks ago. I was sitting, one stormy night—Tuesday night it was—in my study, in after-dinner mood, enjoying the luxury of a good fire and a private clerical cigar, when a young woman—respectable-looking young person—entered, and informed me that a sickly relative, from

whom I have expectations, was dying, and wished to see me immediately.

"Of course I started up at once, donned hat and great-coat, and followed my respectable young person into a cab waiting at the door. Hardly was I in when I was seized by some invisible personage, bound, blindfolded, and gagged, and driven through the starry spheres, for all I know, for hours and hours interminable.

"Presently we stopped. I was led out—led into a house, upstairs, my uncomfortable bandages removed, and the use of my eyesight restored.

"I was in a large room, furnished very much like anybody's parlor, and brilliantly lighted. My companion of the carriage was still at my elbow. I turned to regard him. My friends, he was masked like a Venetian bravo, and wore a romantic inky cloak, like a Roman toga, that swept the floor.

"I sat aghast, the cold perspiration oozing from every pore. I make light of it now, but I could see nothing to laugh at then. Was I going to be robbed and murdered? Why had I been decoyed here?

"My friend of the mask did not leave me long in suspense. Not death and its horrors was to be enacted, but marriage—marriage, my friends—and I was to perform the ceremony.

"I listened to him like a man in a dream. He himself was the bridegroom. The bride was to appear masked, also, and I was only to hear their Christian names—Ernest—Mary. He offered no explanations, no apologies; he simply stated facts. I was to marry them and ask no questions, and I was to be conveyed safely home the same night. If I refused—

"My masked gentleman paused, and left an awful hiatus for me to fill up. I did not refuse—by no means. It has always been my way to make the best of a bad bargain—of two evils to choose the lesser. I consented.

"The bridegroom with the black mask quitted the room, and returned with a bride in a white mask. She was all in white, as it is right and proper to be—flowing veil, orange wreath, trailing silk robe—everything quite nice. But the white mask spoiled all. She was undersized and very slender, and there was one peculiarity about her I noticed—an abundance of bright, golden ringlets."

The reverend gentleman paused an instant to take breath.

Mollie Dane, scarcely breathing herself, listening absorbed, here became conscious, by some sort of prescience, of the basilisk gaze her guardian's wife had fixed upon her.

The strangest smile sat on her arrogant face as she looked steadfastly at Mollie's flowing yellow curls.

"I married that mysterious pair," went on the clergyman —"Ernest and Mary. There were two witnesses—my respectable young woman and the coachman; there was the ring —everything necessary and proper."

Mollie's left hand was on the table. A plain, thick band of gold gleamed on the third finger. She hastily snatched it away, but not before Mrs. Walraven's black eyes saw it.

"I was brought home," concluded the clergyman, "and left standing, as morning broke, close to my own door, and I have never heard or seen my mysterious masks since. There's an adventure for you!"

The ladies rose from the table As they passed into the drawing-room, a hand fell upon Mollie's shoulder. Glancing back, she saw the face of Mrs. Carl Walraven, lighted with a malicious smile.

"Such a queer story, Mollie! And such an odd bride—undersized, very slender, golden ringlets—name, Mary! My pretty Cricket, I think I know where you passed that mysterious fortnight!"

CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT TETE-A-TETE.

MOLLIE DANE sat alone in her pretty room. A bright fire burned in the grate. Old Mme. Walraven liked coal-fires, and would have them throughout the house. It was very late—past midnight—but the gas burned full flare, its garish flame subdued by globes of tinted glass, and Mollie, on a low stool before the fire, was still in all the splendor of her pink silk dinner-dress, her laces, her pearls.

Mollie's considering-cap was on, and Mollie's dainty brows were contracted, and the rosebud mouth ominously puckered. Miss Dane was doing what she did not often do—thinking—and the thoughts chasing one another through her flighty brain were evidently the reverse of pleasant.

"So I'm really married," mused the young lady—"really and truly married!—and I've been thinking all along it was only a sham ceremony."

She lifted up her left hand and looked at the shining wedding-ring.

"Ernest! Such a pretty name! And that's all I know about him. Oh, who is he, among all the men I know—who? It's not Doctor Oleander—I'm certain it's not, although the

height and shape are the same; and I don't think it's Sardonyx, and I know it's not Hugh Ingelow—handsome Hugh! —because he hasn't the pluck, and he's a great deal too lazy. If it's the lawyer or the doctor, I'll have a divorce, certain. If it were the artist—more's the pity it's not—I—well, I shouldn't ask for a divorce. I do like Hugh! I like him more and more every day, and I almost wish I hadn't played that shameful trick upon him. I know he loves me dearly—poor little, mad-headed me! And I—oh! how could I think to marry Sir Roger Trajenna, knowing in my heart I loved Hugh? Dear, dear! it's such a pity I can't be good, and take to love-making, and marriage, and shirt-buttons, like other girls! But I can't; it's not in me. I was born a rattle-pate, and I don't see how any one can blame me for letting 'nater caper.'"

She rose up impatiently and began pacing the room—always her first impulse in moments of perplexity.

"I'm a mystery and a puzzle to myself and to everybody else. I don't know who I am, nor what my real name may be—if I have any right to a name! I don't know what I am to this Mr. Walraven, and I don't know who that mysterious woman, Miriam, is. I don't know anything. I have a husband, and I don't know him—shouldn't recognize him if I met him face to face this instant. I'm like the mysterious orphans in the story-books, and I expect it will turn out I have a duke for a father, somewhere or other."

Miss Dane walked to the window, drew the curtain, and looked out.

The full April moon, round and white, shone down in silvery radiance upon the deserted avenue; the sky was aglitter with myriad stars; the rattling of belated vehicles came, faint and far off, on the windless night.

No one was visible—not even a stray "guardian of the night," treading his solitary round—and Mollie, after one glance at the starry concave, was about to drop the curtain and retire, when a tall, dark figure came fluttering up the street, pausing before the Walraven mansion, and gazing up earnestly at its palatial front.

Mollie recognized that towering form instantly, and, impulsively opening the sash, she leaned forward and called:

"Miriam!"

The woman heard her, responded, and advanced.

Mollie leaned further out.

"Have you come to see me?"

"I should like to see you. I heard you had returned, and came here, though I did not expect to meet you at this hour."

"Wait one moment," said Mollie; "I will go down and let you in."

She closed the window and flew down-stairs, opened the house door softly, and beckoned.

Miriam entered. Ten minutes later, and they were safely closeted in the young lady's cozy room.

"Sit down, Aunt Miriam, and take off your shawl. You look cold and wretched and half starved."

The woman turned her hollow eyes mournfully upon her. They were indeed a contrast—the bright vision in the rose silk dress, the floating amber curls, the milky pearls, the foamy lace, and the weird woman in the wretched rags, with sunken cheeks and hollow, spectral eyes.

"I am cold and wretched and half starved," she said, in a harsh voice—"a miserable, homeless outcast, forsaken of God and man. My bed is a bundle of filthy straw, my food a crust or a bone, my garments rags from the gutters. And yet I accept my fate, since you are rich and well and happy."

"My poor, poor Miriam! Let me go and get you something to eat, and a glass of wine to refresh you. It is dreadful to see any human being so destitute."

She started impetuously up, but Miriam stretched forth her hand to detain her, her fierce eyes flaming up.

"Not half so dreadful, Mollie Dane, as the eating the bread or drinking the cup of Carl Walraven! No; I told him before, and I tell you now, I would die in a kennel, like a stray dog, before I would accept help from him."

"Miriam!"

Miriam made an impatient gesture.

"Don't let us talk about me. Let us talk about yourself. It is my first chance since you came here. You are well and happy, are you not? You look both."

"I am well and I am happy; that is, as happy as I can be, shrouded in mystery. Miriam, I have been thinking about myself. I have learned to think, of late, and I would give a year of my life to know who I am."

"What do you want to know?" Miriam asked, gloomily.

"Who I am; what my name may be; who were my parents—everything that I ought to know."

"Why do you speak to me about it?"

"Because you know, I am certain; because you can tell me, if you will. Tell me, Miriam—tell me!"

She leaned forward, her ringed hands clasped, her blue eyes

lighted and eager, her pretty face aglow. But Miriam drew back with a frown.

"I have nothing to tell you, Mollie—nothing that would make you better or happier to hear. Be content and ask no questions."

"I can't be content, and I must ask questions!" the girl cried, passionately. "If you cared for me, as you seem to, you would tell me! What is Mr. Walraven to me? Why has he brought me here?"

"Ask him."

"He won't tell me. He says he took a fancy to me, seeing me play 'Fanchon' at K——, and brought me here and adopted me. A very likely story! No, Miriam; I am silly enough, Heaven knows, but I am not quite so silly as that. He came after me because you sent him, and because I have some claim on him he dare not forego. What is it, Miriam? Am I his daughter?"

Miriam sat and stared at her a moment in admiring wonder, then her dark, gaunt face relaxed into a grim smile.

"What a sharp little witch it is! His daughter, indeed! What do you think about it yourself? Does the voice of nature speak in your filial heart, or is the resemblance between you so strong?"

Mollie shook her sunny curls.

"The 'voice of nature' has nothing to say in the matter, and I am no more like him than a white chick is like a mastiff. But it might be so, you know, for all that."

"I know. Would it make you any happier to know you were his daughter?"

"I don't know," said Mollie, thoughtfully. "I dare say not. For, if I were his daughter and had a right to his name, I would probably bear it, and be publicly acknowledged as such before now; and if I am his daughter, with no right to his name, I know I would not live ten minutes under the same roof with him after finding it out."

"Sharp little Mollie! Ask no questions, then, and I'll tell you no lies. Take the goods the gods provide, and be content."

"But, Miriam, are you really my aunt?"

"Yes; that much is true."

"And your name is Dane?"

"It is."

"And my mother was your sister, and I bear my mother's name?"

The dark, weather-beaten face of the haggard woman

lighted up with a fiery glow, and into either eye leaped a devil.

"Mollie Dane, if you ever want me to speak to you again, never breathe the name of your mother. Whatever she did, and whatever she was, the grave has closed over her, and there let her lie. I never want to hear her name this side of eternity."

Mollie looked almost frightened; she shrunk away with a wistful little sigh.

"I am never to know, then, it seems, and I am to go on through life a cheat and a lie. It is very hard. People have found out already I am not what I seem."

"How?" sharply.

"Why, the night I was deluded from home, it was by a letter signed 'Miriam,' purporting to come from you, saying you were dying, and that you wanted to tell me all. I went, and walked straight into the cunningest trap that ever was set for a poor little girl."

"You have no idea from whom that letter came?"

"Not the slightest. I am pretty sure, though, it came from my husband."

"Your—what?"

"My husband, Miriam! You didn't know Miss Dane was a respectable married woman, did you? It's true, however. I've been married over a month."

There was no doubting the face with which it was said. Miriam sat staring, utterly confounded.

"Good heavens! Married! You never mean it, Mollie?"

"I do mean it. It's an accomplished fact, Mrs. Miriam Dane, and there's my wedding-ring."

She held up her left hand. Among the opals, and pearls, and pale emeralds flashing there, gleamed a little circlet of plain gold—badge of woman's servitude.

"Married!" Miriam gasped, in indescribable consternation. "I thought you were to marry Sir Roger Trajenna?"

"So I was—so I would have, if I had been let alone. But that letter from you came—that forgery, you know—and I was carried off and married, willy-nilly, to somebody else. Who that somebody else is, I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Haven't the slightest idea! I've a good mind to tell you the story. I haven't told any one yet, and the weight of a secret a month old is getting a little too much for me. It would be a relief to get some one else to keep it for me, and I fancy you could keep a secret as well as any one else I know."

"I can keep your secret, Mollie. Go on."

So Mollie began and related the romantic story of that fortnight she had passed away from home.

"And you consented to marry him?" Miriam exclaimed, when she had got that far—"you consented to marry a man totally unknown to you, whose face you had not even seen, whose name you did not even know, for the sake of freedom? Mollie, you're nothing but a miserable little coward, after all!"

"Perhaps so," said Mollie, defiantly. "But I would do it again, and twice as much, for freedom. Think of being cooped up in four stifling walls, shut in from the blessed sunshine and fresh air of heaven. I tell you that man would have kept me there until now, and I should have gone stark, staring mad in half the time. Oh, dear!" cried Mollie, impatiently, "I wish I was a gypsy, free and happy, to wander about all day long, singing in the sunshine, to sleep at night under the waving trees, to tell fortunes, and wear a pretty scarlet cloak, and never know, when I got up in the morning, where I would lie down at night. It's nothing but a nuisance, and a trouble, and a bother, being rich, and dressing for dinner, and going to the opera and two or three parties of a night, and being obliged to talk and walk and eat and sleep by line and plummet. I hate it all!"

"You're tired of it, then?" Miriam asked, with a curious smile.

"Yes; just now I am. The fit will pass away, I suppose, as other similar fits have passed."

"I wonder you never take it into your head to go back upon the stage. You liked that life?"

"Liked it? Yes; and I will, too," said Mollie, recklessly, "some day, when I'm more than usually aggravated. It strikes me, however, I should like to find out my husband first."

"Finish your story. You married this masked man?"

"Yes; that very night, about midnight, we were married. Sarah came to me early in the evening, and told me to be ready, that the clergyman would be there, and that I was to be wedded under my Christian name, Mary, alone. I still wore the wedding-robes in which I was to have been made Lady Trajenna. To these a white silk mask, completely hiding my face, was added, and I was led forth by my masked bridegroom into another apartment, and stood face to face with a portly, reverend gentleman of most clerical aspect and most alarmed face. I thought he had a familiar look, but in

the confusion of such a moment I could not place him. I know him now, though—it was the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh, of St. Pancras'. I've heard him preach dozens of times."

"How came he to lend himself to such an irregular proceeding?"

"By force, as I did. He was carried off in much the same fashion, and scared pretty nearly out of his wits—married us to get free—like me again. At the conclusion of the ceremony, I returned with Sarah to the inner room, and the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh was safely taken home."

There was a pause. Mollie sat looking with knitted brows into the fire.

"Well?" questioned Miriam, sharply.

"I stayed there a week," went on Mollie, hurriedly. "It was part of the compact, and if he was to keep his, and liberate me, I was to remain quietly as long as I had promised. But it was not so long in passing. I had the range of two or three rooms—all with carefully closed blinds, however—and I had a piano and plenty of books, and as much of Miss Sarah Grant's society as I chose. There was nothing to be got out of her, however, and I tried hard enough, goodness knows. You might as well wring a dry sponge."

"And the man you married?"

"Oh, he was there, too—off and on every day; but he kept me as much in the dark as Sarah. He always persisted in speaking French to me—that I might fail to recognize his voice, I dare say; and he spoke it as fluently as a Frenchman. But he was really an agreeable companion, could talk about everything I liked to talk about, could play the piano to a charm, and I should have liked him immensely if he had not been my husband, and if he had not worn that odious mask. Do you know, Miriam," flashing a sudden look up, "if he had taken off that mask, and showed me the handsome face of one of my rejected suitors I did not absolutely abhor. I think I should have consented to stay with him always. He was so nice to talk to, and I liked his bold stroke for a wife—so much in the 'Dare-Devil Dick' style. But I would have been torn to pieces before I'd have dropped a hint to that effect."

"If it had been Doctor Oleander, would you have consented to stay with him as his wife?"

"Doctor Oleander? No. Didn't I say if it were some one I did not absolutely abhor? I absolutely and utterly and altogether abhor and detest Doctor Oleander!"

"What is that? Some one is listening."

Miriam had started in alarm to her feet; Mollie rose up also, and stood hearkening. There had been a suppressed sound, like a convulsive sneeze, outside the door. Mollie flung it wide in an instant. The hall lamp poured down its subdued light all along the stately corridor, on pictures and statues and cabinets, but no living thing was visible.

"There is no one," said Mollie. It was cats or rats, or the rising wind. 'Every one in the house is asleep."

She closed the door and went back to the fire. As she did so, a face peeped out from behind a great, carved Indian cabinet, not far from the door—a face lighted with a diabolical smile of triumph.

CHAPTER XII.

"BLACK MASK"—"WHITE MASK."

"FINISH your story!" exclaimed Miriam, impatiently. "Morning is coming, and like owls and bats and other noxious creatures, I hide from the daylight. How did you escape?"

"I didn't escape," said Mollie. "I couldn't. The week expired—my masked husband kept his word and sent me home."

"Sent you! Did he not fetch you?"

"No; the man who drove the carriage—who, with the girl Sarah, witnessed the marriage—brought me. Sarah bound me, although there was no occasion, and the man led me down and put me in. Sarah accompanied me, and I was driven to the very corner here. They let me out, and, before I had time to catch my breath, were off and away."

"And that is all?" said Miriam, wonderingly.

"All! I should think it was enough. It sounds more like a chapter out of the 'Castle of Otranto,' or the 'Mysteries of Udolpho,' than an incident in the life of a modern New York belle. For, of course, you know, Madame Miriam," concluded the pretty coquette, tossing back airily all her bright curls, "I am a belle—a reigning belle—the beauty of the season!"

"A little conceited, goosey girl—that's what you are, Mollie Dane, whom even this terrible event can not make serious and sensible."

"Terrible event! Now, Miriam, I'm not so sure about that. If I liked the hero of the adventure—and I have liked some of my rejected flirtees, poor fellows!—I should admire his pluck, and fall straightway in love with him for his ro-

mantic daring. It is so like what those old fellows—knights and barons and things—used to do, you know. And if I didn't like him—if it were Sardonyx or Oleander—sure, there would be the fun and fame of having my name in all the papers in the country as the heroine of the most romantic adventure of modern times. There would be sensation novels and high-pressure melodramas manufactured out of it, and I would figure in the Divorce Court, and wake up some day, like Lord Byron, and find myself famous."

Miriam listened to this rattle with a face of infinite contempt.

"Silly child! It will ruin your prospects for life. Sir Roger will never marry you now."

"No," said Mollie, composedly, "I don't think he will; for the simple reason that I wouldn't have him."

"Wouldn't have him? What do you mean?"

"What I say, auntie. I wouldn't marry him, or anybody else, just now. I mean to find out who is my husband first."

"Do they know this extraordinary story?"

Mollie laughed.

"No, poor things! And he and guardy are dying by inches of curiosity. Guardy has concocted a story, and tells it with his blandest air to everybody; and everybody smiles, and bows, and listens, and nobody believes a word of it. And that odious Mrs. Carl—there's no keeping her in the dark. She has the cunning of a serpent, that woman. She has an inkling of the truth, already."

"How?"

"Well, Mr. Rashleigh—the clergyman, you know, who was abducted to marry us—was at a dinner-party this very day—or, rather, yesterday, for it's two in the morning now—and at dinner he related his whole wonderful adventure. Of course, he didn't see my face or know me; but he described the bride—small, slender, with a profusion of golden ringlets. You should have seen Mrs. Carl look across the table at me—you should have heard her hiss in my ear, in her venomous, serpent-like way: 'I think I know where you spent that fortnight.' I couldn't sleep to-night for thinking of it, and that's how I came to be awake so late, and to see you from the window. I'm not afraid of her; but I know she means me mischief, if she can."

Miriam gazed thoughtfully at her. She looked a very helpless, childish little creature, sitting there—the youthful face looking out of that sunshiny cloud of curls.

"She is your deadly enemy, then, Mollie. Why does she dislike you so much?"

"Because I dislike her, I suppose, and always did, and she knew it. It is a case of mutual repulsion. We were enemies at first sight. Then she is jealous of me—of my influence with her husband. She is provoked that she can not fathom the mystery of my belongings, and she thinks, I know, I am Mr. Walraven's daughter, *sub rosâ;* and, to cap the climax, I won't marry her cousin, Doctor Oleander."

"You seem to dislike Doctor Oleander very much?"

"I do," said Mollie, pithily. "I'd give him and the handsome Blanche a dose of strychnine each, with all the pleasure in life, if it wasn't a hanging matter. I don't care about being hanged. It's bad enough to be married and not know who your husband is."

"It may be this Doctor Oleander."

Mollie's eyes blazed up.

"If it is!"—she caught her breath and stopped—"if it is, Miriam, I vow I would blow his brains out first, and my own afterward! No, no, no! Such a horrible thing couldn't be!"

"Do you know, Mollie," said Miriam, slowly, "I think you are in love?"

"Ah! do you really? Well, Miriam, you used to spae fortunes for a living. Look into my palm now, and tell me who is the unhappy man."

"Is this artist you speak of handsome and young?"

"Handsome and young, and tolerably rich, and remarkably clever. Is it he?"

"I think it is."

Mollie smiled softly, and looked into the glowing mass of coals.

"You forget I refused him, Miriam."

"Bah! a girl's caprice. If you discovered he was your mysterious husband, would you blow out his brains and your own?"

"No," said Mollie, coolly. "I would much rather live with Hugh Ingelow than die with him. Handsome Hugh!" Her eyes softened and grew humid. "You are right, Miriam. You can spae fortunes, I see. I do like Hugh, dearly. But he is not the man."

"No? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. He is too chivalrous, for one thing, to force a lady's inclination."

"Don't trust any of them. Their motto is: 'All fair in

love!' And then, you know, you played him a very shabby trick."

"I know I did."

Miss Dane laughed at the recollection.

"And he said he would not forget."

"So they all said. That's why I fear it may be one of the three."

"And it is one of the three; and you are not the clever girl I give you credit to be if you can not find it out."

"How?"

"Are they so much alike in height, and gait, and manner of speaking, and fifty other things, that you can't identify him in spite of his mask?"

"It is not so easy to recognize a masked man when he disguises himself in a long cloak and speaks French in a feigned voice. Those three men are very much of a height, and all are straight and slender. I tried and tried again, I tell you, during that last week, and always failed. Sometimes I thought it was one, and sometimes another."

"Try once more," said Miriam, pithily.

"How?"

"Are you afraid of this masked man?"

"Afraid? Certainly not. I have nothing to fear. Did he not keep his word and restore me to my friends at the expiration of the week? You should have heard him, Miriam, at that last interview—the eloquent, earnest, impassioned way in which he bid me good-bye. I declare, I felt tempted for an instant to say: 'Look here, Mr. Mask; if you love me like that, and if you're absolutely not a fright, take off that ugly, black death's-head you wear, and I'll stay with you always, since I am your wife.' But I didn't."

"You would not fear to meet him again, then?"

"On the contrary, I should like it, of all things. There is a halo of romance about this mysterious husband of mine that renders him intensely interesting. Girls love romance dearly; and I'm only a girl, you know."

"And the silliest girl I ever did know," said Miriam. "I believe you're more than half in love with this man in the mask; and if it turns out to be the artist, you will plump into his arms, forever and always."

"I shouldn't wonder in the least," responded the young lady, coolly. "I never knew how much I liked poor dear Hugh until I gave him his *congé*. He's so very, very, very handsome, you see, Miriam; and I adore beauty."

"Very well. Find out if it's he—and find out at once."

"More easily said than done, isn't it?"

"Not at all. You don't suppose he has left the city?"

"No. He told me that he would not leave—that he would remain and watch me, unseen and unknown."

"Then, if you advertise—if you address him through the medium of the daily papers—he will see and answer your advertisement."

"Very probably. But he isn't going to tell me who he is. If he had any intention of doing so, he would have done it last week."

Miriam shook her head.

"I'm not so sure about that. You never asked him to reveal himself. You gave him no reason to suppose you would do otherwise than scorn and flout him, let him be who he might. It is different now. If it is Hugh Ingelow, you will forgive him all?"

"Miriam, see here: why are you so anxious I should forgive this man?"

"Because I want to see you some respectable man's wife; because I want to see you safely settled in life, and no longer left to your own caprices, or those of Carl Walraven. If you love this Hugh Ingelow, and marry him, you may probably become a rational being and a sensible matron yet."

Mollie made a wry face.

"The last thing I ever want to be. And I don't believe half a dozen husbands would ever transform me into a 'sensible matron.' But go on, all the same. I'm open to suggestion. What do you want me to do?"

"Address this man. Ask him to appoint a meeting. Meet him. Tell him what you have told me, and make him reveal himself. He will be sure to do it, if he thinks there are grounds for hope."

"And if it turns out to be Sardonyx or Oleander—and I have a presentiment that it's the latter—what then?"

"'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I don't believe it is either. From what you tell me of them, I am sure neither would behave so honorably at the last—keeping his promise and fetching you home."

"There is something in that," said Mollie, thoughtfully. "Unless, indeed, they grew tired of me, or were afraid to imprison me longer. And my masked husband talked, at the parting, as neither of these reptiles could talk. It may be some one of whom I have never thought—who knows? I've had such a quantity of lovers that I couldn't possibly keep the

run of them. However, as I'm dying to meet him again, whoever he is, I'll take your advice and address him."

Miriam rose.

"That is well. And now I must be going. It is past three, and New York streets will presently be astir. I have a long way to go, and no wish to be seen."

"Miriam, stop. Can't I do anything to assist you? You are half starved, I know; and so miserably clad. Do—do let me aid you?"

"Never!" the woman cried, "while you are beneath this roof. If ever you settle down in a house of your own, and your husband permits you to aid so disreputable a being as I am, I may listen to you. All you have now belongs to Carl Walraven; and to offer me a farthing of Carl Walraven's money is to offer me the deadliest of insults."

"How you hate him! how he must have wronged you!"

Again that burning blaze leaped into the woman's haggard eyes.

"Ay, girl! hate and wrong are words too poor and weak to express it. But I bide my time—and it will surely come—when I will have my revenge."

She opened the door and passed out swiftly. The listener at the key-hole barely escaped behind the cabinet—no more.

Mollie, in her rosy silken robes, like a little goddess Aurora, followed her out, down the stairs, and opened for her the house door.

The first little pink clouds of the coming morn were blushing in the east, and the rag-women, with their bags and hooks, were already astir.

"When shall I see you again?" Mollie said.

Miriam turned and looked at her, half wonderingly.

"Do you really wish to see me again, Mollie—such a wretched-looking being as I am?"

"Are you not my aunt?" Mollie cried, passionately. "How do I know there is another being on this earth in whose veins flow the same blood as mine? And you—you love me, I think."

"Heaven knows I do, Mollie Dane!"

"Then why wrong me by such a question? Come again, and again; and come soon. I will be on the watch for you. And now, farewell!"

She held out her little white hand. A moment, and they had parted.

The young girl went slowly back to her room to disrobe and

lie down, and the haggard woman flitted rapidly from street to street, on her way to the dreary lodgings she called home.

Two days after, running her eyes greedily over the morning paper, Miriam read, heading the list of "Personals:"

"BLACK MASK.—I wish to see you soon, and alone. There is no deception meant. Appoint time and place, and I will meet you. WHITE MASK."

"So," said the woman to herself, "she has kept her word. Brave little Mollie! Oh! that it may be the man she loves! I should be almost happy, I think, to see her happy—Mary's child!"

Miriam waited impatiently for the response. In two days it came:

"WHITE MASK.—To-morrow, Friday night, ten o'clock. Corner Fourteenth Street and Broadway. BLACK MASK."

"I, too, will be there," said Miriam. "It can do no harm; it may, possibly, do some good."

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. CARL WALRAVEN'S LITTLE GAME.

MYSTERIOUS Miriam, in her dismal garret lodging, was not the only person who read, and intelligently comprehended, these two very singular advertisements.

Of all the hundreds who may have perused and wondered over them, probably there were but four who understood in the least what was meant—the two most interested, and Miriam and Mrs. Walraven.

Stay! There was the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh, who might have seen his way through, had he chanced to read the "Personal" column of the paper.

On the Thursday morning that this last advertisement appeared, Mrs. Carl Walraven sat alone in the pretty boudoir sacred to her privacy. It was her choice to breakfast alone sometimes, *en dishabille*. It had been her choice on this particular day.

At her elbow stood the tiny round table, with its exquisite appointments of glass, and porcelain, and silver; its chocolate, its toast, its eggs, its little broiled bird.

Mrs. Walraven was of the luxurious sort, as your full-blown, high-blooded Cleopatras are likely to be, and did ample justice to the exquisite *cuisine* of the Walraven mansion.

Lying back gracefully, her handsome morning robe falling loosely around her, her superb black hair twisted away in a careless, serpentine coil, her face fresh and blooming, "at peace with the world and all therein," my lady Blanche digested her breakfast and leisurely skimmed the morning paper.

She always liked the "Personals." To-day they had a double interest for her. She read again and again—a dozen times, at least—that particular "Personal" appointing the meeting at Fourteenth Street, and a lazy smile came over her tropical face at last as she laid it down.

"Nothing could be better," mused Mrs. Walraven, with that indolent smile shining in her lazy, wicked black eyes. "The little fool sets her trap, and walks into it herself, like the inconceivable idiot she is. It reminds one of the ostrich, this advertisement—pretty Mollie buries her head in the sand, and fancies no one sees her. Now, if Guy only plays his part—and I think he will, for he's absurdly and ridiculously in love with the fair-haired tom-boy—she will be caught in the nicest trap ever silly seventeen walked into. She was caged once, and got free. She will find herself caged again, and not get free. I shall have my revenge, and Guy will have his inamorata. I'll send for him at once."

Mrs. Walraven rose, sought out her blotting-book, took a sheet of paper and an envelope, and scrawled two or three words to her cousin:

"DEAR GUY,—Come to me at once. I wish to see you most particularly. Don't lose a moment.

"Very truly,

"BLANCHE."

Ringing the bell, Mrs. Walraven dispatched this little missive, and then, reclining easily in the downy depths of her violet velvet *fauteuil*, she fell into a reverie that lasted for upward of an hour. With sleepy, slow, half-closed eyes, the wicked smile just curving the ripe-red mouth, Mme. Blanche wandered in the land of meditation, and had her little plot all cut and dry as the toy Swiss clock on the low mantel struck up a lively waltz preparatory to striking eleven. Ere the last silvery chime had ceased vibrating, the door of the boudoir opened and Dr. Guy Oleander walked in.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Walraven," said the toxicologist, briskly. "You sent for me. What's the matter?"

He took off his tall hat, set it on a sofa, threw his gloves

into it, and indulged in a prolonged professional stare at his fair relative.

"Nothing very serious, I imagine. You're the picture of handsome health. Really, Blanche, the Walraven air seems to agree with you. You grow fresher, and brighter, and plumper, and better-looking every day."

"I didn't send for you to pay compliments, Doctor Oleander," said Mrs. Walraven, smiling graciously, all the same. "See if that door is shut fast, please, and come and sit here beside me. I've something very serious to say to you."

Dr. Oleander did as directed, and took a seat beside the lady.

"Your husband won't happen in, will he, Blanche? Because he might be jealous, you know, at this close proximity; and your black-a-vised men of unknown antecedents are generally the very dickens when they fall a prey to the green-eyed monster."

"Pshaw! are you not my cousin and my medical adviser? Don't be absurd, Guy. Mr. Walraven troubles himself very little about me, one way or other. I might hold a levee of my gentlemen friends here, week in and week out, for all he would know or care."

"Ah! post-nuptial bliss. I thought marriage, in his case, would be a safe antidote for love. All right, Blanche. Push ahead. What's your business? Time is precious this morning. Hosts of patients on hand, and an interesting case of leprosy up at Bellevue."

"I don't want to know your medical horrors," said Mrs. Walraven, with a shudder of disgust; "and I think you will throw over your patients when you hear the subject I want to talk about. That subject is—Mollie Dane!"

"Mollie!" The doctor was absorbed and vividly interested all at once. "What of Mollie Dane?"

"This," lowering her voice: "I have found out the grand secret. I know where that mysterious fortnight was spent."

"Blanche!" He leaned forward, almost breathless. "Have you? Where?"

"You'd never guess. It sounds too romantic—too incredible—for belief. Even the hackneyed truism, 'Truth is stranger than fiction,' will hardly suffice to conquer one's astonishment—yet true it is. Do you recollect the Reverend Mr. Rashleigh's story at the dinner-party, the other day—that incredible tale of his abduction and the mysterious marriage of the two masks?"

"I recollect—yes."

"He spoke of the bride, you remember—described her as small and slender, with a profusion of fair, curling hair."

"Yes—yes—yes!"

"Guy," fixing her powerful black eyes on his face, "do you need to be told who that masked bride was?"

"Mollie Dane!" cried the doctor, impetuously.

"Mollie Dane," said Mrs. Walraven, calmly.

"By Jove!"

Dr. Oleander sat for a instant perfectly aghast.

"I only wonder it did not strike you at the time. It struck me, and I whispered my suspicion in her ear as we passed into the drawing-room. But she is a perfect actress. Neither start nor look betrayed her. She stared at me with those insolent blue eyes of hers, as though she could not possibly comprehend."

"Perhaps she could not."

Mrs. Walraven looked at him with a quiet smile—the smile of conscious triumph.

"She is the cleverest actress I ever saw off the stage—so clever that I am sometimes inclined to suspect she may have been once on it. No, my dear Guy, she understood perfectly well. Mollie Dane was the extraordinary bride Mr. Rashleigh married that extraordinary night."

"And who the devil," cried Dr. Guy, using powerful language in his excitement, "was the birdegroom?"

"Ah!" said Blanche, "there's the rub! Mr. Rashleigh doesn't know, and I don't know, and Mollie doesn't know herself."

"What!"

"My dear Doctor Oleander, your eyes will start from your head if you stare after that fashion. No; Mollie doesn't know. She is married; but to whom she has no more idea than you have. Does it not sound incredible?"

"Sound? It is incredible—impossible—absurd!"

"Precisely. It is an accomplished fact, all the same."

"Blanche, for Heaven's sake, explain!" exclaimed the young man, impatiently. "What the foul fiend do you mean? I never heard such a cock-and-bull story in all my life!"

"Nor I. But it is true, nevertheless. Listen: On the night following the dinner-party I did the meanest action of my life. I played eavesdropper. I listened at Mollie's door. All for your sake, my dear Guy."

"Yes?" said Guy, with an incredulous smile.

"I listened," pursued Mrs. Blanche, "and I overheard the

strangest confession ever made, I believe—Mollie Dane relating the adventures of that hidden fortnight, at midnight, to that singular creature, Miriam."

"Miriam! Who is she?"

"Oh! you remember—the woman who tried to stop my marriage. Mollie quieted her on that ocasion, and they had a private talk."

"Yes, yes! I remember. Go on. How did Miriam come to be with Mollie, and who the mischief is Miriam?"

"Her aunt."

"Her aunt?"

"Her mother's sister—yes. Her mother's name was Dane. Who that mother was," said Mrs. Walraven, with spiteful emphasis, "I fancy Mr. Walraven could tell you."

"Ah!" said her cousin, with a sidelong glance, "I shouldn't wonder. I'll not ask him, however. Proceed."

"I took to reading a novel after I came home," proceeded Mrs. Walraven, "and my husband went to bed. I remained with my book in the drawing-room, very much interested, until nearly midnight. I fancied all in the house had retired; therefore, when I heard a soft rustling of silk swishing past the drawing-room door, I was considerably surprised. An instant later, and the house door was softly unfastened. I turned the handle noiselessly and peeped out. There, in her pink dinner toilet, jewels and all, was Miss Dane, stealing upstairs, and following her, this wretched, ragged creature, Miriam."

"Well?" said the doctor.

"Well, I followed. They entered Miss Dane's chamber and closed the door. The temptation was strong, the spirit willing, and the flesh weak. I crouched at the key-hole and listened. It was a very long conversation—it was fully three o'clock before Miriam departed—but it held me spell-bound with its interest from beginning to end. Once I was nearly caught—I sneezed. I vanished behind a big cabinet, and just saved myself, for they opened the door. Mollie set it down to the wind, or the rats, closed the door again, and my curiosity overcoming my fear of detection, I crept back and heard every word."

"Well?" again said the doctor.

"Well, Mollie made a clean breast of it. On her wedding-night she was enticed from the house by a letter purporting to come from this Miriam. The letter told her that Miriam was dying, and that she wished to make a revelation of her parentage to Mollie, before she departed for a worse land. It

seems she knows Miss Dane's antecedents, and Miss Dane doesn't. Mollie went at once, as the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh did, and, like him, was blindfolded and bound, borne away to some unknown house, nobody knows where, waited on by the girl who carried the letter, and held a fast prisoner by a man in a black mask. That man's face Mollie never saw, nor has she the least idea of whom it may be. She is inclined to suspect you."

"Me!"

The doctor's stare of astonishment was a sight to behold.

"It is you, or Sardonyx, or Ingelow—one of you three, Mollie is certain. The particular one she can't decide. She dreads it may be either the lawyer or the doctor, and hopes, with all her heart, it may be the artist."

Dr. Oleander's swarthy brows knit with a midnight scowl.

"She is in love with this puppy, Ingelow. I have thought as much for some time."

"Hopelessly in love with him, and perfectly willing to be his wife, if he proves to be her husband. Should it chance to be you, she will administer a dose of strychnine the first available opportunity."

"She said that, did she?"

"That, and much more. She hates, detests, and abhors you, and loves the handsome artist with all her heart."

"The little jade! And how about her elderly admirer?"

"Sir Roger? Oh! he is to get the go-by. 'Men have died, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.' He will stand the blow. 'All for love, and the world well lost,' is to be her motto for the future. She is in love with Hugh, and Hugh she must have. The spoiled baby is tired of all its old toys, and wants a new one."

"And she married this masked man, and never saw him? That is odd."

"The whole affair is excessively odd. You know how impatient she naturally is. She grew desperate in her confinement in a few days, and was ready to sell her birthright for a mess of pottage—ready to sacrifice her freedom in one way for her freedom in another. She had the man's promise that he would return her to her friends a week after she became his wife. She married him, and he kept his promise."

"And he never let her see his face?"

"Never! and she can not even suspect who it is. He wore a long, disguising cloak that concealed his figure, false beard and hair, and spoke only French. But she hopes it may be Hugh Ingelow. What do you think?"

"That is not Hugh Ingelow. The fellow hasn't energy enough to entrap a fly."

"Sardonyx, then?"

"Sardonyx is too cautious. He knows too much of the law to run his head into the lion's jaws. Besides, it is too absurdly romantic for so practical a man. No, it is not Sardonyx."

"Yourself, then?"

The doctor laughed.

"Nonsense, Blanche! Mollie is out of her reckoning about us three. By the bye, I see now through those queer advertisements that have appeared in the 'Herald' of late. Black Mask—White Mask."

"Yes; Mollie wants to find out whom she has espoused. By Miriam's advice, she inserted that first advertisement to Black Mask. He, as you perceive, replies in to-day's edition."

"And she is to meet him to-morrow night."

"Exactly; and will, unless you forestall him."

"How?"

"Don't be stupid, pray. What is to hinder you from being at the place of rendezvous first and playing Black Mask?"

"I beg your pardon; I am stupid still. Black Mask will be there himself."

"Look here: ten is the hour. Toward evening I will advance every time-piece in the house, Mollie's watch included, half an hour. She will be at the place of tryst at half past nine. Be you there, likewise—cloaked, bearded, bewigged. Have a carriage in waiting. Make her think you are Hugh Ingelow, and she will enter it without hesitation. Speak French. She will not recognize your voice. Once in the carriage, carry her off."

"Where?" asked the doctor, astonished at the rapidity of all this.

"To Long Island—to the farm. She will be as safe there as in Sing Sing. Make her think you are her unknown husband. It will be easily done, for she half thinks it now. Only—look out for the strychnine!"

The doctor rose to his feet, his sallow face flushed, his small black eyes sparkling.

"By Jove! Blanche, what a plotter you are! I'll do it, as sure as my name's Guy. I love the little witch to madness, and I owe her one for the way she jilted me. I'll do it, by thunder!"

"Very well," said Mrs. Walraven, quietly. "Don't get excited, and don't make a noise. I knew you would."

"But what will the old lady say?"

"Who cares for the old lady?" retorted Mme. Blanche, contemptuously. "Not you, I hope. Tell her it's an insane patient you have brought to her for quiet and sea air. Judy is a regular dragon, and the old woman is as keen as a ferret and as sly as a female fox. Mollie won't escape from them. She may yield, if she really is convinced you are her husband. Tell her you love her to distraction—can't live without her, and so on. She may yield. Who knows? These girls are bundles of inconsistencies, and Mollie Dane the most inconsistent of the tribe. Have the ceremony performed over again before witnesses, and bring her back here in a month—Mrs. Guy Oleander! Even if she won't consent from pity for your state, she may to escape from that dreary Long Island farm. She did once before, you know, and may again. That is all I have to suggest, Guy. The rest is with yourself. In the vocabulary of great men, there is no such word as fail."

She rose up. Dr. Oleander grasped her hand in an outburst of enthusiastic gratitude.

"Blanche, you're a brick—a trump—a jewel beyond price! I don't know how to thank you. You're a woman of genius—a wife for a Talleyrand!"

"Thanks. Let me be able to return the compliment. I ask no more. Let me see how cleverly you will carry off pretty Mollie. I never want to see her under this roof again."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

THE April day had been very long, and very, very dull in the handsome Walraven Fifth Avenue palace. Long and lamentable, as the warning cry of the banshee, wailed the dreary blast. Ceaselessly, dismally beat the rain against the glass. The icy breath of the frozen North was in the wind, curdling your blood and turning your skin to goose-flesh; and the sky was of lead, and the streets were slippery and sloppy, and the New York pavements altogether a delusion and a snare.

All through this bad, black April day, Mollie Dane had wandered through the house, upstairs and down-stairs, like an uneasy ghost.

Some evil spirit of unrest surely possessed her. She could settle nowhere. She threw herself on a sofa in her pretty bedroom, and tried to beguile the forlorn hours with the latest novel. In vain. She yawned horribly over the pages and flung it from her in disgust.

She wandered down to the drawing-room and tried the grand piano, whose tones were as the music of the spheres. Still in vain. The listless fingers fell aimlessly on the ivory keys.

She strove to sleep, but the nervous restlessness that possessed her only drove her to the verge of feverish madness in the effort. The girl was possessed of a waking nightmare not to be shaken off.

"What is it?" cried Mollie, impatiently, to herself. "What the mischief's the matter with me? I never felt like this before. It can't be remorse for some unacted crime. I never committed murder that I know of. It can't be dyspepsia, for I've got the digestive powers of an anaconda. It can't be the weather, for I've struggled through one or two other rainy days in my life-time; and it can't be anxiety for to-night to come, for I'm not apt to get into a gale about trifles. Perhaps it's a presentiment of evil to come. I've heard of such things. It's either that or a fit of the blue-devils!"

The long, wet, windy day wore on. Mr. Walraven slept through it comfortably in his study. Mrs. Walraven had a *tête-à-tête* luncheon with her cousin, the doctor, and dawdled the slow hours away over her tricot and fashion magazines.

Old Mme. Walraven rarely left her own apartments of late days. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law detested each other with an intensity not common even in that relationship. How she ever killed time was a mystery unknown. Mollie good-naturedly devoted a couple of her precious daily hours to her.

The house was as still as a tomb. Down-stairs, Messrs. Johnson and Wilson, Mr. Coachman, Mme. Cook and Mlle. Chambermaid may have enjoyed themselves in one another's society, but above the kitchen cabinet all was forlorn and forsaken.

"Awfully slow, all this!" said Miss Dane to herself, with a fearful yawn. "I'll die of stagnation if this sort of thing keeps on. Mariana, howling in the Moated Grange, must have felt a good deal as I do just at present—a trifle worse, maybe, for I don't wish I were dead altogether. The Tombs is gay and festive compared to Fifth Avenue on a rainy day. I wish I were back playing Fanchon the Cricket, free and happy once more, wearing spangles as Ophelia of Denmark, and a gilt paper crown as Cleopatra of Egypt. I wasn't married then; and I didn't go moping about, like an old hen with the distemper, every time it was wet and nasty. If it keeps on like this I shall have a pretty time of it getting to

Fourteenth Street at ten o'clock to-night. And I'll surely go, if it were to rain cats, dogs, and pitchforks!"

She stood drearily at the drawing-room window, looking forlornly out at the empty street.

The eerie twilight was falling, rain and wind rising and falling with it, the street lamps twinkling ghostily through the murky gloaming, the pavement black and shining. Belated pedestrians hurried along with bowed heads and uplifted umbrellas, the stages rattled past in a ceaseless stream, full to overflowing. The rainy night was settling down, the storm increasing as the darkness came on. Mollie surveyed all this disconsolately enough.

"I don't mind a ducking," she murmured, plaintively, "and I never take cold; but I don't want that man to see me looking like a drowned rat. Oh, if it should turn out to be Hugh—dear, dear Hugh!" Her face lighted rapturously at the thought. "I never knew how much I loved him until I lost him. If it isn't Hugh, and Hugh asks me to run away with him to-morrow, I'll do it—I declare I will—and the others may go to grass!"

At that moment voices sounded on the stairs—the voices of Mrs. Walraven and her cousin.

The drawing-room door was ajar, Mollie's little figure hidden in the amber drapery of the window, and she could see them plainly, without herself being seen.

"You won't fail?" Mrs. Walraven said, impressively. "I will do my part. Are you equal to yours?"

"I never fail where I mean to succeed," answered Dr. Guy, with equal emphasis. "Sooner or later, I triumph! I shall triumph now! 'All things are possible to him who knows how to wait.' I have waited, and this night gives me my reward."

The house door closed after the young man. Mrs. Walraven peeped into the drawing-room, never seeing the slender figure amid the voluminous golden damask, and then reascended the stairs. Mollie was again in silence and solitude.

"Now, what are those two up to, I should like to know?" soliloquized the young lady. "Some piece of atrocious mischief, I'll be bound! He looks like the Miltonic Lucifer sometimes, that man, only not one half so good-looking; but there is a snakish, treacherous, cold-blooded glare in his greenish-black eyes that makes me think of the arch-tempter; and some people have the bad taste to call him handsome."

The twilight had ended in darkness by this time. Mollie

put her hand to her belt to find her watch, but it was not there.

"I have left it on my dressing-table," she thought, moving away. "I will have a cup of tea in my room this evening, and let guardy and Madame Blanche dine together. I wish it were time to start. I abominably hate waiting."

Mollie found her watch on the table, and was rather surprised to see it past eight.

"I had no idea it was so late," she said to herself. "I shall leave here at half past nine. There is nothing like keeping tryst in season."

She rang for Lucy, ordered a little supper in her room, and then dismissed the maid.

"I sha'n't want you again to-night, Lucy," she said. "You can go out, if you like, and see your mother."

Lucy tripped away, right well pleased, and Mollie dawdled the time over her supper and a book.

Half past nine came very soon.

"Time to get ready," thought Mollie, starting up. "Dear, dear! it's highly romantic and highly sensational, this nocturnal appointment with a masked man, and that man one's mysterious husband. I can't say much for the place; there's precious little romance around the Maison Dorée. Does it still rain, I wonder?"

She opened the blind and looked out. Yes, it still rained; it still blew in long, shuddering gusts; the low-lying sky was inky black; athwart the darkness flashed the murky street lamps.

Mollie dropped the curtain, with a little shiver.

"'The night is cold, and dark, and dreary,
It rains, and the wind is never weary.'

It's a horrible night to be abroad, but I'll keep my word, if I drown for it!"

She hunted up the long water-proof mantle she had worn the night of her abduction, drew the hood far over her head and face, wrapped it around her, opened the window, and resolutely stepped out on the piazza.

She paused an instant—a blinding rush of wind and rain almost took her off her feet; the next, the brave little heroine was flitting along the slippery piazza, down the stairs, out of the wicket gate and into the black, shining street.

Away sped Mollie—swift as a little, wingless Mercury—down the avenue, through Union Square, to the place of tryst.

She expected every moment to hear the city clocks chime

ten, but she reached Broadway without hearing them. Little wonder, when it was but half past nine.

Drenched through, blown about, breathless, panting, almost scared at the dreary forlornness of the deserted streets, the adventurous little damsel reached the place of tryst.

Was she too soon? Surely not. There stood a cab, drawn close to the curbstone, and there, in the shadow of the cab, stood a tall man in a cloak, evidently waiting.

The lamps of the carriage shone upon him, but the cloak collar was so turned up, the slouched hat so pulled down, such a quantity of dark beard between, that nothing was visible of the face whatever.

Mollie paused, altogether exhausted; the man advanced a step out of the shadow.

"White Mask?" he asked, in a cautious whisper.

"Black Mask!" responded Mollie, promptly.

"All right, then!" replied the man, speaking in French, and speaking rapidly. "It's impossible to stand here in the rain and talk. I have brought a carriage—let me assist you in."

But Mollie shrunk back. Some nameless thrill of terror suddenly made her dread the man.

"You must—you must!" cried the man, in an impetuous whisper. "We can not stand here in this down-pour. Don't you see it is impossible? And the first policeman who comes along will be walking us off to the station-house."

He caught her arm and half led her to the carriage. Shrinking instinctively, yet hardly knowing what to do, she found herself in it, and seated, before she quite knew it.

He sprung after her, closed the door, the carriage started at once at a great pace, and the poor little fly was fairly caught in the spider's web.

"I don't like this," said Mollie, decisively. "I had no idea of entering a carriage when I appointed this meeting. Where are you taking me to?"

"There is no need to be alarmed, pretty Mollie," said the man, still speaking French. "I have given the coachman orders to rattle along through the streets. We can talk here at our leisure, and as long as we please. You must perceive the utter impossibility of conversation at a street corner and in a down-pour of rain."

Mollie did, but she fidgeted in her seat, and felt particularly uncomfortable, all the same. Now that it was too late, she began to think she had acted unwisely in appointing this meeting.

"Why didn't I let well enough alone?" thought the young

lady. "At a distance, it seemed the easiest thing in the world; now that I am in the man's power, I am afraid of him, more so than I ever was before."

The man had taken his seat beside her. At this juncture he put his arm around her waist.

"Why can't we be comfortable and affectionate, as man and wife should—eh, Mollie? You don't know how much obliged to you I am for this interview."

There was a ring of triumph in his tone that Mollie could not fail to perceive. Her heart gave a great jump of terror, but she angrily flung herself out of his arm.

"Keep your distance, sir! How dare you? You sing quite a new song since I saw you last! Don't you lay a finger on me, or I'll—"

"What, pretty Cricket?" with a sardonic laugh.

Mollie caught her breath. That name, that tone—both were altogether new in the unknown man.

The sound of the voice, now that he spoke French, was quite unlike that of the man she had come to meet. And he was not wont to call her Cricket.

Had she made some horrible mistake—been caught in some dreadful trap? But, no; that was impossible.

"Look here, Mr. Mask," said Mollie, fiercely, "I don't want any of your familiarity, and I trust to your honor to respect my unprotected situation. I appointed this meeting because you kept your word, and behaved with tolerable decency when we last parted. I want to end this matter. I want to know who you are."

"My precious Mollie, your husband!"

"But who are you?"

"One of your rejected suitors."

"But which of them?—there were so many."

"The one who loved you best."

"Pshaw! I don't want trifling! What is your name?"

"Ernest."

"I never had a lover of that name," said Mollie, decidedly. "You are only mocking me. Are you—are you—Hugh Ingelow?"

Her voice shook a little. The man by her side noted it, and burst into a derisive laugh.

"You are not Hugh Ingelow!" Mollie cried in a voice of sharp, sudden pain—"you are not!"

"And you are sorry, pretty Mollie? Why, that's odd, too! He was a rejected lover, was he not?"

"Let me out!" exclaimed the girl, frantically—"let me

go! I thought you were Hugh Ingelow, or I never would have come! Let me out! Let me out!"

She made a rush at the door, with a shrill cry of affright. A sudden panic had seized her—a horrible dread of the man beside her—a stunning sense that it was not the man she loved.

Again that strident laugh—mocking, sardonic, triumphant—rang through the carriage. Her arms were caught and held as in a vise.

"Not so fast, my fair one; there is no escape: I can't live without you, and I see no reason why a man should live without his wife. You appointed this meeting yourself, and I'm excessively obliged to you. I am taking you to the sea-side to spend the honey-moon. Don't struggle so—we'll return to New York by and by. As for Hugh Ingelow, you mustn't think of him now; it isn't proper in a respectable married woman to know there is another man in the scheme of the universe except her husband. Mollie! Mollie! if you scream in that manner you'll compel me to resort to chloroform—a vulgar alternative, my dearest."

But Mollie struggled like a mad thing, and screamed—wild, shrill, womanly shrieks that rang out even above the rattle and roll of the carriage wheels.

The man, with an oath, placed his hand tightly over her mouth. They were going at a frightful pace, and already the city, with its lights and passengers, was left far behind. They were flying over a dark, wet road, and the wind roared through distant trees, and the rain fell down like a second deluge.

"Let me go—let me go!" Mollie strove madly to cry, but the tightening grasp of that large hand suffocated her.

The carriage seemed suddenly to reel, a thousand lights flashed before her eyes, a roar like the roar of many waters surged in her ears, a deathly sickness and coldness crept over her, and with a gasping sob she slipped back, fainting away for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN IN THE MASK.

DIZZILY Mollie opened her eyes. Confused, bewildered, she strove to sit up and catch her breath in broken gasps.

"So sorry, Mollie," said an odious voice in her ear. "Quite shocked, I am sure, to have you faint; but you've not been insensible half an hour. It wasn't my fault, you know. You would scream, you would struggle, you would exhaust

yourself! And what is the consequence of all this excitement? Why, you pop over in a dead swoon."

Mollie raised herself up, still dazed and confused. She put her hand to her forehead and strove to recall her drifting senses.

They were still bowling along at a sharp pace over a muddy country road; still fell the rain; still howled the wind; still pitch darkness wrapped all without. Were they going on forever? Was it a reality or a horrible nightmare?

"We are almost at our journey's end," said the man, soothingly. "Come, cheer up, Cricket. I love you, and I won't hurt a hair of your head."

"Where are we?" Mollie faintly asked.

"Rattling over a beastly country road," answered her companion, "under a sky as black as Erebus, and in a down-pour that threatens a second flood. There's the sea. We're down 'by the sad sea waves' now, Mollie."

Mollie listened. Above the roar of the elemental strife she could hear the deep and mighty bass of the roaring sea.

"We will be there in ten minutes more," said the man, briskly.

"Where is there?" inquired Mollie, in the same faint accent.

"Home, my pretty wife—our cottage by the sea, and all that, you know. Don't droop, my charming Cricket. We'll be as happy together as the days are long. I love you with all my soul—I swear it by all that's good and gracious; and I'll make you the best husband ever bright-eyed little girl had. Trust me, Mollie, and cheer up. Yoicks! Here we are."

The carriage stopped with a jerk that precipitated Mollie into her captor's arms; but, with an angry push, she was free again directly.

The man opened the door and sprung out. Wind howling, rain falling, trees surging, sea roaring, and a big dog barking, made the black night hideous.

"Down, Tiger! Down, you big, noisy brute!" cried the man. "Here, Mollie, let me help you out."

There was no escape—Mollie let him. The salt breath of the sea blew in her face—its awful thunder on the shore drowned all lesser noises.

Through the blackness of the black night she could see the blacker outline of a house, from one or two windows of which faint lights shone. Tossing trees surrounded it—a high board fence and a tall, padlocked gate inclosed it.

"All right, Mollie," the man said. "This is home!"

He drew her arm within his and hurried her up a long, graveled path, under dripping, tossing trees.

The storm of wind and rain nearly beat the breath out of the girl's body, and she was glad when the shelter of a great front porch was gained.

"I hope you're not very wet, my little wife," said the man; "because I don't know as there is a change of garments in this establishment that will fit you. However, as you will retire directly, it doesn't so much matter."

He knocked with his knuckles a thundering reveille that echoed and re-echoed ghostily through the rumbling old house. In a moment there was a shuffling of footsteps inside, a rattling of a chain, and the noisy undoing of rusty bolts.

"Who's there?" asked a cracked old voice. "Is it the young master?"

"Yes, you old idiot! Didn't I send you word? Open the door at once, and be hanged to you!"

A key turned gratingly in the ponderous lock—bolts and chains fell, and the massive door swung back on creaky old hinges.

"Like an ancient castle in a story book," thought Mollie, in the midst of her trouble. "Where in the wide world am I? Oh, what an unfortunate little wretch I am! A stolen princess couldn't be abducted and imprisoned oftener."

The opening of the door showed a long, black, gloomy entrance hall—bare, bleak and draughty. Two people stood there—a grizzly old man, stooping, and bleared, and wrinkled, who had opened the door, and a grizzly old woman, just a shade less stooping, and bleared, and wrinkled, who held a sputtering tallow candle aloft.

"How are you, Peter? How are you, Sally?" said Mollie's conductor, nodding familiarly to these two antediluvians. "Is the room ready? Here's the lady."

He drew Mollie, whose arm he retained in a close grasp, a little closer to him, and Mollie noticed that, for some reason, the ancient pair shrunk back, and looked as though they were a little afraid of her.

"The room's all ready," said the old woman, with a pair of glittering little eyes fixed, as if fascinated, on Mollie's pretty face. "The missis and me's been a-tidying of it all day long. Poor creeter! so young and so pretty! What a pity!"

This last was *sotto voce*, but Mollie's quick ear caught it. She looked up at her conductor, but cloak and hat and whis-

kers disguised him as effectually as the mask had done on other occasions. She looked back at the old woman and held out her supplicating hands.

"My good woman, whoever you are, if you have a woman's heart, take pity on me. I have been brought here against my will by this man."

"Ah, poor creeter!" sighed the old woman, shaking her grizzly old head; "as if I didn't know that. Poor little creeter!"

"Help me!" Mollie cried. "Don't aid this man to keep me here. I don't know who he is—I have been wickedly entrapped. I am a little, helpless girl, but I have rich and powerful friends who will liberally reward you. Don't help this bad, bold man to keep me a prisoner here."

"Ah, poor creeter!" sighed the old woman, plaintively, a second time; "only hear her talk now. And such a pretty little thing, too! Dear, dear! It goes to one's heart. Don't keep her standing in them wet clothes, sir. Come upstairs. Such a pity, such a pity!"

She hobbled away, muttering to herself and shaking her head. The disguised man laughed—a low, deriding laugh.

"You see, my dear little Mollie, you'll get any amount of pity, but nothing else. Old Sally will be very sincerely sorry for you, but she won't help you to escape. On the contrary she'll keep you under lock and key as faithfully as though you were the Koh-i-noor. Come in; you may take cold in this nasty, draughty passage."

He drew her with him. Mollie seemed in a sort of dreamy swoon, and went passively. They ascended the stairs into another dark and draughty hall, flanked on either side by a couple of doors. One of these the old dame opened, and quite a new picture burst on Mollie's sight.

The apartment was not at all like the mysterious padded room of former experience; the four bare walls were plastered and blankly bare; the boarded floor was strewn with rags; the two big square windows were draped with paper blinds. A huge fire of logs, such as Mollie had never beheld in her life before, roared gloriously in the old-fashioned fire-place, and lighted the room with a lurid glow. A four-post bedstead, the bed covered with a gaudy patch-work or counterpane, stood in one corner, a table with a white cloth stood in another, a chest of drawers in a third, and the door by which they entered in the fourth. This was Mollie's new prison.

"Elegant simplicity," observed the man, leading her in; "but we will do our best to make you comfortable during

your stay. It need not be long—you know it depends on yourself, Mollie."

"On myself?"

She turned her pale face and angry eyes upon him.

"I am your husband by a secret marriage, you know. Let that marriage be solemnized over again in public—no one need know of the other: consent to be my wife openly and above-board, and your prison doors will fly open that hour."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?" cried Mollie, impatiently. "End this ridiculous farce—remove that disguise—let me see who I am speaking to. This melodramatic absurdity has gone on long enough—the play is played out. Talk to me, face to face, like a man, if you dare!"

Her eyes blazed, her voice rose. The old woman looked from one to the other, "far wide," but in evident curiosity. The man had persisted in speaking to her in French, and Mollie had answered him in that language.

"Be it as you say!" cried her captor, suddenly; "only remember, Mollie, whether I am the person you prefer to see under this disguise or not, I am nevertheless your husband as fast as the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh can tie the knot. You shall know who I am, since it is only a question of to-night or to-morrow at the most. Sally, you can go."

Sally looked from one to the other with sharp, suspicious old eyes.

"Won't the young lady want me, sir? Is she able to 'tend to herself?"

"Quite able, Sally; she's not so bad as you think. Go away, like a good soul. I have a soothing draught to administer to my patient."

"Your patient!" said Mollie, turning the flashing light of her great blue eyes full upon him.

The man laughed.

"I had to invent a little fable for these good people. Didn't you notice they looked rather afraid of you? Of course you did. Well, my dear Mollie, they think you're mad."

"Mad?"

"Exactly. You are, a little, you know. They think you've come here under medical orders to recruit by the sea-shore. I told them so. One hates to tell lies, but, unfortunately, white ones are indispensable at times."

The blue eyes shone full upon him, blazing with magnificent disdain.

"You are a poorer creature than even I took you to be, and you have acted a mean and dastardly part from the first—the

part of a schemer and a coward. Pray, let me see the face of our modern Knight of Romance."

Old Sally had hobbled from the room and they stood alone, half the width of the apartment between them.

"Hard words, my pretty one! You forget it was all for love of you. I didn't want to see you the wife of an old dotard you didn't care a fillip for."

"So, to mend matters, you've made me the wife of a scoundrel. I must forever hate and despise—yourself."

"Not so, Mollie! I mean you to be very fond of me one of these days. I don't see why you shouldn't. I'm young; I'm well off; I'm clever; I'm not bad-looking. There's no reason why you shouldn't be very fond of me, indeed. Love begets love, they say, and I love you to madness."

"So it appears. A lunatic asylum would be the fitter place for you, if you must escape state prison. Are we to stand here and bandy words all night? Show me who you are and go."

The man laid his hand on his hat.

"Have you no suspicions, Mollie? Can't you meet me half-way—can't you guess?"

"I don't want to guess."

She spoke defiantly; but her heart was going in great, suffocating plunges against her side, now that the supreme moment had come.

"Then, Mollie, behold your husband!"

With a theatrical flourish he whipped off slouched hat, flowing beard and wig, dropped the disguising cloak, and stood before her revealed—Dr. Guy Oleander!

She gave one gasping cry, no more. She stood looking at him as if turning to stone, her face marble white—awfully rigid—her eyes starting from their sockets. The man's face was lighted with a sinister, triumphant glow.

"Look long, Mollie," he said, exultantly, "and look well. You see your husband for the first time."

And then Mollie caught her gasping breath at the taunt, and the blood rushed in a dark, red torrent of rage and shame to her fair face.

"Never!" she cried, raising her arm aloft—"never, so help me Heaven! I will sit in this prison and starve to death! I will throw myself out of yonder window into the black, boiling sea! I would be torn to pieces by wild horses! I will die ten thousand deaths, but I will never, never, never be wife of yours, Guy Oleander!"

Her voice rose to a shriek—hysterical, frenzied. For the

instant she felt as though she were going mad, and she looked it, and the man recoiled before her.

"Mollie!" he gasped, in consternation.

The girl stamped her foot on the floor.

"Don't call me Mollie!" she screamed, passionately. "Don't dare to speak to me, to look at me, to come near me! I have heard of women murdering men, and if I had a loaded pistol this moment, God help you, Doctor Oleander!"

She looked like a mad thing—like a crazed pythoness. Her wild, fair hair fell loose about her; her blue eyes blazed steely flame; her face was crimson with the intensity of her rage, and shame, and despair, from forehead to chin.

"Go!" she cried, fiercely, "you snake, you coward, you felon, you abductor of feeble girls, you poisoner! Yes, you poison the very air I breathe! Go, or, by all that is holy, I will spring at your throat and strangle you with my bare hands!"

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed the petrified doctor, retreating precipitately, "what a little devil it is! Mollie, Mollie, for pity's sake—"

Another furious stamp, a spring like a wild cat toward him, and the aghast doctor was at the door.

"There, there, there, Mollie! I'm going. By Jove! what a little fiend you are! I didn't think you would take it like this. I— Great powers! Yes, I'm going!"

He flew out, closing the door with a bang. Then he opened it an inch and peeped in.

"I'll come again to-morrow, Mollie. Try, for goodness' sake, to calm yourself in the meantime. Yes, yes, yes, I'm going!"

For, with a shriek of madness, she made a spring at him, and the doctor just managed to slam the door and turn the key before her little, wiry hands were upon his throat.

"Great Heaven!" Dr. Oleander cried to himself, pale and aghast, wiping the cold perspiration off his face; "was ever such a mad creature born on the earth before? She looked like a little yellow-haired demon, glaring upon me with those blazing eyes. Little tiger-cat! I told them she was a raving lunatic, and, by George! she's going to prove me a prophet. It's enough to make a man's blood run cold."

CHAPTER XVI.

MOLLIE'S DESPAIR.

DR. OLEANDER descended the stairs, passed through the lower hall, and entered the kitchen—a big, square room, bleak and draughty, like all the rest of the old, rickety place, but lighted by a roaring fire.

Old Sally was bustling about over pots and stew-pans, getting supper; old Peter stood at the table peeling potatoes. In an arm-chair before the fire sat another old woman with snaky-black eyes, hooked nose, and incipient black mustache.

Old Sally was volubly narrating what had transpired upstairs, and cut herself short upon the entrance of her master.

"How are you, mother?" said Dr. Oleander, nodding to the venerable party in the arm-chair. "Sally's telling you about my patient, is she?"

His mother's answer was a stifled scream, which Sally echoed.

"Well, what now?" demanded the doctor.

"You look like a ghost! Gracious me, Guy!" cried his mother, in consternation; "you're whiter than the table-cloth."

Dr. Oleander ground out an oath.

"I dare say I am. I've just had a scare from that little, crazy imp that would blanch any man. I thought, in my soul, she was going to spring upon me like a panther and choke me. She would have, too, by Jove, if I hadn't cleared out."

"Lor'!" cried Sally, in consternation, "and I've just been a-telling the missis how sweet, and gentle, and innocent, and pretty she looked."

"Innocent and gentle—be—hanged!" growled the doctor. "She's the old Satan in female form. If you don't look out, Sally, she'll throttle you to-morrow when you go in."

Sally gave a little yelp of dismay.

"Lor' a massy, Master Guy! then I'll not go near her. I ain't a-going to be scared out of my senses by mad-women in my old age. I won't go into her room a step to-morrow, Master Guy. If you wants to turn honest people's houses into lunatic asylums, then get lunatic-keepers to see arter them. I sha'n't do it, and so I tell you."

With which short and sharp ultimatum Sally began vigorously laying the cloth for supper.

Before Dr. Oleander could open his mouth to expostulate, his mother struck in:

"I really don't think it's safe to live in the house with such a violent lunatic, Guy. I wish you had taken your crazy patient elsewhere."

"Oh, it's all right, mother. She's only subject to these noisy fits at periodical times. On certain occasions she appears and talks as sanely as you or I. Sally can tell you."

"That I can," said Sally. "You'd oughter heerd her, missis, when she fust came in, a-pleading, you know, with me to assist her, and not help to keep her a prisoner here. I declare, it quite went to my heart. And she looked so little, and so young, and so helpless, poor creature!"

"You're sure her room's all safe and secure, Sally—windows and all?"

"Sure as sure, master. Jack the Giant Killer couldn't remove them 'ere bars."

"Because," said Dr. Oleander, "she is quite capable, in her mad fits, of precipitating herself out of the window and breaking her neck. And be careful, Sally, you cut up her food when you take it to her. Don't bring her any knives or forks."

"I said I wouldn't go near her," said old Sally, facing him resolutely; "and I won't! And what's more, Peter won't! And if you fetches mad-women here, Doctor Guy, you've got to 'tend onto 'em yourself, sir. I won't be 'sassynated in my old age by crazy lunatics; and no more my old man won't, neither. There now!"

Sally finished with a shower of resolute nods. Dr. Oleander knew her a great deal too well to remonstrate. When Sally "put her foot down" all the powers of earth and Hades couldn't put it up again.

"You will be here yourself to-morrow, Guy," said his mother, decisively. "Wait upon her yourself, then."

"But I must return to New York to-morrow afternoon."

"Very well; get an attendant for your crazy patient and send her down. If the young lady's friends are as wealthy as you say, they will surely let her have a keeper."

"They will let her have a dozen if necessary; that is not the question."

"What, then?"

"Have you accommodation for another in this old barn? Can you put up with the trouble?"

"We'll endeavor to do so for your sake. It is easier to put up with another person in the house than be at the beck and

call of a lunatic ourselves. Send one from New York capable of taking care of your crazy young lady, and Sally and I will take care of her."

"Thanks! And meantime?"

"Meantime, I will wait upon her myself—if you will assure me she will not be violent."

"I think I can. She is only violent with me, poor soul. She has got an idea into her weak, deranged little head that she is as sane as you or I, and that I have carried her off by force and keep her prisoner here. She goes raving mad at sight of me, but with you she may probably be cool enough. She will tell you a piteous story of how she has been entrapped and carried off from home, if you will listen to her. You had better not; it only encourages her unfortunate delusion."

Mrs. Oleander shrugged her broad shoulders. She was an old woman of strong mind and iron resolution, and nothing in the way of heart to speak of. Her accomplished son took after her in these admirable qualities.

"I have other fish to fry than listening to the empty babble of a maniac. By the bye, what did you say her name was?"

"Miss Dane," responded the doctor, after a slight pause. He knew he might as well tell the truth about it, or Mollie herself would for him.

"And she is a relative of Blanche's husband?"

"A very near though unacknowledged relation. And now, mother mine, I'll take my supper and turn in if you'll permit me. I've had a very long and fatiguing drive this stormy night."

He sat down to the table and fell to work with an appetite. Old Sally waited upon him, and gazed at his performance with admiring eyes.

"Won't your young lady want something, Guy?" his mother asked, presently.

"Let her fast a little," replied the doctor, coolly; "it will take some of the unnecessary heat out of her blood. I'll fetch her her breakfast to-morrow."

Mrs. Oleander upon this retired at once, and the doctor, after smoking old Peter's pipe in the chimney-corner, retired also.

Then the old man hobbled upstairs to bed, and Sally, after raking out the fire, and seeing to the secure fastening of doors and windows, took up her tallow candle and went after him.

Outside the door of the poor little captive she paused, listening in a sort of breathless awe. But no sound came forth:

the tumult of wind, and sea, and rain had the inky night all to themselves.

"She's asleep, I reckon," said old Sally, creeping away. "Poor little, pretty creeter!"

But Mollie was not asleep. When the door had closed after Dr. Oleander, she had dropped on the floor like a stone, and had never stirred since.

She was not in a faint. She saw the ruddy blaze of the fire, as the tongues of flame leaped like red serpents up the chimney; she heard the wild howling of the night wind, the ceaseless dash and fall of the rain, the indescribable roar of the raging sea; she heard the trees creak and toss and groan; she heard the rats scampering overhead; she heard the dismal moaning of the old house itself rocking in the gale.

She saw, she heard, but as one who neither sees nor hears; like one in a drugged, unnatural stupor. She could not think; an iron hand seemed to have clutched her heart, a dreadful despair to have taken possession of her. She had made a horrible, irreparable mistake; she was body and soul in the power of the man she hated most on earth. She was his wife!—she could get no further than that.

The stormy night wore on; midnight came and the elemental uproar was at its height. Still she lay there all in a heap, suffering in a dulled, miserable way that was worse than sharpest pain. She lay there stunned, overwhelmed, not caring if she ever rose again.

And so morning found her—when morning lifted a dull and leaden eye over the stormy sea. It came gloomy and gray, rain falling still, wind whispering pitifully, and a sky of lead frowning down upon the drenched, dank earth and tossing, angry ocean.

All in a heap, as she had fallen, Mollie lay, her head resting on a chair, her poor golden ringlets tossed in a wild, disheveled veil, fast asleep. Pitifully, as sleep will come to the young, be their troubles ever so heavy, sleep had sealed those beaming blue eyes, "not used to tears at night instead of slumber." Tears, Mollie had shed none—the blow that had fallen had left her far beyond that.

Nine o'clock struck; there was a tap at the prison door. Dr. Oleander, thinking his patient's fast had lasted long enough, was coming with a bountiful breakfast. There was no reply to the tap.

"Mollie," the doctor called, gently, "it is I with your breakfast. I am coming in."

Still no response. He turned the key in the lock, opened the door and entered.

What he had expected, Dr. Oleander did not know; he was in a little tremor all over. What he saw was his poor little prisoner crouched on the floor, her face fallen on a chair, half hidden by the shower of amber curls, sleeping like a very babe.

The hardened man caught his breath; it was a sight to touch any heart; perhaps it even found its way to his.

He stood and looked at her a moment, his eyes getting humid, and softly set down his tray.

"'The Sleeping Beauty,'" he said, under his breath. "What an exquisite picture she makes! My poor little, pretty little Mollie!"

He had made scarcely any noise; he stood gazing at her spell-bound; but that very gaze awoke her.

She fluttered like a bird in its nest, murmured indistinctly, her eyelids quivered a second, then the blue eyes opened wide, and directly she was wide awake.

"Good-morning, Mollie," said the doctor. "I'm afraid I awoke you, and you were sleeping like an angel. You have no idea how lovely you look asleep. But such a very uncomfortable place, my dear one. Why didn't you go to bed like a reasonable being?"

Mollie rose slowly and gathered away her fallen hair from her face. Her cheeks were flushed pink with sleep, her eyes were calm and steadfast, full of invincible resolution. She sat down in the chair she had used for a pillow, and looked at him steadily.

"You may take that away, Doctor Oleander," she said. "I will neither eat nor drink under this roof."

"Oh, nonsense, Mollie!" said the doctor, in no way alarmed by this threat; "yes, you will. Look at this buttered toast, at these eggs, at this ham, at these preserves, raspberry jam. Mollie—'sweets to the sweet,' you know—look at them and you'll think better of it."

She turned her back upon him in bitter disdain.

"Mollie," the doctor said, beseechingly, "don't be so obstinately set against me. You weren't, you know, until I removed my disguise. I'm no worse now than I was before."

"I never thought it was you," Mollie said, in a voice of still despair.

"Oh, yes, you did. You dreaded it was me—you hoped it was that puppy, Ingelow, confound him! Why, Mollie, he doesn't care for you one tithe of what I do. See what I have

risked for you—reputation, liberty, everything that man holds dear."

"And you shall lose them yet," Mollie said, between her clinched teeth.

"I have made myself a felon to obtain you, Mollie. I love you better than myself—than anything in the world. You are my wife—be my wife, and forgive me."

"Never!" cried Mollie, passionately, raising her arm aloft with a gesture worthy of Siddons or Ristori; "may I never be forgiven when I die if I do! I could kill you this moment, as I would a rat, if I had it in my power, and with as little compunction. I hate you—I hate you—I hate you! How I hate you words are too poor and weak to tell!"

"Of course," said the doctor, with ineffable calm; "it's perfectly natural just now. But you'll get over it, Mollie, believe me you will, and like me all the better by and by."

"Will you go?" said Mollie, her eyes beginning to blaze.

"Listen to me first," said the doctor, earnestly. "Listen to me, I implore you, Mollie! I have taken a dangerous step in fetching you here—in marrying you as I did; my very life is at stake. Do you think I will stick at trifles now? No. You must either return to New York as my wife, openly acknowledging yourself such, or—never return. Wait—wait, Mollie! Don't interrupt. You are altogether in my power. If you were hidden in a dungeon of the French Bastile you could not be more secure or secluded than here. There is no house within five miles; there is the wild sea, the wild woods, a stretch of flat, barren, marshy sea-coast—nothing more. No one ever comes here by water or land. There are iron bars to those windows, and the windows are fifteen feet from the ground. The people in this house think you mad—the more you tell them to the contrary the less they will believe you. In New York they have not the slightest clew to your whereabouts. You vanished once before and came back—they will set this down as a similar trick, and not trouble themselves about you. You are mine, Mollie, mine—mine! There is no alternative in the wide earth."

Dr. Oleander's face flushed with triumph, his voice rang out exultantly, his form seemed to tower with victory, his eyes flashed like burning coals. He made one step toward her.

"Mine, Mollie; mine you have been, mine you will be for life. The gods have willed it so, Mollie—my wife!"

Another step nearer, triumphant, victorious, then Mollie lifted her arm with a queenly gesture and uttered one word:

"Stop!"

She was standing by the mantel, drawn up to her full height, her face whiter than snow, rigid as marble, but the blue eyes blazing blue flame.

"Back, Doctor Oleander! Not one step nearer if you value your life!" She put her hand in her bosom and drew out a glittering plaything—a curious dagger of foreign workmanship she had once taken from Carl Walraven. "Before I left home, Doctor Oleander, I took this. I did not expect to have to use it, but I took it. Look at it; see its blue, keen glitter. It is a pretty little toy, but it proves you a false boaster and a liar! It leaves me one alternative—death!"

"Mollie! For God's sake!"

There was that in the girl's white, rigid face that frightened the strong man. He recoiled and looked at the little flashing serpent with horror.

"I have listened to you, Doctor Guy Oleander," said Mollie Dane, slowly, solemnly; "now listen to me. All you say may be true, but yours I never will be—never, never, never! Before you can lay one finger on me this knife can reach my heart or yours. I don't much care which, but yours if I can. If I am your wife, as you say, the sooner I am dead the better."

"Mollie, for Heaven's sake—"

But Mollie, like a tragedy queen, waved her hand and interrupted him:

"They say life is sweet—I suppose it is—but if I am your wife I have no desire to live, unless, indeed, to be revenged on you. Put a dose of arsenic in yonder coffee-cup and give me the draught. I will drink it."

Dr. Oleander "grinned horribly a ghastly smile."

"I had much rather give you a love-philter, Mollie," he said, recovering from his first scare. "Unhappily, the age of love-philters seems to have passed. And now I will leave you for the present—time will work wonders, I think. I must go back to New York; no one must suspect I have left it for an hour. I will return in a day or two, and by that time I trust you will no longer be in such a reckless frame of mind. I don't want you to die by any means; you are a great deal too pretty and piquant, and I love you far too well. Good-bye, my spirited little wife, for a couple of days."

He bowed low and left the room, locking the door carefully. And when he was gone Mollie drooped at once, leaning against the mantel, pale and trembling, her hands over her face—alone with her despair.

CHAPTER XVII.

MIRIAM TO THE RESCUE.

AN artist stood in his studio, overlooking busy, bright Broadway. He stood before his easel, gazing in a sort of rapture at his own work. It was only a sketch, a sketch worthy of a master, and its name was "The Rose Before It Bloomed." A girl's bright, sweet face, looking out of a golden aureole of wild, loose hair; a pair of liquid, starry, azure eyes; a mouth like a rosebud, half pouting, half smiling. An exquisite face —rosy, dimpled, youthful as Hebe's own—the radiant face of Mollie Dane.

The day was near its close, and was dying in regal splendor. All day the dark, dreary rain had fallen wearily, ceaselessly; but just as twilight, ghostly and gray, was creeping up from the horizon, there had flashed out a sudden sunburst of indescribable glory.

The heavens seemed to open, and a glimpse of paradise to shew, so grand and glorious was the oriflamme of crimson and purple and orange and gold that transfigured the whole firmament.

A lurid light filled the studio, and turned the floating yellow hair of the picture to living, burnished ripples of gold.

"It is Mollie—living, breathing, lovely Mollie!" the artist said to himself in sudden exultation—"beautiful, bewitching Mollie! Fit to sit by a king's side and wear his crown. Come in!"

For a tap at the studio door suddenly brought our enthusiastic artist back to earth. He flung a cloth over the sketch, and leaned gracefully against the easel.

The figure that entered somewhat disturbed the young man's constitutional phlegm—it was so unlike his usual run of visitors—a remarkable figure, tall, gaunt, and bony, clad in wretched garb; a haggard, powerful face, weather-beaten and brown, and two blazing black eyes.

The artist opened his own handsome orbs to their widest extent.

"I wish to see Mr. Hugh Ingelow," said this singular woman in a deep bass voice.

"I am Hugh Ingelow, madame, at your service."

The woman fixed her burning eyes on the calm, serenely handsome face. The lazy hazel eyes of the artist met hers coolly, unflinchingly.

"I await your pleasure, madame. Will you enter and sit down?"

The woman came in, closed the door cautiously after her, but declined the proffered seat.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit?" asked the artist, quietly. "I have not the pleasure of knowing you."

"I am Mollie Dane's aunt."

"Ah, indeed!" and Mr. Hugh Ingelow lighted up, for the first time, with something like human interest. "Yes, yes; I remember you now. You came to Mr. Carl Walraven's wedding and gave us a little touch of high tragedy. Pray sit down, and tell me what I can do for you."

"I don't want to sit. I want you to answer me a question."

"One hundred, if you like."

"Do you know where Mollie Dane is?"

"Not exactly," said Mr. Ingelow, coolly. "I'm not blessed, unfortunately, with the gift of the fairy prince in the child's tale. I can't see my friends through walls of stone and mortar; but I take it she is at the palatial mansion uptown."

"She is not!"

"Eh?"

"She is not!" reiterated Miriam. "I have just been there. They are in the utmost alarm and distress—at least, Mr. Walraven appears to be. Mollie has again disappeared."

"By Jove!" cried Mr. Ingelow, in dismay.

"She left the house late last night. One of the servants, it appears, saw her go, and she has never been heard of or seen since."

"By Jove!" for the second time exclaimed Hugh Ingelow.

"It is supposed that she has met with foul play—been inveigled away from home, and is in the power of a villain."

"Well," said Mr. Ingelow, drawing a long breath, "Miss Dane has the greatest knack of causing sensations of any lady I ever knew. Pray, are you aware this is the second time such a thing has happened?"

"I am quite aware of it. Also, that she went against her will."

"Indeed! Being so near a relative, it is natural you should be posted. And now, may I beg to know," said the young man, with cool politeness, "why you do me the honor to come and inform me?"

Miriam looked at him with her eagle glance—keen, sidelong, searching. Mr. Ingelow made her a slight bow.

"Well, madame?" smiling carelessly.

"Do you not know?"

"I?"—a broad stare. "Really, madame, I am at a loss—How should I know?"

"Did you not meet Mollie last night at the corner of Broadway and Fourteenth Street?"

"Most certainly not."

"Where were you at ten o'clock last evening?"

Again Mr. Ingelow smiled.

"Really, a raking cross-examination. Permit me to decline answering that question."

"And you know nothing of Mollie's previous disappearance—of that mysterious fortnight?"

"My good woman, be reasonable. I'm not an astrologer, nor a wizard, nor yet a clairvoyant. I'm not in Miss Dane's confidence. I put it to yourself—how should I know?"

"You shuffle—you equivocate!" cried Miriam, impatiently. "Why don't you answer at once—yes or no?"

"My dear lady," with a deprecating wave of his shapely hand, "don't be so dreadfully blunt. Pray tell me of what you accuse me—of forcibly abducting Miss Dane last night at ten o'clock? With my hand on my heart, madame, on the word of a man and brother—on the honor of an artist—I solemnly asseverate I didn't do it!"

Miriam groaned.

"Then what has become of that unfortunate child? She thought it was you, or she never would have gone."

The fair, refined face of the artist flushed deep red, and he was grave in an instant.

"Madame, what do you say?"

"Oh, you know!" cried the woman, vehemently. "You surely know, else all you men are blinder than bats. You know she loved you well."

"Oh, madame!"

The young man caught his breath.

"She told me so herself," cried Miriam, recklessly betraying this, and wringing her hands; "and she went last night, hoping it was you."

The momentary expression of rapture had quite faded out of Mr. Ingelow's face by this time, and, leaning against his easel, he was listening with cool attention. But if Miriam could have known how this man's heart was plunging against his ribs!

"I think there is a mistake somewhere," said Hugh, with *sang-froid*. "Miss Dane refused me."

"Bah!" said Miriam, with infinite scorn; "much you know of women, to take that for a test! But it isn't to talk of love I came here. I am half distracted. The child has met with foul play, I am certain, since you are here."

"Will you have the goodness to explain, my good woman," said Mr. Ingelow, beseechingly. "Consider, I am all in the dark."

"And I can not enlighten you without telling you the whole story, and if you are not the hero of it, I have no right, and no wish, to do that. One question I will ask you," fixing her powerful eyes on his face: "Do you still love Mollie Dane?"

Mr. Ingelow smiled serene as the sunset sky outside.

"A point-blank question. Forgive me if I decline answering it."

Miriam's eyes flashed fire.

"You never cared for her!" she said, in fierce impatience. "You are a poltroon and a carpet-knight, like the rest—ready with plenty of fine words, and nothing else! You asked her to marry you, and you don't care whether she is living or dead!"

"Why should I?" said Mr. Ingelow, coolly. "She refused to marry me."

"And with a flighty girl's refusal your profound, and lasting, and all-enduring love dies out, like a dip-candle under an extinguisher! Oh, you are all alike—all alike! Selfish, and mean, and cruel, and false, and fickle to the very heart's core!"

"Hard words," said Mr. Ingelow, with infinite calm. "You make sweeping assertions, madame, but there is just a possibility of your being mistaken, after all."

"Words, words, words!" Miriam cried, bitterly. "Words in plenty, but no actions! I wish my tongue had been palsied ere I uttered what I have uttered within this hour!"

"My dear madame, softly, softly! Pray, pray do not be so impetuous! Don't jump at such frantic conclusions! I assure you, my words are not empty sound. I mean 'em, every one. I'll do anything in reason for you or your charming niece."

"In reason!" said the woman, with a scornful laugh. "Oh, no doubt! You'll take exceeding good care to be calm and reasonable, and weigh the pros and cons, and not get yourself into trouble to deliver the girl you wanted to marry the other day from captivity—from death, perhaps! She refused you, and that is quite sufficient."

"Now, now!" cried Mr. Ingelow, appealing to the four walls in desperation. "Did ever mortal man hear the like of this? Captivity—death! My good woman—my dear lady—can't you draw it a little milder? Is not this New York City? And are we not in the year of grace eighteen hundred and ninety? Pray, don't go back to the Dark Ages, when lovers went clad in clanking suits of mail, and forcibly carried off brides from the altar, under the priest's very nose, *à la* Young Lochinvar. Do be reasonable, there's a good soul!"

Miriam turned her back upon him in superb disdain.

"And this is the man Mollie preferred! This is the man I thought would help me! Mr. Hugh Ingelow, I wish you good-evening."

"No, no!" exclaimed Mr. Ingelow, starting up. "Not yet! Open the mysteries a little before you depart. I'm willing and ready to aid you to the best of my ability. Tell me what I'm to do, and I'll do it."

"I have nothing to tell," Miriam said, steadfastly. "I will not put you to the trouble of helping me."

"But you must!" cried the artist, suddenly transforming himself into a new man. "If Mollie Dane is really in danger, then I must know, and aid her. No one has a better right, for no one on earth loves her as well as I do."

"Ha!" exclaimed Miriam, stopping short. "We have it at last, have we? You love her, then?"

"With all my heart, and mind, and strength; as I never have loved, and never will love, any other earthly creature. Now, then, sit down here and tell me, from first to last, what you came here to tell."

He wheeled forward a chair, took the woman by both shoulders, and compelled her to be seated. His face was very pale, his eyes alight, his statuesque mouth stern, and set, and powerful.

Miriam looked at him with dawning admiration and respect. The man that makes them obey is the man women are pretty safe to adore.

"Now, then," he said—"now, Madame Miriam, I want you to begin at the beginning and tell me all. If Mollie Dane is above ground, I will find her."

The woman looked up in his handsome face, locked in grim, inflexible resolution—an iron face now—and relaxed.

"Mollie was not deceived in you, after all. I am glad of it. I like you. I would give a year of my life to see you safely her husband."

"Many thanks! Pity she is not of the same mind!"

"Girls change.—You never asked her but once. Suppose you try again. You are young enough and handsome enough to win whomsoever you please."

"You are complimentary. Suppose we leave all that and proceed to business. Tell me what you know of Miss Dane's abduction."

He seated himself before her and waited, his eyes fixed gravely on her face.

"To make what I have to say intelligible," said Miriam, "it is necessary to give you an insight into the mystery of her previous evanishment. She was tricked away by artifice, carried off and forcibly held a prisoner by a man whose masked face she never saw."

"Impossible! Mr. Walraven told me, told every one, she was with you."

"Very likely. Also, that I was dying or dead. The one part is as true as the other. Mollie never was near me. She was forcibly detained by this unknown man for a fortnight, then brought home. She told me the story, and also who she suspected that man to be."

"Who?"

Miriam looked at him curiously.

"Doctor Guy Oleander, or—you!"

"Ah, you jest, madame!" haughtily.

"I do not. She was mistaken, it appears, but she really thought it might be you. To make sure, she found means of communicating with this strange man, and a meeting was appointed for last night, ten o'clock, corner of Broadway and Fourteenth Street."

"Yes! Well?"

"Mollie went, still thinking—perhaps I should say hoping—it might be you, Mr. Ingelow; and I, too, was there."

"Well?"

"Mollie did not see me. I hovered aloof. It was only half past nine when she came—half an hour too early—but already a carriage was waiting, and a man, disguised in hat and cloak and flowing beard, stepped forward and accosted her at once. What he said to her I don't know, but he persuaded her, evidently with reluctance, to enter the carriage with him. The rain was pouring. I suppose that was why she went. In a moment the coachman had whipped up the horses, and they were off like a flash."

Miriam paused. Mr. Ingelow sat staring at her with a face of pale amaze.

"It sounds like a scene from a melodrama. And Miss Dane has not returned since?"

"No; and the household on Fifth Avenue are at their wits' end to comprehend it."

"And so am I," said the artist. "From what you say, it is evident she went willingly—of her own accord. In such a case, of course, I can do nothing."

"She did not go willingly. I am certain she entered that carriage under the impression she was going with you."

Mr. Ingelow's sensitive face reddened. He rose and walked to the window.

"But since it was not I, who do you suppose it may have been?"

"Doctor Oleander."

"No! He would not dare!"

"I don't know him," said Miriam; "but from what Mollie says of him, I should judge him to be capable of anything. He loves her, and he is madly jealous; and jealous men stop at nothing. Then, too, Mrs. Walraven would aid him. She hates Mollie as only one woman can hate another."

"Doctor Oleander, then, must be the man who abducted her before, else how could he keep the assignation?"

"Yes," said Miriam, "that is the worst of it. Poor Mollie! it will drive her mad. She detests the man with all her heart. If she is in his power, he will show her no mercy. Mr. Ingelow, can you aid her, or must I seek her alone and unaided?"

Mr. Ingelow was standing with his back to her, looking out at the last yellow line of the sunset streaking the twilight sky. He turned partly around, very, very pale, as the woman could see, and answered, guardedly:

"You had better do nothing, I think. You had better leave the matter altogether to me. Our game is shy, and easily scared. Leave me to deal with him. I think, in a battle of wits, I am a match even for Guy Oleander; and if Mollie is not home before the moon wanes, it will be no fault of mine."

"I will trust you," Miriam said, rising and walking to the door. "You will lose no time. The poor child is, no doubt, in utter misery."

"I will lose no time. You must give me a week. This day week come back, if Mollie is not home, and I will meet you here."

Miriam bowed her head and opened the door.

"Mollie will thank you—I can not. Farewell!"

"Until this day week," Hugh Ingelow said, with a courteous smile and bow.

And then Miriam Dane was gone, flitting through bustling Broadway like a tall, haggard ghost.

Hugh Ingelow turned back to the window, his brows knit, his lips compressed, his eyes glowing with a deep, intense fire —thinking. So he stood while the low, yellow gleams died out of the western sky, and the crystal stars swung in the azure arch—thinking, thinking!

CHAPTER XVIII.

"SHE ONLY SAID, 'MY LIFE IS DREARY.'"

THAT same brilliant sunburst that transfigured the artist's studio in Broadway blazed into the boudoir of Mrs. Carl Walraven, and turned the western windows to sheets of quivering flame.

Elegant and handsome, in a superb dinner-dress of rose-bloom silk and pale emeralds, Mrs. Walraven lay back on her sofa and looked up in the face of her cousin Guy.

"Booted and spurred," as if from a journey, the young man stood before her, hat in hand, relating the success of their scheme. A little pale, a good deal fagged, and very anxious, Dr. Guy had sought his cousin the very first thing on his arrival in town. Mrs. Carl, arrayed for conquest, going out to a grand dinner-party, was very well disposed to linger and listen. An exultant smile wreathed her full, ripe lips and lighted the big black eyes with triumph.

"Poor little fool!" she said. "How nicely she baited her own trap, and how nicely she walked into it! Thank the stars, she is out of my way! Guy, if you let her come back, I'll never forgive you!"

"By Jove, Blanche!" said the doctor, bluntly, "if she ever comes back, it will matter very little whether you forgive me or not. I shall probably go for change of air to Sing Sing for the remainder of my mortal career."

"Pooh! there is not the slightest danger. The ball is in your own hands; Mollie is safe as safe in your dreary farm-house by the sea. Your mother and Sally and Peter are all true as steel; no danger of her escaping from them."

"No; but they decline to have anything to do with my mad patient. It was no easy matter, I can tell you, to get them to consent to having her there at all. I must get her an attendant."

"That increases the risk. However, the risk is slight. Advertise."

"I mean to. I sent an advertisement to the papers before I came here, carefully worded. Applicants are to come to my office. Those who read it, and who know me, will think I want a nurse for one of my invalids, of course."

"You will be very careful in your selection, Guy?"

"Certainly. My life depends upon it. It is a terrible risk to run, Blanche, for a foolish little girl."

"Bah! Quaking already? And you pretend to love her?"

"I do love her!" the young man cried, passionately. "I love her to madness, or I would not risk life and liberty to obtain her."

"I don't see the risk," said Mrs. Blanche, coldly. "You have the cards in your own hands—play them as you choose. Only you and I know the secret."

Dr. Oleander looked at his fair relative with a very gloomy face.

"A secret that two know is a secret no longer."

"Do you dare doubt me?" demanded the lady, fiercely.

"No—yes—I don't know. Oh! never look so haughtily insulted, Mrs. Walraven. I almost doubt myself. It's my first felony, and it is natural a fellow should quake a little. But Mollie is worth the risk—worth ten thousand risks. If it were to do over again, I would do it. By Heaven, Blanche! you should have seen her as she stood there brandishing that dagger aloft and defying me! I never saw anything so transcendently beautiful!"

Mrs. Walraven's scornful upper lip curled.

"Lady Macbeth—four feet high—eh? 'Give me the daggers!' I always knew she was a vixen. Your married life is likely to be a happy one, my dear Guy!"

"Oh!" Dr. Guy aspirated, "if she only were my wife! Blanche, I would give all I possess on earth to know who that man is!"

"Indeed!" said Mme. Blanche, coolly. "Then I think I can tell you: it was Hugh Ingelow."

"Blanche!"

"I have no positive knowledge, you see, of the fact," went on the lady, adjusting her regal robes, "but an inward prescience tells me so. However, you may remarry her and welcome, Guy. I don't think she will hardly be tried for bigamy. The happy man, whoever he may be, will scarcely come forward and prove the previous marriage."

"And she loves this Hugh Ingelow?" the doctor said, moodily.

"She told that old lady so," Mrs. Blanche said, airily. "But, my dear love-struck cousin, what of that? To love, is one thing; to have, is another. She may love Ingelow, but she is yours. Make her your wife. Teach her to overcome that little weakness."

"As soon as I can settle my affairs," said Doctor Oleander, resolutely, "I shall leave the country. I have a friend in Havana—a physician. There is a promising opening out there, he tells me. I'll take Mollie and go."

"I would," replied Mrs. Walraven, cheerfully. "It's a nice, unhealthy climate; and then, when you are a widower—as you will be, thanks to yellow fever—come back to dear New York. There's no place like it. And now, my dear Guy, I don't wish to be rude, you know, but if you would depart at once, you would very much oblige me."

Mrs. Walraven stood up, walked over to the whole-length mirror, and took a prolonged and complacent view of her full-blown charms.

"How do you think I am looking, Guy?" languidly. "Rather too pale, am I not? I must have recourse to that vulgar necessity, rouge. Don't you think this new shade of pink lovely? and so highly suitable to my brunette style."

Dr. Oleander gave her a glance of disgust, took his hat, and turned to leave.

"I didn't come here to talk of new shades of pink, or your brunette style, either. Excuse me for trespassing on your valuable time, and permit me to wish you good-evening."

"Good-evening, cousin mine," Mme. Blanche responded, sweetly. "Come to-morrow, and we'll have another little chat. By the bye, how long do you expect to remain in the city?"

"Until I have engaged an attendant," answered the doctor, rather sulkily.

"Ah! and that will be day after to-morrow, at furthest. You will find dozens of applicants. Well, by-bye. Come again soon. I shall be anxious always for your success."

Dr. Oleander departed. His practice was extensive, and he had hosts of neglected patients to attend to.

Mrs. Walraven saw nothing of him all next day; but in the evening of the succeeding day, and just as she was getting very uneasy, Dr. Oleander entered, pale and fagged.

Dr. Oleander had spent a most harassing afternoon, his office besieged with applicants for that advertised situation.

The number of incapables that thought themselves capable, and the number of capables who flatly declined the moment they heard they were to go down into the country, might have worn out the patience of a more patient man. And the capables willing to overlook the dreariness of the country in consideration of high wages rose up immediately and bid him good-day when informed the patient was a lunatic.

Dr. Oleander was driven to the verge of desperation, when, lo! just as he was about to give it up in despair, there entered an applicant who suited as if made to order.

The applicant—this "last, and brightest, and best"—was a woman of uncertain age, tall and stout, strong and strapping, and adorned with a head of violent red hair and a pair of green spectacles. Minus these two disagreeable items, she was a highly respectable woman, with a grave, shrewd face, and a portly person wrapped in a somber plaid shawl.

She stated her case. She had seen the advertisement, and had come to apply for the situation. She was accustomed to the office of sick-nurse, and considered herself fully qualified for it.

Her statement was plain and straightforward—much more so than that of her predecessors. Dr. Oleander was inclined to be pleased, despite the green spectacles.

"But I should wish you to go into the country—a very dull place indeed."

The applicant folded her cotton gloves one over the other, and met the doctor's gaze with composed green glasses.

"The country is no objection, sir. I'm used to quiet, and all places are alike to me."

"You have your credentials with you, I suppose?"

"I have, sir. Here they are."

She handed two or three certificates of capability to the toxicologist.

He glanced them lightly over, and saw that Mrs. Susan Sharpe was all that heart could desire in the way of sick-nurse.

"These are satisfactory," handing them back. "But I have one fact to mention that may discourage you: the lady—the patient—is insane."

Mrs. Susan Sharpe heard this startling statement without moving a muscle of her dull, white face.

"Indeed, sir! A violent lunatic, sir?"

"Oh, dear, no! merely insane. Subject to occasional fits of violence, you understand, but quiet generally. But even in her most violent fits she would be nothing in your hands—

a strong, large woman like you. She is little more than a child in years, and quite a child in weakness. If you don't mind the dullness of the country, you would suit admirably, I think."

"I don't in the least mind, sir. The situation will suit me very well."

"I am very glad to hear it," said the doctor, immensely relieved. "We may consider it a bargain, then?"

"If you please, sir," rising quietly. "When will you want me to go?"

"To-morrow morning. By the way, Mrs. Sharpe," said the doctor, eying the obnoxious lunettes, "why do you wear green glasses?"

"My eyes are weak, sir." Mrs. Sharpe removed the spectacles as she spoke, and displayed a pair of dull gray eyes with very pink rims. "The light affects them. I hope my glasses are no objection, sir?"

"Oh, not in the least! Excuse my question. Very well, then, Mrs. Sharpe; just give me your address, and I'll call round for you to-morrow forenoon."

Mrs. Sharpe gave him the street and number—a dirty locality near the East River. Dr. Oleander "made a note of it," and the new nurse made her best obeisance and departed.

And, to inform Mme. Blanche of his success in this matter, Dr. Guy presented himself at the Walraven mansion just as the misty twilight was creeping out and the stars and street lamps were lighting up.

He found the lady, as usual, beautiful and elegant, and dressed to perfection, and ready to receive him alone in the drawing-room.

"I've been seriously anxious about you, Guy," Mrs. Walraven said. "Your prolonged absence nearly gave me a nervous fit. I had serious ideas of calling at your office this afternoon. Why were you not here sooner?"

"Why wasn't I? Because I couldn't be in half a dozen places at once," answered her cousin, rather crossly. "I've been badgered within an inch of my life by confounded women in shabby dresses and poky bonnets all day. Out of two or three bushels of chaff I only found one grain of wheat."

"And that one?"

"Her earthly name is Susan Sharpe, and she rejoices in red hair and green glasses, and the blood and brawn and muscle of a gladiator—a treasure who doesn't object to a howling wilderness or a raving-mad patient. I clinched her at once."

"And she goes with you—when?"

"To-morrow morning. If Mollie is still obdurate, I must leave her in this woman's charge, and return to town. As soon as I can settle my affairs, I will go back to the farm and be off with my bride to Havana."

"Always supposing she will not consent to return with you to New York in that character?"

"Of course. But she never will do that," the doctor said, despondently. "You don't know how she hates me, Blanche."

Blanche shrugged her graceful shoulders.

"Do you implicitly trust this woman you have hired?"

"I trust no one," responded Dr. Guy, brusquely. "My mother and Sally and Peter will watch her. Although, I dare say, there may be no necessity, it is always best to be on the safe side."

"How I should like to see her—to triumph over her—to exult in her misery!" Blanche cried, her eyes sparkling.

"I dare say," said Dr. Oleander, with sneering cynicism. "You would not be a woman, else. But you will never have the chance. I don't hate my poor little captive, remember. There! is that the dinner-bell?"

"Yes—come! We have Sir Roger Trajenna to-day, and Mr. Walraven detests being kept waiting."

"Poor Sir Roger!" with a sneering laugh. "How does the lovesick old dotard bear this second loss?"

"Better than he did the first; his pride aids him. It is my husband who is like a man distraught."

"The voice of Nature speaks loudly in the paternal breast," said Dr. Oleander. "'Nater will caper,' as Ethan Spike says. Mollie's mamma must have been a very pretty woman, Blanche."

Mrs. Walraven's black eyes snapped; but they were at the dining-room door, and she swept in as your tall, stately women in trailing silks do sweep, bowing to the baronet, and taking her place, and, of course, the subject of the interesting captive down in Long Island was postponed indefinitely.

Dr. Oleander dined and spent the evening at the Walraven palace, and talked about his ward's second flight with her distressed guardian, and opined she must have gone off to gratify some whim of her own, and laughed in his sleeve at the two anxious faces before him, and departed at ten, mellow with wine and full of hope for the future.

Early next morning Dr. Oleander called round for Susan Sharpe, and found that treasure of nurses ready and waiting.

All through the long drive she sat by his side in his light wagon, never opening her discreet lips except to respond to his questions, and gazing straight ahead through her green glasses into the world of futurity, for all her companion knew.

"Among your charge's hallucinations," said Dr. Oleander, just before they arrived, "the chief is that she is not crazy at all. She will tell you she has been brought here against her will; that I am a tyrant and a villain, and the worst of men; and she will try and bribe you, I dare say, to let her escape. Of course you will humor her at the time, but pay not the least attention."

"Of course," Mrs. Susan Sharpe answered.

There was a pause, then the nurse asked the first question she had put:

"What is my patient's name, sir?"

Dr. Oleander paused an instant, and mastered a sudden tremor. His voice was quite steady when he replied:

"Miss Dane. Her friends are eminently respectable, and have the utmost confidence in me. I have every reason to hope that the quiet of this place and the fresh sea air will eventually effect a cure."

"I hope so, sir," Mrs. Susan Sharpe said; and the pink-rimmed eyes glowed behind the green glasses, and into the tallow-candle complexion crept just the faintest tinge of red.

It was an inexpressibly lonely place, as Mrs. Sharpe saw it. A long stretch of bleak, desolate, windy road, a desolate, salty marsh, ghostly woods, and the wide, dreary sea. Over all, this afternoon, a sunless sky, threatening rain, and a grim old pile of buildings fronting the sea view.

"A lonesome place," Mrs. Susan Sharpe said, as if in spite of herself—"an awfully lonesome place!"

Dr. Oleander looked at her suspiciously as he drew up before the frowning gate.

"It is lonely," he said, carelessly. "I told you so, you remember; but, from its very loneliness, all the better for my too excitable patient."

Mrs. Sharpe's face seemed to say she thought it might be more conducive to begetting melancholy madness than curing it, but her tongue said nothing. Two big dogs, barking furiously, came tumbling round the angle of the house. Dr. Oleander struck at them with his whip.

"Down, Tiger! Silence, Nero, you overgrown brute!" he cried, with an angry oath. "Come along, Mrs. Sharpe. There's no occasion to be alarmed; they won't touch you."

Mrs. Sharpe, despite this assurance, looking mortally

afraid, kept close to the doctor, and stood gazing around her while waiting to be admitted. Bolts grated, the key creaked, and heavily and warily old Peter opened the door and reconnoitered.

"It is I, Peter, you old fool! Get out of the way, and don't keep us waiting!"

With which rough greeting the young man strode in, followed by the nurse.

"He fetches a woman every time," murmured old Peter, plaintively, "and we've got a great plenty now, Lord knows!"

"This way, ma'am," called Dr. Oleander, striding straight to the kitchen; "we'll find a fire here, at least. It's worse than Greenland, this frigid zone!"

Mrs. Oleander sat before the blazing fire, plucking a fowl; Sally stood at the table, kneading dough. Both paused, with feminine exclamations, at sight of the doctor, and turned directly, with feminine curiosity, to stare at the woman.

"How do, mother? How are you, Sally? Back again, you see, like the proverbial bad shilling! This is Mrs. Susan Sharpe, the nurse I promised to bring. How's our patient?"

He turned anxiously to his mother. She took her eyes from Mrs. Sharpe to answer.

"I don't know; she frightens me, Guy."

"Frightens you!" growing very pale. "How? Is she so violent?"

"No; it's the other way. She's so still; she's like one dead in life. She sits all day, and never moves nor speaks. She doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive, and she never sleeps, I believe; for, go into her room night or day, there you find her sitting wide awake."

Dr. Oleander looked white with dismay.

"Does she never speak?" he asked.

"She never spoke to me but once, and that was to ask me who I was. When I told her I was your mother, she turned her back upon me, with the remark, 'He says I'm mad, and surely none but a mad-woman would look for mercy from a tiger's dam!' She has never spoken to me since."

Dr. Oleander stood listening with a very gloomy face. Mrs. Sharpe, sitting warming herself before the fire, looked straight at it, with a blank, sallow face.

"What do you find her doing mostly?" he asked, after awhile.

"Sitting by the window, looking at the sea," answered his mother—"always that—with a face the color of snow."

The gloom on the young man's face deepened. What if he

should prove himself a prophet? What if this spirited, half-tamed thing should go melancholy mad?

"I will go to her at once!" he exclaimed, starting up. "If she goes into a passion at sight of me, it will do her good. Anything is better than this death in life."

He held out his hand for the key of the room upstairs. His mother handed it to him, and he strode out at once; and then Mrs. Oleander turned her regards upon the new nurse.

Strangers were "sight for sair een" in that ghostly, deserted farm-house. But the new nurse never looked at her; she sat with those impenetrable green glasses fixed steadfastly on the blazing fire.

CHAPTER XIX.

MISTRESS SUSAN SHARPE.

Dr. Oleander was by no means a coward, yet it is safe to say his heart was bumping against his ribs, with a sensation that was near akin to fear, as he ascended the stairs. He was really infatuatedly in love with his fair-haired little enchantress, else he never had taken his late desperate step to win her; and now, having her completely in his power, it was rather hard to be threatened with her loss by melancholy madness.

"What *shall* I do with her?" he asked himself, in a sort of consternation. "I must keep her here until I get my affairs settled, and that will be a week at the soonest. If we were safely *en route* for Havana, I should cease to fear. How will she receive me, I wonder?"

He tapped softly at the door. There was no response. The silence of the grave reigned all through the lonely old house. He tapped again. Still no answer. "Mollie!" he called. There was no reply. The next moment he had inserted the key, turned it, and opened the prison door.

Dr. Oleander paused on the threshold and took in the picture. He could see the low-lying, sunless afternoon sky, all gray and cheerless; the gray, complaining sea creeping up on the greasy shingle; the desolate expanse of road; the tongue of marshland; the strip of black pine woods—all that could be seen from the window. The prison-room looked drear and bleak; the fire on the hearth was smoldering away to black ashes; the untasted meal stood on the table. Seated by the window, in a drooping, spiritless way, as if never caring to stir again, sat bright Mollie, the ghost of her former self. Wan as a spirit, thin as a shadow, the sparkle gone from her blue

eyes, the golden glimmer from the yellow hair, she sat there with folded hands and weary, hopeless eyes that never left the desolate sea. Not imprisonment, not the desolation of the prospect, not the loneliness, not the fasting had wrought the change, but the knowledge that she was this man's wife.

Dr. Oleander had ample time to stand there and view the scene. She never stirred. If she heard the door open, she made no more sign than if she were stone deaf.

"Mollie!" he called, advancing a step.

At the sound of that hated voice she gave a violent start, a faint, startled cry, and, turning for the first time, eyed him like a wild animal at bay.

"Mollie, my poor little girl," he said in a voice of real pity, "you are gone to a shadow! I never thought a few days' confinement could work such a change."

She never spoke; she sat breathing hard and audibly, and eying him with wild, wide eyes.

"You mustn't give way like this, Mollie; you mustn't really, you know. It will not be for long. I mean to take you away from here. Very soon we will go to Cuba, and then my whole life will be devoted to you. No slave will serve his mistress as I will you."

He drew nearer as he spoke. Quick as lightning her hand sought her breast, and the blue gleam of the dagger dazzled his eyes.

"One step nearer," she hissed, between set, glistening teeth, "and I'll bury it in your heart or my own!"

She raised it with a gesture grand and terrible, and rising slowly from her seat, confronted him like a little tigress.

"Mollie," he said, imploringly, "listen to me—your husband!"

Her white teeth locked together with a clinching noise; she stood there like a pale little fury.

"Have you no pity for such love as mine, Mollie? Is your heart made of stone, that all my devotion can not melt it?"

To his horror, she broke into a discordant, mirthless laugh.

"His devotion! He tears me away from my friends, he locks me up in a dungeon until he drives me mad! His devotion!"

She laughed hysterically again.

"It seems harsh, Mollie, but it is not meant in harshness. If there were any other way of winning you, you know I would never resort to such extreme measures. I am not the only man that has carried off the woman he loved, when other means failed to win her."

Again he came nearer, holding out his hands with an imploring gesture.

"Only say that you will try and love me—only say that you will be my wife—promise me on your word of honor, and I will take you back to New York this day!"

But Mollie's answer was to raise her formidable knife.

"One step more," she said, glaring upon him with suppressed fury—"one step nearer, if you dare!"

He saw in her face it was no idle threat, and he recoiled.

"Stay here, then," he angrily cried, "since you will have it so! It is your own fault, and you must abide the consequences. Mine you shall be, by fair means or foul! I leave you now, since my presence does no good, but by this day week you will be sailing with me to sunny Cuba. There I can have things my own way, and your high-tragedy airs will avail you little."

He walked to the door, turned, paused. She stood like a statue, white as marble, but with, oh! such fiercely burning eyes!

"I have brought you an attendant," he said, sullenly. "I will send her up for those things," pointing to the untasted dinner; "she will wait upon you during the brief time you are to remain here."

She never moved. She stood there white and defiant and panting, her glittering eyes riveted to his face. With a sullen oath he opened the door and walked out, baffled once more.

"Curse the little vixen!" he muttered, as he stalked downstairs; "she's made of the stuff that breaks but never bends. I believe in my soul if I was to carry her off to sea to-morrow she would leap overboard and end it all the day after. I wish I had never listened to Blanche's tempting. I wish I had left the little termagant in peace. The game isn't worth the candle."

He found Mrs. Susan Sharpe sitting where he had left her, with her imperturbable face still turned to the fire, her bonnet and shawl still on.

"Take off those things!" he ordered, harshly, pointing to the offending garments—it was a relief to vent his spleen on some one. "Why the deuce don't you take her to her room?" turning savagely upon Sally. "Let her have the chamber next my patient, and then go into her room and fetch away the tray, and see what you can do for her."

He flung himself into a chair. Mrs. Sharpe rose with an immovable face.

"Lor'!" said old Sally, "don't snap our heads off, Master

Guy! I can't help that young woman's tantrums upstairs; so, if she puts you out of temper, you needn't come howling at me. This way, ma'am."

Mrs. Sharpe, with a stolid countenance, followed Sally upstairs. The old woman, grumbling angrily all the way, led her into a small, draughty apartment adjoining that of her charge.

"There!" said Sally, snappishly; "this here is your room, and the crazy young woman's is next. Take off your things, and then come down-stairs and see what he wants next, and don't have him biting at us as if we was dogs!"

Mrs. Sharpe obeyed orders to the letter. In five minutes she was back in the kitchen, ready for action. The carroty locks were partly covered with a black, uncouth cap, and a large stuff apron protected her dingy bombazine dress. She turned a questioning face upon her employer, but spoke never a word.

"This is the key of your patient's room," he said, handing it to her; "you will go up and introduce yourself, and do whatever is needful. I am going back to town to-night. Don't let me have any fault to find with you when I return."

Mrs. Sharpe took the key and turned to go.

"I know my duty, sir," she said, as she walked out. "I know what I came to do, and I'll do it."

Dr. Oleander turned to his mother and old Sally when the nurse had gone.

"What do you think of her, mother?"

"I don't like her," Mrs. Oleander answered, promptly. "I wouldn't trust a person with hair like that as far as I could see them!"

"Pooh, pooh! what's her hair got to do with it?"

"Very well," said Mrs. Oleander, nodding sagaciously. "It's nothing to me; but a red-haired person is never to be trusted."

"Then watch her," said the doctor. "I trust you and Sally to do that. I know nothing about her; but don't you let her play me false. It is of the greatest importance to me that the insane girl upstairs does not escape—and escape she will if she can. She will try to bribe the nurse—do you watch the nurse. It will only be for a week at furthest."

"I am glad to hear it," said his mother, spitefully. "I don't like my house full of mad-women and mad-women's nurses, and I don't like playing the spy!"

"It will only be for a week," the doctor repeated. "I

will never trouble you in this way again. And now I must be off at once. I want to sleep in New York to-night."

Without further parley Dr. Oleander stalked out of the kitchen and out of the house. Five minutes more, and they heard the sharp rattle of his wheels on the gravel. Then old Peter bolted and locked and put up the chains, and made the lonely farm-house as much like a jail as bolts and bars could render it. Their situation was so isolated, and they themselves so helpless, that, although there was but little to fear, these precautionary measures were natural enough.

Meantime, the new nurse had ascended the stairs and unlocked her captive's door. She rapped respectfully before entering; but, as usual, Mollie deigned no notice, and after waiting an instant, she turned the handle and went in.

Mollie had resumed her seat by the window, and, with her chin resting on her hand, was gazing with gloomy eyes at the evening mists rising over the bleak gray sea.

Much weeping had dulled the luster of those sparkling eyes and paled the bright bloom of the once rounded cheeks.

The Christmas snows were not whiter nor colder than the girl who sat there and stared in blank despair at the wide sea.

"I beg your pardon, miss," said Mrs. Susan Sharpe, halting in the door-way; "I want to come in."

At the sound of the strange voice, the prisoner wheeled suddenly around and confronted her.

"Come in, then," she said: and Mrs. Sharpe came slowly in and closed the door. "Who are you?" Mollie asked, transfixing her with her steadfast gaze. "I never saw you before."

"No, miss; I only came from New York to-day."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Susan Sharpe."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm to be your nurse, miss. Doctor Oleander hired me and brought me down."

"Doctor Oleander is a villain, and you are, I suspect, his tool."

"I'm sorry you think so, miss," Mrs. Susan Sharpe said, composedly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

But Mollie did not reply. She was staring at her new attendant with all her might.

"Who are you?" she said, breathlessly. "Surely someone I know."

The woman smiled.

"No one you know, miss—unless you have the advantage of me. I don't suppose you ever heard my name before."

"I don't suppose I have," retorted Miss Dane; "but I have certainly heard your voice."

"No! Have you, now? Where, I wonder?"

Mollie gazed at her wistfully, scrutinizingly. Surely that face, that voice, were familiar; and yet, as soon as she strove to place them, all became confusion. She turned away with a sigh.

"It's of no use. I suppose you're in league with the rest. I think the people in this house have hearts harder than stone."

"I'm very sorry for you, miss, if that's what you mean," said Mrs. Susan Sharpe, respectfully. "Yours is a very sad affliction, indeed."

"A very sad affliction! Do you mean being imprisoned here?"

"Oh, dear, no, miss!" looking embarrassed. "I mean—I'm sure, I beg your pardon, miss—I mean—"

"You mean you pretend to believe Doctor Oleander's romance," interrupted Mollie, contemptuously. "You mean I am crazy!"

"Don't be angry, miss," said Mrs. Sharpe, deprecatingly. "I wouldn't give offense for the world."

"Look at me," said Mollie, impetuously—"look me in the face, Susan Sharpe, and tell me if I look like one insane!"

Mrs. Sharpe turned the mild light of the green glasses on the pale, excited young face.

"No, miss, I can't say you do; but it isn't for me to judge. I'm a poor woman, trying to turn an honest penny—"

"By helping the greatest scoundrel that ever escaped the gallows to keep prisoner an unoffending girl! Is that how you try to turn an honest penny, Susan Sharpe?"

Susan Sharpe, shrinking, as well as she might, from the fiery flashing of two angry blue eyes, murmured an inaudible something, and busied herself among the dishes.

"Listen to me, woman," cried Mollie, pushing back her wild, loose hair, "and pity me, if you have a woman's heart. This man—this Doctor Oleander—led me into a trap, inveigled me from home, brought me here, and keeps me here a prisoner. To further his own base ends he gives out that I am insane. My friends are in the greatest distress about me, and I am almost frantic by being kept here. Help me to es-

cape—my friends in New York are rich and powerful—help me, Susan Sharpe, and you will never know want more!"

Mrs. Susan Sharpe had keen ears. Even in the midst of this excited address she had heard a stealthy footstep on the creaking stairs—a footstep that had paused just outside the door. She took her cue, and made no sign.

"I'm very sorry, miss," slightly raising her voice—"very sorry for you, indeed. What you say may be all very true, but it makes no difference to me. My duty's plain enough. I'm paid for it, I've promised to do it, and I'll do it."

"And that is—"

"To wait upon you. I'll be your faithful attendant while I'm here; but to help you to escape I can't. Doctor Oleander tells me you're insane; you tell me yourself you're not insane. I suppose you ought to know best; but I've been in lunatic asylums before now, and I never yet knew one of 'em to admit there was anything the matter with 'em."

And with this cruel speech, Mrs. Susan Sharpe, keeping her eyes anywhere but upon the young lady's face, lifted the tray and turned to go.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?" she said, pausing at the door. "Is there anything nice you would like for supper?"

But Mollie did not reply. Utterly broken down by fasting, and imprisonment, and solitude, she had flung herself passionately on the floor, and burst out into a wild storm of hysterical weeping.

"I'm very sorry for you, Miss Dane," the nurse said for the benefit of the eavesdropper without; "but my duty's my duty, and I must do it. I'll fetch you up your supper presently—a cup of tea will cure the 'stericks."

She opened the door. Mrs. Oleander, at the head of the staircase, was making a great show of having just come up.

"They'll be the death of me yet—those stairs!" she panted. "I often tell my son I'm not fitted to mount up and down a dozen times a day, now in my old age; but, la! what do young men care?"

"Very true, ma'am," replied the imperturbable nurse to this somewhat obscure speech.

"And how's your patient?" continued the old lady.

"Very bad, ma'am—'stericky and wild-like. I left her crying, poor soul!"

"Crying! For what?"

"Because I wouldn't help her to escape, poor dear!" said

Mrs. Sharpe in a tone of commiseration. "She's greatly to be pitied."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Oleander, carelessly; "you couldn't help her, you know, even if you would. There's Peter, and Sally, and me on the watch all day long, and from nightfall we let loose Tiger and Nero. They'd tear you both to pieces in five minutes. Tell her so, poor creature, if she talks any more of escape."

"I will, ma'am," responded the respectful Mrs. Sharpe.

Mrs. Oleander ascended the stairs and went to her own room, very well satisfied with the submissive and discreet new nurse; and the new nurse descended to the kitchen, and prepared her patient's supper of tea and toast, delicate sliced ham, and raspberry preserves.

The dusk of the sunless afternoon was falling out-of-doors ere her preparations were completed, and the stair-ways and halls of the dreary house were in deepest gloom as she returned to her patient's room.

She found that unhappy little patient lying prone on her face on the floor, as still, as motionless as if death had hushed forever that impulsive heart. She made no sign of having heard when Mrs. Sharpe entered—she never moved nor looked up until the nurse set the tray on the table, and stooping over her, gave her a gentle shake.

"Miss Dane," she said in her stolid tones, "please to get up. Here's your supper."

And Mollie, with a low, wailing cry, raised her wan face and fixed her blue eyes on the woman's face with a look of passionate reproach.

"Why don't you let me alone? Why don't you leave me to die? Oh, if I had but the courage to die by my own hand!"

"Please to take your supper," was Mrs. Sharpe's practical answer to this insane outburst. "Don't be foolish."

She lifted Mollie bodily up, led her over, seated her in her chair, poured her out a cup of tea, and made her drink it, before that half-distracted creature knew what she was about.

"Now take another," said sensible Mrs. Sharpe; "tea will do you a power of good; and eat something; there's nothing like good, wholesome victuals for curing people of notions."

Wearied out in body and mind, Mollie let herself be catered for in submissive silence. She took to her new nurse as she had never taken to any one else in this horrid house. She had a kindly face, had Mrs. Susan Sharpe.

"You feel better now, don't you?" said that worthy wom-

an, the meal completed. "Suppose you go to bed? You look tired. Let me undress you and tuck you in."

And again willful Mollie submitted, and dropped asleep as soon as her head was fairly on the pillow. Motherly Mrs. Sharpe "tucked her in" and kissed her, and then, with the remains of the supper, went down-stairs to partake of her own evening repast.

Mrs. Oleander took tea with her servants, and was very gossipy indeed. So, too, was old Sally; so, likewise, was old Peter. The beverage that exhilarates seemed to lighten their aged hearts wonderfully; but Mrs. Susan Sharpe did not thaw out under the potent spell of the best English breakfast tea. Silent and attentive, she eat, and drank, and listened, and responded when directly addressed; and, when it was over, helped Sally to clear up, and then pounced upon a basket of undarned hose under the table, and worked away with a will. Her energy and good-will, and the admirable manner in which she filled up the holes in the stockings with wondrous criss-cross work, quite won the hearts of both Sally and Sally's mistress.

The clock struck nine; work was laid aside; Mrs. Oleander read a chapter aloud out of the Bible, and they then all adjourned to their respective chambers. Doors and windows had been secured at nightfall, Tiger and Nero liberated—their hoarse, deep growls every now and then making night hideous.

Up in her own apartment, Mrs. Susan Sharpe's first act was to pull up the curtain and seat herself by the window. The night was pitch dark—moonless, starless—with a sighing wind and a dully moaning sea. It was the desolation of utter desolation, down in that dismal sea-side prison—the two huge dogs below the only living things to be heard.

"It's enough to drive any one mad, this horrible place," said Mrs. Susan Sharpe, to herself; "and the very weather seems in the conspiracy against us."

She took her lamp as she spoke, and held it close to the window, with an anxious, listening face. Its solitary red ray streamed far out over the black road.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, then a sound rent the night silence—a long, shrill, sharp whistle.

"Thank the Lord!" said Mrs. Susan Sharpe. "I thought he wouldn't fail."

She dropped the curtain, set the light on the table, knelt down and said her prayers, rose up and undressed herself; and then this extraordinary female went to bed and to sleep.

CHAPTER XX.

HUGH INGELOW KEEPS HIS PROMISE.

MRS. SUSAN SHARPE was up with the lark, or, rather, with the sea-gulls whirling and shrieking out on the tossing waters. The early morning sun streamed in the little chamber; the wind wailed plaintively still, and the dull tramp, tramp of the multitudinous waves kept up their ceaseless refrain.

All was yet still in the lone farm-house—no living thing was stirring, not even the rats, that had held high carnival all night. Down in the back yard and front garden, Tiger and Nero prowled about their beat, surlily growling at the tossing trees, and were monarchs of all they surveyed.

Mrs. Sharpe was not an imaginative person, luckily. She got up and made her toilet, and splashed herself briskly in a basin of cold water. The effect of these ablutions was singular—they effected a total cure of her inflamed eyelids.

More singular still, a wig of red hair stood on the dressing-table, and Mrs. Sharpe's cranium was adorned with a respectable growth of dark, glossy, brown hair.

"If they only saw me now," said Mrs. Sharpe to herself, with a chuckle, "I rather think they'd open their old eyes!"

She went to work artistically—reddened her eyelids over again, carefully adjusted her wig, set her cap on it, fixed her spectacles on her nose, and surveyed herself complacently in the cracked chimney-glass.

"You'll do," said Mrs. Sharpe, nodding familiarly to her image. "You're as ugly as if somebody had bespoke you. I only wonder how that little unfortunate can take to such a looking object—and she does take to me, poor dear! And now I'll write to him. He's sure to be along in the course of the morning."

Taking from her capacious pocket a blank-book and a lead-pencil, Mrs. Susan Sharpe sat down and wrote.

And this is what Mrs. Sharpe wrote:

"She's here, and safe and well, and don't know me no more than the dead. But I can't get her out. Two old women and one old man are on the watch all day long. I daren't sneeze but they know it. And before they go off the watch there's two big, savage dogs goes on, and prowl about all night. I don't know what to do; tell me. She's awful down-hearted, and cries and goes on. I heard your whistle

last night. Her room is next to mine—the windows to the left. If you walk on the beach she'll see you; she sits at the window all day. Doctor O. is going to Cuba in a week, and going to take her with him; so you had better be quick."

Mrs. Sharpe read her own composition over two or three times, with a satisfied look.

"I think that will do," she murmured. "Trust him to find a way out of a fix, and we're in a fix now, if there ever was one. Drat the dogs! If it wasn't for them I could get on myself."

Mrs. Sharpe was not a rapid scribe. It had taken her a considerable while to indite this, and the household was astir. She folded it up in the smallest possible dimensions, and wedged it into her thimble.

"A brass thimble makes a good, strong envelope," said the nurse, with a grim smile. "And now to begin my day's work."

She quitted her own apartment and went into that of her charge. Mollie was still asleep—sleeping like a babe, with lips apart, and cheeks softly flushed, and loose, golden hair falling in burnished masses over the pillow. Involuntarily Mrs. Sharpe paused.

"She looks like a picture," she thought. "No wonder he's crazy in love."

The sound of the opening door awoke the light sleeper. She rose up on her elbow and stared around. The nurse advanced with a propitiatory smile.

"Good-morning, miss," she said, cheerfully. "I hope you had a nice sleep."

"Oh, is it you?" said Mollie. "I was dreaming I was back home with guardy, and Sir Roger, and poor Hugh, and here I am still. Oh!" in a voice of bitter anguish, "why did you awake me?"

"My poor dear," said the nurse, touched, "I didn't know, you know, or I wouldn't. There! don't think about it now, but get up, like a good girl, and wash and dress yourself, and have your breakfast comfortable. Things won't be always like this, you know."

Mollie looked wistfully at her, but Mrs. Sharpe wasn't going to commit herself, with no certainty but that listening ears were at the door.

She assisted the poor prisoner with her toilet, combed out and curled the beautiful, abundant hair, and made her as pretty as a picture.

"She's lost her rosy cheeks, and is failed away to nothing," mused the nurse. "Only for that, she'd be the loveliest thing the sun shines on."

"And now you're fixed, my pretty dear," said Mrs. Sharpe, "I'll go down and get your breakfast. Nobody ever feels right in the morning on an empty stomach."

Down in the kitchen, Mrs. Sharpe found things in a lively state of preparation—coffee boiling, steak broiling, toast making, and muffins baking. Old Sally, in a state threatening spontaneous combustion, bent over the fire, and Mrs. Oleander, in her rocking-chair, superintended.

"Are you only getting up now?" asked the doctor's mother, suspiciously.

"Been up these two hours, ma'am," responded Mrs. Sharpe. "I tidied up myself and my room, and then tidied up Miss Dane and her'n. I came down to fetch up her breakfast."

"It's all ready," said Sally. "Fetch along your tray."

So Susan Sharpe fetched along her tray, and received a bountiful supply of coffee and toast, and steak and muffins.

"There's nothing like plenty of good victuals for curing the vapors," observed Sally, sagely. "You make the young woman eat this, Mrs. Sharpe, and she'll feel better, you'll see."

Mrs. Sharpe smiled, as she bore off her burden, at the idea Sally must have of one little girl's appetite.

She found Mollie sitting at the window gazing at the sea, sparkling as if sown with stars, in the morning sunshine.

"Is it not beautiful?" she said, turning to the nurse. "Oh, if I were only free once more—free to have a plunge in that snow-white surf—free to have a breezy run along that delightful beach this magnificent morning?"

Mrs. Sharpe set down her tray, looked cautiously around her, lowered her voice, fixed her green-spectacled eyes meaningly on Mollie's face, and uttered these remarkable words:

"Wait! You may be free before long!"

"What do you mean?" cried Mollie, starting violently.

"Hush! 'Sh! 'sh!" laying her hand over the girl's mouth. "Not a word. Walls have ears, in prisons. Take your breakfast, miss," raising her voice. "It will do you no good, acting ugly and not eating."

For the stairs had creaked under a cautious, ascending footstep, and Mrs. Sharpe had heard that creak.

So, too, had Mollie this time; and she turned her shining eyes in eloquent silence to Mrs. Sharpe, and Mrs. Sharpe had

nodded, and smiled, and grimaced toward the door in a way that spoke volumes.

"I'm going down to get my breakfast, now," she said, authoritatively. "Let me see what you'll have done by the time I get back."

The stairs were creaking again. Mrs. Sharpe did not tarry too much, and Mrs. Oleander, all panting, was back in her rocker when she re-entered the kitchen, trying very hard to look as though she had never left it.

"And how's your patient to-day, Mrs. Sharpe?" she asked, as soon as she could properly get her wind.

"Much the same," said Mrs. Sharpe, with brevity; "wants to starve herself to death, crying in spells, and making a time. Let me help you."

This to Sally, who was scrambling to get half a dozen things at once on the table. Mrs. Sharpe came to the rescue with a practiced hand, and upon the entrance of old Peter, who had been out chaining up the dogs, the quartet immediately sat down to breakfast.

After breakfast, the new nurse again made herself generally useful in the kitchen, helped Sally, who was inclined to give out at the knees, to "red up," washed dishes and swept the floor with a brisk celerity worthy of all praise.

And then, it being wash-day, she whipped up her sleeves, displaying two lusty, round arms, and fell to with a will among the soiled linens and steaming soap-suds.

"I may as well do something," she said, brusquely, in answer to Mrs. Oleander's very faint objections; "there's nothing to do upstairs, and she doesn't want me. She only calls me names."

So Mrs. Susan Sharpe rubbed, and wrung, and soaped, and pounded, and boiled, and blued for three mortal hours, and then there was a huge basket of clothes all ready to go on the line.

"Now, ma'am," said this priceless treasure, "if you'll just show me the clothes-line, I'll hang these here out."

Mrs. Oleander pointed to two long ropes strung at the lower end of the back yard, and Susan Sharpe, hoisting the basket, set off at once to hang them to dry.

The two old women watched her from the window with admiring eyes.

"She's a noble worker!" at last said old Sally. "She 'minds me of the time when I was a young girl myself. Dearie me! It went to my heart to see her rubbing them sheets and things as if they were nothing."

"And I think she's to be trusted, too," said Mrs. Oleander. "She talks as sharp to that girl as you or I, Sally. I shouldn't mind if we had her here for good."

Meantime, the object of all this commendation had marched across the yard, and proceeded scientifically to hang the garments on the line. But all the while the keen eyes inside the green spectacles went roving about, and alighted presently on something that rewarded her for her hard day's work.

It was a man emerging from the pine woods, and crossing the waste strip of marshland that extended to the farm.

A high board fence separated the back yard from this waste land, and but few ever came that way.

The man wore the dress and had the pack of a peddler, and a quantity of tow hair escaped from under a broad-brimmed hat. The brown face was half hidden in an enormous growth of light whiskers.

"Can it be?" thought Susan, with a throbbing heart. "I darsn't speak, for them two old witches are watching from the window."

Here the peddler espied her, and trolled out, in a rich, manly voice:

"My father he has locked the door,
My mother keeps the key;
But neither bolts nor bars shall part
My own true love and me."

"It is him!" gasped Mrs. Susan Sharpe. "Oh, good gracious!"

"Good-day to you, my strapping lass. How do you find yourself this blessed morning?"

Susan Sharpe knew there were listening ears and looking eyes in the kitchen, and for their benefit she retorted:

"It's no business of yours how I am! Be off with you! We don't allow no vagrants here!"

"But I ain't a vagrant, my duck o' diamonds. I'm a respectable Yankee peddler, trying to turn an honest penny by selling knickknacks to the fair sect. Do let me in, there's a pretty dear! You hain't no idee of the lovely things I've got in my pack—all dirt cheap, too!"

"I don't want nothing," said Mrs. Susan Sharpe.

"But your ma does, my love, or your elder sister, which I see 'em at the winder this minute. Now do go, there's a lamb, and ask your ma if I mayn't come in."

Mrs. Sharpe dropped her basket in a pet and stalked back to the house.

"It's a peddler-man," she said, crossly, "a-wanting to

come in. I told him he couldn't, and it's of no use; and the best thing you can do is to set the dogs on him."

"No, no!" cried Mrs. Oleander, shrilly. "Let him come in. I like peddlers. Go with her, Sally, and tell the man to come round to the garden gate."

"I'll tell him," said Susan Sharpe, stalking out again. "Let Sally go and open the gate."

She marched across the yard and addressed the "perambulating merchant."

"You're to go round to the front gate. This way. I've a note for you in my thimble. I'll drop the thimble in your box."

The first half of Mrs. Sharpe's speech was given for the benefit of Mrs. Oleander's greedy ears—the latter half, hurriedly and in a low voice, for his own.

The sagacious peddler nodded, struck up a second stave of his ditty, and trudged round to the front gate.

Mrs. Sharpe finished hanging out the clothes before she re-entered the kitchen. When she did, there sat the peddler displaying his wares, and expatiating volubly on their transcendent merits. And there stood Sally and Mrs. Oleander, devouring the contents of the box with greedy eyes.

It is not in the heart of women—country women, particularly—to resist the fascinations of the peddler's pack.

Mrs. Oleander and her old servant were rather of the strong-minded order; but their eyes glistened avariciously, for all that, at the display of combs, and brushes, and handkerchiefs, and ribbons, and gaudy prints, and stockings, and cotton cloth, and all the innumerables that peddlers do delight in.

"This red-and-black silk handkerchief, ma'am," the peddler was crying, holding up a gay square of silk tartan, "is one fifty, and dirt cheap at that. Seein' it's you, ma'am, however, I'll take a dollar for it. Wuth two—it is, by ginger! Sold three dozens on 'em down the village, and got two dollars apiece for 'em, every one."

"I'll take it at a dollar," said Mrs. Oleander. "Sally, that piece of brown merino would just suit you."

"Makes up lovely, ma'am," said the peddler, turning to Sally; "only four dollars for the hull piece. Jest feel of it—soft as a baby's skin. Halloo! miss, what can I do for you?"

This last to Susan Sharpe, who had set down her basket, and was looking on.

"Nothing," replied Susan, with asperity.

"Oh, now, don't you say that!" exclaimed this persuasive

man; "you do want suthin'—lots o' things—I kin see it in them air sparklin' eyes o' your'n. What makes you wear green glasses. See here, I've blue, and white, and fancy colors, with silver straddles for the nose. Do look at 'em—there's a love!"

Mrs. Oleander laughed, and Mrs. Sharpe so far unbent her austerity as to kneel down and begin rummaging the miscellaneous articles.

The peddler's quick eye never left her hands; and when he heard the tiny click of something falling, an intelligent flash shot from him to the obnoxious green glasses.

"I want a thimble," said Mrs. Sharpe, with phlegm. "I've lost mine. How much do you ask for these here, mister?"

"Three cents apiece."

Susan paid down the three cents, pocketed the brass thimble, and slowly rose.

"No more to sell to-day," said the peddler, bundling up with celerity. "So you won't take the brown, ma'am? Sorry we can't make a trade; but I'll run up again to-morrow with a new lot, and I've no doubt we can strike a bargain. Good-morning, ladies."

With which Mr. Peddler shouldered his pack and trudged away, singing. Old Peter let him out, and locked the gate after, and watched him out of sight. The peddler ceased his song the moment he was out of hearing, struck into the woods the instant he was out of sight, and flinging his pack on the grass, tore it open.

He had not long to search—Mrs. Sharpe's tarnished old thimble was conspicuous enough among his glistening new ones. He fished it up, poked out the crumpled bit of paper, and slowly read it through. When read, he tore it into fifty morsels, and scattered them in a white shower all about. Then, with knitted brows and compressed lips, he sat and thought and thought for a full hour.

Meanwhile, matters went on smoothly behind him. Mrs. Sharpe, having finished the washing, and quite won the hearts of the two old women by her workmanlike manner, prepared her patient's dinner, and brought it up.

On this occasion Mrs. Oleander undertook to accompany her. They found that refractory patient at her usual post—the window—gazing with dreamy, empty eyes over the ceaseless sea.

Susan Sharpe was strictly on her guard; her austere face never unbent, and Mollie took her cue once more.

"Here's your dinner miss," she said, briefly; "is there anything I can do for you?'

"Nothing," replied Mollie, sullenly. "Only leave me alone. I never want to see either of your ugly old faces."

She turned her back upon them as she spoke, and never turned round until they had quitted the room.

"She's a little imp, if there ever was a little imp yet," said Mrs. Oleander, spitefully. "Does she always treat you like that?"

"Worse, mostly," said the imperturbable Susan; "but, la! I don't mind; I'm used to 'em."

"Do you think she'll ever get better?"

"I think it's very likely, ma'am," responded Mrs. Sharpe. "Your cross ones are always the likeliest. But, of course, I can't say."

All that long afternoon Mollie was left quite alone. Mrs. Sharpe never came near her. This indifference on the part of the nurse quite disarmed Mrs. Oleander's suspicions. If she had any wish to curry favor with her son's patient, or help her to escape, surely she would not sit there in the kitchen, hemming her new silk handkerchief, all the while. That was what Susan did, however, and the weary, weary hours of the warm, sunny day wore blankly on to poor, lone Mollie.

The horrible stillness of the place seemed driving her mad. The endless monotony of the waves rolling up on the beach was growing unendurable. The wild waste of sparkling waters, ending in the low horizon line, wearied her eyes like the sands of the desert.

"I shall lose all the little reason I ever had if I am kept in this howling desolation much longer," she said, pressing her hands to her throbbing temples. "Oh! to shut out this mocking sunshine—to lose sight of this dreary waste, where no living thing comes! Oh, to get away from that horrible sea! If I could only die and end it all! But I live on, and live on where others would be happier and find death."

She sighed wearily, and looked across at the radiant western sky, gorgeous with the coming sunset.

"What did that woman mean? Did she mean anything? Yes, I am sure she did, and she has come here to help me to escape. Oh, Heaven have pity, and grant me freedom once more!"

She clasped her hands and sat there like one out of herself, while the moments wore on. Purple and gold made the western sky luminous with glory, and when the gorgeous flames were at their brightest, and the sea turning to a lake of

blood-red fire, a little white boat, with a blue pennant flying, shot out of the red light and drifted close to the shore.

Mollie fixed her eyes on this tiny skiff—why, she could not have told. Boats passed and repassed often enough, but seldom so close to the shore. The beauty of the little bark attracted her, nestling as it did like a white dove on the water, and that fairy azure banner flying.

A solitary figure sat in the boat, his face turned her way; but the distance was too great for her to distinguish that face. A word in white letters she could see on the blue flag; but again the distance was too great for her to distinguish. She sat and watched and watched, until the opening of the door startled her. She turned round and saw Susan Sharpe—this time alone.

"Look there!" said Mollie, obeying a sudden impulse; "did you ever see anything so pretty?"

The nurse looked—bent her brows and looked again. Her face flushed—she caught her breath.

"Who is the man?" she asked, hurriedly, lowly.

"I don't know," in the same breathless way. "He is watching here—but the distance is so great. Oh, nurse—"

She did not finish the sentence, but with hands clasped and lips parted, stood looking imploringly in the woman's face.

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. Susan Sharpe; "there is no one on the watch this time, thank the Lord! Mrs. Oleander's down with the toothache."

She left the room—was absent in her own two or three minutes—then returned with a pocket telescope in her hand.

"Try this," she said, quietly; "it's small, but it's powerful."

She put it in the girl's hand. Mollie turned eagerly to the window—the boat and the man were near enough now. The word on the blue flag was Hope; the face of the man was still toward her, true as the needle to the north star. With the first look she recognized it. A low cry of amaze, and she dropped the glass, and stood all trembling with the sudden joyful shock.

For it was the face she had sighed for, day-time and night-time—it was the man she loved. It was Hugh Ingelow.

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. SHARPE DOES HER DUTY.

"You know that man, miss?" Mrs. Sharpe said, ineffably calm, stooping to pick up the glass.

Mollie turned to her with eyes wild and wide.

"I know him—yes. And you— Oh, for pity's sake, say you know him, too!"

"How on earth can I say so until I've seen him?" said Mrs. Sharpe, poising her glass and clapping her eye to it, one hand over the other, after the fashion of the sex.

She took a long look.

"Well?" Mollie panted.

Mrs. Susan Sharpe turned to her with a singular smile—a smile that made luminous the sallow face and glorified the green spectacles.

Just then the stairs creaked under a cautious, ascending tread.

"It's Sally," said Mrs. Sharpe, not moving a muscle. "Eat your supper, and keep your eyes off the window if she comes in. Keep up heart, and think of the word on the blue banner—hope."

She turned away and abruptly opened the door as she spoke. There stood old Sally, with the eyes of a watching cat.

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed the ancient handmaiden of Mrs. Oleander, very much discomposed by this abrupt proceeding. "How you do startle a body with your quick ways! Is Mrs. Oleander in here?"

"No," said Susan. "How could Mrs. Oleander be here when I left her, five minutes ago, half crazy with toothache?"

"Well, she left the kitchen after you, and came up, and I thought she might have dropped in to see the young woman," fibbed Sally. "How is she?"

"Suppose you drop in and see for yourself," responded the nurse, provoked into being pert to her elders. "Miss Dane, here's a visitor for you."

Mollie turned round from the table, where she sat taking her evening meal.

"I don't want you or your visitors, Mrs. Sharpe, if that be your name," said the irascible patient. "You're all a set of old tabby cats together, and if you don't clear out, I'll fling something at your head!"

She bounced from her chair as she spoke and brandished the tea-pot.

With a howl of dismay, old Sally turned tail and fled incontinently. Just waiting to exchange one approving glance with her patient, the nurse thought it prudent to follow her example.

This little incident had one salutary effect. It frightened Sally out of her feeble old wits, confirming, as it did, Dr.

Guy's fable of the periodical fits of madness to which the young lady was prone. She related to her mistress, in shrill falsetto, what had occurred.

"And if ever I go near the crazy little hussy again, as long as she's under this roof," concluded Sally, wildly, "I'm a Dutchman!"

"Weren't you frightened?" Mrs. Oleander asked, turning to the nurse.

"Oh, not much!" said the serene Susan. "I'm used to it, you know. I could have ~~dodged~~ if she had heaved the tea-pot. She takes them tantrums once or twice a day."

Mollie spent the evening alone, of course, but in despair no longer. Hope had planted her shining foot on the threshold of her heart, and for the time she could forget she was the most miserable wife of Dr. Oleander, in the face of freedom. And Hugh Ingelow was near, and she loved Hugh. Oh, if she had never refused him—bravest, noblest heart that ever beat! the most generous gentleman the Creator ever made!

Alone Mollie sat—alone, but lonely no longer; for yonder, drifting lazily into the setting tide, the sunset glowing above and around it, floated the snow-white skiff. In the amber mist fluttered the banner of blue—the banner of hope—and there, lounging easily, with his face turned to her, was the man she loved, handsome Hugh! her beloved—her darling!

"And, oh! that I were by his side," Mollie exclaimed, in her rhapsody, "never, never to leave it again."

Solitude and imprisonment had done this willful child some good, you see. They had taught her to think—to know herself. She never could be the same crude, madcap Mollie again.

The last, low, yellow gleam died out of the sunset—slowly crept up the twilight, palely, gemmed with stars. A round, red moon showed its crimson disk above the silvery horizon line, whitening as it arose, until it trailed a flood of crystal radiance over the purple bosom of the sleeping sea. And still Mollie sat there, watching the shining stars creep out, and still the fairy bark floated lazily with the drifting current. She could have sat there and watched him forever—her noble, gallant Hugh! But by and by, as the night wind grew chill, the little white boat glided away and disappeared.

The entrance of Mrs. Sharpe, with her night-lamp, aroused Mollie from her trance. She turned eagerly round to greet her. Next to Hugh Ingelow, her hope now was in this mysterious woman.

Mrs. Sharpe closed the door carefully after her, set the lamp on the table, dropped the curtain, and then turned her face to Mollie. One look at that face told Mollie something had occurred.

"What is it?" she asked in a breathless whisper.

And Susan Sharpe, bending down, whispered hurriedly:

"Doctor Oleander is here."

Mollie barely repressed a cry. Susan Sharpe caught her, in alarm, by the shoulder.

"Hush! Are you crazy? Not a word. Yes, he's downstairs—came half an hour ago. Don't look so frightened—he won't trouble you this time."

"This time," repeated Mollie, noticing the emphasis. "What do you mean?"

"That he was only run down to see how we get along, and to tell us to be all ready for an early start. We are going to Cuba."

"We?"

"Yes," with a grim smile and nod, "we. You, and me, and Doctor Oleander."

"Oh, nurse—"

"Hush! Hear me out—I can stay but a minute. He is going to take you to Cuba. His affairs are nearly arranged. He means to start on Friday night—this is Tuesday. A schooner will be in waiting at the wharf, in the village yonder. I am to go with you as attendant. He is very much pleased with me, and I have consented."

Mrs. Sharpe laughed softly.

"But, nurse—"

"Yes, yes; be still. We won't go—be sure of that. He wanted to come up to see you, but I told him he had better not, if he wanted to have you quiet when the time came. So he goes off again to-night without troubling you."

Mollie clasped her hands in thankfulness.

"How can I thank you? How good you are!"

"Thank me by going straight to bed and sleeping like a top. Let the thought that it is likely to be your last night under this accursed roof be your lullaby. And now I must go."

Mollie held up her rosy lips—tempting and sweet—and the woman stooped and kissed her.

"You are my best friend," Mollie said, simply. "God bless you!"

The woman smiled.

"Nay, the kiss and the blessing, if meant for your best

friend, should have been kept for Hugh Ingelow. I but obey his orders."

Mollie turned radiantly red. Mrs. Susan Sharpe, with a significant smile at her own keenness, immediately quitted the room.

Dr. Oleander did not disturb Mollie. He departed half an hour after Mrs. Sharpe quitted her for the night. The account his mother and Sally gave of the nurse made him disposed to trust her.

"I will take her with me," he thought, "since she is so trustworthy. It would be too horribly dreary for Mollie without one companion of her own sex."

So he offered liberal terms, and Mrs. Sharpe closed with his offer readily enough.

"I'd as lief go to Cuba as not," she said, in her sedate way. "One place is the same as another to me. But it's very soon to be ready."

"Never mind," replied the doctor. "We'll find dry-goods stores in Havana, I dare say, and, meantime, I'll provide some ready-made things from New York."

Dr. Oleander departed very well satisfied. He would have liked very much to see Mollie, but his approach always threw her into such a fury, and he wanted her kept as quiet as possible until the hour of departure.

"I'll have to resort to the vulgar alternative of chloroform, I dare say," he thought. "She'll make a fight for it at the last. I can quiet her, however."

And so Dr. Oleander went back to New York without one suspicion that his new nurse was playing him false.

Within an hour after breakfast, the peddler presented himself next morning. Again Mrs. Oleander and Sally were vividly interested, and again each purchased something. Again Mrs. Sharpe said she wanted nothing, and again she knelt down to examine the contents of the pack. The peddler pressed his goods, Mrs. Sharpe obdurately declined. He persisted, Mrs. Sharpe grew angry.

"Take these here gloves, then, for massy sake!" cried the peddler in desperation, "ef yer won't take nothin' else. They're the richest of silk gloves, and, bein' it's you, only fifty cents. Just you feel of 'em."

He looked Mrs. Sharpe full in the face. She took the gloves—a slip of paper was to be felt inside—a moment's demur, then she purchased and put them in her pocket.

The peddler departed; Mrs. Sharpe went upstairs, and drew forth the slip of paper. There were but three lines:

"Meet me this afternoon at two. I will be waiting in the woods near the shore, where you saw my boat yesterday. I know he was with you last night."

Mrs. Sharpe read this, destroyed it, and sat ruminating.

"What if they won't let me go? But no, they wouldn't dare keep me a prisoner, and if it came to fisticuffs," smiling to herself, "I could beat the three of them—poor old bodies! I'll go by strategy, if possible—by main force, if necessary. But I'll go."

Five minutes longer the nurse sat thinking. Then she arose, walked down-stairs, and complained drearily of a shocking bad headache.

Mrs. Oleander recommended a woman's cure—a cup of strong tea and going to bed. But Susan Sharpe shook her head.

"Tea never does me no good, and going to bed only makes me worse. I suppose it's staying in-doors so much. I ain't used to it. I always take a walk every afternoon. I'll wait and see if it gets better. If it don't, I'll go and take a little walk along the shore. A mouthful of fresh air will do me good."

Mrs. Sharpe waited accordingly, but the headache did not get better. On the contrary, it grew so much worse that when the one-o'clock dinner was ready, she was unable to eat a mouthful. She lay with her head on the table in a sort of stupor.

"I think you had better take a walk," said Mrs. Oleander, who was not an ill-natured old woman on the whole. "I don't want you to be laid up on our hands."

Mrs. Sharpe glanced at the clock; it wanted a quarter of two. She rose at once.

"I think I must, or I'll be fit for nothing for a week. I'll go and put on my things."

In five minutes, Susan Sharpe walked out of the garden gate and down to the shore. Old Peter closed the gate, watched her out of sight, and went back to the house, unsuspectingly.

Mrs. Sharpe sauntered slowly over the sandy beach to the strip of dark woods, skirted them, to avoid being seen from the windows of the house, and called:

"Mr. Ingelow."

"Here," answered a voice, and the peddler emerged from the trees and stood beside her. "You're a treasure, Mrs.

Susan Sharpe," said the peddler—"worth your weight in crown diamonds. How is she?"

"As well as can be expected. A good deal the better for seeing you from her window last evening."

"I saw you both watching. She knows I have come to rescue her?"

"Of course. She is a woman."

"Does she recognize you?"

"No," with a laugh. "She called me her best friend last night. If she only knew!"

"She would still call you her best friend, perhaps. Your 'make-up' is a good one, Sarah, since she has failed to recognize you. What brought the doctor?"

Susan Sharpe briefly told him.

Mr. Ingelow whistled expressively.

"So soon? But I have thought so. He is not the man to wait. Well, we must be ahead of him, Sarah."

Sarah nodded.

"Yes—how?"

"I have it all arranged. Miss Dane must escape to-night. Look at this."

He pointed to a basket at his feet.

Mrs. Sharpe lifted the cover, and saw two lumps of raw beef.

"Well?" she asked, wonderingly.

"'A sop for Cerberus,'" laughed Hugh Ingelow; "a supper for the dogs. They'll never want another after."

"What do you mean?"

"The meat is poisoned; there is strychnine enough in these two pieces to kill a dozen dogs. I mean to throw that to them this evening."

"But how?"

"Over the wall, of course. What's their names? They'll come when I call them."

"Tiger and Nero."

"So be it. Tiger and Nero will devour the beef and ask no questions. An hour after they'll be as dead as two doornails."

"Poor fellows! But it can't be helped, I suppose?"

"I suppose not. Save your sympathy, Sarah. You must do for the three old folks."

"Poison them, too?" asked Sarah, grimly.

"Not quite. Just put them to sleep."

"Indeed! How?"

Mr. Ingelow produced a little white paper from his vest pocket.

"You see this powder?" holding it up. "Drop it into the tea-pot this evening, and don't drink any of the tea."

The woman shrunk a little.

"I'm almost afraid, Mr. Ingelow. I don't like drugging. They're old and feeble; I daren't do it."

"You must do it," Hugh Ingelow said, sternly. "I tell you there is no danger. Do you take me for a murderer?"

"No; but there might be a mistake."

"There is none. The powder is an opiate; it will harm no one. They will go to sleep a little earlier, and sleep a little longer and a little sounder than usual—that is all."

Mrs. Sharpe took the paper, but with evident reluctance.

"I tell you it is all right," reiterated Hugh Ingelow; "no one is to be murdered but the dogs. Doctor Oleander will have no scruple about drugging Miss Dane on Friday night, you will see. The choice lies between her and them. Are you going to fail me at the last, Sarah?" sternly.

"No," said the woman. She dropped the little package in her pocket, and looked him firmly in the face. "I'll do it, Mr. Ingelow. And then?"

"And then the dogs will be dead, and the people asleep, before ten o'clock. At ten I'll be at the gate; a vehicle will be waiting down below in the clump of cedars. You will open the house door and the garden gate, and let me in. Before another day we'll be in the city."

"So be it. And now," said Mrs. Sharpe, drawing her shawl around her, "I must go. I came to walk off a bad headache; I find it is gone, so I had better return."

"Good-bye, and God speed you!" said Hugh Ingelow.

Mrs. Sharpe walked back to the house. Old Peter admitted her, and all three were solicitous about her headache.

"Much better," Mrs. Sharpe said, quietly. "I knew that walk would cure it."

All the rest of the afternoon she helped old Sally to manufacture pies. Tea-time came, and, ever willing, she volunteered to make the tea.

"Do so," said old Sally. "I can't abear to take my hands out o' dough when they're into it."

The tea was made, the supper-table set, and then Mrs. Sharpe begged permission to make herself a cup of coffee.

"I find it better for my head than tea. It will cure me quite, I know."

Mrs. Oleander assented, and the coffee was made. The

quartet sat down to supper, and Susan Sharpe felt an inward quaking as she watched them drink the tea. Mrs. Oleander complained that it was weak; Sally said it must have boiled, it had such a nasty taste; but they drank it for all that.

Supper over, Mrs. Sharpe brought up her patient's. But she carried her coffee, and left the doctored tea behind.

"We are to escape to-night," she said to Mollie. "Be ready. We will start at ten. Don't ask me to explain now. I feel nervous and am going down."

Before an hour had elapsed the drug began its work. Mrs. Oleander nodded over her knitting; Sally was drowsy over her dishes; Peter yawned audibly before the fire.

"I don't know what makes me so sleepy this evening," Mrs. Oleander said, gaping. "The weak tea, I suppose. Peter, close up early to-night; I think I'll go to bed."

"I'll let the dogs loose now," said Peter. "I'm blamed sleepy myself."

The old man departed. Very soon the hoarse barking of the dogs was heard as they scampered out of their kennel. Peter returned to find the two old women nodding in company.

"You had better go to bed," suggested Mrs. Sharpe. "I'm going myself. Good-night."

She quitted the kitchen. Mrs. Oleander, scarcely able to keep her eyes open, rose up also.

"I will go. I never felt so sleepy in my life. Good-night, Sally."

"Good-night," said Sally, drowsily. "I'll go after you."

Before the kitchen clock struck nine, sleep had sealed the eyelids of Mrs. Oleander and her servants more tightly than they were ever sealed before. And out in the yard, stiff and stark, lay Nero and Tiger. They had eaten the poisoned beef, and, like faithful sentinels, were dead at their posts.

CHAPTER XXII.

A MOONLIGHT FLITTING.

THE big Dutch clock on the kitchen mantel struck nine. The silence of the grave reigned within the house. With the first clear chime Mrs. Susan Sharpe rose from the bed on which she had thrown herself, dressed and prepared for action.

She drew the curtain and looked out. The night was celestial. A brilliant, full moon flooded the dark earth and purple sea with silvery radiance; the sky was cloudless—blue

as Mollie Dane's eyes, the stars beyond number, big and bright.

A faint sea-breeze just stirred the swaying trees; the surf broke in a dull, monotonous wash on the shining strand; even the dreary Long Island farm-house and its desolate surroundings were transfigured and glorified by the radiant moonlight.

Mrs. Susan Sharpe was an inestimable woman in her way, but neither a poet nor an artist. She gave a complacent glance at earth, and sky, and water, thankful that the benign influences, in the way of weather, were at work to aid them.

"It's a very nice night," murmured Mrs. Susan Sharpe. "Couldn't be better if they tried ever so much. It would have been dreadful awkward if it rained. How still the house is—like a tomb! Dear me, I hope there was no harm done by that drug! I must go and get ready at once."

But just at that moment she heard a sharp, shrill, prolonged whistle. She paused. An instant more and a man vaulted lightly over the high board fence.

"Lor'!" said Mrs. Sharpe, "if it isn't him already! I hope the dogs are done for."

It seemed as if they were, for, as she looked and listened, in considerable trepidation, the man approached the house in swift, swinging strides. Of course, it was the peddler. Mrs. Sharpe threw up her window and projected her head.

"Mr. Ingelow!"

"Halloo!"

The man halted and looked up.

"Where are the dogs?"

"In the dogish elysium, I hope. Dead and done for, Sarah. Come down, like a good girl, and let me in."

"I'm not sure that they're fast asleep."

"Oh, they are," said Hugh Ingelow, confidently, "if you administered the drug and they drank the tea."

"I did," said Mrs. Sharpe, "and they drank the tea and went to bed awful sleepy. If you think it's safe, I'll go down."

"All right. Come along."

Mrs. Sharpe lowered the sash and hurried down-stairs. Bolts clattered, the lock creaked, but the sleepers in the house made no sign. A second or two and the nocturnal marauders were together in the hall.

"I told you it was safe," said Mr. Ingelow. "You are a woman in a thousand, Sarah, to manage so cleverly! Now, then, for Miss Dane! Upstairs, is it? Do you go in first,

Sarah; but don't tell her I'm coming. I want the pleasure of surprising her myself."

Sarah smiled, and unlocked Mollie's door. The girl was sitting with an anxious, listening, expectant face. She rose up and turned around at the opening of the door.

"Is it you, nurse? Oh, I have been so uneasy! What noise was—"

She never finished the sentence—it died out in an inarticulate cry of joy. For Hugh Ingelow, his disguise torn off, stood in the door-way, smiling and serene as the god of safety himself.

Mollie Dane was a creature of impulse—she never stopped to think. One faint, suppressed cry, one bound forward, and she was in the young man's arms.

"Hugh! Hugh! Hugh!" she cried, hysterically, clinging to him, "save me! save me!"

It was the first time she had ever called him other than Mr. Ingelow. The young man's arms closed around her as if they never would open again.

"My darling, I have come to save you!"

It had all passed in five seconds, but that short interval was long enough for Mollie's womanly instincts to take the alarm. She disengaged herself, reddening violently. What would he think of her? and Mrs. Sharpe there, too!

"They have driven me nearly out of my senses!" she said, with a sort of choking sob. "I don't know what I am doing half the time, and I was so glad to see a friend's familiar face, Mr. Ingelow."

The blue eyes—the eyes of a very child—lifted themselves wistfully, deprecatingly, shining in tears. Hugh Ingelow was touched to the core of his heart.

"I know it, my poor little girl! It is enough to drive any one out of his senses. But let us see if we can't outwit the crafty Oleander. Put your bonnet on and come."

Mollie paused suddenly, and looked first at him, then at Mrs. Susan Sharpe, then back again.

"Well, Miss Dane," said Mr. Ingelow, "you're not afraid to come with me?"

"Afraid?" the blue eyes turned upon him with an eloquent glance. "Oh, no! But she—Mrs. Sharpe—"

"Is coming, too, of course, to play propriety," laughed Hugh. "Mrs. Sharpe," turning to that demure lady, "put on your fixings and let us fly!"

Mrs. Sharpe nodded, and turned to go into her own room.

"There's Miss Dane's things," she said, pointing to the pegs on which they hung. "I'll be back in two minutes."

Mr. Ingelow took them down, and tenderly wrapped the long mantle about the slender, girlish figure.

"Are you sure you will be warm enough, Mollie?—I beg your pardon—Miss Dane."

"Ah, call me Mollie!" the eloquent glance once more. "How good you are to me, Mr. Ingelow!"

Hugh Ingelow winced as if she had stabbed him.

"I'm a wretch—a brute—a heartless monster! That's what I am, Mollie, and you'll think so, too, some day—that's the worst of it. Don't wear that puzzled, frightened face, my darling! Heaven knows I would die for you!"

She took his hand and kissed it. Before either had time to speak, of course Mrs. Sharpe must happen in and spoil all.

But Hugh Ingelow, strange to say, looked rather relieved. His face had flushed hotly under that innocent kiss, and then grown deathly pale. He was very white when Mrs. Sharpe came in, and Mrs. Sharpe's sharp eyes saw it. The green glasses were gone.

"You look fit to die," observed Mrs. Susan Sharpe, eying him. "What's the matter?"

Mollie looked at him, then turned away. Had she been forward? Was he mortified?

She colored painfully, then slowly petrified to marble. But the young artist only laughed.

"Pining for you, Mrs. Sharpe. I only exist in the light of your eyes. By the way, where's the green spectacles?"

"In my pocket. Come!"

Mollie had knotted her bonnet strings with nervous, trembling fingers. She was thrilling through with mortification. She had been bold, and she had disgusted his fastidious taste, and she had not meant it. She was so grateful, and she loved him so dearly, but she never would offend in that way again.

Mr. Ingelow offered her his arm, but she drew back.

"I will follow you," she said, in a low voice, shrinking painfully into herself.

He said no more, but led the way. Mrs. Sharpe went after, Miss Dane last. No sound broke the stillness of the house. They might have been in their beds for all the noise they made.

"I hope it's all right," Mrs. Sharpe said, with a very uneasy face; "but I feel scared."

"You needn't, then," answered Mr. Ingelow; "they're

safe enough. They'll be all alive in two or three hours from now, and will never know what ailed them. Save your sympathy, Susan, for time of need."

They went down-stairs, out-of-doors, into the cool, bright moonlight. Mollie Dane drew a long, long breath of unspeakable thankfulness as she breathed the fresh, free air once more.

"Thank Heaven," she thought, "and—Hugh Ingelow!"

They reached the garden gate; it stood wide; they passed out, and the artist closed it securely after him.

"'Safe bind, safe find!' Now, Miss Dane, take my arm, and let us see you step out. I have a trap waiting down the road. Neat thing this in the way of moonlight, isn't it?"

Mollie essayed to laugh. He had not waited for her to decline his proffered arm this time—he had taken her hand and drawn it securely through.

"How does freedom feel, Mollie, after a week or two of close imprisonment?"

"Very delightful. You must suffer the imprisonment first, Mr. Ingelow, before you can realize it."

"I would prefer trying to realize it without. Ah, my worthy Doctor Oleander, I think I have outwitted you nicely!"

"I have been so bewildered, and so flurried, and so stunned from the first," said Mollie, "that I can not properly comprehend anything, but I should like to hear how you have brought all this about."

"Why," said Mr. Ingelow, "Mrs. Sharpe told me."

"Yes; but you sent Mrs. Sharpe here in the first place; she told me that. How did you know I was here?"

"Ah! thereby hangs a tale—too long to tell at this sharp pace. Wait until to-morrow, Miss Mollie. There's our vehicle yonder. I might tell you by the way, but the road is long, and the night is chill, and I am to be charioteer. I couldn't do proper justice to the subject, you perceive; and besides, I want you to cuddle up and go to sleep. Here we are. Pile in, Mrs. Sharpe; the back seat, if you please. Miss Dane and I will sit in front and shield you from the inclemency of the weather."

"Much obliged to you, sir," Mrs. Sharpe said, dryly, obeying orders, nevertheless.

"I'll sit back with Mrs. Sharpe," said Mollie, sensitively shrinking.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" retorted Mr. Ingelow, authoritatively. "You'll do precisely as I tell you! You and Mrs. Sharpe are both in my power, and if you don't keep un-

commonly civil and docile, I'll run off with the pair of you and start a seraglio! There, ma'am, you're comfortable, I hope? Now, the sooner you go to sleep the better."

He helped Mrs. Sharpe into the back seat of the two-seated buggy, wrapped her up, and then assisted Mollie up in front.

"A splendid night for our business," he said, getting in beside her and gathering up the reins. "Now then, off we go, over 'brake, bush and scaur,' and good-bye to Doctor Oleander and the trip to Cuba!"

Obedience was not very hard in this instance. Miss Dane snugged up nice and close to Mr. Ingelow, and felt very comfortable indeed. As for him, there was a glow of happiness about his heart like the halo round a full moon. They would have been satisfied, just then, to sit side by side and drive along in a glory of moonshine forever and ever.

"Where are we going?" Mollie asked once.

"To the city—to New York."

"Oh! I know. But where?"

"Wherever you please, Miss Mollie. That will be Mr. Walraven's, I presume?"

"But—"

Mollie hesitated.

"What?" he said, in surprise. "Don't you want to go home?"

"Very much, Mr. Ingelow. It isn't that."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Mr. Ingelow, you'll think me very silly, I dare say; but I don't want to go up there in a matter-of-fact sort of way at day-break to-morrow morning, in this double buggy, with you and Mrs. Sharpe. I should like—how shall I say it?—a little *coup de théâtre!*"

"Oh! I understand," Mr. Ingelow laughed. "It is quite natural. I should like it myself. And, by Jove! I've got a capital idea."

Mollie looked up brightly.

"Oleander has given out that he is going to Cuba—he makes no secret of one half the story, you see—and Mr. Walraven gives a farewell dinner in honor of the mournful occasion, on Thursday—to-morrow evening. The party is select—very—on your account, you know—only Sir Roger Trajenna, Walraven's lawyer, Sardonyx, and myself. Now, when we're all assembled, discussing your absence, as I'll take care we shall be, and Oleander is telling lies by the yard, do you appear like a thunder-clap and transfix him. Guilt will be confounded, innocence triumphantly vindicated, the virtu-

ous made happy, and the curtain will go down amid tremendous applause. Eh, how do you like the style of that?"

Mollie laughed gleefully. Half-tamed thing that she was, a few moments of breezy freedom, by the side of the man she loved, made her all her old, happy, mischief-loving self again. In the first bright sparkle and intoxication, she could quite forget that awful fact that she was Dr. Oleander's wedded wife.

"Splendid! Oh! what fun it will be to see him! And such glorious revenge, too!"

"Seriously, Mollie," said Mr. Ingelow, "he deserves to be punished for his unmanly trick."

"And he shall be!" Mollie cried, her eyes sparkling. "He shall be, if all the world knows the story! What care I? I will have my revenge on the man I hate—on the man who has wronged me beyond reparation. And then I can go away where no one will know me, and make my own way through the world, as I did before I ever came to New York."

Hugh Ingelow looked at her. Her eyes were alight, her cheeks flushed, her whole face eager, angry, and aglow.

"Wronged you beyond reparation!" he slowly repeated. "Mollie, what do you mean?"

"I mean," Mollie passionately cried, "that I am his wife. And I will never forgive him for making me that—never, never, if it were my dying day!"

"His wife!"

The young man looked at her thunder-struck.

"Oh! you don't know. You hadn't heard, of course. It wasn't this time. I would have murdered him and myself this time before he would ever lay a finger on me. It was before. You remember that other time I was carried off?"

"Oh!"

It was all Mr. Ingelow said; but, singular to relate, he looked unutterably relieved.

"He married me then—forced me to marry him—and I—Oh, miserable girl that I am! why did I not die a thousand deaths sooner than consent? But I was mad, and it's too late now. Mr. Rashleigh married us. You recollect that story he told at Mrs. Grand's dinner-party? Well, I was the masked heroine of that adventure; but I never, never, never thought Guy Oleander was the hero. I'd have died, even then, sooner than become his wife. I hoped it was—I thought it was—"

She paused abruptly.

"Who?" pointedly asked Hugh Ingelow.

Mollie stole a sidelong glance from under her sweeping lashes at the handsome face.

"Some one who loved me as well, and whom I—well, didn't exactly hate; and I do hate Doctor Oleander!"

"Which is extremely natural; at the same time wicked, I suppose. Now, Mollie, don't try to keep awake and talk, because the journey is long and dreary. Follow Mrs. Sharpe's example and go to sleep."

He wrapped her up closer; and Mollie, with a delicious sense of safety, and comfort, and sleepiness, cuddled close in her wraps and felt luxuriously happy.

She had slept very little of late. Tears had been her nightly portion, instead of slumber. Now she was happy and at rest; and the very rush of the swift wind, as they bowled along, made her drowsy. She leaned her head against his arm and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

It was broad day when Mollie awoke, the sun shining brilliantly. She started up on her elbow, bewildered, and gazed around.

She was lying on a lounge in a strange room, and Mrs. Susan Sharpe was seated in an elbow-chair before her, nodding drowsily. At Mollie's exclamation she opened her eyes.

"Where are we?" asked the young lady, still bewildered.

"In Mr. Ingelow's studio," responded Mrs. Susan Sharpe.

"Oh, Broadway! Then we are safe in New York?"

The uproar in the great thoroughfare below answered her effectually. She rose up and walked to one of the windows. Life was all astir on the noisy pave. The crowds coming and going, the rattle and clatter were unspeakably delightful, after the dead stagnation of her brief imprisonment.

"How did we come here?" asked Mollie, at length, turning round. "The last I remember I was dropping asleep in the buggy."

"And you stayed asleep—sound—all the way," replied Mrs. Sharpe. "You slept like the dead. Mr. Ingelow lifted you out and carried you up here, and you never woke. I was asleep, too; but he made no ado about rousing me up. You were quite another matter."

Mollie blushed.

"How soundly I must have slept! What's the hour, I wonder?"

"About half past eight."

"Is that all? And where is Mr. Ingelow?"

"Gone to get his breakfast and send us ours. Hadn't you better wash and comb your hair, Miss Dane? Here is the lavatory."

Miss Dane refreshed herself by a cold ablution, and combed out her beautiful, shining tresses.

As she flung them back, a quick, light step came flying upstairs, a clear voice sounded, whistling: "My Love is But a Lassie Yet."

"That's Mr. Ingelow," said Susan Sharpe, decisively.

The next instant came a light rap at the door.

"The room is thine own," said Mollie, in French. "Come in."

"Good-morning, ladies," Mr. Ingelow said, entering, handsome and radiant. "Miss Dane, I trust you feel refreshed after your journey?"

"And my long sleep? Yes, sir."

"And ready for breakfast?"

"Quite ready."

"That is well. for here it comes."

As he spoke, a colored personage in a white apron entered, staggering under the weight of a great tray.

"Breakfast for three," said Mr. Ingelow, whipping off the silver covers. "Set chairs, Sam. Now, then, ladies, I intended to breakfast down at the restaurant; but the temptation to take my matinal meal in such fair company was not to be resisted. I didn't try to resist it, and—here we are!"

Mollie sat beside him, too pretty to tell, and smiling like an angel. At seventeen one night is enough to make us as happy as a seraph. For golden-haired, blue-eyed Mollie earth held no greater happiness, just then, than to sit by Hugh Ingelow's side and bask in the light of his smile.

"Delightfully suggestive all this, eh?" said the artist, helping his fair neighbor bountifully.

And Mollie blushed "celestial, rosy red."

"What comes next?" she asked. "After breakfast—what then?"

"That is for Mistress Mollie to decide."

"I am not to go home until this evening?"

"Not if you wish to give unlucky Oleander his *coup de grâce*. Poor devil! I pity him, too. If you intend to make your *entrée* like the ghost of Banquo at the feast, you can't appear, of course, until evening."

"Must I stay here all day?"

"Will it be so very hard?" with an eloquent glance. "I shall be here."

"No, no!" Mollie said, hastily, blushing and laughing. "It would be light penance, in any case, to spend a day here, after a fortnight down yonder. What I mean is, I might improve the time by going to see Miriam."

"If you wait, Miriam may improve the time by coming to see you."

"No! What does she know about your studio?"

"Heaps!" said Mr. Ingelow, coolly. "It isn't the first time ladies have come to my studio."

"I know; but Miriam—"

"It isn't the first time for Miriam, either."

Mollie opened wide her eyes.

"I protest, Mr. Ingelow, I didn't know you were acquainted with her at all."

"Which proves you are not *au fait* of all my lady acquaintances. But, to solve the riddle, it was Miriam who first came here and put me on your track."

The blue eyes opened wider.

"You see," said Mr. Ingelow, with the air of one entering upon a story, "she knew about your appointment that night, and was at the place of rendezvous, all silent and unseen. She saw you go off in the carriage with that man, and took it into her head that something was wrong. She called at Mr. Walraven's that day, and found you were missing—no tale nor tidings to be had of you. Then, what does she do but come to me?"

Mr. Ingelow looked full at the young lady as he spoke, and once more Mollie was silly enough to blush.

"I really don't know how it was," pursued Mr. Ingelow, with provoking deliberation, "but Madame Miriam had taken it into her head that I was the man you had gone to meet. Extraordinary, wasn't it? She thought so, however, and was taken all aback to find me quietly painting here."

Mollie did not dare to look up. All her saucy *insouciance* was gone. Her face was burning. She felt as though it would be an infinite relief to sink through the floor. The floor not being practicable for the purpose, she stole a look at Mrs. Sharpe; but Mrs. Sharpe sat with the face of a wooden figure-head, intent on the business of eating and drinking.

"Miriam and I had a long and confidential talk," the young artist continued, "and came to the conclusion that Doctor Oleander was at the bottom of the matter, and that, wherever you were, you were an unwilling prisoner. Of

course, to a gentleman of my knight-errantry, that was sufficient to fire my blood. I put lance in rest, buckled on my armor, mounted my prancing charger, and set off to the ogre's castle to rescue the captive maiden! And for the rest, you know it. I came, I saw, I conquered—Doctor Oleander!"

"Which means," Mollie said, trying to laugh, "you imposed Mrs. Sharpe here upon Doctor Oleander as the nurse for his purpose, and fooled him to the top of his bent. Well, Mr. Ingelow, you have gone to a great deal of trouble on my account, and I am very much obliged to you."

"Is that all?"

"Is that not enough?"

"Hardly. I don't labor for such poor pay. As you say, I have gone to a great deal of trouble, and lost three nights' sleep running. I want something more than 'thank you' for all that."

Mollie tried to laugh—all in a flutter.

"Name your price, then, sir. Though it were half my kingdom, you shall be paid."

"And don't mind me, sir," suggested Mrs. Sharpe, demurely.

"Ah! but I do mind you," said Mr. Ingelow; "and besides, the time for payment has not yet come. Doctor Oleander's little bill must be settled first. What do you mean to do about it, Miss Dane?"

"Punish him to the utmost of my power."

"And that will be pretty severe punishment, if you appeal to the laws of our beloved country. Abductions, and forcible marriages, and illegal imprisonment don't go for nothing, I fancy. Only, unfortunately, the whole land will ring with your story, and your notoriety will be more extensive than gratifying."

Mollie made a gesture of horror.

"Oh, stop! Not that! I should die if it were known I was Guy Oleander's wife! I mean it, Hugh Ingelow. I should die of shame!"

She rose impetuously from the table and walked away to one of the windows.

"You don't know how I abhor that man—abhor, detest, hate, loathe him! There is no word in all the language strong enough to express my feeling for him. Think of it, Mr. Ingelow!"—she faced around, her eyes flashing fire—"think of tearing a bride from the very altar on her wedding-night, and compelling her to marry a man she abhorred! You, who

are a brave man and an honorable gentleman, tell me what language is strong enough for so dastardly a deed."

Hugh Ingelow left his seat and faced her, very pale. Mrs. Sharpe slipped out of the room.

"Do you regret your broken marriage with Sir Roger Trajenna, Mollie?"

"No—yes—no. I don't know—I don't think I do. It isn't that. I didn't care for Sir Roger. I was mean enough and shabby enough to consent to marry him for his wealth and title. But I was such a little fool! Sir Roger was a thousand times too good for me, and he and I are both well out of that matter. But that is no excuse for such a villainous deed."

"True. Nothing can excuse it. But you must be merciful. The man loved you passionately."

"Mr. Ingelow," opening her eyes wild and wide, "are you pleading Doctor Oleander's case?"

"No, Mollie—the case of the man who loved you so madly, so recklessly, that the thought of your being another's—another's whom you did not love—drove him to insanity, and to the commission of an insane deed."

"And that man was Doctor Oleander."

"It was not!"

"Mr. Ingelow!"

"No, Mollie; never Guy Oleander. He hadn't the pluck. He never cared for you enough."

"But he did it twice."

"Once only—this last time—stung, goaded into it by the lash of Mrs. Walraven's waspish tongue. But he is not the man who married you, whoever that man may be. At least," cooling down suddenly, as he saw the full blue eyes fixed upon him with piercing intentness, "I don't believe it."

"What do you believe, then, Mr. Ingelow?" Mollie said, slowly and suspiciously.

"That when you made Miriam the confidante of your story, on a certain night in your bedroom, Mrs. Carl Walraven overheard you."

"Impossible!"

"Perhaps so; but you'll find that's the way of it. She listened and heard, and patched it up with Mr. Rashleigh's dinner-table tale, and confabulated with her cousin, and put him up to this last dodge. She saw your advertisement in the paper, and understood it as well as you did, and Doctor Oleander was there in waiting. You committed one unaccountable blunder. You appointed ten for the nocturnal interview, and

were at the place of the tryst at half past nine. How do you explain that little circumstance?"

"It seems to me, Mr. Ingelow," said Mollie, "that you must be a sorcerer. How do you know all this?"

"Partly from Miriam, partly from my own inborn ingenuity, as a Yankee, in guessing. Please answer my question."

"I didn't know I was before time. It was later than half past nine by my watch when I quitted the house. I remember listening for the clocks to strike ten as I reached Fourteenth Street."

"You didn't hear them?"

"No."

"Of course not. Your watch was tampered with, and that confirms my suspicion of Mrs. Walraven. Believe me, Mollie, a trap was laid for you, and you were caught in it. You never met 'Black Mask' that night."

"If I thought so!" Mollie cried, clasping her hands.

"You will find it so," Hugh Ingelow said, very quietly. "Let that be Doctor Oleander's punishment. Make him confess his fraud—make him confess Mrs. Walraven aided and abetted him—to-night."

"How can I?"

"Simply enough. Accuse him and her before us all. There will be no one present you can not trust. Your guardian, Sir Roger, and myself know already. Sardonyx is Mr. Walraven's lawyer, and silence is a lawyer's forte."

"Well?" breathlessly.

"Accuse him—threaten him. Tell him you know his whole fraud from first to last. Accuse her! Tell him if he does not prove to your satisfaction he is the man who carried you off and married you, or if he refuses to own he is not the man, that he will go straight from the house to prison. He knows you can fulfill the threat. I think it will succeed."

"And if he confesses he is not the man who married me—if he acknowledges the fraud—what then?"

"Ah! what then? Doctor Oleander will not be your husband."

"And I will be as much in the dark as ever."

"A moment ago you were in despair because you thought he, of all men, was the man," said Hugh Ingelow. "It seems to me you are hard to satisfy."

"No," said Mollie; "if it be as you suspect, I shall be unspeakably thankful. No fate earth can have in store for me can be half so horrible as to know myself the wife of Guy Oleander."

"And if I thought you were his wife, Mollie, rest assured I should never have taken you from him," said Mr. Ingelow, decidedly. "You are no more Guy Oleander's wife than I am."

"Heaven be praised for that!" Mollie cried. "But then, I am entirely in the dark. Whose wife am I?"

Mr. Ingelow smiled.

"That question has an extraordinary sound. One doesn't hear it often in a life-time. If I were a sorcerer, as you accuse me of being, I might perhaps answer it. As it is, I leave it to your own woman's wit to discover."

"My woman's wit is completely at a loss," said Mollie, despairingly. "If ever I do find out, and I think it likely I shall, the divorce law will set me free. I must tell guardy all, and get him to help me."

"Is there no one you suspect?"

"Not one—now," Mollie replied, turning away from him.

How could Mollie Dane tell him she had ever suspected, ever hoped, it might be himself? It was evidently a matter of very little moment to him.

"And you can not forgive the love that resorts to such extreme measures, Mollie?" he asked, after a pause.

"No more than I can forgive Doctor Oleander for carrying me off and holding me captive in his dreary farm-house," answered Mollie, steadily. "No, Mr. Ingelow, I will never forgive the man who married me against my will."

"Not even if you cared a little for him, Mollie?"

He asked the question hesitatingly, as if he had something at stake in the answer. And Mollie's eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed angry red as she heard it.

"I care for no one in that way, Mr. Ingelow," she said, in a ringing voice. "You ought to know that. If I did, I should hate him for his dastardly deed."

Dead silence fell. Mollie stood looking down at the bustle of Broadway at one window, Mr. Ingelow at the other. He was pale—she flushed indignant red. She was grieved, and hurt, and cruelly mortified. She had found out how dearly she loved him, only to find out with it he was absolutely indifferent to her; he was ready to plead another man's cause, yield her up to her bolder lover.

She could have cried with disappointment and mortification, and crying was not at all in Mollie's line. Never until now had she given up the hope that he still loved her.

"It serves me right, I dare say," she thought, bitterly. "I have been a flirt and a trifler, and I refused him cruelly,

heartlessly, for that old man. Oh! if the past could be but undone, what a happy, happy creature I should be!"

The oppressive silence lasted until Mrs. Sharpe re-entered with some needle-work. Then Mr. Ingelow rose and looked at his watch.

"I believe I'll take a stroll down Broadway," he said, a little coldly. "Your friend Miriam will probably be here before I return. If not, there are books yonder with which to beguile the time."

Mollie bowed, proudly silent, and Mr. Ingelow left the room for his morning constitutional. Miss Dane walked over, took a book, opened it, and held it before her face a full hour without turning a leaf. The face it screened looked darkly bitter and overcast. She was free from prison, only to find herself in a worse captivity—fettered by a love that could meet with no return.

The bright morning wore on; noon came. Two o'clock brought dinner and Mr. Ingelow, breezy from his walk.

"What!" he exclaimed, looking round, "no Miriam?"

"No Miriam," said Mollie, laying down her book. "Mrs. Sharpe and I have been quite alone—she sewing, I reading."

Mrs. Sharpe smiled to herself. She had been watching the young lady, and surmised how much she had read.

"Why, that's odd, too," Mr. Ingelow said. "She promised to be here this morning, and Miriam keeps her promises, I think. However, the afternoon may bring her. And now for dinner, mesdames."

But the afternoon did not bring her. The hours wore on —Mr. Ingelow at his easel, Mollie with her book, Susan Sharpe with her needle, conversation desultory and lagging.

Since the morning a restraint had fallen between the knight-errant and the rescued lady—a restraint Mollie saw clearly enough, but could not properly understand.

Evening came. Twilight, hazy and blue, fell like a silvery veil over the city, and the street-lamps twinkled through it like stars.

Mr. Ingelow in an inner room had made his toilet, and stood before Mollie, hat in hand, ready to depart for the Walraven mansion.

"Remain here another half hour," he was saying; "then follow and strike the conspirators dumb. It will be better than a melodrama. I saw Oleander to-day, and I know information of your escape has not yet reached him. You had better enter the house by the most private entrance, so that,

all unknown, you can appear before us and scare us out of a year's growth."

"I know how to get in," said Mollie. "Trust me to play my part."

Mr. Ingelow departed, full of delightful anticipations of the fun to come. He found all the guests assembled before him. It was quite a select little family party, and Mr. Walraven and Sir Roger Trajenna were in a state of despondent gloom that had become chronic of late.

Mollie, the apple of their eye, their treasure, their darling, was not present, and the whole universe held nothing to compensate them for her loss.

Mrs. Walraven, superbly attired, and looking more like Queen Cleopatra than ever, with a circlet of red gold in her blue-black hair, and her polished shoulders and arms gleaming like ivory against bronze in her golden-brown silk, presided like an empress. She was quite radiant to-night, and so was Dr. Guy. All their plans had succeeded admirably. Mollie was absolutely in their power. This time to-morrow scores of broad sea miles would roll between her and New York.

The conversation turned upon her ere they had been a quarter of an hour at table. Mr. Walraven never could leave the subject uppermost in his thoughts for long.

"It is altogether extraordinary," Sir Roger Trajenna said, slowly. "The first absence was unaccountable enough, but this second is more unaccountable still. Some enemy is at the bottom."

"Surely Miss Dane could have no enemies," said Hugh Ingelow. "We all know how amiable and lovable she was."

"Lovable, certainly. We know that," remarked Sardonyx, with a grim smile.

"And I adhere to my former opinion," said Dr. Oleander, with consummate coolness—"that Miss Mollie is playing tricks on her friends, to try their affection. We know what a tricksy sprite she is. Believe me, both absences were practical jokes. She has disappeared of her own free will. It was very well in the Dark Ages—this abducting young ladies and carrying them off to castle-keeps—but it won't do in New York, in the present year of grace."

"My opinion precisely, Guy," chimed in his fair cousin. "Mollie likes to create sensations. Her first absence set the avenue on the *qui vive* and made her a heroine, so she is resolved to try it again. If people would be guided by me," glancing significantly at her husband, "they would cease to

worry themselves about her, and let her return at her own good pleasure, as she went."

"Yes, Mr. Walraven," said Dr. Oleander, flushed and triumphant, "Blanche is right. It is useless to trouble yourself so much about it. Of her own accord she will come back, and you may safely swear of her own accord she went."

"Guy Oleander, you lie!"

The voice rang silver-sweet, clear as a bugle-blast, through the room. All sprung to their feet.

"Ah-h-h-h-h!"

The wordless cry of affright came from Mrs. Carl Walraven. Dr. Oleander stood paralyzed, his eyes starting from their sockets, his face like the face of a dead man.

And there in the door-way, like a picture in a frame, like a Saxon pythoness, her golden hair falling theatrically loose, her arm upraised, her face pale, her eyes flashing, stood Mollie.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOLLIE'S TRIUMPH.

THE tableau was magnificent.

There was a dead pause of unutterable consternation. All stood rooted to the spot with staring eyes and open mouths. Before the first electric charge had subsided, Mollie Dane advanced and walked straight up to the confounded doctor, confronting him with eyes that literally blazed.

"Liar! traitor! coward! Whose turn is it now?"

Dr. Oleander fairly gasped for breath. The awful suddenness of the blow stunned him. He could not speak—he made the attempt, but his white lips failed him.

"Before all here," cried Mollie Dane, arm and hand still upraised with an action indescribably grand, "I accuse you, Guy Oleander, of high felony! I accuse you of forcibly tearing me from my home, of forcibly holding me a prisoner for nearly two weeks, and of intending to carry me off by force to-morrow to Cuba. And you, madame," turning suddenly as lightning strikes upon Mrs. Carl, "you, madame, I accuse as his aider and abettor."

There was another horrible pause. Even Hugh Ingelow thrilled through every vein.

Then Carl Walraven found voice:

"For God's sake, Mollie, what does this mean?"

Mollie turned to him and held out both hands.

"It means, guardy, that but for the direct interposition of

Providence you never would have seen your poor little Cricket again."

And at last Dr. Oleander found his voice.

"That infernal nurse!" he cried between his set teeth.

Mollie heard the hissing words and turned upon him like a pale little fury.

"Yes, Guy Oleander, the nurse played you false—fooled you to your face from the first. Came down from New York for no other purpose than to rescue me. And here I am, safe and sound, in spite of you; and the tables are turned, and you are in my power now. Out of this house you never stir except to go to prison."

"Mollie! Mollie! Mollie!" Mr. Carl Walraven cried in desperation, "for the Lord's sake, what do you mean? What has Doctor Oleander done?"

"Carried me off, I tell you—forcibly abducted me. Held me a prisoner for the last two weeks in a desolate old farmhouse over on Long Island. Look at him. Was ever guilt more plainly written on human face? Let him deny it if he can—or you, madame, his accomplice, either."

"I do deny it," Mme. Blanche exclaimed, boldly. "Mollie Dane, you are mad."

"You will find to your cost there is method in my madness, Mrs. Walraven. What say you, Doctor Oleander? Have you the hardihood to face me with a deliberate lie, too?"

Dr. Oleander was not deficient in a certain dog-like courage and daring. He saw his position in a moment—saw that denial would be utterly useless. His own mother would prove against him it if came to law.

There was but one avenue of escape for him—he saw it like a flash of light. Mollie would not dare publish this story of hers for her own sake, and neither would Carl Walraven for his wife's.

"He does not deny it!" cried Mollie. "He dare not. Look at his changing face. He carried me off and held me a prisoner in his mother's house, and gave out I was mad. And that is not the worst he has done. I might overlook that, now that I have safely escaped—"

Dr. Oleander suddenly interrupted her.

"That is the very worst—and you dare not publish it, even to punish me."

"What!" exclaimed the young lady, "do you deny your other tenfold greater crime—the compulsory marriage performed by the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh? Oh, if there

be law or justice in the whole country, you shall suffer for that!"

"I do deny it," said the doctor, boldly. "You are no wife of mine by compulsion or otherwise. That story was trumped up to deceive you the second time."

Mollie's heart gave one great throb, and then seemed to stand still.

Mrs. Walraven turned, ghastly with fear and rage, upon her cousin.

"Guy Oleander, are you mad? What are you saying?"

"The truth, Blanche. It is too late for any other alternative now. Don't fear—Mr. Walraven will hardly allow his ward to prosecute his wife."

"Traitor and coward!" Blanche Walraven cried in fierce scorn. "I wish my tongue had blistered with the words that urged you on."

"I wish it had," returned the doctor, coolly. "I wish, as I often have wished since, that I had never listened to your tempting. It was your fault, not mine, from first to last."

It was the old story of Adam and Eve over again: "The woman tempted me, and I did eat."

"'When rogues fall out, honest men get their own.' You mean to say, Doctor Oleander, that Mrs. Walraven instigated you on?"

"How else should I know?" answered the doctor. "She overheard you telling the woman Miriam, in your chamber, the whole story. She saw and understood your advertisement and its answer. She concocted the whole scheme, even to advancing the hands of your watch half an hour. If the law punishes me, Miss Dane, it must also punish your guardian's wife."

"Coward! coward!" Blanche furiously cried. "Oh, basest of the base! If I only had the power to strike you dead at my feet!"

The doctor bore the onslaught quietly enough.

"Heroics are all very well, Blanche," he said; "but self-preservation is the first law of nature. Confession is the only avenue of escape, and I have taken it. Besides, justice is justice. You deserve it. You goaded me on. It was your fault from beginning to end."

"And you own, then, you are not the man who carried me off before?" said Mollie. "You are not the man Mr. Rashleigh married?"

"I swear I'm not!" cried the doctor, with an earnestness there was no mistaking. "And I'm very thankful I'm not.

I wouldn't lead the life I've led for the past two weeks for all the women alive. I'm glad you're here, and that the whole thing is knocked in the head."

He spoke with the dogged recklessness of a man goaded to desperation. Mollie turned again to her guardian and laid her face on his shoulder.

"Send that man away, guardy. His presence in the room turns me sick to death."

"I am going, Miss Dane," said Dr. Oleander, turning moodily to the door, "and I shall not go to Cuba. I shall not quit New York. Let you or your guardian prosecute me if you dare!"

He stalked out with the last words. No one moved or spoke until the house-door banged after him.

Then Mme. Blanche, seeing all was lost, gave one horrible scream, clasped her hands over her head, and fell back in violent hysterics.

"Ring for her maid, guardy," said Mollie. "You had best take her up to her room. Sir Roger, Mr. Ingelow, please to remain. Mr. Sardonyx, excuse me, but you have heard all that it is necessary you should hear."

The lawyer became angry-red, but turned at once to go.

"I have no wish to pry into your very extraordinary secrets or escapades, Miss Dane," he said, haughtily. "Permit me to wish you good-evening."

Mr. Sardonyx departed. Mr. Walraven saw his wife safely conveyed to her room and left in charge of her maid, and then returned to the dining-room.

Mollie's first act was to hold out both hands, with infinite grace and courtesy, to Hugh Ingelow.

"Mr. Ingelow, words are poor and weak to tell you how I thank you. I have not deserved it from you. I can only ask you to try and forgive me."

The young artist lifted the fair little hands to his lips.

"I am repaid ten thousand-fold," he said, quietly. "I would give my life to serve you."

"In the name of Heaven, Mollie," cried the nearly frantic master of the house, "what does all this extraordinary mystery mean?"

"It means that a terrible crime has been committed, guardy," Mollie replied, gravely, "and that your wife and her cousin are among the chief conspirators. Sit down and I will tell you the whole story. Sir Roger Trajenna, likewise. I owe you both a full explanation. Mr. Ingelow knows already."

She sat down before them, and beginning at the beginning, told them the whole story—her forced and mysterious marriage and its very unpleasant sequel.

"That I ever escaped," she concluded, "I owe, under Providence, to Mr. Ingelow. Guardy, I would have spared you if I could; but, you see, it was impossible. Of course, we won't prosecute your wife or her cousin. I am almost satisfied, now that I know I am not Guy Oleander's wretched wife."

"But, heavens above, Mollie Dane!" cried the bewildered Mr. Walraven, "whose wife are you?"

"Ah, guardy, I would give a great deal to know that."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"I suspect no one now."

There was a shade of sadness in her tone, and her eyes wandered wistfully over to the young artist.

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Walraven. "I never heard or read of the like. It's perfectly astounding. Did you ever hear anything so extraordinary, Sir Roger?"

The baronet had been sitting like a man stunned by a blow. Now he turned his eyes from Mollie's for the first time, and tried to speak.

"I am utterly bewildered," he said. "The whole story sounds like an impossibility—incredible as a fairy tale."

"It is quite true, nevertheless," said Mollie.

"And you are a wedded wife?"

"I am."

"You're nothing of the sort!" burst out Carl Walraven. "You're free—free as air. It would be outrageous, it would be monstrous, to let such a marriage bind you. You are free to wed to-morrow if you choose; and let the villain come forward and dispute the marriage if he dare!"

"He speaks the truth," said Sir Roger, eagerly. "Such a marriage is no marriage. You are as free as you were before, Mollie."

"Perhaps so," said Mollie, calmly. "Nevertheless, I shall never marry."

"Never?"

It was Sir Roger's despairing voice.

"Never, Sir Roger. I never was worthy of you. I would be the basest of the base to marry you now. No; what I am to-night I will go to my grave."

She stole a glance at Hugh Ingelow, but the sphinx was never more unreadable than he. He caught her glance, however, and calmly spoke:

"And now, as Miss Mollie has had a fatiguing journey lately, and as she needs rest, we had better allow her to retire. Good-night."

He had bowed and reached the door ere the voice of Carl Walraven arrested him.

"This very unpleasant business, Mr. Ingelow—Sir Roger," he said, with evident embarrassment, "in which Mrs. Walraven is concerned—"

"Will be as though it had never been, Mr. Walraven," Hugh Ingelow said, gravely. "Once more—good-night."

He quitted the room.

Sir Roger Trajenna turned to follow, a sad, crushed old man.

Mollie shyly and wistfully held out her hand.

"Try and forget me, Sir Roger—try and forgive me. I have been a foolish, flighty girl; I am sorry for it. I can say no more."

"No more!" Sir Roger said, with emotion, kissing the little hand. "God bless you!"

He, too, was gone.

Then Mollie turned and put her arms round her guardian's neck.

"Dear old guardy, I am sorry for you. Oh, I wish you had never married that hateful Blanche Oleander, but lived free and happy with your mother and your Mollie. But it's too late now; you must forgive her, I suppose. I detest her like the mischief; but we must all keep the peace."

"I suppose so, Mollie," with a dreary sigh. "You can't wish I had never married more than I do. It's a righteous punishment upon me, I suppose. I've been the greatest villain unhung to the only woman who ever did love me, and now this is retribution."

He groaned dismally as he rose and kissed Mollie good-night.

"Go to your room, Mollie, and let us forget, if we can."

"Ah!" said Mollie, "if we can. Guardy, good-night."

CHAPTER XXV.

MIRIAM'S MESSAGE.

NEXT morning, at breakfast, Mrs. Walraven did not appear. She was very ill and feverish, her maid reported, and quite unable to leave her bed.

Mr. Carl Walraven heard this sad account of his wife's health with a grimly fixed countenance. He looked as though

he had passed a restless night himself, and looked worn and haggard and hollow-eyed in the bright morning sunshine.

Mollie, on the other hand, was blooming and brilliant as the goddess Hebe. Past troubles sat lightly on buoyant Mollie as dew-drops on a rose. She looked rather anxiously at her guardian as the girl quitted the breakfast-room.

"You didn't mention Blanche's illness, guardy. Tea or chocolate this morning?"

"A cup of tea. I didn't mention her illness because I wasn't aware of it. I haven't had the pleasure of seeing Madame Blanche since we parted in the dining-room last night."

"Indeed!" said Mollie, stirring her chocolate slowly.

"And what's more," pursued the master of the house, "I don't care if I never see her again."

"Dear me, guardy! Strong language, isn't it?"

"It is truthful language, Mollie. Sleeping on a thing sometimes alters its complexion materially. Last evening I concluded to let things blow over and keep up appearances before the world. This morning I am resolved to let the world go hang, and teach one of the conspirators a lesson she won't forget in a hurry."

Mollie looked alarmed.

"Not a divorce, guardy? Surely not the public scandal of a divorce? All must come out then."

"Not quite a divorce," Mr. Walraven said, coolly; "its next-door neighbor. A quiet, gentlemanly, and lady-like separation."

"Guardy Walraven," said Miss Dane, solemnly, "don't do anything rash."

"I don't intend to. I've thought the matter well over. Didn't get a wink of sleep last night for it. We won't break our hearts"—with a cynical sneer—"myself nor my gentle Blanche. I don't know why we married, exactly. Certainly not for love, and we will part without a pang."

"Speak for yourself, guardy. I dare say Blanche will be frantic."

"Frantic at leaving a house on Fifth Avenue—frantic at leaving you mistress in her place—frantic that she can't be my blooming young widow—frantic at all that, I grant you."

"Guardy, don't be dreadful," adjured Mollie, pathetically. "If I can forgive Blanche, I'm sure you may."

"No, Mollie, I can not. She has deceived me basely, wickedly. More—I dare not."

"Dare not. Now, Mr. Walraven—"

"Hear me out, Mollie. A woman who would concoct such

a villainous plot would stop at nothing. Abduction would be followed by murder. I would not trust her from henceforth on her Bible oath. My life is not safe while she remains in this house."

"Guardy! guardy! how can you say such horrible things? Commit murder? You know very well she would not dare."

"Wives dare it every week if the public journals speak the truth. I tell you I would not trust her. There is Guy Oleander, a toxicologist by profession—what more easy than for him to supply her with some subtle drug, and call it catalepsy, a congestion, a disease of the heart? I tell you, Mollie, after finding them out, my life would not be worth a fillip in their hands. I could as easily live with a female gorilla as with Blanche Oleander."

"Well," said Mollie, looking a little startled, "if you feel like that, of course— When do you propose—"

She paused.

"I shall lose no time. I shall see Mrs. Walraven immediately after breakfast."

"But she is ill."

"Bosh! She's shamming. She's afraid to show her wicked, plotting face. She's lying there to concoct some new villainy. I won't spare her—she didn't spare you. I'll send her packing, bag and baggage, before the week's out."

"And if she refuses to go, guardy?"

"Then," cried Mr. Walraven, with flashing eyes, "I'll make her go. I'll have a divorce, by Heaven! She'll find she can't commit high felonies in this enlightened age and go unpunished. I'd see her boiled alive before I'd ever live with her again."

With which spirited declaration Mr. Walraven finished his breakfast and arose. His first proceeding was to ring the bell violently. One of the kitchen damsels answered.

"Go to Mrs. Walraven's room and tell her Mr. Walraven is coming to see her."

The girl, looking rather surprised, hastened to obey.

Mr. Walraven took a turn or two up and down the room, "nursing his wrath to keep it warm."

"The more I think of this infernal business, Mollie," he burst out, "the more enraged I get. If Doctor Oleander was so madly in love with you that he carried you off to prevent your marrying any one else, one might find some excuse for him. Love, we all know, is a 'short-lived madness.' But for her, a woman, to invent that diabolical scheme in cold

blood, simply because she hated you! Oh, it was the work of an accursed harridan, and never to be forgiven!"

He strode from the room as he spoke, his face and eyes aflame, and stalked straight to the sleeping-room of Mme. Blanche. One loud rap; then, before the attendant could open, it he had flung it wide, and he was standing, stern as Rhadamanthus, above the cowering woman in the bed.

"Do you leave the room!" he exclaimed, turning savagely upon the girl; "and mind, no eavesdropping, if you have any regard for whole bones. Be off!"

The frightened girl scampered at once. Mr. Walraven closed the door, locked it, strode back, and stood glaring down upon his wife with folded arms and fiercely shining eyes.

"Well, madame?"

"Spare me, Carl." She held up her arms in dire affright. "Forgive me, my husband."

"Never!" thundered Carl Walraven—"never! you base, plotting Jezebel! The fate you allotted to Mollie Dane shall fall upon yourself. You shall quit this house before the week ends, never to return to it more."

"Carl! Husband—"

"Silence, madame! No husband of yours, either now or at any future time! This shall be our last interview. We part to-day to meet no more."

"Carl! Carl! for pity's sake, hear me."

"Not a word, not a syllable. All the excuses in the world would not excuse you. I never loved you—now I hate you. After this hour I never want to look upon your wicked white face again."

Blanche Walraven's spirit rose with the insult. She flung down the clothes and sat erect in bed, her black eyes flashing.

"Be it so! You never loved me less than I did you! You can not hate me more than I hate you! But, for all that, I won't go!"

"You shall go—and that within this week!"

"I tell you I won't! I dare you! Do your worst!"

"Do you, madame? Then, by Heaven, I accept your challenge! The law of divorce shall set me free from the vilest wife man ever was cursed with!"

She gave a gasping cry, her face ghastly white.

"Carl Walraven, you would not dare!"

"Would I not?" with a harsh laugh. "We shall see. You don't know what Carl Walraven is capable of yet, I see."

"Wait! wait! wait!" Blanche screamed after him, in mortal terror. "Tell me what you came here to propose."

"A separation, madame—quietly, without *éclat* or public scandal. Accept or refuse, as you please."

"What are your terms?" sullenly.

"More liberal than you deserve. An annuity larger than anything you ever had before you married me, a house up the Hudson, and your promise never to return to New York. With my death, the annuity will cease, and you will be penniless. I don't choose to be put out of the way by you or your poisoning cousin."

Blanche Walraven's eyes flashed fury.

"You are a merciless, iron-hearted man, Carl Walraven, and I hate you! I close with your terms, because I can not help myself; but I'll have revenge yet!"

"And the very first attempt you make," said Mr. Walraven, coolly, "I'll hand you over to the law as I would the commonest vagrant that prowls the streets. Don't think to intimidate me, my lady, with your tragedy airs and fiery glances. Mr. Sardonyx will wait upon you this afternoon. If you can make it convenient to leave to-morrow, you will very much oblige me."

His last words were almost lost. Mrs. Walraven, with a hysterical scream, had fallen back among the pillows in strong convulsions. He just stopped to give one backward glance of pitiless loathing, then rang for her maid and left the room.

And so parted the ill-assorted husband and wife to meet no more. So ended one mercenary marriage.

Carl Walraven went down-stairs, and found Mollie uneasily awaiting him.

"It's all settled, Mollie," he said. "You are the little mistress of the house from this day forward, until"—looking at her earnestly—"you get married."

Mollie reddened and shook her head.

"I shall never get married, guardy."

"No? Not even to Hugh Ingelow?"

"Least of all to Hugh Ingelow. Don't let us talk about it, guardy. What did Mrs. Walraven say?"

"More than I care to repeat, Cricket. We won't talk about Mrs. Walraven, either."

"But, guardy, are you really going to send her away?"

"I really and truly am. She goes to-morrow. Now, Mollie Dane, there's no need for you to wear that pleading face. She goes—that's flat! I wouldn't live in the same house with her now for a kingdom. If you say another word about it we'll quarrel."

He strode off like a sulky lion, and Mollie, feeling as though

it were all her fault, was left disconsolate and uncomfortable enough.

"I had rather they had made it up," she thought. "I don't want to be the cause of parting man and wife. She behaved atrociously, no doubt, and deserves punishment; but I wish the punishment had fallen on the man, not the woman. It's a shame to make her suffer and let that horrible doctor off scot-free."

Mr. Walraven, in his study, meantime, had written a letter to Lawyer Sardonyx, detailing in brief his wishes, and requesting him to call upon Mrs. Walraven in the course of the day. That done, he quitted the house, determined to return no more until she had left.

The afternoon brought Hugh Ingelow. Mollie was alone in her room, having a very anxious time; but when his name was announced, she dropped the book she was trying to read and made a headlong rush down-stairs. If Hugh Ingelow had seen the rosy light that leaped into her cheeks, the glad sparkle that kindled in her eyes at the sound of his name, he could hardly have been insensible to their flattering import.

Mr. Ingelow congratulated her on her bright looks as he shook hands.

"I never saw you looking better," he said, with earnest admiration.

"Looks are deceitful, then," said Mollie, shaking her curly head dolefully. "I don't think I ever felt worse, even when cooped up in Doctor Oleander's prison."

"Really! What has gone wrong now?" the artist inquired.

"Everything dreadful! The most shocking tempests in tea-pots. Guardy is going to separate from his wife!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Ingelow, coolly. "The very best thing he could do."

"Oh, Mr. Ingelow!"

"Quite true, Mollie. She's a Tartar, if ever there was a Tartar. He committed a terrible act of folly when he married her; let him show his return to wisdom by sending her adrift. I don't pity her in the least. If he forgave her this time, she would simply despise him, and begin her machinations all over again."

"No! Do you think so? Then I'm not to blame?"

"You!" Mr. Ingelow laughed. "I should think not, indeed! Set that tender little heart of yours at rest, Mollie. Blanche Walraven is big and fierce, and able to take care of herself. Let us get rid of her quietly, if we can, and be thankful."

"Mr. Sardonyx is with her now," said Mollie, "arranging matters. Oh, dear! I can't help feeling nervous and troubled about it. It's not fair to punish her and let Doctor Oleander go off scot-free."

"His punishment is his detection and your loss, Mollie. I can think of no heavier punishment than that. I met him, by the bye, in Broadway, as large as life, and as impudent as the gentleman with the cloven foot. He bowed, and I stared, and cut him dead, of course."

Before Mollie could speak, the door-bell rang. A moment later and there was the sound of an altercation in the hall.

"You can't see Miss Dane, you ragamuffin!" exclaimed the mellifluous tones of footman Wilson. "You hadn't oughter ring the door-bell! The airy's for such as you!"

"It is Miriam!" cried Mollie, running to the door. "It is surely Miriam at last!"

But it was not Miriam. It was a dirty-faced boy—a tatterdemalion of fourteen years—with sharp, knowing black eyes. Those intelligent orbs fixed on the young lady at once.

"Be you Miss Dane—Miss Mollie Dane—miss?"

"Yes," said Mollie. "Who are you?"

"Sammy Slimmens, miss. Miss Miriam sent me, miss—she did."

"Miriam? Are you sure? Why didn't she come herself?"

"Couldn't, miss," nodding sagaciously. "She's very bad, she is. Got runned over, miss."

"Run over!" Mollie cried, in horror.

"Corner Fulton Street, miss, and Broadway. Yesterday morning 'twas. I told the policeman where she lived, and he fotched her home. Won't live, they say, and she's sent for you. Got something very 'ticular to tell you, miss."

"I will go at once," Mollie said, unutterably distressed. "My poor Miriam! I might have known something had happened, or she would have been here before this."

She flew upstairs and was back again, dressed for the street, in ten minutes.

"Permit me to accompany you, Miss Dane," said Hugh Ingelow, stepping forward. "You have been entrapped before. We will be on our guard this time. Now, my man," to the hero of the rags and tatters, "lead on; we follow."

The boy darted away, and Mr. Ingelow, with Mollie's hand drawn through his arm, set off after him at a rapid rate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MIRIAM'S STORY.

A MISERABLE attic chamber, dimly lighted by one dirty sky-light, a miserable bed in one corner, a broken chair, an old wooden chest, a rickety table, a few articles of delf, a tumble-down little cook-stove.

That was the picture Mollie Dane saw, standing on the threshold of Miriam's room.

There was no deception this time. On that wretched bed lay the broken and bruised figure of the woman Miriam, dying.

Her deep, labored breathing was painfully audible, even outside the room; her strong chest rose and fell—every breath torture.

By her side sat the mother of the ragged boy, holding a drink to her lips, and coaxing her to open her mouth and try to swallow.

In vivid contrast to all this poverty and abject wretchedness, the young girl in the door-way stood, with her fair, blooming face, her fluttering golden ringlets, her rich silken garments, and elegant air.

The woman by the bed turned round and stared for a moment; then—

"Be you the young lady as Mrs. Miriam sent my Sammy for?" she asked.

"Yes," said Mollie, coming forward. "How is she?"

"Bad as bad can be, miss. Won't never see another day, the doctor says."

"My poor Miriam—my poor Miriam!"

The slow tears gathered in her eyes as she bent above her and saw the pinched, sharpened face, with the blue tinge of coming death already dawning there.

"Be you a relation?" the woman asked, curiously. But Mollie did not answer—she was stooping over the sick woman, absorbed.

"Miriam!" she said, softly, taking the skinny hand in both her own—"Miriam, look up! Speak to me. It is I—your own Mollie."

The sound of that beloved voice penetrated the death fog already blurring every faculty. The dulled eyes opened with a sudden, joyful light of recognition.

"Mollie," she said, "my dear little Mollie. I knew you would come."

"I am very, very sorry to see you like this, Miriam. Do you suffer much pain?"

"Not now—only a dull aching from head to foot. But even that will soon be over. I am glad. My life has been nothing for the past sixteen years but one long torment. I am glad it is so nearly done. Mollie," fixing her haggard eyes solemnly on her face, "you know I will never see another sunrise."

"My poor, poor Miriam!"

"Are you sorry for poor Miriam, Mollie?"

"Sorrier than sorry! What other relative have I in the wide world but you?"

"Not one, Mollie. But I am a relative you need hardly grieve for. I have been a bad, cruel woman—the worst woman that ever lived to you, my poor little girl!"

"Miriam!"

"Ah! don't look at me with those innocent, wondering blue eyes! You shall know all. I can't die with my story untold, my secret unrevealed. Mrs. Slimmens, I have something very particular to say to this young lady. Please to leave us alone."

The woman, with a disappointed look, rose up and quitted the room.

Mollie drew up the only chair and seated herself by the bedside.

"Did you come here alone?" was Miriam's first question, when they were together.

"No," said Mollie, coloring slightly. "Mr. Ingelow came with me. He is waiting below."

"That is well. It is growing late, and the neighborhood is not a good one. He saved you, did he not?"

"He did. I owe him my life—my liberty."

"I knew he would—I knew he would! I trusted him from the first. Mollie, do you know why I sent for you in my dying hour?"

"To tell me who I am."

"Yes—you would like to know?"

"More than anything else in the wide world."

"And have you no idea—no suspicion?"

Mollie hesitated.

"I have sometimes thought," reddening painfully, "that I might be Mr. Walraven's daughter."

"Ah!" said Miriam, her eyes lighting; "and he thinks so, too!"

"Miriam!"

"Yes," said Miriam, exultingly, "he thinks so—he believes so, and so does his wife. But for all that, not one drop of his blood flows in your veins!"

"Miriam!"

"Not one drop! If there did, you should not now be standing by my death bed. I would expire unrepenting and unconfessed. Mollie, you are mine—my very own—my daughter!"

She raised herself on her elbow and caught Mollie in her arms with a sudden, fierce strength. The girl stood perfectly speechless with the shock.

"My child—my child—my child! For years I have hungered and thirsted for this hour. I have desired it as the blind desire sight. My child—my child! have you no word for your dying mother?"

"Mother!"

The word broke from Mollie's white lips like a sobbing sigh. The intense surprise of the unexpected revelation stunned her.

"You believe me, then—you do believe me!" Miriam cried, holding her fast.

"You are dying," was Mollie's solemn answer. "Oh, my mother! why did you not tell me this before?"

"Because I would not disgrace you and drag you down. I loved you far too well for that. I could have done nothing for you but bespatter you with the mire in which I wallowed, and I wanted you, my beautiful one—my pearl, my lily—to be spotless as mountain snow. It can do you no harm to know when I am dead."

"And Carl Walraven is nothing to me?"

"Nothing, Mollie—less than nothing. Not one drop of his black blood flows in your veins. Are you sorry, Mollie?"

"No," said Mollie, drawing a long breath. "No!" she repeated, more decidedly. "I am glad, Miriam—mother."

"You can call me mother, then, despite all?"

"Surely," Mollie said, gravely; "and now tell me all."

"Ah, it is a long, sad story—a wicked and miserable story of shame, and sin, and suffering! It is a cruel thing to blight your young life with the record of such horrible things."

"I may surely bear what others have to endure. But, Miriam, before you begin, do you really mean to tell me Mr. Walraven thinks me his daughter?"

"He believes it as surely as he believes in Heaven. He thinks you are his child—Mary Dane's daughter."

"Who was Mary Dane?"

"Your father's sister by marriage—done to death by Carl Walraven."

Mollie turned very pale.

"Tell me all," she said. "Begin at the beginning. Here, drink this—it is wine."

She had brought a pocket-flask with her. She filled a broken tea-cup and held it to the dry, parched lips.

Miriam drained it eagerly.

"Ah!" she said, "that is new life! Sit down here by me, Mollie, where I can see you; give me your hands. Now listen:

"Mollie, you are eighteen years old, though neither you nor Carl Walraven thinks so. You are eighteen this very month. His child, whom he thinks you are, would be almost seventeen, if alive. She died when a babe of two years old.

"Eighteen years ago, Mollie, I was a happy wife and mother. Down in Devonshire, in the little village of Steeple Hill, my husband and I lived, where we had both been born, where we had courted and married, where we hoped to lay our bones at last. Alas and alas! he fills a bloody grave in the land of strangers, and I am drawing my last breath in far America. And all, Mollie—all owing to Carl Walraven."

She paused a moment. The girl held the cup of wine to her lips. A few swallows revived her, and enabled her to go on.

"There were two brothers, James and Stephen Dane. James, the elder by six years, was my husband and your father. We lived in the old Dane homestead—we three—a happy and prosperous household. We needed but your coming, my daughter, to fill our cup of joy to the very brim. No woman in all broad England was a happier wife and mother than Miriam Dane when you were laid upon my breast.

"We named our baby-girl Miriam—your father would have it so—and you grew healthful and beautiful, fair and blue-eyed, as it is in the nature of the Danes to be. I was glad you had not my black eyes and gypsy skin. I think I loved you all the more because you were your father's image.

"Ah, Mollie, I never can tell you what a blessed, peaceful household we were until you were three months old! Then the first change took place—Stephen Dane got married.

"At Wortley Manor, just without the confines of Steeple Hill, lived Sir John Wortley and his lady. They had come to spend the hot months down in the country, and my lady

had brought with her a London lady's-maid, full of London airs and graces, styles and fashions. She was a pretty girl, this buxom Mary Linton, with flaxen curls, and light blue eyes, and a skin white as milk and soft as satin. She could sing like an angel, and dance like a fairy, and dress and talk like my lady herself.

"Of course, before she had been a month in the place, she had turned the heads of all the young fellows in the village, Stephen Dane's among the rest. But while she coquetted with all, she smiled most sweetly on Stephen, with his three hundred pounds laid by in bank, his broad shoulders, his lofty stature and his hearty looks. Three months after she came to Wortley Manor, she was Stephen Dane's wife.

"That marriage was the beginning of all the trouble, Mollie. They left the farm, this young pair, and set up a public-house. A public suited Mary Dane to the life. She flaunted in gay dresses and bright ribbons, and gossiped over the bar with the customers, and had all the news of the place pat at her tongue's end. And Stephen, he took to drink—a little, at first, to be jovial with the customers; more and more gradually, until, at the end of the honey-moon, he was half his time on the fuddle. And Mary Dane didn't care. She laughed in her pretty way when people talked.

"'Let him take his glass, Miriam,' says she to me. 'He's fonder of me in his cups, and better-natured every way, than when he's sober. As long as my man doesn't beat me and pull the house about our heads, I'll never say him nay.'

"It was near the end of the second month that a sick traveler stopped at the Wortley Arms—so they called the inn—and lay very ill there for weeks and weeks. He had taken cold and got a fever, and he was very poorly and like to die. Mary Dane, with all her airy ways, had a tender heart and a soft head, and she turned to and nursed the sick man like a sister. They took such care of him at the Wortley Arms that he got well, and in three weeks was able to be up and about.

"This strange gentleman gave the name of Mr. Walls; and he was young and handsome, and very rich. He spent money like water; he paid the doctor and the landlord and the nurses as if he had been a prince. He had a pleasant word and jest for every one. He was hand and glove with Stephen Dane, and heaped presents on presents on his wife. He gave her silk dresses and gold rings and costly shawls and gay bonnets until people began to talk. What did he care for their talk? what did Mary Dane, either? He lingered and lingered. The talking grew louder, until, at last, it reached the ears of

Stephen Dane. He took it quietly. 'It's mighty dull for the likes of you here, Mr. Walls,' he says to the gentleman, looking him full in the eye. 'It's no place for a young gentleman, in my notion. I think you had better be going.'

"'Do you?' says Mr. Walls, back again, as cool as himself. 'You are right, I dare say. I'll settle my bill to-night and be off to-morrow.'

"He did settle his bill at the bar before they parted, took a last glass with Stephen Dane, and walked up to his room, whistling. Steeple Hill never saw him more. When morning came he was far away, and Mary Dane with him."

Again Miriam paused; again Mollie held the wine-cup to her lips; again she drank and went on:

"I couldn't tell you, Mollie, if I would, the shock and the scandal that ran through Steeple Hill, and I wouldn't if I could. If it were in my power, such horrors would never reach your innocent ears. But they were gone, and Stephen Dane was like a man mad. He drank, and drank, and drank until he was blind drunk, and then, in spite of everybody, set off to go after them. Before he had got ten yards from his own doorstep he fell down in a fit, blood pouring from his mouth and nostrils. That night he died.

"The hour of his death, when he knew he had but a few moments to live, he turned every soul out of the room, and made his brother kneel down and take a solemn oath of vengeance.

"'I'll never rest easy in my grave, James,' said the dying man, 'and I'll never let you rest easy in your life, until you have avenged me on my wronger.'

"Your father knelt down and swore. It was a bad, bad death-bed, and a bad, bad oath. But he took it; and Stephen Dane died, with his brother's hand clasped in his, and his dying eyes fixed on his brother's face.

"They buried the dead man; and when the sods were piled above him, your father told me of the vow he had made—the vow he meant to keep. What could I say? what could I do? I wept woman's tears, I said woman's words. I pleaded, I reasoned, I entreated—all in vain. He would go, and he went.

"He followed the guilty pair, like a blood-hound, for weary months and months. For a long time it seemed as though he must give up the search as fruitless; but at last, in the open street of a French city, he met the man Walls face to face. He flew at him like a madman, grasped his throat, and held him until the man turned black in the face. But he was

lithe, and young, and powerful, and he shook him off at last. Then commenced a struggle for life or death. The street was a lonely one; the time past midnight. No one was abroad; not a creature was to be seen. Walls pulled out a pistol and shot James Dane through the head. With a cry of agony, the murdered man fell forward on his face. Another instant, and Walls had fled. The dead man was alone in the deserted street.

"Next day the papers were full of the mysterious murder, but before next day Walls and Mary Dane were far away. Rewards were offered by the government, the police were set on the track, but all in vain—the murderer was not to be found.

"But there was one who knew it, and to whom the knowledge was a death-blow—guilty Mary Dane. At all times she had been more weak than wicked, and when Walls had fled home, blood-stained and ghastly, and in his first frenzy had told her all, she dropped down at his feet like a dead woman.

"Mary Dane fled with him from the scene of his crime, because his baby daughter lay on her arm, and she would not see its guilty father die a felon's death; but her heart was torn with remorse from that hour. She never held up her head again. Her wicked love turned to hatred and loathing; the very first opportunity she left him, and, like a distracted creature, made her way home.

"Walls made no effort to follow her—he thought she had gone off in a fit of remorse and misery and drowned herself. He was glad to be rid of her, and he left France at once, and wandered away over the world.

"Mary Dane came home with her child—home to die. On her death-bed she told me the story of my husband's death, and from the hour I heard it, Reason tottered on her throne. I have never been sane since my misery drove me mad.

"Mary Dane died, and I buried her. The child went to the work-house—I would not have touched it with a pair of tongs—and there it, too, died of lack and care. And so the miserable story of sin and shame ended, as all such stories must end.

"But the misery did not end here. You were left me, but I seemed to care for you no longer. I sat down, a stunned and senseless thing, and let all belonging to me go to rack and ruin. The farm went, the furniture went, the homestead went—I was left a widowed, penniless, half-crazed wretch. Thus all was gone but the clothes upon our backs—you went, too. We were starving, but for the pitying charity of others.

As you sat singing by the road-side, the manager of a strolling band of players overheard you, took a fancy to your pretty looks, and ways, and voice, and made me an offer for you. I don't think I knew what I was doing half the time—I didn't then—I let you go.

"When you were gone I broke down altogether, and the authorities of the village took and shut me up in a lunatic asylum. The years I spent there—and I spent six long years—are but a dull, dead blank. My life began again when they sent me forth, as they said—cured.

"I left Steeple Hill and began my life as a tramp. I joined a band of gypsies, and took to their ways—fortune-telling, rush-weaving—anything that came up; and I was black enough and weather-beaten enough to pass for one of them. I had but one desire left in life—to hunt up the manager of the little theater, and see my daughter again. I didn't want you back. What could I, a miserable tramp, homeless, houseless, do with a young girl?—but I hungered and thirsted for the sound of your voice, for the sight of your face. I would know you anywhere—you were of the kind that do not change much. I knew I would recognize you as soon as I saw you.

"For two years I strolled about with the gypsy gang, searching in vain. Then my time came, and I saw you. It was at Liverpool, embarking on board a vessel for America. I had money—made in those two years' wandering—hidden in my breast, more than enough for my passage. I crossed the Atlantic in the same vessel with you, and never lost sight of you since.

"But a great, a mighty shock was waiting for me this side the ocean. On the pier, as we landed, Mollie, the first person my eyes rested on was the man Walls—older, darker, sterner than when I saw him before, but my arch-enemy—the murderer Walls.

"Mollie, I let you go and I followed that man home. I followed him to a mansion that was like a palace, and I heard his name—his real name. Mollie, Mollie, do you need to be told what that name is?"

"No," said Mollie, in a horror-struck voice; "*it is* Carl Walraven!"

"It is. Now do you know why I hate him—why I would die the death of a dog by the way-side before I would take a crust from him?"

"And yet," Mollie cried in a voice of bitter anguish, "you

have let me, James Dane's child, eat of his bread, drink of his cup, dwell under his roof! Oh, my mother!"

At that piercing cry of unutterable reproach, the dying woman held up her supplicating hands.

"It was because I loved you a thousand times better than myself—better than my revenge. Forgive me, Mollie—forgive me!"

"You are my mother, and you are dying," Mollie said, solemnly, bending down and kissing her. "I forgive you everything. But I will never set foot under Carl Walraven's roof again."

CHAPTER XXVII.

DEAD AND BURIED.

THE twilight was falling without—the last silvery radiance of the dying day streamed through the dirty, broken attic window, and lighted, as with a pale glory, Mollie's drooping head and earnest, saddened face.

Miriam had fallen back upon the pillow, exhausted, panting, laboring for breath.

There was a long pause; then Mollie lifted her bowed head and drew closer to the dying woman.

"Finish your story," she said, softly, sadly.

"It is finished," Miriam answered, in a voice, scarcely above a whisper. "You know the rest. I went to you, as you remember, the day after you landed, and proved to you that I was your aunt—a falsehood, Mollie, which my love and my pride begot.

"Some dim recollection of me and your childhood's days yet lingered in your breast—you believed me. You told me you were going to K——. You gave me money, and promised to write to me. You were so sweet, so gentle, so pitying, so beautiful, that I loved you tenfold more than ever. Your life was one of labor, and drudgery, and danger. If I could only make you a lady, I thought! My half-crazed brain caught at the idea, and held it fast—if I could only make you a lady!

"Like lightning there dawned upon me a plan. The man who had wronged us all so unutterably was rich and powerful—why should I not use him? Surely, it could not be wrong—it would be a just and righteous reparation. He need not know you were my child—with that knowledge I would far sooner have seen you dead than dependent upon him—but let him think you were his very own (Mary Dane's) dead child, and where would be the obligation?

"I could neither sleep nor eat for thinking of this plot of mine. Your image, bright and beautiful in silken robes and sparkling jewels, waited upon by obedient servants, a life of ease and luxury for my darling whom I had deserted—a lady among the ladies of the land—haunted me by night and by day.

"I yielded at last. I went to Carl Walraven, and stood boldly up before him, and faced him until he quailed. Conscience makes cowards of the bravest, they say, and I suppose it was more his guilty conscience than fear of me; but the fear was there. I threatened him with exposure—I threatened to let the world know his black crimes, until he turned white as the dead before me.

"He knew and I knew, in our heart of hearts, that I could do nothing. How could I substantiate a charge of murder done years ago in France?—how prove it? How bring it home to him? My words would be treated as the ravings of a mad-woman, and I would be locked up in a mad-house for my pains.

"But knowing all this, and knowing I knew it, he nevertheless feared me, and promised to do all I wished. He kept his word, as you know. He went to K——, and, seeing you, became as desirous of you as I would have had him. Your bright, girlish beauty, the thought that you were his daughter, did the rest. He brought you home with him, and grew to love you dearly."

"Yes," Mollie said, very sadly, "he loves me dearly. I should abhor and hate the murderer of my father, I suppose, but somehow I can not. Mr. Walraven has been very good to me. And now, mother, tell me why you came on the day of his marriage, and strove to prevent it? You did not really think he was going to marry me?"

"I never thought so," said Miriam. "It was one of my mad freaks—an evil wish to torment him. I have been a nightmare to him ever since my first appearance. I hardly know whether he hates or fears me most. But that is all past and gone. I will never torment him again in this world. Give me more wine, Mollie—my lips are parched."

Miriam moistened her dry mouth and fell back, ghastly and breathing hard. Mollie rose from the bedside with a heavy sigh.

"You will not leave me?" the dying woman whispered, in alarm, opening her glassy eyes.

"Only for a moment, mother. Mr. Ingelow is below. I must speak with him."

She glided from the room and went down-stairs.

Hugh Ingelow, leaning against the door-post, smoking a solacing cigar, and watching the new moon rise, started as she appeared. She looked so unlike herself, so like a spirit, that he dropped his cigar and stared aghast.

"Is she dead?" he asked.

"She is dying," Mollie answered. "I came to tell you I will stay to the last—I will not leave her again. You can not, need not wait longer here, Mr. Ingelow."

"I will not leave you," Mr. Ingelow said, resolutely, "if I have to stay a week. Good heavens, Mollie! what do you think I am, to leave you alone and unprotected in this beastly place?"

"I will be safe enough," Mollie said with a wan smile at his vehemence. "I dare say the worst crime these poor people are guilty of is poverty."

"I will not leave you," Hugh Ingelow reiterated. "I will go upstairs and stay in the passage all night if you will find me a chair. I may be needed."

"You are so kind!" raising her eloquent eyes; "but it is too much—"

"Not one whit too much. Don't let us waste words over a trifle. Let us go up."

He ran lightly up the rickety staircase, and Mollie, pausing a moment to tap at Mrs. Slimmens' door, and ask her to share her last vigil, slowly followed, and returned to the solemn chamber of death.

Mrs. Slimmens, worthy woman, saw to Mr. Ingelow's comfort. She found a chair and a little table and a pillow for the young gentleman, and fixed him as agreeably as possible on the landing. The patient artist laid the pillow upon the table and his head thereon, and slept the sleep of the just.

The long night wore on; Miriam lay, white and still, the fluttering breath just there and no more. After midnight she sunk lower and lower with every passing hour. As day-dawn, pale and blank, gleamed dimly across the night, the everlasting day dawned for her. Sinful and suffering, she was at rest.

Only once she had spoken. Just before the last great change came, the dulled, glazed eyes opened and fixed themselves on Mollie.

"My darling—my darling!" she whispered, with a last look of unutterable love.

Then a shiver shook her from head to foot, the death-rattle sounded, the eyeballs rolled upward, and Miriam was dead.

Mrs. Slimmens' wild cry brought Hugh Ingelow into the room. He crossed the room to where Mollie knelt, rigid and cold.

"Mollie!" he whispered, bending tenderly down; "my own dear Mollie!"

She looked up vaguely, and saw who it was.

"She was my mother, Hugh," she said, and slipped heavily backward in his arms, white and still.

Mollie did not faint. She lay a moment in a violent tremor and faintless, her face hidden on his shoulder; then she lifted her face, white as the dead—white as snow.

"She was my mother, Hugh," she repeated—"my own mother."

"Your mother, Mollie? And I thought Carl Walraven—"

"Oh, hush! not that name here. He is nothing to me—less than nothing. I shall never see him again."

"Are you not going home?"

"I have no home," said Mollie, mournfully. "I will stay here until she is buried. After that—'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' You will help me, Mr. Ingelow?" looking piteously up. "I don't know what to do."

"I will help you," he said, tenderly, "my poor little forlorn darling; but only on one condition—that you will grant me a favor."

"What?" looking at him wonderingly.

"That you will go and lie down. You need sleep—go with Mrs. Slimmens—eat some breakfast, and try to sleep away the morning. Don't make yourself uneasy about anything—all shall be arranged as well as if you were here. You will do this for me, Mollie?"

"Anything for you, Hugh," Mollie replied, hardly knowing what she said; "but I feel as though I should never sleep again."

Nevertheless, when led away by Mrs. Slimmens, and a cup of warm tea administered, and safely tucked in a clean straw bed, Mollie's heavy eyelids closed in a deep, dreamless sleep. That blessed slumber which seals the eyes of youth, despite every trouble, wrapped her in its comforting arms for many hours.

It was high noon when Mollie awoke, refreshed in body and mind. She rose at once, bathed her face and brushed her curls, and quitted the bedroom.

Mrs. Slimmens, in the little kitchen, was bustling about the midday meal.

"Your dinner is all ready, Miss Dane," that worthy wom-

an said, "and the young gentleman told me not on any account to allow you upstairs again until you'd had it. Sit right down here. I've got some nice broiled chicken and blanc-mange."

"You've never gone to all this trouble and expense for me, I hope?" remonstrated Mollie.

"La, no; I hadn't the money. The young gentleman had 'em ordered here from the restaurant up-street. Sit right down at once."

"Dear, kind, considerate Hugh!" Mollie thought, as she took her place at the tidy table. "Where is he now, Mrs. Slimmens?"

"Gone for his own dinner, miss, or his breakfast; I don't know which, seein' he's had nothing all day but a cup of tea I gave him this morning. He's been and had the poor creeter upstairs laid out beautiful, and the room fixed up, and the undertaker's man's been here, a-measurin' her for her coffin. She's to be buried to-morrow, you know."

"Yes, I know. Poor Miriam! poor mother!"

Mollie finished her meal and went at once upstairs. The chamber of death looked ghastly enough, draped with white sheets, which hid the smoky, blotched walls; the stove had been removed, the floor scrubbed, the window washed and flung open, and on the table stood two large and beautiful bouquets that scented the little room with sweetest odors of rose and mignonette.

On the bed, snowily draped in a white shroud, lay Miriam, her hands folded across her bosom, a linen cloth covering the dead face. By the bed a watcher sat—a decently dressed woman, who rose with a sort of questioning courtesy upon the entrance of the young lady.

"This is Mrs. Harmen, Miss Dane," said Mrs. Slimmens. "She's the person that fixed the shroud and helped tidy up. She's to take spells with you and me watching until the funeral comes off."

"Very well," said Mollie, quietly. "Perhaps she had better go down with you for the present. I will remain here for the rest of the day."

The two women quitted the apartment, and Mollie was left alone. She removed the cloth and gazed sadly on the rigid face.

"Poor soul!" she thought, bitterly, "hers was a hard, hard life! Oh, Carl Walraven! if you could look upon your work, surely even you would feel remorse."

The entrance of Hugh Ingelow aroused her. She turned to him her pale, sweet face and earnest blue eyes.

"I want to thank you so much, Mr. Ingelow, and I can not. You are very, very, very good."

He took the hand she held out and kissed it.

"One word from you would repay me for ten times as much. May I share your watch for a couple of hours?"

"For as long as you will. I want to tell you the story she told me on her death-bed. You have been so good to me—no brother could have been more—that I can have no secrets from you. Besides, you must understand why it is I will return to Mr. Walraven's no more."

"No more?" he echoed in surprise.

"Never again. I never want to see him again in this world. I will tell you. I know the miserable secret is as safe with you as in my own breast."

If Mollie had loved Hugh Ingelow less dearly and devotedly than she did, it is doubtful if she would have revealed the dark, sad history Miriam had unfolded. But he had her heart, and must have every secret in it; so she sat and told him, simply and sadly, all her father's and mother's wrongs. Mr. Ingelow listened in horrified amaze.

"So now, you see, my friend," she concluded, "that I can never cross Carl Walraven's threshold more."

"Of course not," cried Mr. Ingelow, impetuously. "Good heavens! what a villain that man has been! They ought to hang, draw, and quarter him. The infliction of such a wife as Madame Blanche has been is but righteous retribution. You should expose him, Mollie."

"And myself? No, no, Mr. Ingelow. I leave him in higher hands. The mill of the gods grinds slow, but it grinds sure. His turn will come, be certain of that, sooner or later. All I will do is, never to look upon his guilty face again."

"What do you mean to do, Mollie? But I suppose you have no plan formed yet."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, looking at her askance, and Mollie sighed wearily.

"Yes, I have a plan. I intend to leave New York as soon as possible after to-morrow."

"Indeed. May I ask—to go where?"

"Mr. Ingelow, I shall join my old company again. They will be glad to have me, I know. I have always kept up a correspondence with a friend I had in the troupe, and she continually, half in jest, wholly in earnest, urges my return. They are down in Kentucky now. I will write to the man-

ager. He will forward me the funds to join them, I know. While I wait for his answer and remittance, good Mrs. Slimmens will provide me a home."

She ceased, and rising up, walked over to the window.

Now was Mr. Ingelow's time, surely, if he cared for Mollie at all; but Mr. Ingelow spoke never a word. He sat in dead silence, looking at the little figure by the window, knowing she was crying quietly, and making no attempt to wipe away those tears by one tender word.

The afternoon wore away. As the twilight fell, Mr. Ingelow took his departure, and Mollie went down to Mrs. Slimmens' for a reviving cup of tea.

"I have everything arranged for the funeral, Mollie," Mr. Ingelow said at parting. "I will be here by nine o'clock tomorrow. Don't give yourself the least anxiety about the matter, Mollie."

The young man departed. Mollie had her toast, and returned to the death-room. She remained there until past midnight with Mrs. Harmen; then, at Mrs. Slimmens' earnest request, she retired, and that good woman took her place. At ten next day, the humble funeral *cortège* started. Mr. Ingelow sat in the carriage with Mollie, but they spoke very little during the melancholy drive.

It was a dismal day, with ceaseless rain, and sighing wind, and leaden sky. Mollie cowered in a corner of the carriage, her pale face gleaming like a star above her black wraps, the bright blue eyes unutterably mournful.

And Hugh Ingelow watched her with an indescribable expression in his fathomless eyes, and made no effort to console her.

The sods rattled on the coffin-lid, the grave was filled up, and everybody was hurrying away out of the rain.

It was all over, like some dismal dream, and Mollie, shivering under her shawl, took one last backward look at the grave of her mother, and was hurried back to the carriage by Hugh Ingelow.

But she was so deathly white and cold, and she trembled with such nervous shivering, that the young man drew her to him in real alarm.

"You are going to be ill, Mollie," he said. "You are ill."

"Am I?" said Mollie, helplessly. "I don't know. I hope not. I want to go away so much."

"So much? To leave me, Mollie?"

Mollie lifted her heavy eyes, filled with unutterable reproach.

"You don't care," she said. "It is nothing to you. And it should be nothing," suddenly remembering herself and sitting up. "Please let me go, Mr. Ingelow. We must part, and it is better so."

Mr. Ingelow released her without a word. Mollie sat up, drew a letter from her pocket, and handed it to him. He saw it was addressed to Carl Walraven, and looked at her inquiringly.

"I wish you to read it," she said.

It was unsealed. He opened it at once, and read:

"MR. WALRAVEN,—Miriam is dead—Miriam Dane—my mother. She deceived you from first to last. I am no daughter of yours—for which I humbly thank God!—no daughter of Mary Dane. I am Miriam's child; yours died in the work-house in its babyhood. I know my own story—I know your hand is red with my father's blood. I don't forgive you, Mr. Walraven, but neither do I accuse you. I simply never will see you again. Mr. Ingelow will hand you this. He and I alone know the story. MARY DANE."

Mr. Ingelow looked up.

"Will it do?" she asked.

"Yes. Am I to deliver it?"

"If you will add that kindness to your others. I don't think he will seek me out. He knows better than that."

Her head dropped against the side of the carriage. The face usually so sparkling looked very, very pale, and worn, and sad. The young artist took her hand and held it a moment at parting.

"You intend to write to your old manager to-morrow, Mollie?"

"Yes."

"Don't do it. Postpone it another day. I am coming here to-morrow, and I have a different plan in my head that I think will suit better. Wait until to-morrow, Mollie, and trust me."

His eyes flashed with an electric fire that thrilled the girl through.

What did he mean? But Mr. Ingelow had sprung into the carriage again and was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CRICKET'S HUSBAND.

MR. CARL WALRAVEN sat alone in his private room in a Broadway hotel, smoking an after-breakfast cigar, and looking lazily at the stream of people hurrying up and down. It was the morning following Miriam's funeral, of which he, of course, had heard nothing. He had left the city after his interview with his wife, and had but just returned. He had not gone home, but he had notified Mr. Sardonyx of his presence in town, and signified that that gentleman was to wait upon him immediately.

Pending his arrival, Mr. Walraven sat and smoked, and stared at the passers-by, and wondered, with an internal chuckle, how Mme. Blanche felt by this time, and whether Mollie was lonely or not, shut up in the deserted mansion.

"If she'll consent, I'll take her to Europe," mused Carl Walraven. "It will be delightful to go over the old places with so fresh a companion as my sparkling little Cricket. But I'm not sure that she'll go—she's a great deal too fond of young Ingelow. Well, he's a fine fellow, and I've no objection."

Mr. Walraven's reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Sardonyx. The lawyer bowed; his employer nodded carelessly.

"How do, Sardonyx? Find a chair. I've got back, you see. And now, how's things progressing?"

"Favorably, Mr. Walraven. All goes well."

"And madame has gone packing, I hope?"

"Mrs. Walraven left for Yonkers yesterday. I accompanied her and saw her safely to her new home."

"How does she take it?"

"In sullen silence. She doesn't deign to speak to me; but with her cousin it is quite another matter. He had the hardihood to call upon her in my presence, and you should have seen her. By Jove, sir! she flew out at him like a tigress. Doctor Guy departed without standing on the order of his going, and hasn't had the courage to try it on since."

Mr. Walraven smiled grimly.

"That's as it should be. Apart, they are harmless; together, they are the devil's own. And now, how's the mother, and how's Mollie?"

"Your mother is as well as usual, I believe. As to Miss

Dane," lifting his eyebrows in surprise, "have you not heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, that she has gone."

"Gone!" cried Carl Walraven, "gone again? What the foul fiend does the girl mean? Has she been carried off a third time?"

"Oh, dear, no! nothing of that sort. Miss Dane and Mr. Ingelow departed together late in the afternoon of the same day you left, and neither has since been heard of."

Mr. Sardonyx made this extraordinary statement with a queer smile just hovering about the corners of his legal mouth. His employer looked at him sternly.

"See here, Sardonyx," he said; "none of your insinuations. Miss Dane is my ward, remember. You are her jilted lover, I remember. Therefore, I can make allowances. But no insinuations. If Miss Dane and Mr. Ingelow left together, you know as well as I do there was no impropriety in their doing so."

"Did I say there was, Mr. Walraven? I mean to insinuate nothing. I barely state facts, told me by your servants."

"Did Mollie leave no word where she was going?"

"There was no need; they knew. This was the way of it: a ragged urchin came for her in hot haste, told her Miriam was dying, and desired her presence at once, to reveal some secret of vital importance. Miss Dane departed at once. Mr. Ingelow chanced to be at the house, and he accompanied her. Neither of them has returned."

The face of Carl Walraven turned slowly to a dead, sickly white as he heard the lawyer's words. He rose slowly and walked to one of the opposite windows, keeping his back turned to Sardonyx.

"Has there been no letter, no message of any sort since?" he inquired, huskily, after a pause.

"None. No one in your household knows even where this Miriam resides. As for Mr. Ingelow, I called twice at the studio since, but each time to find it locked."

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," said the lawyer.

And enter a waiter, with a card for Mr. Walraven. That gentleman took it with a start.

"Speak of the— Hugh Ingelow!" he muttered. "Sardonyx, I wish to see Ingelow in private. I'll drop into your office in the course of the day."

Mr. Sardonyx bowed and took his hat and his departure at once.

Mr. Ingelow and he crossed each other on the threshold.

The young artist entered, his handsome face set, and grave, and stern.

Mr. Walraven saw that cold, fixed face with a sinking heart.

"Good-morning, Ingelow," he said, trying to nod and speak indifferently. "Take a seat and tell me the news. I've been out of town, you know."

"I know," Mr. Ingelow said, availing himself of the proffered chair only to lean lightly against it. "Thanks. No, I prefer to stand. My business will detain you but a few minutes. I come from Miss Dane."

He spoke with cold sternness. He could not forget the horrible fact that the man before him was a profligate and a murderer.

"Ah!" Carl Walraven said, with ashen lips. "She is well, I trust?"

"She is well. She desired me to give you this."

He held out the note. The hands of the millionaire shook as he tried to open it.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"She is with friends. Read that note; it explains all."

"Have you read it?" Carl Walraven asked with sudden, fierce suspicion.

"I have," answered Mr. Ingelow, calmly; "by Miss Dane's express desire."

Mr. Walraven opened the note and read it slowly to the end. His face changed from ashen gray to the livid hue of death. He lifted his eyes to the face of the young artist, and they glowed like the burning eyes of a hunted beast.

"Well?"

It was all he said, and he sent the word hissing hot and fierce from between his set teeth.

"That is all my errand here, Mr. Walraven," the young man said, his cool brown eyes looking the discovered murderer through. "I know all, and I believe all. You have been duped from first to last. Miss Dane is no child of yours, thank God!"

He raised his hand as he uttered the solemn thanksgiving, with a gesture that thrilled the guilty man through.

"Your secret is safe with her and with me," pursued Hugh Ingelow, after a pause. "You may live to the end of

your life unmolested of man, for us, but you must never look upon Mollie Dane's face more."

Carl Walraven sunk down into a chair and covered his face, with a groan. Hugh Ingelow turned to go.

"Stop!" Mr. Walraven said, hoarsely. "What is to become of her? Are you going to marry her, Hugh Ingelow?"

"I decline answering that question, Mr. Walraven," the artist said, haughtily. "Miss Dane will be cared for—believe that. I wish you good-morning."

Mr. Ingelow was very pale when he emerged into thronged Broadway, but there was no indecision in his movements. He hailed a hack passing, sprung in, and was driven rapidly to the east side—to the humble abode of Mrs. Slimmens.

Mollie came forth to meet him, worn and sad, and with traces of tears, but with a bright, glad light in her starry eyes at sight of him—the light of sweet young love.

"I have seen him, Mollie," he said. "I gave him your letter. You would hardly have known him, he looked so utterly aghast and confounded. He will not try to see you, I am certain. And now, my dear girl, for that other and better plan that I spoke of last evening. But first you must take a drive with me—a somewhat lengthy drive."

She looked at him wonderingly, but in no fear.

"A drive," she repeated. "Where?"

"Only to Harlem—not quite out of the world," with a smile. "The carriage is waiting. Go put on your bonnet, and come."

"It is very odd," thought Mollie.

But she obeyed implicitly, and in five minutes they were rattling along over the stony streets.

"Won't you tell me now?" the young lady asked.

"Not yet. Let the mystery develop itself as it does in a novel. Trust to me, and prepare for a great shock."

She gazed at him, utterly unable to comprehend. He was smiling, but he was strangely pale.

"It is no jest, surely," Mollie said. "It is something serious. You look as though it were."

"Heaven knows I never was more serious in my life. Don't ask any more questions now, Mollie; but if I have ever done you the slightest service, try to bear it in mind. You will need to remember it shortly, and I will stand sorely in want of all your magnanimity."

He said no more, and Mollie sat in a dazed state, but still happy, as she ever must be by his side. And on, and on, and on they rattled, and the city was left behind, and they

were driving through the quiet of Harlem, green and pretty in its summery freshness.

The driver, obeying some directions of Mr. Ingelow, turned up a shady green lane ending in a high gate-way.

They entered the gate-way and drove up through a long avenue of waving trees to a square, fair mansion of gleaming white—a large wooden structure with intensely green blinds, all closely shut.

Mollie sat and looked in speechless expectation. Mr. Ingelow, volunteering no explanation, assisted her out, desired cabby to wait, opened the door with a latch-key, and ushered Mollie in.

The entrance-hall was very much like any other entrance-hall; so, likewise, was the broad stair-way; so, also, the upper landing.

It was only when Mr. Ingelow, pausing before one of the doors in the second hall, spoke, that Mollie received her first shock.

"You will enter here, Mollie, and wait. Prepare yourself for a great surprise—a terrible surprise, perhaps."

He bowed and left her, passing into another room, and closing the door.

All in an agitated flutter, Mollie opened her door and entered. But on the threshold she paused, with a shrill cry of wonder, terror, and doubt; for the padded walls and floor, the blind windows, the lighted lamp, the bed, the furniture, were all recognized in a moment.

It was the room where she had been first imprisoned—where she had consented to marry the masked man.

A quiet figure rose from a chair under the lamp and faced her with a courtesy. It was the girl who had lured her from her home—Sarah Grant.

"Come in, miss," said this young person, as though they had just parted an hour ago. "Master told me to expect you. Sit down; he'll be here in a minute. You look fit to drop."

She felt "fit to drop." She sunk into the proffered seat, trembling through every limb in her body, overwhelmed with a stunning consciousness that the supreme moment of her life had come.

Sarah Grant left the room, and Mollie was alone. Her eyes turned to the door, and fixed themselves there as if fascinated. Her head was awhirl—her mind a blank. Something tremendous was about to happen—what, she could not think.

The door opened slowly—the man in the black mask strode in and stood, silent and awful, before her.

Without a word or cry, but white as death, she rose up and confronted him with wild, dilated eyes.

"You know me, Mollie," the masked man said, addressing her, as before, in French—"I am your husband."

"Yes," Mollie answered, her white lips scarce able to form the words. "For God's sake, take off that mask and show me your face!"

Without a word, he unclasped the cloak and let it slip on the floor; he removed the flowing hair and beard, and with it the mask. And uttering a low, wailing cry, Mollie staggered back—for there before her, pale as herself, stood the man she loved—Hugh Ingelow!

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHICH WINDS UP THE BUSINESS.

He stood before her, pale and stern, his eyes fixed upon her, as a culprit before his judge waiting sentence of death.

But Mollie never looked. After that one brief, irrepressible cry, she had fallen back, her face bowed and hidden in her hands.

"You shrink from me, Mollie," Hugh Ingelow said; "you will not even look at me. I knew it would be so. I know I deserve it; but if I were never to see you again, I must tell you the truth all the same. Yes, Mollie, recoil from me, hate me, spurn me, for the base, unmanly part I have acted. It is not Doctor Oleander who is the dastard, the villain, the abductor of weak women—it is I!"

She did not speak, she did not move, she made no sign that she even heard him.

"It will avail me little, I know," he continued, "to tell you I have repented the dastardly deed in bitterness of spirit since. It will avail nothing to tell you how I have hated myself for that cruel and cowardly act that made me your husband. I think you maddened me, Mollie, with your heartless, your insulting rejection, and I did love you passionately. I swore, in my heart of hearts, I would be avenged, and, Mollie, you know how I kept my vow."

Still no reply, still no movement on Mollie's part. She stood half bowed, her head averted, her face covered by her hands.

"It drove me into a sort of frenzy, the thought of your be-

coming Sir Roger Trajenna's wife. If he had been a young man, and you had loved him, I would have bowed my head, as before a shrine, and gone my way and tried to forgive you and wish you happiness. But I knew better. I knew you were selling yourself for an old man's rank, for an old man's gold, and I tried to despise and hate you. I tried to think that no base act I could commit would be baser than the marriage you were ready to make. A plan—mad, impracticable as my own mad love, flashed across my brain, and, like many other things impossible in theory, I did it! It seemed an impossiblity to tear you from the very altar, and make you my wife, all unknown, but I did it. I had this house here, uninhabited, furnished. I had a friend ready to help me to the death. I disguised myself like a hero of romance, I decoyed you here, forced you to consent, I married you!"

Still mute, still dropping, still averted, still motionless. There was a tremor in Hugh Ingelow's steady voice when he went on.

"How hard it was for me, what a cruel, cold-blooded monster I felt myself, how my very heart of hearts was touched by your suffering here, I can not tell. Besides, it would seem like mockery, since all my compassion did not make me spare you. But from the moment you set foot here I considered it too late; and then, besides, Mollie, I was mad with love of you. I could not let you go. You yielded—you consented to barter yourself for freedom, as once before you consented for gold. I brought the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh here—he married me under my second name of Ernest—as you know."

He paused again. Still no sign, and then he went on:

"I let you go. I did not dare reveal myself, but I kept my promise. Hate me, Mollie, as you will; despise me, as you must—but try and think how dearly I love you. I would lay down my life for you, my darling Mollie. That would be an easy sacrifice; it remains for me to make a greater one. A divorce shall set you free. I myself will obtain that divorce. No one knows of our marriage—no one ever shall know. I will leave you free—free as the wind that blows—to go forth and make happy a more honorable and deserving man. Only, Mollie, no man ever will love you as I love you!" His voice failed. He turned abruptly away, and stood as if waiting for her to speak. But she never uttered a word.

He took her silence for a token of her utter scorn and hate.

"Farewell then, Mollie," he said. "I go, and I will never molest you more. The carriage that brought you here will

fetch you home again. But before we part forever, let me say this—if you ever want a friend, and can so far forgive me the wrong I have done you as to call upon me for help, then, Mollie, I will try to repair my unpardonable offense."

He walked to the door, he turned the handle, he gave one last, despairing look—and what did he see? A little, white hand extended imploringly, and a pathetic little voice, tremulously speaking:

"Hugh, don't go!"

He stopped, turning ghastly white.

"Mollie! For God's sake—"

"Don't—don't go, Mr. Ingelow! Don't go, for I forgive you—I love you!"

Hugh Ingelow gave one amazed cry—it was more like a shout—and in the next ecstatic moment Miss Dane was in his arms, held there as if he never would let her go.

"Please don't!" Mollie said, pettishly. "What do you suppose a person's ribs are made of, to stand such bear's hugs as that? Besides, I didn't tell you to. I only asked you not to mind the divorce—to-day!"

"Mollie, Mollie! for Heaven's sake, don't trifle with me! I am nearly beside myself—what with remorse, despair, and now hope. Tell me—can you ever forgive me? But I am mad to ask it, to hope for it. I know what you said to Doctor Oleander."

"Do you?" said Mollie; "but then you're not Doctor Oleander."

"Mollie!"

"But still," said Mollie, solemnly, and disengaging herself, "when I have time to think about it, I am sure I shall hate you like poison. I do now, but I hate divorces more. Oh, Mr. Ingelow! how could you behave so disgracefully?"

And then all at once and without the slightest premonitory warning, the young lady broke out crying hysterically, and to do it the better laid her face on Mr. Ingelow's shoulder. And that bold buccaneer of modern society gathered the little girl close to his heart, like the presumptuous scoundrel he was, and let her cry her fill; and the face he bent over her was glorified and ecstatic.

"Stop crying, Mollie," he said at last, putting back the yellow curls, and peeping at the flushed, wet, pretty face. "Stop crying, my dear little wife, and look up and say, 'Hugh, I forgive you.'"

"Never!" said Mollie. "You cruel, tyrannical wretch, I hate you!"

And saying it, Mollie put her arms round his neck, and laughed and cried wildly in the same breath.

"The hysterics will do you good, my dear," said Mr. Ingelow; "only don't keep them up too long, and redden your precious blue eyes, and swell your dear little nose. Mollie, is it possible you love me a little, after all?"

Mollie lifted her face again, and looked at him with solemn, shining eyes.

"Oh, Hugh! am I really and truly—your very wife?"

"My very own—my darling Mollie—my precious little bride, as fast as Church and State and Mr. Rashleigh can make you."

"Oh, Hugh, it was a shame!"

"I know it, Mollie—a dreadful shame! But you'll be a Christian, won't you, and try to forgive me?"

"I'll try, but I'm afraid it is impossible. And all the time I thought it was Doctor Oleander. Oh, Hugh, you've no idea how miserable I was."

There was a mysterious twinkle in Hugh's eyes.

"Almost as miserable as at present, Mollie?"

"Yes; more so, if such a thing be possible. It's shocking to carry off a girl like that, and marry her against her will. Nobody in this world, but an angel like myself, would ever forgive you."

"Which is equivalent to saying you do forgive me. Thousand thanks, Mrs. Ingelow. Tell me, would you ever have forgiven Guy Oleander?"

"You know I wouldn't," Mollie answered, blushing beautifully at her new name; "but, then, you're different."

"How, Mollie?"

"Well—well, you see I hate Doctor Oleander, and I don't hate you."

"You like me a little, Mollie, don't you? Ah, my darling, tell me so. You know you never have yet."

And then Mollie put her two arms round his neck, and held up her lovely, blushing face.

"Dear, dear Hugh! I love you with all my heart! And the happiest day of Mollie's life is the day she finds you are Mollie's husband!"

* * * * * * *

They were back in the carriage, driving through the golden mist of the sunny afternoon slowly back to the city. Side by side, as happy lovers sit, they sat and talked, with—oh, such infinitely blissful faces!

"And now," said Mollie, "what are we going to do about

it? It will never answer to reveal this horrid little romance of ours to all the world."

"Nor shall I. The world has no right to our secrets, and the Reverend Raymond Rashleigh will go to his grave with his little mystery unsolved. But we will be married again, openly and before the world, and you, Mrs. Ingelow, will be under double obligation, because you will have promised to love, honor and obey twice."

"And we'll go and live out at Harlem, in the dear, romantic old house?" Mollie said, with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, if you wish it. I will have it repaired and refurnished immediately, and, while the workmen are about it, we will be enjoying our wedding-tour. For we must be married at once, Mollie," with a comical look.

Mollie blushed and fidgeted, and laughed a little nervous laugh.

"This day fortnight will give you ample time for all the wedding garniture," said the young man. "You hear, Mollie—a fortnight."

Mollie sighed resignedly.

"Of course, you will play the tyrant, as usual, and carry me off willy-nilly, if I don't consent. You must have everything your own way, I suppose. And now—I'm dying to know—tell me, who is Sarah Grant?"

"An eminently respectable young woman, and the wife of my foster-brother. She and her husband would do anything under the sun for me. The husband was the coachman who drove you when you were abducted—who witnessed the marriage, and who is driving us now. Sarah's a trump! Didn't she outwit Oleander nicely?"

"How? Oh, Hugh," clasping her hands, "I see it all—the resemblance just puzzled me so. Sarah Grant was Susan Sharpe."

"Of course, she was, and a capital nurse she made. Sarah's worth her weight in gold, and you will tell her so the next time you see her. And now, here we are at Mrs. Watson's, and so good-bye for an hour or two, my little wife."

And Mollie went in, her face radiant, and all the world changed since she had left.

With the "witching hour of candle-light" came Mr. Ingelow again, to spend the evening with his lady-love. He looked a little serious, as Mollie saw.

"What is it, Hugh?" she asked, in alarm.

"Nothing much. I was thinking of Walraven. I saw him this afternoon."

"Well?" breathlessly.

"He is off again. Back to Europe, in the steamer to-morrow, never to return, he says. I never saw a man more cast down. So old Madame Walraven will be monarch of all she surveys once more, and the Fifth Avenue mansion will be the abode of darkness and desolation again. Miss Blanche is settled at Yonkers for good."

"Did you tell him—"

"About our forthcoming nuptials? Oh, yes! He looked rather surprised, and asked about the Mysterious Unknown in the mask. But I pooh-poohed that matter—told him I didn't think the mysterious husband would ever trouble us, and I don't think he will. By the bye, Sir Roger Trajenna goes to-morrow, too, so my little girl is deserted by all, and must cling the closer to me."

* * * * * * *

While Carl Walraven and Sir Roger Trajenna sailed over the wide sea—while Blanche Walraven ground her teeth in impotent rage up at Yonkers—while Dr. Guy Orleander pursued his business in New York, and scowled darkly at the failure of his plans—the daily papers burst out, one morning, with the jubilant news that Hugh Ernest Ingelow, Esq., and Miss Mollie Dane were one flesh. The Reverend Raymond Rashleigh performed the ceremony, and the wedding was a very quiet affair, and the happy pair started off at once to spend the honey-moon in a trip to the Canadas.

So we leave Cricket—all her girlish troubles, and flirtations, and wildness over, to settle down into the dearest, brightest, loveliest little wife in wide America. Happy as the days are long, and bright as the sun that shines, has Cricket been since Hugh Ingelow has been her husband.

THE END.

THE DUC DE L'OMELETTE.

And stepped at once into a cooler clime.—*Cowper.*

KEATS fell by a criticism. Who was it died of "*The Andromache?*"* Ignoble souls! De L'Omelette perished of an ortolan. *L'histoire en est brève.* Assist me, Spirit of Apicius!

A golden cage bore the little winged wanderer, enamored, melting, indolent, to the *Chaussée D'Antin*, from its home in far Peru. From its queenly possessor La Bellissima, to the Duc De L'Omelette, six peers of the empire conveyed the happy bird.

That night the Duc was to sup alone. In the privacy of his bureau he reclined languidly on that ottoman for which he sacrificed his loyalty in outbidding his king—a notorious ottoman of Cadèt.

He buries his face in the pillow. The clock strikes! Unable to restrain his feelings, his Grace swallows an olive. At this moment the door gently opens to the sound of soft music, and lo! the most delicate of birds is before the most enamored of men! But what inexpressible dismay now overshadows the countenance of the Duc?——"*Horreur!—chien!—Baptiste!—l'oiseau! ah, bon Dieu! cet oiseau modeste que tu as deshabillé de ses plumes, et que tu as servi sans papier!*" It is superfluous to say more:—the Duc expired in a paroxysm of disgust. . . . . .

"Ha! ha! ha!" said his Grace on the third day after his decease.

"He! he! he!" replied the Devil faintly, drawing himself up with an air of *hauteur*.

"Why, surely you are not serious," retorted De L'Omelette.

* Montfleury. The author of the *Parnasse Réformé* makes him speak in Hades: "*L'homme donc qui voudrait savoir ce dont Je suis mort, qu'il ne demande pas si'l fût de fievre ou de podagre ou d'autre chose mais qu'il entende que ce fut de 'L'Andromache.'*"

"I have sinned—*c'est vrai*—but, my good sir, consider!—you have no actual intention of putting such—such—barbarous threats into execution."

"No *what?*" said his majesty—"come, sir, strip!"

"Strip, indeed!—very pretty i' faith!—no, sir, I shall *not* strip. Who are you, pray, that I, Duc De L'Omelette, Prince de Foie-Gras, just come of age, author of the 'Mazurkiad,' and Member of the Academy, should divest myself at your bidding of the sweetest pantaloons ever made by Bourdon, the daintiest *robe-de-chambre* ever put together by Rombert—to say nothing of the taking my hair out of paper—not to mention the trouble I should have in drawing off my gloves?"

"Who am I?—ah, true! I am Baal-Zebub, Prince of the Fly. I took thee, just now, from a rosewood coffin inlaid with ivory. Thou wast curiously scented, and labelled as per invoice. Belial sent thee,—my Inspector of Cemeteries. The pantaloons, which thou sayest were made by Bourdon, are an excellent pair of linen drawers, and thy *robe-de-chambre* is a shroud of no scanty dimensions."

"Sir!" replied the Duc, "I am not to be insulted with impunity! Sir! I shall take the earliest opportunity in avenging this insult! Sir! you shall hear from me! In the meantime *au revoir!*" and the Duc was bowing himself out of the Satanic presence, when he was interrupted and brought back by a gentleman in waiting. Hereupon his Grace rubbed his eyes, yawned, shrugged his shoulders, reflected. Having become satisfied of his identity, he took a bird's-eye view of his whereabouts.

The apartment was superb. Even De L'Omelette pronounced it *bien comme il faut.* It was not its length nor its breadth, but its height—ah, that was appalling! There was no ceiling—certainly none—but a dense whirling mass of fiery-colored clouds. His Grace's brain reeled as he glanced upward. From above, hung a chain of an unknown blood-red metal—its upper end lost, like the city of Boston, *parmi les nues.* From its nether extremity swung a large cresset. The Duc knew it to be a ruby; but from it there poured a light so intense, so still, so terrible, Persia never worshipped such—Gheber never imagined such—Mussulman never dreamed of such when, drugged with opium, he has tottered to a bed of poppies, his back to the flowers, and his face to the God Apollo. The Duc muttered a slight oath, decidedly approbatory.

The corners of the room were rounded into niches. Three of these were filled with statues of gigantic proportions. Their beauty was Grecian, their deformity Egyptian, their *tout ensemble* French. In the fourth niche the statue was veiled; it was *not* colossal. But then there was a taper ankle, as andalled foot. De L'Omelette pressed his hand upon his heart, closed his eyes, raised them, and caught his Satanic Majesty —in a blush.

But the paintings!—Kupris! Astarte! Astoreth!—a thousand and the same! And Rafaelle has beheld them! Yes, Rafaelle has been here; for did he not paint the——? and was he not consequently damned? The paintings! the paintings! O luxury! O love! who, gazing on those forbidden beauties, shall have eyes for the dainty devices of the golden frames that besprinkled, like stars, the hyacinth and the porphyry walls?

But the Duc's heart is fainting within him. He is not, however, as you suppose, dizzy with magnificence, nor drunk with the ecstatic breath of those innumerable censers. *C'est vrai que de toutes ces choses il a pensé beaucoup—mais!* The Duc De L'Omelette is terror-stricken; for, through the lurid vista which a single uncurtained window is affording, lo! gleams the most ghastly of all fires!

Le pauvre Duc! He could not help imagining that the glorious, the voluptuous, the never-dying melodies which pervaded that hall, as they passed filtered and transmuted through the alchemy of the enchanted window-panes, were the wailings and the howlings of the hopeless and the damned! And there, too!—there!—upon that ottoman!—who could *he* be?—he, the *petitmaitre*—no, the Deity—who sat as if carved in marble, *et qui sourit*, with his pale countenance, *si amérement?*

Mais il faut agir—that is to say, a Frenchman never faints outright. Besides, his Grace hated a scene—De L'Omelette is himself again. There were some foils upon a table—some points also. The Duc had studied under B——; *il avait tué ses six hommes.* Now, then, *il peut s'échapper.* He measures two points, and, with a grace inimitable, offers his Majesty the choice. *Horreur!* his Majesty does not fence!

Mais il joue!—how happy a thought!—but his Grace had always an excellent memory. He had dipped in the "*Diable*" of the Abbé Gualtier. Therein it is said "*que le Diable n'ose pas refuser un jeu d'écarté.*"

But the chances—the chances! True—desperate; but

scarcely more desperate than the Duc. Besides, was he not in the secret? had he not skimmed over Père Le Brun? was he not a member of the Club Vingt-un? "*Si je perds,*" said he, "*je serai deux fois perdu*—I shall be doubly damned —*viola tout!* (Here his Grace shrugged his shoulders.) *Si je gagne, je reviendrai à mes ortolans—que les cartes soient préparées!*"

His Grace was all care, all attention—his Majesty all confidence. A spectator would have thought of Francis and Charles. His Grace thought of his game. His Majesty did not think; he shuffled. The Duc cut.

The cards are dealt. The trump is turned—it is—it is—the king! No it was the queen. His Majesty cursed her masculine habiliments. De L'Omelette placed his hand upon his heart.

They play. The Duc counts. The hand is out. His Majesty counts heavily, smiles, and is taking wine. The Duc slips a card.

"*C'est à vous à faire,*" said his Majesty, cutting. His Grace bowed, dealt, and arose from the table *en presentant le Roi.*

His Majesty looked chagrined.

Had Alexander not been Alexander, he would have been Diogenes; and the Duc assured his antagonist in taking leave, "*que s'il n'eût pas été De L'Omelette il n'aurait point d'objection d'être le Diable.*"

THE OBLONG BOX.

Some years ago, I engaged passage from Charleston, S. C., to the city of New York, in the fine packet-ship Independence, Captain Hardy. We were to sail on the fifteenth of the month (June), weather permitting; and, on the fourteenth, I went on board to arrange some matters in my stateroom.

I found that we were to have a great many passengers, including a more than usual number of ladies. On the list were several of my acquaintances; and among other names, I was rejoiced to see that of Mr. Cornelius Wyatt, a young artist, for whom I entertained feelings of warm friendship. He had been with me a fellow-student at C—— University, where we were very much together. He had the ordinary temperament of genius, and was a compound of misanthropy, sensibility, and enthusiasm. To these qualities he united the warmest and truest heart which ever beat in a human bosom.

I observed that his name was carded upon *three* staterooms; and, upon again referring to the list of passengers, I found that he had engaged passage for himself, wife, and two sisters—his own. The staterooms were sufficiently roomy, and each had two berths, one above the other. These berths, to be sure, were so exceedingly narrow as to be insufficient for more than one person; still, I could not comprehend why there were *three* staterooms for these four persons. I was, just at this epoch, in one of those moody frames of mind which make a man abnormally inquisitive about trifles: and I confess, with shame, that I busied myself in a variety of ill-bred and preposterous conjectures about this matter of the supernumerary stateroom. It was no business of mine, to be sure; but with none the less pertinacity did I occupy myself in attempts to resolve the enigma. At last I reached a conclusion which wrought in me great wonder why

I had not arrived at it before. "It is a servant, of course," I said; "what a fool I am, not sooner to have thought of so obvious a solution!" And then I again repaired to the list—but here I saw distinctly that *no* servant was to come with the party; although, in fact, it had been the original design to bring one—for the words "and servant" had been first written and then overscored. "Oh, extra baggage to be sure," I now said to myself—"something he wishes not to be put in the hold—something to be kept under his own eye—ah, I have it—a painting or so—and this is what he has been bargaining about with Ficolino, the Italian Jew." This idea satisfied me, and I dismissed my curiosity for the nonce.

Wyatt's two sisters I knew very well, and most amiable and clever girls they were. His wife he had newly married, and I had never yet seen her. He had often talked about her in my presence, however, and in his usual style of enthusiasm. He described her as of surpassing beauty, wit, and accomplishment. I was, therefore, quite anxious to make her acquaintance.

On the day in which I visited the ship (the fourteenth), Wyatt and a party were also to visit it—so the captain informed me—and I waited on board an hour longer than I had designed, in hope of being presented to the bride; but then an apology came. "Mr. W. was a little indisposed, and would decline coming on board until to-morrow, at the hour of sailing."

The morrow having arrived, I was going from my hotel to the wharf, when Captain Hardy met me and said that "owing circumstances" (a stupid but convenient phrase), "he rather thought the Independence would not sail for a day or two, and that when all was ready, he would send up and let me know." This I thought strange, for there was a stiff southerly breeze; but as "the circumstances" were not forthcoming, although I pumped for them with much perseverance, I had nothing to do but to return home and digest my impatience at leisure.

I did not receive the expected message from the captain for nearly a week. It came at length, however, and I immediately went on board. The ship was crowded with passengers, and everything was in the bustle attendant upon making sail. Wyatt's party arrived in about ten minutes after myself. There were the two sisters, the bride, and the artist—the latter in one of his customary fits of moody misanthropy. I was

too well used to these, however, to pay them any special attention. He did not even introduce me to his wife, this courtesy devolving, per force, upon his sister Marian, a very sweet and intelligent girl, who, in a few hurried words, made us acquainted.

Mrs. Wyatt had been closely veiled; and when she raised her veil, in acknowledging my bow, I confess that I was very profoundly astonished. I should have been much more so, however, had not long experience advised me not to trust, with too implicit a reliance, the enthusiastic descriptions of my friend, the artist, when indulging in comments upon the loveliness of woman. When beauty was the theme, I well knew with what facility he soared into the regions of the purely ideal.

The truth is, I could not help regarding Mrs. Wyatt as a decidedly plain-looking woman. If not positively ugly, she was not, I think, very far from it. She was dressed, however, in exquisite taste—and then I had no doubt that she had captivated my friend's heart by the more enduring graces of the intellect and soul. She said very few words, and passed at once into her stateroom with Mr. W.

My old inquisitiveness now returned. There was *no* servant —*that* was a settled point. I looked, therefore, for the extra baggage. After some delay, a cart arrived at the wharf, with an oblong pine box, which was everything that seemed to be expected. Immediately upon its arrival we made sail, and in a short time were safely over the bar and standing out to sea.

The box in question was, as I say, oblong. It was about six feet in length by two and a half in breadth; I observed it attentively, and like to be precise. Now this shape was *peculiar;* and no sooner had I seen it, than I took credit to myself for the accuracy of my guessing. I had reached the conclusion, it will be remembered, that the extra baggage of my friend, the artist, would prove to be pictures, or at least a picture; for I knew he had been for several weeks in conference with Nicolino: and now here was a box which, from its shape, *could* possibly contain nothing in the world but a copy of Leonardo's "Last Supper;" and a copy of this very "Last Supper," done by Rubini the younger at Florence, I had known, for some time, to be in the possession of Nicolino. This point, therefore, I considered as sufficiently settled. I chuckled excessively when I thought of my acumen. It was the first time I had ever known Wyatt to keep from me any of his artistical secrets; but here he evidently intended to steal a march upon

me, and smuggle a fine picture to New York, under my very nose; expecting me to know nothing of the matter. I resolved to quiz him *well*, now and hereafter.

One thing, however, annoyed me not a little. The box did *not* go into the extra stateroom. It was deposited in Wyatt's own; and there, too, it remained, occupying nearly the whole of the floor—no doubt to the exceeding discomfort of the artist and his wife;—this the more especially as the tar or paint with which it was lettered in sprawling capitals, emitted a strong, disagreeable, and, to *my* fancy, a peculiarly disgusting odor. On the lid were painted the words—"*Mrs. Adelaide Curtis, Albany, New York. Charge of Cornelius Wyatt, Esq. This side up. To be handled with care.*"

Now, I was aware that Mrs. Adelaide Curtis, of Albany, was the artist's wife's mother; but then I looked upon the whole address as a mystification, intended especially for myself. I made up my mind, of course, that the box and contents would never get farther north than the studio of my misanthropic friend, in Chambers Street, New York.

For the first three or four days we had fine weather, although the wind was dead ahead; having chopped round to the northward, immediately upon our losing sight of the coast. The passengers were, consequently, in high spirits, and disposed to be social. I *must* except, however, Wyatt and his sisters, who behaved stiffly, and, I could not help thinking, uncourteously to the rest of the party. *Wyatt's* conduct I did not so much regard. He was gloomy, even beyond his usual habit—in fact he was *morose*—but in him I was prepared for eccentricity. For the sisters, however, I could make no excuse. They secluded themselves in their staterooms during the greater part of the passage, and absolutely refused, although I repeatedly urged them, to hold communication with any person on board.

Mrs. Wyatt herself was far more agreeable. That is to say, she was *chatty;* and to be chatty is no slight recommendation at sea. She became *excessively* intimate with most of the ladies; and, to my profound astonishment, evinced no equivocal disposition to coquet with the men. She amused us all very much. I say "*amused*"—and scarcely know how to explain myself. The truth is, I soon found that Mrs. W. was far oftener laughed *at* than *with*. The gentlemen said little about her; but the ladies, in a little while, pronounced her a "good-hearted thing, rather indifferent-looking, totally un-

educated, and decidedly vulgar." The great wonder was, how Wyatt had been entrapped into such a match. Wealth was the general solution—but this I knew to be no solution at all; for Wyatt had told me that she neither brought him a dollar nor had any expectations from any source whatever. "He had married," he said, "for love, and for love only; and his bride was far more than worthy of his love." When I thought of these expressions, on the part of my friend, I confess that I felt indescribably puzzled. Could it be possible that he was taking leave of his senses? What else could I think? *He*, so refined, so intellectual, so fastidious, with so exquisite a perception of the faulty, and so keen an appreciation of the beautiful! To be sure, the lady seemed especially fond of *him*—particularly so in his absence—when she made herself ridiculous by frequent quotations of what had been said by her "beloved husband, Mr. Wyatt." The word "husband" seemed forever—to use one of her own delicate expressions—forever "on the tip of her tongue." In the meantime, it was observed by all on board, that he avoided *her* in the most pointed manner, and, for the most part, shut himself up alone in his stateroom, where, in fact, he might have been said to live altogether, leaving his wife at full liberty to amuse herself as she thought best, in the public society of the main cabin.

My conclusion, from what I saw and heard, was, that the artist, by some unaccountable freak of fate, or perhaps in some fit of enthusiastic and fanciful passion, had been induced to unite himself with a person altogether beneath him, and that the natural result, entire and speedy disgust, had ensued. I pitied him from the bottom of my heart—but could not, for that reason, quite forgive his incommunicativeness in the matter of the "Last Supper." For this I resolved to have my revenge.

One day he came upon deck, and, taking his arm as had been my wont, I sauntered with him backward and forward. His gloom, however (which I considered quite natural under the circumstances), seemed entirely unabated. He said little, and that moodily, and with evident effort. I ventured a jest or two, and he made a sickening attempt at a smile. Poor fellow! as I thought of *his wife*, I wondered that he could have heart to put on even the semblance of mirth. At last I ventured a home-thrust. I determined to commence a series of covert insinuations, or inuendoes, about the oblong box—just to let him perceive, gradually, that I was *not* altogether

the butt, or victim, of his little bit of pleasant mystification. My first observation was by way of opening a masked battery. I said something about the "peculiar shape of *that* box;" and, as I spoke the words, I smiled knowingly, winked, and touched him gently with my fore-finger in the ribs.

The manner in which Wyatt received this harmless pleasantry convinced me, at once, that he was mad. At first he stared at me as if he found it impossible to comprehend the witticism of my remark; but as its point seemed slowly to make its way into his brain, his eyes, in the same proportion, seemed protruding from their sockets. Then he grew very red—then hideously pale—then, as if highly amused with what I had insinuated, he began a loud and boisterous laugh, which, to my astonishment, he kept up, with gradually increasing vigor, for ten minutes or more. In conclusion, he fell flat and heavily upon the deck. When I ran to uplift him, to all appearance he was *dead*.

I called assistance, and, with much difficulty, we brought him to himself. Upon reviving he spoke incoherently for some time. At length we bled him and put him to bed. The next morning he was quite recovered, so far as regarded his mere bodily health. Of his mind I say nothing, of course. I avoided him during the rest of the passage, by advice of the captain, who seemed to coincide with me altogether in my views of his insanity, but cautioned me to say nothing on this head to any person on board.

Several circumstances occurred immediately after this fit of Wyatt's which contributed to heighten the curiosity with which I was already possessed. Among other things, this: I had been nervous—drank too much strong green tea, and slept ill at night—in fact, for two nights I could not be properly said to sleep at all. Now, my stateroom opened into the main cabin, or dining-room, as did those of all the single men on board. Wyatt's three rooms were in the after-cabin, which was separated from the main one by a slight sliding door, never locked even at night. As we were almost constantly on a wind, and the breeze was not a little stiff, the ship heeled to leeward very considerably; and whenever her starboard side was to leeward, the sliding door between the cabins slid open, and so remained, nobody taking the trouble to get up and shut it. But my berth was in such a position, that when my own stateroom door was open, as well as the sliding door in question (and my own door was *always* open on account of the

heat), I could see into the after-cabin quite distinctly, and just at that portion of it, too, where were situated the state-rooms of Mr. Wyatt. Well, during two nights (*not* consecutive) while I lay awake, I clearly saw Mrs. W., about eleven o'clock each night, steal cautiously from the stateroom of Mr. W., and enter the extra room, where she remained until daybreak, when she was called by her husband and went back. That they were virtually separated was clear. They had separate apartments—no doubt in contemplation of a more permanent divorce; and here, after all, I thought, was the mystery of the extra stateroom.

There was another circumstance, too, which interested me much. During the two wakeful nights in question, and immediately after the disappearance of Mrs. Wyatt into the extra stateroom, I was attracted by certain singular, cautious, subdued noises in that of her husband. After listening to them for some time, with thoughtful attention, I at length succeeded perfectly in translating their import. They were sounds occasioned by the artist in prying open the oblong box, by means of a chisel and mallet—the latter being muffled, or deadened, by some soft woollen or cotton substance in which its head was enveloped.

In this manner I fancied I could distinguish the precise moment when he fairly disengaged the lid—also, that I could determine when he removed it altogether, and when he deposited it upon the lower berth in his room; this latter point I knew, for example, by certain slight taps which the lid made in striking against the wooden edges of the berth, as he endeavored to lay it down *very* gently—there being no room for it on the floor. After this there was a dead stillness, and I heard nothing more, upon either occasion, until nearly daybreak; unless, perhaps, I may mention a low sobbing, or murmuring sound, so very much suppressed as to be nearly inaudible—if, indeed, the whole of this latter noise were not rather produced by my own imagination. I say it seemed to *resemble* sobbing or sighing—but, of course, it could not have been either. I rather think it was a ringing in my own ears. Mr. Wyatt, no doubt, according to custom, was merely giving the rein to one of his hobbies—indulging in one of his fits of artistic enthusiasm. He had opened his oblong box, in order to feast his eyes on the pictorial treasure within. There was nothing in this, however, to make him *sob*. I repeat therefore, that it must have been simply a freak of my own

fancy, distempered by good Captain Hardy's green tea. Just before dawn, on each of the two nights of which I speak, I distinctly heard Mr. Wyatt replace the lid upon the oblong box, and force the nails into their old places, by means of the muffled mallet. Having done this, he issued from his state-room, fully dressed, and proceeded to call Mrs. W. from hers.

We had been at sea seven days, and were now off Cape Hatteras, when there came a tremendously heavy blow from the southwest. We were, in a measure, prepared for it, however, as the weather had been holding out threats for some time. Everything was made snug, alow and aloft; and as the wind steadily freshened, we lay to, at length, under spanker and foretopsail, both double-reefed.

In this trim, we rode safely enough for forty-eight hours—the ship proving herself an excellent sea boat, in many respects, and shipping no water of any consequence. At the end of this period, however, the gale had freshened into a hurricane, and our after-sail split into ribbons, bringing us so much in the trough of the water that we shipped several prodigious seas, one immediately after the other. By this accident we lost three men overboard with the caboose, and nearly the whole of the larboard bulwarks. Scarcely had we recovered our senses, before the foretopsail went into shreds when we got up a storm stay-sail, and with this did pretty well for some hours, the ship heading the sea much more steadily than before.

The gale still held on, however, and we saw no signs of its abating. The rigging was found to be ill-fitted, and greatly strained; and on the third day of the blow, about five in the afternoon, our mizzen-mast, in a heavy lurch to windward, went by the board. For an hour or more, we tried in vain to get rid of it, on account of the prodigious rolling of the ship; and, before we had succeeded, the carpenter came aft and announced four feet water in the hold. To add to our dilemma, we found the pumps choked and nearly useless.

All was now confusion and despair—but an effort was made to lighten the ship by throwing overboard as much of her cargo as could be reached, and by cutting away the two masts that remained. This we at last accomplished—but we were still unable to do anything at the pumps; and, in the meantime, the leak gained on us very fast.

At sundown, the gale had sensibly diminished in violence,

and, as the sea went down with it, we still entertained faint hopes of saving ourselves in the boats. At eight P.M. the clouds broke away to windward, and we had the advantage of a full moon—a piece of good fortune which served wonderfully to cheer our drooping spirits.

After incredible labor we succeeded, at length, in getting the long-boat over the side without material accident, and into this we crowded the whole of the crew and most of the passengers. This party made off immediately, and, after undergoing much suffering, finally arrived, in safety, at Ocracoke Inlet, on the third day after the wreck.

Fourteen passengers, with the Captain, remained on board, resolving to trust their fortunes to the jolly-boat at the stern. We lowered it without difficulty, although it was only by a miracle that we prevented it from swamping as it touched the water. It contained, when afloat, the captain and his wife, Mr. Wyatt and party, a Mexican officer, wife, four children, and myself, with a negro valet.

We had no room, of course, for anything except a few positively necessary instruments, some provision, and the clothes upon our backs. No one had thought of even attempting to save anything more. What must have been the astonishment of all then, when, having proceeded a few fathoms from the ship, Mr. Wyatt stood up in the stern-sheets, and coolly demanded of Captain Hardy that the boat should be put back for the purpose of taking in his oblong box!

"Sit down, Mr. Wyatt," replied the Captain, somewhat sternly; "you will capsize us if you do not sit quite still. Our gunwale is almost in the water now."

"The box!" vociferated Mr. Wyatt, still standing—"the box, I say! Captain Hardy, you cannot, you *will* not refuse me. Its weight will be but a trifle—it is nothing—mere nothing. By the mother who bore you—for the love of Heaven—by your hope of salvation, I *implore* you to put back for the box!"

The Captain, for a moment, seemed touched by the earnest appeal of the artist, but he regained his stern composure, and merely said:

"Mr. Wyatt you are *mad*. I cannot listen to you. Sit down, I say, or you will swamp the boat. Stay—hold him—seize him! he is about to spring overboard! There—I knew it—he is over!"

As the Captain said this, Mr. Wyatt, in fact, sprang from

the boat, and, as we were yet in the lee of the wreck, succeeded, by almost superhuman exertion, in getting hold of a rope which hung from the fore-chains. In another moment he was on board, and rushing frantically down into the cabin.

In the meantime, we had been swept astern of the ship, and being quite out of her lee, were at the mercy of the tremendous sea which was still running. We made a determined effort to put back, but our little boat was like a feather in the breath of the tempest. We saw at a glance that the doom of the unfortunate artist was sealed.

As our distance from the wreck rapidly increased, the madman (for as such only could we regard him) was seen to emerge from the companion-way, up which, by dint of a strength that appeared gigantic, he dragged, bodily, the oblong box. While we gazed in the extremity of astonishment, he passed, rapidly, several turns of a three-inch rope, first around the box and then around his body. In another instant both body and box were in the sea—disappearing suddenly, at once and forever.

We lingered awhile sadly upon our oars, with our eyes riveted upon the spot. At length we pulled away. The silence remained unbroken for an hour. Finally, I hazarded a remark.

"Did you observe, Captain, how suddenly they sank? Was not that an exceedingly singular thing? I confess that I entertained some feeble hope of his final deliverance, when I saw him lash himself to the box, and commit himself to the sea."

"They sank as a matter of course," replied the Captain, "and that like a shot. They will soon rise again, however—*but not till the salt melts.*"

"The salt!" I ejaculated.

"Hush!" said the Captain, pointing to the wife and sisters of the deceased. "We must talk of these things at some more appropriate time."

We suffered much, and made a narrow escape; but fortune befriended *us*, as well as our mates in the long boat. We landed, in fine, more dead than alive, after four days of intense distress, upon the beach opposite Roanoke Island. We remained there a week, were not ill-treated by the wreckers, and at length obtained a passage to New York.

About a month after the loss of the Independence, I happened to meet Captain Hardy in Broadway. Our conversa-

tion turned, naturally, upon the disaster, and especially upon the sad fate of poor Wyatt. I thus learned the following particulars.

The artist had engaged passage for himself, wife, two sisters, and a servant. His wife was, indeed, as she had been represented, a most lovely and most accomplished woman. On the morning of the fourteenth of June (the day in which I first visited the ship), the lady suddenly sickened and died. The young husband was frantic with grief—but circumstances imperatively forbade the deferring his voyage to New York. It was necessary to take to her mother the corpse of his adored wife, and on the other hand, the universal prejudice which would prevent his doing so openly, was well known. Nine-tenths of the passengers would have abandoned the ship rather than take passage with the dead body.

In this dilemma, Captain Hardy arranged that the corpse, being first partially embalmed, and packed, with a large quantity of salt, in a box of suitable dimensions, should be conveyed on board as merchandise. Nothing was to be said of the lady's decease; and, as it was well understood that Mr. Wyatt had engaged passage for his wife, it became necessary that some person should personate her during the voyage. This the deceased's lady's maid was easily prevailed on to do. The extra state-room, originally engaged for this girl during her mistress' life, was now merely retained. In this state-room the pseudo-wife slept, of course, every night. In the daytime she performed, to the best of her ability, the part of her mistress —whose person, it had been carefully ascertained, was unknown to any of the passengers on board.

My own mistakes arose, naturally enough, through too careless, too inquisitive, and too impulsive a temperament. But of late, it is a rare thing that I sleep soundly at night. There is a countenance which haunts me, turn as I will. There is an hysterical laugh which will forever ring within my ears.

KING PEST.

A TALE CONTAINING AN ALLEGORY.

The gods do bear and well allow in kings
The things which they abhor in rascal routes.
Buckhurst's Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex.

About twelve o'clock, one night in the month of October, and during the chivalrous reign of the third Edward, two seamen belonging to the crew of the Free and Easy, a trading schooner plying between Sluys and the Thames, and then at anchor in that river, were much astonished to find themselves seated in the tap-room of an ale-house in the parish of St. Andrew's, London—which ale-house bore for sign the portraiture of a Jolly Tar.

The room, although ill-contrived, smoke-blackened, low-pitched, and in every other respect agreeing with the general character of such places at the period—was, nevertheless, in the opinion of the grotesque groups scattered here and there within it, sufficiently well adapted to its purpose.

Of these groups our two seamen formed, I think, the most interesting, if not the most conspicuous.

The one who appeared to be the elder, and whom his companion addressed by the characteristic appellation of "Legs," was at the same time much the taller of the two. He might have measured six feet and a half, and an habitual stoop in the shoulders seemed to have been the necessary consequence of an altitude so enormous. Superfluities in height were, however, more than accounted for by deficiencies in other respects. He was exceedingly thin, and might, as his associates asserted, have answered, when drunk, for a pennant at the mast-head, or, when sober, have served for a jib-boom. But these jests, and others of a similar nature, had evidently

produced, at no time, any effect upon the cachinnatory muscles of the tar. With high cheek-bones, a large hawk-nose, retreating chin, fallen under-jaw, and huge protruding white eyes, the expression of his countenance, although tinged with a species of dogged indifference to matters and things in general, was not the less utterly solemn and serious beyond all attempts at imitation or description.

The younger seaman was, in all outward appearance, the converse of his companion. His stature could not have exceeded four feet. A pair of stumpy bow-legs supported his squat, unwieldy figure, while his unusually short and thick arms, with no ordinary fists at their extremities, swung off dangling from his sides like the fins of a sea-turtle. Small eyes, of no particular color, twinkled far back in his head. His nose remained buried in the mass of flesh which enveloped his round, full, and purple face; and his thick upper-lip rested upon the still thicker one beneath with an air of complacent self-satisfaction, much heightened by the owner's habit of licking them at intervals. He evidently regarded his tall shipmate with a feeling half-wondrous, half-quizzical; and stared up occasionally in his face as the red setting sun stares up at the crags of Ben Nevis.

Various and eventful, however, had been the peregrinations of the worthy couple in and about the different tap-houses of the neighborhood during the earlier hours of the night. Funds, even the most ample, are not always everlasting; and it was with empty pockets our friends had ventured upon the present hostelrie.

At the precise period, then, when this history properly commences, Legs, and his fellow, Hugh Tarpaulin, sat, each with both elbows resting upon the large oaken table in the middle of the floor, and with a hand upon either cheek. They were eyeing, from behind a huge flagon of unpaid-for "humming-stuff," the portentous words, "No Chalk," which to their indignation and astonishment were scored over the doorway by means of that very mineral whose presence they purported to deny. Not that the gift of deciphering written characters—a gift among the commonalty of that day considered little less cabalistical than the art of inditing—could, in strict justice, have been laid to the charge of either disciple of the sea; but there was, to say the truth, a certain twist in the formation of the letters—an indescribable lee-lurch about the whole—which foreboded, in the opinion of both seamen, a long run of dirty

weather; and determined them at once, in the allegorical words of Legs himself, to "pump ship, clew up all sail, and scud before the wind."

Having accordingly disposed of what remained of the ale, and looped up the points of their short doublets, they finally made a bolt for the street. Although Tarpaulin rolled twice into the fireplace, mistaking it for the door, yet their escape was at length happily effected—and half after twelve o'clock found our heroes ripe for mischief, and running for life down a dark alley in the direction of St. Andrew's Stair, hotly pursued by the landlady of the Jolly Tar.

At the epoch of this eventful tale, and periodically, for many years before and after, all England, but more especially the metropolis, resounded with the fearful cry of "Plague!" The city was in a great measure depopulated—and in those horrible regions, in the vicinity of the Thames, where amid the dark, narrow, and filthy lanes and alleys, the Demon of Disease was supposed to have had his nativity, Awe, Terror, and Superstition were alone to be found stalking abroad.

By authority of the king such districts were placed *under ban*, and all persons forbidden, under pain of death, to intrude upon their dismal solitude. Yet neither the mandate of the monarch, nor the huge barriers erected at the entrance of the streets, nor the prospect of that loathsome death which, with almost absolute certainty, overwhelmed the wretch whom no peril could deter from the adventure, prevented the unfurnished and untenanted dwellings from being stripped, by the hand of nightly rapine, of every article, such as iron, brass, or lead work, which could in any manner be turned to a profitable account.

Above all, it was usually found, upon the annual winter opening of the barriers, that locks, bolts, and secret cellars, had proved but slender protection to those rich stores of wines and liquors which, in consideration of the risk and trouble of removal, many of the numerous dealers having shops in the neighborhood had consented to trust, during the period of exile, to so insufficient a security.

But there were very few of the terror-stricken people who attributed these doings to the agency of human hands. Pest-spirits, plague-goblins, and fever-demons, were the popular imps of mischief; and tales so blood-chilling were hourly told, that the whole mass of forbidden buildings was, at length, enveloped in terror as in a shroud, and the plunderer

himself was often scared away by the horrors his own depredations had created; leaving the entire vast circuit of prohibited district to gloom, silence, pestilence, and death.

It was by one of the terrific barriers already mentioned, and which indicated the region beyond to be under the Pest-ban, that, in scrambling down an alley, Legs and the worthy Hugh Tarpaulin found their progress suddenly impeded. To return was out of the question, and no time was to be lost, as their pursuers were close upon their heels. With thoroughbred seamen to clamber up the roughly fashioned plank-work was a trifle; and maddened with the twofold excitement of exercise and liquor, they leaped unhesitatingly down within the enclosure, and holding on their drunken course with shouts and yellings, were soon bewildered in its noisome and intricate recesses.

Had they not, indeed, been intoxicated beyond moral sense, their reeling footsteps must have been palsied by the horrors of their situation. The air was cold and misty. The paving-stones, loosened from their beds, lay in wild disorder amid the tall, rank grass which sprang up around the feet and ankles. Fallen houses choked up the streets. The most fetid and poisonous smells everywhere prevailed; and by the aid of that ghastly light which, even at midnight, never fails to emanate from a vapory and pestilential atmosphere, might be discerned lying in the by-paths and alleys, or rotting in the windowless habitations, the carcass of many a nocturnal plunderer arrested by the hand of the plague in the very perpetration of his robbery.

But it lay not in the power of images, or sensations, or impediments such as these, to stay the course of men who, naturally brave, and, at that time especially, brimful of courage and "humming-stuff!" would have reeled, as straight as their condition might have permitted, undauntedly into the very jaws of Death. Onward—still onward stalked the grim Legs, making the desolate solemnity echo and re-echo with yells like the terrific war-whoop of the Indian; and onward, still onward rolled the dumpy Tarpaulin, hanging on to the doublet of his more active companion, and far surpassing the latter's most strenuous exertions in the way of vocal music, by bull-roarings *in basso*, from the profundity of his stentorian lungs.

They had now evidently reached the stronghold of the pestilence. Their way at every step or plunge grew more noi-

some and more horrible—the paths more narrow and more intricate. Huge stones and beams falling momently from the decaying roofs above them, gave evidence, by their sullen and heavy descent, of the vast height of the surrounding houses; and while actual exertion became necessary to force a passage through frequent heaps of rubbish, it was by no means seldom that the hand fell upon a skeleton or rested upon a more fleshy corpse.

Suddenly, as the seamen stumbled against the entrance of a tall and ghastly-looking building, a yell more than usually shrill from the throat of the excited Legs, was replied to from within, in a rapid succession of wild, laughter-like, and fiendish shrieks. Nothing daunted at sounds which, of such a nature, at such a time, and in such a place, might have curdled the very blood in hearts less irrevocably on fire, the drunken couple rushed headlong against the door, burst it open, and staggered into the midst of things with a volley of curses.

The room within which they found themselves proved to be the shop of an undertaker; but an open trap-door, in a corner of the floor near the entrance, looked down upon a long range of wine-cellars, whose depths the occasional sound of bursting bottles proclaimed to be well stored with their appropriate contents. In the middle of the room stood a table —in the centre of which again arose a huge tub of what appeared to be punch. Bottles of various wines and cordials, together with jugs, pitchers, and flagons of every shape and quality, were scattered profusely upon the board. Around it, upon coffin-tressels, were seated a company of six. This company I will endeavor to delineate one by one.

Fronting the entrance, and elevated a little above his companions, sat a personage who appeared to be the president of the table. His stature was gaunt and tall, and Legs was confounded to behold in him a figure more emaciated than himself. His face was as yellow as saffron—but no feature, excepting one alone, was sufficiently marked to merit a particular description. This one consisted in a forehead so unusually and hideously lofty, as to have the appearance of a bonnet or crown of flesh superadded upon the natural head. His mouth was puckered and dimpled into an expression of ghastly affability, and his eyes, as indeed the eyes of all at the table, were glazed over with the fumes of intoxication. This gentleman was clothed from head to foot in a richly embroidered black silk-velvet pall, wrapped negligently around his form after the

fashion of a Spanish cloak. His head was stuck full of sable hearse-plumes, which he nodded to and fro with a jaunty and knowing air; and in his right hand he held a huge human thigh-bone, with which he appeared to have been just knocking down some member of the company for a song.

Opposite him, and with her back to the door, was a lady of no whit the less extraordinary character. Although quite as tall as the person just described, she had no right to complain of his unnatural emaciation. She was evidently in the last stage of a dropsy; and her figure resembled nearly that of the huge puncheon of October beer which stood, with the head driven in, close by her side, in a corner of the chamber. Her face was exceedingly round, red, and full; and the same peculiarity, or rather want of peculiarity, attached itself to her countenance, which I before mentioned in the case of the president—that is to say, only one feature of her face was sufficiently distinguished to need a separate characterization: indeed the acute Tarpaulin immediately observed that the same remark might have applied to each individual person of the party, every one of whom seemed to possess a monopoly of some particular portion of physiognomy. With the lady in question this portion proved to be the mouth. Commencing at the right ear, it swept with a terrific chasm to the left—the short pendants which she wore in either auricle continually bobbing into the aperture. She made, however, every exertion to keep her mouth closed and look dignified, in a dress consisting of a newly starched and ironed shroud coming up close under her chin, with a crimpled ruffle of cambric muslin.

At her right hand sat a diminutive young lady whom she appeared to patronize. This delicate creature, in the trembling of her wasted fingers, in the livid hue of her lips, and in the slight hectic spot which tinged her otherwise leaden complexion, gave evident indications of a galloping consumption. An air of extreme *haut ton*, however, pervaded her whole appearance; she wore in a graceful and *degagée* manner, a large and beautiful winding-sheet of the finest India lawn; her hair hung in ringlets over her neck; a soft smile played about her mouth; but her nose, extremely long, thin, sinuous, flexible, and pimpled, hung down far below her under lip, and in spite of the delicate manner in which she now and then moved it to one side or the other with her tongue, gave to her countenance a somewhat equivocal expression.

Over against her, and upon the left of the dropsical lady, was seated a little puffy, wheezing, and gouty old man, whose cheeks reposed upon the shoulders of their owner like two huge bladders of Oporto wine. With his arms folded, and with one bandaged leg deposited upon the table, he seemed to think himself entitled to some consideration. He evidently prided himself much upon every inch of his personal appearance, but took more especial delight in calling attention to his gaudy-colored surtout. This, to say the truth, must have cost him no little money, and was made to fit him exceedingly well—being fashioned from one of the curiously embroidered silken covers appertaining to those glorious escutcheons which, in England and elsewhere, are customarily hung up, in some conspicuous place, upon the dwellings of departed aristocracy.

Next to him, and at the right hand of the president, was a gentleman in long white hose and cotton drawers. His frame shook, in a ridiculous manner, with a fit of what Tarpaulin called "the horrors." His jaws, which had been newly shaved, were tightly tied up by a bandage of muslin; and his arms being fastened in a similar way at the wrists, prevented him from helping himself too freely to the liquors upon the table; a precaution rendered neccessary, in the opinion of Legs, by the peculiarly sottish and wine-bibbing cast of his visage. A pair of prodigious ears, nevertheless, which it was no doubt found impossible to confine, towered away into the atmosphere of the apartment, and were occasionally pricked up in a spasm, at the sound of the drawing of a cork.

Fronting him, sixthly and lastly, was situated a singularly stiff-looking personage, who, being afflicted with paralysis, must, to speak seriously, have felt very ill at ease in his unaccommodating habiliments. He was habited, somewhat uniquely, in a new and handsome mahogany coffin. Its top or head-piece pressed upon the skull of the wearer, and extended over it in the fashion of a hood, giving to the entire face an air of indescribable interest. Arm-holes had been cut in the sides for the sake not more of elegance than of convenience; but the dress, nevertheless, prevented its proprietor from sitting as erect as his associates; and as he lay reclining against his tressel, at an angle of forty-five degrees, a pair of huge goggle eyes rolled up their awful whites toward the ceiling in absolute amazement at their own enormity.

Before each of the party lay a portion of a skull, which was used as a drinking-cup. Overhead was suspended a human skeleton, by means of a rope tied round one of the legs and fastened to a ring in the ceiling. The other limb, confined by no such fetter, stuck off from the body at right angles, causing the whole loose and rattling frame to dangle and twirl about at the caprice of every occasional puff of wind which found its way into the apartment. In the cranium of this hideous thing lay a quantity of ignited charcoal, which threw a fitful but vivid light over the entire scene; while coffins, and other wares appertaining to the shop of an undertaker, were piled high up around the room, and against the windows, preventing any ray from escaping into the street.

At sight of this extraordinary assembly, and of their still more extraordinary paraphernalia, our two seamen did not conduct themselves with that degree of decorum which might have been expected. Legs, leaning against the wall near which he happened to be standing, dropped his lower jaw still lower than usual, and spread open his eyes to their fullest extent; while Hugh Tarpaulin, stooping down so as to bring his nose upon a level with the table, and spreading out a palm upon either knee, burst into a long, loud, and obstreperous roar of very ill-timed and immoderate laughter.

Without, however, taking offence at behavior so excessively rude, the tall president smiled very graciously upon the intruders—nodded to them in a dignified manner with his head of sable plumes—and, arising, took each by an arm, and led him to a seat which some others of the company had placed in the meantime for his accommodation. Legs to all this offered not the slightest resistance, but sat down as he was directed; while the gallant Hugh, removing his coffin tressel from its station near the head of the table, to the vicinity of the little consumptive lady in the winding-sheet, plumped down by her side in high glee, and pouring out a skull of red wine, quaffed it to their better acquaintance. But at this presumption the stiff gentleman in the coffin seemed exceedingly nettled; and serious consequences might have ensued, had not the president, rapping upon the table with his truncheon, diverted the attention of all present to the following speech:

"It becomes our duty upon the present happy occasion——"

"Avast there!" interrupted Legs, looking very serious, "avast there a bit, I say, and tell who the devil ye all are, and

what business ye have here, rigged off like the foul fiends, and swilling the snug blue ruin stowed away for the winter by my honest shipmate, Will Wimble the undertaker!"

At this unpardonable piece of ill-breeding, all the original company half started to their feet, and uttered the same rapid succession of wild fiendish shrieks which had before caught the attention of the seamen. The president, however, was the first to recover his composure, and at length, turning to Legs with great dignity, recommenced:

"Most willingly will we gratify any reasonable curiosity on the part of guests so illustrious, unbidden though they be. Know then that in these dominions I am monarch, and here rule with undivided empire under the title of 'King Pest the First.'

"This apartment, which you no doubt profanely suppose to be the shop of Will Wimble the undertaker—a man whom we know not, and whose plebeian appellation has never before this night thwarted our royal ears—this apartment, I say, is the Dais-Chamber of our Palace, devoted to the councils of our kingdom, and to other sacred and lofty purposes.

"The noble lady who sits opposite is Queen Pest, our Serene Consort. The other exalted personages whom you behold are all of our family, and wear the insignia of the blood royal under the respective titles of 'His Grace the Archduke Pest-Iferous'—'His Grace the Duke Pest-Ilential'—'His Grace the Duke Tem-Pest'—and 'Her Serene Highness the Archduchess Ana-Pest.'

"As regards," continued he, "your demand of the business upon which we sit here in council, we might be pardoned for replying that it concerns, and concerns *alone*, our own private and regal interest, and is in no manner important to any other than ourself. But in consideration of those rights to which, as guests and strangers, you may feel yourselves entitled, we will furthermore explain that we are here this night, prepared by deep research and accurate investigation, to examine, analyze, and thoroughly determine the indefinable spirit—the incomprehensible qualities and nature—of those inestimable treasures of the palate, the wines, ales, and liqueurs of this goodly metropolis; by so doing to advance not more our own designs than the true welfare of that unearthly sovereign whose reign is over us all, whose dominions are unlimited, and whose name is 'Death.'"

"Whose name is Davy Jones!" ejaculated Tarpaulin, help-

ing the lady by his side to a skull of liqueur, and pouring out a second for himself.

"Profane varlet!" said the president, now turning his attention to the worthy Hugh, "profane and execrable wretch! we have said, that in consideration of those rights which, even in thy filthy person, we feel no inclination to violate, we have condescended to make reply to thy rude and unseasonable inquiries. We nevertheless, for thy unhallowed intrusion upon our councils, believe it our duty to mulct thee and thy companion in each a gallon of Black Strap, having imbibed which to the prosperity of our kingdom, at a single draught and upon your bended knees, ye shall be forthwith free either to proceed upon your way, or remain and be admitted to the privileges of our table, according to your respective and individual pleasures."

"It would be a matter of utter unpossibility," replied Legs, whom the assumptions and dignity of King Pest the First had evidently inspired with some feelings of respect, and who arose and steadied himself by the table as he spoke—"it would, please your majesty, be a matter of utter unpossibility to stow away in my hold even one-fourth part of that same liquor which your majesty has just mentioned. To say nothing of the stuffs placed on board in the forenoon by way of ballast, and not to mention the various ales and liqueurs shipped this evening at various seaports, I have, at present, a full cargo of 'humming stuff' taken in and duly paid for at the sign of the 'Jolly Tar.' You will, therefore, please your majesty, be so good as to take the will for the deed—for by no manner of means either can I or will I swallow another drop—least of all a drop of that villanous bilge-water that answers to the hail of 'Black-Strap.'"

"Belay that!" interrupted Tarpaulin, astonished not more at the length of his companion's speech than at the nature of his refusal, "Belay that, you lubber! and I say, Legs, none of your palaver! *My* hull is still light, although I confess you yourself seem to be a little top-heavy; and as for the matter of your share of the cargo, why, rather than raise a squall I would find stowage-room for it myself, but——"

"This proceeding," interposed the president, "is by no means in accordance with the terms of the mulct or sentence, which is in its nature Median, and not to be altered or recalled. The conditions we have imposed must be fulfilled to

the letter, and that without a moment's hesitation—in failure of which fulfilment we decree that you do here be tied neck and heels together, and duly drowned as rebels in yon hogshead of October beer!"

"A sentence!—a sentence!—a righteous and just sentence!—a glorious decree!—a most worthy and upright, and holy condemnation!" shouted the Pest family altogether. The king elevated his forehead into innumerable wrinkles; the gouty little old man puffed like a pair of bellows; the lady of the winding-sheet waved her nose to and fro; the gentleman in the cotton drawers pricked up his ears; she of the shroud gasped like a dying fish; and he of the coffin looked stiff and rolled up his eyes.

"Ugh! ugh! ugh!" chuckled Tarpaulin, without heeding the general excitation, "ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh! ugh—ugh! ugh! ugh!—I was saying," said he, "I was saying, when Mr. King Pest poked in his marline-spike, that as for the matter of two or three gallons more or less of Black Strap, it was a trifle to a tight sea-boat like myself not overstowed; but when it comes to drinking the health of the Devil (whom God assoilzie) and going down upon my marrow-bones to his ill-favored majesty there, whom I know, as well as I know myself to be a sinner, to be nobody in the whole world but Tim Hurlygurly the stage-player!—why! it's quite another guess sort of a thing, and utterly and altogether past my comprehension."

He was not allowed to finish this speech in tranquillity. At the name of Tim Hurlygurly the whole assembly leaped from their seats.

"Treason!" shouted his Majesty King Pest the First.

"Treason!" said the little man with the gout.

"Treason!" screamed the Archduchess Ana-Pest.

"Treason!" muttered the gentleman with his jaws tied up.

"Treason!" growled he of the coffin.

"Treason!" treason!" shrieked her majesty of the mouth; and, seizing by the hinder part of his breeches the unfortunate Tarpaulin, who had just commenced pouring out for himself a skull of liqueur, she lifted him high into the air, and let him fall without ceremony into the huge open puncheon of his beloved ale. Bobbing up and down, for a few seconds, like an apple in a bowl of toddy, he at length finally disappeared amid the whirlpool of foam which, in the already effervescent liquor, his struggles easily succeeded in creating.

Not tamely, however, did the tall seaman behold the discomfiture of his companion. Jostling King Pest through the open trap, the valiant Legs slammed the door down upon him with an oath, and strode toward the centre of the room. Here tearing down the skeleton which swung over the table, he laid it about him with so much energy and good-will, that, as the last glimpses of light died away within the apartment, he succeeded in knocking out the brains of the little gentleman with the gout. Rushing then with all his force against the fatal hogshead full of October ale and Hugh Tarpaulin, he rolled it over and over in an instant. Out burst a deluge of liquor so fierce, so impetuous, so overwhelming, that the room was flooded from wall to wall—the loaded table was overturned—the tressels were thrown upon their backs—the tub of punch into the fireplace—and the ladies into hysterics. Piles of death-furniture floundered about. Jugs, pitchers, and carboys mingled promiscuously in the *mêlée*, and wicker flagons encountered desperately with bottles of junk. The man with the horrors was drowned upon the spot—the little stiff gentleman floated off in his coffin—and the victorious Legs, seizing by the waist the fat lady in the shroud, rushed out with her into the street, and made a bee-line for the Free and Easy, followed under easy sail by the redoubtable Hugh Tarpaulin, who, having sneezed three or four times, panted and puffed after him with the Archduchess Ana-Pest.

THREE SUNDAYS IN A WEEK.

"You hard-hearted, dunder-headed, obstinate, rusty, crusty, musty, fusty old savage!" said I, in fancy, one afternoon, to my granduncle Rumgudgeon—shaking my fist at him in imagination.

Only in imagination. The fact is, some trivial discrepancy *did* exist, just then, between what I said and what I had not the courage to say—between what I did and what I had half a mind to do.

The old porpoise, as I opened the drawing-room door, was sitting with his feet upon the mantel-piece, and a bumper of port in his paw, making strenuous efforts to accomplish the ditty

Remplis ton verre vide!
Vide ton verre plein!

"My *dear* uncle," said I, closing the door gently, and approaching him with the blandest of smiles, "you are always so *very* kind and considerate, and have evinced your benevolence in so many—so *very* many ways—that—that I feel I have only to suggest this little point to you once more to make sure of your full acquiescence."

"Hem!" said he, "good boy! go on."

"I am sure, my dearest uncle [you confounded old rascal!], that you have no design really, seriously, to oppose my union with Kate. This is merely a joke of yours, I know—ha! ha! ha!—how *very* pleasant you are at times."

"Ha! ha! ha!" said he, "curse you! yes!"

"To be sure—of course! I *knew* you were jesting. Now, uncle, all that Kate and myself wish at present, is that you would oblige us with your advice as—as regards the *time*—*you* know, uncle—in short, when will it be most convenient

for yourself, that the wedding shall—shall—come off, you know?"

"Come off, you scoundrel!—what do you mean by that?—Better wait till it goes on."

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—hi! hi! hi!—ho! ho! ho!—hu! hu! hu!—oh, that's good!—oh, that's capital—*such* a wit! But all we want just *now*, you know, uncle, is that you would indicate the time precisely."

"Ah!—precisely?"

"Yes, uncle—that is, if it would be quite agreeable to yourself."

"Wouldn't it answer, Bobby, if I were to leave it at random—some time within a year or so, for example?—*must* I say precisely?"

"*If* you please, uncle—precisely."

"Well, then, Bobby, my boy—you're a fine fellow, aren't you?—since you *will* have the exact time, I'll—why, I'll oblige you for once."

"Dear uncle!"

"Hush, sir!" [drowning my voice]—"I'll oblige you for once. You shall have my consent—and the *plum*, we must'nt forget the plum—let me see! when shall it be? To-day's Sunday—isn't it? Well, then, you shall be married precisely—*precisely*, now mind!—*when three Sundays come together in a week!* Do you hear me, sir? *What* are you gaping at? I say, you shall have Kate and her plum when three Sundays come together in a week—but not *till* then—you young scapegrace—not *till* then, if I die for it. You know me—*I'm a man of my word*—now be off!" Here he swallowed his bumper of port, while I rushed from the room in despair.

A very "fine old English gentleman," was my grand-uncle Rumgudgeon, but unlike him of the song, he had his weak points. He was a little, pursy, pompous, passionate, semicircular somebody, with a red nose, a thick skull, a long purse, and a strong sense of his own consequence. With the best heart in the world, he contrived, through a predominant whim of *contradiction*, to earn for himself, among those who only knew him superficially, the character of a curmudgeon. Like many excellent people, he seemed possessed with a spirit of *tantalization*, which might easily, at a casual glance, have been mistaken for malevolence. To every request, a positive "No!" was his immediate answer; but in the end—in the long, long end—there were exceedingly few requests which

be refused. Against all attacks upon his purse he made the most sturdy defence; but the amount extorted from him at last was, generally, in direct ratio with the length of the siege and the stubbornness of the resistance. In charity no one gave more liberally or with a worse grace.

For the fine arts, and especially for the belles lettres, he entertained a profound contempt. With this he had been inspired by Casimir Perier, whose pert little query "*A quoi un poète est-il bon?*" he was in the habit of quoting, with a very droll pronunciation, as the *ne plus ultra* of logical wit. Thus my own inkling for the Muses had excited his entire displeasure. He assured me one day, when I asked him for a new copy of Horace, that the translation of "*Poeta nascitur non fit*" was "a nasty poet for nothing fit"—a remark which I took in high dudgeon. His repugnance to "the humanities" had, also, much increased of late, by an accidental bias in favor of what he supposed to be natural science. Somebody had accosted him in the street, mistaking him for no less a personage than Doctor Dubble L. Dee, the lecturer upon quack physics. This set him off at a tangent; and just at the epoch of this story—for story it is getting to be after all—my grand-uncle Rumgudgeon was accessible and pacific only upon points which happened to chime in with the caprioles of the hobby he was riding. For the rest, he laughed with his arms and legs, and his politics were stubborn and easily understood. He thought, with Horsley, that "the people have nothing to do with the laws but to obey them."

I had lived with the old gentleman all my life. My parents, in dying, had bequeathed me to him as a rich legacy. I believe the old villain loved me as his own child—nearly if not quite as well as he loved Kate—but it was a dog's existence that he led me, after all. From my first year until my fifth, he obliged me with very regular floggings. From five to fifteen, he threatened me hourly with the House of Correction. From fifteen to twenty not a day passed in which he did not promise to cut me off with a shilling. I was a sad dog, it is true—but then it was a part of my nature—a point of my faith. In Kate, however, I had a firm friend, and I knew it. She was a good girl, and told me very sweetly that I might have her (plum and all) whenever I could badger my grand-uncle Rumgudgeon into the necessary consent. Poor girl!—she was barely fifteen, and without this consent, her little amount in the funds was not come-at-able until five im-

measurable summers had "dragged their slow length along." What then, to do? At fifteen, or even at twenty-one (for I had now passed my fifth olympiad), five years in prospect are very much the same as five hundred. In vain we besieged the old gentleman with importunities. Here was a *pièce de résistance* (as Messieurs Ude and Carene would say) which suited his perverse fancy to a T. It would have stirred the indignation of Job himself, to see how much like an old mouser he behaved to us two poor wretched little mice. In his heart he wished for nothing more ardently than our union. He had made up his mind to this all along. In fact, he would have given ten thousand pounds from his own pocket (Kate's plum was *her own*) if he could have invented anything like an excuse for complying with our very natural wishes. But then we had been so imprudent as to broach the subject *ourselves*. Not to oppose it under such circumstances, I sincerely believe was not in his power.

I have said already that he had his weak points; but, in speaking of these I must not be understood as referring to his obstinacy—which was one of his strong points—"*assurément ce n'était pas son faible.*" When I mention his weakness I have allusion to a *bizarre* old-womanish superstition which beset him. He was great in dreams, portents, *et id genus omne* of rigmarole. He was excessively punctilious, too, upon small points of honor, and, after his own fashion, was a man of his word, beyond doubt. This was, in fact, one of his hobbies. The *spirit* of his vows he made no scruple of setting at naught, but the *letter* was a bond inviolable. Now it was this latter peculiarity in his disposition, of which Kate's ingenuity enabled us one fine day, not long after our interview in the dining-room, to take a very unexpected advantage, and, having thus, in the fashion of all modern bards and orators, exhausted in *prolegomena*, all the time at my command, and nearly all the room at my disposal, I will sum up in a few words what constitutes the whole pith of the story.

It happened then—so the Fates ordered it—that among the naval acquaintances of my betrothed were two gentlemen who had just set foot upon the shores of England, after a year's absence, each, in foreign travel. In company with these gentlemen, my cousin and I, preconcertedly, paid uncle Rumgudgeon a visit on the afternoon of Sunday, October the tenth—just three weeks after the memorable decision which had so cruelly defeated our hopes. For about half an hour the

conversation ran upon ordinary topics; but at last we contrived, quite naturally, to give it the following turn:

Capt. Pratt. "Well, I have been absent just one year. Just one year to-day, as I live—let me see! yes!—this is October the tenth. You remember, Mr. Rumgudgeon, I called this day year to bid you good-bye. And by the way, it *does* seem something like a coincidence, does it not—that our friend, Captain Smitherton, here, has been absent exactly a year also—a year to-day?"

Smitherton. "Yes! just one year to a fraction. You will remember, Mr. Rumgudgeon, that I called with Capt. Pratt on this very day, last year, to pay my parting respects."

Uncle. "Yes, yes, yes—I remember it very well—very queer indeed! Both of you gone just one year. A very strange coincidence, indeed! Just what Doctor Dubble L. Dee would denominate an extraordinary concurrence of events. Doctor Dub——"

Kate. [*Interrupting.*] "To be sure, papa, it *is* something strange; but then Captain Pratt and Captain Smitherton didn't go altogether the same route, and that makes a difference, you know."

Uncle. "I don't know any such thing, you huzzy! How should I? I think it only makes the matter more remarkable. Doctor Dubble L. Dee——"

Kate. "Why, papa, Captain Pratt went round Cape Horn, and Captain Smitherton doubled the Cape of Good Hope."

Uncle. "Precisely!—the one went east and the other went west, you jade, and they both have gone quite round the world. By the by, Doctor Dubble L. Dee——"

Myself. [*Hurriedly.*] "Captain Pratt, you must come and spend the evening with us to-morrow—you and Smitherton—you can tell us all about your voyage, and we'll have a game of whist and——"

Pratt. "Whist, my dear fellow—you forget. To-morrow will be Sunday. Some other evening——"

Kate. "Oh, no, fie!—Robert's not *quite* so bad as that. *To-day's* Sunday."

Uncle. "To be sure—to be sure!"

Pratt. "I beg both your pardons—but I can't be so much mistaken. I know to-morrow's Sunday, because——"

Smitherton. [*Much surprised.*] "What *are* you all thinking about? Wasn't *yesterday* Sunday, I should like to know?"

All. "Yesterday, indeed! you *are* out!"

Uncle. "To-day's Sunday, I say—don't *I* know?"

Pratt. "Oh no!—to-morrow's Sunday."

Smitherton. "You are *all* mad—every one of you. I am as positive that yesterday was Sunday, as I am that I sit upon this chair."

Kate. [*Jumping up eagerly.*] "I see it—I see it all. Papa, this is a judgment upon you, about—about you know what. Let me alone, and I'll explain it all in a minute. It's a very simple thing, indeed. Captain Smitherton says that yesterday was Sunday: so it was; he is right. Cousin Bobby, and uncle and I, say that to-day is Sunday: so it is; we are right. Captain Pratt maintains that to-morrow will be Sunday: so it will; he is right, too. The fact is, we are all right, and thus *three Sundays have come together in a week.*"

Smitherton. [*After a pause.*] "By the by, Pratt, Kate has us completely. What fools we two are! Mr. Rumgudgeon, the matter stands thus: the earth you know is twenty-four thousand miles in circumference. Now this globe of the earth turns upon its own axis—revolves—spins round—these twenty-four thousand miles of extent, going from west to east, in precisely twenty-four hours. Do you understand, Mr. Rumgudgeon?"

Uncle. "To be sure—to be sure—Doctor Dub——"

Smitherton. [*Drowning his voice.*] "Well, sir; that is at the rate of one thousand miles per hour. Now, suppose that I sail from this position a thousand miles east. Of course, I anticipate the rising of the sun here at London, by just one hour. I see the sun rise one hour before you do. Proceeding, in the same direction, yet another thousand miles, I anticipate the rising by two hours—another thousand, and I anticipate it by three hours, and so on, until I go entirely round the globe, and back to this spot, when, having gone twenty-four thousand miles east, I anticipate the rising of the London sun by no less than twenty-four hours; that is to say, I am a day *in advance* of your time. Understand, eh?"

Uncle. "But Dubble L. Dee——"

Smitherton. [*Speaking very loud.*] Captain Pratt, on the contrary, when he had sailed a thousand miles west of this position, was an hour, and when he had sailed twenty-four thousand miles west, was twenty-four hours, or one day, *behind* the time at London. Thus, with me, yesterday was Sunday—thus, with you, to-day is Sunday—and thus, with Pratt, to-morrow will be Sunday. And what is more, Mr. Rumgud-

geon, it is positively clear that we are *all right*: for there can be no philosophical reason assigned why the idea of one of us should have preference over that of the other."

Uncle. "My eyes!—well, Kate—well, Bobby!—this *is* a judgment upon me, as you say. But I am a man of my word —*mark that!* you shall have her, boy (plum and all), when you please. Done up, by Jove! Three Sundays all in a row. I'll go, and take Dubble L. Dee's opinion upon *that*."

THE DEVIL IN THE BELFRY.

What o'clock is it?—*Old Saying.*

EVERYBODY knows, in a general way, that the finest place in the world is—or, alas, *was*—the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss. Yet, as it lies some distance from any of the main roads, being in a somewhat out-of-the-way situation, there are, perhaps, very few of my readers who have ever paid it a visit. For the benefit of those who have *not*, therefore, it will be only proper that I should enter into some account of it. And this is, indeed, the more necessary, as with the hope of enlisting public sympathy in behalf of the inhabitants, I design here to give a history of the calamitous events which have so lately occurred within its limits. No one who knows me will doubt that the duty thus self-imposed will be executed to the best of my ability, with all that rigid impartiality, all that cautious examination into facts, and diligent collation of authorities, which should ever distinguish him who aspires to the title of historian.

By the united aid of medals, manuscripts, and inscriptions, I am enabled to say, positively, that the borough of Vondervotteimittiss has existed, from its origin, in precisely the same condition which it at present preserves. Of the date of this origin, however, I grieve that I can only speak with that species of indefinite definiteness which mathematicians are, at times, forced to put up with in certain algebraic formulæ. The date, I may thus say, in regard to the remoteness of its antiquity, cannot be less than any assignable quantity whatsoever.

Touching the derivation of the name Vondervotteimittiss, I confess myself, with sorrow, equally at fault. Among a multitude of opinions upon this delicate point—some acute, some learned, some sufficiently the reverse—I am able to select noth-

ing which ought to be considered satisfactory. Perhaps the idea of Grogswigg—nearly coincident with that of Kroutaplenttey—is to be cautiously preferred. It runs:—"*Vondervotteimittiss—Vonder, lege Donder—Votteimittiss, quasi und Bleitziz—Bleitziz obsol: pro Blitzen.*" This derivation, to say the truth, is still countenanced by some traces of the electric fluid evident on the summit of the steeple of the House of the Town-Council. I do not choose, however, to commit myself on a theme of such importance, and must refer the reader desirous of information to the "*Oratiunculæ de Rebus Præter-Veteris,*" of Dundergutz. See, also, Blunderbuzard "*De Derivationibus,*" pp. 27 to 5010, Folio, Gothic edit., Red and Black character, Catch-word and No Cypher;—wherein consult, also, marginal notes in the autograph of Stuffundpuff, with the sub-Commentaries of Gruntundguzzell.

Notwithstanding the obscurity which thus envelops the date of the foundation of Vondervotteimittiss, and the derivation of its name, there can be no doubt, as I said before, that it has always existed as we find it at this epoch. The oldest man in the borough can remember not the slightest difference in the appearance of any portion of it; and, indeed, the very suggestion of such a possibility is considered an insult. The site of the village is in a perfectly circular valley, about a quarter of a mile in circumference, and entirely surrounded by gentle hills, over whose summit the people have never yet ventured to pass. For this they assign the very good reason that they do not believe there is anything at all on the other side.

Round the skirts of the valley (which is quite level, and paved throughout with flat tiles) extends a continuous row of sixty little houses. These, having their backs on the hills, must look, of course, to the centre of the plain, which is just sixty yards from the front door of each dwelling. Every house has a small garden before it, with a circular path, a sundial, and twenty-four cabbages. The buildings themselves are so precisely alike, that one can in no manner be distinguished from the other. Owing to the vast antiquity, the style of architecture is somewhat odd, but it is not for that reason the less strikingly picturesque. They are fashioned of hard-burned little bricks, red, with black ends, so that the walls look like a chess-board upon a great scale. The gables are turned to the front, and there are cornices, as big as all the rest of the house, over the eaves and over the main doors. The windows

are narrow and deep, with very tiny panes and a great deal of sash. On the roof is a vast quantity of tiles with long curly ears. The woodwork, throughout, is of a dark hue, and there is much carving about it, with but a trifling variety of pattern; for, time out of mind, the carvers of Vondervotteimittiss have never been able to carve more than two objects—a time-piece and a cabbage. But these they do exceedingly well, and intersperse them, with singular ingenuity, wherever they find room for the chisel.

The dwellings are as much alike inside as out, and the furniture is all upon one plan. The floors are of square tiles, the chairs and tables of black-looking wood with thin crooked legs and puppy feet. The mantel-pieces are wide and high, and have not only time-pieces and cabbages sculptured over the front, but a real time-piece, which makes a prodigious ticking, on the top in the middle, with a flower-pot containing a cabbage standing on each extremity by way of outrider. Between each cabbage and the time-piece, again, is a little China man having a large stomach with a great round hole in it, through which is seen the dial-plate of a watch.

The fire-places are large and deep, with fierce crooked-looking fire-dogs. There is constantly a rousing fire, and a huge pot over it, full of saur-kraut and pork, to which the good woman of the house is always busy in attending. She is a little fat old lady, with blue eyes and a red face, and wears a huge cap like a sugar-loaf, ornamented with purple and yellow ribbons. Her dress is of orange-colored linsey-woolsey, made very full behind and very short in the waist—and indeed very short in other respects, not reaching below the middle of her leg. This is somewhat thick, and so are her ankles, but she has a fine pair of green stockings to cover them. Her shoes—of pink leather—are fastened each with a bunch of yellow ribbons puckered up in the shape of a cabbage. In her left hand she has a little heavy Dutch watch; in her right she wields a ladle for the sauer-kraut and pork. By her side there stands a fat tabby cat, with a gilt toy repeater tied to its tail, which "the boys" have there fastened by way of a quiz.

The boys themselves are, all three of them, in the garden attending the pig. They are each two feet in height. They have three-cornered cocked hats, purple waistcoats reaching down to their thighs, buckskin knee-breeches, red woollen stockings, heavy shoes with big silver buckles, and long sur-

tout coats with large buttons of mother-of-pearl. Each, too, has a pipe in his mouth, and a little dumpy watch in his right hand. He takes a puff and a look, and then a look and a puff. The pig—which is corpulent and lazy—is occupied now in picking up the stray leaves that fall from the cabbages, and now in giving a kick behind at the gilt repeater, which the urchins have also tied to *his* tail, in order to make him look as handsome as the cat.

Right at the front door, in a high-backed, leather-bottomed, armed chair, with crooked legs and puppy feet like the tables, is seated the old man of the house himself. He is an exceedingly puffy little old gentleman, with big circular eyes and a huge double chin. His dress resembles that of the boys—and I need say nothing further about it. All the difference is, that his pipe is somewhat bigger than theirs, and he can make a greater smoke. Like them, he has a watch, but he carries his watch in his pocket. To say the truth, he has something of more importance than a watch to attend to—and what that is, I shall presently explain. He sits with his right leg upon his left knee, wears a grave countenance, and always keeps one of his eyes, at least, resolutely bent upon a certain remarkable object in the centre of the plain.

This object is situated in the steeple of the House of the Town Council. The Town Council are all very little, round, oily, intelligent men, with big saucer eyes and fat double chins, and have their coats much longer and their shoe-buckles much bigger than the ordinary inhabitants of Vondervotteimittiss. Since my sojourn in the borough, they have had several special meetings, and have adopted these three important resolutions :—

"That it is wrong to alter the good old course of things :"

"That there is nothing tolerable out of Vondervotteimittiss :" and—

"That we will stick by our clocks and our cabbages."

Above the session-room of the Council is the steeple, and in the steeple is the belfry, where exists, and has existed time out of mind, the pride and wonder of the village—the great clock of the borough of Vondervotteimittiss. And this is the object to which the eyes of the old gentlemen are turned who sit in the leather-bottomed arm-chairs.

The great clock has seven faces—one in each of the seven sides of the steeples—so that it can be readily seen from all quarters. Its faces are large and white, and its hands heavy

and black. There is a belfry-man whose sole duty is to attend to it; but this duty is the most perfect of sinecures—for the clock of Vondervotteimittiss was never yet known to have anything the matter with it. Until lately, the bare supposition of such a thing was considered heretical. From the remotest period of antiquity to which the archives have reference, the hours have been regularly struck by the big bell. And, indeed, the case was just the same with all the other clocks and watches in the borough. Never was such a place for keeping the true time. When the large clapper thought proper to say "Twelve o'clock!" all its obedient followers opened their throats simultaneously, and responded like a very echo. In short, the good burghers were fond of their sauer-kraut, but then they were proud of their clocks.

All people who hold sinecure offices are held in more or less respect, and as the belfry-man of Vondervotteimittiss has the most perfect of sinecures, he is the most perfectly respected of any man in the world. He is the chief dignitary of the borough, and the very pigs look up to him with a sentiment of reverence. His coat-tail is *very* far longer—his pipe, his shoe-buckles, his eyes, and his stomach, *very* far bigger—than those of any other old gentleman in the village; and as to his chin, it is not only double, but triple.

I have thus painted the happy estate of Vondervotteimittiss; alas, that so fair a picture should ever experience a reverse!

There has been long a saying among the wisest inhabitants, that "no good can come from over the hills;" and it really seemed that the words had in them something of the spirit of prophecy. It wanted five minutes of noon, on the day before yesterday, when there appeared a very odd-looking object on the summit of the ridge to the eastward. Such an occurrence, of course, attracted universal attention, and every little old gentleman who sat in a leather-bottomed arm-chair, turned one of his eyes with a stare of dismay upon the phenomenon, still keeping the other upon the clock in the steeple.

By the time that it wanted only three minutes to noon, the droll object in question was perceived to be a very diminutive, foreign-looking young man. He descended the hills at a great rate, so that everybody had soon a good look at him. He was really the most finnicky little personage that had ever been seen in Vondervotteimittiss. His countenance was of a dark snuff-color, and he had a long, hooked nose, pea eyes, a wide mouth, and an excellent set of teeth, which latter he

seemed anxious of displaying, as he was grinning from ear to ear. What with mustachios and whiskers there was none of the rest of his face to be seen. His head was uncovered, and his hair neatly done up in *papillotes*. His dress was a tight-fitting swallow-tailed black coat (from one of whose pockets dangled a vast length of white handkerchief), black kersey-mere knee-breeches, black stockings, and stumpy-looking pumps, with huge bunches of black satin ribbon for bows. Under one arm he carried a huge *chapeau-de-bras*, and under the other a fiddle nearly five times as big as himself. In his left hand was a gold snuff-box, from which, as he capered down the hill, cutting all manner of fantastical steps, he took snuff incessantly, with an air of the greatest possible self-satisfaction. God bless me!—here was a sight for the honest burghers of Vondervotteimittiss!

To speak plainly, the fellow had, in spite of his grinning, an audacious and sinister kind of face; and as he curvetted right into the village, the odd stumpy appearance of his pumps excited no little suspicion; and many a burgher who beheld him that day would have given a trifle for a peep beneath the white cambric handkerchief which hung so obtrusively from the pocket of his swallow-tailed coat. But what mainly occasioned a righteous indignation was, that the scroundrelly popinjay, while he cut a fandango here, and a whirligig there, did not seem to have the remotest idea in the world of such a thing as *keeping time* in his steps.

The good people of the borough had scarcely a chance, however, to get their eyes thoroughly open, when, just as it wanted half a minute of noon, the rascal bounced, as I say, right into the midst of them; gave a *chassez* here, and a *balancez* there; and then, after a *pirouette* and a *pas-de zephyr*, pigeon-winged himself right up into the belfry of the House of the Town-Council, where the wonder-stricken belfry-man sat smoking in a state of dignity and dismay. But the little chap seized him at once by the nose; gave it a swing and a pull; clapped the big *chapeau-de-bras* upon his head; knocked it down over his eyes and mouth; and then, lifting up the big fiddle, beat him with it so long and so soundly, that with the belfry-man being so fat, and the fiddle being so hollow, you would have sworn that there was a regiment of double-bass drummers all beating the devil's tattoo up in the belfry of the steeple of Vondervotteimittiss.

There is no knowing to what desperate act of vengeance this

unprincipled attack might have aroused the inhabitants, but for the important fact that it now wanted only half a second of noon. The bell was about to strike, and it was a matter of absolute and pre-eminent necessity that everybody should look well at his watch. It was evident, however, that just at this moment, the fellow in the steeple was doing something that he had no business to do with the clock. But as it now began to strike, nobody had any time to attend to his manœuvres, for they had all to count the strokes of the bell as it sounded.

"One!" said the clock.

"Von!" echoed every little old gentleman in every leather-bottomed arm-chair in Vondervotteimittiss. "Von!" said his watch also; "von!" said the watch of his vrow, and "von!" said the watches of the boys, and the little gilt repeaters on the tails of the cat and pig.

"Two!" continued the big bell; and

"Doo!" repeated all the repeaters.

"Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight! Nine! Ten!" said the bell.

"Dree! Vour! Fibe! Sax! Seben! Aight! Noin! Den!" answered the others

"Eleven!" said the big one.

"Eleben!" assented the little fellows.

"Twelve!" said the bell.

"Dvelf!" they replied, perfectly satisfied, and dropping their voices.

"Und dvelf it iss!" said all the little old gentlemen, putting up their watches. But the big bell had not done with them yet.

"*Thirteen!*" said he.

"Der Teufel!" gasped the little old gentlemen, turning pale, dropping their pipes, and putting down all their right legs from over their left knees.

"Der Teufel!" groaned they, "Dirteen! Dirteen!!—Mein Gott, it is Dirteen o'clock!!"

Why attempt to describe the terrible scene which ensued? All Vondervotteimittiss flew at once into a lamentable state of uproar.

"Vot is cum'd to mein pelly?" roared all the boys. "I've been ongry for dis hour!"

"Vot is cum'd to mein kraut?" screamed all the vrows. "It has been done to rags for dis hour!"

"Vot is cum'd to mein pipe?" swore all the little old gen-

tlemen, "Donder and Blitzen! it has been smoked out for dis hour!"—and they filled them up again in a great rage, and, sinking back in their arm-chairs, puffed away so fast and so fiercely that the whole valley was immediately filled with impenetrable smoke.

Meantime the cabbages all turned very red in the face, and it seemed as if old Nick himself had taken possession of everything in the shape of a timepiece. The clocks carved upon the furniture took to dancing as if bewitched, while those upon the mantlepieces could scarcely contain themselves for fury, and kept such a continual striking of thirteen, and such a frisking and wriggling of their pendulums as was really horrible to see. But, worse than all, neither the cats nor the pigs could put up any longer with the behavior of the little repeaters tied to their tails, and resented it by scampering all over the place, scratching and poking, and squeaking and screeching, and caterwauling and squalling, and flying into the faces, and running under the petticoats of the people, and creating altogether the most abominable din and confusion which it is possible for a reasonable person to conceive. And to make matters still more distressing, the rascally little scape-grace in the steeple was evidently exerting himself to the utmost. Every now and then one might catch a glimpse of the scoundrel through the smoke. There he sat in the belfry upon the belfry-man, who was lying flat upon his back. In his teeth the villain held the bell-rope, which he kept jerking about with his head, raising such a clatter that my ears ring again even to think of it. On his lap lay the big fiddle at which he was scraping out of all time and tune, with both hands, making a great show, the nincompoop! of playing "Judy O'Flannagan and Paddy O'Raferty."

Affairs being thus miserably situated, I left the place in disgust, and now appeal for aid to all lovers of correct time and fine kraut. Let us proceed in a body to the borough, and restore the ancient order of things in Vondervotteimittiss by ejecting that little fellow from the steeple.