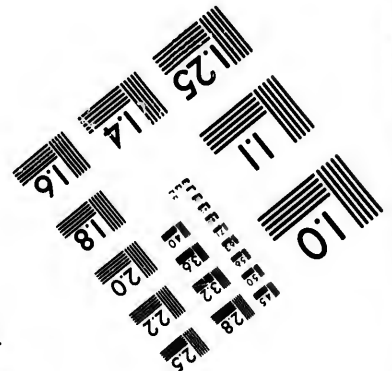
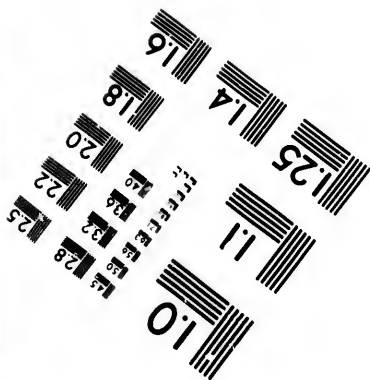
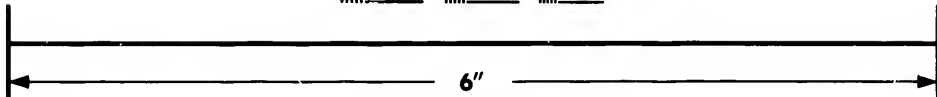
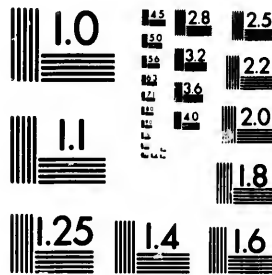


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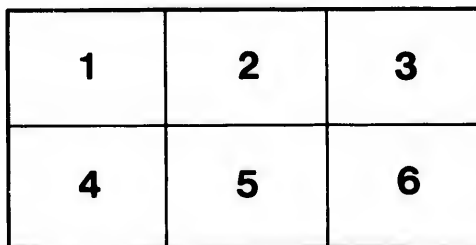
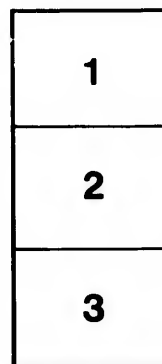
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A Novel

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AUTHOR OF

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WEDDED FOR PIQUE.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE THEATER.

THE theater was crowded. The parquette was one swaying sea of human faces. The galleries were vivid semicircles of eyes, blue, black, brown, and gray; and the boxes and the upper tiers were rapidly filling, for was not this the benefit night of Mademoiselle Vivia? and had not all the theater-going world of London been half mad about Mademoiselle Vivia ever since her first appearance on the boards of the — Theater.

Posters and play-bills announced it her benefit. Madam Rumor announced it her last appearance on any stage.

There were wonderful tales told about this same Vivia, the actress. Her beauty was an undisputed fact; so was her marveious talent in her profession; and her icy virtue was a household word. Every one in the house probably knew what was to be known of her history—how the manager of the house stumbled upon her accidentally in an obscure, third-rate Parisian play-house; how, struck by her beauty and talent, he had taken her away, had her instructed for two years, and how, at the end of that time, three months previous to this particular night, she had made her *début*, and taken the good people of London by storm. Gouty old dukes and apoplectic earls, had knelt in dozens at her feet, with offers of magnificent settlements, superb diamonds, no end of blank checks, carriages, and horses, and a splendid establishment, and been spurned for their pains.

Mademoiselle Vivia had won, during her professional career, something more than admiration and love, the respect of all, young and old. And yet that some gossiping lady, Madam Rumor, whispered low, that the actress had managed to lose her heart after all.

Madam Rumor softly insinuated, that a young nobleman, marvelously handsome to look upon, and marvelously rich to back it, had laid his heart, hand, and name most honorably and romantically at her fair feet; but people took the whisper for what it was worth, and were a little dubious about believing it implicitly. No one was certain of anything; and yet the knowing ones raised their glasses with a peculiar smile to a certain stage-box occupied by three young men, and with an inward conviction that the secret lay there. One of the three gentlemen sitting in it—a large, well-made, good-looking personage of thirty or so—was sweeping the house himself, lorgnette in hand, bowing, and smiling, and criticising.

“And there comes that old ogre, the Marquis of Devon, rouged to the eyes; and that stiff antediluvian on his arm, all pearl-powder and pearls, false ringlets and more rouge, is his sister. There goes that oily little cheat, Sylvester Sweet, among the swells, as large as life; and there’s Miss Blanche Chester with her father. Pretty little thing, isn’t she, Lisle?”

The person thus addressed—a very tall, very thin, very pale, and very insipid-looking young person, most stylishly got up, regardless of expense, leaned forward, and stared out of a pair of very dull and very expressionless gray eyes, at an exceedingly pretty and graceful girl.

“Aw, yes! Very pretty, indeed!” he lisped, with a languid drawl; “and has more money, they say, than she knows what to do with. Splendid catch, eh? But look there. Who are those? By Jove! what a handsome woman!”

The attention of Lord Lisle—for the owner of the dull eyes and lantern jaws was that distinguished gentleman—had been drawn to a party who had just entered the box opposite. They were two ladies, three gentlemen, and a little child, and Sir Roland Cliffe. The first speaker leaning over to see, opened his eyes very wide, with a low whistle of astonishment.

"Such a lovely face! Such a noble head! Such a grand air!" raved young Lord Lisie, whose heart was as inflammable as a lucifer match, and caught fire as easily.

Sir Roland raised his shoulders and eyebrows together and stroked his flowing beard.

"Which one?" he coolly asked; "the beautiful blonde, or the jolly brunette?"

"The lady in pink satin and diamonds! Such splendid eyes! Such a manner! Such grace! She might be a princess!"

Hearing this the third occupant of the box leaned forward also, from the lazy recumbent position he had hitherto indulged in, and glanced across the way. He looked the younger of the two—slender and boyish—and evidently not more than nineteen or twenty, wearing the undress uniform of a lieutenant of dragoons, which set off his eminently handsome face and figure to the best advantage. He, too, opened his large Saxon blue eyes slightly, as they rested on the object of Lord Lisie's raptures, and exchanged a smile with Sir Roland Cliffe.

The lady thus unconsciously apostrophized and stared at was lying back in her chair, and fanning herself very much at her ease. It was a blonde face of the purest type; the skin, satin-smooth and white; the blue veins scarcely traceable under the milkwhite surface; the oval cheeks tinged with the faintest shade of rose, deepening into vividness in the thin lips. The eyes were large, blue, and bright—very coldly bright, though; the eyebrows, light and indistinct; and the hair, which was of flaxen fairness, was rolled back from the beautiful face, *à la* Marie Stuart.

Light hair, fair blue eyes, and colorless complexion usually make up rather an insipid style of prettiness; but this lady was not at all insipid. The eyes, placed close together, had a look of piercing intentness; the thin lips, decidedly compressed, had an air of resolute determination and from the crown of her flaxen head to the sole of her dainty foot, she looked as high and haughty as any lady in the land.

Her dress was pale rose satin, with a profusion of rare old point, yellow with age, and precious as rubies. Diamonds ran like a river of light round the beautiful arched neck, and blazed on the large, snow-white, rounded

arms. Her fan was of gold and ebony, and marabout feathers ; and she managed it with a hand like Hebe's own. One dainty foot, peeping out from under the rosy skirt, showed the arched instep and tapering ankle ; and, to her fingers's tips, she looked the lady. Her age it was impossible to guess, for old Time deals gallantly with those flaxen-haired, pearly skinned beauties, and Lord Lisle could not have told, for his life, whether to set her down as twenty or thirty. She certainly did not look girlish ; and her figure, though tall, and slight, and delicate, was unmistakably matured ; and then her style of dress, and the brilliant opera-cloak of scarlet and white, slipping off her shoulders, was matured, too.

She and her companion formed as striking a contrast as could be met with in the house. For the latter was a pronounced brunette, and a very full-blown brunette at that, with lazy rolling black eyes ; a profusion of dead-black hair, worn in braids and bandeaux, and entwined with pearls. Her large and showy person was arrayed in slight mourning ; but her handsome, rounded, high-colored face was breaking into smiles every other instant, as her lazy eyes strayed from face to face, as she bent to greet her friends.

A lovely little boy of some six years, richly dressed, with long golden curls falling over his shoulders, and splendid dark eyes straying like her own around the house, leaned lightly against her knee. They were mother and son, though they looked little like it ; and Mrs. Leicester Cliffe was a buxom widow of five-and-twenty. The black roving eyes rested at last on the opposite box, and the incessant smile came over the Dutch face as she bowed to one of the gentlemen—Sir Roland Cliffe.

“How grandly she sits !—how beautiful she is !” broke out Lord Lisle, in a fresh ecstasy. “Who in the world is she, Sir Roland !”

“You had better ask my beloved nephew here,” said Sir Roland, with a careless motion toward the young officer ; “and ask him, at the same time, how he would like you for a step-father.”

Lord Lisle stared from one to the other, and then at the fair lady, aghast.

“Why—how—you don't mean to say that it is Lady Agnes Shirley !”

"But I do, though! Is it possible, Lisle, that you, a native of Sussex yourself, have never seen my sister!"

"I never have!" exclaimed Lord Lisle, with a look of hopeless amazement; "and that is really your mother, Shirley?"

The lieutenant of dragoons, who was sitting in such a position that the curtain screened him completely from the audience, while it commanded a full view of the stage, nodded with a half-laugh, and Lord Lisle's astonished bewilderment was a sight to see.

"But she is so young; she does not look over twenty."

"She is eight years older than I, and I am verging on thirty," said Sir Roland, taking out a penknife and beginning to pare his nails; "but those blondes never grow old. What do you think of the black beauty beside her?"

"She is fat!" said Lord Lisle, with gravity.

"My dear fellow, don't apply that term to a lady; say plump, or inclined to *embonpoint*! She is rather of the Dutch make, I confess, but we can pardon that in a widow, and you must own she's a splendid specimen of the Low Country, Flemish style of loveliness. Paul Rubens, for instance, would have gone mad about her; perhaps you have never noticed, though, as you do not much affect the fine arts, that all his Madonnas and Venuses have the same plentiful supply of blood, and brawn, and muscle that our fair relative yonder rejoices in."

"She is your relative, then?"

"Leicester Cliffe, rest his soul! was my cousin. That is her son and heir, that little shaver beside her—fine little fellow, isn't he? and a Cliffe, every inch of him. What are you thinking of, Cliffe?"

"Were you speaking to me?" said the lieutenant, looking up, abstractedly.

"Yes. I want to know what makes you so insufferably stupid to-night? What are you thinking of, man—Vivia?"

The remark might be nearer the truth than the speaker thought, for a slight flush rose to the girl-like cheek of Lieutenant Cliffe Shirley.

"Nonsense! I was half asleep, I believe. I wish the curtain were up, and the play well over."

"I have heard that this is Vivia's last night," remarked Lord Lisle; "and that she is about to be married, or something of that sort. How is it, Sir Roland? As you know everything, you must know."

"I don't know that, at all events; but he is a lucky man, whoever gets her. Ah, what a pretty little thing it is! By Jove! I never see her without feeling inclined to go on my knees, and say— Ah! Sweet, old fellow, how are you?"

This last passage in the noble baronet's discourse was not what he would say to Mlle. Vivia, but was addressed to a gentleman who had forced his way with some difficulty through the crowd, and now stood at the door.

Mr. Sweet was not a handsome man, but he had the most smiling and beaming expression of countenance imaginable. He was of medium size, inclined to be angular and sharp at the joints, with a complexion so yellow as to induce the belief that he was suffering from chronic jaundice. His hair, what there was of it, was much the color of his face, but he had nothing in that line worth speaking of; his eyes were small and twinkling, and generally half closed; and he displayed, like the blooming relic of the late lamented Leicester Cliffe, the sweetest and most ceaseless of smiles.

His waistcoat was of a bright canary tint, much the color of his face and hair; lemon-colored gloves were on his hands; and the yellow necktie stood out in bold relief against the whitest and glossiest of shirt collars. He wore large gold studs, and a large gold breastpin, a large gold watch-chain, with an anchor, and a heart, and a bunch of seals, and a select assortment of similar small articles of jewelry dangling from it, and keeping up a musical tinkle as he walked. He had small gold ear-rings in his ears, and would have had them in his nose, too, doubtless, if any one had been good enough to set him a precedent. As it was, he was so bright, and so smiling, and so glistening, with his yellow hair, and face, and waistcoat, and necktie, and jewelry, that he fairly scintillated all over, and would have made you wink to look at him by gaslight.

"Hallo, Sweet!" "How do, Sweet?" "Come in, Sweet," greeted this smiling vision from the three young men.

And Mr. Sweet, beaming all over with smiles, and jingling his seals, did come in, and took a seat between the handsome young lieutenant and his uncle, Sir Roland.

The orchestra was crashing out a noisy overture, but at this moment a bell tinkled, and when it ceased the curtain shriveled up to the ceiling and disclosed Henry VIII., a very stout gentleman, in flesh-colored tights, scarlet velvet doublet, profusely ornamented with tinsel and gold lace, wearing a superb crown of pasteboard and gilt paper on his royal head. Catherine of Aragon was there, too, very grand, in a long trailing dress of purple cotton velvet, and blazing all over with brilliants of the purest glass, kneeling before her royal husband, amid a brilliant assembly of gentlemen in tights and mustaches, and ladies in very long dresses and paste jewels, in the act of receiving a similar pasteboard crown from the fat hands of the king himself.

The play was the "Royal Blue-Beard," a sort of half musical burlesque, and though the audience laughed a good deal and applauded a little over the first act, their enthusiasm did not quite bring the roof down; for Vivian was not there. Her *rôle* was Anne Boleyn; and when in the second act that beautiful and most unfortunate lady appeared among the maids of honor, to win the fickle-hearted monarch by her smiles, a cheer greeted her that made the house ring.

She was their pet, their favorite; and standing among her painted companions, all tinselled and spangled, she looked queen-rose and star over all. Petite and fairy-like in figure, a clear, colorless complexion, lips vividly red, eyes jetty black and bright as stars, shining black hair, falling in a profusion of curls and waves far below her waist, and with a smile like an angel! She was dressed all in white, with flowers in her hair and on her breast; and when she came floating across the stage in her white, mist-like robes, her pure, pale face, uplifted dark eyes, and waving hair, crowned with water-lilies, she looked more like a fairy by moonlight than a mere creature of flesh and blood.

What a shout it was that greeted her! how gentle and sweet was the smile that answered it! and how celestial she looked with that smile on her lips!

Sir Roland leaned over, with flashing eyes.

"It is a fairy; it is Titania! It is Venus herself!" he cried, enraptured. "I never saw her look so beautiful before in my life!"

Lord Lisle stared at him in his dull, vacant way; and Mr. Sweet smiled and stole a sidelong glance at the lieutenant, and this nonchalant young warrior lounged easily back on his seat and watched the silver-shining vision with philosophical composure.

The play went on. The lovely Anne wins the slightly fickle king with her "becks, and nods, and wreathed smiles," and triumphs over the unfortunate lady in the purple train. Then comes her own brief and dazzling term of glory; then blue-eyed Jane Seymour conquers the conqueress, and Mistress Anne is condemned to die.

Throughout the whole thing, Vivia was superb. Vivia always was; but in the last scene of all she surpassed herself. From the moment when she told the executioner, with a gay laugh, that she heard he was an expert, and that she had but a small neck, to the moment she was led forth to die, she held the audience spell-bound.

When the curtain rose on the last scene, the stage was hung in black, the lights burned dim, the music waxed faint and low, and, dressed in deepest mourning, and looking by contrast deadly pale, she laid her beautiful head on the block. At the sound of the falling ax, as the curtain fell, a thrill ran through every heart; and the four gentlemen in the stage-box bent over, and gazed with their hearts—such as they were—in their eyes.

A moment of profound silence was followed by so wild a tempest of applause that the domed roof rang, and "Vivia!" "Vivia!" shouted a storm of voices, enthusiastically.

Once again she came before them, pale and beautiful in her black robes and flowing hair, and bowed her acknowledgments with the same lovely smile that had won all their hearts long before. A small avalanche of bouquets and wreaths came fluttering down on the stage, and three of the occupants of the stage-box flung their offerings, too. A wreath of white roses, clasped by a great pearl, from Sir Roland; a bouquet of splendid hot-house exotics from Lord Lisle; and a cluster of jasmine flowers from Lieutenant Shirley, which he took from his buttonhole for the purpose. Mr. Sweet had nothing to

cast but his eyes ; and casting those optics on the actress, he saw her turn her beautiful face for one instant toward their box ; the next, lift the jasmine flowers and raise them to her lips, and the next—vanish.

“She took your flowers, Shirley—she actually did,” cried Lord Lisle, with one of his blank stares, “and left mine, that were a thousand times prettier, just where they fell !”

“Very extraordinary,” remarked Mr. Sweet, with one of his bright smiles and sidelong glances. “But what do all the good folks mean by leaving ? I thought there was to be a farce, or ballet, or something.”

“So there is ; but as they won’t see Vivia, they don’t care for staying. And I think the best thing we can do is to follow their example. What do you say to coming along with us, Sweet ? We are going to have a small supper at my rooms this evening.”

Mr. Sweet, with many smiles, made his acknowledgments, and accepted at once ; and, rising, the four passed out, and were borne along by the crowd into the open air. Sir Roland’s coach was in waiting, and being joined by three or four other young men, they were soon dashing at break-neck speed toward a West End hotel.

* * * * *

No man in all London ever gave such *petits soupers* as Sir Roland Cliffe, and no one ever thought of declining his invitations. On the present occasion the hilarity waxed fast and furious. The supper was superb, the claret deliciously cool after the hot theater, the sherry like liquid gold, and the port fifty years old at least. All showed their appreciation of it, too, by draining bumper after bumper, until the lights of the room, and everything in it, were dancing hornpipes before their eyes—all but Mr. Sweet and Lieutenant Shirley. Mr. Sweet drank sparingly, and had a smile and an answer for everybody ; and the lieutenant scarcely ate or drank at all, and was abstracted and silent.

“Do look at Shirley !” hiccoughed Lord Lisle, whose eyes were staring fishily out of his head, and whose hair and shirt-front were splashed with wine ; “he looks as sol—yes—as solemn as a coffin !”

“Hallo, Cliffe, my boy ! don’t be the death’s-head at

the feast! Here," shouted Sir Roland, with flushed face, waving his glass over his head; "here, lads, is a bumper to Vivia!"

"Vivia!" "Vivia!" ran from lip to lip. Even Mr. Sweet rose to honor the toast; but Lieutenant Shirley, with wrinkled brows and flashing eyes, sat still, and glanced round at the servant who stood at his elbow with a salver and a letter thereon.

"Note for you, Lieutenant," insinuated the waiter. "A little boy brought it here. Said there was no answer expected, and left."

"I say, Cliffe, what have you there? A dun?" shouted impetuous Sir Roland.

"With your permission, I will see," rather coldly responded the young officer, breaking the seal.

Mr. Sweet, sitting opposite, kept his eyes intently fixed on his face, and saw it first flush scarlet, and then turn deathly white.

"That's no dun, I'll swear!" again lisped Lord Lisle. "Look at the writing! A fairy could scarcely trace anything so light. And look at the paper—pink-tinted and gilt-edged. The fellow has got a *billet-doux*!"

"Who is she, Shirley?" called half a dozen voices.

But Lieutenant Shirley crumpled the note in his hand, and rose abruptly from the table.

"Gentlemen—Sir Roland, you will have the goodness to excuse me. I regret extremely being obliged to leave you. Good-night!"

He had advanced to the door, opened it and disappeared before any of the company had recovered their maudlin senses sufficiently to call him back.

Mr. Sweet always had his senses about him; but that shining gentleman was wise in his generation, and he knew when Lieutenant Shirley's cheek paled, and brow knitted, and eye flashed, he was not exactly the person to be trifled with; so he only looked after him, and then at his wine, with a thoughtful smile. He would have given all the spare change he had about him to have donned an invisible cap, and walked after him through the silent streets, dimly lit by the raw coming morning, and to have jumped after him into the cab Lieutenant Shirley hailed and entered.

On he flew through the still streets, stopping at last be-

fore a quiet hotel in a retired part of the city. A muffled figure—a female figure—wrapped in a long cloak, and closely veiled, stood near the ladies' entrance, shivering under her wrappings in the chill morning blast. In one instant, Lieutenant Shirley had sprung out; in another, he had assisted her in, and taken the reins himself; and the next, he was riding away with break-neck speed, with his face to the rising sun.

CHAPTER II.

MOTHER AND SON.

A BROAD morning sunbeam, stealing in through satin curtains, fell on a heavy tapestry carpet, on rosewood furniture, pretty pictures, easy-chairs and ottomans, and on a round table, bright with damask, and silver, and china, standing in the middle of the handsome parlor. The table was set for breakfast, and the coffee, and the rolls, and the toast, and the cold tongue, were ready and waiting; but no one was in the room, save a spruce waiter, in a white jacket and apron, who arranged the eggs, and tongue, and toast artistically, and set up two chairs *vis-à-vis*, previous to taking his departure.

As he turned to go, the door opened, and a lady entered—a lady tall and graceful, proud and handsome with her fair hair combed back from her high-bred face. She wore a neatly fitting robe of silk and velvet, with lace drapery, and Lady Agnes Shirley managed to look in this superb toilet as stately and haughty as a duchess.

Her large light-blue eyes wandered round the room and rested on the obsequious young gentleman in the white jacket and apron.

"Has my son not arrived yet?" she said, in a voice that precisely suited her face—sweet, and cold, and clear.

"No, my lady; shall I——"

"You will go downstairs, and when he comes, you will ask him to step up here directly."

There was a quick, decided rap at the door. Lady

Agnes turned from the window, to which she had walked, as the waiter opened it, and admitted Lieutenant Cliffe Shirley.

"My dearest mother!"

"My dear boy!" And the proud, cold eyes lighted up with loving pride as he kissed her. "I thought I was never destined to see you again."

"Let me see. It is just two months since I left Clifton-lea—a frightful length of time, truly."

"My dear Cliffe, those two months were like two years to me!"

Lieutenant Cliffe, standing with the morning sunshine falling on his laughing face, made her a courtly bow.

"Ten thousand thanks for the compliment, mother mine. And was it to hunt up your scapegrace son, that you journeyed all the way to London?"

"Yes." She said it so gravely, that the smile died away on his lips, as she moved in her graceful way across to the table. "Have you had breakfast? But of course you have not; so sit down there, and I will pour out your coffee as if you were at home."

The young man sat down opposite her, took his napkin from its ring, and spread it with most delicate precision on his knees.

There was a resemblance between mother and son, though by no means a striking one. They had the same blonde hair, large blue eyes, and fair complexions—the same physical Saxon type; for the boast of the Cliffes was, that not one drop of Celtic or Norman blood ran in their veins—it was a pure, unadulterated Saxon stream, to be traced back to days long before the Conqueror entered England. But Lady Agnes' haughty pride and grand manner were entirely wanting in the laughing eyes and gay smile of her only son and heir, Cliffe.

"When did you come?" he asked, as he took his cup from her ladyship's hand.

"Yesterday. Did not my note tell you?"

"True! I forgot. How long do you remain?"

Lady Agnes buttered her roll with a grave face.

"That depends!" she quietly said.

"On what?"

"On you, my dear boy."

"Oh, in that case," said the lieutenant, with his bright

smile, "you will certainly remain until the end of the London season. Does Charlotte return the same time you do?"

"Who told you Charlotte was here at all?" said Lady Agnes, looking at him intently.

"I saw her with you last night at the theater, and little Leicester, too?"

"Were you in the box with Sir Roland, and the other two gentlemen, last night?"

"Yes. Don't look so shocked, my dear mother. How was I to get through all that crowd to your box? and besides, I was engaged to Sir Roland for supper at his rooms; we left before the afterpiece. By the way, I wonder you were not too much fatigued with your journey, both of you, to think of the theater."

"I was fatigued," said Lady Agnes, as she slowly stirred her coffee with one pearl-white hand, and gazed intently at her son; "but I went solely to see that actress—what do you call her? Vivia, or something of that sort, is it not?"

"Mademoiselle Vivia is her name," said the young man, blushing suddenly, probably because at that moment he took a sip of coffee scalding hot.

Lady Agnes shrugged her shapely shoulders, and curled her lip in a little, slighting, disdainful way peculiar to herself.

"A commonplace little thing as ever I saw. They told me she was pretty; but I confess when I saw that pallid face and immense black eyes, I never was so disappointed in my life. I don't fancy her acting either—it is a great deal too tragic; and I confess I am at a loss to know why people rave about her as they do."

"Bad taste, probably," said her son, laughing, and with quite recovered composure; "since you differ from them, and yours is indisputably perfect. But your visit to the theater was not thrown away after all, for you must know you made a conquest the first moment you entered. Did you see the man who sat beside Sir Roland, and stared so hard at your box?"

"The tall young gentleman with the sickly face? Yes."

"That was Lord Henry Lisle—you know the Lisles of Lisletown; and he fell desperately in love with you at first sight."

"Oh, nonsense! don't be absurd, Cliffe! I want you to be serious this morning, and talk sense."

"But it's a fact, upon my honor! Lisle did nothing but rave about you all the evening, and protested you were the prettiest woman in the house."

"Bah! Tell me about yourself, Cliffe—what have you been doing for the last two months?"

"Oh, millions of things! Been on parade, fought like a hero in the sham fights in the park, covered myself with glory in the reviews, made love, got into debt, went to the opera, and——"

"To the theater!" put in Lady Agnes, coolly.

"Certainly, to the theater! I could as soon exist without my dinner as without that!"

"Precisely so! I don't object to theaters, in the least," said Lady Agnes, transfixing him with her cold, blue eyes, "but when it comes to actresses, it is going a little too far. Cliffe, what are those stories that people are whispering about you, and that the birds of the air have borne even to C'ftonlea?"

"Stories about me! Haven't the first idea. What are they?"

"Don't equivocate, sir! Do you know what has brought me up to town in such haste?"

"You told me a few moments back, if my memory serves me, that it was to see me."

"Exactly! and to make you give me a final answer on a subject we have often discussed before."

"And what may that be, pray?"

"Matrimony!" said Lady Agnes, in her quiet, decided way.

Lieutenant Shirley, with his eyes fixed intently on his plate, began cutting a slice of toast thereon into minute squares, with as much precision as he had used in spreading his napkin.

"Ah, just so! A very pleasant subject, if you and I could only take the same view of it, which we don't. Do you want to have a daughter-in-law, to quarrel with at Castle Cliffe, so badly that you've come to the city to bring one home?"

"One thing I don't want, Lieutenant Shirley," said Lady Agnes, somewhat sharply, "is to see my son make a sentimental fool of himself! Your Cousin Charlotte is

here, and I want you to marry her and go abroad. I've been wishing to go to Rome myself for the last two or three months, and it will be an excellent opportunity to go with you."

"Thank you, mother! But, at the same time, I'm afraid you and my cousin Charlotte must hold me excused!" said the lieutenant, in his cool manner.

"What are your objections, sir?"

"Their name is legion. In the first place," said the young gentleman, beginning to count on his fingers, "she is five years older than I am; secondly, she is fat—couldn't possibly marry any one but a sylph; thirdly, she is a widow; the lady I raise to the happiness of Mrs. S—, must give me a heart that has had no former lodger; fourthly, she has a son, and I don't precisely fancy the idea of becoming, at the age of twenty, papa to a tall boy of six years; and fifthly, and lastly, and conclusively, she is my cousin, and I like her as such, and nothing more, and wouldn't marry her if she was the last woman in the world!"

Though this somewhat emphatic refusal was delivered in the coolest and most careless of tones, there was a determined fire in his blue eyes that told a different story.

Two crimson spots, all unusual there, were burning on the lady's fair cheeks ere he ceased, and her own eyes flashed blue flame, but her voice was perfectly calm and clear. Lady Agnes was too great a lady ever to get into so vulgar a thing as a passion.

"You refuse?"

"Most decidedly! Why, in Heaven's name, my dear mother, do you want me to take (with reverence be it said) that great slug for a wife!"

"And pray what earthly reasons are there why you should not take her? She is young and handsome, immensely rich, and of one of the first families in Derbyshire! It would be the best match in the world!"

"Yes, if I wanted to make a *mariage de convenance*. I am rich enough as it is, and Madam Charlotte may keep her guineas, and her black eyes, and her tropical person for whomsoever she pleases. Not all the wealth of the Indies would tempt me to marry that passionate, full-blown, high-blooded Cleopatra!"

One singular trait of Lieutenant Shirley was, that he

said the strongest and most pungent things in the coolest and quietest of tones. The fire in his lady mother's eyes was fierce, the spots on her cheeks hot and flaming, and in her voice there was a ringing tone of command.

"And your reasons!"

"I have given you half a dozen already, dear mother!"

"They are not worth thinking of; there must be a stronger one! Lieutenant Shirley, I demand to know what it is?"

"My good mother, be content! I hate this subject. Why cannot we let it rest."

"It shall never rest now! Speak, sir, I command!"

"Mother, what do you wish to know?"

"There is another reason for this obstinate refusal—what is it?"

"You had better not ask me—you will not like to know!"

"Out with it!"

"The very best reason in the world, then," he said, with his careless laugh. "I am married already!"

CHAPTER III.

"I LOVE IT AS IF IT WERE MY OWN."

A STORMY March morning was breaking over London. The rain and sleet, driven by the wind, beat and clamored against the windows, flew furiously through the streets, and out over grave-yards, brick-fields, marshes, and bleak commons, to the open country, where wind and sleet howled to the bare trees, and around cottages, as if the very spirit of the tempest was on the "rampage."

Most of these cottages, out among brick-yards and ghastly wastes of marsh, had their doors secured, and their shutters closely fastened, as if they, too, like their inmates, were fast asleep, and defied the storm. But there was one standing away from the rest, on the hillside, whose occupants, judging from appearances, were certainly not sleeping. Its two front windows were

bright with the illumination of fire and candle, and their light flared out red and lurid far over the desolate wastes. The shutters were open, the blinds up, and the vivid glare would have been a welcome sight to any storm-beaten traveler, had such been out that tempestuous March day; but nobody was foolhardy enough to be abroad at that dismal hour of that dismal morning; and the man who sat before the great wood fire in the principal room of the cottage, though he listened and watched, like sister Anne on the tower-top, for somebody's coming, that somebody came not, and he and his matin meditations were left undisturbed.

He was a young man, sunburned and good-looking—a laborer unmistakably, though dressed in his best, and with his chair drawn up close to the fire, and a boot on each andiron, he drowsily smoked a short clay pipe.

The room was as neat and clean as any room could be, the floor faultlessly sanded, the poor furniture deftly arranged, and all looked cozy and cheerful in the ruddy firelight.

There was nobody else in the room, and the rattling of the rain and sleet against the windows, the dull roar of the fire, and the sharp chirping of a cricket on the hearth, were the only sounds that broke the silence. Yes, there was another; once or twice, while the man sat and smoked, and nodded, and listened to the storm, there had been the feeble cry of an infant; and at such times he had started and looked uneasily at a door behind him, opening evidently into another room. As a little Dutch clock on the mantelpiece chimed, slowly, six, this door opened, and a young, fair-haired, pretty woman came out. Her eyes were red and swollen with weeping, and she carried a great bundle of something rolled in flannel carefully in her arms.

The man looked up inquisitively, and took the pipe out of his mouth.

"Well?" he pettishly asked.

"Oh, poor dear, she is gone at last!" said the woman, breaking out into a fresh shower of tears. "She has just departed! 'I feel tired, and if you will take the baby I will try to sleep now,' she says, and then she kisses it with her own pretty, loving smile; and I takes it up, and she just turns her face to the wall and dies. Oh, poor

dear young lady!" with another tender-hearted tempest of sobs.

"How uncommon sudden!" said the man, looking meditatively at the fire. "Is that the baby?"

"Yes, the pretty little dear! Do look how sweetly it sleeps."

The young woman unrolled the bundle of flannel, and displayed an infant of very tender age indeed—inasmuch as it could not have been a week old—simmering therein. It was very much like any other young baby in that fresh and green stage of existence, having only one peculiarity, that it was the merest trifle of a baby ever was seen. A decent wax-doll would have been a giantess beside it. The mite of a creature, void of hair, and eyebrows, and nails, sleeping so quietly in a sea of white flannel, might have gone into a quart-mug, and found the premises too extensive for it at that. John looked at it as men do look at very new babies, with a solemn and awe-struck face.

"It's a very small baby, isn't it?" he remarked, in a subdued tone. "I should be afraid to lay my finger on it, for fear of crushing it to death. It's a girl, you told me, didn't you?"

"To be sure it's a girl, bless its little heart! Will you come and look at the young lady, John?"

John got up and followed his wife into the inner room. It was a bedroom; like the apartment they had left, very neat; but, unlike that, very tastefully furnished. The floor had a pretty carpet of green and white; its windows were draped with white and green silk. A pretty toilet-table, under a large gilt-framed mirror, with a handsome dressing-case thereon, was in one corner; a guitar and music-rack in another; a lounge with green silk cushions in a third; and, in a fourth, a French bedstead, all draped and covered with white. Near the bed stood a round gilded stand, strewn with vials, medicine bottles, and glasses; beside it, a great sleepy-hollow of an arm-chair, also cushioned with green silk; and on the bed lay the mistress and owner of all these pretty things, who had left them, and all other things earthly, forever.

A shaded lamp stood on the dressing-table. The woman took it up and held it so that its light fell full on the dead face—a lovely face, whiter than alabaster; a slight smile lingering round the parted lips; the black

lashes lying at rest on the pure cheek ; the black, arched eyebrows sharply traced against the white, smooth brow, stamped with the majestic seal of death. A profusion of curling hair, of purplish black luster, streamed over the white pillow and her own delicate white night-robe. One arm was under her head, as she had often lain in life ; and the other, which was outside of the clothes, was already cold and stiff.

Man and woman gazed in awe—neither spoke. The still majesty of the face hushed them ; and the man, after looking for a moment, turned and walked out on tiptoe, as if afraid to wake the calm sleeper. The woman drew the sheet reverently over the face, laid the sleeping baby among the soft cushions of the lounge, followed her husband to the outer room, and closed the door. He resumed his seat and looked seriously into the fire ; and she stood beside him, with one hand resting on his shoulder, and crying softly still.

“Poor, dear lady ! To think that she should die away from all her friends like this, and she so young and beautiful, too !”

“Young and beautiful folks must die, as well as old and ugly ones, when their time comes,” said the man, with a touch of philosophy. “But this one is uncommon handsome, no mistake. And so you don’t know her name, Jenny ?”

“No,” said Jenny, shaking her head, thoughtfully ; “her and him—that’s the young gentleman, you know—came, bright and early, one morning in a coach ; and he said he had heard we were poor folks and lately married, and would not object to taking a lodger for a little while, if she paid well and gave no trouble. Of course, I was glad to jump at the offer ; and he gave me twenty guineas to begin with, and told me to have the room furnished, and not say anything about my lodger to anybody. The young lady seemed to be ill then, and was shivering with cold ; but she was patient as an angel, and smiled and thanked me like one for everything I did for her. And that’s the whole story ; and the young gentleman has never been here since.”

“And that’s—how long ago is that ?”

“Three weeks to-morrow. You just went to London that very morning, yourself, you remember, John.”

"I remember," said John; "and my opinion is, the young gentleman is a scamp, and the young lady no better nor she ought to be."

"I don't believe it," retorts his wife, with spirit. "She's a angel in that bedroom, if ever there was one! Only yesterday, when the doctor told her she was a-dying, she asked for pen and ink to write to her husband, and she said if he was living it would bring him to her before she died yet—poor, dear darling!"

"But it didn't do it, though!" said John, with a triumphant grin; "and I don't believe——"

Here John's words were jerked out of his mouth, as it were, by the furious gallop of a horse through the rain; and the next moment there was a thundering knock at the door that made the cottage shake.

John sprang up and opened it, and there entered the dripping form of a man, wearing a long cloak, and with his military cap pulled over his face to shield it from the storm. Before the door was closed, the cloak and cap were off, and the woman saw the face of the handsome young gentleman who had brought her lodger there. But that face was changed now; it was as thin and bloodless almost as that of the quiet sleeper in the other room, and there was something of fierce intensity in his eager eyes.

At the sight of him, Jenny put her apron over her face, and broke out into a fresh shower of sobs.

"Where is she?" he asked, through his closed teeth.

The woman opened the bedroom door, and he followed her in. At sight of the white shape lying so dreadfully still under the sheet, he recoiled; but the next moment he was beside the bed. Jenny laid her hand on the sheet to draw it down; he laid his there, too; the chill of death struck to his heart, and he lifted her hand away.

"No!" he said, hoarsely; "let it be. When did she die?"

"Not half an hour ago, sir."

"You had a doctor?"

"Yes, sir; he came every day. He came last night, but he could do nothing for her."

"Is that man in the next room your husband?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Tell him, then, to go and purchase a coffin, and order the sexton to have the grave prepared by this

evening. In twenty-four hours I leave England forever, and I must see her laid in the grave before I depart."

"And the baby, sir?" said the woman, timidly, half-frightened by his stern, almost harsh tone. "Will you not look at it? Here it is."

"No!" said the young man fiercely. "Take it, and begone!"

Jenny snatched up the baby, and fled in dismay; and the young man sat down beside his dead, and laid his face on the pillow where the dead face lay. Rain and hail still lashed the windows, the wind shrieked in dismal blasts over the bare brick-fields and bleak common. Morning was lifting a dull and leaden eye over the distant hills, and the new-born day gave promise of turning out very sullen and dreary.

"Blessed is the corpse that the rain rains on!" and so Jenny thought, as she laid the baby on her own bed, and watched her husband plunging through the rain and wind on his doleful errand.

The dark, sad hours stole on, and the solitary watcher in the room of death kept his vigil undisturbed. Breakfast and dinner hour passed, and Jenny's hospitable heart ached to think that the young gentleman had not a mouthful to eat all the blessed time; but she would not have taken broad England and venture to open that door uninvited again. And so, while the storm raged without, the lamp flared on the dressing-table, the dark, wintry day stole on, and the lonely watcher sat there still.

It was within an hour of dusk, and Jenny sat by the fire, singing a soft lullaby to the baby, when the door opened, and he stood before her, like a tall, dark ghost.

"Has the coffin come?" he asked.

And Jenny started up, and nearly dropped the baby, with a shriek, at the hoarse and hollow sound of his voice.

"Oh, yes, sir; there it is!"

The dismal thing looked black and ominous as it rested near the opposite wall. He just glanced at it, and then back again at her.

"And the grave has been dug?"

"Yes, sir; and, if you please, the undertaker has sent his hearse, and, on account of the rain, it is waiting now in the shed. My John is there too. I will call him in, sir, if you please."

He made a gesture in the affirmative, and Jenny flew out to do her errand.

When she returned with her John, the young man assisted him in laying the dead form within the coffin, and they both carried it to the door and placed it reverently within the hearse.

"You will come back, sir, won't you?" ventured Jenny, standing at the door, and weeping incessantly behind her apron.

"Yes, go on!"

The hearse started, and John and the stranger followed to the last resting-place of her lying within. It was all dreary, the darkening sky, the drenched earth, the gloomy hearse, and the two solitary figures following silently after, with bowed heads, through the beating storm.

Luckily the church-yard was near. The sexton, at sight of them, ran off for the clergyman, who, shivering and reluctant, appeared on the scene just as the coffin was lowered to the ground.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!" The beautiful burial-service of the English Church was over. The coffin was lowered, and the sods went rattling drearily down on the lid.

The young man stood bareheaded, his auburn hair fluttering in the wind, and the storm beating unheeded on his head. John was bareheaded, too, much against his will; but the clergyman ran home with unclerical haste the moment the last word was uttered; and the sexton shoveled and beat down the sods with professional indifference.

Just then, fluttering in the wind, a figure came through the leaden twilight. The young man lifted his gloomy eyes, and the new-comer his hat. He had yellow hair, and a jaundice complexion, and his overcoat was a sort of yellowish brown. In short, it was Mr. Sylvester Sweet.

"Good-morning, Lieutenant Shirley! Who in the world would expect to meet you here? Not lost a friend, I hope."

"Have the goodness to excuse me, Mr. Sweet. I wish to be alone," was the cold and haughty reply.

And Mr. Sweet, with an angel smile rippling all over his face, left accordingly, and disappeared in the dismal gloaming.

With the last sod beaten down, the sexton departed, and John went slowly to the gate, to wait, in wet impatience, for the young gentleman. Standing at his post, he saw that same young gentleman kneel down on the soaking sods, lean his arm on the rude wooden cross the sexton had thrust at the head of the grave, and lay his face thereon.

So long did he kneel there, with the cold March rain beating down on his uncovered head, that John's teeth were chattering, and an inky darkness was falling over the city of the dead. But he rose at last, and came striding to his side, passed him with tremendous sweeps of limb, and was standing, dripping like a water-god, before the kitchen fire when the good man of the house entered.

Jenny was in a low chair, with the baby on her lap, still sleeping—its principal occupation, apparently—and he looked at it with a cold, steady glance, very like that of his lady mother.

"I am going to leave England," he said, addressing them both, when John entered. "In twenty-four hours I am going to India, and if I should never come back, what will you do with that child?"

"Keep it always," said Jenny, kissing it. "Dear little thing! I love it already as if it were my own!"

"If I live, it will not only be provided for, but you will be well paid for your trouble. You can take this as a guarantee of the future; and so, good-bye!"

He dropped a purse heavy with guineas into John's willing palm; then going over, looked at the sleeping infant, with a cold, set face, for one instant, and then, stooping down, touched his lips lightly to its velvet cheek; and then, wrapping his cloak closely around him, and pulling his military cap far over his brows, he went out into the wild, black night.

They heard his horse's hoofs splashing over the marshy common, and they knew not even the name of the "marble guest" who came and disappeared as mysteriously as the black horseman in the German tale.

And so the world went on its course! In her far-off home, amid the green hills and golden Sussex downs, sat a lady, whose pride was so much stronger than her love, that by her own act she had made herself a childless,

broken-hearted woman. Steaming down the Thames, in a great transport, a young officer stood, with folded arms, watching the receding shores he might never see again, whose love was so much stronger than his pride, that he was leaving his native land with a prayer in his heart that some Sepoy bullet might lay him dead under the blazing Indian sky. And, sleeping in her cottage home, all unconscious of the destiny before her, lay the little heiress.

CHAPTER IV.

TWELVE YEARS AFTER.

THE great bell of Clifton Cathedral was just ringing the hour of five. The early morning was dim with hazy mist, but the sky was blue and cloudless, and away in the east a crimson glory was spreading, the herald of the rising sun.

Early as the hour was, all was bustle and busy life in the town of Cliftonlea. You would have thought, had you seen the concourse of people in High Street, it was noon instead of five in the morning. Windows, too, were opening in every direction, night-capped heads being popped out, anxious glances being cast at the sky, and then the night-caps were popped in again, the windows slammed down, and everybody making their toilet, eager to be out.

Usually, Cliftonlea was as quiet and well-behaved a town as any in England, but on the night previous to this memorable morning its two serene guardian angels, Peace and Quietness, had taken unto themselves wings and flown far away. The clatter of horses and wheels had made night hideous; the jingling of bells, and shouts of children, and the tramp of numberless footsteps, had awoke the dull echoes from nightfall till day-dawn. In short, not to keep any one in suspense, this was the first day of the annual Cliftonlea Races—and Bartlemy Fair, in the days of Henry the Eighth, was not a circumstance to the Cliftonlea Races.

Nobody in the whole town, under the sensible and settled age of thirty, thought of eating a mouthful that morning ; it was sacrilege to think of such a groveling matter as breakfast on the first glorious day ; and so new coats and hats, and smart dresses, were donned, and all the young folks came pouring out in one continuous stream toward the scene of action.

The long, winding road of three miles between Cliftonlea and the race-course, on common everyday days, was the pleasantest road in the world—bordered with fragrant hawthorn hedges, with great waving fields of grain and clover on each hand, and shadowed here and there with giant beeches and elms. But it was not a particularly cool or tranquil tramp on this morning, for the throng of vehicles and foot-passengers was fearful, and the clouds of dust more frightful still. There were huge refreshment caravans, whole troops of strolling players, gangs of gypsies, wandering minstrels, and all such roving vagabonds, great booths on four wheels, carts, drays, wagons, and every species of conveyance imaginable. There were equestrians, too, chiefly mounted on mules and donkeys ; there were jingling of bells, and no end of shouting, cursing, and vociferating, so that it was the liveliest morning that road had known for at least twelve months.

There rose the brightest of suns, and the bluest of skies, scorching and glaring hot. The volumes of dust were awful, and came rolling even into the town ; but still the road was crowded, and still the cry was, "They come !" But the people and vehicles which passed were of another nature now. The great caravans and huge carts had almost ceased, and young England came flashing along in tandems, and dog-carts, and flies, and four-in-hands, or mounted on prancing steeds. The officers, from the Cliftonlea barracks—dashing dragoons, in splendid uniforms—flew like the wind through the dust, and sporting country gentlemen in top boots and jaunty caps, and fox-hunters in pink, and betting men and blacklegs, book in hand, followed, as if life and death depended on their haste.

In two or three more hours came another change—superb barouches, broughams, phaetons, grand carriages, with coachmen and footmen in livery, magnificent horses, in silver harness, rich hammer-cloths, with coats of arms

emblazoned thereon, came rolling splendidly up, filled with gayly dressed ladies. All the great folks for fifty miles round came to the Cliftonlea Races; even the Right Reverend, the Bishop of Cliftonlea, deigned to come there himself.

And the scene on the race-ground—who shall describe it? The circuses, the theaters, the refreshment booths, the numerous places of amusement and traps for catching money; the hundreds and hundreds of people running hither and thither over the green sward in one living sea; the long array of carriages drawn up near the race-ground, and filled with such dazzling visions of glancing silk and fluttering lace, waving plumes and beautiful faces. Then the air was filled with music from the countless performers, making up a diversified concert, not unpleasant to listen to; and over all there was the cloudless blue sky and blazing August sun.

A group of officers standing near the course, betting-books in hands, were discussing the merits of the rival racers and taking down wagers. *Vivia*, owned by Sir Roland Cliffe of Cliftonlea, and *Lady Agnes*, owned by Lord Henry Lisle, of Lisleham, were the favorites that day.

"Two to one on *Vivia*!" cried Captain Douglas, of the Light Dragoons.

"Done!" cried a brother officer. "I am ready to back the *Lady Agnes* against any odds."

The bets were booked, and as Captain Douglas put his betting-book in his pocket with a smile on his lip, and his quick eye glanced far and wide, he suddenly exclaimed:

And here comes the *Lady Agnes* herself, looking stately as a queen and fair as a lily, as she always does."

"Where?" said his superior officer, old Major Warwick, looking helplessly round through his spectacles. "I thought *Lady Agnes* was a roan."

"I don't mean the red mare," said Captain Douglas, laughing, "but the real *Lady Agnes* herself—*Lady Agnes Shirley*. There she sits, like a princess in a play, in that superb pony-phaeton."

"Handsome woman in *Sussex*," lisped a young ensign, "and worth no end of tin. That's her nephew, young *Shirley*, driving, and who is that little fright in the back seat?"

"That's her niece, little Maggie Shirley, and, they say, the heiress of Castle Cliffe."

"How can that be?" said the major. "I thought the estate was entailed."

"The Shirley estates are, but the castle and the village adjoining were the wedding-dower of Lady Agnes Cliffe when she married Doctor Shirley. So, though the Shirley property is strictly entailed to the nearest of kin, Lady Agnes can leave Castle Cliffe to her kitchen maid if she likes."

"Has she no children of her own?" asked the major, who was a stranger in Cliftonlea, and a little stupid about pedigree.

"None now; she had a son, Cliffe Shirley—splendid fellow he was, too! He was one of us, and as brave as a lion. We served together some years in India. I remember him well. There was not a man in the whole regiment who would not have died for him; but he was a discarded son."

"How was that? Lady Agnes looks more like an angel than a vindictive mother."

"Oh, your female angels often turn out to have the heart of Old Nick himself," said Captain Douglas, complacently stroking his mustache. "I don't mean to say she has, you know; but those Cliffes are infernally proud people. They all are. I have known some of their distant cousins, and so on, poor as Job's turkey, and proud as Lucifer. Cliffe Shirley committed that most heinous of social crimes—a low marriage. There was the dickens to pay, of course, when my lady yonder heard it; and the upshot was, the poor fellow was disinherited. His wife died a year after the marriage; but he had a daughter. I remember his telling me of her a thousand times, with the stars of India shining down on our bivouac. Poor Cliffe! he was a glorious fellow! but I have heard he was killed since I came home, scaling the walls of Monagoola, or some such place."

"Whom did he marry?"

"I forget now. He never would speak of his wife; but I have heard she was a ballet-dancer, or opera-singer, or something of that sort."

"All wrong," said a voice at his elbow; and there stood Lord Henry Lisle, tapping his boots with a cane and

listening intently. "I know the whole story. She was a French actress. You've seen her a score of times. Don't you remember Mademoiselle Vivia who took all London by storm some twelve years ago?"

"Of course I do. Ah, what eyes that girl had! And then she disappeared so mysteriously, nobody ever knew what became of her."

"I know. Cliffe Shirley married her, and she died, as you have said, a year after."

Captain Douglas gave an intensely long whistle of astonishment.

"Oh, that was the way of it, then? No wonder his lady mother was outrageous. A Cliffe marry an actress!"

"Just so," drawled Lord Lisle. "And if her son hadn't married her, her brother would. Sir Roland nearly went distracted about her."

"Oh, nonsense! He married that black-eyed widow—that Cousin Charlotte of his, with the little boy—in half a year after."

"It's true, though. I never saw any one half so frantically in love; and he hasn't forgotten her yet, as you may see by his naming his black mare after her."

Captain Douglas laughed.

"And is it for the same reason you have named your red racer after Lady Agnes—eh, Lisle?"

Lord Lisle actually blushed. Everybody knew how infatuated the insipid young peer was about the haughty lady of Castle Cliffe, who might have been his mother; and everybody laughed at him, except the lady herself, who, in an uplifted sort of way, was splendidly and serenely scornful.

"Lovely creature!" lisped the ensign. "And those ponies must be worth a thousand guineas if they're worth one."

"How much? Where is she? Is she here?" cried Lord Lisle, who was, mentally and physicaly, rather obtuse, staring around him. "Oh, I see her: Excuse me, gentlemen; I must pay my respects."

Off went Lord Lisle, like a bolt from a bow. The officers looked at each other, and laughed.

"Now you'll see the grandly disdainful reception he'll get," said Captain Douglas. "The queenly descendant of the Cliffes treats the lately fledged lordling as if he

were her footboy; and probably his grandfather shoed her grandfather's horses."

The whole group were looking toward the glittering file of carriages, drawn up near the end of which was an exquisite phaeton, drawn by two beautifully matched ponies of creamy whiteness.

The phaeton had three occupants—a lady looking still young and still beautiful, and eminently distinguished, dressed in flowing robes of black barege, with a costly lace shawl, gracefully worn more like drapery than a shawl half slipping off one shoulder, daintily gloved in black kid, and wearing a black tulle bonnet, contrasting exquisitely with the pearly fairness of the proud face, and shining bandeaux of flaxen hair. In those flaxen bandeaux not one gray hair was visible; and leaning back with languid hauteur, she looked a proud, indolent, elegant woman of the world, but not a widow wearing mourning for her only son. Lady Agnes Shirley might have felt sorrowful—widows with only sons mostly do—but certainly the world knew nothing of it. Her heart might break; but she was one who could suffer and make no sign.

Sitting beside her, and holding the reins, pointing everything out to her with vivid animation, talking with the greatest volubility, and gesticulating with the utmost earnestness, was a tall, dark-eyed, dark-haired, good-looking young giant, who, although only sixteen, was six feet high, and told his friends he wasn't half done growing yet. He was Tom Shirley, an orphan, the son of Lady Agnes' late husband's youngest brother, now resident at Castle Cliffe, and senior boy in the College School of Cliftonlea. And that was Master Tom's whole past history, except that he was the best natured, impetuous, fiery, rough, kind-hearted young giant, whose loud voice and long strides brought uproar everywhere he went.

There was a third figure in the back seat—a small girl, who looked ten and who was in reality fifteen years old—Miss Margaret Shirley, the daughter of Doctor Shirley's second brother—like Tom, an orphan, and dependent on her aunt. She was dressed in bright rose silk, wore a pretty summer-hat trimmed with rose ribbons; but the bright colors of robe and chapeau contrasted harshly with

her dark, pale face. It was a wan, sickly, solemn, unsmiling little visage as ever child wore; with large, hollow gray eyes, neither bright nor expressive; sharp, pinched features, and altogether an inexplicably cowed and subdued look. Her hair was pretty—the only pretty thing about her—dark, and thick, and curly, as the hair of all the Shirleys was; but it could not relieve the solemn, sallow face, the pinched, angular figure, and everybody wondered what Lady Agnes could see in that homely girl, and shrugged their shoulders to think that she should reign in Castle Cliffe, the beauty of whose mistress had always been the country's boast.

The knot of officers watching Lord Lisle had all their expectations realized. His profound bow received only the slightest and coldest answering bend of the haughty head. Then Tom Shirley jumped from the carriage, and digging his elbow into everybody's ribs who came in his way, tore like a fiery meteor through the crowd.

Then the horses were starting, and the officers had no time to think of anything else. For some time Vivia and Lady Agnes kept neck and neck. The excitement and betting were immense. Captain Douglas doubled his wager—Vivia went ahead—a shout arose—she kept ahead—Lady Agnes was beaten! and Vivia, amid a tremendous cheer, came triumphantly in the winner.

"That's three thousand pounds in my pocket," said Captain Douglas, coolly. "Hallo, Shirley! What's the row?"

For Tom Shirley was tearing along, very red in the face, his elbows in the ribs of society, and looking as much like a distracted meteor as ever. He halted in a high state of excitement at the captain's salute.

"The most glorious sight! Such a girl! You ought to see her! She's positively stunning!"

"Who's stunning, Tom? Don't be in a hurry to answer. You're completely blown."

"I'll be blown again, then, if I stop talking here. If you want to see her come along and look for yourself."

"I'm your man!" said the captain, thrusting his arm through Tom's, and sticking his other elbow, after that spirited young gentleman's fashion, into the sides of everybody who opposed him. "And now relieve my curiosity, like a good fellow, as we go along."

"Oh, it's a tight-rope dancer!" said Tom. "Make haste, or you won't see her, and it's a sight to see, I tell you!"

"Is she pretty, Tom?"

"A regular trump!" said Tom. "Get out of my way, you old kangaroo, or I'll pitch you into the middle of next week."

This last apostrophe was addressed to a stout gentleman, who came along panting, and snorting, and mopping his face. And as the old gentleman and everybody else got out of the way of this human whirlwind, Tom and Captain Douglas soon found themselves before a large canvas tent, around which an immense concourse of people, young and old, were gathered. A great pole, fifty feet high, stuck up through the middle of this tent, and from it a thick wire-rope came slanting to the ground. Two or three big men, in bright uniforms of scarlet and yellow, were keeping the multitude away from this, and a band of modern troubadours, with brass instruments in their mouths, were discoursing the "British Grenadiers." A very little boy was beating a big drum in a very large way, so that when the captain spoke, he had to shout as people do through an ear-trumpet.

"How are we to get through this crowd to the tent, if the damsel you speak of is within it?"

"Oh, she'll be out presently!" said Tom; "she is going to give the common herd a specimen of her powers, by climbing up to the dizzy top of that pole, and dancing the polka mazurka, or an Irish jig, or something of that sort, on the top. And while we are waiting for her, just look here!"

The captain looked. On every hand there were huge placards with letters two feet long, in every color of the rainbow, so that he who ran might read, and the text of these loud posters was somewhat in this fashion:

UNRIVALED ATTRACTION!

THE INFANT VENUS!

The Pet and Favorite of the Royal Family, the Nobility, and Gentry of England!

Come one! Come all!

The Infant Venus! The Infant Venus!! The Infant Venus!!!

Admission, 6d. Children, half price.

By the time the captain had got to the end of this absorbing piece of literature, a murmuring and swaying motion of the crowd told him that the Infant Venus herself had appeared in the outer world. There was a suppressed rush—the men in scarlet jackets flourished their batons dangerously near the noses of the dear public. There was an excited murmur: "Where is she?" "What is she like?" "Oh, I can't see her!" And everybody's eyes were starting out of their sockets to make sure that the Infant Venus was of real flesh and blood, and not an optical illusion.

But soon they were satisfied. A glittering figure, sparkling and shining like the sunlight from head to foot, bearing the Union Jack of Old England in either hand, went fluttering up this slender wire. The crowd held its breath, the music changed to a quick, wild measure, and the beautiful vision floated up in the sunshine, keeping time to the exciting strain.

It was the light, slender figure of a girl of thirteen or fourteen, with the little tapering feet gleaming in spangled slippers of white satin, the slight form arrayed in a short white gossamer skirt reaching to the knee, and, like the slippers, all over silver spangles. Down over the bare white shoulders waved such a glorious fall of golden-bronze hair, half waves, half curls, such as few children ever had before; and the shining tresses were crowned with ivy leaves and white roses. The face was as beautiful as the hair, but instead of the blue or brown eyes that should have gone with it, they were of intensest black, and veiled by sweeping lashes of the same color.

The music arose, quicker and faster; the silvery vision, scintillating and shining, flashed up, and up, and up, with her waving flags, till she looked like a bright, white speck against the blue summer sky, and the lookers-on hushed the very beating of their hearts. One false step—one dizzy turn, and that white frock will cover a bleeding and mangled little form, and the bronze hair will be crimson in blood. But she is at the top; she is looking down upon them; she waves her flags triumphantly in her eagle eyrie, and a mighty cheer goes up from a hundred throats, that makes the whole plain ring.

Now the music changes again; it grows slower, and the fairy in silver spangles begins to descend. If she

should miss, even now ! But no, she is on the ground even before they can realize it, and then there is another shout louder than the first ; the band strikes up an " *Io Triomphe*," and Tom and the captain take off their own hats, and cheer louder than any of the rest. And the brave little beauty bows right and left, and vanishes like any other fairy, and is seen no more.

" Didn't I tell you she was stunning ! " cried Tom, exultingly.

" Tom, you're an oracle ! Is she going to do anything within ? "

" Lots of things—look at that rush ? "

There was a rush, sure enough. The doors had been opened, and everybody was scrambling in pellmell. Sixpences and threepences were flying about like hail-stones in a March storm, and women and children were getting torn and " squeezed to death."

Tom and the captain fought their way through with the rest. Two people were taking money at the door in which they entered—a man and a woman. They paid their sixpences, made a rush for a seat, and took it in triumph. Still the crowd poured in—it might have been the beauty of the girl, her dizzying walk up the wire-rope, or the rumor of her dancing, that brought them, but certainly the canvas tent was filled from its sawdust pit to its tented roof.

They were not kept long waiting for the rising of the curtain—the same thing was to be played at least half a dozen times that day, so the moments were precious, and the solemn green curtain went up in ten minutes, and they saw the youthful Venus rise up from the sea-foam, with her beautiful hair unbound, and floating around her, her white robes trailing in the brine, and King Neptune and Queen Amphitrite, and their Mermaid court, and the Graces and attendant Sylphs, all around her. The scene was all sea and moonlight ; and Venus floated, in her white dress, across the moonlit stage, like a fairy in a magic ring.

The tent shook with the applause ; and nobody ever danced in trailing robes as she did then. The contest for the crown of beauty arose—Juno, Minerva, and Venus were all there ; and so was the arbiter and judge. Oh, what another storm of applause there was when Paris

gave Venus the gold apple, and Juno and Minerva danced a *pas de deux* of exasperation, and she floated round them like a spirit of a dream. And then Venus bowed and smiled at the audience, and kissed her finger-tips to them, and vanished behind the green curtain; and then it was all over, and everybody was pouring out in ecstasies of delight.

"Isn't she splendid?" cried Tom, in transport. "She beats the ballet-dancers I saw when I was in London, all to sticks. And then she is as good-looking as an enchanted princess in the 'Arabian Nights!'"

"My dear Tom, moderate your transports. I wonder if there's any way of finding out anything more about her? I must confess to feeling a trifle interested in her myself."

"Let us ask the old codger at the door."

"Agreed."

The twain made their way to the door, where the old codger, as Tom had styled the black-browed, sullen looking man who had taken the money, stood counting over his gains with his female companion—a little, stooping, sharp-eyed, vixenish-looking old woman. The man looked up as Captain Douglas lightly touched him on the shoulder.

"See here, my friend, that is a very pretty little girl you have there!"

"Glad you like her!" said the man, with a sort of growl.

"I thought you would be. What's her name?"

"Her name? Can't you read? Her name is out there on them bills! Don't you see she is the Infant Venus?"

"But I presume, for the common uses of everyday life, she has another? Come, old fellow, don't be disobliging—let's hear it."

"Not as I know on," growled the questioned one, civilly.

Tom, combating a severe mental resolve to punch his head, then drew out a sovereign instead, and flourished it before his eyes.

"Look here, old chap! tell us all about her, and I'll give you this."

"I'll tell you!" said the old woman, snapping with

vicious eagerness at the money. "She's his daughter, and I'm his mother, and she's my granddaughter, and her name's Barbara Black! Give it here!"

Before Tom could recover his breath, jerked out of him by the volubility with which this confession was poured forth, the old woman had snatched the coin out of his hand, and was thrusting it, with a handful of silver, into her pocket, when a pleasant voice behind her exclaimed:

"Dear little Barbara, the prettiest little fairy that ever was seen, and the very image of her charming grandmother!"

All looked at the speaker—a gentleman in a canary-colored waistcoat, wearing gold studs and breastpin, a gold watch-chain, with a profusion of shimmering gold charms attached, a lemon-colored glove on one hand, and a great gold ring on the other, with a yellow seal that reached nearly to the second joint; a saffronish complexion, and yellow hair, that seemed to encircle his head like a glory—a gentleman who glittered in the sunlight almost as much as the Infant Venus herself, and whose cheerful face wore the pleasantest of smiles—a gentleman to make you smile from sympathy as you looked at him, and not at all to be afraid of; but as the grandmother of the Infant Venus had turned her eyes upon him, she uttered a terrified scream, dropped the handful of gold and silver, and fled.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRODIGAL SON.

"Ah, Sweet, how are you?" said Tom, nodding familiarly to the new-comer. "What the dickens ails the old girl?"

"A hard question to answer. She is out a little, you know" (Mr. Sweet tapped his forehead significantly with his forefinger, and looked at the man), "just a little here!"

"Can we speak to the Infant Venus?" asked Tom of the old codger.

"I tell you what, gents," was the angry reply, "I want you three to clear out of this! There are other ladies and gents a-coming in, and I can't be having you a-loitering round here all day! Come!"

"Quite right," said Mr. Sweet, in his pleasant way. "Mr. Tom, I heard Lady Agnes asking for you a short time ago. Captain Douglas, the major told me to say, if I found you, he had a little commission for you to execute. Mr. Tom, I believe her ladyship wishes to go home."

"All right!" said Tom boyishly, moving away arm-in-arm with the captain; and turning his head as he went. "Give my love to Barbara, you old bear, and don't let her be risking her precious little neck climbing that horrid wire, or I'll break your head for you. *Au revoir!*"

With which gentle valedictory Tom and the captain moved away; and the doorkeeper looked after them with a growl; but he growled more when he found Mr. Sweet standing still before him, gazing up in his face with a soft smile, and showing no signs of moving.

"Come! get out of this!" he began, gruffly.

"Oh, no!" said Mr. Sweet. "By no means; not at all; not yet. 'Tis just the hour." Moore found that out, you know. I want to see the old lady who ran away."

"You will want it then! Be off, I tell you!"

"My dear fellow, don't raise your voice in that unpleasant manner. People will hear you, and I'm sure you would regret it after. Do lead me to that dear old lady again—your mother, I think you said."

And Mr. Sweet patted him soothingly on the back.

"I'll break your neck," cried the exasperated man, snatching up a cudgel that stood beside him, and flourishing it in a way that showed he was most unpleasantly in earnest, "if you stay another minute here!"

The two men were looking straight at each other—the one with furious eyes, the other perfectly serene.

There is a magnetism, they say, in a calm, commanding human eye that can make an enraged tiger crouch and tremble. Mr. Sweet's eyes were very small, and were mostly hidden under two thick, yellow eyebrows;

but they were wonderful eyes for all that. The man with the stick was a big, stout fellow, who would have made two of him easily ; but he slowly dropped his stick and his eyes, and crouched like a whipped hound before his master.

"What do you want?" he demanded, with his customary growl, "a-coming and bullying a man what's been and done nothing to you. I wish you would clear out. There's customers a-coming in, and you're in the way."

"But I couldn't think of such a thing," said Mr. Sweet, laughing. "I couldn't, indeed, until I've seen the old lady. Dear old lady! do take me to her, my friend."

Muttering to himself, but still cowed, the man led on through the rows of benches, pushed aside the green curtain, and jumped on the low stage. Mr. Sweet followed, and entered with him the temporary greenroom, pausing in the doorway to survey it.

A horrible place, full of litter, and dirt, and disorder, and painted men and women, and children, and noise, and racket, and uproar. There was a row of little looking-glasses stuck all round the wall, and some of the players were standing before them, looking unutterably ghastly with one cheek painted blooming red, and the other of a grisly whiteness. And in the midst of all this confusion "worse confounded," there sat the Infant Venus, looking as beautiful off the stage as she had done on it, and needing no paint or tawdry tinsel to make her so. And there, crouching down in the farthest corner, horribly frightened, as every feature of her old face showed, was the dear old lady they were in search of.

The noise ceased at the entrance of the stranger, and all paused in their manifold occupations to stare, and the old woman crouched farther away in her corner, and held out her shaking hands as if to keep him off. But Mr. Sweet, in his benevolent designs, was not one to be so easily kept off ; and he went over and patted the old lady encouragingly on the back as he had done her son.

"My good old soul, don't be so nervous ! There is no earthly reason why you should tremble and look like this. I wouldn't hurt a fly, I wouldn't. Do compose yourself, and tell me what is the matter."

The old woman made an effort to speak, but her teeth chattered in her head.

“You said you were—you said——”

“Precisely! That was exactly what I said, that I was going to America; but I haven't gone, you see. I couldn't leave England, I couldn't really.

“‘England, my country, great and free,
Heart of the world, I leap to thee!’

and all that sort of thing, you know. “What! you're shaking yet. Oh, now, really, you mustn't; it quite hurts my feelings to see one at your time of life taking on in this fashion. Permit me to help you up, and assist you to a chair. There is none! Very well; this candle-box will do beautifully.”

With which Mr. Sweet assisted the old lady to arise, placed her on the box, amid the wondering company, and, smiling in his pleasant way around on them all, pursued his discourse,

“These good ladies and gentlemen here look surprised, and it is quite natural they should; but I can assure them you and I are old and tried friends, and I will intrude on them but a few minutes longer. I am anxious to say five words in private to your son, my worthy soul! and lest his naturally prudent nature should induce him to decline, I have come to you to obtain your maternal persuasions in my favor. I will step to the door and wait, but I'm sure he will listen and obey the words of a tender mother.”

Humming an air as he went, Mr. Sweet walked out, after bowing politely to the company, and waited with the utmost patience for some ten minutes at the door. At the end of that period the gentleman waited for made his appearance, looking sour, suspicious, and discontented. Mr. Sweet instantly took his arm and led him out in his pleasant way.

“Dear old fellow! I knew you would come—in fact, I was perfectly sure of it. About fifty yards from this place there is a clump of birch trees, overhanging a hedge—a retired place where nobody ever comes. Do you know it?”

A sulky nod was the answer.

“Very well. Have the goodness to precede me there—people might say something if they saw us go together. I have a very interesting little story to tell you, which

will not bear more than one listener, and that dark spot is just the place to tell it in. Go on!"

The man paused for one moment and looked at him in mingled suspicion and fear; but Mr. Sweet was pointing steadily out. And muttering in his peculiar, growling tones, like those of a beaten cur, he slunk away in the direction indicated.

The distance was short; he made his way through the crowd, and soon reached the spot, a gloomy place, with white birches casting long, cool shadows over the hot grass, in an obscure corner of the grounds where nobody came. There was an old stump of a tree, rotting under the fragrant hawthorn hedge; the man sat down on it, took a pipe out of his pocket, lighted it, and began to smoke. As he took the first whiff, something glistened before him in the sun, and raising his sullen eyes, they rested on the jewelry and smiling visage of Mr. Sweet.

"Ah, that's right!" that gentleman began in his lively way; "make yourself perfectly comfortable, my dear Black—your name is Black, is it not—Peter Black, eh?"

Mr. Black nodded, and smoked away like a volcano.

"Mine's Sweet—Sylvester Sweet, solicitor-at-law, and agent and steward of the estates of Lady Agnes Shirley, of Castle Cliffe. And now that we mutually know each other, I am sure you will be pleased to have me proceed to business at once."

There was a rustic stile in the hawthorn hedge quite close to where Mr. Black sat. Mr. Sweet took a seat upon it, and looked down on him, smiling all over.

"Perhaps you're surprised, my dear Mr. Black, that I should know you as if you were my brother; and you may be still further surprised when you hear that it was solely and exclusively on your account that I have come to the races. I am not a betting man; I haven't the slightest interest in any of these horses; I don't care a snap who wins or who loses, and I detest crowds; but I wouldn't have stayed away from the races to-day for a thousand pounds! And all, my dear fellow," said Mr. Sweet, jingling his watch-seals till they seemed laughing in chorus, "all because I knew you were to be here."

Mr. Black, smoking away in grim silence, and looking stolidly before him, might have been deaf and dumb for all the interest or curiosity he manifested.

"You appear indifferent, my good Black; but I think I will manage to interest you yet before we part, I have the most charming little story to relate, and I must go back—let me see—eleven years."

Mr. Black gave the slightest perceptible start, but still he neither looked up nor spoke.

"Some fifteen miles north of London," said Mr. Sweet, still playing with his watch-seals, "there is a dirty little village called Worrel, and in this village there lived, eleven years ago, a man named Jack Wildman, better known to his pot-house companions by the sobriquet of Black Jack."

Mr. Peter Black jumped as if he had been shot, and the pipe dropped from his mouth, and was shivered into atoms at his feet.

"What is it? Been stung by a wasp or a hornet?" inquired Mr. Sweet, kindly. "Those horrible little insects are in swarms around here; but sit down, my good Black; sit down, and take another pipe. Got none? Well, never mind. This Black Jack I was telling you of was a mason by trade, earning good wages, and living very comfortably with a wife and one child, a little girl; and I think her name was Barbara. Do sit down, Mr. Black; and don't look at me in that uncomfortably steadfast way—it's not polite to stare, you know!"

Mr. Black crouched back in his seat; but his hands were clenched and his face was livid.

"This man, as I told you, was getting good wages, and was doing well; but he was one of those discontented, ungrateful curs, who, like a spaniel, required to be whipped and kicked to be made to keep his place. He got dissatisfied; he went among his fellow-laborers, and stirred up a feeling of mutinous revolt. There was a strike, and to their great amazement and disgust, their employers took them at their word, hired other workmen, and told the discontented men to depart—to get out! They grew furious, houses were set on fire, the new workmen were waylaid and beaten, works were demolished, and no end of damage done. But it did not last long; the law has a long arm and a strong hand, and it reached the disaffected stonemasons of Worrel. A lot of them were taken one night after having set a house on fire, and beaten an inoffensive man to death; and three months

after, the whole villainous gang were transported for life to New South Wales. Allow me to give you a cigar, my dear Black; I am sure you can listen better, and I can talk better while smoking."

There was a strong club, with an iron head, that some one had dropped, lying near. Mr. Black picked it up, and sprang to his feet with a furious face. The motion was quick, but his companion had made a quicker one; he had thrust his hand into his breast-pocket, and drawn out something that clicked sharply.

"Dear old boy, keep cool! No good ever comes of acting on impulse, and this is a hair-trigger! Sit down—do—and throw that club over the hedge, or I'll blow your brains out as I would a mad dog's!"

Mr. Sweet's voice was as soft as the notes of an Æolian harp, and his smile was perfectly seraphic. But his pistol was within five inches of Mr. Black's countenance; and snarling like a baffled tiger, he did throw the club over the hedge, and slunk back with a face so distorted by fear and fury, that it was scarcely human.

"Dear boy, if you would only be sensible and keep quiet like that; but you are so impulsive! Mr. Wildman was transported, and is probably founding a flourishing colony in that delightful land, at this present moment, for nobody ever heard of him again. But some five months ago, there arrived in London, from some unknown quarter, a gentleman by the name of Black—Peter Black, who was so charmingly got up with the aid of a wig, false whiskers, and mustaches, and a suit of sailor's clothes, that his own dear mother couldn't have known him. In fact, that venerable lady didn't know him at all, when, after a month's diligent search and inquiry, he found her out, and paid her an unexpected visit; but it was a delightful meeting. Don't ask me to describe it; no known words in the English language could do justice to a mother's feelings on meeting a lost son—and such a son! Ah, dear me!" said Mr. Sweet, taking his cigar between his finger and thumb, and looking down at it with a pensive sigh.

Mr. Peter Black, crouching down between the trunks of the trees, and glaring with eyes like those of a furious bull-dog about to spring, did not seem exactly the sort of son for any mother to swoon with delight at seeing; but

then, tastes differ. Mr. Sweet knocked the ashes daintily off the end of his cigar, replaced it between his lips, looked brightly down on the glaring eyes, and went on :

“ Mr. Peter Black, when the first transports of meeting were over, found that the relict of the late transported Mr. Wildman had departed—let us hope to a better land—and that his mother had adopted Miss Barbara, then a charming young lady of eleven, and the most popular little tight-rope dancer in London. Miss Barbara was introduced to Mr. Black, informed he was her father, just returned after a long cruise, and no end of shipwrecks, and through her influence a place was procured for him as ticket-taker in the theater. It was a wandering affair that same theater, and Mr. Black and his charming daughter and mother went roving with it over the country, and finally came with it to the Cliftonlea Races. Sly old fox! how you sit there drinking in every word—do let me prevail on you to light this cigar.”

He drew from his cigar-case a fragrant Havana as he spoke : but the sly old fox let it roll on the grass at his feet, and never took his savage eyes off the sunny face of the lawyer. His face was so frightfully pale, that the unearthly glare and the mat of coarse black hair, made it look by contrast quite dreadful.

“ You won't have it? Well, no matter. How do you like my story?”

“ You devil ;” said Mr. Black, speaking for the first time, and in a horrible voice, “ where did you learn my story?”

“ Your story, eh? I thought you would find it interesting. No matter where I learned it, I know you, Mr. Peter Black, as pat as my prayers, and I intend to use that knowledge, you may take your oath! You are as much my slave as if I bought you from your master, Satan, for so many hundred dollars ; as much my dog as if I had you chained and kenneled in my yard! Don't stir, you returned transport, or I'll shoot you where you stand.”

With the ferocious eyes blazing, and the tiger-jaws snarling, Mr. Black crawled, in spirit, in the dust at the feet of the calm-voiced, yellow-haired lawyer.

“ And now, Mr. Black, you understand why I brought you here to tell you this little story ; and as you've lis-

tened to it with exemplary patience, you may listen now to the sequel. The first thing you are to do is, to quit this roving theater—you, and the dear old lady, and the pretty little tight-rope dancer. You can remain with them to-day, but to-night you will go to the Cliffe Arms, the three of you, and remain there until I give you leave to quit. Have you money enough to pay for lodgings there a week?"

Mr. Black uttered some guttural sounds by way of reply, but they were so choked in his throat with rage and terror that they were undistinguishable.

Mr. Sweet jumped down and patted him on the shoulder with a good-natured laugh.

"Speak out, old fellow! Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"You won't go secretly, you know. Tell the proprietor of the affair that you like this place, and that you are going to settle down and take to fishing or farming; that you don't like this vagabond kind of life for your little girl, and so on. Go to the Cliffe Arms to-night. You'll have no trouble in getting quarters there, and you and your delightful family will stay there till I see fit to visit you again. You will do this, my dear boy—won't you?"

"You know I must!" said the man, with a fiendish scowl, and his fingers convulsively working, as if he would have liked to spring on the pleasant lawyer and tear him limb from limb.

"Oh, yes, I know it!" said Mr. Sweet, laughing; "and I know, too, that if you should attempt to play any tricks on me, that I will have you swinging by the neck in the yard of the Old Bailey prison six months after. But you needn't be afraid. I don't mean to do you any harm. On the contrary, if you only follow my directions, you will find me the best friend you ever had. Now, go."

Mr. Black rose up, and turned away, but before he had gone two yards he was back again.

"What do you want? What does all this mean?" he asked, in a husky whisper.

"Never you mind that, but take yourself off. I am done with you for the present. Time tells everything, and time will tell what I want with you. Off with you!"

Mr. Black turned again, and this time walked steadily out of sight; and when he was entirely gone, Mr. Sweet

broke into a musical laugh, threw his cigar-end over the hedge, thrust his hands in his pockets, and went away whistling :

“ My love is but a lassie yet.”

But if the steward and agent of Lady Agnes Shirley had given the father of the Infant Venus a most pleasant surprise, there was another surprise in reserve for himself — whether pleasant or not, is an unanswerable question.

He was making his way through the crowd, lifting his hat and nodding and smiling right and left, when a hearty slap on the shoulder from behind made him turn quickly, as an equally hearty voice exclaimed :

“ Sweet, old fellow, how goes it ? ”

A tall gentleman, seemingly about thirty, with an unmistakably military air about him, although dressed in civilian costume, stood before him. Something in the peculiarly erect, upright carriage, in the laughing blue eyes, in the fair, curly hair and characteristic features, seemed familiar. but the thick military mustache and sun-browned skin puzzled him. Only for a moment, though ; the next, he had started back, with an exclamation of :

“ Lieutenant Shirley ! ”

“ Colonel Shirley, if you please. Do you suppose I have served twelve years in India for nothing ? Don't look so blanched, man. I am not a ghost, but the same scapegrace you used to lend money to in old lang syne. Give me your hand, and I'll show you.”

Mr. Sweet held out his hand, and received such a bear's grip from the Indian officer, that tears of pain started into his eyes.

“ Thank you, Colonel ; that will do,” said the lawyer, wincing, but in an overjoyed tone all the same. “ Who could have looked for such an unexpected pleasure ? When did you arrive ? ”

“ I got to Southampton last night, and started for here the first thing. How are all our people ? I haven't met any one I know, save yourself ; but they told me in Cliftonlea, Lady Agnes was here.”

“ So she is. Come along, and I'll show you where.”

With a face radiant with delight and surprise, Mr. Sweet led the way, and Colonel Shirley followed. Many of the faces that passed were familiar, Sir Roland's among the

rest ; but the Indian officer, hurrying on, stopped to speak to no one. The file of carriages soon came in sight. Mr. Sweet pointed out the pony-phaeton ; and his companion the next instant, was measuring off the road toward it in great strides.

Lady Agnes, with Tom beside her, was just giving languid directions about driving home, when a handsome face, bronzed and mustached, was looking smilingly down on her, a hand being held out, and a well-known voice exclaiming :

“ Mother, I have come home again ! ”

CHAPTER VI.

KILLING THE FATTED CALF.

It is a vulgar thing to be surprised at anything in this world. Lady Agnes Shirley was too great a lady to do anything vulgar ; so the common herd, gathered round, heard only one faint cry, and saw the strange gentleman's hands wildly grasping both the great lady's.

“ Don't faint, mother. They haven't killed me in India, and it's no ghost, but your good-for-nothing son, Cliffe ! ”

“ Oh, Cliffe ! Oh, Cliffe ! ” she cried out. “ Is this really you ? ”

“ It really is, and come home for good, if you will let me stay. Am I forgiven yet, mother ? ”

“ My darling boy, it is I who must be forgiven, not you. How those odious people are staring ! Tom, jump out, and go away. Cliffe, for Heaven's sake ! get in here and drive out of this, or I shall die ! Oh, what a surprise this is ! ”

Master Tom obeyed, with his eyes starting out of his head with astonishment, and the Indian officer laughingly took his place, touched the cream-colored ponies lightly, and off they started, amid a surprised stare from fifty pairs of eyes.

“ Oh, Cliffe ! I cannot realize this. When did you come ? Where have you been ? What have you been doing ? Oh, I am dreaming, I think ! ”

"Nothing of the kind, dear mother. There is not a more wide-awake lady in England. I came here an hour ago. I have been in India fighting my country's battles, and getting made a colonel for my pains."

"My brave boy! And it is twelve years—twelve long, long years since I saw you last! Shall I ever forget that miserable morning in London?"

"Of course you will. Why not? Let by-gones be by-gones, as the Scots say, and I shall settle down into the most contented country gentleman you ever saw at Castle Cliffe. How do things go on at the old place?"

"Exceedingly well. I have the best agent in the world. But, Cliffe, we heard you were killed."

"Likely enough; but you may take my word for it when I tell you I was not. I was very near it though, more than once, but that's all over now, and I'm out of the reach of bullets and sword-cuts. Who is the young lady behind?"

"You remember your uncle, Edward Shirley? Well, he is dead, and that is his daughter. Wretched little creature!" said Lady Agnes, lowering her voice, and laughing contemptuously. "But I took her to keep her out of the work-house! Drive fast, Cliffe; I am dying to get home and hear everything."

The two creamy ponies flashed like an express-train through Cliftonlea, and along through a delightful, wooded road, and drew up before two immense iron gates, swinging under a great granite arch, with the arms of Cliffe carved thereon. The huge gates were opened by a man who came out of an Italian cottage—or, at least, as near an imitation of a cottage as they can go in Italy—and which was the gate-lodge, and the ponies dashed up a spacious avenue, with grand cedars of Lebanon on either hand, for upward of a quarter of a mile. Then they crossed a great wide bridge, wide enough to have half-spanned the Mississippi, and which in reality spanned an ambitious little stream you might have waded through in half a dozen steps, running sparkling through the green turf like a line of light, and disappearing among the trees.

Past this the avenue ran along through a part of the grounds less densely wooded, and you saw that the rivulet emptied itself into a wide lake, lying like a great pearl

set in emeralds, and with a miniature island in the center. There was a Swiss farmhouse on the island with fowls, and children, and dogs scrambling over each other, a little white skiff drawn up on the bank, and a woman standing in the rustic porch, with a baby in her arms, and looking, under the fragrant arch of honeysuckles, like a picture in a frame. Then the plantation grew denser, and the avenue lost itself in countless by-paths and windings, and there were glimpses, as they flew along among the trees, of a distant park, and deer sporting therein. Once they drove up a steep hillside, and on the top there was a view of a grand old house on another hillside, with towers, and turrets, and many gables, and no end of pinnacles, and mullioned windows, and queer chimneys, and a great cupola, with a flag flying on the top ; and farther away to the left, there were the ruins of some old building, with a huge stone cross pointing up to the blue sky, amid a solemn grove of yew trees and golden willows, mingling light and shade pleasantly together. And there were beautiful rose-gardens to the right, with bees and butterflies glancing around them, and fountains splashing like living jewels here and there, and hot-houses, and green-houses, and summer-houses, and bee-hives, and a perfect forest of magnificent horse-chestnuts. And farther away still, there spread the ceaseless sea, sparkling as if sown with stars ; and still and white beneath the rocks, there was the fisherman's village of Lower Cliffe, sweltering under the broiling seaside sun. Oh, it was a wonderful place, was Castle Cliffe !

They were down the hill in a moment, and dashing through a dark, cool, beech wood. A slender gazelle came bounding along, lifting its large, tearful, beautiful eyes, and vanishing again in affright.

Colonel Shirley uncovered his head, and reverently said :

“ It is good to be home ? ”

Two minutes later they were in a paved court-yard. A groom came and led away the horse, after looking curiously at the strange gentleman, who smiled, and followed Lady Agnes up a flight of granite steps, and into a spacious portico. A massive hall-door of oak and iron, that swung on the same honest hinges in the days of the Tudor-Plantagenets, flew back to admit them, and they

were in an immense hall, carved, and painted, and pictured, with the Cliffe coat-of-arms emblazoned on the ceiling, and a floor of bright, polished oak, slippery as glass. Up a great sweeping staircase, rich in busts and bronzes—where you might have driven a coach and four, and done it easy—into another hall, and at last into the boudoir of Lady Agnes herself—a very modern apartment, indeed, for so old a house. Tapestry carpeted, damask-curtained, with springy couches, and easy-chairs, and ottomans, and little gems of modern pictures looking down on them from the walls.

“It is good to be home!” repeated Colonel Shirley, looking round him with a little, satisfied smile, as he sat down in an arm-chair; “but the room is new to me.”

“Oh! I have left the Agnes Tower altogether—such a dismal place, you know, and full of rats! and I had the suite to which it belonged all fitted up last year. Are you hungry, Cliffe? You must have luncheon, and then you shall tell me all the news.”

With which practical remark the lady rang, and ordered her maid to take off her things, and send up lunch. And when it came, the traveller did ample justice to the champagne and cold chicken, and answered his mamma’s questions between the mouthfuls.

“Oh, there is very little to tell, after all! You know I was thrown from my horse that morning, after I left you at the hotel in London, and it was three weeks before I was able to go about again. And then I got a note from Vivia” (his sunny face darkened for a moment), “telling me that she was ill—dying! She was more. When I reached her, I found her—dead!”

But Lady Agnes was sitting, very cold, and pale, and upright. What was the death of a French actress to her?

“There was a child—a midge of a creature, a week old, and I left it with the good people with whom she lodged, and set sail for India the next morning,—a desperate man. I went on praying that some friendly bullet would put an end to a miserable existence; but I bore a charmed life; and while my comrades fell around me in scores, I scaled ramparts, and stormed breaches, and had led forlorn hopes, and came off without a scratch. I

would have made the fortune of any Life Assurance Company in England!" he said with a frank laugh.

"And the child?" said Lady Agnes, intensely interested.

"Do you really care to know anything of her?"

"It was a daughter, then? Of course, I do, you absurd boy! If she lives, she is the heiress of Castle Cliffe!"

Colonel Shirley took an oyster-pate, with a little malicious smile.

"And the daughter of a French actress?"

"She is my son's daughter!" said Lady Agnes, haughtily. And with a slight flushing cheek, continued, "Pray, go on!"

"I sent money to the people who had her, and received in return semi-annual accounts of her health for the first six years. Then they sent me word that they were going to leave England, and emigrate to America, and told me to come and take the child, or send word what they should do with her. I wanted to see Old England again, anyway, and I had natural feelings, as well as the rest of mankind, so I obtained leave of absence and came back to the old land. Don't look so incredulous, it is quite true!"

"And you never came to see me. Oh, Cliffe!"

"No," said Cliffe, with some of her own coldness. "I had not quite forgotten a certain scene in a London hotel, at that time, as I have now. I came to England, and saw her, a slender angel in pinafores and pantalettes, and I took her with me, and left her in a French convent, and there she is safe and well to this day."

Lady Agnes started up with clasped hands and radiant face.

"Oh, delightful! And a descendant of mine will inherit Castle Cliffe after all! I never could bear the idea of leaving it to Margaret Shirley. Cliffe, you must send for the child immediately!"

"But I don't think she is a child now—she is a young lady of twelve years. Perhaps she has taken the veil before this!"

"Oh, nonsense! Have you seen her since?"

"No; the Lady Superior and I have kept up a yearly correspondence on the subject, and the young person has

avored me herself with a half dozen gilt-edged, cream-laid, French effusions, beginning, 'I embrace my dearest papa, a thousand times,' and ending, 'with the most affectionate sentiments, your devoted child!' How does your ladyship like the style of that?"

"Cliffe, don't be absurd. You are just the same great boy you were twelve years ago. What is her name?"

"True! I forgot that part of it! Her good foster mother being at a loss for a name, took the liberty of calling her after her most gracious majesty herself, and when I brought her to the convent I told them there to add that of her mother; so Miss Shirley is Victoria Genevieve."

"What a disgrace! She ought to have been Agnes—all the Cliffes are. But it's too late now. Whom does she resemble, us or——"

Her ladyship had the grace to pause.

"Not her mother!" said Colonel Shirley, with perfect composure. "She has blue eyes and light hair, and is not bad looking. I will start for Paris to-morrow, if you like, and bring her home."

"No, no! I cannot part with you, after your twelve years' absence, in that fashion. I will send Mrs. Wilder, the housekeeper, and Roberts, the butler—you remember Roberts, Cliffe—and they will do excellently. I shall not lose a moment. I am fairly dying to see her, so you must write a letter to the convent (oh, the idea of placing my granddaughter in such a place!) and Roberts and Mrs. Wilder can start in the afternoon train."

Lady Agnes could be energetic when she chose, and ink and paper were there in a moment. Cliffe laughed at his mother's impetuosity, but he wrote the letter, and that very afternoon, sure enough, the dignified housekeeper and the old family butler were steaming away on their journey to Paris.

There had not been such a sensation in Cliftonlea for years as there was when it became known that the lost heir had returned. Everybody remembered the handsome, laughing, fair-haired boy, who used to dance with the village girls on the green, and pat the children in the down streets on the head, and throw them pennies; and about whom there were so many romantic stories afloat.

Everybody called, and the young colonel rode everywhere to see his friends, and be shaken by the hand; and Lady Agnes drove him through Cliftonlea, with a flush on her cheek, and a light in her eye which had not been seen there for many a day.

At the end of the first week there was a select dinner-party in his honor, in his own ancestral hall—a very select dinner-party, indeed, where no one was present but his own relatives (all Cliffes and Shirleys), and a few old personal friends. There was Sir Roland, of course, who had married and buried the dark-eyed Cousin Charlotte, whom Lady Agnes had once wanted her son to wed, and who was now step-father to the little boy of the golden curls we saw at the theatre. The Bishop of Cliftonlea, also a relative, was there; and Captain Douglas was there, and Margaret and Tom Shirley, and Lord Lisle, and some half dozen others—all relatives and connections, of course. It was a most enjoyable and select dinner-party; and Colonel Shirley, as the lion, roared amazingly, and told them wonderful stories of hunting jackals and tigers, and riding elephants and camels, and shooting natives. And Lady Agnes, in black velvet and rubies, looked like a queen. And the blue drawing-room, after dinner, was gorgeous with illuminations, and gilding, and jewels, and perfumes, and music, and brilliant conversation. And Lady Agnes was just telling everybody about her granddaughter in the Parisian convent, expected home now every day, when there was a great bustle in the lower hall, and Tom Shirley, who had been out to see, came rushing in, in a wild state of excitement, to say that Wiider and Roberts had returned, and with them a French *bonne* and the young lady herself.

It was indeed true! The rightful heiress of Castle Cliffe stood within the halls of her fathers at last.

CHAPTER VII.

MADEMOISELLE.

A MOMENT before, the drawing-room had been lively enough with music, and laughter, and conversation, and everybody felt a strong impulse to run out to the hall, and behold the daughter of Cliffe Shirley and the French actress. But it would not have been etiquette, and nobody did it except Tom Shirley, who never minded etiquette or anything else; and the colonel, who might well be pardoned for any breach in such a case, and Lady Agnes, who rose in the middle of an animated speech, made a hasty apology, and sailed out after her son and nephew.

They were standing at the head of the grand, sweeping staircase, looking down into the lower hall with its domed roof and huge chandelier. A crowd of servants, all anxious to catch a glimpse of their future mistress, were assembled there; and right under the blaze of the pendant gas-burners stood the travelers; Mrs. Wilder, Mr. Roberts, a coquettishly dressed lady's maid, evidently Miss Shirley's *bonne*; and, lastly, a small person in a gray cloak and little straw hat, undoubtedly Miss Shirley herself.

As Lady Agnes reached the landing the travelers were moving toward the staircase, and Mrs. Wilder, seeing her ladyship's inquiring face, smilingly answered it.

"Yes, my lady, we have brought her all safe; and here she is.

The little girl followed Mrs. Wilder quite slowly and decorously up the stairs, either too much fatigued or with too strong a sense of the proprieties to run. It was a little thing, but it predisposed Lady Agnes—who had a horror of romps—in her favor, and they all stepped back as she came near. A pair of bright eyes under the straw hat glanced quickly from face to face, rested on the handsome colonel, and with a glad, childish cry of "*Ah, mon*

père ;" the little girl flung herself into his arms. It was quite a scene.

"My dear little daughter! Welcome to your home!" said the colonel, stooping to kiss her, with a laugh, and yet with a happy glow on his own face. "I see you have not forgotten me in our six years' separation."

"*Non, mon père.*"

The colonel pressed her again, and turned with her to Lady Agnes.

"Genevieve, say, 'How do you do?' to this lady—it is your grandmother."

"I hope madam is very well," said Mademoiselle Genevieve, with sober simplicity, holding up one cheek, and then the other, to be saluted in very French fashion.

"What a little parrot it is!" cried Lady Agnes, with a slight and somewhat sarcastic laugh, peculiar to her.

"Can you not speak English, my child?"

"Yes, madam," replied the little girl in that language, speaking clearly and distinctly, but with a strong accent.

"I am glad to hear it, and I am very glad to see you, too. Are you tired, my dear?"

"No, madam; only very little."

"Then we will take off this cloak and hat, and you will stay with us fifteen minutes before you retire to your room. Come."

The great lady took the little girl's hand and led her, with a smile on her lips, into the drawing-room. It was more a stroke of policy than of curiosity or affection that prompted the action; for one glance had satisfied Lady Agnes that the child was naturally presentable, and she was anxious to display her to her friends before they could maliciously say she had been tutoring her.

And the next moment mademoiselle, fresh from the sober twilight of her convent, found herself in the full blaze of a grand drawing-room, that seemed filled with people and all staring at her. Half recoiling on the threshold, timid and shy, but not vulgarly so, she was drawn steadily on by the lady's strong, small hand, and heard the clear voice saying:

"It is my granddaughter. Let me take off your wrappings, my dear." And then, with her own fair fingers, the shrouding hat and cloak were removed, and the little heiress stood in the full glow of the lights revealed.

Everybody paused an instant to look at her father and grandmother, and, after this momentary inspection of the two older persons, turned again to the little visitor. A slender angel, quite small for her age, with the tiniest hands and feet in the world—but then all the Cliffes had been noted for that trait—a small, pale face, very pale just now, probably from fatigue, delicate, regular features, and an exuberance of light hair, of the same flaxen lightness as Lady Agnes' own.

Her dress was high-necked and long-sleeved, soft and gray in shade, thick and rich in texture, and slightly trimmed with peach-colored ribbons. The eyes were downcast, the little head drooping in pardonable embarrassment; and with the small, pale face, the almost colorless hair, and dingy gray dress, she did not look very dazzling, certainly. But Lady Agnes had the eye of an eagle, and she saw that, under different auspices and in different costume, Miss Shirley was not wholly an unpromising case. She was not awkward; she might some day yet be even pretty.

All the ladies came forward to kiss her; and Miss Lisle, who saw in her already the future bride of Lord Henry, went into perfect raptures over her. Some of the gentlemen kissed her, too; foremost among whom was Master Tom Shirley, who was mentally contrasting her, to her great disadvantage with the silver-gilt Infant Venus, on whom he had lavished his youthful affections.

And yet, in the midst of all this caressing, there stood one Mordecai at the king's gate, who did not seem inclined to fall down and adore the rising star. It was Margaret Shirley who, in amber gauze, and fluttering ribbons, and creamy flowers, looked dark, and pale, and unlovely as ever; and who hung back, either from timidity or some worse feeling, until the sharp blue eyes of her aunt fell upon her.

"Margaret, come here, and embrace your cousin," called that lady in authoritative displeasure; for Miss Margaret was no favorite at the best of times. "My dear child, this is your cousin, Margaret Shirley."

Mademoiselle, a good deal recovered from her embarrassment, raised her eyes—very large, very bright, very blue—and fixed them, with a look that had something of Lady Agnes' own piercing intensesness, on the sallow and

unhealthy face of Cousin Margaret. A cold look came over it, as if with that glance she had conceived a sudden antipathy to her new relative, and the cheek she turned to be saluted was offered with marked reserve.

Margaret murmured low some words of welcome, to which an unsmiling face and a very slight bend of the head were returned; and then Genevieve shrank back to her grandmother, and the blue eyes went wandering wistfully round the room. They rested, on those for whom she was seeking—her father's. He held out his hand, with a smile, and in a twinkling the grave little face was radiant and transformed, and she was over and clinging to his arm, and looking up in his face with dancing eyes.

It was quite evident that while all the rest there were mere shadows to her, seen and thought of now for the first time, *mon père* was a vivid image in reality, beloved and dreamed of for years.

"Were you sorry to leave your convent, Genevieve?" he asked, sitting down in an arm-chair, and lifting her on his knee.

"Oh, no, papa!" she answered, readily, speaking in English, as he had done.

"And why? Your friends are all there; and here, everybody is strange."

"Not everybody, papa—you are here!"

"And she only saw me once in her life, and that's six years ago," laughed the colonel, looking down at the little face nestling against his shoulder.

"But I dreamed of you every day and every night, papa; and then your letters—oh, those beautiful letters! I have them every one, and have read them over a thousand times!"

"My good little girl! and she loves papa, then?"

"Better than everything else in the world, papa!"

"Thank you, mademoiselle!" still laughing; "and grandmamma—you mean to love her too, don't you?"

"Why certainly!" said mademoiselle with gravity.

"And your uncle and your cousins? There is one now—how do you think you will like him?"

Tom Shirley was standing near, with his hands, boy fashion, in his pockets, listening with an air of preternatural solemnity to the conversation, and the colonel

turned his laughing face toward him. Miss Genevieve glanced up and over Tom with calm and serious dignity.

"I don't know, papa—I don't like boys at all—that is, except Claude!"

"Who is Claude, my dear?"

"Oh, you know, don't you? His father is La Marquis de St. Hilary; and I spent the last vacation at the chateau, away out in the country."

"Grand connections! Who sent my little girl there?"

"I went with Ignacia—that's his sister; and we are in the same division at school. Papa," in a whisper "is that girl over there, in the yellow dress, his sister?"

"No, my darling. Why?"

"For they have black eyes and black hair alike, only his is curly, and he is a great deal handsomer. Grand-mamma said she was my cousin—is she?"

"Yes; and his."

"Does she live here?"

"Yes, they both live here. Well, what now—don't you like them?"

"I don't like her at all! Oh, how ugly she is!"

The colonel laughed, and laid his hand over her lips.

"My dear Genevieve, what are you saying? It will never do for you to talk in that fashion. Maggie is the best little girl in the world, and she will be a nice companion for you to play with."

"I sha'n't play with her! I sha'n't like her at all!" said Genevieve, with decision. "What makes her live here?"

"Because she is an orphan, and has no other home, and I know you will be kind to her, Genevieve. Who taught you to speak English as well as you do?"

"Oh, we had an English teacher in the convent, and a great many of the girls were English, and we used to speak it a great deal. Did I tell you in my last letter how many prizes I got at the distribution?"

"I forget—tell me again?"

"I got the first prize in our division for singing and English; the second for music and drawing, mathematics, and astronomy."

"Whew!" whistled Tom, still an attentive listener.

"This little midge taking the prize in mathematics! What an idea that is!"

"Can you sing and play, then?"

"Yes, papa. certainly!"

"Then, suppose, you favor us with a song. I should like to hear you sing, of all things," said the colonel, still in his half-laughing way.

"Oh, my dear Cliffe, the child must be too tired!" said Lady Agnes, sailing up at the moment, and not caring half so much for the child's fatigue as the idea that she might make a show of herself.

"I am not fatigued; but I don't like to sing before so many ladies and gentlemen, papa," whispered Miss Genevieve, blushing a little.

"Oh, nonsense! I am certain they will be delighted. Come along."

Miss Lisle having just favored the company with a Swiss composition, that had a great many "tra la-las" at the end of each verse, closed with a shrill shriek and a terrific bang of all the keys at once, and arose from the instrument. Colonel Shirley, holding his little daughter's hand, led her, reluctant and blushing, to the seat the young lady had vacated, amid a profound silence of curious expectation.

"What shall I sing, papa?" inquired mademoiselle, running her fingers lightly over the keys, and recovering her self-possession when she found herself hopelessly in for it.

"Oh, whatever you please. We are willing to be enchanted with anything."

Thus encouraged, mademoiselle played a somewhat difficult prelude from memory, and then, in a clear, sweet soprano, broke out into "Casta Diva." Her voice was rich and clear, and full of pathos; her touch highly cultivated; her expression perfect. Evidently her musical talent was wonderful, or she had the best of teachers, and an excellent power of imitation. Everybody was astonished—no one more so than papa, who had expected some simple French chansonnette, and Lady Agnes was equally amazed and delighted. The room rang with plaudits when she ceased; and, coloring visibly, Mademoiselle Genevieve rose quickly, and sought, shrinking, shelter under papa's wings.

"It is a most wonderful child!" said Miss Lisle, holding up her hands. "No professional could have sung it better."

"She sings well," said Lady Agnes, smiling graciously on the little performer, and patting the now hot cheek with her gold and ivory fan. "But she is tired now, and must go to rest. Tom, ring for Mrs. Wilder."

Tom rang, and Mrs. Wilder came.

"Bid your friends good-night, my dear," said Lady Agnes.

Mademoiselle did so, courtesying with the prettiest childlike grace imaginable.

"You will take her to the Rose Room, Mrs. Wilder, next my boudoir. Good-night, my love. Pleasant dreams!"

And Lady Agnes finished by kissing her, and turning her and the housekeeper out of the drawing-room.

"Where is Jeannette, madam?" inquired Miss Shirley, as she tripped along up another grand staircase, and through halls and corridors, beside the housekeeper.

"In your room, Miss Vivia, waiting for you."

"Is she to sleep near me? I must have Jeannette near me."

"She is to sleep in a little closet off your room. Here it is. Good-night, Miss Vivia."

But Miss Vivia did not speak. She had stopped in the doorway in an ecstasy of admiration and delight. And no wonder. In all her childish dreams of beauty, in all she had seen at the chateau and Hôtel de St. Hilary, there had never been anything half so beautiful as this. The apartment had once been Lady Agnes' study, where she received her steward, and transacted all her business; but during the last week, it had been newly furnished and fitted up for the youthful heiress. Her own rooms—bathroom, dressing-room, bedroom, and boudoir—were all *en suite*, and this was the last of them. The feet sank in the carpet of pale rose-colored velvet, sown all over with white buds and deep-green leaves; the walls were paneled in pink satin, bordered with silver; and the great Maltese window was draped in rose velvet, cut in antique points. The lofty ceiling was fretted in rose and silver, and the chairs of some white wood, polished till they shone like ivory, were cushioned in the same glowing tints; so were the couches, and a great carved and gilded easy-chair; and the flashing chandelier of frosted silver, with burners shaped like lilies, had deep red shades,

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filling the room with rosy radiance. The bed in a distant alcove, screened with filmy white lace curtains, was carved and gilded in the same snow-white wood; and over the head, standing on a Grecian bracket, was a beautiful statue of the "Guardian Angel," with folded wings, drooping head, outstretched arms, and smiling face. The inlaid tables were exquisite; a Bible lay on one of them, bound in gold and rose velvet, with the name "Victoria Genevieve" in gold letters on the cover; a gilded bird-cage, with two or three brilliant tropical birds therein, was pendant near the window; and over the carved mantel of Egyptian marble hung the exquisite picture of "Christ Blessing Little Children." The whole thing had been the design of Lady Agnes. Every article it contained had been critically inspected before being placed there, and the effect was perfect. In it, Moore might have written "Lalla Rookh," and not even Fadla-deen could have found anything to grumble at; and little Genevieve clapped her hands in an ecstasy of speech and delight.

"It is perfect, mademoiselle!" exclaimed Jeannette, the maid who had attended the little girl from Paris. "Look at this lovely dressing-case! And here is the wardrobe with such great mirror-doors; and in this Psyche glass I can see myself from top to toe; and here is a door at the foot of your bed opening into grandmamma's boudoir; and this cedar closet—does it not smell deliciously?—oh, this is my sleeping-room!

"Oh, it is beautiful! There is nothing at all in the Hôtel de St. Hilary like it! It is like heaven!"

"Yes, mademoiselle; and your grandmamma is a very great lady; and they say downstairs there is not a finer house in all England than this, and that you will be the richest heiress ever heard of!"

"That is charming! I will sit in this great, beautiful chair, and you may take my dress off, and brush out my hair. Did you see my papa, Jeannette?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. He looks like a king."

"And I love him! Oh, I love him better than all the whole world! And *ma grandmère*—you saw her, too, Jeannette? She makes one afraid of her, in her splendid dress and rubies—far finer than anything that Madame la Marquise de St. Hilary ever wore; but she is very

grand and handsome, and I admire her ever so much! And my cousins—you did not see them, did you, Jeannette?"

"No, mademoiselle. Do you like them?"

"I don't like one of them at all. Mademoiselle Marguerite—oh, she is so ugly, and has such a yellow skin! Just as yellow as poor old Sister Lucia, in the convent. There, Jeannette, you can go. I shall say my prayers and go to bed. Oh, what a lovely room this is!"

The flaxen hair was gathered in a little cambric night-cap; the gray dress exchanged for a long *sac de nuit*; and everything being done, Jeannette vanished, and mademoiselle said her prayers with sleepy devotion, and climbed in, and sunk from sight in pillows of down; and, thinking how splendid everything was, fell asleep.

Lady Agnes Shirley, waking at some gray and dismal hour of the early morning, felt a strong impulse of curiosity prompting her to rise up and take a look at her little granddaughter asleep. So, arising, she donned slippers and dressing-gown, entered the boudoir, softly opened the door of communication between it and her little girl's room, and looked in.

And there a surprise awaited her. Instead of finding mademoiselle fast asleep among the pillows, something half-dressed, a fairy in a white morning gown, stood with her back toward her, trying—yes, actually trying to make the bed! But the ambitious effort was unavailing; the small arms could by no means reach half-way across, and the little hands could not shake up the mighty sea of down, and, with a long-drawn sigh, the heiress of the Shirleys gave up the attempt at last.

Then she went to the basin, washed her face and hands, brushed out the profusion of her pale hair, and then coming back, knelt down under the "Guardian Angel," and with clasped hands and upraised eyes, began to pray.

The child looked almost lovely at that moment, in her loose drapery, her unbound falling hair, her clear, pale face, clasped hands, and uplifted earnest eyes. But Lady Agnes was a great deal too stupefied at the whole extraordinary scene to think of admiration, or even think at all, and could do nothing but stand there and look on.

A quarter of an hour passed, and the little girl did not

stir; half an hour, the little saint prayed still, when the door of the cedar closet opened, and out came Jeannette. Genevieve finished her devotions and arose.

"Now, mademoiselle, what have you been about? You have never been trying to make that bed?"

"Yes, I have, though, but I couldn't do it. It's so very large, you see, Jeannette."

"Mademoiselle, I am surprised at you. What would your grandmamma say if she knew it?"

Mademoiselle opened her bright blue eyes in undisguised surprise.

"Knew what? What have I done?"

"You are not to make beds, mademoiselle!" said Jeannette, laughing. "I am sure your grandmamma does not expect you to do anything of the sort."

"But I have always done it. We all made our own beds in the convent, except the very little pupils."

"Well, this is not a convent, but a castle; and you know, Mademoiselle Vivia, there is a proverb that we must do in Rome as the Romans do. So you need not do it any more, or they'll think you have been a housemaid in France; and another thing—what in the world do you get up so early for?"

"Early! Why, the sun is rising, and we always got up before the sun in the convent."

"The convent! the convent! Please to remember you are not in a convent now, mademoiselle, and sunrise is a very early hour. There is not one up in the house, I believe, but ourselves."

"I don't care for that; I shall get up as early as I please, unless papa or grandmamma prevent it, and I don't think they will. So here, curl my hair, and say no more about it."

Jeannette twined the flaxen tresses over her fingers and let them fall in a shining shower to the child's waist. Then a dress of fresh white muslin was brought out and put on, a sash of broad blue ribbon knotted round the little waist, and Lady Agnes, from her watching-place, admitted, what she could not last night, that her granddaughter was pretty.

"Now," said mademoiselle, tying her straw hat over her pretty curls, "I saw some lovely rose-gardens out of the window, and you must come with me to see them.

Do you think you can find your way to the door? It is such a great house, this!"

"I will see. Come along!"

The two went out of the Rose Room, and Lady Agnes, having got the better of her amazement, laughed her low and sarcastic laugh, and went back to her own bed-chamber.

"It is a prodigy, this little granddaughter of mine, and so French! I am afraid she takes after that dreadful French actress, though, thank Heaven, she does not look like her. Well, if they have taught her nothing worse than getting up at sunrise in her French convent, they have done no harm after all. But what an extraordinary child it is, to be sure! She took to that exhibition of herself quite naturally last evening—the French actress again! And that odious name of Genevieve! I wish I could have her christened over again and called Agnes; but I suppose Victoria will do, for want of a better."

The young lady thus apostrophized was meantime having a very good time, out among the rose-gardens and laurel walks. Jeannette had found her way through some side door or other; and now the little white fairy, with the blue ribbons, and fluttering flaxen curls, was darting hither and thither among the parterres like some pretty white bird. Now she was watching the swans sailing serenely about in the mimic lakes; now she was looking at the gold-fish glancing in the fountains; now she was lost in admiration of a great peacock, strutting up and down on one of the terraces, with the first rays of sunshine sparkling on his outspread tail—a tail which its owner evidently admired quite as much as the little girl; now she was hunting squirrels; now she was listening to the twittering of the birds in the beechwood and through the shrubbery; now she was gathering roses and carnations to make bouquets for papa and grandmamma; and anon she was running up and down the terraces, with dress, and ribbons, and curls streaming in the wind, a bloom on her cheek, and a light in her eye, and a bounding, elastic life in every step, that would make one's pulses leap from sympathy only to look at her.

The time went by like magic. Even the staid Jeannette so far forgot the proprieties as to be coaxed into a race up and down the green lanes between the chestnut trees;

and coming flying back, breathless and panting, Genevieve ran plump into the arms of the colonel, who stood on the lawn, laughing, and smoking his matin cigar.

"You wild gypsy! Is this the sort of thing they have been teaching you in your sober convent? At what un-Christian hour did you rise this morning? and who are those bouquets for?"

"One is for you, papa; and I've been out here three hours, and I am so, so hungry!" laughing merrily, and pressing the hand he held out for the flowers.

"That's right! stick to that, if you can, and you will not need any rouge; your cheeks are redder now than your roses. There! they are in my button-hole, and while I smoke my cigar down the avenue do you go in with your maid, and get some bread and milk."

Vivia ran off after Jeannette, and a housemaid brought them the bread and milk into the breakfast-parlor.

Like all the rooms in the house, it was handsome, and handsomely furnished; but Vivia saw only one thing—a portrait over the mantel of Master Cliffe Shirley at the age of fifteen. He wore the costume of a young Highland chief—a plumed bonnet on his princely head, a plaid of Rob Roy tartan over his shoulders, and a bow and arrow in his hand. His handsome, laughing face, the bright, frank, cheery eyes, the becoming dress, gave the picture a fascination that riveted the gaze even of strangers.

Lady Agnes Shirley, cold, hard woman of the world, had wept heart-broken tears over that splendid face in the days when she thought him dead under an Indian sky; and now his little daughter dropped on one knee before it, and held up her clasped hands, with a cry:

"Oh, my handsome papa! Everything in this place is beautiful, but he is the best of all!"

CHAPTER VIII.

CASTLE CLIFFE.

LADY AGNES was not an early riser. Noon usually found her breakfasting in her boudoir ; but on this particular morning she came sailing downstairs, to the infinite astonishment and amazement of all beholders, just as the little French clock in the breakfast-parlor was chiming eight.

Genevieve sat on an ottoman opposite the mantel, with a porcelain bowl on her lap, a silver spoon in her hand, gazing intently at the portrait and feasting her eyes and her palate at the same time. She started up as Lady Agnes entered, with a smiling courtesy, and came forward with frank grace, holding up her blooming cheeks to be saluted.

"Good-morning, *petite* ! Fresh as a rosebud, I see ! So you were up and out of your nest before the birds this morning ! Was it because you did not sleep well last night?"

"Oh, no, madam. I slept very well ; but I always rise early. It is not wrong, is it?"

"By no means. I like to see little girls up with the sun. Well, Tom, good-morning !"

"Can I believe my eyes?" exclaimed Tom Shirley, entering, and starting back in affected horror at the sight. "Do I really behold my Aunt Agnes, or is this her ghost?"

"Oh, nonsense ! Ring the bell. Have you seen the colonel? Oh, here he comes. Have you ordered the carriage to be in readiness, Cliffe?"

"Yes. What is the program for to-day?" said the colonel, sauntering in.

"You know we are to return all those calls. Such a bore, too ! and this the first day of our little girl's stay among us ! What will you do all day, my dear?"

"Oh, she will amuse herself, never fear," said the

colonel. "I found her racing like a wild Indian. Don't blush, Vivian, it's all right. And she can spend the day in exploring the place with her maid."

"Would you like to see the house, Victoria?" inquired Lady Agnes, taking her place at the head of the table, and laying marked emphasis on the name.

"If it does not inconvenience you at all, madam."

"Let Margaret stay from school, then, and show her the place," said the colonel.

"Margaret! Absurd! Margaret couldn't show it any more than a cat. Tom, can you not get a half-holiday this afternoon, and show Cousin Victoria over the house?"

"Certainly, if that young gentlewoman herself does not object," said Tom, buttering his roll, with gravity.

The small gentlewoman in question, standing in the middle of the floor, in her white dress, and blue ribbons, and flaxen curls falling to her waist, did not object; though, had Margaret been decided on as chaperon, she probably would have done so. Both cousins had been met last night for the first time, but her feelings toward them were quite different. Toward Tom they were negative; she did not dislike him, but she did not care for him one way or the other. Toward Margaret they were positive repulsion, and expressed exactly what she felt toward that young person. Still she looked a little doubtful as to the propriety of being chaperoned by a great boy six feet high; but grandmamma suggested it, and papa was smiling over at her, so there could be no impropriety, and she courtesied gravely in assent, and walked toward the door.

Margaret entered at the same moment, arrayed in pink muslin. She passed mademoiselle with a low "Good-morning, Cousin Genevieve!" and took her place at the table.

"Won't you stay and take a cup of coffee and a roll with us?" called her father after her, as she stood in the hall, balancing herself on one foot, and beating time, *à la militaire*, with the other.

"No, papa, thank you; I never drink coffee. We always had bread and milk for breakfast in the convent."

"Oh, I'm tired of such reminders!" exclaimed Lady Agnes, pettishly. "We will have another martyred abbess in the family, Cliffe, if you ever send the little fairy back to her Paris school."

Immediately after breakfast, Tom slung his satchel over his shoulder, and set out with Margaret to Cliftonlea, telling that young lady, as he went, he expected it would be jolly showing the little original over the house. And as her toilet was made, Lady Agnes and her son rolled away in the grand family carriage, emblazoned with the Cliffe coat-of-arms, and Genevieve was left to her own devices.

In all her life she could not remember a morning that went so swiftly as that, flying about in the sunshine, half-wild with the sense of liberty, and the hitherto unimagined delights of the place. She found her way to the Swiss farm-house, and was transported by the little pigs, and calves, and poultry; and she and Jeannette got into the little white boat, and were rowed over the sparkling ripples of the lake by one of the farmer's girls. She wandered away down even to the extreme length of the grand avenue, tiring Jeannette nearly to death; made the acquaintance of the lodgekeeper and his wife in the Italian villa, and was even more enchanted by a little baby they had there than she had been before by the pigs and calves; and when Tom returned for his early dinner at one o'clock, he found her swinging backward and forward through space, like an animated pendulum, in a great swing in the trees.

The young lady and gentleman had a *tête-à-tête* dinner that day, for Margaret was a half-boarder at the Cliftonlea Female Academy, and always dined there; and before the meal was over they were chatting away with the familiarity of old friends.

At first, Mademoiselle Vivia was inclined to treat Master Tom with dignified reserve, but his animated volubility and determination to be on cordial terms were not to be resisted, and they rose from the table the best friends in the world.

To visit Cliftonlea without going to Castle Cliffe was like visiting Rome without going to St. Peter's. All sight-seers went there, and were enchanted, but few of them ever had so fluent and voluble a guide as its heiress had now. From gallery to gallery, through beautiful saloons and supper-rooms, through blooming conservatories, magnificent suites of drawing-rooms, oak parlors and libraries, Tom enthusiastically strode, gesticulating, de-

scribing—and inventing sometimes, when his memory fell short of facts—in a way that equally excited the surprise and admiration of his small auditor.

The central, or main part of the castle, according to Tom, was as old as the days of the Fifth Henry—as indeed its very ancient style of architecture, and an inscription in antique French on an old mantelpiece, proved. To the right and left there were two octagonal towers; one called the Queen's Tower, built in the time of Queen Elizabeth, and so named because that illustrious lady herself had once honored it with a week's visit; the other, called the Agnes Tower, had been erected in the same reign at a later date, and was named after Lady Agnes Cliffe, the bride of its then proprietor. Tom had wonderful stories to tell about these old places; but the great point of attraction was the picture-gallery, an immense hall lighted with beautiful oriel windows of stained glass, and along whose walls hung the pictured faces of all the Cliffes, who had reigned there from time immemorial. Gallant knights, in wigs, and swords, and doublets; courtly dames in diamond stomachers, and head-dresses three feet high, looked down with their dead eyes on the last of their ancient race—the little girl in the white dress and blue ribbons, who held her breath with awe, and felt as if she heard the ghostly rustling of their garments against the oak walls.

Master Tom, who had no Cliffe blood in his veins, and no bump of veneration on his head, ran on with an easy fluency that would have made his fortune as a stump-lecturer.

“That horrid old fright up there, in the bag-wig and knee-breeches, is Sir Marmaduke Cliffe, who built the two towers in the days of Queen Elizabeth; and that sour-looking dame, with a ruffle sticking out five feet, was Lady Agnes Neville, his wife. That there is Sir Lionel, who was master here in the days of the Merry Monarch—the handsomest Cliffe among them, and everybody says I'm his born image. That good-looking nun over there, with the crucifix in her hand and the whites of her eyes upturned, was the lady abbess, once of the ruined convent behind here, and got her brains knocked out by that abominable scamp, Thomas Cromwell. There's the present Lady Agnes in white satin and pearls

—her bridal dress, I believe. And there—do you know who that is?”

A young man, looking like a prince, in the uniform of an officer of dragoons, with the blue eyes, golden hair, and laughing face, she knew by heart; and a flush of light rose to her face as she looked.

“It is my papa!—my own splendid papa! And there isn’t one among them all who looks half as much like a king as he!”

“That’s true enough; and as he is the best, so he is the last. I suppose they will be hanging yours up near it very soon.”

“But my mamma’s, where is that? Is not her picture here as well as the rest?”

Tom looked at her, and suppressed a whistle.

“Your mamma’s? Oh, I never saw her. I don’t know anything about her. Her picture is not here, at all events!”

“She is dead!” said the child, in her manner of grave simplicity. “I never saw my dear mamma!”

“Well, if she is dead, I suppose she can’t have her portrait taken very easily, and that accounts! And now, as I’m tired of going from one room to another, suppose we go out and have a look at the old convent I promised to show you. What do you think of the house?”

“It is a very great place.”

“And the Cliffes have been very great people in their time, too; and are yet, for that matter; best blood in Sussex, not to say in all England.”

“Are you a Cliffe?”

“No—more’s the pity? I am nothing but a Shirley!”

“Is that girl?”

“What girl?”

“Mademoiselle Marguerite. We three are cousins, I know, but I can’t quite understand it.”

“Well, look here, then, and I’ll demonstrate it so that even your capacity can grapple with the subject. Once upon a time, there were three brothers by the name of Shirley; the oldest married Lady Agnes Cliffe, and he is dead; the second married my mother, and they’re both dead; the third married Mademoiselle Marguerite’s mother, and they’re both dead, too—dying was a bad habit the Shirleys had. Don’t you see?—it’s as clear as mud.”

"I see. And that is why you both live here?"

"That's why. And Mag would have had this place, only you turned up—bad job for her, you see! Sir Roland offered to take me; but as I had some claim on Lady Agnes, and none at all on him, she wouldn't hear of such a thing at any price."

"Sir Roland is the stout gentleman who told me to call him uncle, then, and—grandmamma's brother. Has he no wife?"

"Not now; she's defunct. He has a step-son up at Oxford, Leicester Shibley—Cliffe, they call him, and just the kind of fellow you would like, I know. Perhaps he will marry you some day when he comes home; it would be just the thing for him!"

"Marry me! He will do nothing of the kind," said Miss Vivian, with some dignity, and a good deal of asperity. "I shall marry nobody but Claude. I wouldn't have anybody else for the world."

"Who is Claude?"

"Why, just Claude—nothing else; but he will be Marquis de St. Hilary some day, and I will be Madame la Marquise. He is a great deal handsomer than you, and I like him ever so much better!"

"I don't believe it! I'm positive you like me better than anybody else in the world; or at least you will when we come to be a little better acquainted. Almost every little girl falls in love the moment she claps her eyes on me!"

Genevieve lifted her blue eyes, flashing with mingled astonishment and indignation; but Tom's face was perfectly dismal in its seriousness, and he bore her angry regards without wincing.

"You say the thing that is not true, Monsieur Tom. I shall never love you as long as I live!"

"Then all I have to say is, that you ought to be pitied for your want of taste. But it is just as well; for, in case you did love me, it would only be an affair of a broken heart, and all that sort of thing; for I wouldn't marry you if you were the heiress of Castle Cliffe ten times over. I know a girl—I saw her dancing on the tight-rope at the races the other day—who is a thousand times prettier than you, and whom I intend making Mrs. S. as soon as I get able to support her."

Genevieve looked horrified. In her peculiar simplicity, she took every word for gospel.

"A tight-rope dancer! Oh, Tom! what will grand-mamma say?"

"I don't care what she says," said Tom, desperately, thrusting his hands in his pockets. "A tight-rope dancer is as good as anybody else; and I won't be the first of the family, either, who has tried that dodge."

The last was added in a low voice, but the little girl heard it, and there was a perceptible drawing up of the small figure, and an unmistakable creasing of the proud little head.

"I don't see how any Cliffe could make such a *mésalliance*, and I don't believe any of them ever did it. I should think you would be ashamed to speak of such a thing, Cousin Tom."

"You despise ballet-dancers, then?"

"Of course."

"And actresses, also?"

"Why, certainly. It is all the same. Claude often said he would die before he would make a low marriage; and so would I."

Tom thrust his hands deeper in his trousers pockets, rolled up his eyes to the firmament, and gave vent to his feelings in a prolonged whistle.

"And this little princess, with her chin up and her eyes flashing, is the daughter of a nameless French actress!" was his thought.

Then, aloud:

"You seem to have very distinct ideas on the subject of matrimony, Miss Victoria. Was it in your convent you learned them?"

"Of course not. But Claude, and I, and Ignacia have talked of it a thousand times in the holidays. And, Cousin Tom, if you marry your dancing-girl, how will you live? You are not rich!"

"No; you might swear that, without fear of perjury. But my wife and I intend to set up a cigar-shop, and get our rich relations to patronize us. There, don't look so disgusted, but look at the ruins."

While talking, they had been walking along a thickly wooded avenue, and, as Tom spoke, they came upon a semicircular space of greensward, with the ruins of an old

convent in the center. Nothing now remained but an immense stone cross, bearing a long inscription in Latin, and the remains of one superb window in the only unruined wall. The whole place was overrun with ivy and tangled juniper, even the broad stone steps that led up to what once had been the grand altar.

"Look at those stains," said Tom, pointing to some dark spots on the upper step. "They say that's blood. Lady Edith Cliffe was the last abbess here, and she was murdered on those steps, in the days of Thomas Cromwell, for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy. The sunshine and storm of hundreds of years have been unable to remove the traces of the crime. And the town-folk say a tall woman, all in black and white, walks here on moonlight nights. As I have never had the pleasure of seeing the ghost, I cannot vouch for that part of the story, but I can show you her grave. They buried her down here, with a stake through her heart; and the place is called the 'Nun's Grave' from that day to this."

Genevieve reverently contemplated the stained stones.

"I am glad I am a Cliffe!" she said, as she arose and followed him down the paved aisle.

The grave was not far distant. They entered a narrow path, with dismal yew and gloomy elm interlacing their branches overhead, shutting out the summer sunshine—a spot as dark and lonely as the heart of a primeval forest. And at the foot of a patriarchal dryad of yew was a long mound, with a black marble slab at the head, without name, or date, or inscription.

"Horrid dismal old place!—isn't it?" said Tom, flinging himself on the grass. "But dismal or not, I am about done up, and intend to rest here. Why, what is the matter?"

For Genevieve, looking down at the grass, had suddenly turned of a ghostly whiteness, and sunk down in a violent tremor, and faintness across the mound. Tom sprang up in dire alarm.

"Vivia, Vivia! What in the world is this?"

She did not speak.

He lifted her up, and she clung with a nameless trembling terror to his arm, her very lips blanched to the whiteness of death.

"Vivia, what under heaven is this?"

The pale lips parted.

"Nothing!" she said, in a voice that could scarcely be heard. "Let us go away from this."

He drew her arm within his, and led her away, mystified beyond expression. But, in the terrible after-days, when the "Nun's Grave" had more of horror for him than Hades itself, he had reason to remember Vivia's first visit there.

CHAPTER IX.

VICTORIA REGIA.

BEFORE the end of the first week, the little heiress was thoroughly domesticated at Castle Cliffe. Everybody liked her, from Lady Agnes down to the kitchen maids, who sometimes had the honor of dropping her a courtesy, and receiving a gracious little smile in return. Lady Agnes had keen eyes, and reading her like a printed book, saw that the little girl was aristocratic to the core of her heart. If she wept, as she once or twice found occasion to do, it was like a little lady—noiselessly, with her handkerchief to her eyes, and her face buried in her arm. If she laughed, it was careless, low, and musical, and with an air of despising laughter all the time. She never romped; she never screamed; she was never rude. Heaven forbid! The blue blood of the Cliffes certainly flowed with proud propriety through those delicate veins.

The girl of twelve, too, understood it all, as the duckling understands swimming, by intuition, and was as radically and unaffectedly haughty in her way as Lady Agnes in hers. She was proud of the Cliffes, and of their long pedigree; proud of their splendid house and its splendid surroundings; proud of her stately grandmother; and proudest of all of her handsome papa.

"The child is well named," said Lady Agnes, with a conscious smile. "She is Victoria—exactly like her namesake, that odd, wild, beautiful flower, the Victoria Regia."

Everybody in Cliftonlea was wild to see the heiress;

the return of her father had been nothing to this *furor* ; so the white muslin and blue ribbons were discarded for brilliant silks and nodding plumes, and Lady Agnes and Miss Shirley drove through the town in a grand barouche, half buried among amber-velvet cushions, and looking like a full-blown queen and a princess in the bud. Certainly, it was a bewildering change for the little gray-robed pupil of the French convent.

It was a sultry September afternoon, with a high wind, a brassy sun, and crimson clouds in a dull, leaden sky—a Saturday afternoon, and a half-holiday with Tom Shirley, who stood before the portico of the hall-door, holding the bridles of two ponies—one his own, the other Cousin Victoria's. This latter was a perfect miracle of Arabian beauty, snowy white, slender-limbed, arch-necked, fiery-eyed, full of spirit, yet gentle as a lamb to a master-hand. It was a present from Sir Roland to the heiress of Castle Cliffe, and had been christened by that little young lady "Claude"—a title which Tom indignantly repudiated for its former one of "Leicester."

The girl and the boy were bound for a gallop to Sir Roland's home, Cliffwood, a distance of some seven miles ; and while Tom stood holding the impatient ponies, the massive hall-door was thrown open by the obsequious porter, and the heiress herself tripped out.

Tom had very gallantly told her once that the rope-dancer was a thousand times prettier than she ; but looking at her now, as she stood for one moment on the topmost step, he cried inwardly, "*Peccavi!*" and repented. Certainly nothing could have been lovelier—the light, slender figure in an exquisitely fitting habit of blue ; yellow gauntlets on the fairy hands, one of which lightly lifted her flowing skirt, and the other poising the most exquisite of riding-whips ; the fiery lances of sunshine glancing through the sunny curls flowing to the waist, the small black riding-hat and waving plume tied with azure ribbons ; the sunlight flashing in her bright blue eyes, and kissing the rose-tint on her pearly cheeks.

Yes, Victoria Shirley was pretty—a very different looking girl from the pale, dim, colorless Genevieve who had arrived a little over a week before. And, as she came tripping down the steps, planting one dainty foot in Tom's palm, and springing easily into her saddle, his boy's

heart gave a quick bound, and his pulses an electric thrill. He leaped on his own horse; the girl smilingly kissed the tips of her yellow gauntlets to Lady Agnes in her chamber window, and they dashed away in the teeth of the wind, her curls waving behind like a golden banner.

Vivia rode well—it was an accomplishment she had learned in France; the immense iron gates under the lofty stone arch split open at their approach, and away they dashed through Cliftonlea. All the town flew to the doors and windows and gazed in profound admiration and envy after the twain as they flew by—the bold, dark-eyed, dark-haired, manly boy, and the delicate fairy, with the blue eyes and golden hair, beside him. The high wind deepened the roses and brightened the light in Vivia's eyes, until she was glowing like a second Aurora, when they leaped off their horses at the villa's gates. This villa was a pretty place—a very pretty place, but painfully new; for which reason Vivia did not like it at all. The grounds were spacious and beautifully laid out; the villa was a gem of gothic architecture, but it had been built by Sir Roland himself, and nobody ever thought of coming to see it. Sir Roland did not care, for he liked comfort a great deal better than historic interest and leaky roofs, and told Lady Agnes, with a good-natured laugh, when she spoke of it in her scornful way, that she might live in her old ruined convent if she liked, but he would stick to his commodious villa.

Now he came down the grassy lawn to meet them, and welcomed them with cordiality; for the new heiress was an immense favorite of his already.

"Aunt Agnes thought it would do Vic good to gallop over," said Tom, switching his boot with his whip. "So here we are. But you needn't invite us to stay, for, as this is Saturday afternoon, you know it couldn't be heard of."

"Oh, yes," said Vic—a name which Tom had adopted for shortness; "we ought to go right back, for Tom is going to show me something wonderful down on the shore. Why, Uncle Roland, what is this?"

They had entered a high, cool hall, with glass doors thrown open at each end, showing a sweeping vista of lawns, and terraces, and shrubbery, rich with statues and portraits; and before one of these the speaker had made so sudden a halt that the two others stopped also. It

was a picture in a splendid frame of a little boy some eight years old, with long, bright curls, much the same as her own, blue eyes, too, but so much darker than hers that they seemed almost black; the straight, delicate features characteristic of the Cliffes, and a smile like an angel's. It was really a beautiful face—much more so than her own, and the girl clasped her hands in her peculiar manner, and looked at it in a perfect ecstasy.

"Why," Tom was beginning, impetuously, "where did you—" when Sir Roland, smilingly, caught his arm and interposed.

"Hold your tongue, Tom. Little boys should be seen and not heard. Well, Vic, do you know who that is?"

"It looks like—it does look like," a little doubtfully, though, "my papa."

"So it does; the forehead, and mouth, and hair are alike exactly. But it is not your papa. Guess again."

"Oh, I can't. I hate guessing. Tell me who it is."

"It is a portrait of my step-son, Leicester, taken when a child, and the reason you never saw it before is, it has been getting a new frame. Good-looking little fellow, eh?"

"Oh, it is beautiful! It is an angel."

Sir Roland and Tom both laughed, but Tom's was a perfect shout.

"Leicester Cliffe an angel! Oh, ye gods! won't I tell him the next time I see him, and he the veriest scamp that ever strutted!"

"Nothing of the kind, Vic," said Sir Roland, as Vic colored with mortification. "Leicester is an excellent fellow, and, when he comes home, you and he will be capital friends, I'm sure."

Vic brightened up immediately.

"And when will he be home, Uncle Roland?"

"That's uncertain—perhaps at Christmas."

"Is he old?"

"Considerably stricken in years, but not quite as old as Methuselah's cat," struck in Tom. "He is eighteen."

"Does he look like that now?"

"Except that all those young-lady-like curls, and that innocent expression, and those short jackets are gone, he does, and then he is as tall as a May-pole, or as Tom Shirley. Come in and have lunch."

Sir Roland led the way. After luncheon the cousins mounted their horses and rode to the castle. The sun was setting in an oriflamme of crimson and black, and the wind had risen to a perfect gale, but Tom insisted on his cousin accompanying him to the shore, nevertheless.

"I won't be able to show the Dev—I mean the Demon's Tower until next Saturday, unless you come now, so be off, Vic, and change your dress. It is worth going to see, I can tell you."

Vic, nothing loth, flew up the great oaken staircase to her own beautiful room, and soon reappeared in a gay silk robe and black velvet basque. As she joined Tom in the avenue, she recoiled in surprise and displeasure to see that Margaret was with him.

"Don't be cross, Vic," whispered Tom, giving her a coaxing pinch. "She was sitting, moping like an old hen with the distemper, under the trees, and I thought it would be only an act of Christian politeness to ask her. Come on, she won't eat you ; come on, Mag."

Tom's long legs measured off the ground as if he were shod with seven-leagued boots, and the two girls, running breathlessly at his side, had enough to do to keep up with him. The shore was about a half-mile distant, but he knew lots of short cuts through the trees, and before long they were on the sands and scrambling over the rocks, Tom holding Vic's hand, and Margaret making her way in the best manner she could, with now and then an encouraging word from him. The sky looked dark and menacing, the wind raged over the heaving sea, and the surf washed the rocks far out in great billows of foam.

"Look there," said Tom, pointing to something that really looked like a huge mass of stone tower. "That's the Demon's Tower, and they call that the Storm Bar beyond it. We can walk to it now because the tide is low, but any one caught there at high water would be drowned for certain, unless he was an uncommon swimmer. There's no danger now, though, as the tide's very low. So make haste and come along."

But over the slippe y rocks and slimy sea-weed Vic could not "come along" at all. Seeing which, Tom lifted her in his arms, with as much ceremony and difficulty as if she had been a kitten ; and calling to Margaret to mind her eye, and not break her neck, bounded from

jag to jag with as much ease as a goat. Margaret, slipping, and falling, and rising again, followed patiently on, and in fifteen minutes they were in the cavern, and Vic was standing, laughing and breathless, on her own feet again.

It was in reality a tower without a top; for some twenty feet above them they could see the dull, leaden sky, and the sides were as steep, and perpendicular, and unclimbable as the walls of a house. The cavern was sufficiently spacious, and opposite the low, natural archway by which they had entered, were half a dozen rough steps cut in the rocks, and above them was a kind of a seat made by a projecting stone. The place was filled with hollow, weird sounds, something between the sound we hear in sea-shells and the mournful sighing of an Æolian harp, and the effect altogether was unspeakably wild and melancholy.

Again Vic clasped her hands, this time in mingled awe and delight.

"What a place! How the sea and wind roar among the rocks! I could stay here forever!"

"I have often been here for hours on a stretch with Leicester Cliffe," said Tom. "We cut those steps in the rock; and, when we were little shavers, he used to play Robinson Crusoe, and I, Man Friday. We named it Robinson Crusoe's Castle; but that was too long for every day; so the people in Lower Cliffe—the fishing village over there—called it the Devil's Tower. Vic, sing a song, and hear how your voice will echo round these stone walls."

"But," said Margaret, "I don't think it's safe to stay here, Tom. You know, when the tide rises it fills this place nearly to the top, and would drown us all!"

"Don't be a goose, Maggie; there's no danger, I tell you! Vic, get up in Robinson Crusoe's seat, and I'll be Man Friday again, and lie here at your feet."

Vic got up the steps, and seated herself upon the stone ledge; Tom flung himself on the stone floor, and Margaret sat down on a pile of dry sea-weed in the corner. Then Vic sang some wild Venetian barcarole, that echoed and re-echoed, and rang out on the wind, in a way that equally amazed and delighted her. Again and again she sang, fascinated by the wild and beautiful echo, and Tom

joined in loud choruses of his own, and Margaret listened, seemingly quite as much delighted as they, until, suddenly, in the midst of the loudest strain, she sprang to her feet with a sharp cry.

"Tom! Tom! the tide is upon us!"

Instantly Tom was on his feet, as if he were made from head to heel of spring-steel, and out of the black arch. For nearly two yards, the space below the archway was clear of the surf; but, owing to a peculiar curve in the shore, the tower had become an island, and was almost encircled by the foaming waves. The dull day was darkening, too; the fierce blast dashed the spray in his eyes, and in one frantic glance he saw that escape was impossible.

He could not swim to the shore in that surf; neither he nor they could climb up the steep sides of the cavern, and they all must drown where they were. Not for himself did he care—brave Tom never thought of himself in that moment, nor even of Margaret—only of Vic. In an instant he was back again, and kneeling at her feet on the stone floor.

"I promised to protect you!" he cried out, "and see how I have kept my word!"

"Tom, is it true? Can we not escape?"

"No; the sea is around us on every hand, and in twenty minutes will be over that arch and over our heads! Oh, I wish I had been struck dead before I brought you here."

"And can we do nothing?" said Vic, clasping her hands—always her impulse. "If we could only climb to the top."

Again Tom bounded to his feet.

"I will try! There may be a rope there, and it is a chance, after all!"

In a twinkling he was at the top of Robinson's seat and clutching frantically at invisible fragments of rock, to help him up the steep ascent. But in vain; worse than in vain! Neither sailor nor monkey could have climbed up there: and, with a sharp cry, he missed his hold, and was hurled back, stunned and senseless, to the floor.

The salt spray came dashing in their faces as they knelt beside him. Margaret shrieked, and covered her face with her hands, and cowered down; and "Oh, holy

mother, protect us ! " murmured the pale lips of the French girl.

And still the waters rose !

CHAPTER X.

BARBARA.

THE Cliftonlea races were over and well over, but at least one-third of the pleasure-seekers went home disappointed. The races had been successful ; the weather propitious ; but one great point of attraction had mysteriously disappeared—after the first day, the infant Venus vanished and was seen no more. The mob had gone wild about her, and had besieged the theater clamorously next day ; but when another and very clumsy Venus was substituted, and the original divinity was not to be found, the manager nearly had his theater pulled down about his ears, in their angry disappointment. None could tell what had become of her, except, perhaps, Mr. Sweet—which prudent gentleman enchanted the race-ground no longer with his presence, but devoted himself exclusively to a little business of his own.

It was a sweltering August evening. The sun, that had throbbed and blazed all day like a great heart of fire in a cloudless sky, was going slowly down behind the Sussex hills, but a few vagrant wandering sunbeams lingered still on the open window, and along the carpetless floor, in an upper room in the Cliffe Arms.

It was a small room, with an attic roof—stifling hot just now, and filled with reeking fumes of tobacco ; for Mr. Peter Black sat near the empty fireplace, smoking like a volcano. There were two ladies in the room ; but, despite their presence and the suffocating atmosphere, Mr. Black kept his hat on, for the wearing of which article of dress he partly atoned by being in his shirt-sleeves, and very much out at the elbows at that.

One of these ladies, rather stricken in years, exceedingly crooked, exceedingly yellow, and with an exceedingly

sharp and vicious expression generally, sat on a low stool opposite him; her skinny elbows on her knees, her skinny chin in her hands, and her small, rat-like eyes transfixing him with an unwinking stare.

The second lady—a youthful angel arrayed in faded gauze, ornamented with tawdry ribbons and tarnished tinsel—stood by the open window, trying to catch the slightest breeze; but no breeze stirred the stagnant air of the sweltering August afternoon. It was the Infant Venus, of course—looking like anything just now, however, but a Venus, in her shabby dress, her uncombed and tangled profusion of hair, and the scowl, the unmistakable scowl, that darkened the pretty face.

There never was greater nonsense than that trite old adage of “beauty unadorned being adorned the most,” Beauty in satin and diamonds is infinitely more beautiful than the same in linsey-wolsey, and the caterpillar, with sulky face and frowzed hair, looking out of the window, was no more like the golden butterfly, wreathed and smiling on the tightrope, than a real caterpillar is like a real butterfly. In fact, none of the three appeared to be in the best of humor; the man looked dogged and scowling; the old woman, fierce and wrathful, and the girl, gloomy and sullen. They had been in exactly the same position for at least two hours, without speaking, when the girl suddenly turned round from the window, with flashing eyes and fiery face.

“Father, I want to know how long we are to be kept roasted alive in this place? If you don’t let me out, I will jump out of the window to-night, though I break my neck for it!”

“Do, and be ——,” growled Mr. Black, surlily, without looking up.

“What have we come here for at all? Why have we left the theater?”

“Find out!” said Mr. Black, laconically.

The girl’s eyes flamed, and her hands clenched, but the old woman interposed,

“Barbara, you are a fool! and fools ask more questions in a minute than a wise man can answer in a day. We have come here for your good, and—there’s a knock, open the door.”

“It’s that yellow old ogre again,” muttered Barbara,

going to the door. "I know he's at the bottom of all this, and I should like to scratch his eyes out—I should!"

She unlocked the door as she uttered the gentle wish; and the yellow old ogre, in the person of the ever-smiling Mr. Sweet, stepped in. Certainly he was smiling just now—quite radiantly, in fact; and his waistcoat, and whiskers, and hair, and profusion of jewelry seemed to scintillate sparks of sunshine, and smile, too.

"And how does my charming little Venus find herself this warm evening? Blooming as a rosebud, I hope?" he began, chuckling her under the chin. "And the dear old lady quite well and cheerful, I trust? And you, my dear old boy, always smoking and enjoying yourself after your own fashion. How do you do, all?"

By the way of answer, the charming little Venus wrenched herself angrily from his grasp; the dear old lady gave him a malignant glance out of her weird eyes, and the dear old boy smoked on with a steady scowl, and never looked up.

"All silent!" said Mr. Sweet, drawing up a chair, and looking silently round. "Why, that's odd, too? Barbara, my dear, will you tell me what is the matter?"

Barbara faced round from the window with rather decomposing suddenness, not to say fierceness.

"The matter is, Mr. Sweet, that I'm about tired of being cooped up in this hot hole; and if I don't get out by fair means, I will by foul, and that before long. What have you brought us here for? You needn't deny it, I know you have brought us here."

"Quite right, Miss Barbara. *It was I!*"

"Then I wish you had just minded *your own* business, and let us alone. Come, let me out, or *I* shall jump out of the window, if I break every *bone* in my body."

"My dear Miss Barbara, I admire your *spirit and* courage, but let us do nothing rash. If I have brought you here, it is for your own good, and you will thank me for it one day!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind; and you won't thank yourself either, if you don't let me out pretty soon. What do you mean, sir, by interfering with us, when we weren't interfering with you?"

"Barbara, hold your tongue!" again the old lady sharply cut in. "Her tongue is longer than the rest of her body, Mr. Sweet, and you mustn't mind her. How dare you speak so disrespectful to the gentleman, you minx!"

"You needn't call either of us names, grandmother," said Barbara, quite as sharply as the old lady herself, and with a spectral flash out of her weird dark eyes. "I shouldn't think you and father would be such fools as to be ordered about by an old lawyer, who had better be minding his own affairs, if he has any to mind!"

Mr. Peter Black, smoking stolidly, still chuckled grimly under his unshaven beard at his little daughter's large spirit; and Mr. Sweet looked at her with mild reproach.

"Gently, gently, Miss Barbara! you think too fast! As you have guessed it, it is I who have brought you here, and it is, I repeat, for your good. I saw you at the races, and liked you—and who could help doing that!—and I determined you should not pass your life in such low drudgery; for I swear you were born for a lady, and shall be one! Miss Barbara, you are a great deal too beautiful for so public and dangerous a life, and, I repeat again, you shall be a lady yet!"

"How?" said Barbara, a little mollified, like all of her sex, by the flattery.

"Well, in the first place, you shall be educated; your father will have a more respectable situation than that of ticket-taker to a band of strolling players; and, lastly, when you have grown up, I shall perhaps make you—my little wife."

Mr. Sweet laughed pleasantly, but Barbara shrugged her shoulders, and turned away with infinite contempt.

"Oh, thank you! I shall never be a lady in that case, I am afraid! You may keep your fine promises, Mr. Sweet, for those who like them, and let me go back to the theater."

"My dear child, when you see the pretty cottage I have for you to live in, and the fine dresses you shall have, and all the friends you will make, you will think differently of it. I am aware this is not the most comfortable place in the world, but I came up for the express purpose of telling you you are to leave here to-night.

Yes, my good friend Black, you will hold yourself in readiness to-night to quit this for your future home."

Mr. Black took his pipe out of his mouth and looked up for the first time.

"Where's that?" he gruffly asked.

"Down in Lower Cliffe, the fishing-village below here, and I have found you the nicest cottage ever you saw, where you can live as comfortably as a king."

"And that respectable occupation of yours—perhaps it's a lawyer's clerk you want to make of me. I'm not over particular, Lord knows! but I don't want to come to that."

"My dear Black, don't be sarcastic, if you can help it. Your occupation shall be one of the oldest and most respectable—a profession the apostles followed—that of a fisherman, you know."

"I don't know anything about the apostles," said Mr. Black, gruffly, "and I know less about being a fisherman. Why don't you set me up for a milliner, or a lady's maid at once?"

"My dear friend, I am afraid you got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning, you're so uncommon savage; but I can overlook that and the few other defects you are troubled with, as people overlook spots on the sun. As to the fishing, you'll soon learn all you want to know, which won't be much; and as you will never want a guinea while I have one in my purse, you need never shorten your days by hard work. In three hours from now—that is, at nine o'clock—I will be here with a conveyance to bear you to your new home. And now," said Mr. Sweet, rising, "as much as I regret it, I must tear myself away; for I have an engagement with my lady at the castle in half an hour. By the way, have you heard the news of what happened at the castle the other day?"

"How should we hear it?" said Mr. Black, sulkily. "Do you suppose the birds of the air would fly in with news? and you took precious good care that none should reach us any other way."

"True. I might have known you would not hear it; but it is a mere trifle after all. The only son of Lady Agnes Shirley has returned home, after an absence of twelve years, and all Cliftonlea is ringing with the news. Perhaps you would like to hear the story, my good Judith,"

said Mr. Sweet, leaning smilingly over his chair, and fixing his eyes full on the skinny face of the old woman. "It is quite a romance, I assure you. A little over thirteen years ago, this young man, Cliffe Shirley, made a low marriage with a French actress—very good, very pretty, but a nobody, you know. Actresses are always nobodies!"

"And lawyers are something worse!" interrupted Barbara, facing indignantly round. "I would thank you to mind what you say about actresses, Mr. Sweet."

The lawyer bowed in deprecation to the little vixen.

"Your pardon, Miss Barbara. I hold myself rebuked. When my lady heard the story, her wrath, I am told, was terrific. She comes of an old and fiery race, you see, and it was an unheard-of atrocity to mix the blood of the Cliffes with the plebeian puddle of a French actress; so this only son and heir was cast off. Then came righteous retribution for the sin against society he had committed; the artful actress died, the young man fled into voluntary exile in India, to kill natives and do penance for his sins; and after spending twelve years in these pleasant pursuits, he has unexpectedly returned home, and been received by the great Lady of Castle Cliffe with open arms."

"Oh, grandmother," cried Barbara, with animation, "that must have been the lady and gentleman we saw driving past in the grand carriage yesterday. There were four beautiful horses, all shining with silver, and a coachman and footman in livery, and the lady was dressed splendidly, and the gentleman was—oh, ever so handsome! Don't you remember, grandmother?"

But grandmother, with her eyes fixed as if fascinated on the cheerful face of the narrator, her old hands trembling, and her lips spasmodically twitching, was crouching away in the chimney-corner, and answered never a word.

Mr. Sweet turned to the girl, and took it upon himself to answer.

"Right, Miss Barbara. It was Lady Agnes and Colonel Shirley; no one else in Cliftonlea has such an equipage as that; but your grandmother will like to hear the rest of the story.

"There is a sequel, my good Judith. The young sol-

dier and the pretty actress had a daughter ; and the child, after remaining six years in England, was taken away by its father and placed in a French convent. There it has remained ever since ; and not long ago two messengers were sent to Paris to bring her home, and the child of the French actress is now the heiress of Castle Cliffe ! Miss Barbara, how would you like to be in her place ?”

“ You needn't ask. I would give half my life to be a lady for one day.”

Mr. Sweet laughed and turned to go ; and old Judith, crouching into the chimney-corner, shook as she heard it like one stricken with palsy.

“ Never mind, my pretty little Barbara, you shall be one some day, or I'll not be a living man. And now you had better see to your grandmother ; I am afraid the dear old lady is not very well.”

CHAPLER XI.

THE FIRST TIME.

THE village of Lower Cliffe was a collection of about twenty wretched cottages, nestled away under bleak, craggy rocks, that sheltered them from the broiling sea-side sun. About a dozen yards from the one straggling road, winding away among rocks and jutting crags, was the long, sandy beach, where the fishermen mended their nets in the sunny summer days, and where their fishing-boats were moored, and away beyond it spread the blue and boundless sea. To the right, the rough, irregular road lost itself in a mist of wet marshes and swampy wastes, covered with tall rank grass, weedy flowers—blue, and yellow, and flame-colored—and where the cattle grazed on the rank herbage all day long. To the left were piled up miniature hills of weed-covered rocks, and in their midst the Demon's Tower. In the background the sloping upland was bounded by the high wall that inclosed the park grounds and preserves of the castle.

The village belonged to the estate of Lady Agnes Shir-

ley ; but that august lady had never set her foot therein. In a grand and lofty sort of way she was aware of such a place, when her agent, Mr. Sweet, paid in the rents ; and she scarcely knew anything more about it than she did of any Hottentot village in Southern Africa. And yet it was down here in this obscure place that her lawyer located the little dancing-girl whom he had promised one day to make a lady.

The delightful little cottage he had mentioned to Mr. Black stood away by itself at the end of the village farthest from the marshes, and nearest the park gate—a little whitewashed, one-story affair, with its solitary door facing the sea, and opening immediately into the only large room of the house. The place had been newly furnished by the benevolent lawyer before his *protégés* came there ; and this room was kitchen, sitting-room, dining-room, and parlor all in one. There were two small bedrooms opening off it—one occupied by the old woman Judith, the other by Barbara ; and Mr. Peter Black courted repose in a loft above.

The little dancing-girl, much as she had regretted being taken away from her theater at first, grew reconciled to her new home in a wonderfully short space of time. Mr. Sweet had given her a boat—the daintest little skiff that ever was seen—painted black, with a crimson streak running round it, and the name “ Barbara ” printed in crimson letters on the stern. And before she had been living two days in the cottage, Barbara had learned to row.

There must have been some wild blood in the girl's veins, for she lived out of doors from morning till night, like a gypsy—climbing up impassable places like a cat—making the acquaintance of everybody in the village, and taking to the water like a duck. Out long before the sun rose red over the sea, and out until the stars sparkled on the waves, the child, who had been cooped up all her life in dingy, grimy city walls, drank in the bracing sea air, as if it had been the elixir of life, went dancing over the marshes, gathering bouquets of the tall, rank, reedy blossoms, singing as she went, springing from jag to jag along the dizzy cliffs, with the wind in her teeth, and her pretty brown hair blowing in the breeze behind her. It was a new world to Barbara.

Mr. Sweet was certainly the most benevolent of men.

He not only paid the rent for the tenants in the sea-side cottage, but he bought and paid for the furniture himself, and made Barbara new presents every day. And Barbara took his presents—his pretty boat, the new dresses, the rich fruits and flowers from the conservatories and parterres of the castle—and liked the gifts immensely, and began to look even with a little complacency on the giver. But being of an intensely jealous nature, with the wildest dreams of ambition in her childish head, and the most passionate and impetuous of tempers, she never got on very friendly terms with any one.

Barbara certainly was half a barbarian. She had not apparently the slightest affection either for father or grandmother; and if she had a heart, it lay dormant yet, and the girl loved nobody but herself.

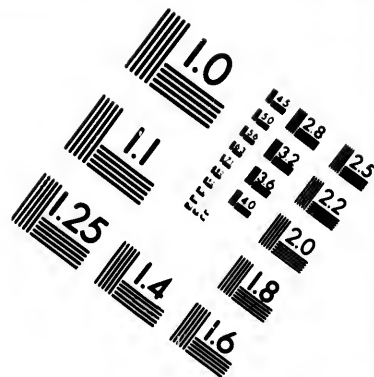
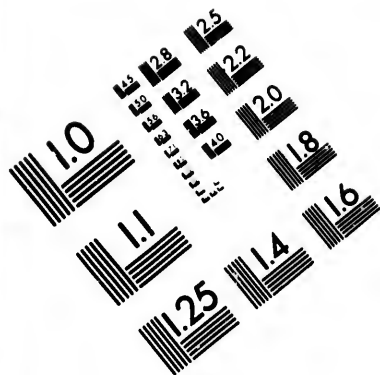
Mr. Sweet studied her profoundly, but she puzzled him. Scarcely a day passed but he was at the cottage—taking the trouble to walk down from his own handsome house in Cliftonlea; and Barbara was never displeased to see him, because his hands or his pockets had always something good for her.

One evening, long after sunset, Mr. Sweet turned down the rocky road leading to the fisherman's cottage. A high wind was surging over the sea, and rendering it necessary for him to clutch his hat with both hands to prevent its blowing into the regions of space; the sky was of a leaden gray, with bars of hard red in the west, and the waves cannonaded the shore with a roar like thunder. No one was abroad. At the village, all were at supper. But Mr Sweet looked anxiously for a lithe girlish figure, bounding from rock to rock as if treading on air—a sight he very often saw when walking down that road. No such figure was flying along, however, in the high gale this evening; and while he watched for it over the cliffs and sandhills, his foot stumbled against something lying in the sand, with its head pillowed in the midst of the reeds and rushes.

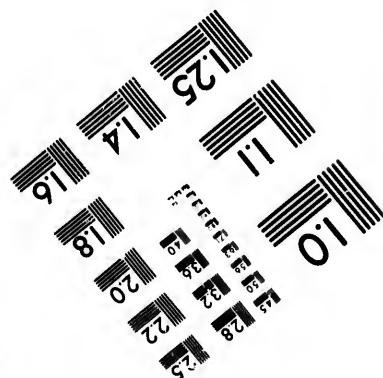
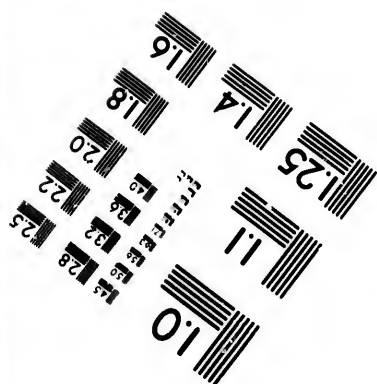
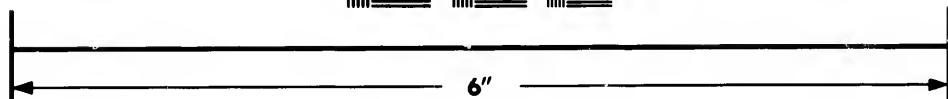
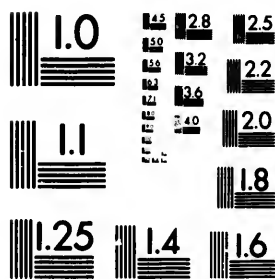
The recumbent figure instantly sprang erect, with angry exclamations, and he saw the sunburnt face of her he was looking for. Something had evidently gone wrong; for the bright face looked dark and sullen, and she began instantly, and with asperity, the attack.

“What are you about, Mr Sweet, trampling on people





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with your great feet, as if they were made of cast iron?"

"My dear Miss Barbara, I beg a thousand pardons! I really never saw you."

"Oh! you didn't? You're becoming blind, I suppose! But it's always the way. I never go anywhere for peace but you or somebody else is sure to come bothering."

With which Barbara sat upright, a very cross scowl disfiguring her pretty face, and gathering up the profusion of her brown hair, tangled among the reeds and thistles, began pushing it away under her gypsy hat. Mr. Sweet took a bunch of luscious grapes out of his pocket, and laid them by way of a peace-offering, in her lap.

"What's the matter with my little Barbara? Something is wrong."

"No, there isn't!" said Barbara, snappishly, and without condescending to notice the grapes. "Nothing wrong."

"What have you been about all day?"

"Nothing."

"Your general occupation, I believe! Has the dear old lady been scolding?"

"No! And I shouldn't care if she had!"

"Have you been to supper?"

"No."

"How long have you been lying there?"

"I don't know. I wish you wouldn't torment me with questions."

Mr. Sweet laughed, but he went on perseveringly, determined to get at the bottom of Barbara's fit of ill-humor.

"Were you in Cliftonlea this afternoon?"

The right spring was touched—Barbara sprang up with flashing eyes.

"Yes, I was in Cliftonlea, and I'll never go there again! There was everybody making such fools of themselves over that little pink and white wax doll from France, just as if she were a queen. She and that cousin of hers, that tall fellow they call Tom Shirley, were riding through the town; she on her white pony, with her blue riding-habit and black hat, yellow curls, and baby face, and everybody running out to see them, and the women dropping courtesies, and the men taking off their hats, as they passed. Bah! it was enough to make one sick!"

Mr. Sweet suppressed a whistle and a laugh. Envy, and jealousy, and pride, as usual, were at the bottom of Miss Barbara's ill-temper, for the humble fisherman's girl had within her a consuming fire—the fire of a fierce and indomitable pride. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and looked at her passionate face with a smile.

"They are right, my dear! She is the richest of heiresses, and the Princess of Sussex! What would you give to change places with her, Barbara?"

"Don't ask me what I would give," said Barbara, fiercely. "I would give my life, my soul, if I could sell it, as I have read of men doing; but it's no use talking; I am nothing but a miserable pauper, and always shall be."

The lawyer was habitually calm, and had wonderful self-possession; but now his yellow face actually flushed, his small eyes kindled, and the smile on his face was like the gleam of a dagger.

"No, Barbara," he cried, almost hissing the words between his shut teeth; "a time will come when you will hold your head far higher than that yellow-haired upstart! Trust to me, Barbara, and you shall be a lady yet."

He turned away, humming as he went. "There's a good time coming, wait a little longer." And walking much faster than was his decorous wont, he passed the cottage and entered the park-gates, evidently on his way to the castle.

Barbara looked after him for a moment a little surprised; and then becoming aware that the night was falling, and the sea rising, and the wind raging, darted along the rocks, and watched with a sort of gloomy pleasure the wild waves dashing themselves frantically along their dark sides.

"What a night it will be, and how the minute-guns will sound before morning!" she said, speaking to herself and the elements. "And how the surf will boil in the Demon's Tower, when the tide rises! I will go and have a look before I go in."

Over the rocks she flew, her hands on her sides; her long hair and short dress streaming in the gale; her eyes and cheeks kindling with excitement at the wild scene and hour.

The Demon's Tower was much more easily scaled from

without than within, and the little tight-rope dancer could almost tread on air. So she flew up the steep sides, hand over hand, swiftly as a sailor climbs the rigging, and reached the top, breathless and flushed. Pushing away the hair that the wind was blowing into her eyes, she looked down expecting to hear nothing but the echo of the blast, and see the spray fly in showers, when, to her boundless astonishment, she heard instead a sharp cry, and saw two human figures kneeling on the stone floor, and a third falling back from the side with an alarming sound.

Barbara was, for a moment, mute with amazement ; the next, she had comprehended the whole thing instinctively, and found her voice. Leaning over the dizzy height, she shouted at the top of her clear lungs :

“Hallo !”

The voice, clear as a bugle blast, reached the ears of one of the kneeling figures. It was Vivia, and she looked up to see a weird face, with streaming hair and dark eyes, looking down at her, in the ghostly evening light.

“Hallo !” repeated Barbara, leaning farther over. “What in the world are you doing down there ? Don’t you know you’ll be drowned ?”

Vivia sprang to her feet and held up her arms with a wild cry :

“Oh, save us ! save us ! save us !”

“Yes, I will ; just wait five minutes !” exclaimed Barbara, who, in the excitement of the moment, forgot everything but their danger. “I’ll save you if I drown for it.”

Down the rocky sides of the tower Barbara went as she had never gone before, bruising her hands till they bled, without feeling the pain. Over the craggy peak, like an arrow from a bow, and down to a small, sheltered cove between two projecting cliffs, where her little black-and-red boat, with the oars in it, lay safely moored. In an instant the boat was untied, Barbara leaped in, and shoved off, seated herself in the thwart, and took the oars. It was a task of no slight danger, for outside the little cove the waves ran high ; but Barbara had never thought of danger—never thought of anything, but that three persons were drowning within the Demon’s Cave.

The little skiff rode the waves like a cockle-shell ; and the girl, as she bent the oars, had to stoop her head low to avoid the spray being dashed in her face. The even-

ing, too, was rapidly darkening ; the fierce bars of red had died out in the ghastly sky, and great drops of rain began splashing on the angry and heaving sea. The tide had risen so quickly, that the distance to the cavern was an ominous length, and Barbara had never been in such weather before, but still the brave girl kept on, undismayed, and reached it at last, just as the waves were beginning to wash the stone floor. The boat shot on through the black arch, stopping beside the prostrate figure of Tom, and their rescuer sprang out, striving to recognize them in the gloom.

"Is he dead?" was her first question, looking down at the recumbent figure.

"Not quite!" said Tom, feebly, but with strength enough in his voice to put the matter beyond all doubt.

"Who are you?"

"Barbara Black. Who are you?"

"Tom Shirley—what's left of me. Help those two into the boat, and then I will try to follow them before we all drown here."

"In with you, then!" cried Barbara.

And Margaret at once obeyed, but Vivia held back.

"No, not until you get in first, Tom. Help me to raise him, please. I am afraid he is badly hurt."

Barbara obeyed, and with much trouble and more than one involuntary groan from Tom, the feat was accomplished, and he was safely lying in the bottom. Then the two girls followed him, and soon the little black-and-red boat was tossing over the surges, guided through the deepening darkness by Barbara's elastic arms.

But the task was a hard one ; more than once Margaret's shrieks of terror had rung out on the wind ; and more than once Barbara's brave heart had grown chill with fear ; but some good angel guarded the frail skiff, and it was moored safely in its own little cove at last. Not, however, until night had fallen in utter darkness, and the rain was sweeping over the sea in drenching torrents. Barbara sprang out and secured her boat as it had been before.

"Now, then, we are all safe at last!" she cried. "And as he can't walk, you two must stay with him until I come back with help. Don't be afraid. I won't be gone long."

She was not gone long. Fifteen minutes had not elapsed until she was back with her father and another fisherman she had met on the way. But every second had seemed an hour to the three cowering in the boat, with the rain beating pitilessly on their heads. Barbara carried a dark lantern; and by its light the two men lifted Tom and bore him between them toward the cottage, while Barbara went slowly before, carrying the lantern, and with Vivia and Margaret each clinging to an arm.

A bright wood fire was blazing on the cottage hearth when they entered; for though the month was September, Judith's bones were old and chill, and Judith sat crouching over it now, while she waited their coming. The dripping procession entered, and Vivia thought the fire the pleasantest thing she had ever seen at Castle Cliffe. A wooden settle stood before the hearth; Tom was placed thereon, and Margaret dropped down beside it, exhausted and panting; and Vivia and Barbara stood opposite and looked at each other across the hearth. Vivia's rich silk dress hung dripping and clammy around her, and her long sunny curls were drenched with rain and sea-spray. Barbara recognized her instantly, and so did the fisherman who had helped her father to carry Tom.

"It is Miss Shirley and Master Tom!" he cried out.

"Oh, what will my lady say?"

Old Judith started up with a shrill scream, and darted forward.

"Miss Shirley, the heiress! Which of them is she?"

"I am," said Vivia, turning her clear blue eyes on the wrinkled face, with the simple dignity natural to her; "and you must have word sent to the castle immediately."

Old Judith, shaking like one in an ague fit, and looking from one to the other, stood grasping the back of the settle for support.

There they were, facing each other for the first time, and neither dreaming how darkly their destinies were to be interlinked—neither the dark-browed dancing-girl, nor the sunny-haired heiress of Castle Cliffe.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NUN'S GRAVE.

"Some one must go to the Castle," repeated Vivia, a little imperiously. "Papa and grandmamma will be anxious, and Tom's hurt must be attended to immediately."

Old Judith, like a modern Gorgon, stood staring at this figure, her bleared eyes riveted immovably on her face, and shaking like a withered aspen as she clutched the settle. Victoria stood like a little queen looking down on her subjects; her bright silk dress hanging dripping around her, and her long hair uncurled, soaking with sea-spray, and falling in drenched masses over her shoulders. Barbara, who had been watching her, seemingly as much fascinated as her grandmother, started up impetuously.

"I'll go, grandmother. I can run fast, and I won't be ten minutes."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," interposed Mr. Black, in his customary gruff tones. "You're a pretty-looking object to go anywhere, wet as a water-dog! Let the young lady go herself. She knows the way better than you."

Victoria turned her blue eyes, flashing haughty fire, on the surly speaker; but without paying the slightest attention to him, Barbara seized a shawl, and throwing it over her head, rushed into the wild, wet night.

The storm had now broken in all its fury. The darkness was almost palpable. The rain swept wildly in the face of the blast over the sea, and the thunder of the waves against the shore, and the lamentable wail of the wind united in a grand diapason of their own. But the fleet-footed dancing-girl heeded neither the wind that seemed threatening to catch up her light form and whirl it into the regions of eternal space, nor the rushing rain that beat in her face and blinded her, as she leaped at

random over the slimy rocks. More by instinct than eyesight, she found her way to the park-gates—they were closed and bolted ; but that fact was a mere trifle to her. She clambered up the wall like a cat, and dropped, cat-like, on her feet, among the wet shrubbery within. There was no finding a path in the darkness ; but she ran headlong among the trees, slipping, and falling, and rising, only to slip, and fall, and rise again, until, at last, as she was stopping exhausted in despair, thinking she had lost her way in the thickly wooded plantation, she saw a number of twinkling lights flashing in and out, like fire-flies, in the darkness, and heard the echo of distant shouts.

Barbara comprehended instantly that it was the servants out with lanterns in search of the missing trio ; and starting up, she flew on again at breakneck speed, until her rapid career was brought to a close by her running with a shock against two persons advancing from an opposite direction. The impetus nearly knocked her down ; but recovering her center of gravity with an effort, Barbara clutched the branches of a tree, and paused to recover the breath that had been nearly knocked out of her by concussion.

“Whom have we here ?” said the voice of one of the men, coming to a halt ; “is it a water-witch, or a mermaid, or——”

“Why, it’s little Barbara :” interrupted the other, holding up the lantern he carried. “Little Barbara Black, actually ! My dear child, how in the world came you to be out and up here on such a night ?”

Barbara looked at the two speakers, and recognized in the first, Colonel Shirley, and in the second, Mr. Sweet, who held the lantern close to her face, and gazed at her in consternation.

“They’re saved, Mr. Sweet ; they’re all saved ! You need not look for them any more, for they’re down at our cottage, and I’ve come up here to bring the news.”

“Saved ! How—where—what do you mean, Barbara ?”

“Oh, they were in the Demon’s Tower—went there at low water : and the tide rose, and they couldn’t get out ; and so I took my boat and rowed them ashore ; and he has hurt himself, and they’re all down at our house, waiting for somebody to come.”

Colonel Shirley laughed, though a little dismayed withal, at this very intelligible explanation.

"Who is this little sea-goddess, Sweet, and where does she come from?" he asked.

"From Lower Cliffe, Colonel. Her father is a fisherman there, and I understand the whole matter now."

"Then we must go down to Lower Cliffe immediately. What could have brought them to the Demon's Tower? But, of course, it's some of Master Tom's handiwork. Wait one moment, Sweet, while I send word to Lady Agnes, and tell the rest to give over the search. What an escape they must have had if they were caught by the tide in the Demon's Tower!"

"And, Colonel, you had better give orders to have a conveyance of some sort follow us to the village. The young ladies cannot venture out in such wind and rain; and, if I understood our little messenger aright, some one is hurt. Barbara, my dear child, how could they have the heart to send you out in such weather?"

"They didn't send me—I came!" said Barbara, composedly, as the colonel disappeared for a moment in the darkness. "Father wanted me not to come, but I don't mind the weather. I'll go home now, and you can show the gentleman the way yourself."

"No, no; I cannot have my little Barbara risking her neck in that fashion. Here comes Colonel Shirley. So give me your hand, Barbara, and I will show you the way by the light of my lantern."

But Miss Barbara, with a little disdainful astonishment even at the offer, declined it, and ran along in the pelting rain, answering all the colonel's profuse questions, until the whole facts of the case were gained.

"Very rash of Mr. Tom—very rash, indeed!" remarked Mr. Sweet, at the conclusion; "and I hope his narrow escape and broken head will be a lesson to him the rest of his life. Here we are, Colonel—this is the house."

The ruddy glow of the firelight was shining still, a cheerful beacon, from the storm windows, to all storm-beaten wayfarers without. Barbara opened the door and bounded in, shaking the water from her soaking garments as she ran, followed by the lawyer and the Indian officer. The wood fire blazed still on the hearth; Tom lay on the settle before it; Margaret and Vivia were steaming away

in front of the blaze, and Mr. Peter Black sat in the chimney-corner sulky and sleepy. But old Judith's chair opposite was vacant, and old Judith herself was nowhere to be seen.

Vivia started up, as they entered, with a cry of joy, and sprang into her father's arms.

"Oh, papa, I am so glad you've come! Oh, papa, I thought I was never going to see you again!"

"My darling! And to think of your being in such danger, and I not know it!"

"Oh, papa, it was dreadful! and we would all have been drowned, only for that girl!"

"She is a second Grace Darling, that brave little girl, and you and I can never repay her for to-night's work, my Vivia. But this rash boy, Tom—I hope the poor fellow has not paid too dearly for his visit to the Demon's Tower."

"He is not seriously hurt, papa, but his face is bruised, and he says he thinks one of his arms is broken."

"It's all right with Mr. Tom, Colonel," said Mr. Sweet, who had been examining Tom's wounds, looking up cheerily. "One arm is broken, and there are a few contusions on his head-piece, but he will be over them all before he is twice married. Ah! there comes the carriage now!"

"And how is it with little Maggie?" said the colonel, patting her on the head, with a smile. "Well, Tom, my boy, this is a pretty evening's work of yours—isn't it?"

Tom looked up into the handsome face bending over him, and, despite his pallor, had the grace to blush.

"I am sorry, with all my heart; and I wish I had broken my neck instead of my arm—it would only have served me right!"

"Very true; but still, as it wouldn't have helped matters much, perhaps it's as well as it is. Do you think you can walk to the carriage?"

Tom rose with some difficulty, for the wounds on his head made him sick and giddy, and leaning heavily on Mr. Sweet's arm, managed to reach the door.

The colonel looked at Mr. Black, who still maintained his seat, despite the presence of his distinguished visitors, and never turned his gloomy eyes from the dancing blaze.

"Come away, papa," whispered Vivia, shrinking away with an expression of repulsion from the man in the chimney-corner. "I don't like that man!"

Low as the words were spoken, they reached the man in question, who looked up at her with his customary savage scowl.

"I haven't done nothing to you, young lady, that I knows on : and if you don't like me or my house—which neither is much to look at, Lord knows!—the best thing you can do is to go back to your fine castle, and not come here any more!"

Colonel Shirley turned the light of his dark bright eyes full on the speaker, who quailed under the keen glance, and sank down in his seat like the coward he was.

"My good fellow, there is no necessity to make yourself disagreeable. The young lady is not likely to trouble you again, if she can help it. Meantime, perhaps this will repay you for any inconvenience you may have been put to to-night. And as for this little girl—your daughter, I presume—we will try if we cannot find some better way of recompensing her, in part at least, for the invaluable service she has rendered."

He threw his purse to the fisherman, as he would have thrown a bone to a dog, and turned, an instant after, with his own bright smile, to the fisherman's daughter.

She stood leaning against the mantel, the firelight shining in her splendid eyes, gilding her crimson cheeks, and sending spears of light in and out through the tangled waves of her wet brown hair. Something in the attitude, in the dark, beautiful face, in the luminous splendor of the large eyes, recalled vividly to the colonel some dream of the past—something seen before—seen, and lost forever. But the wistful, earnest look vanished as he turned to her, and with it the momentary resemblance, as it struck him as a lance strikes a scared wound.

"Ask her to come to the castle to-morrow, papa," again whispered Vivia. "I like that girl so much!"

"So you should, my dear. She has saved your life. Barbara—Your name is Barbara, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"My little girl wants you to come to visit her to-morrow, and I second her wish. Do you think you can find your way through the park gates again, Barbara?"

The smile on the Indian officer's face was infectious. Barbara smiled brightly back an answer; and albeit Barbara's smiles were few and far between, they were as beautiful as rare.

"Yes, sir, if you wish it."

"I never wished for anything more, and I shall be glad to see you there every day for the future. Genevieve, bid Barbara good-night, and come."

Vivia held out her lily-leaf of a hand, and Barbara just touched it with her brown fingers.

"Don't forget. I shall be waiting for you at the park gates. Good-night."

"I shall not forget. Good-night."

The tall, gallant, soldier-like form, and the little vision in shot silk and yellow hair, went out into the stormy night, and Barbara went to her room, but, for once in her life, not to sleep. Her book of life had opened on a new page that day. The vague yearnings in her heart, that had so long grown wild, like rank weeds, had struck deeper root, and sprang up strong and tall, to poison her whole future life.

It was some time in the afternoon of the following day, when Barbara walked slowly—something unusual for her—up the rough road to the park gates. As she passed through, and went on under the shadows of some giant pines, a bright little figure came flying down the avenue to meet her.

"Oh, Barbara!"

And two little hands clasped hers with childish impetuosity.

"Oh, Barbara! I was so afraid you would not come!"

"I couldn't come any sooner. I was in Cliftonlea all the morning. Oh, what great trees those are here! and what a queer old cross that is standing up there among them!"

"That's the ruins of the convent that used to be here long ago—hundreds and hundreds of years ago—when there were convents and monasteries all through England; and the last abbess was murdered there. Tom told me all about it the other day, and showed me her grave. Come! I'll show it to you now."

The two children—the high-born heiress, in rose silk and the daintiest of little French hats, and the low-bred dancing girl, in her plain merino and cotton sun-bonnet—

strayed away together, chattering like magpies, among the gloomy elms and yews, down to the Nun's Grave.

With the tall plantation of elms and oaks belting it on every side, and the thickly interlacing branches of yew overhead, the place was dark at all times, and a solemn hush rested ever around it. The very birds seemed to cease their songs in the gloomy spot, and the dead nun, after the lapse of hundreds of years, had her lonely grave as undisturbed as when she had first been placed there with the stake through her heart.

"What a lonesome place!" said Barbara, under her breath, as the two stood looking, awe-struck, at the grave. "When I die, I should like to be buried here!"

Vivia, mute with the solemn feeling one always has when near the dead, did not answer, but stood looking down at the quiet grave, and the black marble slab above it.

The silence was broken in a blood-chilling manner. "Barbara!"

Both girls recoiled with horror, for the voice came from the grave at their feet—clear, and sweet, and low, but distinct, and unmistakably from the grave!

"Victoria!"

The voice again—the same low, sweet, clear voice from beneath their feet!

The faces of both listeners turned white with fear.

The voice from the grave came up on the still, summer air, solemn and sweet, once more:

"From death one has been saved by the other; and in the days to come, one shall perish through the other. Barbara, be warned! Victoria, beware!"

It ceased. A blackbird, perched on an overhanging branch, sat up its chirping song, and the voice of Made-moiselle Jeannette was heard in the distance, crying out for Miss Vivia. It broke the spell of terror, and both girls fled from the spot.

"Oh, Barbara! what was that?" cried Vivia, her very lips white with fear.

"I don't know," said Barbara, trying to hide her own terror. "It came from the grave. It couldn't be the dead nun, could it? Is that place haunted?"

"No—yes—I don't know. I think Tom said there was a ghost seen there. Don't tell Jeannette; she will only

laugh at us. But I will never go there as long as I live!"

"What made you stay away so long, Mademoiselle Vivia? Your grandmother was afraid you were lost again."

"Let us hurry, then. I want grandmamma to see you, Barbara. So make haste."

The great hall door of the old mansion was wide-open as they came near, and Lady Agnes herself stood in the hall, talking to the colonel and Mr. Sweet.

Vivia ran breathlessly in, followed by Barbara, who glanced around the carved and pictured hall, and up the sweeping staircase, with its gilded balustrade, in grand, careless surprise.

"Here is Barbara, grandmamma! here is Barbara!" was Vivia's cry, as she rushed in. "I knew she would come."

"Barbara is the best and bravest little girl in the world!" said Lady Agnes, glancing curiously at the bright, fearless face, and holding out two jeweled, tapered fingers. "I am glad to see Barbara here, and thank her for what she has done with all my heart."

Mr. Sweet, standing near, with his pleasant smile on his face, stepped forward, hat in hand.

"Good-afternoon, my lady. Good-afternoon, Miss Victoria. Our little Barbara will have cause to bless the day that has brought her such noble friends."

With a tune on his lips, and the smile deepening inexplicably, he went out into the great portico, down the broad stone steps guarded by two crouching lions, and along the great avenue, shading off the golden sunshine with its waving trees.

Under one of them he paused, with his hat still in his hand the sunlight sifting through the trees, making his jewelry and his yellow hair flash back its radiance, and looked around. The grand old mansion, the sweeping vista of park and lawn, and terrace and shrubbery, and glade and woodland, mimic lake and radiant rose garden, Swiss farm-house and ruined convent, all spread out before him, bathed in the glory of the bright September sun.

The tune died away, and the smile changed to an exultant laugh.

"And to think," said Mr. Sweet, turning away, "that one day all this shall be mine!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAY QUEEN.

SUCH a morning as the first of May was ! Had the good people of Cliftonlea sent an express order to the clerk of the weather to manufacture for them the fairest day he could possibly turn out, they could not have had a more perfectly unexceptionable one than that. Sun and sky were so radiantly bright, they fairly made you wonder to think of them. Ceylon's spicy breezes could not have been warmer or spicier than that blowing over Cliftonlea Common. The grass and the trees were as green as, in many other parts of England, they would have been in July. The cathedral bells were ringing until they threatened to crack and go mad with joy ; and as for the birds, they were singing at such a rate that their music shamed that of the bells, and the little chirpers had been hard and fast at it since five o'clock. All the town were hurrying, with eager anticipation, toward the common—a great square, carpeted with the greenest possible grass, besprinkled with pink and white daisies, and shaded by tall English poplars, where the Cliftonlea brass-band was already banging away at the "May Queen."

All business was suspended ; for May Day had been kept from time immemorial a holiday, and the Lady of Castle Cliffe always encouraged it, by ordering her agent to furnish a public dinner and supper, and no end of ale, on each anniversary. Then, besides the feasting and drinking, there was the band, and dancing by the young people, until the small hours, if they chose. And so it was no wonder that May Day was looked for months before it came, and was the talk months afterward, and that numberless matches were made there, and that the May Queen was the belle of all the succeeding year, and the envy of all the young ladies of the town.

The cathedral bells had just begun to chime forth the national anthem ; the crowd of townfolk kept pouring

in a long stream through High Street toward the common, when a slight sensation was created by the appearance of two young men, to whom the women courtesied and the men took off their hats. Both bore the unmistakable stamp of gentlemen, and there was an indefinable something—an indescribable air—about them that told plainer than words they were not of the honest burghers among whom they walked.

One of these, upon whom the cares of life and a green shooting-jacket appeared to sit easily, was remarkable for his stature—being, like Saul, the son of Kish, above the heads of his fellow-men—with the proportions of a grenadier, and the thews and sinews of an athlete. On an exuberant crop of short, crisp, black curls jauntily sat a blue Scotch bonnet, with a tall feather. On the herculean form was the green hunting-jacket, tightened round the waist with a yellow belt, and to his knees came a pair of tall Wellington boots. This off-hand style of costume suited the wearer to perfection, which is as good as saying his figure was admirable, and suited, too, the laughing black eyes and dashing air generally. A mustache, thick and black, became well the sunburned and not very handsome face; and he held his head up, and talked and laughed in a voice sonorous and clear, not to say loud as a bugle-blast.

The young giant's companion was not at all like him—nothing near so tall, though still somewhat above the usual height, and much more slender of figure—but then he had such a figure! One of those masculine faces, to which the adjective beautiful can be applied, and yet remain intensely masculine. A light, summer straw-hat sat on the fair brown hair, and shaded the broad, pale brow—the dreamy brow of a poet or a painter—large blue eyes, so darkly blue that at first you would be apt to mistake them for black, shaded as they were by girl-like, long, sweeping lashes—wonderful eyes, in whose clear, calm depths spoke a deathless energy, fiery passion, amid all their calm, and a fascination that his twenty-four years of life had proved to their owner few could ever resist. The clear, pale complexion, the straight delicate features, somewhat set and haughty in repose, were a peculiarity of his race, and known to many in London and Sussex as the “Cliffe face.” His dress was the most faultless of

morning costumes, and a striking contrast to the easy style of his companion's, with whom he walked arm-in-arm; patting, now and then, with the other hand, which was gloved, the head of a great Canadian wolf-hound trotting by his side. Both young gentlemen were smoking; but the tall wearer of the green jacket was carrying his cigar between his finger and thumb, and was holding forth volubly.

"Of course they will have a May Queen! They always have had in Cliftonlea, from time immemorial; and I believe the thing is mentioned in Magna Charta. If you had not been such a heathen, Cliffe, roaming all your life in foreign parts, you would have known about it before this. Ah! how often have I danced on the green with the May Queen, when I was a guileless little shaver in roundabouts; and what pretty little things those May Queens were! If you only keep your eye skinned to-day, you will see some of the best-looking girls you ever saw in your life."

"I don't believe it."

"Seeing is believing, and you just hold on. The last time I was here Barbara Black was the May Queen; and what a girl that was, to be sure! Such eyes; such hair; such an ankle; such an instep; such a figure; such a face! Just the sort of thing you fellows always go mad about. I believe I was half in love with her at the time, if I don't greatly mistake.

"I don't doubt it in the least. It's a way you have," said his companion, whose low, refined tones contrasted forcibly with the vigorous voice of the other. "How long ago is that?"

"Four years, precisely."

"Then, take my word for it, Barbara Black is homely as a hedge-fence by this time. Pretty children always grow up ugly, and *vice versa*."

"Perhaps so," said the giant in the green jacket, and tightening his belt. "Well, it may be true enough as a general rule; for I was uncommonly ugly when a child, and look at me now! But I'll swear Barbara is an exception; for she is the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life—except one. Only to think, being four years absent from a place, and then not to find it the least changed when you come back."

"Isn't it? I know so little of Cliftonlea, that its good people might throw their houses out of the windows without my being anything the wiser. What a confounded din that band makes, and what a crowd there is! I hate crowds!"

"They'll make way for us," said the young giant; and, true to his prediction, the dense mob encircling the common parted respectfully to let the two young men through.

"Look there, Cliffe, that's the Maypole, and that flower-wreathed seat underneath is the Queen's throne,—God bless her! See that long arch of green boughs and flowers; that's the way Her Majesty will come. And just look at this living sea of eager eyes and faces! You might make a picture of all this, Sir Artist."

"And make my fortune at the Exhibition. It's a good notion, and I may try it some day, when I have time. Who is to be the May Queen this year?"

"Can't say. There she comes herself!"

The place where the young men stood was within the living circle around the boundary of the common, in the center of which stood a tall pole, wreathed with evergreens and daisies, and surmounted by a crown of artificial flowers, made of gold and silver paper, sparkling in the sunshine like a golden coronet. From this pole to the opposite gate were arches of evergreen, wreathed with wild flowers, and under this verdant canopy was the May Queen's train to enter. The militia band, in their scarlet and blue uniforms, stood near the May Queen's throne, playing now "Barbara Allen"; and the policemen were stationed here and there, to keep the crowd from surging in until the royal procession entered. This common, it may be said, parenthetically, was at the extremity of the town, and away from all dwellings; but there were two large, gloomy-looking stone buildings within a few yards of it—one of them the court-house, the other the county jail—as one of the young gentlemen had reason to know in after days, to his cost.

There was a murmur of expectation and a swaying of the crowd; the band changed from "Barbara Allen" to the national anthem, and the expected procession began to enter. Two by two they came; the pretty village girls all dressed in translucent white, blue sashes round

their waists, and wreaths of flowers on their heads ; blonde and brunette, pale and rosy, stately and petite—on they came, two and two, scattering flowers as they went, and singing "God Save the Queen."

It was, indeed, a pretty sight, and the artist's splendid eyes kindled as they looked ; but though many of the faces were exceedingly handsome, the May Queen had not come yet. Nearly thirty of this gauzy train had entered and taken their stand round the throne, looking in their swelling amplitude of snowy gauze ten times that number, when a mighty shout arose unanimously from the crowd, announcing the coming of the fairest of them all—the Queen of May.

Over the flower-strewn path came a glittering equipage the queen of the Fairies might herself have ridden in ; a tiny chariot dazzling with gilding, vivid with rose-red paint, and wreathed and encircled with flowers, drawn by six of the snow-clad nymphs, the Queen's maids of honor. By its side walked two children, neither more than six years old, each carrying a flag, one the Union Jack of old England, the other a banner of azure silk, with the name "Barbara" shining in silver letters thereon. And within the chariot rode such a vision of beauty, in the same misty white robes as her subjects, the blue sash round the taper waist, and a wreath of white roses round the stately head, such a vision of beauty as is seen oftener in the brains of poets and artists than in real life, and heard of oftener in fairy tales than seen in this prosy, every-day world. But the radiant vision, with a coronet of shining dark braids twisted round and round the stately head—Nature's own luxuriant crown—with the lustrous dark eyes, flushed cheeks and smiling lips, was no myth of fairy tale, or vapory vision of poetry, but a dazzling flesh-and-blood reality ; and as she stepped from her gilded chariot, fairest where all were fair, "queen-rose of the rose-bud garden of girls," such a shout went up from the excited crowd, that the thunder of brass band and drum was drowned altogether for fully ten minutes. "God Save the Queen !" "Long Live Queen Barbara !" rang and rang again on the air, as if she were, indeed, a crowned queen, and the tall stately white figure, slender and springy as a young willow, bent smilingly right and left, while the band still banged out its patriotic tunes, and the crowd shouted themselves hoarse.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Cliffe, "what a perfectly beautiful face!"

The young giant in shooting-jacket did not answer. From the first moment his eyes had fallen upon her, his face had been going through all the phases of emotion that any one face can reasonably go through in ten minutes' time. Astonishment, admiration, recognition, doubt, and delight, came over it like clouds over a summer sky; and as she took her seat under the flower-bedecked Maypole, spreading out her gauzy skirt and azure ribbons, he broke from his companion with a shout of "It is!" and springing over the intervening space in two bounds he was kneeling at her feet, raising her hand to his lips, and crying in a voice that rang like a trumpet-tone over the now-silent plain:

"Let me be the first to do homage to Queen Barbara!"

"Hurrah for Tom Shirley," said a laughing voice in the crowd, and "Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah for Tom Shirley!" shouted the multitude, catching the infection, until the tall Maypole, and the ground under their feet, seemed to ring with the echo. It was all so sudden and so stunningly loud, that the May Queen, half startled, snatched away her hand, and looked round her, bewildered, and even Tom Shirley was startled, for that giant gazed round at the yelling mob, completely taken aback by his enthusiastic reception.

"What the deuce do the good people mean? Have they all gone mad, Barbara, or do they intend making a May Queen of me, too?"

"They certainly ought, if they have any taste!" said the girl. But do let me look at you again, and make sure that it is really Tom Shirley!"

Tom doffed his Scotch cap and made her a courtly bow.

"Certainly! Your majesty may look as much as you like. You won't see anything better worth looking at, if you search for a month of Sundays. I promise you that!"

The young lady, trying to look grave, but with a little smile rippling round her red lips, began at the toes of his Wellington boots, scrutinized him carefully to the topmost kink of his curly head, and recommencing there, got down to the soles of his boots again, before she was prepared to vouch for his identity.

"It is yourself, Tom! Nobody else in the village

was ever such a Brobdingnagian as you! If you had only come a little earlier, you might have saved them the trouble of seeking for a Maypole; and just fancy how pretty you would look, twined round with garlands of roses, and a crown of silver lilies on your head!"

Mr. Tom drew himself up to the full extent of his six feet four inches, and looked down on the dark, bright, beautiful face, smiling up at him, under the white roses.

"Well, this is cool! Here, after four years' absence, during which I might have been dead and buried, for all she knew, instead of welcoming me, and falling on my neck, and embracing me with tears, as any other Christian would do, she commences, the moment she claps her eyes on me, calling me names, and loading me with opprobrium, and——"

"Oh, nonsense, Tom! You know I am real glad to see you!" said Barbara, giving him her hand, carelessly, "and as to falling on your neck, I would have to climb up a ladder or a fire-escape first, to do it. But there, the band is playing the 'Lancers,' and everybody is staring at us; so do, for goodness sake, ask me for a dance, or something, and let us get out of this!"

"With all the pleasure in life, Miss Black," said Tom, in solemn politeness. "May I have the honor of your hand for the first set? Thank you! And now—but first, where's—— Oh, yes, here he is. Miss Black, permit me to present this youthful relative of mine, Mr. Leicester Cliffe, of Cliffewood, late of everywhere in general and nowhere in particular—an amiable young person enough, of rather vagabondish inclination, it's true, but I don't quite despair of him yet. Mr. Cliffe, Miss Black."

"You villain! I'll break every bone in your body!" said Mr. Cliffe, in a savage undertone to his friend, before turning with a profound bow to Barbara, whose handkerchief hid an irrepressible smile. "Miss Black, I trust, knows Mr. Tom Shirley too well to give any credit to anything he says. May I beg the honor of your hand for——"

"You may beg it, but you won't get it," interrupted Tom. "She is mine for the next set, and as many more as I want—ain't you, Barbara?"

"For the second then, Miss Black? I'll not leave you a sound bone from head to foot!" said Mr. Cliffe, chang-

ing his voice with startling rapidity, as he addressed first the lady and then the gentleman.

"With pleasure, sir," said Barbara, who was dying to laugh outright.

"And Mr. Leicester Cliffe, favoring her with another bow, with a menacing glance at his companion, walked away.

"*Sic transit gloria mundi!*" They're waiting for us, Barbara," said Tom, making a grimace after his relative.

And Barbara burst out into a silvery and uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"Tom, I'm ashamed of you! And is that really Mr. Leicester Cliffe?"

"It really is. What do you know about him, pray?"

"Nothing. There! he is our *vis-à-vis*—actually with Caroline March. I have had the honor of seeing him once before in my life—that is all!"

"Where?"

"There is a picture at Cliffewood, in the hall, of a pretty little boy, with long yellow curls and blue eyes, that I have looked at many a time—first, with you and Miss Vic, and afterward when I went there alone; and I saw him on several occasions when he was here six years ago."

"Six years ago? Why, that was just after you came to Lower Cliffe at first; and I was here then, and I don't remember anything about it."

"No, I know you don't; but the way of it was simple enough. You, and Miss Vic, and Lady Agnes, and Colonel Shirley, and Miss Margaret, all left the castle three months after I came to live here—you to go to Cambridge, Miss Vic to return to her French convent, Miss Margaret to go to a London boarding-school, and Lady Agnes and the colonel to go to Belgium. Do you comprehend?"

"Slightly."

"Well, let us take our place then, for the quadrille is about to commence. Sir Roland was going away, too, to Syria—was it not? And Mr. Leicester came down from Oxford to spend a week or two before his departure; and I saw him almost every day then, and we were excellent friends, I assure you."

"Were you? That's odd; for when I was speaking of you ten minutes ago, he seemed to know as little about you, as I do about the pug-faced lady."

Barbara smiled and shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Out of sight, out of mind! Monsieur has forgotten me!"

"Oh, the barbarian! As if any one in his proper senses could ever see you and forget you! Ever since we parted," said Tom, laying his hand with pathos on the left side of his green jacket, "you have been my star by day and my dream by night—the sun of my existence and the cherished idol of my young affections. Don't be laughing; it's truth I'm telling!"

"Bah! don't be talking nonsense! Do you remember the night you nearly broke your neck, and I saved you and your two cousins from the Demon's Tower?"

"That was six years ago—a long stretch to look back; but as if I could forget anything you ever had a hand in, Barbara!"

"I'll box your ears, sir, if you keep on making an idiot of yourself! You remember I was up the next day at the castle, and enjoyed the pleasure of the first chat I ever had with you; and we had a terrific quarrel that raged for at least three days?"

"I remember. I told you that when I grew up and married Vic, you should be my second wife, and that whichever I found suited me best should be first sultana. Well, now, Barbara, to make amends; suppose you become first, and——"

"Stuff! Tell me where you dropped from so unexpectedly to-day?"

"From Cliffewood, the last place. I came down with Leicester in last evening's train."

"Are you going to remain?"

"No, indeed. I'm off again to-night."

"A flying visit, truly. Did you come for a coal, Mr. Tom, and want to get back to London with it before it goes out?"

"Not exactly. I came to stir up that superannuated old dame, Mrs. Wilder, with the intelligence that my lady and suite are to arrive this day month at the castle."

"Is it possible? Are all coming?"

"All. My lady, the colonel, Miss Shirley, and Miss Margaret Shirley, not to mention a whole drove of visitors, who are expected down later in the summer."

"And Miss Vic—is she well and as pretty as ever?"

"Pretty! I believe you! 'She's all my heart painted

her, she's divine,' and her heart it is no other's, and I'm bound it shall be mine! Did you hear she had been presented at court?"

"I read it in the papers, with a full account of her diamonds, and moire antique, and Honiton lace, and the sensation she created, and everything else. I suppose she has been having a very gay winter?" said Barbara, with a little envious sigh.

"Stunning! It's her first season out, and she has made a small regiment of conquests already. You ought to see her, Barbara, in her diamonds and lace looking down on her multitude of adorers like a princess, and eclipsing all the reigning belles of London. One of her lovers—a poor devil of a poet, who was half mad about her—christened her the 'Rose of Sussex;' and, upon my word, she is far more widely known by that title than as Miss Shirley."

"Oh!" said Barbara, drawing in her breath hard, "if I only were she!"

"If you were," said Tom, echoing the sigh, "I would wish you to possess a little more heart. With all her beauty, and her smiles, and her coquetry, she is as finished a coquette as ever broke a heart. The girl is made of ice. You might kneel down and sigh out your soul at her feet, and she would laugh at you for your pains!"

"She must have changed greatly, then, since she left here six years ago."

"Changed! There never was such change—improvement, perhaps, some people would call it; but I can't see it. She used to be Vic Shirley, then, but now she is Miss or Mademoiselle Genevieve; and with all that satin and flummediddles floating around her, a fellow can only look on and admire from a respectful distance. Have you never seen her since?"

"Never! But," said Barbara, with a sudden crimsoning, that might have been pride or any other feeling, deepening the rose-hue on her cheek, "she wrote me one letter!"

"How generous! And you saved her life, too! What was it about?"

"It was a year ago," said Barbara, in a low tone; "a few months before she left school, and the colonel brought it from Paris. Among other things it contained an account of an interview she had had with some of the digni-

aries of the government, who were on a visit at the convent school; they gave her a costly present, and complimented her in the most cordial manner."

"Oh, I've heard of all that," said Tom, with an impatient shrug. "Lady Agnes has taken care to bore her dear five hundred friends with it at least a thousand times!"

"Now, Tom, tell me truly, are you going to marry your cousin?"

"I don't know," said Tom, with a groan. "I wish to Heaven I could; but it doesn't depend on me, unfortunately. She is encircled from week's end to week's end with a crowd of perfumed Adonises, who always flutter around heiresses like moths round a lighted candle; and girls are such inconceivable fools that they are always sure to prefer one of those nicely winged moths to a straightforward, honest, sensible, practical man. Miserable little popinjays! I could take the best of them by the waistband and lay them low in the dust, any day, if I liked!"

"You great big monster! Then the great bear has actually lost his heart!"

"Great bear! You are all alike; and her pet name for me is *Ursa Major*, too!"

"But you are really in love, Tom?"

"I don't know that, either!" groaned Tom. "Sometimes I love her—sometimes I hate her! and then, she is provoking enough to make a meeting-house swear. Oh, there's old Sweet, the lawyer, as yellow and smiling as ever, dallying along with Leicester, and I suppose I must give you up to him for one set, at least! By the way, how is the governor and the old lady?"

"If you mean my father and grandmother, they are as well as usual."

"Well, that's jolly—beg your pardon! *Ursa Major* has bruinish ways of talking, and they never could knock any manners into me at Cambridge. Oh, I see something nice over there, and I'm going to ask her for the next dance."

Off went Tom, like a rocket, and up came suave and graceful Mr. Leicester Cliffe, with the smiling agent of *Lady Agnes Shirley*.

"I believe I have the honor of the next, lady fair,"

said the young gentleman. "You and Tom appear to prefer talking to dancing, if one may judge from appearances."

Barbara laughed.

"Tom and I are old friends, Mr. Cliffe, and when old friends meet, they have a thousand things to say to each other."

"'Mr. Cliffe!' and you used to call me Leicester when I was here before."

"Oh, but you were a boy then," said Barbara, with another gay laugh and vivid blush.

"Well, just think I'm a boy again, won't you? Barbara and Leicester are much pleasanter and shorter than Miss Black and Mr. Cliffe."

Barbara did not speak.

"If I were a lady," was her thought, "would he talk to me like this?" And all the fierce, indomitable pride, asleep, but not dead within her rose up, and sent a flush to her cheek and a fire to her eye and a sudden uplifting of the haughty little head.

"Six years is a long time, Mr. Cliffe," she said, coldly; "and half an hour ago you had forgotten me."

"Miss Barbara, I have sinned in doing so, and have been repenting of it ever since. I accuse myself," he said, penitently, "of forgetting the little wild-eyed gypsy who used to sit on my knee and sing for me 'Lang-syne;' but when I forget the May Queen of to-day, I shall forget all things earthly."

There was a low, mocking laugh behind them, and Barbara turned round. She had not laughed at his speech as she had done at similar speeches from Tom Shirley, and her dark face was glowing like the heart of a June rose when her eye fell on the laugher. But it was only Mr. Sweet talking to a vivacious little damsel, and not paying any attention to them at all.

The heir of Cliffewood and the fisherman's daughter took their station at the head of the quadrille, and hundreds of eyes turned curiously upon them. The gulf between herself and Tom Shirley was not so very wide, for Tom was nearly as poor as she; but the heir of Cliffewood—that was quite another thing.

"What a handsome couple," more than one had said, in a stage whisper.

And a handsome couple they were. The young artist, with his dreamy brow, his splendid eyes, his fair brown hair, his proud, characteristic face, and princely bearing; the girl crowned with roses, and crowned with her beauty and pride, as a far more regal diadem; her dress of gauzy white, a duchess or a peasant might have worn with equal propriety, looking a lady to her finger-tips. The whisper reached them as they moved away at the conclusion of the dance, she leaning lightly on his arm, and he turned to her, with a smile.

"Did you hear that? They call you and me 'a couple,' Barbara."

"Village gossips will make remarks," said the young lady, with infinite composure; "and over in that field there are a horse and an ox coupled. Noble and inferior animals should find their own level."

"You are pleased to be sarcastic."

"Not at all. Where have you been all these years, Mr. Cliffe?"

"Over the world. I made the grand tour when I left Oxford four years ago; then I visited the East, and, last of all, I went to America. This day six weeks, I was in New York."

"America! Ah! I would like to go there. It has been my dream all my life."

"And why?"

She did not speak. Her eyes were downcast, and her cheeks crimson.

"Will your majesty not tell your most faithful subject," he said, laughing in a careless way, that reminded her of Colonel Shirley; and, indeed, his every look, and tone, and smile reminded her of the absent Indian officer, and made her think far more tenderly of Mr. Leicester Cliffe than she could otherwise have done, for Barbara had the strongest and strangest affection for the handsome colonel.

"Why would you like to go to America?" he reiterated, looking at her curiously.

She raised her eyes, flashing with a strange fire, and drew her hand hastily from his arm.

"Because all are equals there. Excuse me, Mr. Cliffe, I am engaged to Mr. Sweet for this quadrille."

He looked after her with a strange smile, as she moved away treading the ground as if she were indeed a queen.

"You will sing another tune some day, my haughty little beauty," said he to himself, "or my power will fail for once."

The day passed delightfully. There was the dinner on the grass, and more dancing, and long promenades; and the May Queen's innumerable admirers uttered curses not loud but deep, to find that Mr. Leicester Cliffe devoted himself to her all day, as if she had been the greatest lady in the land. To contest any prize against such a rival was not to be thought of; and when supper was over, and the stars were out, and the young May moon rose up, the heir of Cliffewood walked home with the cottage beauty on his arm. Tom Shirley had taken the evening train for London, and there were none to tell tales out of school.

The sea lay asleep in the moonlight, and the fishing-boats danced over the silvery ripples under the hush of the solemn stars.

"Oh, what a night," exclaimed Barbara. "What a moon that is, and what a multitude of stars. It seems to me," with a light laugh, "they never were so many or so beautiful before."

"They're all beautiful," said Leicester, speaking of them and looking at her. "But I have seen a star brighter than any there to-day. Fairest Barbara, good-night."

Those same slandered stars watched Mr. Leicester Cliffe slowly riding homeward in their placid light, and watched him fall asleep with his head on his arm, and the same queer half-smile on his lips, to dream of Barbara.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WARNING.

SIR ROLAND CLIFFE sat in his dining-room at Cliffewood—a pleasant room, with a velvet carpet of crimson and white on the floor; crimson satin curtains draping the French windows that opened on a sunny sweep of lawn; pictures on the satin-paneled walls—pretty pictures in gilded frames, of fruit and the chase, with green glimpses of Indian jungles, American prairies, and Canadian forests—the latter, the work of Sir Roland's heir. Sir Roland himself sat in a great arm-chair of crimson velvet, with gilded back and arms—a corpulent gentleman of fifty, much addicted to that gentlemanly disease, the gout—before an antique mahogany table, draped with the snowiest of damask, strewn with baskets of silver filligree, heaped with oranges, grapes, and nuts, and flanked with sundry cut-glass decanters of ruby port and golden sherry.

An open letter lay on the table, in a dainty Italian hand, that began, "My Dear Brother;" and while the May sunshine and breezes floated blandly through the crimson curtains, Sir Roland sipped his pale sherry, munched his walnuts and grapes, and ruminated deeply. He had sat quite alone over his dessert making his meditations, when right in the middle of an unusually profound one came the sound of a light, quick step on the terrace without, the sweet notes of a clear voice singing. "The Lass o' Gowrie," and the next minute the door was thrown open, and Mr. Leicester Cliffe walked in, with his huge Canadian wolf-dog by his side.

The young gentleman wore a shooting costume, and had a gun in his hand; and the sea-side sun and wind seemed to agree with him well, for there was a glow on his pale cheek, and a dancing light in his luminous eyes.

"Late, as usual," was his salutation, as he stood his gun in a corner and flung his slouch-hat on a sofa. "I intended to be the soul of punctuality to-day; but the time goes here one doesn't know how, and I only found out it was getting late by feeling half-famished. Hope I haven't kept you waiting?"

"I have not waited," said Sir Roland. "Ring the bell, and they'll bring your dinner. Been gunning, I see? I hope with more success than usual?"

"I am sorry to say not. Loup and I have spent our day and bagged nothing."

"Very shy game yours must be, I think."

"It is," said Leicester with emphasis.

"Well, you'll have the chance to aim at game of another sort, soon—high game, too, my boy. Here is a letter from Lady Agnes."

"Indeed."

"And it contains a pressing invitation for you to go up to London and be present at a ball her ladyship gives in a few days."

"Does it? I won't go."

"You will go. Listen."

"Tell Leicester to be sure to come, Roland. I would not have him absent for the world. It is about the last ball of the season, and he will meet scores of old friends, who will be anxious to see him after all these years of heathenish wanderings. And you know there is another and still stronger reason, my dear brother, for if the proposed alliance between Victoria and him ever becomes an established fact, I am extremely desirous to have it settled, and the engagement publicly made known before we leave London."

Sir Roland laid down the letter at this passage, and looked complacently across the table at his step-son; and that young gentleman, who had been paying profound attention to his dinner, and very little to her lady's letter, now raised an eye haughty and indignant.

"The proposed alliance! What does Lady Agnes mean by that?"

"Precisely what she says, my dear boy. Pass those oranges, if you please."

"That I'm to marry her granddaughter, Miss Victoria Shirley?"

"Exactly! Oh, you needn't fire up like that. The matter is the simplest thing in the world. Lady Agnes and I have intended you for one another ever since little Vic first came from France."

"Much obliged to you both; at the same time, I beg to decline the honor."

"You will do nothing of the kind. It is the most reasonable and well-assorted match in the world. You are both young, both good-looking, both of the same family, and the two estates will join admirably, and make you one of the richest landed gentlemen in England."

"Unanswerable arguments, all. Still, permit me to decline."

"And why, pray?" inquired Sir Roland, slightly raising his voice.

"My dear sir," said the young gentleman, filling with precision his glass with sherry, "I am infinitely obliged to her ladyship and yourself for selecting a wife for me in this most royal and courtly fashion, but still, strange as it may appear, I have always had the vague notion that I should like to select the lady myself. It seems a little unreasonable, I allow, but then it's a whim I have."

"Stuff and nonsense! What would the boy have? If you want riches, she is the richest heiress in the kingdom, and if you want beauty, you may search the three kingdoms and not see anything like her."

"I don't know about that. I have never seen her."

"You have seen her picture, then."

"I have looked at a picture over there in the old hall, of a very pink-and-white damsel, with round blue eyes and colorless hair, and as insipid, I am ready to make my affidavit, as a mug of milk and water. I don't fancy the small-beer style of young ladies; and as for beauty—cream candy and strawberries are very nice in their way, but nobody can live on them forever."

"Speak plain English, sir, and never mind cream candy. Do you mean to say you refuse the hand of Miss Shirley?"

"Really, Sir Roland, you have the most point-blank way of putting questions. Does Miss Shirley know that

she is to remain, like 'a stationer's parcel, to be left till I call for her? Or, if that is not plain enough English, is she a party to this affair?"

"She knows nothing about it; but it will be made known to her as soon as you arrive in London."

"And do you suppose, sir, that she, a beauty, an heiress, a belle, moving in the first circles, with all the best men of the day at her feet, will consent to be made a puppet of, and jump into my arms the moment I open them? The day has passed for such things, sir, and English girls are too punky to be traded like Eastern slaves."

"She is no English girl. She is French by birth and education; French to the core of her heart; and being French, she is too well used to this style of thing to dream for a moment of opposing the will of her guardians. The girl is what you are not—as obedient as if trained in a military school. A girl with such French notions as she has, would almost marry a live kangaroo, if her friends desired her."

"And that in itself is another objection. Miss Shirley, as you say, is French. So was her mother. Would you have a Cliffe marry the daughter of a French actress?"

"I'll break your head with this decanter if you insinuate such a thing again!" said Sir Roland, furiously; for there was still a tender spot in his heart sacred to the memory of Vivia. "Miss Shirley is altogether too good for such a worthless scape-grace as yourself. And I vow, sir, I have half a mind to disinherit you, and make Tom Shirley my heir. He would marry her the moment he was asked, without the least objection."

Lcicester laughed at the threat.

"I do not doubt it in the least, sir. But you and Lady Agnes are the most artless conspirators ever I heard of. Now, when you wanted us to unite our fortunes, your plan was to have brought us together in some romantic and unusual way, and warned us, under the most frightful penalties, not to dream of ever being anything but acquaintances. The consequence would have been, a severe attack of the grand passion, and an elopement in a fortnight. I compliment you, sir, by saying that you have no more art than if you were five instead of fifty years old."

"We don't want to be artful. The matter is to be arranged in the most plain and straightforward manner—nothing deceitful or underhand about it. If you choose to marry Miss Shirley, and gratify the dearest wish of my heart, I shall be grateful and happy all my life; if you prefer declining, well and good. Vic will get a better man, and I shall know how to treat my dutiful step-son."

"Is that meant for a threat, Sir Roland?"

"You may construe it in any way you choose, Mr. Leicester Cliffe, but I certainly have counted without hesitation on your consent in this matter for the last six years."

"But, my dear sir, don't talk as if the affair all rested with me. Miss Shirley may be the first to decline."

"I tell you she will do nothing of the sort. Miss Shirley will obey her natural guardians, and marry you any moment you ask her."

"A most dignified position for the young lady," said Leicester, with a slight shrug and smile, as he proceeded with solicitude to light his cigar. "Of course, her father knows all about this?"

"Her father knows nothing of it as yet. He is one of those men who set their faces against anything like coercion, and who would not have his daughter's wishes forced in the slightest degree."

"I admire his good sense. And suppose I consent to this step, when shall I start for London?"

"To-morrow morning, in the first train. There is no time to be lost, if you wish to arrive for the ball."

"And the first thing I have to do upon getting there, I suppose, is to step up to the young lady, hat in hand, and say, 'Miss Shirley, your grandmother and my father have agreed that we should marry. I don't care a snap for you, but at their express command I have come here to make you my wife.' How do you like the style of that, sir?"

"You may propose any way you please, so that you do it. She is a sensible girl, and will understand it. You will go, then?"

"Here, Loup!" said the young man, holding out a bunch of grapes to his dog, by way of answer; "get down off that velvet ottoman directly. What do you

suppose our worthy housekeeper will say when she finds the tracks of your dirty paws on its whiteness."

"I knew all along that you would go," said Sir Roland, filling his glass. "Here's her health in old port, and success to you both. The only astonishing thing is, how you could have remained here so long. When you got here first, two weeks ago, you told me before you had been five minutes in the house that you would die of ennui to stay here a week; but two of them have passed now, and here you are, a permanent fixture, and not a word of ennui. To be sure there are amusements; you can go out shooting every morning; and return every evening empty-handed; you can go out sailing, there are plenty of boats in Lower Cliffe, and there are plenty of agreeable fishermen, too, with handsome daughters."

It might have been the reflection of the curtains—the young gentleman was standing by the window smoking, and contemplating the scenery—but his face turned crimson.

"There is one particularly," went on Sir Roland, dryly. "Black, is the man, I think—very fine fellow, I have no doubt, with a tall, dark-haired daughter. Barbara is a nice little girl, always was, and will teach you to row and catch lobsters to perfection, very likely; but still Mr. Leicester Cliffe has other duties to fulfill in life besides those two. Take care, my dear boy, and when you reach London, don't talk too much of the fisherman's girl to the heiress of Castle Cliffe."

The young man had been standing with his foot on the window-sill during this harangue; now he stepped out on the lawn.

"I will go to London to-morrow, sir," he said quietly; and was hid from view by the screening curtains.

Flinging away his cigar, he strode around to the stables with his dog at his heels, and without waiting to change his dress, mounted his horse, and in five minutes after was dashing along in the direction of Lower Cliffe. A horse in that small village would have created a sensation; Mr. Leicester never brought one there, and he did not now. Leaving it in the marshes in the care of a boy, he walked down the straggling path among the rocks, and halted at the door of Mr. Black's cottage.

"Come in!" called a sharp voice in answer to his low

knock ; and obeying the peremptory order, he did walk in, and found himself face to face with old Judith. No one else was visible, and the old lady sat upon the broad hearth, propped up against the chimney-piece, with her knees drawn up to her chin, embraced by her clasped fingers, and blowing the smoke of a small, black pipe in her mouth up the chimney.

"If you want our Barbary, young gentleman," said Judith, the moment her sharp eyes rested on him, "she's not here : she went out ten minutes ago, and I rather think if you go through the park gates and walk smart, you'll catch up to her."

"Thank you. What a jolly old soul she is !" said Leicester, apostrophizing the old lady, as he turned out again and sprang with long strides over the road, through the open gates, and along the sweeping path leading to the castle. As he went on, he caught sight of a fluttering skirt glancing in and out through the trees, and in two minutes he was beside the tall, girlish figure, walking under the waving branches with a free, quick, elastic step.

Barbara, handsome even in her plain crimson merino, trimmed with knots of black velvet and black lace ; with no covering on the graceful head, but the shining braids of dark hair twisted, and knotted, and looped, as if there was no way of disposing of their exuberance, and with two or three rosy daisies gleaming through their darkness, looked up at him half-surprised, half-pleased.

"Why, Leicester, what in the world has brought you here?"

"My horse part of the way—I walked the rest."

"Don't be absurd ! When you went away half an hour ago, I did not expect to see you again in Lower Cliffe to-day."

"Neither did I ; but it seems I am going away, and it struck me I should like to say good-bye."

Barbara started and paled slightly.

"Going away ! Where?"

"To London."

"Oh, is that all ? And how long are you going to stay?"

"Only a week or two. The Shirleys are coming back then, and I'm to return with them."

His grave tone startled her, and she looked at him searchingly.

"Is anything wrong? What are you looking so solemn about?"

"Barbara, I have two or three words to say. Come along till we get a seat."

They walked along, side by side, in silence, and turning into a by-path of yew and elm, they came in sight of the Nun's Grave, lying still and gloomy under their shade.

"This is just the place," said Leicester; "and here is a seat for you, Barbara, on this fallen tree."

But Barbara recoiled.

"Oh, not here! it is like a tomb—it is a tomb, this place!"

"Nonsense! What is the matter with you? What are you looking so pale for?"

"Nothing," said Barbara, recovering herself with a slight laugh; "only I've not been here for six years. Miss Shirley was with me then, and something startled us both, and made us afraid of the place."

"Ah!" his face darkened slightly at the name. "Nothing will harm you while I am near. Here is a seat."

She seated herself on the trunk of an old tree, covered with moss, and he threw himself on the grave, with his arm on the black cross, and looked up in the beautiful questioning face.

"Well, Barbara, do you know what I've come to say?"

"You've told me already. Good-bye!" said Barbara, plucking the daisies, with a ruthless hand, from the grave, without looking up.

"And something else—that I love you, Barbara!"

She looked up at him and broke into a low, mocking laugh.

"Do you not believe me?" he asked, quietly.

"No!"

"Pleasant, that, and why?"

"Because, sir," she said, turning upon him so suddenly and fiercely that he started, "such words from you to me, spoken in earnest, would be an insult!"

"An insult! Barbara, I don't know what you mean!"

"You don't? It is plain enough, nevertheless. You are the son of a baronet, and the heir of Cliffwood; I am

the daughter of a fisherman, promoted to that high estate from being a rope-dancer! Ask yourself then, what such words from you to me can be but the deadliest of insults!"

"Barbara, you are mad, mad with pride! Stay and hear me out."

"I am not mad! I will not stay!" she cried, passionately, rising up. "I did think you were my friend, Mr. Cliffe; I did think you respected me a little. I never thought I could fall so low, in your eyes, as this."

He sprang to his feet, and caught both her hands, as she was turning away, with a passionate gesture, and holding her firmly, looked in her eyes with a smile.

"Barbara, what are you thinking of? Are you crazy? I love you with all my heart, and some day, sooner or later, I will make you Lady Cliffe."

"You will make me nothing of the kind, sir. Release me, I command you, for I will not stay here to be mocked."

"It is my turn to be obstinate now, I will not let you go, and I am not mocking, but in most desperate earnest. Look at me, Barbara, and read the truth for yourself."

She lifted her eyes to the handsome, smiling face bending over her, and read there truth and honor in glance and smile.

"Oh, Leicester," she passionately cried, "do not deceive me now, or my heart will break! I have had wild dreams of my own, but never before anything so wild as this. How can you care for one so far beneath you; and, oh! what will Sir Roland and Lady Agnes say, if it be true?"

"What they please! I am my own master, Barbara!"

"But Sir Roland may disinherit you."

"Let him. I have my own fortune, or rather my mother's; and the day I was of age I came into an income of some five thousand a year. So, my proud little Barbara, if my worthy step-father sees fit to disinherit me, you and I, I think, can manage to exist on that."

"Oh, Leicester, can you mean all this?"

"Much more than this, Barbara. And now let me hear you say you love me."

She lifted up to his a face transformed and pale with intense joy; but, ere she could answer, a voice, solemn and sweet, rose from the grave under their feet:

"Barbara, beware!"

The words she would have uttered died out on Barbara's lips, and she started back with a suppressed shriek. Leicester, too, recoiled, and looked round him in wonder.

"What was that? Where did that voice come from, Barbara?"

"From the grave, I think!" said Barbara, turning white.

Leicester looked at her, and seeing she was perfectly in earnest, broke out into a fit of boyish laughter.

"From the grave! Oh, what an idea! But, Barbara, I am waiting to hear whether or not I am to be an accepted lover."

Again the radiant look came over Barbara's face, again she turned to answer, and again arose the voice, so solemn and so sad:

"Beware, Barbara!"

"This is some devilish trick!" exclaimed Leicester, passionately dashing off through the trees. "Some one is eavesdropping; and if I catch him I'll smash every bone in his body."

Barbara, white as a marble statue, and nearly as cold, stood, looking down in horror at the Nun's Grave, until Leicester returned, flushed and heated, after his impetuous and fruitless search.

"I could see no one, but I am convinced some one has been listening, and hid, as I started in pursuit. And now, Barbara, in spite of men and demons, tell me that you love me."

She held out both her hands.

"Oh, Leicester, I love you with all my heart!"

In her tone, in her look, there was something so strangely solemn that he caught the infection, and raising the proffered hands to his lips, he said:

"My own Barbara! When I prove false to you, I pray God that I may die!"

"Amen!" said Barbara, with terrible earnestness, while from her dark eyes there shot for a moment a glance so fierce, that he half dropped her hands in his surprise.

"But I shall never be false!" he said, recovering himself, and believing at the moment what he said was true; "true as the needle to the North Star shall I be to the lady I love. See! I shall be romantic for once, and make

this old elm a memorial, that will convince you it is not all a dream when I am gone. It has stood hundreds of years, perhaps, and may stand hundreds more, as a symbol of our deathless faith."

Half-laughingly, half-earnestly, he took from his pocket a dainty penknife, and with one sharp, blue blade began carving their united initials on the bark of the hoary old elm, waving over the Nun's Grave, "L. S. C.," and underneath "B. B.," the whole encircled by a carved wreath; and as he finished, a great drop of rain fell on his glittering blade. He looked up, and saw that the whole sky had blackened.

"There is going to be a storm," he exclaimed. "And how suddenly it has arisen! Come, Barbara, we will scarcely have time to reach the cottage before it breaks."

Barbara stopped for a moment to kiss the wetted initials; and then as the rain drops began to fall thick and fast, she flew along the avenue, keeping up with his long man-strides, and in ten minutes reached the cottage, panting and out of breath.

Old Judith stood in the doorway looking for her, so there was no chance of sentimental leave-taking; but looks often do wonderfully in such cases, and two pairs of eyes embraced at the cottage door, and said good-bye.

The lightning leaped out like a two-edged sword as Barbara hastened to her room and sat down by the window. This window commanded a view of the sea and the marshes—the one black, and turbid, and moaning; the other, blurred and sodden with the rushing rain. And "Oh, he will be out in all this storm!" cried Barbara's heart, as she watched the rain and the lightning, and listened to the rumbling thunder, until the dark evening wore away, and was lost in the darker and stormier night. Still it rained, still the lightning flashed and thunder pealed, and the sea roared over the rocks, and still Barbara sat at the window, with her long hair streaming around her, and her soul full of a joy too intense for sleep.

With the night passed the storm, and up rose the sun, ushering in a new-born day to the restless world. Barbara was up as soon as the sun, and walking under the dripping boughs, along the drenched grass to the place

of tryst. But the lightning had been before her ; for there, across the Nun's Grave, lay the old elm—the emblem of their endless love—a blackened and blasted ruin.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHADOW IN BLACK.

OLD Judith, when not sitting in the corner, smoking, had a habit of standing in the doorway, taking an observation of all that passed in Tower Cliffe. She stood there now, while the sun set behind the golden, Sussex hills with a black silk handkerchief knotted under her chin, and her small, keen eyes shaded by her hand, peering over the sparkling sea. On the sands, in the crimson glow of the sunset, the fishermen who had been out all day were drawing up their boats on the shore, and among them Mr. Peter Black, with a tarpaulin hat on his head, and noisy fishy oil-cloth jacket, and trousers to match, was coming up the rocky road to supper.

Old Judith, on seeing him, turned hastily into the cottage, grumbling as she went, and began arranging the table. There was no one in the house but herself, and the room did not look particularly neat or inviting ; for Barbara, lazy beauty, liked far better to dream over novels and wander through the beautiful grounds of the castle than to sweep floors and wash dishes, and old Judith was fonder of smoking and gossiping than paying any attention to these little household matters herself. So when Mr. Black entered his cottage, he found chairs and tables, and stools and pots, and kettles and pails, all higglety-pigglety over the floor, as if these household gods had been dancing a fandango ; and his appearance, perfuming the air with a most ancient and fish-like smell, did not at all improve matters.

Judith's low grumblings broke into an outcry the moment she found a listener.

"It's just gone seven by the sun-dial at the park-gates !" she cried, shrilly, "and that girl has been gone since sunrise, and never put her nose inside the door since."

"What girl? Barbara?" inquired Mr. Black, pulling a clasped knife out of his pocket, and falling to his supper of bread, and beef, and beer.

"To be sure it's Barbara—a lazy, undutiful, disrespectful minx as ever lived! There she goes, gadding about from one week's end to t'other, with her everlasting novels in her hand, or strumming on that trashy old guitar Lawyer Sweet was fool enough to give her, among the rocks. Her stockings may be full of holes, her dress may be torn to tatters, the house may be dirty enough to plant cabbage in and I may scold till all is blue, and she don't care a straw for me, but gives snappish answers, and goes on twice as bad as before."

"Can't you talk in the house, mother?" gruffly insinuated Mr. Black, with his mouth full, as the old woman's voice rose in her anger to a perfect squeal. "You needn't make the village think you're being murdered about it."

"Needn't I?" said Judith, her voice rising an octave higher. "I might be murdered and she go to old Nick, where she is going as fast as she can, for all you care. But I tell you what it is, Peter Black, if you're a fool, I'm not; and I won't see my granddaughter going to perdition without raising my voice against it, and so I tell you!"

Peter Black laid down the pewter pot he was raising to his lips, and turned to his tender mother with an inquiring scowl:

"What do you mean, you old screech-owl, flying at a man like a wild-cat the moment he sets his feet inside the door? Has Barbara stuck you, or anybody else, that you're raving mad like this? Lord knows," said Mr. Black, resuming his supper, "if she let a little of that spare breath out of you, I shouldn't be sorry."

"There'll be a little spare breath let out of somebody afore long," screeched the old lady, clawing the air viciously with her skinny fingers, "and it won't be me. I told you before, and I tell you again, that girl's going to Old Nick as fast as she can; and perhaps when you see her there, and it's too late, you'll begin to think about it. Her pride, and her bad temper, and the airs she gave herself about her red cheeks, and her dark eyes, and her long hair, and the learning she's managed to get, weren't bad enough, but now she's fell in with that bescented, pale-faced, high and mighty popinjay from foreign parts,

and they're together morning, noon, and night. And now," reiterated old Judith, turning still more fiercely on her scowling son, "what good is likely to come of a fisherman's daughter and a baronet's son and heir being together for everlastin'? What good, I ask you yourself?"

Mr. Peter Black laid down his knife, opened his eyes, and pricked up his ears.

"Hey?" he inquired. "What the deuce are you driving at now, mother?"

"Do you know Sir Roland Cliffe, of Cliffwood? Answer me that."

"To be sure I do."

"And do you know that fine gentleman, with all his grand airs, Mr. Leicester Cliffe, his step-son?"

"What's the old woman raving about?" exclaimed Mr. Black, with an impatient appeal to the elements. "I've seen Mr. Leicester Cliffe, and that's all I know about him, or want to. What the deuce has he to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing, of course. Ever since he came here last May day, two weeks gone, he and your daughter have been thicker than pickpockets—that's all! Only a trifle, you know—not worth worreting about!"

"Well?" said Mr. Black, fixing his eyes on her with a powerful expression.

And the old woman ran on, with fierce volubility :

"No longer ago than last night, they came home together at dark; and she was off and away this morning at day-dawn, to meet him again, of course. It's been the same thing ever since May day; and she's so savage nobody dare say a word to her; and you're as thick-headed as a mule, and couldn't see water if you went to the seaside! Everybody else sees it, and she's the town's talk by this time. Mr. Sweet sees it; and, by the same token, she treats Mr. Sweet as if he were dirt under her feet. You know very well he wants her to marry him—him that might have the pick of the parish—and she holds her head up in the air and sneers at him for his pains, the ungrateful hussy!"

"Look here, mother," said Mr. Black, turning round, with the blue blade of the knife gleaming in his hand, and a horrible light shining in his eyes; "I know what's in the wind now, and all that you're afraid of, so just listen! I'm proud of my girl; she's handsome and high-stepping,

and holds her head above everybody far and near, and I'm proud of her for it. I'm fond of her, too, though I mayn't show it; and if there's anything in this cursed world I care for, it's her; but I would rather see her dead and buried—I would rather see her the miserable, cast-off wretch you are thinking of, than the rich wife of that black-hearted, doubled-dyed hypocrite, liar, and scoundrel, Sweet! I would, by—!" cried Mr. Black, with an awful oath, plunging his knife into the lump of cold beef, as if it were the boiled heart of the snake, Mr. Sweet.

With the last imprecation yet on his lips, a clear, girlish voice was heard without, singing that good old English tune of "Money Musk" and the door suddenly opened, and Barbara, who rarely sang of late, stood, with the tune on her lips, before them.

The long dark hair, unbound and disheveled by the strong sea-breezes, floated in most becoming disorder over her shoulders; her cheeks were like scarlet rose berries; her dark eyes dancing, her red lips breaking into smiles like a happy child; she fairly filled the dreary and disorderly room with the light of her splendid beauty.

Mother and son turned toward her—one wrathful and menacing, the other with a sort of savage pride and affection.

"So you've come at last," broke out old Judith, in her shrillest falsetto, "after gadding about since early morning, you slovenly——"

"Oh, grandmother, don't scold!" exclaimed Barbara, who was a great deal too happy and full of hope to bear anger and scolding just then. "I will clear up this room for you in five minutes; and I don't want any supper; I had it up at the lodge."

"Oh! you were up at the lodge, and with Mr. Leicester Cliffe, of course?"

Barbara flushed to the temples, more at her grandmother's tone than words, and her eyes flashed; but for once she restrained herself.

"No, I wasn't, grandmother. Mr. Cliffe left for London in the first train this morning."

Old Judith sneered.

"You seem to know all about Mr. Cliffe's doings. Of course, he told you that, and bade you good-bye when you were caught so nicely in the rain last night."

Barbara compressed her lips in rising wrath ; but she went steadily on arranging stools and chairs in silence. Old Judith, however, was not to be mollified.

"Now, I tell you what it is, my lady, you had better bring these fine goings-on to an end, and let Mr. Leicester Cliffe go gallanting round the country with grand folks like himself, while you mend your father's nets and keep his house clean. There is Mr. Sweet been here looking for you half a dozen times to-day, and a pretty thing for him to hear that you had been away since daylight, nobody knew where, but Mr. Leicester Cliffe, perhaps, and——"

But here Barbara's brief thread of patience snapped short, and with an expression of ungovernable anger, she flung the chair she held in her hand against the wall, and was out of the house in an instant, slamming the door after her with a most sonorous bang.

Before she had run, as she was doing in her angry excitement, a dozen yards, she heard a heavy step behind her, and a voice close at her ear singing, "Oh, there's nothing half so sweet in life as Love's young dream!" It made her turn, and, behold, the sunshiny figure and smiling face of Mr. Sweet.

"Home at last, Miss Barbara! I have been at least half a dozen times to-day in the cottage, thinking you were lost."

"You give yourself a great deal of unnecessary trouble, Mr. Sweet."

"Nothing done for you can be any trouble, Miss Barbara. I hope you've spent a pleasant day."

"Thank you!"

"This evening wind is cool, and you have no shawl; shall I not go to the house and bring you one?"

"No; I don't need it."

"Miss Barbara, how cold you are! I wonder what kind of a shawl would warm your manner to me."

Miss Barbara, leaning against a tall rock, was looking over a darkening sea, with a face that might have been cut out of the solid stone, for all the emotion it expressed. The crimson and purple billows of sunset had faded away into the dim gray gloaming, pierced with bright white stars, and the waning May moon was lifting her silver crescent over the murmuring waves. The fishing boats

were dancing in and out in the shining path it made across the waters ; and Barbara, with her long hair fluttering behind her in the wind, watched them with her cold, beautiful eyes, and heeded the man beside her no more than the rock against which she leaned.

He looked at her for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders, with a slight smile.

"Leicester Cliffe left town this morning for London, did he not?" he asked at length, abruptly.

"I believe so."

"Is that the cause of your gloom and silence to-night?"

Barbara turned impetuously round, with a dangerous fire in her great dark eyes.

"Mr. Sweet, take care what you are saying. You will oblige me exceedingly by going about your own affairs, whatever they may be, and leaving me alone. I didn't ask your company here, and I don't want it!"

Mr. Sweet smiled good-naturedly.

"But when I want you so much, Miss Barbara, what does a little reluctance on your part signify? Two weeks ago, on the morning of May day—you remember May day? I did myself the honor to ask you for this fair hand."

"And received 'No' for an answer. I hope you remember that also, Mr. Sweet?"

"Distinctly, Miss Barbara; yet in two weeks your mind may have changed; and, if so, I here to-night renew the offer."

"You are very kind; but I have only the trouble of saying 'No,' over again."

"Barbara, stop and think. I love you. I am a rich man—richer than most people imagine—and I think, without flattering myself, there are few girls in Cliftonlea who would hesitate about refusing me. Barbara, pause before you throw away so good an offer."

"There is no need. I suppose I ought to feel honored by your preference; but I don't in the least, and that is the truth. You may make any of the Cliftonlea young ladies happy by so brilliant an offer, if you choose; and I promise to go to the wedding, if she asks me, without feeling the least jealousy at her good fortune."

"You are sarcastic; and yet I think there are some

feelings—gratitude, for instance—that should make you treat me and my offer with at least decent respect.”

“Gratitude?” said Barbara, fixing her large dark eyes with a strong glance on his face. “I don’t owe you anything, Mr. Sweet. No; don’t interrupt me, if you please. I know what you would say, that I owe all the home I have known for the last two years to you, and that you rescued me from a life of hardship, and perhaps degradation. Well, I’ve been told that so often by you that I have ceased to think it a favor; and as from the first it was your own pleasure to do so, and without my will or request, I consider I’m not indebted to you the value of a farthing. As to education and all that, you know as well I do that Colonel Cliffe sent me to the Town Academy, and provided me with everything while there. So, Mr. Sweet, don’t talk of gratitude any more, if you and I are to be friends.”

While she spoke, in a voice clear and high, with a ringing tone of command and a warning fire in her eye, Mr. Sweet watched her with the same quiet, provoking smile. In her beauty and in her pride she towered above him, and flung back his gifts, like stones, in his face.

“And when is it to be?” he asked, when she ceased.

“What?”

“Your marriage with the heir of Sir Roland Cliffe.”

Even in the moonlight he saw the scarlet flush that dyed face and neck, and the short, half-stifled breath.

“This is your revenge,” she said, calmly, and waving him away, with the air of an outraged queen; “but go—go, and never speak to me again!”

“Not even when you are Lady Cliffe?”

“Go!” she said, fiercely, and stamping her foot.

“Go, or I shall make you!”

“Only one moment. When there are two moons in yonder sky; when you can dip up all the water in the sea before us with a teaspoon; when ‘Birnam Wood doth come to Dunsinane’—then—then Leicester Cliffe will marry Barbara Black! I have said you will be my wife; and, sooner or later, that time will come. Meantime, proud and pretty Barbara, good-night.”

Taking off his hat, he bowed low, and with the smile still on his lips, walked away in the moonlight, not only

smiling, but singing, and Barbara distinctly heard the words :

“ So long as he's constant,
So long I'll prove true ;
And then if he changes,
Why, so can I, too.”

Barbara sank down on the rock, and covered her face with her hands, outraged, ashamed, indignant ; and yet, in the midst of all, with a sharp, keen pain aching in her heart. She had been so happy all that day, beloved, loving and trusting—thinking herself standing on a rock, and finding it crumbling to dust and ashes. Oh, why had they not let her alone ! Why had they not let her hope and be happy ! If Leicester proved false, she felt as though she should die ; and half hating herself for believing for a moment he could change, she sprang up, and darted off, with a fleet, light step, toward the still open park gates, determined to visit once more the trysting-place, and reassure herself there that their mutual love was not all an illusion.

She never thought of the ghostly voice in her excitement, as she walked up the moonlit avenue and down the gloomy lane, toward the fallen elm. The pale moon's rays came glancing faintly through the slanting leaves, and kneeling down beside it, she saw the united initials his hand had carved, and the girl clasped her hands in renewed hope and joy.

“ He is true ! ” she cried, to her heart. “ He will be faithful and true to me forever ! ”

“ He is false ! ” said a low, solemn voice from the grave on which she knelt ; and, starting up, with a suppressed shriek, Barbara found herself face to face with an awful vision.

A nun, supernaturally tall, all in black and white, stood directly opposite, with the grave and the fallen elm between them. Without noise or movement, it was before her ; how, or from whence it came, impossible to tell ; its tall head seeming in the shadowy moonlight to reach nearly to the tree-tops, in a long, straight nun's dress, a black nun's veil, a white band over the forehead, and another over the throat and breast. The moon's rays fell distinctly on the face of deadly whiteness, and with

two stony eyes shining menacingly under bent and stern brows.

Barbara stood stupefied, spell-bound, speechless.

The figure raised its shrouded arm, and pointing at her with one flickering finger, the voice again rose from the grave, for the white lips of the specter moved not.

"Thrice have you been warned, and thrice have you spurned the warning! Your good angel weeps, and the doom is gathering thick and dark overhead. Once more, Barbara, beware!"

Still Barbara stood mute, white almost as the specter, with supernatural terror.

With shrouded arm and flickering finger still pointing toward her, the ghostly nun gazed at her while the sad, solemn voice again rose from the grave:

"You love, and think you are beloved in return. Oh, rash, infatuated child. Spurn every thought of him as you would a deadly viper; for there is ruin, there is misery, there is death in his love!"

"Be it so, then!" cried Barbara, wildly, finding voice in a sort of frantic desperation. "Better death with him than life with another!"

"Barbara, be warned, for your doom is at hand!" said the unseen voice.

And, as it spoke, the moon was lost in shadow, a dark cloud shrouded the gloomy grave and the black shape. There was a quick and angry rush as it vanished among the trees, and the whole night seemed to blacken as it passed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ROSE OF SUSSEX.

WHILE Barbara hoped, and Barbara feared, Leicester Cliffe was whirling away as fast as the steam engine could carry him towards London and his promised bride. And the same white crescent moon that saw her standing at the trysting-place, came peering through the closed shutters of a West-End hotel, and saw that young gentle-

man standing before a swing-glass, making a most elaborate and faultless toilet. A magnificent watch, set with brilliants, that lay on the dressing-table before him, was pointing its golden hands to the hour of eleven, when there came a rap at the door, and opening it, Mr. Cliffe was confronted by a tall waiter, with a card on a small silver tray."

"Show the gentleman up," said Leicester, lifting the card and glancing at it, and going on with his toilet.

Two minutes after, a quick, impetuous, noisy step was taking the stairs two at a time, and Tom Shirley, flushed, excited, and breathless, as usual, stood before him.

"My dear fellow, how goes it?" was his cry, seizing his cousin's hand with a grip that made him wince. "I should have been here ages ago, only I never received your note until within the last ten minutes. I was at the opera, and had just come to my lodgings to spread myself out in gorgeous array for the ball, when I found your letter, and came steaming up here without a second's loss of time. When did you come? And are you going to make one in my lady's crush to-night?"

"Sit down," was Leicester's nonchalant reply to this breathless outburst. "I had given you up in despair, and was about starting on my own responsibility. What induced you to go to the opera to-night?"

"Oh, this is the last night of the brightest star of the season; and, besides, we are time enough for the ball. How long before you have finished making yourself resplendent?"

"I have finished now. Come!"

Tom, who had just seated himself, jumped up, and led the way downstairs, two at a time, as before, and, on reaching the pavement, drew out a cigar-case, offered it to his companion, lighted a weed, and then, taking the other's arm, marched him off briskly.

"We won't call a cab—they're nothing but bores, and it's not ten minutes' walk to Shirley House. How did you leave all the good people in Cliftonlea—Sir Roland among the rest?"

"Sir Roland has had the gout; otherwise, I believe, he's had nothing to complain of."

"Well, that's a good old family disorder we must

all come to in the fulness of time. Was it to-day you arrived?"

"Yes. Lady Agnes was good enough to send me a pressing invitation to this grand ball of hers, and, of course, there was nothing for it but obedience."

"You must have found life in Cliftonlea awfully slow for the last two weeks," said Tom, with an energetic puff at his cigar. "What did you do with yourself all the time?"

Leicester laughed.

"So many things that it would puzzle me to recount them. Shooting, fishing, riding, boating——"

"With a little courting between whites," interrupted Tom, with gravity. "How did you leave little Barbara?"

Leicester Cliffe took his cigar from his lips, and knocked the white end off carefully with his finger.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you? Oh, you are an artless youth! Perhaps you think I don't know how steep you have been coming it with our pretty May Queen. But don't trouble yourself to invent any little fictions about it, for I know the whole thing from beginning to end."

"What do you know?"

"That you have been fooling that little girl, and I won't have it. Oh, you needn't fire up. Barbara is a great friend of mine, and you will just have the goodness to let her alone."

"Pshaw! What nonsense is all this?"

"Is it nonsense?"

"Yes. Who has been talking to you?"

"One who is too old a bird to be caught with chaff. Fred Douglas, of the Dragoons. He came up here to London a week ago."

"I'll put a stray bullet through Fred Douglas' head, and teach him to hold his tongue, and yours, too, my good cousin, if you take it upon yourself to lecture me. How are all the Shirieys?"

"Tolerable. Lady Agnes is up to her eyes in the business of balls, and receptions, and concerts, and matinees. The colonel has been voted unanimously by all the young ladies of Belgrave square a love of a man, and Vic is all the rage, and has turned more heads and de-

clined more offers this winter than you or I could count in a week. The Rose of Sussex is the toast of the town."

"Indeed! And at the head of her list of killed and wounded stands the name of Tom Shirley."

Tom winced perceptibly.

"Precisely! And I'll wager my diamond ring that yours is there too before the end of a week."

"Is she so pretty, then?"

"Pretty? That's a nice word to apply to the belle of London. Here we are, and you will soon see for yourself."

A long file of carriages was drawn up before the door of Shirley House, and a crowd of servants in livery were flitting busily hither and thither. Some of the guests were just passing into the great lighted hall, but, instead of following their example, Tom drew his companion toward a deserted side-door.

"We won't go in there and have our names bawled by the flunkeys, and be stared at as we enter by a hundred pairs of eyes. I know all the ins and outs of this place, and there's a private way that will bring us to the ball-room, where you can have a good look at the Rose of Sussex before you are presented to her in form."

"He rang, as he spoke, the bell of the side door, and on its being opened by a liveried slave, he led the way through the marble hall up a wide staircase, through several empty rooms and passages, all sumptuously fitted up, and echoing with the sounds of distant music and merry-making, and finally into a great conservatory, with the moonlight streaming through two large, arched windows, which opened into a forsaken music-room, which led into the crowded ball-room. There was no door between the music and ball rooms, but, instead, a wide arch hung with curtains of green and silver, and under their friendly shade the two new-comers could sit unobserved, and look on the scene before them to their hearts' content.

The great ball-room was filled, but not to repletion. Lady Agnes had too much taste and sense to suffocate her guests; and every moment the distinguished names of fresh arrivals came from the lips of the tall gentleman in livery at the door. The musicians, sitting perched in a gilded gallery, were blowing away on their brass in-

struments, and filling the air with German dance music; two or three sets of quadrilles were in full swing at the upper end of the room, while the wall flowers and the elderlies, who did not fancy cards, were enjoying themselves after their own fashion at the lower end. The glare of the myriad cluster of gas jets fell on the splendid throng where satins and velvets rustled, and point lace—the twenty years' labor of some Brussels lace-maker—draped snowy elbows and arms, where jewels flashed their rainbow fires, where fans waved and plumes fluttered, and perfumes scented the air; where each pretty and high-titled lady seemed to vie and eclipse the other in splendor.

And near the center of the room, superb in family diamonds and black velvet, stood Lady Agnes by the side of a starred and ribboned foreigner, receiving her guests like a queen. Lady Agnes always wore black—the malicious ones said, because it suited her style, and made her look youthful; but whether from that cause or not, she certainly did look youthful, and handsome, too, albeit her marriageable granddaughter was the belle of the ball. Pale and proud, she stood toying with her fan, her rich, black dress sweeping the chalked floor, her diamonds blazing, and her haughty head erect, while the distinguished foreigner bent over her, listening with profoundest respect to her lightest word. Tom touched Leicester on the shoulder, and nodded toward her.

"That's my lady, standing there with the air of a dowager-duchess, and talking to the Duc de Brumale as if she thought him honored by the condescension."

"Lady Agnes is handsome!" said Leicester, glancing toward her, "and looks as if the pride of all the Cliffes were concentrated in herself. I remember her perfectly, though I have not seen her since I was a boy; but where is your Rose of Sussex?"

"Behold her!" said Tom, tragically. "There she comes, on the arm of Lord Henry Lisle. Look!"

Leicester looked. Moving slowly down the room, at the head of the dancers, came one whom he could almost have known, without being told, to be the Rose of Sussex. A youthful angel, girlish and slender, stately, but not tall, with a profusion of golden curls falling over the shoulders to the taper waist; beautiful eyes of bright, violet blue,

and a bright, radiant look within them, like that of a happy child. Her dress was of pale-blue glacé silk, under flounces of Honiton lace, looped up with bouquets of rosebuds and jasmine, a large cluster of the same flowers clasping the perfect corsage, and pale pearls on the exquisite neck and arms. Her dress was simple, one of the simplest, perhaps, in the whole room; but as the artist looked at her, he thought of the young May moon in its silver sheen—of a clear, white star in the blue summer sky—of a spotless lily, lifting its lovely head in a silent mountain lake.

It was hardly a beautiful face—there were a score handsomer in the room, but there certainly was not another half so lovely. A vision rose before him as he looked, of the smiling faces of Madonnas and angels as he had seen them pictured in grand old cathedrals; and before the sinless soul looking out of those clear eyes, he quailed inwardly, feeling as though he were unworthy to touch the hem of her robe.

"Well," said Tom, looking at him curiously, "there is the Rose of Sussex, and what do you think of her?"

"It is a sylph; it is a snow-spirit; it is a fairy, by moonlight! That is the ideal face I've been trying all my life to paint, and failed, because I never could find a model!"

"Bah! I would rather have one woman of flesh and blood, than a thousand on canvas! Come, we have stood here long enough, and it is time we were paying our respects to Lady Agnes."

"With all my heart," said Leicester, and making their way through the throng, both stood the next moment before the stately lady of the mansion.

"Aunt," said Tom, describing a graceful circle with his hand, as he bowed before the lady. "I come late, but I bring my apology. Allow me to present your nephew, Mr. Leicester Shirley Cliffe!"

Lady Agnes turned with a bright, sudden smile, and held out her jeweled hand.

"Is it possible! My dear Leicester, I am enchanted to see you. How well you are looking! and how tall you have grown! Can this really be the little boy, with the long curls, who used to run wild, long ago, at Castle Cliffe?"

Leicester laughed.

"The same madam, though the long curls are gone, and the little boy stands before you six feet high."

"I had quite despaired of your coming. And you have actually been in England a fortnight, and never came to see us. I am positively ashamed of you. Have you seen the colonel?"

"No; we have just arrived."

"How was it you were not announced?"

"Oh, I brought him round by a side-door; we were late, and our modesty would not permit us to become the cynosure of all eyes. There come the colonel and Vic, now."

Colonel Shirley, looking quite as young and handsome as on the day of the Cliftonlea races, six years before, was advancing with the belle of the room, and my lady tapped him lightly with her fan on the arm.

"Cliffe, do you know who this is?"

"Leicester Cliffe, by Jove!" cried the colonel, in delighted recognition. "My dear boy, is it possible I see you again after all these years, and grown out of all knowledge? Where in the world have you dropped from?"

"From Cliftonlea, the last place. I have found out, after all my wandering, that there is no place like home."

"Right, my boy. Vic, this is your cousin, Leicester Cliffe."

The long lashes drooped, and the young lady courtesied profoundly.

"You remember him, Vic, don't you?" said Tom; "or at least you remember the picture in Cliffewood you used to go into such raptures about long ago. Did you think I was not coming to-night, Vic?"

"I never thought of you at all!" said the young lady, with the prettiest flush and pout imaginable.

"I know better than that. There goes the next quadrille. May I have the honor, Vic?"

"No. I am engaged."

"The next then?"

"Engaged."

"And the next?"

Miss Vic laughed and consulted her tablets.

"Very well, sir; that is the last before supper, and perhaps, you may have the honor also of taking me down."

"And after supper, cousin mine," said Leicester, as

her partner for the set, then forming, came to lead her away, "may I not hope to be equally honored?"

"Oh, the first after supper," with another slight laugh and blush, "is a waltz, monsieur, and I never waltz."

"For the first quadrille, then?"

The young lady bowed assent and walked away, just as the colonel, who had been absent for a moment, came up with another lady on his arm—a plain, dark girl, not at all pretty, very quietly dressed and without jewels.

"You haven't forgotten this young lady, I hope, Leicester. Don't you remember your former playmate, little Maggie Shirley?"

"Certainly. Why, Maggie!" he cried, his eyes lighting up with real pleasure, and catching the hand she held out in both his.

"I am glad to see you again, Leicester," said Maggie, a faint color coming for a moment into her dark cheek, and then fading away. "I thought you were never going to come back to old England again."

"Ah! I was not quite so far gone as that. Are you engaged?"

"No."

"Come, then. I have a thousand things to say to you, and we can talk and dance together."

They took their places in one of the quadrilles, Leicester talking all the time.

Margaret Shirley had been his playmate in childhood, his friend and favorite always, and they had corresponded in all his wanderings over the world; but somehow in this, their first meeting, they did not get on so very well after all. Margaret was, naturally, taciturn as an Indian, and the habit seemed to have grown with her growth, and to all his questions she would return none but the briefest and quietest answers.

"Oh, confound your monosyllables!" muttered Leicester, as he led her down to supper, and watched Tom and Vic chatting and laughing away opposite as if there were nobody in the world but themselves. What a lovely face she had! and how all the gentlemen in the room seemed to flock round her like flies round a drop of honey! Leicester was too much of an artist not to have a perfect passion for beauty in whatever shape it came; and though he could admire a diamond in the rough, he certainly

would have admired the same diamond far more in splendid setting. He might love Barbara with his heart; but he loved Vic already with his eyes. Barbara was the dark daughter of the earth; this fairy sprite seemed a vision from a better land. He was not worthy of her, he felt that; but yet what an *eclat* there would be in his carrying off this reigning belle; and with the wily tempter whispering a thousand such thoughts in his ear, he went back to the ball-room, and, claiming her promise, led her away from Tom, to improve her acquaintance before the quadrille commenced.

The ball-room was by this time oppressively warm, so they strayed into the music-room, where a lady sat singing with a group around her, and from thence on to the cool conservatory, where the moonlight shone in through the arched windows; and the words of the song—Tennyson's "Maud"—came floating on the perfume of the flowers.

"Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown;
Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone:
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the roses blown.

* * * * *

"Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
Come hither, the dancers are gone,
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
Queen lily and rose in one:
Shine out little head, sunning over with curls,
To the flowers, and be their sun."

Side by side they stood together in the moonlight, she in a cloud of white lace and lustrous pearls, the little head "sunning over with curls," and the fair face looking dreamy and sad as she listened—he leaning against the window, and watching her with his heart in his eyes. They had been talking at first of the ball, of Castle Cliffe, of his wanderings; but they had fallen into silence to listen to the song.

"Lovely thing, is it not?" she asked, looking up at last.

"Yes!" said Leicester, thinking of herself, and feeling at that moment there was no other "Maud" for him in the world but her.

"We had better go back to the ball-room, I think, Mr. Cliffe. If I am not greatly mistaken our quadrille is commencing."

"How formally you call me Mr. Cliffe; and yet we are cousins."

"Oh, that is only a polite fiction! You are no more my cousin than you are my brother!"

"Yet, I think you might drop the mister. Leicester is an easy name to say."

"Is it?"

"Try it, and see!"

"If it ever comes natural, perhaps I may," said the young lady, with composure; "but certainly not now. There! it is the quadrille, and I know we will be late."

But they were not late, and came in time to lead off the set with spirit. Somewhere, ugly old Time was mowing down his tens of thousands; but it certainly was not in Shirley House, where the gas-lit moments flew by all too quickly, until the dim dawn began to steal in, and carriages were called for, and the most successful ball of the season came to an end.

Back in his own room, Leicester Cliffe was feverishly pacing up and down, with a war going on in his own heart. A vision rose before him of pearls and floating lace, golden curls, blue eyes, and the face of a smiling angel—a reigning belle, and one of the richest heiresses in England—all to be his for the asking. But with it there came another vision—the Nun's Grave under the gloomy yews; the dark, wild gipsy standing beside him, while he carved her name and his together on the old tree; his own words, "When I prove false to you, I pray God that I may die;" and the dreadful fire that had filled her eyes, and the dreadful "Amen" she had emphatically uttered.

The skein had run fair hitherto, but the tangle was coming now; and, quite unable to see how he was to unwind it, he lay down on his bed at last. But Leicester Cliffe did not sleep much that morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.

THE daintiest of little Swiss clocks on a gilded mantelpiece was beginning to play the "Sophia Waltz," preparatory to striking eleven, and Lady Agnes Shirley looked up at it with an impatient frown.

The Swiss clock and the gilded mantelpiece were in the breakfast parlor of Shirley House; and in a great carved arm-chair, cushioned in violet velvet, before a sparkling coal fire, sat Lady Agnes. She had just arisen; and in her pretty morning dress of a warm rose tint, lined and edged with snow-white fur, the blonde hair, which Time was too gallant to touch with silver, and only ventured to thin out a little at the parting, brushed in the old fashion off the smooth low forehead, and hidden under a gauzy affair of black lace and ribbons, which she was pleased to call a morning-cap, a brooch of cluster diamonds sparkling on her neck, and her daintily slipped feet resting on a violet velvet ottoman, she looked like an exquisite picture in a carved oak frame.

At her elbow was a little round stand, covered with the whitest of damask, whereon stood a porcelain cup half filled with chocolate, a tiny glass, not much larger than a thimble, filled with cognac, a little bird swimming in rich sauce, and a plate of oyster pâté. But the lady did not eat; she only stirred the cold chocolate with the golden spoon, looked dreamily at the fire, and waited.

Last night, before the ball broke up, she had directed a certain gentleman to call next morning and discuss with her a certain important matter; but it was eleven, and he had not called yet; and so she sat with her untasted breakfast before her, and waited and thought. She thought of another morning, more than eighteen years ago, when she had sat and waited for another young gentleman, to talk to him on the very same subject—matrimony. Eighteen years ago she had found the young

gentleman obstinate and refractory, and herself outwitted; but, then, all young gentlemen were not as self-willed as he, and she had great hopes of the particular one waited for this morning. So, tapping her siippered foot on the ottoman, and beating the devil's tattoo with her spoon, she alternately watched the Swiss clock and red cinders falling from the grate, until the door was flung open by a footman, and "Mr. Cliffe" was announced in a stentorian voice. And, hat in hand, Leicester Cliffe stood before her the next moment.

"Punctual!" said Lady Agnes, glancing at the time-piece, and languidly holding out her hand. "I told you to come early, and it is half-past eleven o'clock!"

"Ten thousand pardons, but it is all the fault of the people at the hotel, I assure you; I gave orders to be called at ten precisely; but it was nearer eleven when the waiter came. Am I forgiven?"

"You've kept me waiting half an hour, and I detest people who make me wait; but I think I can forgive you. Take a seat near the fire; the morning is chilly."

"And how are the young ladies?" inquired Leicester, as he obeyed; "not over-fatigued, I trust, after the ball?"

"I cannot answer for Margaret, who is probably asleep yet; but Victoria came to my room fully two hours ago, dressed for a canter in the park. Quite true, I assure you, my dear Leicester—it is the most energetic child in the world! Will you have a cup of coffee?"

"Not any, thank you. I have breakfasted. Miss Shirley is certainly a modern miracle to get up so early; but perhaps to-day is an exception."

"Not at all! Victoria is an early bird, and constantly rises at some dismal hour in the early morning," said Lady Agnes, with a shrug. "Shall I ever forget the first morning after her arrival at Castle Cliffe, when, on going to her room at sunrise, I found her making her bed, like any chamber-maid! I believe you never saw her before last night."

"I never had that pleasure! but I knew her immediately. There is a picture at the castle of a small child with blue eyes and long curls, and it is like her, only Miss Shirley is far lovelier."

Lady Agnes lifted her keen eyes from the fire with a quick, eager sparkle.

"Ah, you think her lovely, then!"

"Lady Agnes, who could look at her and think otherwise?"

"You are right. Victoria is beautiful, as half the young men in our set know to their cost. Ah, she is a finished coquette, is my handsome granddaughter! Who do you think proposed for her last night?"

"I cannot imagine."

"The young Marquis de St. Hilary, whom she knew long ago in France. He spoke to me in the handsomest manner first, and having obtained my consent—for I knew perfectly well what the answer would be—proposed."

"And the answer was—?" said Leicester, with a slight and conscious smile.

"No, of course! Had I dreamed for a moment it could have been anything else, rest assured the Marquis de St. Hilary would never have offered his hand and name to my granddaughter. There is but one name I shall ever be glad to see Victoria Shirley bear, and that is—Cliffe!"

"Now it is coming!" thought Leicester, suppressing a smile with an effort, and looking with gravity at the fire.

Lady Agnes, leaning back in the violet velvet arm-chair eyed her young kinsman askance. Hers was really an eagle glance—sharp, sidelong, piercing; and now she was reconnoitering the enemy, like a skillful general, before beginning the attack. But the handsome face baffled her.

It was as emotionless as a waxed mask, and she bent over and laid her hand on his with a slight laugh.

"What a boy it is! sitting there as unreadable as an oracle, without a sign; and yet he knows all!"

"All what, Lady Agnes?"

"Nonsense! I am not going to have any fencing here; so sheathe your sword, and let us have the whole thing, and in plain English. Of course, Sir Roland has told you all about it."

"Madam," stammered Leicester, really at a loss.

"There, don't blush! Victoria herself could not have done it more palpably. Of course, as I have before said, Sir Roland has told you the whole matter; the object of my invitation, in short. Yes, your face tells it; I see he has!"

"Lady Agnes, I have read your letter."

"So much the better. I need not waste time making a revelation ; and now, what do you think of it?"

"Your ladyship, I have not had time to think of it at all. Consider, I have seen Miss Shirley last night for the first time."

"What of it? On the Continent the bridegroom only sees his bride when they stand before the altar."

"But this is England, Lady Agnes, where we have quite another way of doing those things. I am a true-born Briton, and Miss Shirley is——"

"French to the core of her heart, and with an implicit faith in the Continental way of doing those things, as you call it. You saw her last night for the first time. True. But the sight was satisfactory, I trust."

"Eminently so ; yet——"

"Yet what?"

"Lady Agnes," said Leicester, laughing, yet coloring a little under the cold, keen gaze of the woman of the world, "there is an old-fashioned prejudice in favor of love before marriage, and you will allow we have not had much time to fall in love with each other."

"Bah!" said Lady Agnes, with supreme scorn. "Is that all? How many times in your life, my dear Leicester, have you been in love before this?"

Leicester laughed, and shook back his fair, clustering hair.

"It is past counting, your ladyship."

"And how many of these lady-loves have you married?"

"Rather a superfluous question, I should think, Lady Agnes."

"Answer it!"

"Not one, of course."

Again Lady Agnes shrugged her shoulders, with her peculiar, scornful laugh.

"We have met, we have loved, and we have parted." That is the burden of one of Victoria's songs. And, of course, your heart was broken long ago, after all those sharp blows upon it?"

"I am not aware that it was. It feels all right—beats much the same as usual. I never heard of a man with a broken heart in all my life!"

"Neither have I. And so, Mr. Cliffe, as you've had

love enough without marriage, suppose you try marriage without love ; that sentiment will come afterward, believe me."

"You know best, of course. I bow to your superior judgment, Lady Agnes," said Leicester, bending to hide an irrepressible smile.

"Love is all very fine, and excessively useful in its place," said Lady Agnes, leaning back with the air of one entering upon an abstruse subject ; "the stock and trade with which poets and authors set up business, and without which I don't know how the poor wretches would ever get along. It is also well enough in real life ; for you must know I believe in the existence of such a feeling when in its proper place, and kept in due bounds, but not at all indispensable to the happiness of married life. For instance, I made a *mariage de convenance*. Dr. Shirley was twenty years my senior, and I had not seen him half a dozen times when I accepted him, and, of course, did not care a straw for him in that way ; yet I am sure we got along extremely well together, and never had a quarrel in our lives. Then there was Sir Roland and your mother. You know very well they married, not for love, but because it was an eminently proper match, and she wanted a guardian for her son—yourself ; yet how contentedly they lived together always. Oh, my dear Leicester, if that is all your objection, pray don't mention it again, for it is utterly absurd !"

"So I perceive," said Leicester, dryly. "But is your ladyship quite certain Miss Shirley will agree with you in all these views ? Suppose she has what is called a prior engagement ?"

Lady Agnes drew herself up, and fixed her cold blue eyes proudly on his face.

"The idea is simply absurd ! Miss Shirley has nothing of the sort. My granddaughter—my proud, pure-minded Victoria—stoop to such a thing as a clandestine attachment for any man ! Sir, if any one else had uttered such an idea, I should have considered it an insult !"

"Pardon. I had no intention to offend."

"Perhaps"—still with hauteur—"perhaps you judge her by yourself ; perhaps you have some prior attachment which causes all these scruples. If so, speak the word, and you have heard the last you will ever hear

from me or any one else on this subject. The heiress of Castle Cliffe," said Lady Agnes, a flush crimsoning her delicate face, "is not to be forced on any man!"

Oh, Barbara! his heart went back with a bound to the cottage by the sea, but never before had your power over him been so feeble! What would this satirical kinswoman, this grand and scornful lady, say if he stood before her, like a great schoolboy, and blushinglly blurted out his grand passion for the fisherman's daughter? His cheek reddened at the very thought; and feeling that the eagle eyes were piercing him like needles, he looked up and confronted them with a gaze quite as unflinching and almost as haughty.

"You are somewhat inconsistent, Lady Agnes. You gave me *carte blanche* a moment ago to love as many as I pleased."

"I gave you absolution for the past, not indulgence for the future. With Leicester Cliffe and his amours I have nothing to do, but the husband of my granddaughter must be true to her as the needle to the North Star."

He bowed in haughty silence. Lady Agnes looked at him searchingly, and calmed down.

"If we commence at daggers drawn," she said, still laughing her satirical laugh, "we will certainly end in war to the knife. Listen to me, Leicester, my nephew, the last of the Cliffes, and learn why it is that this marriage is so dear to my heart—why it has been my dream by day and by night since I first saw Victoria. Some of the noblest names in the peerage have been laid this winter at my granddaughter's feet, and by me rejected—she, the most dutiful child in the world, never objecting. You know what an heiress she is—worth at least twenty thousand a year; and do you think I would willingly let the millions of our family go to swell the rent-roll of some impoverished foreign duke or spendthrift English earl? You are the last, except my son and Sir Roland, bearing the name of Cliffe; they will never marry, and I don't want a name that existed before the Conqueror to pass from our branch of the family. By your marriage with my granddaughter, the united fortunes of the Cliffes and Shirley's will mingle, and the name will descend, noble and honored, to posterity, as it has been honored in the past. It is for you to decide whether these hopes are to be real-

ized or disappointed. Victoria has no will but that of her natural guardians, and your decision must be quick; for I am determined she shall leave town engaged."

"You shall have my answer to-night," said Leicester, rising and taking his hat.

"That is well! we go to the theater to-night, and you may come to our box."

"I shall not fail to do so. Until then, *au revoir!*"

Lady Agnes held out her hand with a gracious smile, but he just touched it and ran downstairs. As he passed through the lower hall the library door stood ajar, and he caught sight of a figure sitting in the recess of a window. It was Margaret, holding a book listlessly in one hand, while the other supported her cheek. She was looking out at the square, where a German band was playing "Love Not," and her face wore a look so lonely and so sad that it touched him to the heart. If Leicester Cliffe had one really pure feeling for any human being, it was, strangely enough, for this plain, silent cousin of his, whom nobody ever noticed.

He went in, and was bending over her, with his fair hair touching her cheek, before she heard him.

"Maggie—little cousin—what is the matter?"

She started up with a suppressed cry, her dark face turning, for a moment, brightest crimson, and then white, even to the lips.

"Oh, Leicester!" she cried, laying her hand on her fast-throbbing heart, "how could you startle me so?"

"Did I? I am sorry. What a nervous little puss it is! Her gracious majesty upstairs told me you were asleep."

"For shame, sir! Have you been with Lady Agnes?"

"Oh, haven't I?" said Leicester, making a slight grimace. "What are you doing here alone? Why are you not out riding with your cousin?"

"I prefer being here. Won't you sit down?"

"No. What makes you so pale? I remember, long ago, when we played hide-and-seek together in the old halls of Castle Cliffe, you had cheeks like rose-berries, but they are as white as those lace curtains now.

"Oh, rare pale Margaret!
Oh, fair pale Margaret!"

tell your old playfellow what it is all about."

She glanced up for a moment at the handsome face bending over her, and then stooped lower over her book, turning almost paler than before.

"My good little cousin, tell me what it means."

"Nothing."

"I know better. Young ladies don't go about like white shadows, with as little life in them as one of those marble statues, for nothing. Are you ill?"

"No."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes."

"Is that grand sultana upstairs good to you?"

"Very."

"And the princess royal—how does she treat you?"

"Cousin Victoria is like a sister."

"Then what, in Heaven's name, has crushed all the life out of little Maggie Shirley, I romped with in lang syne? Do you know you're but the ghost of your former self, Maggie?"

She did not speak; she only held the book close to her face, and something fell on it and wet it.

There was a tap on the door, and a servant entered.

"Miss Margaret, my lady wants you to come and read to her."

"I must go, Leicester. Good-morning!"

She was gone in an instant, and Leicester, feeling there was a screw loose somewhere, and, like all of his stupid sex, too blind to guess within a mile of the truth, went down the steps, took his horse from the groom in waiting, and dashed off through the Park.

As he entered Rotten Row he was confronted by three equestrians—Colonel Shirley, his daughter, and Tom. The image of Victoria had been before him all the way, flashing in lace and jewels as he had seen her last night, but now she dawned upon him in quite another vision of beauty. From her childhood the girl had taken to riding as naturally as she had to sleeping, and she sat her spirited Arabian with as easy a grace as she would have sat on a sofa. Nothing could have been more bewitching than the exquisitely fitting habit of dark-blue cloth; the exuberant curls confined in a net, seeing that curls under a riding-hat are an abomination; her fair cheeks flushed with exercise, the violet eyes sparkling and laughing with the very hap-

pininess of living on such a day, and the rosy lips all dimpled with glad smiles.

She touched her black-plumed hat coquettishly, *a la militaire*, with her yellow gauntleted hand, as the young gentleman bowed before her.

"Well met, Cliffe!" said the colonel; "we were just speaking of you. Come home and dine with us."

"Thanks. I regret to say I am already engaged."

"To-morrow, then. Have you any engagement for to-night? We are for the theater."

"None; and I have promised her ladyship to drop into her box. Miss Shirley, I need not ask if you have recovered from the fatigue of last night; you are as radiant as a rose."

"Oh, I am never fatigued," said Miss Shirley, with her frank laugh. "Papa, come; Claude is impatient. *Au revoir*, Mr. Cliffe."

She looked back at him with a saucy glance, waving her hand, and the next moment was dashing away out of sight. And Leicester Cliffe went to his hotel to dress for dinner, with "a dancing shape, an image gay," haunting his mind's eye, to the exclusion of everything else—the princess royal on horseback.

The dinner-party at Lord Henry Lisle's was a very noisy and prolonged affair indeed. Leicester, thinking of the theater, wished them all at Jericho a thousand times before it was over. The Rose of Sussex was toasted so often in punch and port, thick and sweet, that the whole party were rather glorious when they issued forth—Leicester excepted. Remembering his engagement, he had not imbibed quite so much of the "rosy" as the rest, and was all right when he presented himself, according to order, at the stage-box belonging to the Shirleys. Lady Agnes was there, as usual, in a splendid toilet; beside her sat Victoria, looking like an angel in moire antique and emeralds, with a magnificent opera-cloak half dropping off her bare and beautiful shoulders. Tom was leaning devotedly over her chair, talking nonsense very fast, at all of which Miss Shirley was good-natured enough to laugh; and Margaret, very simply dressed, according to custom, sat very still and quiet under the shadow of the curtains. The colonel was absent; and Lady Agnes received him with gracious reproof.

"Lazy boy! The first act is over, and you are late, as usual! Such a charming play—'Undine!' Tom, hold your tongue, and use your eyes, or else go and talk to Margaret. There she sits, like little Jack Horner, alone in the corner, moping!"

Victoria turned her beautiful face and welcomed him with a bewildering smile; and Tom, deaf to his aunt's hint, merely moved aside a little, while the new-comer bent over her chair to pay his respects. The wine he had been drinking had merely raised his spirits to an excellent talking-point. Victoria was a good talker, too; and in ten minutes conversation was in full flow.

"Have you ever seen this play—'Undine'?" she was asking.

"Never."

"Ah, it is beautiful! I love it, because I love Undine herself. Do you know, monsieur, I took a fancy to study German first for the purpose of reading 'Undine' in the original! Look! the curtain is rising now!"

It went up as she spoke, and showed the knight battling with the spirits in the enchanted wood. Leicester looked at the stage and smiled.

"This first visit to the theater since my return to England reminds me of the first time I ever visited a theater at all."

"Do you remember it? It must have been a long time ago?"

"It is. It is eighteen years. I was in a box with Lady Agnes and my mother; and opposite, sat Sir Roland and your father, then Lieutenant Cliffe, Lord Lisle, and that yellow lawyer—a money-lender he was then—Mr. Sweet. It made a vivid impression on me—the lights, the music, the gay dresses, and the brilliant scenery. I forget what the play was, but I know the house was crowded, because it was the last appearance of a beautiful actress, Mademoiselle——"

He had been speaking with animation, but he stopped suddenly, for the beautiful face was crimson, and there was a quick uplifting of the haughty head, which reminded him forcibly of Lady Agnes.

"Mademoiselle Vivia," she said, lifting her violet eyes with a bright free glance to his face. "My mother—my beautiful mother, whom I have never seen."

"Miss Shirley, I did not mean—I never thought! Can you forgive me?"

"Out of my heart, monsieur. See! there is Undine!"

She leaned forward. A tumult of applause shook the house, and he bent over too. There was the sea-coast and the fisherman's cottage, and there from the sea-foam rose Undine, robed in white, with lilies in her hair. It reminded Tom Shirley of the Infant Venus; it reminded Leicester Cliffe of Barbara—the same, though he did not know it. In the dazzle of the music, and lights, and the girl beside him, he had not thought of her before; and now her memory came back with a pang, half pleasure, half pain. Somehow, Victoria's thoughts, by some mysterious influence, were straying in the same direction too.

"Monsieur Cliffe," she said, so suddenly lifting her violet eyes that he was disconcerted, "do you know Barbara Black?"

The guilty blood flew to his face, and he drew back to avoid the innocent eyes.

"I have seen her."

She laughed a gay little mischievous laugh.

"I know that! Tom told me all about the May Queen, and how you were struck. I don't know how it is, but Undine always reminds me of Barbara."

"Does she?"

"Yes. Barbara was a little water-sprite herself, you know; and I wonder she has not melted away into a miniature cascade before this. Did she ever tell you she saved my life?"

"No."

"Proud girl! Spartan Barbara! Is she as handsome as she was long ago?"

"She is very handsome."

Mentally she rose before him, as he spoke, in her mimic chariot, crowned and sceptered, with eyes shining like stars, and cheeks like June roses; and he drew still further back, lest the violet eyes should read his guilt in his face. She drew back a little herself, to avoid the fire of lorgnettes directed at their box—some at the great Sussex heiress, others at the noble and lovely head alone.

"Undine reminds me of her," she went on, "only Undine died of a broken heart; and if Barbara were deceived, I think——"

She stopped with a blush and a laugh.

"Go on, Miss Shirley."

"I think—but I am foolish, perhaps—that she would have revenge; that she would have it in her to kill her betrayer, instead of melting away into the sea of neglect and being heard of no more."

He turned pale as he looked at the stage, where stood the false knight and his high-born bride, while Undine floated away in the moonlight, singing her death-song. Again Victoria leaned forward to look.

"Poor, forsaken Undine! Ah! how I have half cried my eyes out over the story!—and how I hate that treacherous Huldebrand! I could—could almost kill him myself!"

"Have you no pity for him?" said Leicester, turning paler, as he identified himself with the condemned knight. "Think how beautiful Bertalda is; and Undine was only the fisherman's daughter!"

"That makes it all the worse! Knights should have nothing to do with fishermen's daughters!"

"Not even if they are beautiful?"

"No; eagles don't mate with birds of paradise."

"How haughty you are!"

"Not at all. You know the proverb, 'Birds of a feather.' Poor Barbara! I do pity her for being poor!"

"Does wealth constitute happiness?"

"I don't know; but I do know that poverty would constitute misery for me. I am thankful I am Victoria Shirley, the heiress of Castle Cliffe; and I would not be any one else for the world!"

She rose, as she spoke, with a light laugh. The curtain had fallen on the last scene of "Undine," and Lady Agnes was rising, too.

"Where are you going?" asked Leicester. "Will you not wait for the afterpiece?"

"A comedy after 'Undine'! How can you suggest such a thing! Oh, never mind me. I will follow you and grandmamma."

So Leicester gave his arm to grandmamma, and led her forth, Victoria gathering up her flowing robes and following. Tom, who had long ago retreated, sullen and jealous, from the field, came last with Margaret.

The carriage was at the pavement; the footman held

the door open ; the ladies were handed within—Margaret wrapping her mantle around her, and shrinking away into a corner the moment she entered.

Victoria leaned forward, and held out her snowy hand, with the smile of an angel.

“Good-night, monsieur. Pleasant dreams.”

He raised the pretty hand to his lips.

“They will be enchanting. I shall dream of you.”

Lady Agnes bent forward with a look of triumph.

“And your answer, Leicester. You were to give it to-night. Quick! Yes or no.”

“Yes!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DUTIFUL GRANDDAUGHTER.

THE drive home was a silent one, or, at least, it would have been, only Victoria chatted like a magpie all the way. Lady Agnes, sitting with her face to the horse, looked thoughtful and preoccupied ; and as for Margaret, silence was her forte.

Victoria stopped at length, with a pout.

“I declare you are too provoking, grandmamma ! Here I have asked you three times what you thought of the Countess Portici, to-night, and her superb opals, and you’ve never deigned to answer me once.”

Her ladyship, coming out of a brown study, looked at her displeased granddaughter.

“My dear, excuse me ; I was thinking of something else. What were you saying ?”

“Ever so many things ; but you and Margaret won’t speak a word. Perhaps Margaret is thinking of the conquest she made to-night.”

“What conquest ?” asked Lady Agnes, looking suspiciously at her niece, who shrank farther away as she was spoken of, and had on her cheeks two scarlet spots quite foreign to her usual complexion.

“Tom, of course ! Could you not see he was her very

humble and most obedient servant all the evening? I wish you joy of your victory, Margaret."

"Thank you. You forget he only came to me in desperation, because you discarded him, Cousin Victoria.

"Both Tom and Margaret know better than to dream of such a thing," said Lady Agnes, with dignity. "Tom must marry a fortune; for he can only take a poor wife on the principle that what won't keep one will keep two. As for Margaret I shall see that she is properly settled in life, after you are married."

"Oh, grandmamma!" said Vivia, laughing; "what an idea!"

"A very reasonable idea, my dear. You expect to be married some time, I trust. And, apropos of flirtations, what do you call your *lête-à-lête* this evening with my handsome nephew?"

"A cousinly chat, grandmamma, of course," said the young lady, demurely.

"Ah! Cousinly chat! Precisely! And what do you think of this new-found cousin?"

Miss Vivia shrugged her pretty shoulders in very French fashion, that had a trick of grandmamma's self in it.

"I have not had time to think of him at all. I only met him last night for the first time, you recollect."

"And how long does it take to form your mighty opinions, Mademoiselle Talleyrand. Do you like him?"

"Yes; that is, I don't know."

"Do you like him better than the Marquis de St. Hilary?"

"Oh, grandmamma!" said Vivia, blushing vividly.

"You have changed your opinion if you do," said Lady Agnes, a little maliciously. "Long ago, when Sir Roland gave you the pony, named Leicester, after this new-found cousin, you insisted on changing the name to Claude, a name for which you then had an especial admiration. Do you recollect?"

"Grandmamma! I was such a goose, then."

"Exactly. And in six years more, when you look back, you will think you were just as great a goose now. Of course you have decided that Leicester is handsome?"

"There can be but one opinion about that," said the young lady, as the carriage stopped before the door, and

she tripped lightly up the steps, humming an air from "Undine."

A most aristocratic and sleepy porter threw open the door, and they entered the brilliantly lighted hall.

Margaret, with a very brief good-night, went to her room; and Vivia, gayly kissing her grandmother, was about to follow, when that lady detained her, and opened the drawing-room door.

"Not good-night, Victoria. It is only ten o'clock, and too early to think of bed. Come in here. I have five words to say to you, that may as well be said to-night as to-morrow."

Very much surprised at grandmamma's grave tone, Victoria followed her into the deserted drawing-room, on whose marble hearth a few red embers still glowed; for the May evenings were chilly, and her ladyship liked fires. The girl sat down on a low ottoman, beside the elder lady's couch, looking very pretty, with flushed cheeks and her brilliant eyes, her golden hair falling damp and uncurled over her shoulders, from which the gay opera-cloak was loosely slipping to the floor. She lifted up an innocent, inquiring face like that of a little child.

"What is it, grandmamma?"

Lady Agnes took one tiny, taper hand, spotless and ringless as the free young heart. Miss Shirley never wore rings.

"Pretty little hand!" she said, caressing it, the cold blue eyes looking fondly down into the beautiful up-turned face; "and how well an engagement-ring would become it!"

"Oh, grandmamma!"

"You expect to wear an engagement-ring some time, my dear? You do not always expect to be Miss Shirley."

"I wish I could be. It is such a pretty name, I never want to change it!"

"Little simpleton! If I have my way, you shall change it within two months."

"Why, grandmamma!"

"Don't look so astonished, child. One would think you never had such an idea as marriage in your life."

"But, grandmamma, I don't want to be married!" said

mademoiselle, with the prettiest pout in the world; "it is so dowdyish! And then I am too young—I am only eighteen."

"Eighteen is an excellent marriageable age, my dear—I was married a year younger than that."

"Grandmamma, have you tired of me all of a sudden, that you want to send me away? What have I done?"

"You great baby! What has it done!" mimicking the young lady's tone. "I shall have you put in pinafores and sent back to the nursery, if you don't learn to talk sense. Do you know why I have rejected all the eligible offers you have had this winter?"

"Because you are the dearest, kindest grandmamma in the world, and you knew your Vic did not want to accept any of them."

"Nothing of the kind! They have been rejected because I have reserved you, since you were twelve years old, for another."

Up flew the flaxen eyebrows, wide opened the violet eyes, in undisguised amaze.

"Since I was twelve years old! Why, I was only that age when I came first from France."

"Right! And from the first moment I saw you, your destiny was settled in my mind."

Lady Agnes was certainly a wonderful woman. She ought to have been at the head of a nation instead of at the head of the fashionable society of London. The calm consciousness of triumph radiated her pale face now, and she looked down like an empress on the flaxen-haired fairy at her feet, smiling, too, at the look of unutterable wonder on the pretty countenance.

"Can you guess who this favored gentleman is, my dear?"

"Guess! oh, dear me no, grandmamma!"

"Try."

"It can't be—it can't be——"

"Who?" said Lady Agnes, curiously, as she stopped with an irrepressible little laugh.

"Tom. You never can mean Tom, grandmamma?"

"Tom! Oh, what a child. You may well call yourself a goose. Of course not, you little idiot. I mean a very different person, indeed—no one else than Leicester Cliffe."

The hand Lady Agnes held was suddenly snatched

away, and the girl covered her face with both, with a beautiful movement of modesty.

Lady Agnes laughed—her short, satirical laugh.

“Don’t blush, dear child! There is nobody here but grandmamma to see it. What do you think of your intended bridegroom?”

“To think that I should have laughed and talked with him as I did to-night” said Vivia, in a choking voice, as she turned away her hidden face, “and he knowing this! Oh, grandmamma, what have you done?”

“Nothing that you need go into hysterics about! Are you never going to laugh and talk with the person you intend to marry?”

“She did not speak, and the lady saw that the averted cheek was scarlet.

“You are right in thinking he knows it. He does; I told him to-day, and he has consented.”

No answer.

“He admires you exceedingly—he loves you, I am sure, and will tell you so at the proper opportunity. Nothing could be more desirable, nothing more suitable than this match. I have set my heart on it, and so has Sir Roland, for years. You will be the happiest bride in the world, my daughter.”

The heiress of Castle Cliffe, one hand still shading the averted face, the other again held in grandmamma’s the scarlet cheek veiled by the falling hair, the graceful little figure drooping, never spoke or looked around.

“He is everything the most romantic maiden could wish—young, handsome, agreeable, a man and a gentleman, every inch! Then he is a Cliffe—not your cousin, though; cousins should never marry—and heir to a fortune second only to your own.”

Still silent.

“Child!” cried Lady Agnes, impatiently, “what are you thinking of? Are you asleep? do you hear me?”

“Yes, grandmamma.”

“Then why don’t you answer? You will never dream of refusing, surely.”

“No.”

It came so hesitatingly, though, that the lady, who had been leaning easily back, sat up very straight and looked at her.

"Victoria, I am surprised at you. Did you ever dream for a moment you would be left to choose any stray coxcomb, such as girls are given to take a fancy to? Have you not always understood that your marriage was to be arranged by your guardians, myself and your father?"

"Does papa know of this?"

"Certainly. I told him to-day, after dinner."

Vivia remembered, now, that papa and grandmamma had been closeted in close converse for over an hour, after dinner; and how the colonel had come out, looking very grave, and had given her a glance in passing, half-tender, half-mirthful, half-sad; had declined accompanying them to the theater and had solaced himself with cigars all the rest of the afternoon. She started up now at the recollection.

"Grandmamma, I must see papa. I must speak to papa about this to-night!"

Lady Agnes sat up very stately and displeased.

"Is it necessary you should speak to him before you answer me, Miss Shirley!"

"Oh, grandmamma, don't be angry! But I feel so—so strange; and it is all so sudden and queer."

"Remember, Victoria, that I have set my heart on this matter, and that it has been set on it for years. Take care you do not disappoint me."

Victoria knelt softly down, her beautiful eyes filled with tears, and touched the still smooth white hand with her lips.

"Grandmamma, you know I would not disappoint you for all the world. Surely, it is as little as I can do, after all these years of care and love, to yield my will to yours. But, I must—I must see papa!"

"Very well. You will find him in the library, I dare say; but I must have your answer to-night."

"You shall. I will be back here in ten minutes."

"That is my dutiful little granddaughter," said Lady Agnes, stooping to touch the pretty pleading lips with her own. "Go, then; I will wait here."

The fairy figure with the golden hair floated down the staircase, through the hall, and into the library. An odor met her at the door—not the odor of sanctity, but the fragrant one of a cigar, heralding the gentleman who sat in the crimson arm-chair by the window.

The gas has been turned down, and one flickering ray

alone pierced the darkness like a lance. The lace curtains had been drawn back, and the pale stars shone in and rested on the colonel, sitting with his back to the door, and his eyes looking up at their tremulous beauty. One hand rested on a paper on his knee; the other absently held a cigar that had gone out long ago. The handsome and ever gay face looked strangely pale and grave, and he did not see the figure floating through the shadowy room, with the wan green emeralds flashing feebly on the white neck, until it sank down with a cry of, "Oh, papa!" beside him; and a pretty, flushed face and a shower of gold hair fell bowed on his knee. Then he looked down at it, not in surprise, but with the same glance, half tender, half gay, half sad.

"Well, Vivia, it has come at last, and my little girl has found out she is no longer a child."

It was a characteristic trifle—character is always shown best in trifles—that while Lady Agnes, overlooking in her grand and lofty way the very memory of so plebeian a personage as the dead French actress, always called her granddaughter Victoria, not Vivia, the colonel scarcely ever thought of calling her anything else.

"Papa! papa!" sobbed Vivia, her voice losing itself in a sob "I never thought of this!"

He laid his hand lovingly on the little bowed head.

"I have been sharper-sighted than you, Vivia, and have foreseen what was coming long ago, though my lady-mother has never given me credit for so much penetration. She has told you to-night, then?"

"This moment, papa."

"And what has my Vivia said?"

"Oh, papa! Do you think I could say anything until I had seen you?"

"My darling, I have not one word to say in the matter. Vivia shall please herself."

"Oh, I don't know what to say! I don't know what to do! It is all so sudden and so unexpected! and I don't want to be married at all! Oh, I wish I were back in my beautiful France, in my dear, dear old convent-home, where I was always so peaceful and so happy!"

"Foolish child!" said the colonel, smiling in spite of himself at the storm of childish distress, "is it then so dreadful a thing to be married?"

"It is dreadful to leave you, papa, and grandmamma, and all that I love!"

"You forget, Vivia, that it is grandmamma who is sending you away! And then you will have Leicester Cliffe to love—your bridegroom, you know—handsome and dashing—and you will soon forget us old folks altogether!" laughing still, but with a little tremor of the voice.

"Papa, when I forget you, I will be dead."

One little hand lay in his, and he lifted it to his lips, while the stars shook as if seen through water.

"When is my Vivia to answer grandmamma?"

"To-night."

"And what does she intend to say?"

"Papa, you know I must say 'Yes!'"

His hand closed over hers, and his mouth grew stern and resolute, as Lady Agnes had seen it once, eighteen years before.

"Never, my girl, unless you wish it! The ambitious dreams of all the Cliffes and Shirleys that ever existed, from the first of them who spoke English at the Tower of Babel, shall not weigh one feather in the scale against my daughter's inclinations! Let your heart answer, Vivia, 'Yes' or 'No,' as it chooses; and no one living shall gainsay it!"

Vivia looked half frightened at the outbreak, and clung closer to his protecting arm.

"Dear, dear papa! how good you are to me! Oh, the most miserable thing about the whole affair is, that I shall have to leave you!"

He laughed his own gay, careless laugh.

"Oh, if that be all, my darling, we must get over the objection. You don't mean to live and die an old maid for papa's sake surely! I have a plan of my own, when this wedding comes off, that I shall tell you about presently; meantime grandmamma is waiting for you to say 'Yes.' It will be 'Yes,' will it not?"

"Will you consent, papa?"

"My consent depends on yours. You are sure you have no personal objections to this young man?"

"None at all, papa. How could I?"

"True; he is good-looking and spirited—everything the veriest heroine of romance could desire; and the

whole affair is very much like a romance itself, I must say. And you don't—but I hardly need ask that question—you don't care for any one else?"

"Papa, you know I don't."

"Very good. I see no reason, then, why you should not marry him to-morrow. If the hero of this sentimental plan of grandmamma's had been any other man than Leicester Cliffe, I should not have listened to it for a moment; but as it is, I fancy it's all right; and we must conclude that it's one of the marriages made in heaven. I own I have a weakness for people falling in love in the good old orthodox way, as I did myself long ago. Look here, Vivia."

Vivia had often noticed a slender gold chain that her father wore round his neck, and wondered what trinket was attached. Now he withdrew it, displaying a locket, which he opened and handed to her. Vivia looked at it with awe. The beautiful uplifted eyes; the dark hair, half waves, half curls, falling back from the oval face; the superb lips smiling upon the gazer—she knew it well. Reverentially she lifted it to her lips.

"It is my mamma—my dear dead mamma!"

"It is! and next to you, my Vivia, I have prized it through all these years as the most precious thing I possess. I give it to you, now, and you must wear it all your life."

"I shall wear it over my heart till I die! But, papa—"

She had been looking at it with strange intentness, and now she glanced up at him with a puzzled face.

"Well, Vivia?"

"Papa, it is the oddest thing; but, do you know, I think it resembles somebody I have seen."

"Who?"

"You will laugh, perhaps, but it is Barbara Black. It is a long time since I have seen her; but I have a good memory for faces, and I do think she looks like this."

The colonel leaned forward and looked at it thoughtfully.

"I have noticed it before. There is something in the turn of the head and in the smile that is like Barbara; but we see these chance resemblances every day. Are you not afraid Lady Agnes will be tired waiting?"

"I will go to her in a moment, papa," she said, kissing the likeness again, and placing it round her neck. "But first tell me about the plan you spoke of, after I am——" She stopped, blushing.

"Married, Vivia," he said, laughing.

"Yes, papa. You spoke of a plan, you know?"

"I did, and here it is."

He pointed, as he spoke, to the paper, which was filled with accounts of the war in Egypt. A great victory had just been gained by the British, and the columns were dark with deeds of blood and heroism. Vivia clasped her hands, and turned pale, with a presentiment of what was coming.

"It is hardly the thing," said the colonel, "that an old soldier, like myself, should loiter here in inglorious idleness, while such deeds as these are making men famous every day. Now that Vivia is to leave, the old house at home will be rather dreary for comfort, and I shall be off for Africa within a week after you become Mrs. Cliffe."

She did not speak. She clasped her hands on his shoulder, and dropped her face thereon.

"The plan is--Lady Agnes has the whole thing arranged--that you and she and Leicester (for she intends accompanying you) are to pass the summer in France and Switzerland, the winter in Italy, enjoy the carnival in Venice, Holy Week in Rome, and come back to Cliftonlea in the following spring, so that you will be a whole year absent. Meanwhile I shall be storming redoubts, and leading forlorn hopes, and writing letters from the seat of war to my pretty daughter, who will be——"

"Praying for you, papa!"

He had felt his shoulder growing wet with tears, and before he could speak, she had risen and glided lightly from the room.

Upstairs Lady Agnes was pacing up and down, in a little fever of impatience. Vivia paused for a moment, as she passed on her way to her own room.

"I will do everything you wish, grandmamma," she said. "Good-night."

Conquering Lady Agnes! What a radiant smile she cast after the graceful form disappearing in its own chamber. But once there, the bride-elect fell down on her

knees by the window, and buried her face in her hands, feeling that the shining stream along which she had floated all her life was becoming turgid and rough, and that she was drifting, without rudder or compass, into an unknown sea, void of sunshine or shore. So long she knelt there, that the stars waxed pale and went dimly out, one by one, before the gray eyes of the coming morning, and one—the morning star—looked brightly down on her alone.

Well might Vivia keep vigil. In one hour her whole childhood had passed from her like a dream.

CHAPTER XIX.

BACK AGAIN.

ONCE more the cathedral bells were cracking their brazen throats ringing out peals of joy ; once more there were triumphal arches all along High street to the very gates of Castle Cliffe, with "Welcome, Rose of Sussex!" "Long life and happiness to the heiress of Castle Cliffe!" and a score of other flaming mottoes ; once more the charity children turned out to strew the road with flowers ; once more the town was assembled in gala attire ; once more there were to be public feasting and rejoicing, and beer and beef for every "chawbacon" in Sussex, *ad libitum*. That day month there had been shouting for the May Queen—now there was shouting for a far greater personage, no less than the heiress of Castle Cliffe.

In the sunshine of a glorious June afternoon, under the arches of evergreen and over the flower-strewn road, came the triumphal chariot of the heiress, otherwise a grand barouche, drawn by four handsome grays in silver-plated harness, with outriders. In this barouche sat the colonel and Miss Shirley, Lady Agnes and Leicester Cliffe. The young lady was kept busy bowing ; for, as the crowd saw the bright, smiling face, they hurrahed again and again, with much the same enthusiasm as that which made the Scotch people shout, when Mary Stuart rode

among them, "God bless that sweet face!" In the next carriage came Sir Roland and Lord Lisle, Tom and Margaret Shirley, and the two that followed were filled with a crowd of ladies and gentlemen from the city, whom Lady Agnes had brought down, though they knew it not, to be present at her granddaughter's wedding.

The great gates swung majestically back under the carved arch, emblazoned with the escutcheon of the Cliffes, to let the car of triumph in; and the lodgekeeper stood in the door of the Italian cottage to bow to the passing princess. The flag on the domed roof flung out its folds proudly to the breeze, and a long line of servants, many old and gray in the service of the family, stood drawn up in the hall to bid them welcome.

There, too, stood Mr. Sweet, ever smiling and *debonnaire*, the sunshine seeming to glint and scintillate in his yellow hair and whiskers, in his jingling jewelry and smiling mouth, until he made one wink to look at him.

All sorts of miracles had been working in the house for the last fortnight. A whole regiment of upholsterers had been sent down from London to set every room topsyturvy and the servants distracted, and to make them perfectly resplendent with damask and velvet. And now the heiress of all this wealth and splendor, fair and youthful, her eyes filling with tears, was entering, leaning on the arm of her hero of a father, stately and handsome; and some of the servants were wiping their eyes, too, and whispering how like she was to all the Cliffes generally, but particularly to the abbess, whose portrait hung in the hall above.

Marshaled by the housekeeper, everybody hurried off to their rooms to dress for dinner. Vivian went to hers (the Rose Room), where she had slept the first night she entered Castle Cliffe. In all the changes and preparations it had not been altered, by her own especial request; and she danced round it like the happy child she was, glad to be home again.

There stood the dainty bed in the recess, guarded by the watchful angel; there was the picture over the mantel—the majestic figure, with the halo round the head, blessing little children; and there—yes, there was one change—there was another picture, a fair-haired boy, with a face beautiful as an angel; the picture that had once hung

in the villa at Cliffewood, and sent to her by Sir Roland within the last fortnight, as having decidedly the best right to it.

Alone as she was, her cheeks grew hot and crimson at the sight, and then she laughed to herself and kissed her finger-tips to it, and resigned herself into the hands of Jeannette to make her pretty for dinner. And pretty she did look when it was all over ; for she was too impatient to go through the house to see the changes to waste time over her toilet.

Mr. Sweet, standing in the hall, talking to the house-keeper, looked at her, quite lost in admiration, as she came out in a floating amplitude of bright blue silk, low-necked and short-sleeved according to her cool custom ; her golden hair, freshly curled, falling around her in an amber cloud ; her blue eyes shining, her rounded cheeks flushed. Low he bent before her, with a gleam in his eyes that was half admiration, half derision.

Now, Vivia did not like Mr. Sweet, and Mr. Sweet was not fond of Vivia. The young lady had an unwinking way of looking out of her great blue eyes and discerning tinsel from gold, despite its pitiful glistening, with much of her grandmother's eagle glance, and Mr. Sweet always shrank a little under those fearless, guiltless eyes.

"He is too sweet to be wholesome, Tom," she had said once to her cousin. "No man that always smiles and never frowns is anything but a hypocrite."

But to-day she was at peace with the world and all therein, and she bent her pretty head and shimmering curls till they flashed back the sunlight, and then danced down the hall like an incarnate sunbeam herself.

It was well Vivia knew the old house by heart, or she certainly would have been lost in the labyrinth of halls, and corridors, and passages changed as they were now. A certain suite of oak rooms in the Agnes Tower, with windows facing the east—she liked a sunny eastern prospect—had been, by the orders of Lady Agnes, fitted up ostensibly for Miss Shirley ; in reality, for Mr. and Mrs. Cliffe. There was a boudoir whose very carpet was a miracle in itself—violets and forget-me-nots so natural that you scarcely dared step on them, on a groundwork of purest white, like flowers blooming in a snow-bank. There were window curtains of blue satin, with silver

embroidery, under white lace; walls paneled in azure satin, and hung with exquisite pictures, each of which had cost, in Italy and Germany, a small fortune in itself. There was a wonderful cabinet of ebony and gold, vases half as tall as herself, a ceiling where silver stars shone on a blue ground, and chairs of some white wood that looked like ivory cushioned in blue satin. There was a rosewood piano in one corner, with the music she liked on the rack beside it. There were carved swinging-shelves of the same white wood, with all her favorite authors, gayly bound, thereon, from William Shakespeare to Charles Dickens. There were hot-house flowers on the table, and sweet-voiced canaries, singing in silver-plated cages; and a portrait of herself, resplendent in the dress she had worn at court, smiling serenely down on all. And—

“Dear, dear grandmother!” she murmured. “How good, how kind, how generous she is!”

The next suite was an oratory, fitted up for private devotions. Vivia looked round her in delight, and having knelt for a moment to murmur a prayer, passed on to the next—the dressing-room. It was a bath-room as well as a dressing-room; the walls were decorated with mirrors, reaching from floor to ceiling, with fragrant cedar closets on either hand. On one of the tables lay a dressing-case of mother-of-pearl, and the carpet and hangings were of dark crimson. The next was the bed-chamber, a superb room, with four large windows draped in green velvet, cut in antique points, and lined with white satin, overlooking an extensive prospect of terraces, and shrubbery, and plantations, and avenues. Green and white were the pervading tints throughout the room; the bed-hangings were of those shades; the easy-chairs and lounges were upholstered in green velvet, and the carpet looked like green moss with wreaths of white roses laid on it. And then came another dressing-room, whose shades were amber and jet, which made Vivia open her eyes; and beyond it there was a little study with rosewood shelves round three sides of the room, well filled with books, and there was a gentleman’s Turkish dressing-gown of bright scarlet and yellow lying over the back of an arm-chair; and on the table was a long Turkish pipe, with an amber mouth-piece, and beside it a crimson fez.

The other side of the room seemed to be a small armory, for there were swords and daggers of Damascus steel, whose keen blue glitter made her flesh creep ; and pistols and revolvers, at sight of which she recoiled precipitately to the other end of the room.

"Grandmamma is determined that I shall have a variety of dressing-rooms," thought Vivia, in horrified surprise ; "but what all those horrid things are for, I cannot imagine. Does she expect me to wear that red and yellow dressing-gown and flaming cap, and smoke that dreadful, long-stemmed chibouque, I wonder ? I shall go and see."

Each of those rooms had two doors, one opening on the outer hall, the other in a straight line communicating with each other. Vivia hurried on to the beautiful boudoir, and with the free, light, elastic step peculiar to her, traversed the hall and corridor, the last of which was her own. The door of the lady's dressing-room was ajar, and the girl looked in.

"Grandmamma, I have been through the rooms, and they are charming. I never saw anything prettier in my life !"

Lady Agnes was sitting listlessly, with her eyes closed and her hands folded, before a great Psyche mirror, under the hands of her maid. At the sound of the voice, she opened her eyes and looked round in surprise.

"My dear child, is this really you ? How is it possible you are dressed already ?"

Miss Shirley pulled out a watch about the size of a penny-piece, set with a blazing circlet of diamonds, and consulted it with precision.

"I was dressed just twenty minutes ago, grandmamma."

"What an absurd toilet you must have made, then ! Come in and let me look at you."

Vivia entered, and made a respectful little housemaid's courtesy.

"Oh, my lady, don't scold, if you please ! I was dying to see the rooms ; and how could I think of my toilet the very first hour I got home ?"

"Well, you are tolerable," said Lady Agnes, leaning over with a critical eye, "but too plain, child. Simplicity is very nice in young girls, but some ornament—a flower,

a few pearls, everything in keeping, remember." (She herself was blazing in jewels,) "And you have rather too much of a milkmaid flush on your cheeks; but still you are very well. Where did you say you had been?"

"To see the oak rooms in the Agnes Tower. They are lovely, all of them. But, grandmamma, I don't understand why I'm to use two dressing-rooms, and what all those shocking swords and pistols are for."

"Dear child," said Lady Agnes, in German, that Made-moiselle Hortense, the maid, might not understand, "they are not thine alone, but Mr. and Mrs. Cliffe's. The amber dressing-room and study are your husband's."

"Oh!" said Vivia, laughing and blushing.

"After your bridal tour, you know, they will be occupied—not until then; and afterward when you visit the Castle. And now, Victoria, there's something else I want to speak to you about—the announcement of your engagement. As I acceded to your silly entreaties in town and did not announce it there, I think it is only proper that our guests should be informed immediately. As the marriage is to take place itself within a fortnight, the notice even now will be absurdly short."

"Oh, grandmamma, no! Don't publish it yet, not on any account!"

"Victoria, I'm surprised at you! I have no patience with you! Now why, for Heaven's sake, might not the whole world know it?"

"Grandmamma, you know very well. I told you in town why. I should feel so ashamed and so silly; and I am sure I should not be able to speak a word to monsieur, my cousin, again until after the ceremony. And then, to think that every one in Cliftonlea, and in Lower Cliffe, and Lisleham, and all round the country, will talk about it, and my name will be bandied on every lip, high and low; and how the trousseau and settlements will be discussed; and how the sentimental people will wonder if it was a love-match or a *mariage de convenance*; and how they will conjecture, over there in the town, what sort of an appetite I had the day before, and how many tears I will shed on being led to the altar. And then those people here—how, for the next two or three weeks, it will be the sole subject of discussion; how they will shower conscious smiles and glances at me whenever I approach, and

make our united names their theme over the billiard and card-tables, and tell each other what an excellent match it is ; and move away and leave us alone if we chance by accident to come together among the rest ; and I will be congratulated, and kissed, and talked at. Oh, dreadful ! I should never survive it !”

All this had been poured forth with such excited vehemence, that Lady Agnes opened her light blue eyes in surprise, and Mademoiselle Hortense, without understanding a word, stared and pricked up her ears. As she stopped, with very red cheeks and very bright eyes, Lady Agnes broke out with energy :

“Victoria, you are nothing but a little fool !”

“Yes, grandmamma ; but p-p-please don't tell.”

“Now, grant me patience. Was there ever anything heard like this ? Pray tell me, Miss Shirley, if you are ashamed of your coming wedding ?”

“Oh, grandmamma !”

“Is it ever to be announced at all, or are our guests to know nothing of it until the wedding-morning—tell me that ?”

“Oh, not so bad as that. Won't next week do ?”

“This week will do better. Are you not aware that Leicester leaves to-morrow for London, to arrange about the settlements, and will not return till within three or four days of *the day* ?”

“Yes, grandmamma ; and I don't want you to say anything about it until he comes back.”

“Victoria, tell me—do you care at all for your future husband ?”

Victoria wilted suddenly down.

“I—I think so, grandmamma.”

“I—I think so, grandmamma !” said her ladyship, mimicking her tone. “Oh, was there ever such another simpleton on the face of the earth ! Victoria, I am ashamed of you ! Where are you going now ?”

“To the Queen's Room. Don't be angry, grandmamma. I shall do everything you tell me in all other ways and all other matters ; but, please, like a dear, good grandmamma, let me have my way in this.”

It was not in human nature to resist that sweet, coaxing tone, nor that smile, half-gay half-deprecating, nor yet the kiss with which the grand lady's lips were bribed and

sealed. Lady Agnes pushed her away, half-smiling, half-petulant.

"You're all the same as a great baby—Victoria, and altogether spoiled by that other great baby—your papa. Go away."

Laughing, Victoria went, and singing to herself a merry chansonette, danced along the old halls to the Queen's Room in the Queen's Tower. In this particular room, said the traditions of the house, Queen Elizabeth had slept; and, from that memorable time everything had remained precisely as the great queen had left it.

The Queen's Room had been the awe and admiration of Vivia's childhood, and it seemed filled with ghostly rustling now as she entered, as if good Queen Bess's one silk dress still rattled stiffly against the molded wainscoting. It was a dismally old apartment, very long and very low-ceilinged, with great oaken beams crossing it transversely, and quartered in the center in the same wood, with the arms of Cliffe, surmounted by the bloody hand. A huge bed, in which the Seven Sleepers might have reposed, with lots of room to kick about in, stood in the center of the dusty oak floor, and the daylight came dimly through two narrow, high windows, with minute diamond panes set in leaden casements, all overrun with ivy. There was a black gulf of a fireplace wherein Yule logs had blazed a Christmas tune; and there was a huge granite mantelpiece, with a little ledge ever so far up. There must have been giants in the days it was used, and Vivia kissed the cold gray stone and read the pious legend carved on it in quaint letters: "*Mater Dei, memento me!*" All sorts of grotesque heads were carved on the oak panels—sylphs and satyrs, gods and goddesses, heavenly and infernal; and opposite each other, one of the martyred abbesses and Queen Elizabeth. This last was a sliding panel opening with a secret spring, and leading by a subterraneous passage out into the park—a secret passage by which many a crime had been concealed in days gone by, and which Vivia knew well, and had often passed through in her childhood.

She had been walking round the room examining the carvings, and looking at her own pretty self in a dusty old mirror, before which the royal tigress of England had once stood, combing out her red mane, when she

was interrupted in a startling and mysterious way enough.

"Victoria!"

Vivia started and looked round. The voice, soft and low, was close beside her—came actually from the carved lips of the nun in the panel.

"Victoria!"

Again from the lips of wood came the name, clear and sweet. She started back and gazed with blanched cheeks and dilating eyes on the beautiful dust-stained face. One more came the voice, vibrating clear and distinct throughout the room:

"Victoria Shirley, the hour of your downfall is at hand. For six years you have walked your way, with a ring and a clatter, over the heads of those whose handmaid you were born to be; but the hour comes when might shall succumb to right, and you shall be thrust out into the slime from which you have arisen. Heiress of Castle Cliffe, look to yourself, and remember that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

The faint, low voice took a stern and menacing tone at the close, and then died away in impressive silence. Vivia had been standing breathless, and spell-bound, and terror-struck, with her eyes on the carved nun's face over the door.

When it ceased, the spell was broken, and Vivia turned in horror to fly. Not for worlds would she have gone near it to pass through the door; so she touched the spring in the secret panel, and passed out into the opening beyond.

As it closed, shutting out the last ray of light, and leaving her in utter darkness, she caught a glimpse of a dark figure disappearing before her in the gloom, and she flew down along the spiral staircase—how, she scarcely ever afterward knew.

At the foot was a long arched stone passage, nearly an eighth of a mile in extent, ending in a wilderness of ivy and juniper, close beside one of the laurel walks. Through it she flew, pale and breathless, pausing not until she found herself out in sunshine, with the birds singing in the branches overhead, and the pure breezes sweeping up, cool and sweet, from the sea.

Something else was there to reassure her also—a figure

walking up and down the laurel walk, and smoking furiously. It turned the instant after she emerged from the tangled wilderness of ivy, and seeing her, took the cigar between his finger the thumb, and stared with all his might.

Vivia's courage and presence of mind came back all at once.

"Does monsieur think I have dropped from the skies!" she asked, coquettishly, for, being more than half French, Mademoiselle Genevieve took to coquetry as naturally as a wasp takes to stinging.

"Mademoiselle," said Leicester Cliffe, flinging away his cigar, and coming up. "I might very easily be pardoned for mistaking you for an angel, but, in the present instance, I merely think you are a witch! Two seconds ago I was all alone; no one was visible in any direction but myself. At the end of these two seconds I turn round, and lo! there stands before me a shining vision in gold and azure, like the queen of the fairies in a moonlit ring. Will you vanish if I come any nearer?"

"You may come and see!"

He needed no second bidding. And as he stood before her, looking at her in astonishment, he saw how pale she was, and the excited gleam in her serene blue eyes.

"What has happened? Has anything frightened you? Why are you looking so pale?" he asked.

She shivered, drew closer to him involuntarily, and glanced behind her with a startled face.

"Vivia, what is it? Something has gone wrong!"

"Yes; come away from here, and I will tell you."

He drew her hand within his arm, and turned down the laurel walk. It ended in a long avenue leading to the old ruin; and as they entered, he asked again:

"Well, Vivia, what has gone wrong, and how came you to appear there so suddenly and mysteriously?"

"There is nothing mysterious about my getting there. You know the the subterraneous passage leading from the Queen's Tower to the park? I merely came through that."

"A pleasant notion! to come through that dark and damp old vault, when you could have stepped out through the front door with double the ease and convenience! Did you see the ghost of Queen Elizabeth on the way?"

"No, monsieur; but if you laugh at me, I shall not say another word. The mysterious part is to come."

"Oh, there is a mystery, then—that's refreshing! Let me hear it."

"You are laughing at me!"

"By no means! Pray don't keep me in this torturing suspense."

"Monsieur, I had been through the house, looking at the improvements, and I came to the Queen's Room, to see if they had been sacrilegious enough to alter that. In one of the panels there is carved the head of a nun, the abbess who—"

"Oh, I know perfectly! Lady Edith Cliffe, who was murdered there in the old monastery. What else?"

"Monsieur, there was a voice—it seemed to come from that head—and it said things it chills my blood to think of. I think there was no one else in the whole tower but myself; I am sure there was no one else in the room; and yet, there was that voice, which seemed to come from the carved head! Don't laugh at me, monsieur; I am telling the whole truth."

Monsieur was not disposed to laugh—not at all. He was thinking of the Nun's Grave, and of the warning voice so mysterious and so solemn. This voice was possibly the same. Vivia looked up with her earnest eyes.

"What does monsieur think of this?"

"That there is not the least reason in the world to be afraid. Mademoiselle, I, too, have heard that voice!"

"You!"

"Even so!"

"Where?"

"At the Nun's Grave."

"Oh, monsieur, I, too, heard it there long ago! I was a child then, and I was there alone with Barbara Black."

"I, too, was alone with Barbara Black," thought Leicester, but he only said; "Do not distress yourself, Miss Shirley—believe me that mysterious voice is not supernatural!"

"What, then, is it?"

"That I do not altogether know. I have a suspicion; if it prove a certainty, you will yet be able to laugh over to-day's terror. Meantime, I have something else to speak to you about, as I believe this is the only time since I

have had the pleasure of seeing you that we have ever been for five minutes completely alone together."

Vivia turned pale, and drawing her hand suddenly from his arm, stooped to gather the daisies growing under their feet. He looked at her with a smile that had a little of sarcasm in it.

"Are you aware, Miss Shirley, we are to be married in a fortnight?"

Vivia, with a pale face and startled eyes, looked round her for a moment, as if meditating flight; and Leicester, with an inward laugh at her evident dread of a love-scene took her hand and held it firmly.

"Are you sure you know we are to be married, Vivia?"

"Yes, monsieur," very faintly.

"You know, too, that I leave to-morrow for London to arrange the final settlements, and will not return till within a day or two before the wedding?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And though I never had an opportunity of telling you so, you know, of course, I love you?"

"Grandmamma told me so, monsieur."

Leicester smiled outright at this; but as she was not looking, it did not matter. Without lifting her eyes, she tried to release her hand.

"Please to let me go, Monsieur Cliffe."

"You'll run away if I do."

"No; but it is time we were returning to the house; the dinner-bell will ring directly."

"One moment only. As we are to be married so soon, it strikes me I should like to know whether or not you care for me."

With her released hand Vivia was tearing mercilessly to pieces the daisies she had pulled. She was silent so long, with face averted, that he repeated the question.

"Mademoiselle does not answer."

"If I do not answer, monsieur," she said with infinite composure, looking straight before her, "it is because I was thinking how to say what I feel on the subject. If I marry you, I shall love you—depend on that. Your honor, or as much of it as will be in my keeping, shall be dearer to me than my own life, and your happiness will be the most sacred thing to me on earth. But as for love, such as I have read of and heard of from other girls, I

know nothing of it, and if you ask me for passion, I have it not to give. I love my papa best of all on earth; next to him, and in a different way, I respect and"—a little tremor of the voice—"and love you. And, monsieur, I shall be your true and faithful wife until death!"

In speaking, they had drawn near to the Nun's Grave without noticing it. They were standing on its verge now, and one of them remembered how he had stood there last, and how different a love had been given him then.

Much as he admired the heiress of Castle Cliffe, noble and high-minded, unworthy as he felt himself to touch the hem of her dress, he knew that Barbara was a thousand times more to his taste. Miss Shirley was an angel, and he was a great deal too much of the earth earthy, not to prefer the dark, passionate daughter of his own world. He did not want to marry an angel. Had Miss Shirley been a fisherman's daughter, he would as soon have thought of falling in love with a drift of sea-foam as she. But it was too late for all such thoughts now, and he suppressed a sigh, and looked down at the fallen tree. He started to see the carved initials staring him full in the face, like reproachful ghosts, and the guilty blood came crimson to his brow. Vivia saw them, too, and was looking at them curiously.

"Do look at this, monsieur! 'B. B. and L. S. C.' Why, those last are your initials! Did you carve them?"

"I think so—yes," he said, carelessly.

"And whose are the others?"

Leicester Cliffe did not like the idea of willfully telling a lie, but it would never do to say "Barbara Black," so he answered, with the guilty color high in his face:

"I don't know. There is the five minutes' bell; had we not better return to the house?"

"I should think so. What will grandmamma say? I have been fully an hour rambling about the place, and I love every tree and stone in it, even that frightful, charming, and romantic Queen's Room. It is like paradise, this place—is it not, monsieur?"

"Any place would be like paradise to me where you were, Vivia."

She laughed gayly, and they walked away under the elms and disappeared. And neither dreamed of the unseen listener who had heard every word.

CHAPTER XX

ACCEPTED.

AWAY beyond the Nun's Grave the green lanes and winding avenues of Cliffe Park lost themselves in a dry, arid marsh, where tall blue rockets and flame-colored flowers danced crazy fandangos in the wind; where the sheep and cattle grazed in the rank grass, and where wild strawberries were sown like scarlet stars on the golden June evening when the betrothed lovers stood talking by the fallen elm. At the head of the grave was a wild jungle of tall fern, and juniper, and reeds, shaded by thick elms and beeches—a lonely spot, in whose greenish black gloom many a dark deed might be committed, and no one the wiser, a place as gloomy, and silent, and lonely as the heart of a primeval forest.

But it was not deserted now. Crouching among the fern and reedy blossoms was a figure in white—a slender, girlish figure, with crimson buds wreathed in the bands of her shining dark hair—a figure that, on coming toward the Nun's Grave, had discovered two others approaching it from the opposite direction, and had shrank down here out of sight.

Unseen and unheard, she had listened to the whole conversation; and it was well neither saw the terrible eyes gleaming upon them from the green vines, or they scarcely would have walked back to the dinner-table as composedly and as happily as they did. She had started at first, flushing redder than the flowers in her hair; but this had passed away as quickly as it came; and as she half sat, half knelt, and listened, she seemed slowly petrifying, turning from stone to ice.

Long after they went away she knelt there, like something carved in marble, her dress and face all one color, her eyes looking straight before her with a dull, glazed, vacant stare. So long she knelt, that the red lances of

sunset piercing the shifting green gloom had died out one by one, and the evening wind sighing from the sea stirred restlessly in the branches of the elms overhead. Then she arose, with a face that no one had ever seen Barbara Black wear before. She been seen in sorrow, in anger, in pride, and joy ; but never with a face like that, so set, so stone-like, so rigidly calm. She might have been a galvanized corpse ; only no corpse ever had eyes wherein the light of life burned with so fierce and steady a glare.

She had not gone to Cliftonlea that day to see the triumphal procession enter ; always jealously proud, she was more exclusively so now than ever, for the sake of another. Oh, no ; it would never do for the future bride of Leicester Cliffe to be splashed with the mud of his chariot-wheels, like the rest of the common herd ; so, smiling in heart, she had dressed herself in the flowing white robes of the May Queen, in which he had seen her first, and gone forth like a bride to meet him.

Of course, he had been dreaming of her all day, and losing his sleep thinking of her all night, and fretting himself into a fever ever since he went away, to get back to love and her--men always do in such cases ! Of course, the first visit of so ardent a lover would be to the spot made sacred by their plighted vows ; and she would be there, beautiful and radiant in her bridal robes, and be the first to greet him home ! Young ladies in love are invariably fools, and they generally get a fool's reward. Barbara was no exception ; and verily she had her reward.

As she rose up and turned away, she tottered, and leaned for a moment against a tree, with both hands clasped hard over her heart.

"Oh, fool ! fool ! fool !" she cried out, in bitter scorn of herself. "Poor, pitiful fool ! to think that this heart should quail for one instant, though trodden under the feet of such a traitor and bastard as that !"

There was a strong net-work of the tall, rank vines in her path, but she brushed them aside like a cobweb, and went on over the arid marsh on her way to the gates. Bubbling from a rock very near them, and sparkling clear and bright beneath the shadow of the overhanging fern, was a crystal spring, with a sea-nymph watching over it,

and a beautiful little drinking-cup, made from a sea-shell, hanging from the stone girdle round its waist.

Barbara filled the cup, and was raising it to her lips, when she stopped. For the carved face of the goddess was that of Victoria Shirley, and carved on the rose-tinted shell were the words :

“Victoria Regia.”

Barbara drew her white lips off her glistening teeth with a low, derisive laugh, and dashed the shell so furiously against the statue that it shivered on its stone bosom into a hundred fragments.

“Oh, if that pretty, rosy, smiling face were only here, how I could beat out every trace of its wax-doll beauty, and send it back, hideous and lacerated, for him to kiss !” she said, looking at the unmoved smile on the stone face with the eyes of a tigress. “Pretty little devil ! If that were she in reality, instead of her stone image, how I could throttle her as she stands ! Why, I would rather drink poison than anything on which she had looked—sooner touch my lips to red-hot iron than to anything bearing her name !”

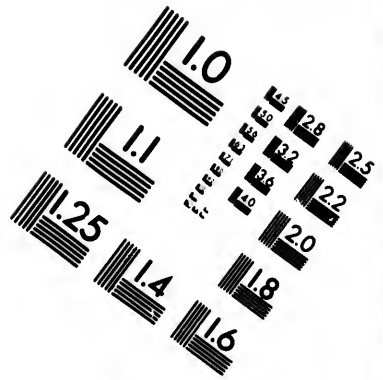
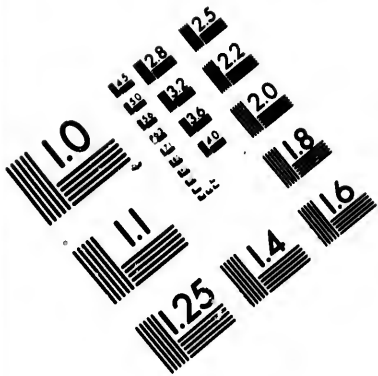
She literally hissed the words through her set teeth, without raising her voice ; and casting one parting look with the same wolfish eyes on the smiling block of stone, she hurried on through the park gates and into the cottage, just as the last little pink cloud of sunset was dipping and fading behind the distant hills.

The cottage looked disorderly and uncomfortable as usual, with piles of nets, and oars, and fish-baskets, and oil-cloth garments scattered in the corners, and chairs and tables at sixes and sevens, and perfumed with the usual ancient and fish-like smell. A wood fire burned on the hearth, and the green wood did not mend matters by vomiting puffs of smoke, and the kettle on the crane seemed in a fair way to boil some time before midnight.

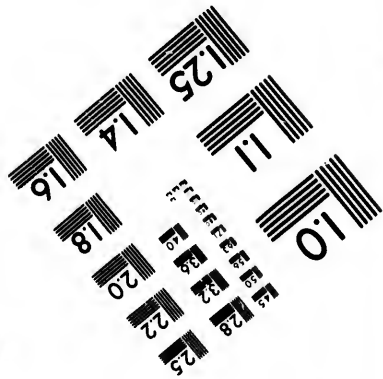
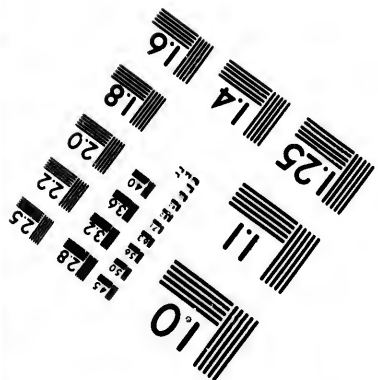
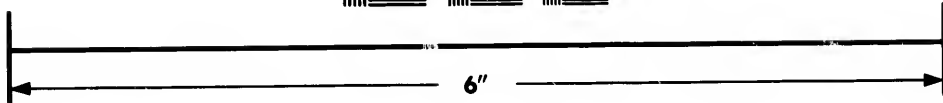
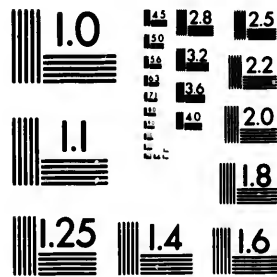
In a chair in the chimney-corner, smoking serenely, sat Mr. Peter Black, his hands in his pockets, his hat on his head, and his eyes on the fire ; and Barbara, entering, a spotless and shining vision, made him look up. Mr. Black did more than look up—he stared, with his eyes open to the widest possible extent.

“Good Lord !” said Mr. Black, still staring, in the utmost consternation, “what is the matter with the girl ?”





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Barbara took a long drink of water, and then coming over, rested her arm on the mantel, and faced him with perfect composure.

"What is it, father?"

"What the deuce is the matter with you? You look as though you had been dead a week."

"Am I pale?"

"Pale? It's quite horrible, I tell you. Have you seen a ghost?"

"Yes, father."

Mr. Black's jaw dropped so suddenly at this announcement, and his eyes opened so wide, that there seemed strong danger of their never being able to regain their natural position again.

"What—what's that you said?"

"That I had seen a ghost, father—the ghost of truth and honor forever dead."

Before Mr. Black could frame an answer to this speech, which was to him as inscrutable as Greek, the door opened, and old Judith, attired in promenade costume—that is, a faded scarlet cloak, with a hood thrown over her head—entered.

Now, Judith's promenading at all beyond three yards of her own threshold was so very unusual and striking a circumstance, that Barbara turned to look at her, and Mr. Black actually took the pipe from his lips, and stared, if possible, harder than ever:

"Why, grandmother," said Barbara, "where have you been?"

The old woman threw back the hood of her cloak, and showed an animated and sprightly countenance as she drew up her chair and held out her hands, with a shiver, to the blaze.

"Ah," said Mr. Black, still holding his pipe, and still staring, "that's just what I should like to know. Where have you been?"

"Up to Cliftonlea, to be sure," said Judith, with a low, dry, cackling laugh, and a sly look out of her eyes, first at her granddaughter and then at her son. "Everybody went, and why couldn't I go among the rest?"

Mr. Black gave vent to his suppressed feelings in a deep bass oath, and Barbara stood looking at her steadily out of her great dark eyes.

Old Judith cackled again, and rubbed her hands.

"It was a fine sight, a grand sight, a brave sight—finer than anything even in the theater. There were the arches with her name on 'em; and flags a-flying; and flowers all along the road for her wheels to go over; and there were four shining horses all covered with silver, holding up their heads as if they were proud of her, and walking on the flowers as if they scorned them and the common folks who threw them; and there was she, among all the grand ladies and gentlemen, with her silk dress rustling, and her eyes like blue stars, and her cheeks like pink velvet, and her smile like—ah, like an angel, and she a-flinging of handfuls of silver among the poor children, as if it was dirt, and she despised it. Ah, she is a great lady—a great lady!"

Old Judith rubbed her hands so hard that there seemed some danger of her flaying them, and looked alternately at her son and granddaughter, with a glance of such mingled shyness, cunning, and exultation, that the gentleman got exasperated.

"What in blazes," inquired Mr. Black, putting it temperately, "is the blessed old scarecrow a-talking of? She can't have been drinking, can she?" Though the adjective Mr. Black used was not exactly "blessed," and though the look with which he favored his tender parent was not the blindest, yet old Judith cackled her shrill laugh again, and diving one skinny arm into the greasy depths of a pocket by her side, fished up a handful of silver coins.

"Look at them!" cried the old lady, thrusting them very near Mr. Black's nose, with an exultant gleam in her greenish black eyes. "Look at them! She saw me sitting by the road-side, and she threw them to me as she rode past, and asked for Barbara. Stop—keep off—it's mine; give me my money, Barbara."

Across Barbara's white face there had shot a sudden crimson streak, and in each of Barbara's eyes there had leaped a demon. She had clutched the skinny arm of the old woman in a hand like iron, and wrenched the money from her avaricious clutch, and dashed it with all her might through the window, smashing the glass as it went. Then, without a word, she resumed her place at the mantel; but father and grandmother sprang to their feet,

the one with a savage oath, the other with a shrill and angry scream.

"What's all this for?" demanded Mr. Black, looking fiercely at his ungovernable daughter. "What the deuce has got into the girl?"

She looked at him with a quiet eye.

"You've said it, father—the evil spirit is in me!"

"My money is gone, all my money," whined old Judith, who stood in mortal dread of her tameless granddaughter. "All my money, and there was three crowns, two half-crowns, and a fi'-penny bit! And she gave it to me, too, all for myself—the pretty young lady."

"What did you do it for, you——"

Mr. Black paused with the epithet on his tongue, for something like the savage light in his own eyes shone in his daughter's and warned him that it would be safer unsaid.

"That's not much," she said, looking at him with a strange laugh. "What would you say if I murdered somebody and was going to be hanged?"

"Oh, the girl's gone mad, stark, staring mad!" said Mr. Black, staring again, until his eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

"No, father."

"Curse it, then," he cried, ferociously, "what do you mean by looking and acting like this? Stop glowering on me like that, or I'll smash your face for you as I would smash an egg-shell."

"And this is my father," said Barbara, with the same wild laugh; and turning toward the door. "Don't try it, father, it would not be safe. Good-evening to you both."

She walked rapidly out and down toward the shore, with a step that rang like steel on the rocks. A slender new moon was rising away in the east, and its radiance silvered the waves and lighted the long, white, sandy beach, and black piles of sea-weedy rocks above them. The tide was far out, and Barbara strode over the wet shingle and slippery seaweed, heeding them no more than if she were gliding over a moonlit lawn, and never stopped until she found herself within the gloomy precincts of the Demon's Tower. Then she glanced round with a look the arch-fiend himself might have envied.

"Here, six years ago, I saved her life," she said. "Oh,

beautiful heiress of Castle Cliffe, if that hour would only come back, and I were looking down on your dying struggles, as I could have done that night !”

She leaned against the dark archway, and looked over the rocks. The scene was placid and serene ; the waves murmured low on the sands ; the boats glided over the moon-tinted waters, and a gay party of fishermen's girls, their boat floating idly on the long, lazy swell, were singing the "Evening Hymn" and the earnest, devotional words came clear and sweet to where she stood.

But they had no salutary or soothing effect on the perturbed heart. It was no "whisper of Heaven" that changed Barbara's face so strangely as she listened. Her bent brow grew rigid and stern, her eye darkened with deadly resolve, her lips compressed with resolute determination, her hands clenched until the nails sunk into the rosy flesh, and her very figure seemed to dilate and grow tall with the deadliest resolve new-born within her.

"Barbara!" A gentle voice behind pronounced the name, but she never moved or turned round. "Bar' ara, my dear girl, what are you doing here alone in this place, and at this hour?"

"Thinking, Mr. Sweet."

Mr. Sweet, shining with subdued yellow luster in the white moonlight, got over the rocks, with a face full of concern, and stood beside her.

"And your hands, Barbara—what ails them? They are bleeding."

She had cut them while coming over the rocks, without ever knowing it ; and now she looked down at the flowing blood with an icy smile.

"It is nothing. I have been bleeding inwardly for the last two or three hours, so I am not likely to mind such a trifle as torn hands."

"Poor little hands," said Mr. Sweet, tenderly, as he took out his handkerchief and began wiping away the blood. "My dear, dear Barbara, what is the meaning of all this?"

"Your dear Barbara! How many have you called dear, besides me, to-day, Mr. Sweet?"

"No one ; you alone are dear to me, Barbara."

"Oh, to be sure! Men always say that, and always mean it, and always are true. I believe you, of course."

"How bitter you are!"

"Not at all. Broken vows and broken hearts are such every-day matters, that it is hardly worth while growing bitter over them."

"So!" said the lawyer, looking at her steadily. "So you've heard all?"

"Everything, Mr. Sweet."

"Who told you?"

"A little bird; or, perhaps, I dreamed it? Is it such a mystery, then, that Miss Shirley and Mr. Cliffe are to be man and wife?"

"It is a fact, but it is also a secret. Lady Agnes told me as soon as she arrived; but she also told me no one knew it here but myself. Where can you have heard it, Barbara?"

"Would you like to know?"

"Yes."

"It is quite romantic. I dressed myself, as you see, to meet my love; for I beg to inform you that the heir of Cliffewood and the fisherman's daughter were engaged. He came, but not alone, to the trysting-place—Miss Shirley was with him, and they had quite an animated talk over their approaching nuptials. Some initials were cut upon a tree, his and mine, and it was his hand that carved them; but I heard him deny it, with as much composure as any vulgar liar who never had an ancestor in the world."

"Barbara, how strangely you talk, and how wild you look. Your hand is like ice; you are ill," he said, really alarmed.

"Don't distress yourself, Mr. Sweet. I am perfectly well."

"May I talk to you, then? Will you listen to what I have to say?"

"With all the pleasure in life."

"Will you answer my questions?"

"Begin."

"You love Leicester Cliffe?"

"Yes."

"He said he loved you?"

"He did."

"He promised to marry you?"

"Yes."

"Do you love him still?"

"Just at present, very much."

"You know he is to be married to Miss Shirley in two weeks?"

"I think I had the pleasure of hearing himself mention the fact."

"You know that you have been slighted, scorned, jilted, cast off for her?"

"I don't need you to remind me of that, my good friend."

"You are a woman. Slighted women, they say, never forgive. Barbara, would you be revenged?"

"Such is my intention, Mr. Sweet."

There was such deadly intensity of purpose in her very quietude, as she said it, that it chilled even Mr. Sweet for an instant—albeit lawyers' blood does not easily run cold.

"How?" he asked, looking at her earnestly.

"That is my affair, sir."

"Shall I tell you of a speedy revenge, that he will feel, as you alone can make him feel?"

"You may."

"A revenge," said Mr. Sweet, his very voice trembling with eagerness—"a revenge that will pierce his heart like an arrow from its shaft—a revenge that will make him feel that he is the jilted one, and not you?"

"Name it?"

"Marry me!"

"Bah!" said she, looking down on him with her scornful eyes. "As if he could not see through such a pitiful sham as that. How reasonable it would look, that I would forsake the heir of Cliffewood, the handsomest man in Sussex, for a poor, paltry attorney, old enough to be my father, and who was certainly behind the door when beauty was given out."

The sallow face of the lawyer turned actually scarlet for one moment; but the next, he laughed his gay and musical laugh.

"Well, I don't set up for a beauty, Barbara, and you know Madame De Stael says men have the privilege of looking ugly. You have not answered my question. Will you marry me?"

"No," she said, coldly. "What good would it do?"

"Only this. The young gentleman leaves to-morrow for London, and will not return until next Tuesday. As he returns, let his first greeting be the news that Barbara Black is married! Think how he will feel that!"

"He will not care."

"He will. A man never likes the woman who has once loved him to marry another, whether or not he has ceased to love her himself. He never loved you, that is plain; but it will cut him to the quick, nevertheless, to find you care so little for him as to be the bride of another."

"If I thought he would care!" said Barbara, breathing quick.

"He would care. And if he ever had the smallest spark of love for you, it will spring into a flame the moment he finds he has lost you forever. Think what a triumph it would be for him to bear off his beautiful bride in triumph, while he fancied you were pining here like a love-lorn damsel, fit to cry your eyes out for his sweet sake!"

Her eye was kindling, her cheek flushing, her breath coming quick and fast, but she did not speak.

"You shall be a lady, too, Barbara," said the phlegmatic Mr. Sweet, kindling, for once, into something like excitement. "You shall hold up your head with the highest in the land—yes, higher than she has ever held hers, with its yellow curls. You shall be a lady, Barbara; yes, I swear it!"

Barbara laughed, something like her old laugh.

"You are simply talking nonsense, Mr. Sweet. Neither you or anybody else can change me from what God made me—a fisherman's daughter."

"You were never made a fisherman's daughter!" he said, energetically, and then he stopped and knit his brows, and changed his tone. "But, Barbara, if you want revenge, marry me. I am a rich man, and Mrs. Leicester Cliffe will not long look down on Mrs. Sylvester Sweet, depend on that."

"You are very kind, but I am not quite so bad as to take you at your word; for, rest assured, if you married me, you would repent it, in mental sackcloth and ashes, all the rest of your life."

"I will risk it!" he said, with an incredulous smile.

"Only consent."

"If I do, you will repent."

"No."

"I have no love for you. I cannot answer for myself. It shall never be said that I entrapped you or any one else into a marriage, for my own ends. Nothing but evil can come from a connection with me. I am not good; and so I tell you."

"You are good enough for me; for I love you."

"You will have it, I see. Remember, if I consent, and you repent of it afterward, you have been warned."

"I take all the risk, so that I can take you with it."

"Very well, then, Mr. Sweet," she said, quietly. "I will marry you whenever you like."

CHAPTER XXI.

BARBARA'S BRIDAL EVE.

"WHERE is Barbara?"

Mr. Sweet was the speaker, and Mr. Sweet was leaning in Barbara's favorite position on the mantel, beating an impatient tattoo on its smoky ledge, and looking down on old Judith, who sat, very blear-eyed and very grimy with smoke, on a low stool facing the hearth. Breakfast was just over in the cottage, for a quantity of very sloppy earthenware strewed the table.

"Where is Barbara?" repeated Mr. Sweet, as Judith's only reply was to blink and look at him with a shrewd smile.

"In her own room. Ah! you've done it at last, sir!"

"Done what?"

"What you always said you would do—make her marry you."

"She hasn't married me yet that I know of."

"No, sir; no, of course not; but she's coming to it—coming to it fast."

"How do you know?"

"Mr. Sweet, I ain't blind, though my old eyes are red

and watery with smoke ; and I saw you coming up from the beach last night, and, ah ! you was sweet upon her, you was, Mr. Sweet."

"Well?"

To this query Old Judith only grinned in answer ; and Mr. Sweet relaxed into a smile himself.

"You are quite right, said he, pulling out his watch, and glancing at it. "She has promised to marry me."

"I always knew it !" cried Judith, rubbing her hands in glee—"I always said it ! Nobody could ever hang out long against you. Mr. Sweet, you had the winningest ways with you ! Ah, she has come to luck, has my handsome granddaughter !"

"It is a pity your handsome granddaughter is not of the same opinion as her amiable grandmother. When can I see her?"

"Directly, sir. I will go and tell her ; but first—it's no use asking her, for she never tells me anything—when is it going to be?"

"When is what going to be?"

"The wedding."

"That is precisely what I want to know. That is why I have made such an early call on your handsome granddaughter this morning."

"Didn't you settle it last night?"

"No. She told me she would marry me whenever I liked ; and then she turned and was gone, like a flash, before we could come to any further terms."

"That is just like her," said old Judith, no way astonished at this characteristic trait, as she walked across the room and rapped at her granddaughter's door. There was no answer ; and she knocked again, and still there was no reply. Judith turned the handle of the door, which opened readily ; and she entered, while Mr. Sweet, a little startled, stood on the threshold and looked in.

Barbara's room was small, and not at all the immaculate apartment in which to enshrine the heroine of a story ; for dresses, and mantles, and bonnets, and all sorts of wearing apparel were hung round the walls ; and there were two or three pairs of boots strewn over the floor, with books, and papers, and magazines ; and the table in the corner was one great litter of sketches and engravings, and novels and painting materials, and a guitar (Mr.

Sweet's gift) on the top of all. There was a little easel in one corner, for Barbara was quite an artist; and this, with the small bed and one chair, quite filled the little chamber, so that there was scarcely room to move.

But the bed was neatly made—evidently it had not been slept in the preceding night; and sitting on the solitary chair at the window, in the gauzy-white dress of the preceding evening, her arms resting on the ledge, her head on them was Barbara, fast asleep.

The exclamation of Judith at the sight awoke her; and she lifted her face, and looked at them vaguely at first, as if wondering how she and they came to be where they were. It all came back to her in a moment, however; and she rose to her feet, gathering up the fallen braids of her hair, and looking at Mr. Sweet with a haughty eye.

"Well, sir," she demanded, angrily, "and what are you doing here?"

"It wasn't his fault," cut in Judith. "I rapped twice, and you never answered, and I thought something had happened, and I asked him to come in."

This last little fiction was invented to avert the storm of wrath that was kindling in Barbara's fiery eye.

"Well, sir," reiterated Miss Barbara, still transfixing her disconcerted suitor with her steady glance, "and being here, what do you want?"

This was certainly not very encouraging, and by no means smoothed the way for so ardent a lover to ask his lady-love to name the day. So Mr. Sweet began in a very humble and subdued tone indeed:

"I am very sorry, Miss Barbara, for this intrusion but, surely, you have not been sitting by that window, exposed to the draught all night!"

"Have you come all the way from Cliftonlea, and taken the trouble to wake me up to say that, Mr. Sweet?"

Mr. Sweet thought of the plastic Barbara he had had last night, and wondered where she had gone to. Mr. Sweet did not know, perhaps, that

"Colors seen by candle-light
Do not look the same by day,"

and that women, being like weathercocks or chameleons are liable to change sixty times an hour.

"Barbara," he cried, in desperation, "have you forgotten your promise of last night?"

"No."

"It is on that subject that I came to speak. Can I not see you for a moment alone?"

"There is not the slightest need, sir. If you have anything to say, out with it!"

For once in his life, the oily and debonair Mr. Sweet was totally disconcerted. "Not at home to suitors," was written in capital letters on Barbara's bent brow and eye; yet there was nothing for him to do but to go on.

"You said, last night, Barbara, that you would marry me whenever I liked. That would be within this hour, if I could; and, as perhaps you would not fancy so hasty a wedding, will you please to name some more definite date?"

He quailed inwardly as he spoke, lest she should retract the promise of last night altogether. He knew he held her only by a hair, and that it was liable to snap at any moment. Her face looked foreboding, sunless, smileless, and dark; and the eye, immovably fixed upon him, had little of yielding or tenderness in it.

"The time is so short, Barbara," he pleaded, with a sinking heart, "that it must be soon."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Within this present week, Barbara, or, if that is too soon, next Monday. That will give you time for your preparations."

"I have no preparations to make."

"For mine, then. Do you consent that it shall be next Monday?"

"Mr. Sweet, I said last night it should be whenever you pleased. I say the same thing to-day! There, you need not thank me—do me the favor to go away."

"Only one moment, Barbara. You must have dresses, you know. I shall give orders to that Frenchwoman up in Cliftonlea, and she will come down here to see you, and provide you with everything you want."

Barbara stood looking at him stonily, with the door in her hand. Old Judith was glancing from one to the other with her keen eyes.

"On Monday morning, at ten, you will be ready, and

I will drive down here and take you to the church ; and, another thing, you must have a bridemaids."

"I have one thing to say to you, sir," said Barbara, opening her compressed lips, "that if you torment me too much with these wretched details, there shall neither be bridemaids nor bride on that day. Whatever is to be done, you must do yourself ; I shall have neither act nor part in this business. Let me alone, and I will marry you on Monday, since you wish it. Begin to harass me with this stupid rubbish about dresses and bridemaids, and I will have nothing whatever to say to you."

With which harsh and decided valedictory, the impatient bride-elect closed the door in their faces, and turned the key inside, to the unspeakable discomposure of the lawyer, and the intense delight of the amiable old lady, who grinned maliciously, until a very yellow blush was visible in her sunken jaws.

"Oh, it is a charming courtship, a charming courtship !" she chuckled, rubbing her hands, and leering sideways at her visitor, "And she is a sweet bride she is ! I wish you joy of her, Mr. Sweet !"

"My good old soul," said that gentleman, bringing the yellow luster of his eyes and smile to bear on his friend, "don't be malicious—don't, or you and I will fall out ! Think what a pity that would be, after having been tried and trusty friends so long !"

Perhaps it was the bare idea of losing the friendship of so good a man, or perhaps it was some hidden menace in his tone and look, that made Judith cower and shrink away fearfully under his calm gaze.

"I expect you to do everything in your power for me," he went on, "in the present case. You see she is willful, and will do nothing herself. Her promise is as frail and brittle as glass ; if I leaned on it ever so lightly, it would shiver into atoms beneath me. Therefore I cannot venture to speak to her. You must act for her ; and, my dear old friend, if you don't act to the utmost of your power, you will find yourself within the stone walls of Cliftonlea jail before the wedding-day dawns."

"Oh, what can I do?" whispered old Judith, putting her dirty apron to her eyes. "I d'nt speak to her. I'm afraid of her. Her eyes are like coals of fire ! I am

sure I want her married as much as you do. I never have any peace with her at all."

"Very well: I think we shall not fall out. I am going now, and I will send my housekeeper down here for one of her gowns, and the Frenchwoman must make them by that, for Barbara won't be measured, it appears. Does my dear friend, Peter Black, know anything about this yet?"

"No, he doesn't."

"Then I shall take the earliest opportunity of letting him know. I would like to have my intended father-in-law's blessing, and all that sort of thing. Where is he?"

"Oh, where he always is—drinking gin and water at the Cliffe Arms."

"Dear, imprudent boy! I suppose he requires a gentle stimulant to keep up his spirits. Good-morning, Mistress Judith; and try if the future Mrs. Sweet will not partake of some breakfast!"

With this parting piece of advice, the pleasant lawyer walked away, drawing on his gloves, and humming gayly, "The Time I've lost in Wooing."

Judith did not take his advice, however, regarding the breakfast. She would almost as soon have put her head inside a lion's den as into the little room where her handsome granddaughter sat. It needed no second-sight to see that the old woman stood in the greatest awe of the grave, majestic girl, who looked at people so strangely and wild out of her dark, spectral eyes—an awe which, truth to tell, her sulky and savage son shared. The dogged and sulky ferocity of the man cowered under the fiercer and higher spirit of his daughter, and Miss Black, for the last two or three years, had pretty much reigned Lady Paramount in the cottage. The gray mare, in that stable, was by long odds the better horse.

So Judith lighted her pipe, and sat on her stool by the smouldering fire, and she and it puffed out little clouds of smoke together, and the big brass hands of the old Dutch clock went swinging round to twelve and nobody entered the cottage, and no sound came from the little chamber, and the future Mrs. Sweet got no breakfast, when, at last, a shadow darkened the sunny door-way, and a meek little woman presented herself and claimed the honor of being Mr. Sweet's housekeeper.

Luckily there was a dress of Barbara's hanging in the kitchen, or Judith would have been between the horns of a very sad dilemma, in fear of the lawyer on one hand, and the young lady on the other; and the meek little matron rolled it up, and hastened off to the French *modiste* up in the town.

That was Wednesday; and as there were only three working days between him and his bridal morning, Mr. Sweet seemed in a fair way to have his hands full. There was a long talk to be had, in the first place, with that dear boy, Peter Black, who swore a great many oaths under his unkempt beard, and couldn't be made to see reason until Mr. Sweet had smiled a great deal, and referred several times to Mr. Jack Wildman, and finally ordered another go of gin and water for his future parent-in-law, and clapped him on the back, and slipped two guineas into his horny palm. Then Mr. Black growled out his paternal assent, and scowled like a tipsy tiger on his new son, who only laughed good-naturedly, and patting him on the back again, walked away.

Then he had to visit Madame Modeste, the fashionable dressmaker, who came in smiling and dipping, with whom he held another consultation, and filled out a blank check, and obtained a promise that everything should be ready on Saturday night.

There were a thousand-and-one other little things to do, for getting married is a very fussy piece of business; but the Cliftonlea lawyer was equal to matrimony, or any other emergency, and everything bade fair to come off swimmingly.

Lady Agnes Shirley had to be informed the next day, for he wanted leave of absence for two or three days to make a short bridal tour to London and back; and Lady Agnes, with as much languid amaze as any lady in her position could be expected to get up, gave him *carte blanche* to stay a month, if he pleased.

Then there were the license and the ring to procure, and the wedding-breakfast to order, and some presents of jewelry to make to his bride, and new furniture so get for his house, and the short week went; and only that he was so impatient to make sure of his bride, Mr. Sweet could have wished every day forty-eight hours long, and

even then would have found them too short for all he had to do.

But if the bridegroom was busy from day-dawn to midnight, the bride made up for it by doing nothing whatever on the face of the earth, unless sitting listlessly by the window, with her hands folded, could be called doing something. All the restlessness, all the fire, all the energy of her nature seemed to have gone like a dream, and she sat all day long looking out, with dull, dread eyes, over the misty marshes and the ceaseless sea. She scarcely ate ; she scarcely slept at all ; she turned her listless eyes, without pleasure or interest, on the pretty dresses and jewels, the flowers and fruit, her friends daily brought, and then turned away again, as if they had merely struck on the nerve of vision without conveying the slightest idea to her mind. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday she passed in a dull dream—the lull that precedes the tempest. But when Sunday came, her bridal eve, she awoke from her lethargy at last.

Sunday had always been the pleasantest day in Barbara's week. She liked to hear the musical bells chiming over the sunny downs ; she liked to go up into the grand old cathedral, with its old-fashioned stained-glass windows and sleepy hollows of pews. She liked to wander through the quiet streets of the town, hushed in Sabbath stillness ; and in the purple sunset she liked to lie on the rocks, lazy as a sybarite, and listen drowsily to the murmuring trees and waves. But it was a dull Sunday, this—a dreary day, with the watery sky of lead—a dismal day, with a raw sea wind and fog—a miserable day, with the drizzling rain blotting out the marshes in a blank of wet and cold—a suicidal day, with a ceaseless drip, drip, drip.

And on this wretched day the bride-elect woke from her heavy trance, and became possessed of a walking demon. She wandered aimlessly in and out of her own room, down to the soaking and splashing shore, over the wet and shiny rocks, along the dark and dreary marshes, and back again into the house, with her clothes wet, and clinging around her, and still unable to sit down anywhere.

After the one-o'clock dinner she retreated again to her chamber, heedless of Judith's warnings to change her clothes, and did not make her appearance until the dark day was changed into a darker and dimmer evening.

The cottage kitchen looked, if possible, more cheerless and disordered than ever. The green wood on the hearth sputtered, and hissed, and puffed out vicious clouds of smoke; and Judith and her son were at the wooden table partaking of a repast of beef and brown bread when her door opened and Barbara came out shawled and bonneted for a walk.

She paused to give one look of unutterable disgust at the whole scene, and then, without heeding the words of either, walked out into the dismal evening. Little pools of water filled the road, and the chill wind blew the rain in her face; but, perfectly indifferent to all outward things, she went on, entered the park gate, and took her way through the avenues, under heavy and dripping trees, up to the old manor.

Night was falling when she reached it—a miserable night—enough to give any wayfarer the horrors; but long lines of light streamed from the rows of windows, and showed her the way to the side-door, where she stopped and rang the servants' bell.

A footman opened it, and a flood of light from the hall-lamp fell on the tall, wet figure standing pale in the doorway.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Black, is it?" said the man who knew Barbara very well. "Come in. Wet night—isn't it?"

"La! Barbara, my dear!" cried Mrs. Wilder, the housekeeper, who was passing through the hall with a trayful of bedroom candlesticks. "I haven't seen you for a month, I think. What in the world has brought you out such a nasty night?"

"I have come to see Colonel Shirley," said Barbara, entering. "Is he at home?"

She had scarcely spoken before that day, and her voice seemed strange and unnatural even to herself. Mrs. Wilder started as she heard it, and gave a little scream as she took another look at Barbara's face.

"What on hearth!" said Mrs. Wilder, who, when flustered, had a free-and-easy way of taking up and dropping her "h's" at pleasure. "What on hearth hails you, my dear? You look like a ghost—don't she, Johnson?"

"Uncommon like, I should say!" remarked Mr. Johnson. "Been sick, Miss Black?"

"No," said Barbara, impatiently. "I want to see Colonel Shirley. Will you have the goodness, Mrs. Wilder, to tell him Barbara Black is here, and wishes particularly to see him?"

"Oh, yes, I'll tell him! Come along upstairs, I was just going into the drawing-room with these candlesticks, anyway. 'Ere, just step in the dining-room, and I'll let him know."

Barbara stepped into the blaze of light filling the spacious dining-room from a huge chandelier, where gods and goddesses played hide and seek in a forest of frosted silver; where a long table flashed with cut-glass, and porcelain, and silver-plate, and bouquets of hot-house exotics, in splendid vases of purple spar and snowy alabaster; where a carved oaken sideboard was loaded with wine and dessert, and where the walls were brilliant with pictures of the chase and banqueting scenes. It was all so dazzling, that Barbara was half blinded for a moment; but she only looked quietly round, and thought of the smoky kitchen, and the bare deal table, with the brown bread and beef at home.

She could hear voices in the blue drawing-room (which was only separated from the one she was in by a curtained arch), and the echo of laughter, and then the curtain was lifted, and Colonel Shirley appeared, his whole face lighted with an eager smile of welcome, and both his friendly hands extended.

"My good little Barbara! my dear little Barbara! and you have come to see us at last!"

She let him take both her hands in his; but as he clasped them, the glad smile faded from his animated face, and gave place to one of astonishment and concern. For the beautiful face was so haggard and worn, so wasted and pale; the smooth white brow furrowed by such deep lines of suffering; the eyes so unnaturally, so feverishly bright; the hands so wan and icily cold, that he might well look in surprised consternation.

"My dear little Barbara!" he said in wonder and in sorrow; "what is the meaning of all this? Have you been ill?"

"No, sir."

"Your very voice is changed! Barbara, what is the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Something, I think. Sit down here and tell me what it is."

He drew up an easy-chair and placed her in it, taking one opposite, and looking anxiously into the wasted and worn face.

"Barbara! Barbara! something is wrong—very much is wrong! Will you not tell an old friend what has changed you like this?"

"No," she said, looking with her lustrous eyes straight into his.

He sat silent, watching her with grave, pitying tenderness, then :

"Why have you not been to see us before, Barbara?"

"I did not wish to," said Barbara, whose innate uprightness and indomitable pride made her always speak the straightforward truth.

"Do you know that Vivia sent for you almost every day?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not come?"

"I did not wish to."

"Do you know that my daughter and I went to your cottage the day after our return, to see you?"

"Yes."

"We did not see you; your grandmother said you were ill. What was the matter?"

"I was not ill, but I could not see you."

More perplexed than ever, the colonel looked at her, wondering what mystery was behind all this to have changed her so.

"I have heard, Barbara," he said, after a pause, "that you are going to be married. Is it true?"

"It is."

"And to Mr. Sweet?"

"To Mr. Sweet," she said, calmly; but with a feverish fire still streaming from her eyes.

His only answer was to take her hands again in both his own, and look at her in a way he sometimes looked at his own daughter of late—half sadly, half gayly, half tenderly. Barbara was looking at him, too. There was something so grand in the man's face, something so noble in his broad, serene brow; something so genial in his

blue eyes, shining with the blended fire of man and tenderness of woman ; something so sweet and strong in the handsome smiling mouth ; something so protecting in the clasp of the firm hand ; something infinitely good and great in the upright bearing of figure, and kind voice—that Barbara's heart broke out into a great cry, and clinging to the strong arm as if it were her last hope, she dropped down on her knees at his feet, and covered his hand with passionate kisses.

“Oh, my friend ! my friend !” she cried ; “you who are so noble, and so good, who have been kind and tender to me always, and whom I love and revere more than all the world besides, I could not do it until I heard you say one kind word to me again. I could not sell my soul to perdition, until I had knelt at your feet, and told you how much I thank you, how much I love you, and how if I dared, I would pray for you all the rest of my life. Oh, I am the wickedest and basest wretch on God's earth ; but if there is anything in this world that could have redeemed me, and made me what I once was, what I never will be again, it is the memory of you and your goodness—you, for whose sake I could die.”

She sank lower down, her face and his hands all blotted with the rain of tears ; and quite beside himself with consternation, the Indian officer strove to raise her up.

“Barbara, my dear child, for heaven's sake, rise ! Tell me, I beg of you, what you mean !”

“No, no, I cannot ! I dare not ! but if in time to come, the miserable time to come, you hear me spoken of as something not fit to name, you will think there is one spot in my wretched heart free from guilt, where your memory will be ever cherished. Try and think of me at my best, no matter what people may say.”

Before he could speak, the door opened, and Barbara leaped to her feet with a rebound. A fairy figure, in a splendid dinner toilet, with jewels flashing on the neck and arms, and a circlet of gems clasping back the flowing curls, came in with a delighted cry of girlish delight.

“Oh, Barbara ! Barbara ! how glad I am to see you !”

But Barbara recoiled, and held out both arms with a gesture of such unnatural terror and repulsion, that the shining figure stopped and looked at her in speechless amaze ; and then before either she or her father could

speak, or intercept her, Barbara was across the room, out of the door, through the hall, down the stairs, and out into the wet black night again.

Mr. Peter Black had long retired to his bed before his daughter came home ; Judith was sitting up for her, very cross and sleepy in her corner ; and Mr. Sweet was there, too, walking up and down the room, feverishly impatient and anxious. Barbara came in soaking wet, and without looking or speaking to either of them, walked straight to her room.

The bridegroom sought his own home, with an anxious heart ; and the happy bride sat by her window the whole livelong night.

CHAPTER XXII.

ASKING FOR BREAD AND RECEIVING A STONE.

It is not a very pleasant notion for any lady or gentleman to take it into their heads that they have made fools of themselves, yet Mr. Leicester Cliffe, albeit not given to hold too humble an opinion of himself, had just arrived at that comfortable conclusion, as the cars whirled him back from London to Sussex. Absence, like death, shows persons and things in their proper light, and strips the gilding from granite, and as distance removed the glamour from his eyes, the heir of Ciffewood had taken to serious reflection and come to a few very correct decisions. *Imprimis*, that he had fallen in love with Barbara the first time that he had ever seen her ; that he had loved her ever since ; that he loved her now, and that he was likely to keep on doing so as long as it was in him to love anybody. Second, that he admired and respected his pretty cousin excessively ; that he knew she was a thousand times too pure for such a sinner as he, and that he had never for one instant felt a stronger sentiment for her than admiration. Third, he was neither more nor less than an unmitigated coward and villain, for whom hanging would be too good.

But just as he arrived at this consoling conclusion, he

suddenly bethought himself of the wise old saw. "It is never too late to mend," and Hope once more planted her shining foot on the threshold of his heart. What if, now that his eyes were opened—even now, at the eleventh hour—he were to draw back, kneel before the lady of his love, and be forgiven! He knew she would forgive him; she loved him, and women are so much like spaniels by nature, that the worse they are used the more they will fawn on the abuser. Perhaps she even had not heard it yet, and he could easily find excuses that would satisfy her for his absence and silence. It was true that would leave him in a nice predicament with Miss Shirley—so nice a one that it was like jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire; but then Miss Shirley did not care a straw about him one way or the other; she married him as a matter of obedience, just as she would have married Mr. Sweet, the lawyer, if papa and grand-mamma had insisted upon it. She would not suffer by his leaving her; there were scores of better men ready and willing to take his place, and her name would not be injured by it, for no one knew of their engagement.

Not that Mr. Leicester dreamed for one instant of being quixotic enough to avow his sentimental intention. He shrank in horror at the bare idea of the unheard-of scene that would ensue, and which would probably end by his being shot like a dog by that fire-eating Colonel Cliffe; but he would induce Barbara to elope with him; he would marry her probably in London and then with his bride would set sail for America, or Australia, or some other howling wilderness, and live happy forever after. And having settled the whole matter to his infinite satisfaction, he leaned back in his seat, opened the *Times*, and was borne swiftly on, not to Victoria's but to Barbara's feet.

And while the grimy engine was tearing over the level track, vomiting clouds of black smoke, and groaning with the commotion in its interior, the said Barbara, all unconscious of her good fortune, was very differently employed—in nothing less than in dressing for her bridal!

A splendid morning of sunshine and summer breezes had followed the gloomy night, and Mr. Sweet had risen with the lark—nay, fully two hours before that early

bird had awakened from his morning nap, and had busily proceeded to make all the final arrangements for his marriage. Before sitting down to his eight-o'clock breakfast, of which he found he could not swallow a morsel, for matrimony takes away the appetite as effectually as sea-sickness, he had dispatched the meek little house-keeper down to Tower Cliffe with sundry bundles and band-boxes, wherein the bride was to be arrayed, and it was with a troubled spirit Mr. Sweet had seen her depart.

For half an hour he paced up and down in a perfect agony of feverish impatience, and still the burden of his thoughts was—what if, after all, at the last moment, the willful, wayward Barbara should draw back? No one could ever count on that impulsive and headstrong young lady more than two minutes at a time, and just as likely as not, when he arrived at the cottage, he would find her locked in her room and refusing all entreaties to come out; or she might come out with a vengeance, and with two or three sharp sentences knock all his beautiful plans remorselessly on the head. So the lawyer paced up and down with a more anxious heart than any other happy bridegroom ever had on his bridal morning; and certainly none ever had a more exasperating bride. And in the middle of a dismal train of reflections about finding himself dished, the clock struck nine, a cab drove up to the door, and he jumped in and was driven through the town and down to Tower Cliffe.

Radiant as Mr. Sweet always was, he had never been seen so intensely radiant as on this particular morning, in a brand-new suit of lawyer-like black, a brilliant canary-colored waistcoat, ditto stock, and ditto gloves, and in his button hole appeared a bouquet of the yellowest possible primroses. But his sallow face was pale with excitement, and his eyes gleamed with feverish eagerness as he entered the cottage, from which he could not tell whether or not he was to bear away a bride.

But he might have spared his fears, for it was all right. The cottage looked neat for once, for the little house-keeper had put it to rights; and Mr. Black and Judith were arrayed in their best, and neither was smoking; and in the middle of the floor was Barbara—the bride. Barbara was not looking her best, as brides should always make it a point of conscience to do; for her face and lips

were a great deal too colorless, her eyes, surrounded by dark circles, telling of sleepless nights and woeful days, looked too large, and hollow, and solemn; but stately and majestic she must always look, and she looked it now—looked as a dethroned and imprisoned queen might do at her jailers.

She was to be married in her traveling-dress, as they were to start immediately after the ceremony for London; and Mr. Sweet countermanded the order for the wedding-breakfast, on finding there would be nobody but himself to eat it. The dress was of silver-gray *barège*, relieved with knots and bows of mauve ribbon, a pretty mantle of silk and lace, and a straw bonnet, trimmed also with mauve and silver-gray. The toilet was simple, but elegant; and if Barbara did not look one-half so brilliant and beautiful in it as she had done a fortnight before in her plain crimson merino, it was her fault, and not Madame Modiste's.

The housekeeper was just fastening the little kid glove, and Barbara lifted her eyes from the floor, on which they had been bent, and looked at Mr. Sweet out of their solemn, dark depths as he entered.

"Are you quite ready?" he nervously asked.

"Quiet ready, sir," answered the housekeeper, who was to accompany them to church.

"The carriage is at the door. Come, Barbara."

She would not see his proffered arm, yet she followed him quietly and without a word, and let him hand her into the carriage. The little housekeeper came next, and then Mr. Black, who had enjoyed the unusual blessings of shaving and hair-cutting, stumbled up the steps, looking particularly sulky and uncomfortable in his new clothes; and then Mr. Sweet jumped in, too, and gave the order to drive to the cathedral.

It was a weird wedding party, without bridemaids or blessings, or flowers or frippery; and on the way not one word was spoken by any of the party. Barbara sat like a cold, white statue, her hands lying listlessly in her lap, her eyes fixed on the floor, her thoughts—where? Mr. Sweet's heart was beating in feverish and impatient throbs, and his breath came quick, and on his sallow cheeks were two burning spots; in his serene eyes shone a strange fire, and his yellow-gloved hands trembled so

that he had to grasp the window to keep them from seeing it. The little housekeeper looked frightened and awe-struck; and Mr. Black, with his hands stuck very deep in his coat-pockets, was scowling desperately on them all by turns.

Fifteen minutes' fast driving brought the grim bridal party to the cathedral, where a curious crowd was collected; some came to attend morning service, which was then going on, and others were attracted there by the rumors of the marriage.

The lawyer drew his bride's arm firmly within his own, and led her in, while the two others followed, while more than one audible comment on the strange looks of Barbara reached his ears as he passed.

The cathedral was half filled, and the organ poured forth grand swelling notes as they walked up the aisle. Behind the rails, in stole and surplice, and book in hand, stood one of the curates; bride and bridegroom placed themselves before him, and the bridegroom could hear nothing, not even the music, for the loud beating of his heart. All the spectators held their breath, and leaned forward to look.

"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" demanded the curate, looking curiously at the strange bride. And Mr. Black stepped forward and gave her.

"Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?" demanded the curate again.

Mr. Sweet said, "I wil," in a voice that was husky and shook; and the bride, in her turn, said, "I will," too, clearly, distinctly, unfalteringly. And then the ring was on her finger, and they joined hands, and the curate pronounced them man and wife.

The organ that had been silent for a moment, as if it, too, had stopped to listen, now broke out into an exultant strain, and the voices of the choristers made the domed roof ring. The names of the married pair were inserted in the register, and Mr. Sweet took his wife's arm—his wife's this time—to lead her down the aisle. The dark eyes were looking straight before her, with a fixed, fierce, yet calm intensity, and as they neared the door the bride's gaze fell on something she had hardly bargained for.

Leaning against a pillar, pale and haughty, stood Leicester Cliffe, who had arrived just in time to witness

the charming sight, and whose blue eyes met those of the bride with a powerful look.

The happy bridegroom saw him at the same instant, and the two burning spots deepened on his cheek bones, and the fire in his eyes took a defiant and triumphant sparkle. There had been a galvanic start on the part of the bride ; but he held her arm tightly, and Mr. Sweet, with a smile on his lip, bowed low to him as he passed, and Barbara's sweeping skirts brushed him, and then they were gone, shut up in the carriage, and driving away rapidly to catch the next London train, the bridegroom happy in the possession of the bride who had WEDDED FOR PIQUE.

* * * * *

Leicester Cliffe turned slowly from the cathedral, mounted his horse, and rode to Cliffewood. There he had his dusty traveling-dress to change, his breakfast to take, and a great deal to hear from Sir Roland, who was full of news, and whose first question was, if he knew that his old flame, pretty little Barbara, had married that oily fellow, Sweet. Then, as in duty bound, he had to ride to his lady-love, and report the successful accomplishment of all his trusts and charges, and spend with a gay party there the remainder of the day.

It was on that eventful day the engagement was publicly and formally announced, and all the kissing and congratulating Vivia had dreaded so much was gone through with, to her great discomposure ; and she was glad when evening came, to leave the talking crowd, and wander under the trees alone with her thoughts. It was a lovely night, moonlit and starlit, and she was leaning against a tree, looking wistfully up at the far-off sky, thinking of the wedding that had taken place that day, and the other so soon to follow, when the sound of a horse galloping furiously up the avenue made her look around and behold Tom Shirley dashing along like a madman. He had been spending the day at Lisleham with Lord Henry ; and Vivia, as she watched him flying along so fiercely, began to think the wine at dinner had been a little too strong.

"Why, Tom !" was her cry ; "have you gone crazy ?"
Tom had not seen her, but at the sound of her voice he

checked his horse so sharply and suddenly, that the steed reared, and pawed the air animatedly with his two fore-legs.

The next moment his rider had jumped recklessly to the ground, leaving him to find his way to the stables himself, and was standing beside Vivia, very red in the face, and very excited in the eyes, holding both her hands in a fierce clasp.

"Vic! Vic! it's not true!—it can't be true! I don't believe a word of it!" began the young man, with the utmost incoherence. "Tell me, for Heaven's sake, that it's all a lie."

"The wine was certainly dreadfully strong," thought Vic, looking at him in terror, and trying to free her hands. But Tom only held them the tighter, and broke out again, more hotly, and wildly, and vehemently than before:

"You shall not go, Vic! you shall not leave me again until you have heard all. Tell me, I say, that it is not true."

"What is not true? Oh, I don't know what you're talking about, Cousin Tom," said Vivia, looking round her in distress.

In spite of his momentary craziness, Tom saw her pale face and terrified eyes, and became aware that he was crushing the little hands as if they were in thumb-screws, and relaxed his bear-like grip contritely.

"I am a brute," said Tom, in a burst of penitence hardly less vehement than his former tone. "Poor little hands. I didn't mean to hurt them; but you know, Vic, what a fellow I am, and that infernal story they told me has nearly driven me crazy. I am a savage, I know, and what must you think of me, Vic?"

Vic laughed, but yet with a rather pale cheek.

"I think that Lord Lisle's port is rather strong, and you have been imbibing more than is good for you, Cousin Tom."

"Oh, she thinks I am drunk!" said Tom, with another burst, this time of indignation; "but allow me to tell you, Miss Shirley, I haven't dined at all. Port indeed! Faith, it is more than wine that has got into my head to-night."

There was a cadence so bitter in his tone that Vic

opened her pretty blue eyes very wide, and looked at him in astonishment. Cousin Vic was very fond of Cousin Tom, and she never felt inclined to run away from him, as she invariably did from Cousin Leicester.

"Something has gone wrong, Cousin Tom, and you are excited. Come, sit down here, and tell me what it is."

There was a rustic bench under the waving chestnuts. Vic sat down, spread out her ample skirts, and made room for him beside her; but Tom would not be tempted to sit down at any price, and burst out again:

"It is just this, Vic. They told me you were going to be married."

The bright eyes dropped, and the pale cheeks took the tint of the reddest rose ever seen.

"I know it is not true. It can't be true."

She did not answer.

"Speak!" exclaimed Tom, almost fiercely; "speak and tell me it is not true."

"I cannot!" very faintly.

"Heavens!" he said, "you can never mean to say it is true!"

She arose suddenly, and looked at him, a cold terror chilling her heart.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Vic, is it true?"

"It is."

"You are going to be married to Leicester Cliffe?"

"I am!"

The rosy light had left her cheeks, for there was something in his face that no one had ever seen in Tom Shirley's face before.

"Do you love him?"

"Tom, what are you thinking of, to ask such a question?"

"Answer it," he said, savagely.

"I will love him!" said Vivia, firmly.

And Tom broke out into a bitter, jeering laugh.

"Which means that you will marry him now because he is an excellent *parti*, and papa, and grandmamma, and Uncle Roland wish it, and trust to the love to come afterward. Vic Shirley, you are a miserable, heartless coquette, and I despise you."

She was leaning against a tree, clinging to it for support her whole face perfectly colorless, but the blue eyes quailed not beneath his own.

"You!" he went on, in passionate scorn, and with flaming eyes, "you, the spotless, immaculate Victoria Shirley! You who set up for an angel, and made common mortals feel unworthy to touch the hem of your garment. You the angel on earth! a wretched, cold-blooded, perjured girl! Oh, Lucifer! star of the morning, how thou art fallen!"

"Tom, what have I ever done to you to make you talk like this?"

"Oh, nothing! only sold yourself, body and soul! A mere trifle, not worth speaking of."

She gave him a look full of sorrow and reproach, and turned with quiet dignity to go away.

"Stay!" he half shouted, "and tell me for what end you have been fooling me all these months."

"I do not understand."

"Poor child! Its little head never was made to untangle such knotted problems. Will you understand if I ask you why you have led me on, like a blind fool, to love you?"

"Tom!"

"You never thought of it before, of course; but you have done it, and I love you. And now, before you stir a step, you shall tell me whether or not it is returned."

"I do love you, Tom—I always have—as dearly as if you were my brother."

"I'm exceedingly obliged to you; but, as it happens, I don't want your sisterly love, and I shall take the first opportunity of sending a bullet through Mr. Leicester Cliffe's head. I have the honor, Miss Shirley, to bid you good-night."

"Tom, stay! Tom, for Heaven's sake——"

And here the voice broke down; and covering her face with both hands, she burst into a hysterical passion of weeping.

Tom turned, and the great, grieved giant heart, so fiery in its wrath, melted like a boy's at sight of her tears. He could have cried himself, but for shame, as he flung himself down on the bench with a sobbing groan.

"Oh, Vic! how could you do it! How could you treat me so?"

She came over, and kneeling beside him, put one arm round his neck, as if, indeed, he had been the dear brother she thought him.

"Oh, Tom, I never meant it—I never meant it!"

"And you will marry Leicester?"

"You know I must, Tom; but you will be my dear brother always."

He turned away and dropped his head on his arm.

"You know it is my duty, Tom. And, oh, you must not think such dreadful things of me any more. If you do, I shall die."

"Go!" he said, lifting his head a moment, and then dropping it again. Go and leave me. I know, Vic, you are an angel, and I—I am nothing but a miserable fool."

And with these words the boy's heart went out from Tom Shirley, and never came back any more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VICTORIA'S BRIDAL EVE.

In the bluest of summer skies, heralded by the rosiest banners of cloud, rose up the sun on Victoria Shirley's wedding-day.

The rose-gardens around Castle Cliffe were in full bloom, the bees and butterflies held grand carnivals there all the long sultry days, and the air was heavy with their burden of perfume. The chestnuts, the oaks, the poplars, the beeches, were out in their greenest garments; the swans floated about serenely in their lakes; the Swiss farm-house was radiant in the glory of new paint; and the Italian cottage was lost in a wilderness of scented creepers. The peacocks and gazelles, the deer and the dogs, had fine times in the June sunshine; and, over all, the banner floated out from the flag-tower, and everybody knew that it was the bridal-day of the heiress of Castle Cliffe.

And within the mansion wonderful were the preparations. At nine in the evening the ceremony was to take place, and Lady Agnes had resolved and announced that a grand ball should follow; and at twelve the next day they were to step into the cars and bid good-bye to Cliftonlea for two long years.

A whole regiment of Gunter's men had come down from London to attend to the supper, which was to be the greatest miracle of cookery of modern times; and another regiment of young persons in the dressmaking department filled the dressing-rooms upstairs. Invitations had been sent to half the county, besides to ever so many in London—so many, in fact, that the railway trains had their first-class coupés crowded all day, and their proprietors realized a small fortune. The grounds were all to be illuminated with colored lamps, hung in all sorts of fanciful devices. And there was to be such a feast there for the tenantry, with music and dancing afterward, and such a display of fireworks, and such a lot of bonfires, and such ringing of bells and beating of drums, and shouting and cheering, and general joy, as had never been seen or heard of before. Lady Agnes declared herself distracted and nearly at death's door, although Mr. Sweet, who had come back from his short wedding-tour, helped her as much as he could, and proved himself perfectly invaluable. And in the midst of it all, the bridegroom spent his time in riding over the sunny Sussex downs, lounging lazily through the rooms of Cliftonlea, and smoking unheard-of quantities of cigars. And the bride, shut up with Lady Agnes and the dressmakers, in the room of the former, was hardly ever seen by anybody—least of all by the intended husband.

The wedding-day came, and all the snowy gear in which she was to be tricked out lay on the bed in the Rose Room—gloves, and slippers, and veil, and wreath, and dress; and the inlaid tables were strewn with magnificent presents, every one of them a small fortune in itself, to be publicly displayed that evening. And Vivia, who had been shut up all day with the seamstresses, a good two hours before it was time to dress, had broken from her captors and turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going, child?" asked Lady Agnes.
"There is the dressing-bell ringing."

"I don't care for the dressing-bell. I'm not going down to dinner."

"Where are you going, then?"

"Through the house—the dear old house—to say good-bye to it before I go. There will be no time to-morrow, I suppose."

"I should think not, indeed, since we start at noon. I suppose you expect the house will say good-bye to you in return?"

"I shall think it does, at all events. I wish we were not going away at all."

"Of course you do. I never knew you wishing for anything but what was absurd! You must have dinner in your own room and remember you are not to be too late to dress for your wedding. It would be just like you to keep the bridal party waiting!"

Lady Agnes sailed past majestically to make her own toilet, and Vivia, with a fluttering little heart, yet happy while she trembled, went from room to room to take a last look. She had nearly finished the circuit, even to the dreadful Queen's Room, and was standing in the picture-gallery, looking wistfully at the haunted faces of all her dead ancestors, when some one came wearily up the stairs, and turning, she saw Margaret Shirley.

If others had been changing within the last few weeks, so had Margaret; always pale and thin, she moved about like a colorless ghost now; her black eyes the only beauty she had ever possessed, sunken and hollow; and the deep lines about the mouth and forehead told their own story of silent suffering. She shunned everybody, and most of all, her bright and beautiful Cousin Victoria, and, seeing her now, standing radiant in the amber haze of the sunset, she stopped, and made a motion as if to retreat. But the clear, sweet voice called her back:

"Don't go, Margaret; I want you. Come here."

Margaret came to the head of the stairs and there stopped.

"I have been wanting to see you all the week, but I could not get near you. Why do you keep away from me?"

"I do not keep away."

"You know you do! Why are you not cordial as you used to be?"

"I am cordial!" still hovering aloof.

"Come nearer, then."

Again Margaret moved a step or two, and again stopped.

"We ought to be friends, Margaret, since we are cousins! But we have not been friends this long time."

No answer. Margaret's eyes were on the floor, and her face looked petrified.

"You are to be one of my bridesmaids, and my traveling companion for the next two years; and all that proves that we ought to be friends."

"You mistake, Cousin Victoria; I am not going to be your traveling companion."

"No? Grandmamma said so."

"Probably she thinks so."

"You are jesting, Margaret?"

"No."

"Where are you going? What do you intend to do?"

"Excuse me; you will learn that at the proper time."

Vivia looked at her earnestly. An intelligent light was in her eye, and a scarlet effusion rose hot to her face, and rapidly faded.

"You are unhappy?"

"Am I?"

"Yes; and I know the reason."

The black eyes were raised from the floor and fixed quietly on her face.

"Shall I tell you what it is?"

"As you like."

Vivia leaned forward, and would have laid her hand on the other's shoulder, but Margaret recoiled, with a look on her face that reminded her cousin of Barbara. She drew back proudly and a little coldly.

"You have no right to be angry with me, Cousin Margaret! Whatever I have done has been in obedience to grandmamma's commands. If by it you are unhappy, it is no fault of mine!"

The black eyes were still looking at her quietly, and over the dark, grave face there dawned a smile sad and scornful, that said as plainly as words, "She talks, and knows not what she is talking about!" but before she could speak, Mademoiselle Jeannette came tripping up stairs.

“Mademoiselle Genevieve. I have been searching for you all over. My lady says you are to go directly and take your dinner.”

Margaret had vanished like a spirit at the appearance of the maid ; so Mademoiselle Genevieve, with a little sigh, followed her cousin to her boudoir, where the slender meal was placed. There was a little Sèvres cup of coffee ; a petite glass of sparkling champagne, *palé à la crème*, and an omelette ; and Vivia ate the paté, and tasted the omelette, and drank the coffee and wine with a very good appetite ; and had only just finished when lady Agnes came in and announced that it was time to dress. After her, came half a dozen bride maids, Cousin Margaret among the rest, and they were all marshaled into Lady Agnes' dressing-room and handed over to a certain French artist, who had come all the way from London to dress their hair.

Vivia's beautiful tresses required least time of all, for they were to be simply worn in flowing curls, according to her jaunty custom ; but most of the other damsels had to be braided, and banded, and scented, and “done up” in the latest style. This important piece of business took a long time, and when it was over, monsieur withdrew. The *femmes de chambre* flocked in ; and Vivia, under the hands of Jeannette and Hortense, went to her own room to be dressed. Lady Agnes followed, looking as if she had something on her mind.

“There is no time to lose !” she said to the maids. “You will have to make your young lady's toilet as fast as you can ; and Victoria, child, don't look so pale. A little paleness is eminently proper in a bride ; but I want you to look ever so pretty to-night !”

“I shall try to, grandmamma ! What are all the people about downstairs ?”

“They are all dressing, of course ! and it is time I was following their example,” glancing at her watch.

“Grandmamma,” said Vivia, struck with a little cloud on that lady's serene brow, “you have been annoyed. What is it !”

“It is nothing—that is nothing but a trifle ; and all about that absurd boy, Tom.”

Vivia started suddenly, and caught her breath. Since the night under the chestnuts she had not seen Tom—no

one had; and it was a daily subject of wonder and inquiry.

"Grandmamma, has anything happened to him?"

"Nothing that I am aware of—certainly nothing to make you wear such a frightened face. But what will you think when I tell you he is in Cliftonlea, and never comes here? It is the most annoying and absurd thing I ever heard of, and everybody talks about it."

"How do you know he is in Cliftonlea?"

"Your papa saw him last night. He, and Captain Douglas, and some more of the gentlemen had been out at the meet of the Duke of Bedford's hounds; and riding home about dark, they saw him down there near the beach woods. They called to him, but he disappeared among the trees, and the people here have done nothing but talk of it all day long. Rogers, the gamekeeper, says he has seen him haunting the place in the strangest manner for the last few days, as if he was afraid to be seen."

Her paleness deepened as Vivia listened, and her heart seemed to stand still.

"It is the most unaccountable thing I ever heard of; and I never saw your papa so vexed about a trifle as he is about this. I cannot understand it at all."

But her granddaughter could; and she averted her face, that grandmamma's sharp eyes might not read the tale it told. The eagle eyes saw, however, and her arm was suddenly grasped.

"Victoria, you can read the riddle. I see it in your eyes. When did you meet Tom last?"

No answer.

"Speak!" said the lady, low, but imperiously.

"When was it?"

"Last Monday night."

"Where?"

"Out under the chestnuts."

"What did he say to you?"

"Grandmamma, don't ask me!"

And the pale cheek turned scarlet.

Lady Agnes looked at her a moment with her cold and

piercing eyes, and then dropped her arm.

"I see it all," she said, a haughty flush dyeing her own delicate cheek. "He has been making a fool of himself, and has got what he deserved. He is wise to stay away;

if he comes within reach of me, he will probably hear something more to the point than he heard under the chestnuts. When I am dressed, I will come back."

The thin lips were compressed. The proud eyes flashing blue flame as Lady Agnes swept out of the Rose Room. If looks were lightning, and Tom Shirley near enough, he would certainly never make love to any one else on earth.

But Vivia's face had changed sadly, and she stood under the hands of the two maids all unconscious of their doings and their presence, and thinking only of him. She thought of a thousand other things, too—things almost forgotten. Her whole life seemed to pass like a panorama before her. She thought dimly as we think of a confused dream, of a poor home, and a little playmate that had been hers long, long ago; then of the quiet content in her dear France, where year after year passed so serenely; of the pleasant château, where her holidays were spent; of Claude who had been almost as dear to her as Tom, and whose life she had embittered like his; of her first visit to England and to this beloved home, where she had met this stately grandmamma and idolized father; and then, more vividly than all the rest, came back the first meeting with Barbara Black. Again she was kneeling in the Demon's Tower, with Margaret couching in a corner, her black eyes shining like stars in its gloom—Tom at her feet, bleeding and helpless; the raging sea upon them in its might; the black night sky; the wailing wind and lashing rain, and a little figure in a frail skiff flying over the billows to save them.

They had been so good to her, and had loved her so well—Barbara and Margaret; but, somehow, she had alienated them all, and they loved her no longer. What was it that was wanting in her? what was this string out of tune that had made the discord? Was she only a sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, and was the real germ of good wanting in her after all? Vivia's blue eyes were full of tears, but she could not find the jarring chords; and now all that was past, and a new day was dawning for her. Her whole life was changed; but the dark veil of Futurity was down, and it was well for her she could not see what was beyond it.

And while Vivia sighed and mused, the handmaidens

were going on with their work, and the moments were flying fast. The wreath and veil were on; the diamond necklace and bracelets clasped; the last ribbon and fold of lace arranged, and the door was opened, and Lady Agnes, in velvet and jewels, looking still youthful and unmistakably fair, re-appeared. At her coming, Vivia awoke from her dream. She had something to do besides dream, now.

"Ah! you have finished!" was my lady's cry. "Turn round, Victoria, and let me see you."

Victoria, who had not once seen herself, turned round with a bright face.

"Will I do, grandmamma?"

"You look charming, superb, lovely!" said Lady Agnes, in a sort of rapture. "My child, you never looked so beautiful before in your life."

Hearing this, Vivia turned to look for herself, and a radiant glow came to her face at the sight. Lovely she must have looked in anything. Dazzling she appeared in her bridal dress. The dress itself was superb. It had been imported from Paris, and had cost a fortune. It was of rich white velvet, the heavy skirts looped with clusters of creamy white roses, the corsage and sleeves embroidered with seed-pearls, and a bouquet of jessamine flowers on the breast. The arching throat, the large and exquisitely molded arms were clasped with diamonds that streamed like rivers of light; the sunny curls showered to the small waist crowned with a wreath of jeweled orange-blossoms sparkling with diamond dew-drops; and over all, and sweeping the carpet, a bridal veil, encircling the shining figure like a cloud of mist. But the lovely head, the perfect face drooping in its exquisite modesty, and blushing and smiling at its own beauty, neither lace, nor velvets, nor jewels were aught compared to that.

"My darling!" cried Lady Agnes, in an ecstasy very, very uncommon with her, "you look like an angel to-night!"

"Dear, dear grandmamma, I care for nothing if I only please you. Are the rest all ready?"

"I have not been to see, but I am going. Do you know," lowering her voice, "a most singular thing has occurred."

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"It is only half an hour to the time appointed for the ceremony, the drawing-room is filled, everybody is there but the one that should be there most of all."

"Who's that?"

"There's a question! Leicester Cliffe, of course."

"Has he not come, then?"

"No, indeed; and when he does come, he shall be taken most severely to task for this delay. The man who would keep such a bride waiting, deserves, deserves—the bastinado! No, that would be too good for him; deserves to lose her."

Vivia laughed.

"Oh, grandmamma, that would be too bad. Has Uncle Roland come?"

"Uncle Roland has been here fully an hour, and knows nothing about the matter. It appears the young gentleman has been out riding all day, and never made his appearance until dinner, when he drank more wine than is usual or prudent with bridegrooms, and behaved himself in a manner that was very strange altogether."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, I don't know; he was queer and excited, Sir Roland says; but he thought little of that, considering the circumstances. He has seen nothing of him since, and came here in the full expectation of seeing him here before him."

"Well, grandmamma, he will be here before the end of the half-hour, I suppose, and that will do, won't it?"

"It will do for the wedding, but it won't save him from a severe lecture from me—a sort of foretaste of what he may expect of you in the future. Everything seems to be going wrong, and I feel as if it would be the greatest relief to box somebody's ears."

Lady Agnes looked it, and Vivia laughed again.

"You might box mine, grandmamma, and relieve your feelings, only it would spoil my vail, and Jeannette would never forgive you for that."

But Lady Agnes was knitting her brows, and not paying the least attention to her.

"To think he should be late on such an occasion! it is unheard of—it is outrageous!"

"Oh, grandmamma, don't worry. I am sure he cannot help it; perhaps he is come now."

"Here come your bridesmaids, at all events," said Lady Agnes, as the communicating door opened, and the bevy of gay girls floated in, robed in white, and crowned with flowers, and gathered round the bride like butterflies round a rose, and—

"Oh, how charming! Oh, how lovely! Oh, how beautiful!" was the universal cry. "You are looking your very best to-night, Victoria."

"So she ought, and so will you all, young ladies, on your wedding-night," said Lady Agnes.

"Is it time to go down? Has everybody come?" inquired one.

"It is certainly time to go down, but I do not know whether everybody has come. Hark! is not that your papa's voice in the hall, Victoria?"

"Yes. Do let him come in, grandmamma. I know he would like to see me before going downstairs."

Lady Agnes opened the door, and saw her son coming rapidly through the hall, looking very pale and stern.

"Has Leicester come yet?"

"No."

"Good heavens! And it is nine o'clock!"

"Exactly. And all those people below are gathered in groups, and whispering mysteriously. By heavens! I feel tempted to kick him when he does come."

"Oh, Cliffe, something has happened!"

"Perhaps. Is the bride ready?"

"Yes; come in; she wishes to see you—the bride is ready; but where is the bridegroom?"

"Where, indeed? But don't alarm yourself yet; he may come after all."

He followed his mother into the bride's maiden bower, and that dazzling young lady came forward with a radiant face.

"Papa, how do I look?"

"Don't ask me; look in the glass. You are all angels, every one of you."

He touched his lips to the pretty brow, and tried to laugh, but it was a failure; and then, nervous as a girl, for the first time in his life, with anxiety, he hurried out and downstairs, to see if the truant had come.

No, he had not come. The bonfires were blazing, the joy-bells were ringing, the park was one blaze of

rainbow light, all the clocks in the town were striking nine, and Leicester Cliffe had not come.

Sir Roland, nearly beside himself with mortification and rage, was striding up and down the hall.

"Is she ready?" he asked.

"Yes," said the colonel, using the words of his mother, "the bride is ready and waiting, but where is the bridegroom?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHERE THE BRIDEGROOM WAS.

THE waning sunlight of Vivia's bridal-day, streaming through the rather dirty windows of Peter Black's cottage, fell on Mr. Sylvester Sweet, sitting beside the hearth, and talking very earnestly indeed. His only listener was old Judith, who had covered her face with her hands, and was moaning and crying, and rocking to and fro.

"My dear Judith—my good Judith!" he was soothingly saying, "don't distress yourself; there is no occasion—not the least in the world!"

But his good Judith was not to be comforted; she only lifted up her voice and wept the louder.

"You knew all along it must come to this; or if you didn't, you ought to have known it. Such guilty secrets cannot be kept forever!"

"And they will put me in prison—they will transport me; maybe they will hang me! Oh, I wish I was dead!—I wish I was dead!" wailed the old woman, rocking to that extent that there seemed some danger of her rocking off her stool.

"Nonsense. They will neither put you in prison, transport, nor hang you. Though," added Mr. Sweet, politely, "you know you deserve it all."

"And then there's Barbara!" cried old Judith, paying no attention whatever to him, and breaking out into a fresh burst of wailing. "She'll kill me. I know she will. She always was fierce and savage, and when she

hears this— Oh, dear me! I wish I was dead!—I do!”

“Yes; but, my dear soul, we can't spare you yet a while. Now, dry up your tears and be reasonable; now do. Remember, if all doesn't go well, I'll hang your son!”

“Oh, I don't expect anything but that we'll all hang together. Oh, I wish I was dead!” reiterated Judith, determined to stick to that to the last.

“I'll soon gratify that wish, you old Jezebel!” said Mr. Sweet, setting his teeth. “if you don't stop your whimpering. What did you do it for, if you are such a coward about it now?”

“I didn't expect it would ever be found out. Oh, I wish——”

Exasperated beyond endurance, her companion seized the tongs; and old Judith, with a shrill shriek, cowered back and held out her arms in terror.

“Be still, then, or by ——” (Mr. Sweet swore a frightful oath, that would have done honor to Mr. Black himself) “I'll smash your head for you! Stop your whining and listen to reason. Are you prepared to take your oath, concerning the story I have to tell?”

Again Judith took to rocking and wringing her hands.

“I must—I must—I must! and I will be killed for it, I know.”

“You won't, I tell you. Neither you nor your son will come to harm. I'll see to that. But, mind, if you don't swear to everything, straight and true, I'll have both of you hanging by the end of the month, as high as Haman!”

Judith set up such a howl of despair at this pleasant intimation, that the lawyer had to grasp the tongs again, and brandish them within an inch of her nose, before she would consent to subside.

“My worthy old lady, I'll knock your brains out if you try that again; and so I give you notice. You have only to swear to the facts before Colonel Shirley, or any other person or persons concerned, and you will be all right. Stick to the truth through thick and thin; there's nothing like it, and I'll protect you through it all.”

Judith's only answer was to rock and whine, and whimper dismally.

"You know," said Mr. Sweet, looking at her steadily, "you had no advisers, no accomplices. You plotted the whole thing, and carried it out alone. Didn't you?"

"Yes; I did—I did!"

"You had the very natural desire to benefit your own flesh and blood, and you thought it would never be found out. Your daughter-in-law went crazy, was sent to a lunatic asylum, and you told your son, on his return from—no matter where—that she was dead. Didn't you?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, dear me, yes!"

"Some things that you dropped made me suspect. I accused you, and in your guilt you confessed all. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I s'pose I did. I don't know. Oh, I wish I was——"

For the third time her companion grabbed the tongs, and the old woman subsided again into pitiful whimpering.

"Now you know, Judith Wildman, if you aggravate me too much, what will be the consequence. I am going up to the Castle to tell this story to-night—a shameful story, that you should have told long ago—and you must hold yourself prepared to swear to it, when called upon to do so. Your son knew nothing of it—he knows nothing of it yet; so no blame attaches to him, and all will end right."

That might be; but Judith couldn't see it, and her misery was a piteous sight to behold. For that matter, Mr. Sweet himself did not look too much at his ease, nothing near so much as was his suave wont, and the paleness that lay on his face, and the excited light that gleamed in his eyes, were much the same as had been seen on his wedding-day.

"The whole extent of the matter is this," he said, laying it down with the finger of his right hand on the palm of his left. "I will tell the story, and you will be called upon to relate it. If you do right, and keep to the truth, you and your son will get off scot free, and I will send you away from this place richer than you ever were before. If, on the contrary, you bungle and make a mess of it, out will come the pleasant little episode of Jack Wildman, who will swing from the top of the Cliftonlea jail, immediately after the assizes; and you, my worthy

soul, if you escape a similar fate, will rot out the rest of your life in the workhouse. Do you understand that?"

The question was rather superfluous, for Judith understood it so well that she rolled off her stool, and worked on the floor in a sort of fit.

Rather dismayed, the lawyer jumped up; but, as in the course of a little more kicking and struggling, she worked herself out of it again, into a state of moaning and gasping, he took his hat and gloves and turned to go.

"You had better get up off the floor, Mrs. Wildman, and take a smoke," was his parting advice. "Good-bye. Don't go to bed. You will probably be wanted before morning."

He walked away, turning one backward glance on the waving trees at the park, smiling as he did so. The fishermen he met pulled off their hats to the steward of their lady, and never before had they known him to be so condescendingly gracious in returning it. As he passed through the town, too, everybody noticed that the lawyer was in uncommon good-humor even for him; and he quite beamed on the servant-maid who opened the door of his own house when he knocked. It was a very nice house—was Mr. Sweet's—with a spacious garden around it, belonging to Lady Agnes, and always occupied by her agent.

"Where is your mistress, Elizabeth?" he asked.

"Missis be in the parlor, sir, if you please."

Two doors flanked the hall. He opened one to the right and entered a pretty room—medallion carpet on the floor, tasteful paper-hangings on the walls, nice tables and sofas, some pictures in gilt frames, a large marble-topped table, strewn with books, in the center of the floor, and a great many china dogs and cats on the mantel-piece. But the window, for it had only one window, this parlor—was pleasanter than all—a deep bay-window, with a sort of divan all around it; and when the crimson moreen curtains were down, it was the cosiest little room in the world.

It was in this recess, lying among soft cushions, that the new Mrs. Sweet had spent all her time since her return to Cliftonlea; and it was there her husband expected to find her now. There she was not, however, but walking up and down the room with the air of a tragedy-

queen. Neither Rachel nor Mrs. Siddons in their palmiest days could have surpassed it. Her hands were clenched, her eyes were flaming, her step had a fiercely metallic ring, her dark profusion of hair, as if to add to the effect, was unbound and streaming around her, and had any stranger entered just then, and seen her, his thought would have been that he had got by mistake into the cell of some private lunatic asylum.

"What new tantrum is this my lady has got into?" thought Mr. Sweet, quailing a little before the terrible light in his lady's eyes, as he shut the door and stood looking at her with his back to it. "My dear Barbara, what is the matter?"

The only answer as she strode past was a glare out of the flashing eyes, under which he inwardly cowered, even as he repeated the question.

"My dear Barbara, what is the matter?"

She stopped this time and stood before him, looking so much like a frenzied maniac that his sallow complexion, in his terror, turned a sort of sea-green.

"Don't ask me!" she said, fairly hissing the words through her closed teeth; "don't! There is a spirit within me that is not from heaven, and the less you of all people say to me to-night, the better!"

"But, my dear Barbara——"

"Your dear Barbara!" she broke out, with passionate scorn. "Oh, blind, blind fool! blind, besotted fool that I was ever to come to this! Go, I tell you! If you have any mercy on yourself, go and leave me! I am not myself, I am mad, and you are not safe in the same room with me!"

"Barbara, hear me!"

"Not a word, not a syllable! I have awakened from my trance—the horrible trance in which I was inveigled to marry you! Man!" she cried, in a sort of frenzy, stopping before him again, "if you had poisoned me I could have forgiven you, but for making me your wife, I can never forgive you—never, until my dying day!"

"Barbara!"

But she would not hear him; for the time she was almost insane, and tore up and down the room like a very fury.

"Oh, miserable, driveling idiot that I have been!"

Sunken, degraded wretch that I am, ever to have married this thing! And you, poor, pitiful hound, whom I hate and despise more than any other creature on God's earth, you forced me into this marriage when I was beside myself, and knew not what I did: You, knowing I loved another, cajoled me into marrying you, and I hate you for it! I hate you! I hate you!"

Mr. Sweet's complexion, from sea-green, turned livid and ghastly, but his voice, though husky, was strangely calm.

"I did not force you, Barbara. You know what you married me for—revenge!"

"Revenge!" she echoed, breaking into a hysterical laugh. "Why, man, I tell you, one other such victory would cost me my soul! Yes, I have the revenge of knowing I am despised by the man I love! Do you hear that, Sylvester Sweet—the man whom I love, every hair of whose head is dearer to me than your whole miserable soul and body!"

Strange lividness this in Mr. Sweet's placid face! Strange fire this in his calm eye; but his voice was steady and unmoved still.

"You forget, Barbara, that he jilted you."

"And you dare to taunt me with that!" she almost shrieked, all her tiger passions unchained. "Oh, that I had a knife, that I might drive it to the hilt in your heart for daring to say such a thing to me! Oh, I had fallen low before—a forsaken, despised, cast-off wretch, but I never sunk entirely into the slime until I married you! Yes, he jilted me; but I love him still—love him as much as I hate and despise you! Go, I tell you! go and leave me, or I will strangle you where you stand!"

She was mad. He saw that in her terrible face. But through all his horror he strove to soothe her.

"Barbara! Barbara! let me say one word! The hour for full and complete vengeance has come at last! To-night you will triumph over him—over them all. His very bride shall be torn from him at the altar, and you shall be proclaimed—Barbara! Great Heaven!"

She had been standing before him, but she reeled suddenly and would have fallen had he not caught her. The frantic fit of fury into which she had lashed herself had given way, and with it all her mad strength.

But she was not fainting, for at his hated touch, a look of unutterable loathing came over the white face, and with a sort of expiring effort she lifted her hands and pushed him away.

"Go!" she said, rising and clinging to the table, while her stormy voice was scarcely louder than a whisper. "Go! If you do not leave me, I shall die!"

He saw that she would. It was written in every line of her death-like face—in every quiver of the tottering form, all thrilling with repulsion. He turned and opened the door.

"I will go, then Barbara," he said, turning for a last look as he passed out. "I go to fulfil my promise and complete your revenge."

He closed the door, went through the hall, down the steps, along the graveled walk, and out into the busy, bustling street. And how was Mr. Sweet to know that he and his bride had parted forever?

With the last sounds of his footsteps, Barbara had tottered to the divan and sank down among the cushions with a prayer in her heart she had not strength enough to utter in words, that she might never rise again. All the giant fury of her passion had passed away; but she had no tears to shed—nothing to do but lie there and feel that she had lost life, and that her seared heart had turned to dust and ashes. There was no wish for revenge left; that was gone with her strength—no wish for anything but to lie there and die. She knew that it was his wedding-night. She heard carriage after carriage rolling away to Castle Cliffe, and she felt as if the wheels of all were crashing over her heart.

The last rosy ray of the daylight had faded, the summer moon rose up, stealing in through the curtains, and its pale light lay on the bowed young head like the pitying hand of a friend.

There came a knock at the front door—a knock loud and imperative, that rang from end to end of the house. Why did Barbara's heart bound as if it would leap from her breast? She had never heard that knock before. There was a step in the hall, light, quick and decided—a voice, too, that she would have known all the world over. She had hungered and thirsted for that voice—she had desired it as the blind desire sight.

"And am I really going mad?" was Barbara's thought. It was no madness. The door was opened, the step was in the room, and Elizabeth, the housemaid, was speaking:

"Missis be in here, sir. I'll go and fetch a light."

"Never mind the light."

The door was closed in Elizabeth's face, the key turned to keep out intruders, and some one was bending over Barbara as she lay, or rather crouched. She could not tell whether she was sane or mad. She dared not look up; it must be all an illusion. What could he be doing here, and to-night?

"Barbara!"

Oh, that voice. If this was madness she never wished to be sane again.

"Barbara!"

Some one's hair was touching her cheek—some one's hand was holding her own—the dear voice was at her ear.

"Barbara, have you no word for me, either of hatred or forgiveness? Will you not even look at me, Barbara?"

She lifted her face for one instant. Yes, it was he, pale and passionate—he here, even at this hour. She dared not look—she dropped her face again in the cushions.

"Have I then sinned beyond redemption? Am I so utterly hateful to you, Barbara, that you cannot even look at me?"

Barbara was mute.

"Do you know that I was to be married to-night—that my bride is waiting for me even now?"

"I know it! I know it!" she said, with a sort of cry—that arrow going to the mark. "Oh, Leicester, you have broken my heart!"

"I have been a traitor and a villain, I know; but villain as I am, I could not finish what I had begun. At the last hour I have deserted them all, Barbara, to kneel at your feet again. She is beautiful and good; but I only love you, and to you I have come back. Will you send me away, Barbara?"

Her hand only tightened over his for answer. In that moment she only knew that she was utterly miserable and desperate, and that she loved this man. She felt her-

self standing on a quicksand, and that it was shifting away under her feet, and letting her down.

"When I left you and went to London, Barbara," the dear, low voice went on, "and saw her first, I was dazzled; and somehow—Heaven only knows how!—I promised to fulfil an engagement made years before I had even heard of her. While she glittered before me the daze continued; but the moment I left her the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw it all. I came back to Cliftonlea, determined to give up everything for love and you—to make you my wife, and seek together a home in the New World. I came. As I passed the cathedral I saw a crowd, and entering, the first thing I beheld was you, Barbara, the wife of another man—my repentance and resolution all too late!"

His listener had a long account to settle with that other man. It was only one more item added to the catalogue, and she said nothing; and still holding her hand tighter, and coming nearer, the voice went on:

"I thought I would give you up, forget you, and take the bride they had chosen for me; but now, at the last hour, I find that life without you is less than worthless. Your marriage was a mockery. You cannot care for this man. Will you send me away, desolate and alone, over the world?"

Still she did not speak. The sand was slipping away fast, and she was going down.

"Barbara," he whispered, "you do not love this man—you love me! Then leave him forever, and fly with me!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STORY.

THE road from the town of Cliftonlea to the Castle was a somewhat long one; but by turning off and going through Lower Cliffe and the park gates, the distance was shortened by half. Mr. Sweet, however, did not choose to take this short-cut, but walked on through the town, at his usual steady pace, neither slowly nor hurriedly, and the white summer moon was shining over his head as he passed the Italian cottage. The whole park seemed alive. Up on a hill fireworks in full blaze, and a vast crowd was gathered round them. Down in a smooth hollow the Cliftonlea brass band was discoursing merry music; and on the velvet sward the dancers were enjoying themselves in another way. The place was one blaze of rainbow light from the myriad-colored lamps hung in the trees; and the moon was more like a dim tallow candle, set up in the sky to be out of the way, than anything else. The joy-bells were clashing out, high over all, and mingled with their loud ringing, the lawyer caught the sound of the cathedral clock tolling nine as he entered the paved court-yard. He paused for a moment, with a smile on his lips.

"Nine o'clock—the appointed hour! Perhaps I will be too late for the ceremony, after all," he said to himself as he ran up the steps.

The great hall door stood open to admit the cool night air, and, standing in a blaze of light, he saw Sir Roland and Colonel Shirley at the foot of the stairs. No one else was in the domed hall but the servants, who flitted ceaselessly to and fro at the farther end; and he stepped in, hat in hand.

The two gentlemen turned simultaneously and eagerly, but the faces of both fell when they saw who it was.

"Good-evening, Sir Roland; good-evening, Colonel

Shirley," began Mr. Sweet, bowing low. "Permit me to offer my congratulations on this happy occasion."

"Congratulations!" exclaimed the colonel. "Faith, I think there will be something besides congratulations needed shortly! Have you seen Mr. Leicester Cliffe anywhere in your travels to-night, Mr. Sweet?"

Mr. Sweet looked at the speaker in undisguised astonishment.

"Mr. Leicester! Is it possible that he is not here?"

"Very possible, my dear sir. I shall be most happy to see him when he comes, and let him know what it is to be disgracefully kicked."

"Is it really possible? Where in the world can he be to-night, of all nights, if not here?"

"Ah! that is what I would like to have some one tell me. Wherever he may be, Castle Cliffe has certainly not the honor of containing him, and the hour for the ceremony, you see, is past."

"It is astonishing!" said Mr. Sweet, slowly and looking a little bewildered by the news. "It is incomprehensible! I never heard anything like it!"

"I agree with you. But, unhappily, that does not mend the matter, and if he does not appear within the next fifteen minutes, you will have the goodness to go and stop those confounded bells, and send all those good people in the park about their business."

"And there has been no wedding, then, to-night?" said Mr. Sweet, still looking bewildered.

"None; nor is there likely to be, as far as I can see."

"And Miss Shirley is still——"

"Miss Shirley—and seems in a fair way of remaining so, for the present at least."

"You have something to say, Sweet, have you not?" asked Sir Roland, who had been watching the lawyer, and seemed struck by something in his face.

Mr. Sweet hesitated a little; but Colonel Shirley interposed impatiently:

"Out with it, man! If you have anything to say, let us have it at once."

"My request may seem strange—bold—almost inadmissible," said the lawyer, still hesitating; "but I do assure you, I would not make it were it not necessary."

"What is the man driving at?" broke out the colonel,

in astonishment and impatience. "What's all this palaver about? Come to the point at once, Sweet, and let us have this inadmissible request of yours."

"It is, Colonel, that I see Miss Shirley at once, and alone! I have two or three words to say to her that it is absolutely necessary that she should hear."

Sir Roland and Colonel Shirley looked at each other, and then at Mr. Sweet, who, in spite of every effort, seemed a little nervous and excited.

"See Miss Shirley at once and alone!" repeated Sir Roland, looking at him with some of his sister's piercing intentness. "You did right to say that your request was a strange and bold one. What can you possibly have to say to Miss Shirley?"

"A few very important words, Sir Roland."

"Say them, then, to the young lady's father—she has no secrets from him."

"I beg your pardon; I cannot do so. That is, I would infinitely rather say them to herself first, and leave it to her own good pleasure to repeat them."

"Are you sure it is nothing about my son?"

"Certainly, Sir Roland. Of your son I know nothing."

"Well, it's odd!" said the colonel, "but I have no objection to your seeing Vivia, if she has none. Come this way Mr. Sweet."

Ascending the wide staircase as lightly as he could have done twenty years before, the colonel gained the upper hall, followed by the lawyer, and tapped at the door of the Rose Room. It was opened immediately by Lady Agnes, who looked out with an anxious face.

"Oh, Cliffe! has Leicester come?"

"No, indeed; but a very different person has—Mr. Sweet."

"Mr. Sweet! Does he bring any news? Has anything happened?"

"No; though he says he wants to see Vivia."

"See Vivia!" exclaimed her ladyship, looking to the last degree amazed, not to say shocked, at the unprecedented request. "Has Mr. Sweet gone crazy?"

"Not that I know of. But here he is to answer for himself."

Thus invoked, Mr. Sweet presented himself, with a deprecating bow.

"I beg your pardon, my lady. I know the request seems strange; but I cannot help it, unreasonable as the time is. I beg of you to let me see Miss Shirley at once, and the explanation shall come afterward."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I'm surprised at you, Mr. Sweet! What can you mean by so outrageous a request?"

"My lady, if you insist upon it, I must tell you, but I earnestly entreat you not to force me to a public explanation, until I have spoken in private to Miss Shirley."

"Oh, it is something about Leicester! I know it is, and he wants to prepare her for some shock. Mr. Sweet, do not dare to trifle with me! I am no baby; and if it is anything about him, I command you to speak out at once!"

"Lady Agnes, I have said, again and again, that it is nothing about him, and I repeat it. Of Mr. Leicester Cliffe I know nothing whatever. The matter simply and solely concerns Miss Shirley."

"Concerns me!" cried a silvery voice, and the beautiful, smiling face of the bride peeped over grandmamma's satin shoulder. "Who wants Miss Shirley? Oh, Mr. Sweet, is it you? Has anything happened to——"

She paused, coloring vividly.

"Nothing has happened to Mr. Cliffe, I hope, Miss Shirley," said Mr. Sweet, turning his anxious face toward that young lady. "I have no doubt he will be here presently. But, before he comes, it is of the utmost importance that I should see you a few minutes in private."

Miss Shirley opened her blue eyes according to custom extremely wide, and turned them in bewildering inquiry upon her papa.

"Mr. Sweet has some awful secret to reveal to you, Vivia," observed that gentleman, smiling. "The 'Mysteries of Udolpho' were plain reading compared to him this evening."

"If Mr. Sweet has anything to say to Miss Shirley," said Lady Agnes, haughtily, "let him say it here, and at once. I cannot have any secret interview and mysterious nonsense."

"It is not nonsense, my lady."

"The more reason you should out with it at once.

You do not need to be told that anything that concerns Miss Shirley concerns her father and myself. If you do not like that, you had better take your leave."

At this sharp speech, Mr. Sweet turned so distressed and imploring a face toward Miss Vivia, that that good-natured young lady felt called upon to strike in.

"Never mind, grandmamma. There is nothing so very dreadful in his speaking to me in private, since he wishes it so much. It is not wrong—is it, papa?"

"Not wrong, but rather silly, I think."

"Well, Mr. Sweet and I are so wise generally that we can afford to be silly for once. Don't say a word, grandmamma; it's all right. This way, if you please, Mr. Sweet."

Turning her pretty face as she went, with an arch little smile, she tripped across the hall, and opened the door opposite—what was called the winter drawing-room. The lawyer followed the shining figure of the bride into the apartment, whose pervading tints were gold and crimson, and which was illuminated by amber-shaded lamps, filling it with a sort of golden haze. He closed the door after him, and stood for a moment with his back to it.

"Will your two or three words take long to say?" asked Miss Shirley, still smiling—"which means, am I to sit down or stand?"

"You had better sit down, I think, Miss Shirley."

"Ah! I thought it was more than two or three words; but you had better be quick, for I have not much time to spare on this particular evening!"

She sank into an easy-chair of scarlet velvet; her gossamer robes floating about her like white mist; her graceful head, with its snowy veil, and golden curls, and jeweled orange-blossoms, leaning light'y against its glowing back; the exquisite face whereon the smile still lingered, as she lightly waved him to a distant chair. Truly, she was dazzling in her splendor; but her companion was not dazzled—he was smiling a little as he took his seat.

"Well, Mr. Sweet, what is this terrible mystery of which papa speaks?"

"Colonel Shirley has termed it rightly—it is a terrible mystery."

"Indeed! And it concerns me, I suppose, or you would not be so anxious to tell it to me."

"Yes, Miss Shirley, I am sorry to say it concerns you very closely indeed."

"Sorry to say! Well, go on and let me hear it, then."

"It is a somewhat complicated story, Miss Shirley, and requires me go back a long time—over eighteen years."

Miss Shirley bowed slowly her willingness for him to go back to the Flood if he liked.

"More than eighteen years ago, Miss Shirley, there lived, several miles from London, in a poor-enough cottage—for they were very poor people—a certain man and wife—Mr. and Mrs. John Wildman."

At this unexpected announcement Miss Shirley opened her blue eyes again, and smiled a little amused smile, as she looked at him inquiringly.

"This Mr. John Wildman was by trade a bricklayer, and often absent from home weeks at a time. One morning, very early, during one of these absences, a carriage drove up to the door, and a young lady and gentleman made their appearance in the cottage. The young lady appeared to be ill, and the gentleman seemed exceedingly anxious that she should lodge there. Mrs. Wildman was not many months married; they were poor; she wished to help her husband, if she could; the gentleman promised to pay well, and she consented. He went away immediately, and for the next two or three weeks did not make his appearance again, though money and furniture were sent to the cottage. At the end of that time two events happened—a child was born and the lady died. Before her death she had sent a message to the young gentleman, who came in time to see her laid in the grave, and consigned his infant daughter to the care of Mrs. Wildman before departing, as he thought, forever, from his native land."

During this preamble, the blue eyes had opened to their widest extent, and were fixed on the speaker with a little bewildered stare that said plainly enough she could make neither head nor tail of the whole thing.

"Several months after this," Mr. Sweet went on steadily, "this John Wildman, with a few others perpetrated a crime for which he was transported, leaving his wife and child—for they had a child some weeks old—to

get on as best they might; the strange gentleman's infant with them. It was by means of this very infant they managed to exist at all; for its father, immediately on his arrival in India, for which place he had sailed, sent her plentiful remittances; and so, for nearly six years, they got along tolerably well. At the end of that time she fell ill, and her husband's mother, who lived in some out-of-the-way place in the north part of England, was sent for, and came to nurse her and the two little girls—whose names, by the way, I forgot to tell you, were Victoria and Barbara."

During all this time his listener had been much perplexed by this, to her, incomprehensible story. But now she started as though she had received a galvanic shock.

"What! Victoria and Barbara! It isn't possible that——"

"Permit me to continue, Miss Shirley," said Mr. Sweet, bowing without looking up, "and you will soon recognize the characters. Yes, their names were Victoria and Barbara. Victoria, the elder by a few months, was the daughter of the dead lady; and Barbara, the daughter of the transported felon. Judith, the mother-in-law, came to take charge of them, and heard for the first time the whole story. She was a crafty old woman, this Judith, with little love for the daughter-in-law or granddaughter whom she had come to take care of. But she was wicked, ambitious, and mischievous, and a demoniac plot at once entered into her head. A letter was dispatched to the gentleman in India—he was an officer, too—telling him that the Wildmans were about to leave for America, and that he had better come home and take charge of his daughter. Miss Shirley, he came; but it was not *his* daughter he received from the old woman, but *her* granddaughter. The children were not unlike; both had the same fair complexions, and light hair, and blue eyes. The real Victoria was kept carefully out of sight, and he carried off the false one in implicit trust and placed her in a convent in France. Miss Shirley, I beg——"

He stopped and rose hastily, for Miss Shirley had sprung from her seat, and was confronting him with flashing eyes.

"It is false! It is false! I shall never believe it! What is this you have dared to tell me, Mr. Sweet?"

"The truth, Miss Shirley."

"Oh, Heaven! Do you mean to say that I am really—that I am not— Oh, it is too false, too absurd to hear! I will not stop and listen to you any longer."

She turned excitedly to go; but he placed himself between her and the door.

"Miss Shirley, I beg, I entreat, for Heaven's sake, hear me out! It is every word true. Do you think I would come here and repeat such a tale, if I was not positive?"

"Oh, *Mon Dieu!* what is he saying? Am I dreaming or awake?"

"Miss Shirley, will you sit down and hear me out?"

"Miss Shirley!" she said, with a sort of wildness in her look. "If what you have dared to say be true, I have no right to that name! It has never for one poor moment belonged to me!"

"You are quite right; but the name, just now, is of little consequence. Will you be pleased to sit down and listen while I finish?"

"I am listening, go on."

She sank back into the seat, not leaning back this time, but sitting erect, her little white hands clinging to one arm of the chair, the wonderful blue eyes fixed upon him wild and dilated.

Her companion resumed his seat and his story; his own eye fixed on the carpet.

"The little girl in the convent, who bore the name of Victoria Genevieve Shirley, but who in reality was Barbara Wildman, remained there until she was twelve years old, when the Indian officer, who fancied himself her father, again returned to England, his mother, and his native home; and his little girl, the supposed heiress of Castle Cliffe, was sent for and came here. Miss Shirley, to tell you any more of her history would be superfluous; but perhaps you would like to hear the story of the real, the defrauded heiress, the supposed Barbara?"

He paused to see if she would speak, and looked at her; but one glance was all he dared venture, and he lowered his eyes and went hurriedly on:

"The sick mother knew nothing of the change until it was too late, and then she went frantic with grief. Old Judith, alarmed, as she very well might be, managed to

remove her to London, by telling her she would recover her child there ; and when there, gave out she was mad, and had her imprisoned in a mad-house. It is all very dreadful, Miss Shirley, but I regret to repeat, it is all quite true, nevertheless."

She covered her face with her hands, and sank down, her face resting on the arm of the chair, quivering all over for a moment and then becoming perfectly still.

"The old woman changed the name of Wildman to that of Black ; and during the next two or three years lived on the money paid her by Colonel Shirley. That began to give out, and she resolved to make Colonel Shirley's daughter find her more. Barbara—the children's names, as I told you, were changed—was a pretty little girl of nine, and attracted the attention of the manager of a band of strolling players. She became one of the band—the most popular one among them—and for the next two years she and her grandmother managed very well, when one day they were astonished by the unlooked-for appearance of the transported Mr. Wildman, who had made his escape, and had found them out. He, too, took the name of Black—Peter Black—attached himself to the same company, and the three went wandering over England together. Are you listening, Miss Shirley?"

He really thought she was not, she was so rigid and still ; but at the question she partly raised herself and looked at him.

"Barbara Black that was—your wife that is—is then the real Victoria Shirley?"

"She is."

He did not dare to look at her ; but he felt the blue eyes were transfixing him and reading his very heart. It was only for a few seconds, and then she dropped her head on the arm of the chair again, and lay still.

"They came here to Sussex six years ago, and, strange enough, settled here. The old woman and her son had each probably their own reasons for so doing. It is an out-of-the-way place, this little sea-coast town, and the returned convict was not ambitious to extend the circle of his acquaintance ; and his mother, probably, was actuated by a desire to see how her wicked and cruel plot worked. So the real and the supposed heiress grew up, both beauti-

ful ; but all similarity ended between them there—one in the lap of luxury, envied, admired, and happy ; the other wretchedly poor, little cared for, and miserable. But I, Miss Shirley, knowing nothing of all this, loved her, and married her ; and it is only within the last day or two these facts have come to my knowledge. I beg your pardon, but are you really listening ? ”

He could not tell what to make of her. She lay drooping over the side of the chair, so immovable that she might have been dead, for all the signs of life she exhibited. But she was very far from dead ; for she answered as she had done before, and at once ; and the sweet voice was almost harsh, so full was it of suppressed inward pain.

“ I am listening. Why need you ask ? Go on. ”

“ This miserable old woman was fond of you—excuse me if I pain you—and her exultation began to show itself when she found you were to be the bride of the first gentleman in Sussex. Her reputed granddaughter, whom she feared and disliked, was my wife ; all her schemes seemed accomplished, and, in her triumph, she dropped hints that roused my suspicions. I followed them up, suspected a great deal, and at last boldly accused her of all. She was frightened, and denied my accusation ; but her denials confirmed my suspicions, and at last I forced from her the whole disgraceful truth. It wasn't over an hour ago. I came here immediately. And that, Miss Shirley, is the whole story. ”

He drew a long breath, and looked rather anxious. She neither spoke nor moved.

“ Miss Shirley ! ”

“ I am listening. ”

“ I have told you all. What is to be done now ? ”

“ You are to go and leave me. ”

He rose up and walked to the door.

“ Yes, Miss Shirley ; but I will remain here. Lady Agnes and Colonel Shirley must know all to-night. ”

He opened the door and passed out. The hall, in a blaze of light, was deserted ; but he heard the murmur of voices from the room opposite and from below.

“ Yes, ” he murmured to himself ; “ yes, my dear Barbara, thanks to you, it is all mine at last. ”

CHAPTER XXVI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE interview between the lawyer and the bride-elect had not lasted over a quarter of an hour, but, as he stood in the hall, he felt that a strange and ominous silence seemed to have fallen over the house. As he was about to descend, the door of the Rose Room opened, and the pale and haughty face of Lady Agnes looked out.

"Is your conference over?" she asked.

"It is over, my lady."

"And where is my granddaughter?"

"In the drawing-room, my lady."

"Why does she not come out?"

"She—she—I am afraid she is not quite well, my lady."

"Not well!" exclaimed Lady Agnes, fixing her piercing eyes in stern suspicion on him. "Not well! What have you been saying to her, then?"

"My lady, pardon me; but I think you had better go to Miss Shirley directly."

"Very well, sir. And you will have the goodness to stay where you are until this mysterious matter is cleared up."

She swept proudly past him with a majestic rustle of her silk skirts, and opened the door of the winter drawing-room. But she paused on the threshold with a shrill shriek—such a shriek as made Mr. Sweet turn ashy white, terrified the guests below, and made her son come from the lower hall, in half a dozen fleet bounds, to her side.

Vivia had fallen to the floor, not quite prostrate, but her hands grasping the arm of the chair, her head on them, and her whole attitude unnatural and distorted. It was a strange sight—the glowing room filled with amber light, all gold and fire; the slender bride in its floating robes, misty veil, and sparkling bridal wreath, crouching

down in that strained, writhing position—its profusion of long ringlets sweeping the crimson carpet.

“The child has fainted!” screamed Lady Agnes, “or that wretch has killed her!”

“Vivia, my darling!” cried her father, flying in and lifting her in his arms. “Vivia, my child, what is the matter?”

Lady Agnes was wrong; she had not fainted. Her eyes were wide open, staring straight before her with a fixed, unnatural look; her face was quite ghastly; but she made a feeble motion when raised, as if struggling to get away.

“Vivia, for Heaven’s sake do not look so! Vivia, dearest, do you not know me?”

The glazed and fixed intensity slowly left her eyes, and they came back to his face with a look of unutterable love.

“Dear papa!”

“My darling, what is this? What ails you?” he asked, pushing back the curls from the pale brow, and touching it tenderly with his lips.

“Oh, papa, don’t!” she cried, in a voice so full of sharp pain that he scarcely knew it; and again the feeble struggle to rise from his arms commenced.

Wondering exceedingly, he lifted and placed her in a chair, just as Jeannette rushed in with smelling-salts, and Lady Agnes held a handkerchief steeped in cologne to her temples. A crowd had collected by this time in the doorway, and seeing them, and revived by stimulants, she rose up.

“Papa! Grandmamma! take me away! Where is Mr. Sweet?”

“Here, Miss Shirley,” said that gentleman, presenting himself promptly, with a very pale and startled face.

The well-bred crowd in the doorway, seeing by this time they were out of place, hurried immediately downstairs, and no one remained in the drawing-room except Vivia, her father and grandmother, and Mr. Sweet.

“I knew no good would come of this outrageous interview!” exclaimed Lady Agnes, flashing a look on her agent that might have scorched him, so fierce was its fire; “but I scarcely thought it would end like this. What have you been saying to her, sir? Out with it at

once, and no more fooling, or I will have you thrust out within the next five minutes !”

“My lady——” hurriedly began Mr. Sweet.

But Vivia started up, all her strength recovered—more than her usual strength for that matter. In the height of her pride and power, she had been beaten to the dust ; but in her last effort, she reared herself higher and prouder than ever before in her life.

“Grandmamma, it is useless to talk to him like this. I have heard nothing but what I should have heard before—what he should have told us all long ago !”

“Miss Shirley, you forget——”

“I forget nothing, Mr. Sweet. In spite of all that you have said, I am convinced you have known the matter all along, and have been silent for your own ends. Those ends are not very difficult to see, and you have accomplished them.”

“But, my dear Vivia, what are you talking about ?” said her father, looking to the last degree puzzled. “What does this all mean ?”

“It means that I am not Vivia !—that I have never had a right to that name ; that for twelve years I have been a usurper ; that, in short, twelve years ago you were deceived, and I am no daughter of yours !”

The same unnatural look that had been in her eyes before came back, and jarred in her tone, whose very calmness and steadiness were unnatural, too. For the time being, quiet as she seemed, she was quite beside herself, or, as the French say, out of herself, and could no more have shed a tear, or uttered a cry, or made a scene, than she could have sunk down at their feet and died. She was not even conscious of sorrow at the revelation ; every nerve seemed numb, every feeling callous, her very heart dead. She only felt there was a dull, heavy pain aching there ; but the swiftness and keenness of the stroke deadened every other feeling. She stood before them, a dazzling figure, and calm as if made of marble ; her eyes, wildly bright, alone betokening momentary insanity. Lady Agnes and the colonel looked at her as if they thought she had really gone insane.

“Vivia, what are you talking about ? I don’t understand.”

“It is plain, nevertheless ; and sudden and quite unex-

pected as it is, I believe it all. It comes back to me now, what I had almost forgotten before, that Barbara was my name long, long ago, and that she was Victoria! Oh I know it is true! I feel it in my heart!"

The colonel turned in desperation to the lawyer.

"Sweet, will you explain this? I do not comprehend a word of what she is saying."

"Colonel Shirley I am sorry—am very sorry; but it is out of my power to help you. The young lady speaks the truth. Twelve years ago you were deceived, and she is not your daughter."

"Not my daughter!"

"No, colonel. Can you remember twelve years back, when you came from India and received her?"

"Certainly, I remember. But what of it?"

"It was not the person you intrusted her to that gave her to you back, but an old woman—was it not?"

"Yes."

"Do you recollect what she looked like?"

"Recollect! No; I did not pay so much attention to her as that. What the deuce are you driving at, man?"

"Only that you have seen her since. She lives in Lower Cliffe. She is Black, the fisherman's mother—she is old Judith!"

"By Jove!" cried the colonel, his face lighting up with sudden intelligence. "I believe you are right. That woman's face puzzled me when I saw it. I was sure I had seen it some place before, but could not tell where. It is all plain now. And it puzzled me the more, as she always seemed dreading to look or speak to me."

"She had reason to dread you. By her you have been most grossly and basely deceived."

"How?"

"The child she gave you twelve years ago was not yours, but her own granddaughter. This young lady is not your child!"

"What!" exclaimed the colonel, starting forward and turning very pale. "You villain! what are you daring to say?"

"The truth, Colonel Shirley, told by her own lips."

"Do you mean to say—do you dare to say that Vivia is not my daughter?"

"I do."

Colonel Shirley stopped and looked at him, mute with consternation. The lawyer stood before him very pale, but meeting his eye without quailing—sincerity and sympathy on every feature.

"I know you are stunned by the suddenness of the shock, sir. I know it is hard to believe it at first, but it is Heaven's truth, for all that. If you will only listen to me five minutes, I will tell you all I have told to——" a pause—"to this young lady."

"Go on."

Mr. Sweet went on accordingly. The story was listened to with profoundest silence, and a long and ominous pause followed, passionately broken at last by Lady Agnes.

"It is a lie from beginning to end! I will never believe a word of it! The man has fabricated the whole thing himself, for the purpose of forcing his own miserable wife upon us! Cliffe, if you do right, you will make the servants kick him out!"

"I will spare your servants that trouble, Lady Agnes," said Mr. Sweet, whose face was perfectly colorless, as he moved toward the door; "but no amount of kicking can alter the truth, and justice must be had, though the heavens fall!"

"Stop," cried Colonel Shirley, in a voice that made the room ring. "Come back! What proof can you give of the truth of all this, beyond that of your word, and that of this old woman, whom you may easily have bullied into the plot?"

"The old woman is ready to depose to the facts, on oath; and you can visit the daughter, if you choose, in her madhouse, where she raves incessantly of her lost child, and tells the story to every one who visits her. Consider, too, the probabilities. What more natural than that this wretched woman should, with her own granddaughter, be placed in affluence, when she had it in her power. It is not the first time the same thing has been done, and the young lady herself believes it."

Colonel Shirley turned to her; she was standing as before. She had not moved once, but her eye had restlessly wandered from face to face of the speakers. "Oh, Vivia, can you believe it?"

"I believe it all," she said, quite calmly. "I can remember it with perfect distinctness now. I could remem-

ber it all along, like a dim dream, that long ago I was called Barbara, and that I played with another child who was Victoria. I believe it, every word."

"Another thing, Colonel Shirley," said Mr. Sweet, emboldened; "this young lady has been said to resemble your family very much, because she is a blonde, and so are all your race. But Barbara is the living image of your dead wife. I remember her well. Here is her portrait; look at it for yourself."

He drew a miniature out of his pocket, and placed it respectfully in the Indian officer's hand. It was a likeness of Barbara, painted on ivory while she was in London, and strikingly like her. Vivia, at the same instant, drew from her neck the gold chain to which the portrait the Colonel had given her was attached, and placed it in his other hand. Strange and striking, indeed, was the resemblance; the same oval contour of face, with the deep bloom on the cheeks; the same profusion of dark waving hair swept back from the broad brow; the same large, uplifted eyes, clear and bright; the same characteristic mouth and chin; the most striking difference being the expression. Barbara looked far colder, and sterner, and prouder than the other.

Those faces settled the matter. The colonel was convinced, and his face seemed changed to marble, ere he looked up.

"The night you gave me this, papa," said Vivia, calling him the old familiar name, "I told you they were alike, and you said it was a chance resemblance. It was no chance resemblance, you see now!"

"I see. But oh, Vivia——"

He leaned against a tall ebony cabinet, and covered his eyes with his hand. Lady Agnes, who had been standing in dumb bewilderment all the time, broke out now with a wild cry:

"Cliffe! Cliffe! This cannot be true? You cannot believe it!"

"Mother, I do!"

"Dear, dear grandmamma!" exclaimed Vivia, springing forward and catching her hand, terrified at her changing face, "I will always—— Oh, papa, come here!"

For Lady Agnes, with a gasping cry, had fallen back quite senseless. Her son caught her in his arms, and Mr.

Sweet violently rang the bell. Jeannette and Hortense were there in a moment. Colonel Shirley carried her to her room, and was back directly.

"Well, sir!" he said to Mr. Sweet, "and what now?"

The lawyer looked really distressed and at a loss, but Vivia came to the rescue at once.

"The first thing to be done is to go to Lower Cliffe immediately, and see this woman. I can never rest now until the whole matter is settled. If you will wait for me, I will be ready to go with you in five minutes."

The colonel took both her hands in his, and looked down pityingly and tenderly into the death-white face.

"You go, Vivia! You look fit to die this moment."

"I am not going to die. I never was so strong before in my life. Don't say a word, papa; it is of no use. I will not keep you five minutes."

She disappeared in the Rose Room; and both gentlemen looked after her, more astonished by the sudden and complete change the girl's whole nature seemed to have undergone within the hour, than by anything that had happened that night. True to her word, she was back in an incredibly short space of time, the bridal-dress doffed, and arrayed in mantle and hat. Again objections were upon the Colonel's lips, but they died out at the sight of the pale, resolute face.

"We must go out this way," she said. "It will never do to go downstairs and pass all these people."

She led the way to another flight of stairs at the opposite end of the hall, and the three went down, and out of one of the side-doors, into the shrubbery. The bells had ceased to ring; but the fireworks were still blazing, the music still clanging; the people still dancing and feasting—the whole park like a glimpse of fairyland.

What a bitter satire it all was! and the keenest pang the colonel had yet felt, wrung his heart as he drew Vivia's arm within his own, and hurried, by sundry by-paths, to the village. Not one word was spoken on the way. They hastened along, and soon came in sight of the cottage. A light shone from the windows.

The lawyer, without hesitation, opened the door and walked in followed by his two companions.

Old Judith, cowering and shivering, was in her usual seat. A tallow candle, in a dirty brass candlestick,

flared, and glittered, and dripped big tears of fat all over it. No one else was present. At sight of them she shrank away, holding out her arms, with a piteous cry.

"Don't take me away! Don't send me to prison! I confess it all—all—all!"

"What have you to confess?" asked Colonel Shirley, standing sternly before her.

"I changed them, I did! I changed them, I did; but I never meant no harm! Oh, good gentlemen, have mercy! I'm an old woman now, and don't send me to prison!"

Vivia bent over her, with a face like that of an angel.

"You shall not be sent to prison. No one will harm you, if you speak the truth. Am I your granddaughter?"

But the sound of the sweet voice, the sight of the lovely face, and the earnest question, seemed to act worse than all on old Judith; for she sprang up and fled into the farthest corner of the room, as she had done once before, long ago, at sight of Mr. Sweet, holding out her arms in a sort of horror.

"Speak, woman!" cried the colonel, striding forward. "Speak at once, and tell me if you gave me your granddaughter, twelve years ago, and kept my child?"

"Papa, papa, she is in a fit!" exclaimed Vivia, in terror.

It was true. Whether from fear or some other cause, the wretched woman had fallen back in a fit of paralysis, her features blackened and convulsed, the foam oozing from her lips—a horrible sight to look on. Of all the terrible changes of that fatal bridal night, there was nothing to equal this; and Vivia covered her face with her hands, and turned away, shuddering, from the revolting spectacle.

"If you'll have the kindness to knock at the cottage next door," said Mr. Sweet, who had sprung forward and lifted her up, "I will place her on the bed, and send a message for the doctor."

The colonel obeyed, quite horror-stricken, and the women from the next house came flocking in. A man was sent in hot haste to Cliftonlea for a doctor, and Mr. Sweet consigned old Judith to their care.

"Do any of you know where her son is?" he asked.

One of the women did; and, with numberless courtesies to her master and her young lady, told how a

couple of hours before, he had entered the cottage, and after staying for some ten minutes, had left it again in haste, and taken the road for the town. Then, as they could do no more, the two left, and paused for a moment in the moonlight.

"Nothing more can be done to-night," remarked Mr. Sweet, addressing the colonel; "and, with your permission, I will return home."

"As you please; but I shall expect you very early to-morrow, and—your wife also. Now that we have commenced, this matter must be investigated to the bottom."

Raising his hat coldly and haughtily, the colonel turned away, and Mr. Sweet hurried off rapidly toward his own home. It was late when he reached it—the cathedral clock was striking eleven. Most of the houses were silent and dark; but a light burned in his, and his knock at the door was promptly answered.

Elizabeth looked rather startled; but he did not notice that, and hurried at once into the parlor, where his wife usually sat, up to all hours. She was not there to-night. And he ran up to her room. She was not there, either, but something else was—something that made Mr. Sweet pause on the threshold, as if a hand of iron had thrust him back.

Over the bed, over the floor, over the table, clear in the moonlight, lay all the gifts he had ever given her, before and after their marriage. Something gleamed at his feet. He stooped and picked it up. A broken ring—broken into three or four pieces—but he knew it at once. It was his wife's wedding-ring, broken and trodden in the dust, like the vows she had plighted—vows that were brittle as glass—slippery withes, that she had snapped like hairs, and trampled under her feet, as she had trampled the ring that bound them.

He saw all in an instant; and in that instant his face altered so frightfully, that no one would have known it.

He tore down the stairs, livid with fear and fury to find himself baffled in the very hour of triumph, and clutched Elizabeth by the arm in a terrible grip.

"Where is your mistress?" he cried, furiously.

"Please, sir, she is gone!" cried the terrified handmaid.

"Gone! Gone where? Speak, or I'll strangle you!"

"Please, sir, I don't know. The gentleman went away ; and the next I saw, she went out the back way in her bonnet and shawl ; and it was dark, and I couldn't see where she went."

"Who was the gentleman? Who was he?" Mr. Sweet almost screamed, shaking the girl until she writhed in his grasp.

"Please, sir, it was young Mr. Cliffe. Oh, Lor' let go my arm!"

Mr. Sweet clapped on his hat, and rushed out like a madman. Through the streets he tore, knocking down everything and everybody that came in his way. He fled through Lower Cliffe, through the park gates, up the avenue, and into the house. Everybody ran screaming before him ; but he rushed on until he found himself in the presence of Sir Roland Cliffe, Colonel Shirley, and the crowd of unknown ladies and gentlemen.

"She is gone! she is gone!" he screamed, frantically. "They have both gone together. My wife has eloped with Leicester Cliffe!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT LAY ON THE NUN'S GRAVE.

WITHIN the memory of the oldest inhabitant, that pleasant-spoken gentleman, the agent of Lady Agnes Shirley, had never been known to be otherwise than perfectly self-possessed and equal to any emergency. The said legal gentleman had imagined himself that nothing earthly could have moved his admirable *sang froid* ; but, on the present occasion, both he and the oldest inhabitant found their mistake. Ever afterward, he had a very vague and indistinct idea of what followed his startling announcement.

He had a dim recollection of a sense of suffocation ; of a roaring sound in his ears ; of being the center of a surging sea of white and terrified faces ; of hearing cries and exclamations ; and, deep, and high over all, the clear, authoritative voice of Colonel Shirley, giving some orders.

Then he felt himself carried away and laid on a bed ; felt mistily that some one was bleeding him, and some one else holding ice to his hot head ; of being relieved from the unpleasant sense of strangulation, and at last of gradually dropping off into a profound and dreamless sleep.

As he was left alone in his distant room to sleep the sleep of the just, he knew nothing of what was going on in the other parts of the great mansion—how Sir Roland Cliffe had dropped down in a fit of apoplexy, and been borne away to another chamber, a dreadful sight ; how the guests had all dispersed in consternation and dismay ; how the news had flown like wildfire through the town ; how the lights had been put out, the tenantry sent home all agape, Castle Cliffe shut up in silence and darkness, and the crowd of servants—an hour before so busy and bustling—grouped together in the lower regions, talking in hushed and awe-struck whispers, and never thinking of bed. How Colonel Shirley was pacing restlessly up and down the lower hall, and unable to stop for one instant ; how the head doctor of the town was flying incessantly from Sir Roland to Lady Agnes ; and how she who should have felt it all the most, was the calmest and most collected person in the house.

In a simple morning-wrapper, all her bright curls gathered up and confined in a net, Vivia bent over Lady Agnes, very pale, very quiet, very calm, obeying all the doctor's directions implicitly ; and when at last that lady consented to come out of her hysterics, swallowed an opiate, and fell asleep, the ex-bride left her to the care of a nurse, and went away to her own room—her own pretty Rose Room—wherein she had so often slept the innocent sleep of careless girlhood—that she never, never could sleep more. Over the mantel, looked down on her still the sweet, majestic face, encircled by the golden halo ; and Vivia dropped down before it, her face hidden in her hands, and prayed as only those pray who see the whole world darkening around them, and no light but the light of Heaven. Long ago, when a little child, she had knelt before the great altar in her dear old convent in sunny France, and prayed as she was doing now, and “Oh !” cried Vivia's heart, “if I had only died then !”

And Mr. Sweet, sleeping serenely, as all good men

should do, knew nothing of all this, and never woke until the summer sunbeams were glancing in through the curtains. Then he awoke with a jerk from some unpleasant dream, and rose slowly up on his elbow, a little confused and bewildered still. His right arm felt stiff and sore, and looking down, he saw it was bandaged, and the bandage stained with blood. That recalled the bleeding, and the bleeding recalled the rest; and feeling his head a little hot and giddy still, he got out of bed filled a basin with cold water, and plunged his cranium into it. This cooling process had the desired effect. Having mopped his yellow hair dry with a towel, he felt he was his own collected, clear-headed self again, and sat down on the edge of the bed to dress himself slowly, and think over all that had happened.

To sleep over a matter sometimes changes its complexion very materially, and Mr. Sweet's first idea was one of wonder, how he ever could have been such a ninny as to be overcome for a moment by the little affair of last night. It was true all the plans he had been forming and cherishing so long were knocked in the head at one blow; but he could still form new plans, and nobody knew better than he that all is not lost that is in danger.

His wife, Colonel Shirley's daughter and heiress, had eloped, to be sure, but there was yet a possibility that she might be found again and reclaimed; and, for his part, he was a sufficiently good Christian to overlook the little episode and take her back again, as if nothing had happened. Even should she refuse to come back—it would be just like Barbara to do it—that did not alter in the least the facts of the case; she was none the less his wife and the heiress of Castle Cliffe. The only thing he blamed himself for was, not having told her all beforehand. It might have prevented this disagreeable *co:tretemps*. But it was too late, now, and—

“Here Mr. Sweet's meditations was cut short by a rap at the door.

“Come in,” he called, and Hurst, Colonel Shirley's valet, came in accordingly.

“Ah, good-morning, Hurst,” said Mr. Sweet, blandly, hastily putting the finishing touches to his toilet.

Mr. Hurst bowed respectfully.

"Good-morning, sir. How do you find yourself this morning?"

"Much better, thank you—quite well, I may say."

"Then my master sends his compliments, and begs you will come to him immediately."

Mr. Sweet, being quite as anxious to see the colonel as that gentleman could possibly be to see him, needed no second invitation, and followed the valet with alacrity through various halls, downstairs, and into the morning-room.

Colonel Shirley was there, dressed as on the preceding evening, walking restlessly up and down still, and looking very pale, very stern. He stopped and glanced searchingly at the lawyer's melancholy face.

"Are you better?" he asked, briefly.

"Quite recovered, thank you. I scarcely know yet how it happened, or what was the matter with me."

"A rush of blood to the head, or something that way. I hope you remember the extraordinary announcement you came rushing here with, just as you were taken?"

Mr. Sweet raised a pair of reproachful eyes.

"It would be still more extraordinary, Colonel, if I could ever forget it. When a man's wife elopes, it is not likely to slip from his memory in a single night."

"It . . . quite true, then?"

"Entirely."

"And Barbara has fled?"

"She has."

"And with Leicester Cliffe?"

Mr. Sweet put his handkerchief to his eyes, and turned away to conceal his emotion.

"How did you discover it? What proof have you of it?" continued the colonel, rapidly casting a somewhat cynical eye on his bereaved companion.

"There can be no doubt of the fact, Colonel," said the lawyer, in a tremulous tone. "I wish to Heaven there was! My wife has fled! and Leicester Cliffe is a traitor and a villain!"

"Be good enough, sir, to keep to the point. What proof have you of what you say?"

"Colonel, last night, when I went home, my servant—we keep only one—met me at the door, and told me her mistress had left the house and had not returned; that

Mr. Leicester Cliffe had been there with her all the evening, and that his departure had preceded hers but a few moments. I went over the house in search of her. In her room I found scattered about all the presents I had ever given her—her wedding-ring broken and lying on the ground among the rest. There was no longer a doubt, and, almost beside myself, I came here with the news."

"And that is all the proof you have that they have fled together?"

"I scarcely think that any more is required. What else could have caused his absence last night?"

"But why in Heaven's name should he elope with your wife?" exclaimed the colonel, impatiently. "What did he care for Barbara?"

"A great deal, Colonel Shirley," said Mr. Sweet, quietly. "since he was in love with her, and promised to marry her before ever he saw your daugh—I mean Miss Vivia."

Colonel Shirley stopped in his excited walk, and looked at him with so much astonishment that Mr. Sweet felt called upon to explain.

"Last May Day, sir, he saw her. She was the May Queen, and he fell in love with her, I take it, on the spot. From that time until he went to London, they were inseparable. The people in Lower Cliffe could tell you of their moonlight walks on the shore, and their sails on the water; and the lodge-keepers could tell you many a tale of their rambles in the park under the trees. Sir Roland knew it all, but he took good care to keep silent, and I believe but for him, Mr. Leicester would never have accepted my lady's invitation, and gone up that time to London."

Still the colonel stood looking at him in stern inquiry.

"The evening before he went, sir, I chanced to be strolling about under the trees down there near the Nun's Grave, when I happened to hear voices, and, looking through the branches, I saw Mr. Leicester and Barbara together, exchanging vows of love and promising everlasting fidelity. He told her—he almost swore—he would marry her secretly when he came back, and they would fly to America, or some other distant place; and then, not wishing to be an eavesdropper, I hurried from the spot."

"Well," said Colonel Shirley, his stern eye still immov-

ably fixed on his companion, "and how came Barbara to marry you after all this?"

"For spite, sir! A woman would sell her soul for spite; and I, I loved her so well that I was only too happy to marry her, no matter what was the motive."

Again Mr. Sweet's handkerchief came in requisition, and Colonel Shirley seized the bell-rope and rang a violent peal. The valet appeared.

"Hurst, bring my breakfast immediately, and order round my horse and another for this gentleman."

Hurst flew to obey. The lawyer used his handkerchief, and the colonel strode up and down unceasingly, until breakfast appeared. Mr. Sweet was invited to take a seat, which he did, and despite his illness and his bereavement, drank the strong coffee and ate the buttered waffles with infinite relish. But the colonel neither ate nor drank; and throwing a large military cloak over his evening costume, imperatively ordered him to come out, mount, and follow him.

"Where to, sir?" Mr. Sweet took the liberty of inquiring.

"To your house, sir," the colonel answered, sternly.

"You do not doubt what I told you, Colonel?"

"I shall investigate the matter myself," reiterated the colonel, coldly.

"And after that, sir?" again Mr. Sweet ventured.

"After that, sir?" cried the colonel, turning his pale face and flashing eyes full on his companion. "After that, I shall search for them, if it be to the ends of the earth! And if, when they are found, things should turn out as I more than half suspect, you, Mr. Sweet, had better look to yourself! Now, come on!"

With this last abrupt order, given in the same ringing tone of command with which, in former days, he had headed many a gallant charge, the colonel dashed spurs into his horse and galloped down the avenue.

Mr. Sweet followed and kept up to him as best he could, in silence; for he had enough to do to keep up within sight of his reckless leader, without thinking of talking.

Early as the hour was, Cliftonlea was up and doing; and the people stared with all their eyes as the two riders dashed past.

The lawyer's house was soon gained, and the Indian

officer was storming at the knocker as if he thought it was an enemy's fortress. Elizabeth answered the appalling clatter, so terrified by the noise that she was likely to drop ; and the colonel strode in and caught her by the arm.

"Is this the servant you spoke of, Mr. Sweet ?"

"This is the servant, sir," said Mr. Sweet.

And Elizabeth's mouth flew open, and her complexion turned sea-green with terror.

"My good girl, you need not be frightened. I am not going to hurt you. I merely want you to answer me a few questions. What time did your master leave home yesterday afternoon ?"

"Please, sir," gasped Elizabeth, quaking all over, "it were nigh onto seven o'clock. I know I was in the hall when he went out, and the clock struck seven a little after."

"Was your mistress at home then ?"

"Please, sir, yes. She was in the parlor."

"Who was with her ?"

"Please, sir, nobody. It was after that he came."

"Who came ?"

"Young Mr. Cliffe, please, sir—Mr. Leicester."

"How long did he stay ?"

"Please sir, a good long while. Him and missis was a-talking in the parlor ; and it was after dark when he went away."

"Did your mistress go with him ? Did he go alone ?"

"Please, sir, yes. And missis she come out all dressed in her bonnet and shawl, a little after, and went out the back way ; and she ain't never come back since."

"Do you know which way she went ?"

"Please, sir, no ; I don't. I don't know nothing else," said Elizabeth, putting her apron to her countenance, and beginning to whimper.

It was quite evident she did not. The colonel dropped a gold coin into her hand, went out, remounted, followed in silence still by Elizabeth's master.

"To Cliffewood ?" was the second sententious order.

And again away they galloped over "brake, bush, and scar," to the great mental and physical discomfort of one of them at least.

A rumor of the extraordinary events going on at the

castle had reached Cliffewood, and a flock of curious servants met them as they entered. The colonel singled out one of them—Sir Roland's confidential attendant; and he followed the two gentlemen into the drawing-room.

"Edwards," he began, "what time did Mr. Leicester leave here for the castle yesterday? Sir Roland, you know, came early, and he remained behind."

"I know, sir. It was about sunset Mr. Leicester left I think."

"He was out all day. Did he dress, or did he leave in what he had worn previously?"

"No, sir. He was in full evening dress."

"Did he walk or ride?"

"He left here on foot, sir."

"Do you know which way he went?"

"Yes, sir. He took the road direct to the town."

"And you have not seen or heard of him since?"

"No, sir."

The colonel turned as abruptly as before, and strode out, followed still by the mute lawyer.

"To Lower Cliffe!" came again the order.

And once more they were dashing through the town, on and on, until they reached the road that turned off toward the village. Here the horses were left at the Cross Roads Inn—an inn where, many a time and oft, Leicester Cliffe had left his gallant gray, when going to visit Barbara; and they struck down the rocky footpath that led to the cottage. The wonderful news had created as much sensation in the village as the town, and curious faces came to the doors and windows as they passed, and watched them eagerly until they vanished under Peter Black's roof-tree.

The cottage looked unusually tidy, and three gentlemen stood near one of the windows conversing earnestly; and in those three the new-comers recognized Mr. Jones, the town apothecary; Squire Channing, the village magistrate; and in the third, no less an individual than the Bishop of Cliftonlea.

This latter august personage held in his hand a paper which he had been diligently perusing; and with it in his hand, he came forward to address the colonel.

"Ah! you've come at last. I feared our messenger would scarcely find you in time."

"What messenger?"

"Joe, the gamekeeper's son. Did you not see him?"

"No. What did you want of me?"

"That wretched old woman," said the bishop, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the door of Judith's bed-chamber, "recovered her speech and her senses during the night, as many do at the point of death; for she is dying, and became frantic in her entreaties for a clergyman and a magistrate. Considering the matter, I could do no less than come myself; Mr. Channing accompanied me, and Mr. Jones followed shortly after, but too late to be of any service. The woman is at the point of death."

"And what did she want?"

"To make a dying deposition concerning the truth of the story Mr. Sweet told you last night. She stated the case clearly and distinctly. Here it is in black and white; and she was most anxious to see you. We sent the gamekeeper's son in search of you; and Providence must have sent you, since Joe has not succeeded in finding you. Come in at once. There is no time to lose."

The colonel followed him into the chamber. Old Judith lay on the bed, her eyes restless, and the gray shadow of coming death over her face. The prelate bent over her in his urbane way.

"My good woman, here is Colonel Shirley."

The eyes, dulling in death, turned from their restless wandering and fixed themselves on the colonel's face.

"It is true!" she whispered, hoarsely. "It is all true. I am sorry for it now, but I changed them; Barbara is your child. It drove her mad, and I'm dying with it all on my guilty soul."

She stopped speaking suddenly; her face turned livid; the death-rattle sounded in her throat; she half sprang up, and fell back dead.

Colonel Shirley stood for a moment horror-struck, and then turned and hastily left the room. If one lingering doubt remained on his mind, concerning the truth of the story, it had all vanished now.

"She has gone," said the bishop, addressing his companions. "It is useless remaining longer here. Let us go."

They all left the house, and bent their steps in the di-

rection of the park gates. The colonel, the bishop, and the magistrate, going first ; the lawyer and the apothecary following.

"Have you seen this old woman's son—this Peter Black?" asked Colonel Shirley, as they walked along.

"No!" said Mr. Channing. "The nurse mentioned that he had not been seen since yesterday evening."

"Is it true about this elopement" asked the bishop, in a low voice.

"Quite true."

"How dreadful it all is, and yet, how calmly you bear it, Cliffe?"

The colonel turned on him a look—a look that answered him without words—and they walked on in silence. When the bishop spoke again, it was in an uncommonly subdued tone.

"How are Sir Roland and Lady Agnes, this morning? I should have been up to see, but for——"

The sentence was never finished. A yell broke the silence—a yell to which an Indian war-whoop was as nothing; and out from among the trees burst Joe, the gamekeeper's son, with a face of ghastly whiteness, hair standing on end, and eyes starting from their sockets. At sight of them, another yell which he was setting up seemed to freeze on his lips, and he, himself, stood stock-still, rooted to the spot. At the same instant, Squire Channing set up an echoing shout:

"There goes Tom Shirley! Look how he runs!"

They looked; bursting out from the trees, in another direction, was a tall figure, its black hair flowing. It vanished again, almost as soon as it appeared, into a by-path; and they turned their attention to the seemingly horror-struck young person before them.

"What is the matter? What has frightened you, my boy?" asked the bishop.

"Oh, my lord! Oh, Colonel! Oh, Colonel!" gasped Joe, almost paralyzed, "he's dead! he's killed! he's murdered!"

The three gentlemen looked at each other, and then, in wonder, at Joe.

"He's up here on the Nun's Grave; he is, with his head all smashed to pieces. Come quick and see!"

They followed him up the avenue, into the by-path, under the gloomy elms, to the forsaken spot.

A figure lay there, on its face, its hat off, a horrible gash on the back of the head, where it had been felled down from behind—its own fair brown hair, and the grass around soaked in blood.

Though the face was hidden in the dust, the moment they saw it they knew who it was, and all recoiled as if struck back by a giant hand.

It was the colonel who recovered first, and, stooping, he raised the body, and turned the face to the garish sunlight. The blood that had rained down from the gash in the head had discolored it all, but they knew it—knew that, on the spot where he had prayed for a short life if he proved false, Leicester Cliffe lay cold and dead.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HOUSE OF SORROW.

MURDERED! there could be no doubt of it. This, then, was where the bridegroom was. While they had been accusing him in their thoughts and vowing future vengeance, he had been lying here, assassinated by some unknown hand. The faces of all had whitened with horror at the sight; but Colonel Shirley, whose stern calmness nothing seemed able to move, lifted his head an instant after, with a face that looked as if changed to stone.

“A horrible murder has been done here! My boy,” turning to Joe, whose teeth were chattering in his head, “how and when did you discover this?”

“It were just now, sir,” replied Joe, keeping far from the body, and looking at it in intensest terror. “My lord and Mr. Channing, they sent me up to the castle a-looking for you, sir, and you wasn’t there; and I was a-coming back to tell them, so I was, down this way, which it’s a short-cut to Lower Cliffe, and as I got here, I saw a man standing up and looking down on this here, which it were Mr. Tom Shirley, as I knowed the minute I seen

him. Then, sir, he turned round, and when he saw me, he ran away ; and then I saw him lying there, all over blood, and I got frightened and ran away, too ; and then I met you ; and that's everything I know about it."

"Can Tom Shirley be the murderer?" asked the bishop, in a low, deep voice.

"Circumstances, at least, are strong enough against him to warrant his arrest," said Mr. Channing. "As a magistrate, I feel it my duty to go in search of him before he escapes."

He hurried away as he spoke ; and the colonel, taking off his large military cloak, spread it on the ground.

"Help me to place the body on this," he said, quietly ; and, with the assistance of Mr. Sweet, the still bleeding form was laid upon it and covered from the mocking sunlight in its folds. Then, at another motion from the colonel, the apothecary and the lawyer lifted it by the lower ends, while he himself took the head, and they slowly turned with their dreadful burden toward the house. Joe followed at a respectful distance, still with an excessively scared and horrified visage.

Mr. Channing had, meantime, been making an arrest. Getting over the ground with tremendous sweeps of limb, he had nearly reached the house, thinking to call the servants to aid him in his search, when he espied a tall, dark figure leaning against a tree, one arm thrown over a high branch, and the head, with all its dark curls, bare to the morning breeze, lying thereon.

The magistrate went up and dropped his hand heavily on the shoulder of the drooping figure, and Tom Shirley lifted his face and looked at him.

What a face! What a change in a few brief days! Usually it was red enough and bold enough ; but now it was almost ghastly in its thinness and pallor. The face of the murdered man could scarcely have been more corpse-like, the black hair heightening the effect, as it hung damp and disordered around it, and the black eyes looking unnaturally large and sunken. Nothing, Mr. Channing thought, but remorse for some enacted crime could have wrought so vivid a change ; but then, perhaps Mr. Channing had never been in love—at all events, so crazily in love—and been jilted, like poor Tom Shirley.

"Well?" said Tom, in a voice as hollow and changed, and unnatural, as his face.

"Mr. Shirley, it is my painful duty to arrest you."

Tom sprang erect as if some one had struck him.

"Arrest me! What do you mean?"

"Mr. Shirley, I am very sorry; but duty must be fulfilled, and it is mine to make you my prisoner."

"Your prisoner, sir!" exclaimed Tom, in something like his customary tone, shaking him off as if he had been a baby. "On what charge?"

"On that of murdering your cousin, Leicester Cliffe."

Tom stood perfectly still—stunned. A volley of fierce words that had been rising hotly to his lips seemed to freeze there. His face turned dark red, and then whiter than before, and the arm he had raised dropped powerless by his side. Whatever the emotion which prompted the display, the magistrate set it down to one cause—guilt—and again laid his hand firmly on the young man's shoulder.

"I regret it, Tom, but it must be done. I beg you will not offer any resistance, but will come with me peaceably to the house. Ah! there they go with the body now."

Tom compressed his lips and lifted up his head.

"I will go with you, Mr. Channing. It matters very little what becomes of me, one way or the other."

He raised his hat from the ground, to which it had fallen, and they walked on together, side by side. The body was borne before them into the morning-room, and through that into a smaller one, used by Vivia as a studio. It was strewn with easels, blank canvas, busts, and lay figures, and on a low couch therein their burden was laid. The cloak was removed. The colonel sent one of the servants in search of the physician, who had remained all night in the house, sternly warning the rest not to let a word of the event reach the ears of Lady Agnes or the young ladies. Hurst brought in warm water and sponge, and the blood was washed off the dead face. It was perfectly calm; there was no distortion to mar its almost womanly beauty, or to show that he had suffered in the last struggle. The blue eyes were wide open in the cold glaze of death; and the bishop, bending down, had just closed them reverently, as the physician came in.

The examination that followed was brief. The blow had evidently been given by a thick club, and he had been struck but once, death following almost instantaneously. The deed, too, from the appearance of the wound, must have been committed some hours previously; for the blood on his clothes was thickly clotted and dry.

In silence they left the studio and gathered together in the morning-room. The colonel had warned the servants to keep quiet; but who ever knew warnings to avail in such cases? Half a dozen gentlemen, the guests who had remained in the house the previous night, had been told, and were there already. The magistrate had taken a seat of authority, and prepared to hold a sort of inquest and investigate the matter. The prisoner stood near a window, drawn up to his full height, with folded arms, looking particularly proud and especially scornful, guarded by Messrs. Sweet and Jones. The colonel took a seat, and motioned the rest to follow his example; and Mr. Channing desired Hurst, keeping sentry at the door, to call in Joe.

Joe, standing in the hall, telling his story over and over again to a curious crowd of servants, came in, looking scared as ever, and told his tale once more, keeping to the same facts steadily, in spite of any amount of cross-questioning.

When this first witness was dismissed, the bishop turned to the prisoner.

"Tom, what have you to say to all this?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Is what this boy says true? Did he really discover you by the body?"

"He did."

"And why, if you are not guilty, should you fly at his approach?"

"I did nothing of the sort. Joe makes a mistake there, for I never saw him at all."

"And how do you account for your presence there?"

"Very simply, sir, I chanced to be walking through the grounds, and came to that particular spot by mere accident."

"How long had you been there when Joe discovered you?"

"I did not remain five minutes altogether. I saw and recognized who it was, and when I recovered from the first shock of horror, I turned and fled to give the alarm."

Mr. Channing leaned over and spoke in a low voice to Colonel Shirley.

"Some one told me, when here last evening, that the prisoner had been absent for several days—is it true?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Shirley," said the magistrate, speaking aloud, "you have been absent for the past week—will you inform us where?"

"I have been absent," said Tom, coldly. "I have been in Cliftonlea."

"Where?"

"At the Cliffe Arms."

"Why were you not at home?"

"I decline answering that question, sir."

"Were you in the town last night?"

"No, sir. I was on the grounds."

Everybody looked at each other blankly. Tom stood up, haughty and defiant, evidently perfectly reckless of what he admitted.

"It is very strange," said Mr. Channing, slowly, "that you should have been there instead of in the house here—your proper place. What reasons had you for such a course?"

"I decline answering, that question, too. I decline," said Tom, with compressed lips and flashing eyes, "answering any more questions whatever. My motives are my own, and you nor any one else shall ever hear them!"

There was very little need for Tom to make his motives known. Not one present—the colonel, perhaps, alone excepted—but knew how madly he had been in love with his cousin, and that his furious jealousy of the accepted lover had driven him from home. All knew his violent temper, too; his fierce outbursts of passion; and believing him guilty, not one of them needed to be told the cause of his prowling about the grounds in secret last night.

Dead silence followed, broken by a rap at the door. Hurst opened it, and the gamekeeper entered, carrying in his hand a great bludgeon, all stained with blood and thickly matted tufts of hair.

"Gentlemen," said the man, coming forward and bowing, "this here is what did the deed! I found it lying among the marsh grass, where it had been chucked. You can see the blood and the hairs sticking in it. I know the stick very well. I have seen it lying down there near the Nun's Grave fifty times."

The gentlemen examined the stick—a murderous-looking bludgeon, full of great knobs and knots—capable, in a strong hand, of felling an ox.

"And, gentlemen," continued the gamekeeper, "I have something else to say. Last evening, about half-past eight, as I was standing down near the park gates, I saw Mr. Leicester come through, walking very fast. I thought, of course, he was going up to the castle, and had come through Lower Cliffe by way of a short cut."

"Was he alone?" asked Mr. Channing.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see any one following him!"

"I didn't wait to see, sir. Me and some more went up to see the fireworks, and that was the last I saw of him."

"I think the facts are quite strong enough to warrant the committal of the accused," said Mr. Channing to the colonel.

"I think so," was the cold reply.

And the warrant of committal was made out immediately. Then there was a general uprising; a carriage was ordered, and Mr. Channing approached Tom.

"I am sorry—I am very sorry—but——"

"Don't distress yourself, Mr. Channing," said Tom, cynically. "I am ready to go with you at any moment."

The bishop came over, and began, in his urbane way, some pious admonition; to which Tom listened as unmoved as if he were talking Greek.

The carriage came round to the door, and he and Mr. Channing turned to go. One glance he cast back toward the colonel; but he was standing with his face averted; and Tom passed the great portico of Castle Cliffe, the home of his boyhood, for the last time, and in five minutes was on his way to Cliftonlea jail, to be tried for his life on a charge of willful murder.

And still the news fled; and while the examination was going on below, it had been whispered, upstairs and

downstairs, and had reached the ears of her who should have been the last to hear it.

As all slowly dispersed from the morning-room, the colonel turned into the studio to take one last look at what lay there, and found that another had preceded him. Besides the door of communication with the morning-room, the studio had another opening in the hall. It stood wide now; and standing over the rigid form, gazing at it as if the sight were slowly turning her to marble, was Vivia.

"Vivia! Vivia!" cried the colonel, in horror. "Why are you here?"

She turned and lifted her eyes; and the next moment, without word or cry, she had fallen back senseless in his arms.

It was the first time in his life he had ever seen Vivia faint. She was of too sanguine a temperament for that; and he nearly tore the bell down in his frantic summons for help, as he quitted the room of death and carried her up to her chamber. Jeannette came in dismay, with smelling-salts and cologne; and leaving her in her charge, the colonel went out. In the hall he was encountered by Margaret, looking like everybody else, pale and wild.

"Is it true? What is this story they are telling? Has Leicester Cliffe been murdered?"

"Margaret, go to your room! It is no story for you to hear!"

"I must hear!" exclaimed Margaret, in a suppressed voice, her dark eyes filling with a dusky fire. "Tell me, or I shall die!"

He looked at her in wonder.

"Margaret, you are ill. You look like a ghost! Do go to your own room and lie down."

"Will you tell me, or shall I go and see for myself?"

"If you will hear such horrors, it is quite true. He has been murdered!"

"And they have arrested some one for it," she hoarsely whispered.

"They have arrested Tom Shirley."

She clasped both hands over her heart, and a spasm crossed her face.

"And do you believe him guilty?"

"I do," he coldly and sternly said.

She sank down with a sort of cry.

But he had other things to think of besides her ; and he left her leaning against the wall, her hands still clasped over her heart, and her face working in a sort of inward anguish. So she stood for nearly an hour, without moving, and then Jeannette came out of the Rose Room crying and wiping her eyes, followed by Vivia, who seemed to have no tears to shed.

"You ought to lie down, and be nursed yourself, mademoiselle, instead of going to nurse other people," cried the attendant. "You are hardly fit to stand now."

"It will not be long, Jeannette," said Vivia, wearily. "All my labors here will soon be at an end."

"Your grandmamma won't see you, either ; so your going is of no use. Hortense told me that she gave orders you were not to be admitted to her room."

It was quite true. In the revulsion of feeling that followed the awakening from her hysteria, Lady Agnes had been seized with a violent aversion to seeing her once almost idolized granddaughter. She could no longer think of her without also thinking of her connection with some wretched old woman in Lower Cliffe and a returned convict. She felt—unjustly enough—as if Vivia had been imposing on her all her life, and that she never wanted to see her again. And so when Hortense opened the door in answer to the well-known gentle tap, Vivia was quietly and firmly refused admittance, and the door civilly shut in her face.

It was only one more blow added to the rest—only fulfilling the rude but expressive adage, "When a dog is drowning, every one offers him water ;" but Vivia tottered as she received it, and stood for a moment clinging to the stair balustrade for support, with everything swimming around her. Then this too, passed, as all blows do, and she walked back, almost tottering as she went, to her own room,

Even there, still another blow awaited her. Margaret stood in the middle of the floor, her face livid, her eyes blazing.

"Oh, Margaret !" was Vivia's cry, as she dropped her head on her shoulder.

But Margaret thrust her off with repulsion.

"Don't touch me—don't !" she said, in the same suppressed voice. "You murderess !"

Vivia had been standing looking at her as a deer does with a knife at its throat, but at the terrible word she dropped into a seat, as if the last blow she could ever receive had fallen.

"You!" said Margaret, with her pitiless black eyes seeming to scorch into her face, and her voice frightful in its depth of suppressed passion—"you, who have walked all your life over our heads with a ring and a clatter—you, who are nothing, after all, but a pitiful upstart—you who have been the curse of my life and of all who have ever known you! I tell you, you are a double murderess! for not only is his blood on your head—he who lies down there a ghastly corpse, but another who will die on the scaffold for your crime!"

The corpse downstairs could scarcely have looked more ghastly than did Vivia herself at that moment. Her white lips parted to speak, but no sound came forth.

Pitilessly Margaret went on:

"You, who stood so high and queenly in your pride, could stoop to lure and wile, like any other coquette!—could win hearts by your false smiles, and then cast them in scorn from your feet! I tell you, I despise you! I hate you! You have brought disgrace and ruin on him, on all connected with you, and you have broken my heart!"

"Oh, Margaret! have you no mercy?"

"None for such as you! I loved him—I loved him with my whole heart, ten thousand times better than you ever could, and you had no mercy on me. You won his heart, and then cast it from you as a child does a broken toy!"

"Margaret, listen to me. I will be heard! I know you loved Leicester, but it was not my fault that——"

Margaret broke into a hysterical laugh.

"Loved Leicester! Is she a fool as well as a miserable jilt? Oh, you might have married him with all my heart!"

"And who, then—— Margaret, is it possible you are speaking of Tom Shir——"

"No!" cried Margaret, holding out her hands, with a sort of scream, "not his name from your lips! Oh, I loved him, you know it well! and now he is to be tried for his life, and all through you! Murderess you are—a

double murderess! for if he dies it will be through you, as much as if you placed the rope around his neck!"

Vivia had dropped down, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Margaret, spare me! Oh, what have I done—what have I done, that all should turn from me like this? Margaret, I am going away. I am going back to my convent in France, where I shall never trouble you nor anybody else again. All the world has turned against me; but there, at least, I can go and die!"

"Go, then; the sooner the better. You are no longer needed here."

"Oh, I know it! All have turned against me—all whom I love; and I would die for them. Even you, Margaret, might forgive me now."

"Ask forgiveness from God! I never will forgive you!"

Vivia's head dropped down on the arm of the chair.

Margaret left her, sought her room, and appeared no more that day.

In the gray dawn of the next morning, when the first train went shrieking from the Cliftonlea depot, on its way to London, a slight, girlish figure, shrouded in a long mantle and closely veiled, glided in, took a seat in a remote corner, and was borne swiftly away from the home to which she had returned so short a time before like a triumphant queen, which she now left like a stealthy culprit.

That same morning, Colonel Shirley found a brief note lying on his dressing-table, that moved him more than all the strange and tragical events of the past two days:

"DEAR PAPA:—Let me call you so this once, for the last time. When you read this, I shall be far away, but I could not go without saying good-bye. I am going back to my dear France, to my dear convent, where I was so happy, and I shall strive to atone by a life of penance for the misery I have caused you all to suffer. Dear, dear papa, I shall love you and pray for you always, and I know, much as you have been wronged, you will not quite forget

"VIVIA."

She, too, was lost! Down below, Leicester Cliffe lay dead. Tom Shirley was in a felon's cell. In his room, Sir Roland lay ill unto death. Lady Agnes and Margaret, shut up in their own apartments, never came out; and Colonel Shirley was left utterly alone. Truly, Castle Cliffe was a house of mourning.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PRISONER.

THE August roses were in full bloom, in the scorching heat of early afternoon, within a pretty garden, in a pretty village, some miles from London, as a light wagon, holding two gentlemen, drove through the wooden gates, and up a shaded avenue, toward a large brick building. The gentlemen—one, tall and handsome, with a grand, kingly sort of face, and dark, grave eyes; the other, middle-sized, but looking puny compared with his companion, a very shining personage, with yellow tinsel hair, wearing a bright buff waistcoat, and a great profusion of jewelry—alighted before the principal entrance. A stout little gentleman, standing on the steps awaiting them, ran down at their approach, and shook hands with this latter, in the manner of an old friend.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Sweet. It is a sight for sair een' as the Scotch say, to see you again."

"Thank you, doctor," said the tinsel individual. "This is the gentleman I told you of. Doctor South, Colonel Shirley."

The doctor bowed low, and the colonel raised his hat.

"You are welcome, Colonel. I presume you have come to see my unfortunate patient, Mrs. Wildman."

"I have. We can see her, I hope."

"Oh, certainly, poor thing! A very quiet case, hers, but quite endurable. Most cases of melancholy madness are. This way, if you please."

Leading them through a long hall, the doctor ascended a staircase, entered a corridor, with a long array of doors on either hand, followed by his two companions.

"My female patients are all on this side," he said, unlocking one of the doors, and again leading the way into another, with neat little sleeping-rooms on each side, and, finally, into a large, long apartment, with the summer sunshine coming pleasantly through two high windows, grated without, filled with women of all ages. Some sat peaceably knitting and sewing; some were walking up and down; some sat talking to themselves; but the colonel was astonished to see how comparatively quiet they all were. His eye wandered round in search of her he had come to see, and it rested and lingered at last on one sitting close to a window, who neither moved nor looked up at their entrance, but remained gazing vacantly out, and slowly and continually wringing her hands. A pallid and faded creature with dim, fair hair, cut short like a child's and streaking her furrowed forehead; a thin wan face, pitiable in its quiet hopelessness, the light-blue eyes vacant and dull, and the poor fingers she twisted continually, nothing but skin and bone. Yet, as Colonel Shirley looked, his thoughts went back to a certain stormy night, eighteen years before, when a pretty, fair-haired woman had kissed and cried over his little child; and he recognized this faded shadow instantly. The doctor went over, and patted her lightly on the shoulder.

"Mrs. Wildman, my dear, look round. Here is a gentleman come to see you."

The woman turned her pale, pinched face, and looked up in a hopeless sort of way, in the pitying eyes of the Indian officer.

"Have you brought her back?" she asked mournfully. "She sent her away; my little Barbara; my only child—my only child!"

"She keeps that up continually," said the doctor, with an intelligent nod to the colonel. "Nobody ever can get anything out of her but that."

"I wish you would bring her back to me!" said the imbecile, still looking in the same hopeless way at her visitor. "She sent her away—my little Barbara—and I loved her so much! Do go and bring her back!"

The colonel sat down beside her and took one of the wasted hands in his, with a look that was infinitely kind and gentle.

"Who was it sent her away—your little Barbara?"

"She did! The one she kept was the gentleman's child, and it was always crying and troublesome, and not kind and good like my little Barbara. I wish you would go and bring her back. It is so lonesome here without her; and she was my only child, my only child!"

"I told you so," said the doctor, with another nod. "You won't get her beyond that if you keep at her till doomsday!"

"Where did she send her to?" asked the colonel; but the woman only looked at him vacantly.

"She sent her away," she repeated, "and kept the gentleman's child—the tall gentleman that was so handsome, and gave me the money. But she sent away my little Barbara; my only child, my only child! Oh! won't somebody go and bring her back?"

The colonel bent over her, took her other hand, and looked steadfastly into the dull eyes.

"Mrs. Wildman, do you not know me? I am the gentleman who left the child."

She looked at him silently; but her gaze was listless and without meaning.

"Your little Barbara has grown up—is a young lady, beautiful and accomplished—do you understand?"

No; she did not. She only turned away her eyes, with a little weary sigh, very sad to hear, and murmured over again:

"Oh! I wish somebody would bring her back! She was my only child, my only child!"

"It's all useless," interposed the doctor. "No earthly power will ever get her beyond that. Hers is a case quite harmless and quite hopeless."

Colonel Shirley arose, and pressed something he took out of his waistcoat-pocket into the doctor's hand.

"Be good to her, Doctor. Poor creature!"

"Thank you, Colonel," said the doctor, glancing with infinite complacency at the bank-note for fifty pounds. "She shall have the best of care. Perhaps you would like to go over the whole establishment?"

"Not to-day, I think. We must catch the two o'clock train back to London."

The doctor led the way downstairs, and bowed them obsequiously out.

Only one sentence was spoken as they drove rapidly down to the depot.

"Poor thing! she is greatly changed, but looks like Miss—Vivia," Mr. Sweet had said, and had received a look in answer that effectually silenced him for the rest of the way.

Next day, when the early afternoon train from London came steaming into Cliftonlea, Colonel Shirley and Mr. Sweet got out and walked up to the town. The latter gentleman speedily turned off in the direction of his own house, and the colonel walked with a grave face up High Street, turning neither to the right nor the left, until he stood knocking at the principal entrance of the town jail. The turnkey who opened it opened his eyes, too; for, during the two months his young relative had been a lodger there, the colonel had not come once to visit him.

All Cliftonlea was in a state of ferment; for the assizes were on, and Tom Shirley's trial would begin to-morrow; and setting his visit down to this cause, the turnkey admitted him.

There was no difficulty in obtaining the desired interview, and in a few minutes a ponderous key was turning in a ponderous lock, a strong door swung open, the colonel was in the prison cell, listening to the re-locking of the door without, and the retreating steps of the jailer.

The cell was as dismal as could be desired, and as empty of furniture, holding but a bed, a chair, and a table; but the August sunshine came just as brightly through the little grated square of light as it did through the plate-glass of Castle Cliffe, and lay broad, and bright, and warm on the stone floor.

The prisoner sat beside the table, reading a little book bound in gold and purple velvet, that looked odd enough in the dreary cell. It was a gift, prized hitherto for the sake of the giver—a little French testament, with "To Cousin Tom, with Vivia's love," written in a delicate Italian hand on the fly-leaf; but of late days Tom had learned to prize it for a sake far higher.

He rose at sight of his visitor, looking very thin, very pale, very quiet, and both stood gazing at each other for a few seconds in silence.

"Is it really Colonel Shirley?" said Tom, at last, with

just a shade of sarcasm in his tone. "This is indeed an unexpected honor."

"You do not need to ask, Tom, why I have never been here before," said the colonel, whose face, always pale lately, had grown even a shade paler.

"Scarcely. Do me the honor to be seated, and let me know to what I am indebted for this visit."

He presented his chair with formal politeness as he spoke; but his visitor only availed himself of it to lean one hand lightly on its back and the other on the young man's shoulder.

"Tom," he said, looking earnestly and searchingly at him, "I have come here to ask you one question, and I want you to answer it truthfully before God! Are you innocent?"

"It is late to ask that question," said Tom, disdainfully.

"Answer it, Tom!"

"Excuse me, sir. The very question is an insult."

"Tom, for Heaven's sake, do not stand balancing hairs with me! You always were the soul of honor and candor, and, late as it is, if you will only tell me, in the face of Heaven, you are innocent, I will believe you."

Tom's honest black eyes, that never quailed before mortal man, rose boldly and truthfully to the speaker's face.

"Before Heaven," he said, solemnly raising his arm and dropping it on the purple book, "as I shall have to answer to God, I am innocent!"

"Enough!" said the colonel, taking his hand in a firm grasp. "I believe you, with all my heart! My dear boy, forgive me for ever thinking you guilty for a moment."

"Don't ask it! How could you help thinking me guilty, in the face of all this circumstantial evidence? But sit down, and let me look at you. It is good to see a friend's face again. You have been getting thin and pale, colonel."

"I am afraid I must return the compliment. I see only the shadow of the ruddy, boisterous Tom Shirley of old."

Tom smiled and pushed back in a careless way his exuberant black curls.

"Nothing very odd in that, sir. Solitude and prison fare are not the best things I ever heard of for putting a man in good condition. How goes the world outside?"

"Much as usual. Have you no visitors, then?"

"None to speak of. A few mere acquaintances came out of curiosity, but I declined to see them; and as my friends," said Tom, with another smile that had very much of sadness in it, "thought me guilty, and held aloof, I have been left pretty much to my own devices."

"Your trial comes on to-morrow?"

"It does."

"You have engaged counsel, of course?"

"Yes; one of the best advocates in England. But his anticipations, I am afraid, are not over brilliant."

"The evidence is very strong, certainly, although merely circumstantial, but——"

"But better men than I have been condemned on circumstantial evidence. I know it," said Tom, very quietly.

"What do you anticipate yourself?"

"Unless Providence should interpose and send the real murderer forward to make a clean breast of it, I anticipate a very speedy termination of my mortal cares."

"And you can speak of it like this! You are indeed changed, Tom."

"Colonel," said Tom, gravely, "when a man sits within four stone walls like this for two months, with a prospect of death before him, he must be something more than human not to change. I have had at least one constant visitor, the bishop; and though I am perfectly certain he believes me guilty, he has done me good; and this small book has helped the work. Had I anything to bind me very strongly to life, it would be different; but there is nothing much in the outer world I care for, and so, let the result be what it may, I think I shall meet it quietly. If one had a choice in so delicate a matter"—with another smile—"I might, perhaps, prefer a different mode of leaving this world; but what can't be cured—you know the proverb. Don't let us talk of it. How is Lady Agnes?"

"Well in body, but ill in mind. She is shut up in her room, and I never see her."

"And Margaret?"

"Margaret followed her example. Sir Roland is laid up again with the gout at Cliftonwood."

"Castle Cliffe must be a dreary place. I wonder you can stay there."

"I shall be there but a short time now. My old regiment is ordered abroad for active service, and as soon as your trial is over, I shall rejoin it."

Tom's eyes lighted, his face flushed hotly, and then turned to its former pale and sickly color.

"Oh, that I——" he began, and then stopped short. But he was understood.

"I wish to Heaven it were possible, Tom; but, whatever happens, we must content ourselves with the cry of the old crusaders, 'God wills it!' You must learn, as we all have to, the great lesson of life—endurance."

Poor Tom had begun the lesson, but his face showed that he found the rudiments very bitter.

The colonel paused for a moment, and then, looking at the floor, went on, in a more subdued tone:

"Somebody else is learning it too, in the solitude of a French convent—Vivia."

Tom gave a little start at the unexpected sound of that name, and the flush came back to his face.

"You have heard from her, then?"

"I have done better—I have seen her. A shadow, a spirit, came behind the convent grating, and shook hands with me through it. She was so wan and wasted, with fasting and vigils, I suppose, that I scarcely knew her, and we talked for fifteen minutes, with the grate between us. Satisfactory—was it not?"

"Very. Has she taken the veil?"

"Not yet. No thanks to her, though. It was her wish; but the superior, knowing it was merely the natural revulsion of feeling, and that she had no settled inclination, would not permit it. Then Vivia wished to go out as a governess—think of that! But Mother Ursula would not hear of that, either. She is to make the convent her home for a year, and if, at the end of that time, she still desires it, she will be permitted to enter upon her novitiate. I will go by Paris, and see her again before I depart to join my regiment."

"Does she know——"

Tom paused.

"She knows all. She gave me this for you."

The colonel produced his pocket-book, and took from between the leaves a little twisted note.

Tom opened it, and read :

"MY BROTHER :—I know you are innocent. I love you, and pray for you every night and day. God keep you always!
VIVIA."

That was all.

Tom dropped his face on the table, without a word.

Colonel Shirley looked at him an instant, then arose.

"I shall leave you now. Remember, I have firm faith in your innocence from henceforth. Keep up a good heart, and until to-morrow, farewell."

He pressed his hand.

But Tom neither spoke nor looked up ; and the colonel went out and left him with his head lying on the wooden table and the tiny note still crushed in his hand.

CHAPTER XXX.

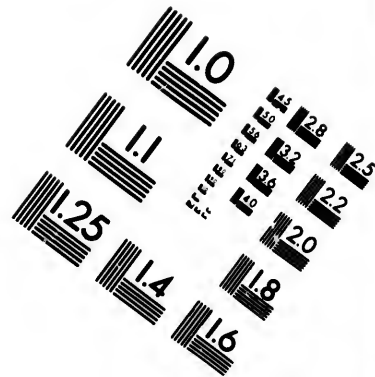
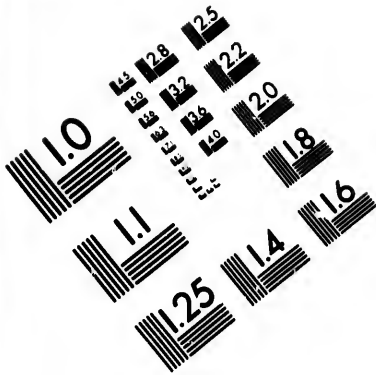
THE SENTENCE.

AT day-dawn next morning Cliftonlea was all bustle and stir ; and at ten o'clock the court-house was a perfect jam. There were troops of people down from London, who knew the Shirleys ; swarms of newspaper reporters, note-book and pencil in hand, not to speak of half the county besides. The gallery was filled with ladies, and among them glided in one in a long shrouding mantle, and wearing a thick veil ; but people knew the white face of Margaret Shirley, despite any disguise.

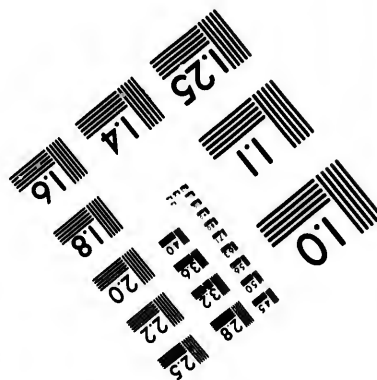
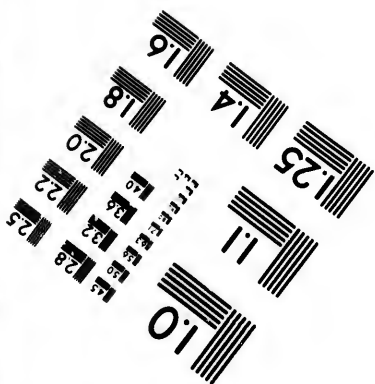
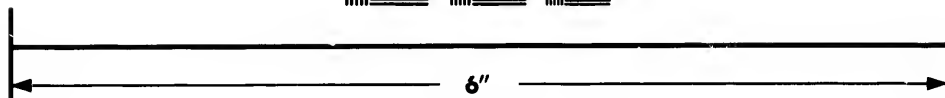
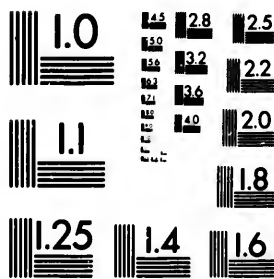
The colonel was there, and so was Sir Roland ; and so was Joe, the gamekeeper's son, looking scared beyond everything, and full of the vague notion that he stood in as much danger of hanging, himself, as the prisoner.

The prisoner did not look at all alarmed ; he sat in the dock, as he had sat in his cell the day before, pale, quiet.





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and perfectly calm, scanning the crowd with his dauntless black eyes, and meeting the gaze of all, known and unknown, with the stoicism of an Indian. Some of the reporters began sketching his face in their note-books. Tom saw it, and smiled; and the crowd set him down as a cool hand, and a guilty one.

Very few present had any doubt of his guilt—the facts that had come out at the inquest were strong against him; and there was nobody else, apparently, in the world who had the least interest in the death of the murdered man. All knew by that time how everything stood—how infatuated he had been with the young lady, and how madly jealous he was of the accepted lover. And everybody knew, too, what jealousy will make, and has made, the best of men do, from King David down; and Tom's hasty and violent temper was notorious. Worst of all, he refused to give any account of himself whatever; for the simple fact that he had no account to give that would not involve Vivia's name; and the tortures of a martyr would not have drawn that from him in a crowded court-room. After the scene in the starlight under the chestnuts, he had fled from the place and haunted Cliftonlea like a lost spirit. On the bridal-night, an insane impulse drew him back again with a relentless hand, and he had wandered up and down among the trees almost beside himself, but wholly unable to go away.

Tom could not very well have told his pitiable tale of love-sickness and insanity to a grim judge and jury; so he just held his tongue, resolved to let things take their course, almost indifferent to the issue.

Things did take their course. They always do, where those two inexorable fates, Time and Law, are in question. The case was opened in a brilliant speech by the counsel for the crown, that told hard on the prisoner, and then the witnesses were called. Joe came in requisition, and so did Mr. Sweet's Elizabeth; and it would be hard to say which of the two was the more terrified, or which cried the more before they were sent down. Mr. Sweet had to give evidence, so had Colonel Shirley, so had Sir Roland, so had the doctor, so had the gamekeeper, so had a number of other people, whom one would think had nothing to do with it. And at three o'clock the court adjourned, leaving things pretty much as they were before;

the prisoner was remanded back to his cell ; the mob went home to their dinners, and to assert confidently that before long there would be an execution in Cliftonlea.

The trial lasted three days ; and with each passing one the interest grew deeper, and the case more and more hopeless. Every day the crowd in and around the court-house grew more dense ; and always the first on the ground was the shrinking figure of the veiled lady. But on the third day, just as the case was drawing to a close, something happened that settled the last doubt in the minds of the jury, if such a thing as a doubt had ever rested there. A woman who had made her way through the crowd by dint of sharp elbows and sharper tongue, and had taken her place on the witness-stand, in a very determined and excited state of mind. The woman was Jeannette, who had followed her young lady to France, and had evidently just come back from that delightful land ; and on informing them she had taken a long journey to give important evidence, she was sworn, and asked what she had to say.

Jeannette had a good deal to say, chiefly in parenthesis, with a strong French accent, a great many *Mon Dieus*, and no punctuation marks to speak of. It appeared, however, when the evidence was shorn of all French embellishment, that on the night the deceased had returned from London (a couple of days before the one fixed for the wedding), Miss Vivia had been wandering alone in the park, where she was suddenly joined by the prisoner. She, Jeannette, had followed her young lady out to warn her against night-dews, when hearing a loud and angry voice, she halted, discreetly, at a distance, with the true instinct of her class, to listen. There she had overheard the prisoner making very loud and honest protestations of love to Miss Shirley, and when rejected, and assured by her she would marry none but Mr. Cliffe, he had burst out in such a way, that she, Jeannette, was scared pretty nearly into fits, and she was perfectly sure she had heard him threaten to murder the bridegroom-elect. Mademoiselle Jeannette further informed her audience that, believing the prisoner guilty, her conscience would not let her keep the matter secret, and it had sent her across the channel, in spite of sea-sickness, unknown to her young lady, to unburden her mind.

It was hard evidence against the prisoner ; and though Mademoiselle underwent a galling cross-examination, her testimony could not be shaken, though it left her, as it well might, in a very wild and hysterical state of mind at its close.

Colonel Shirley, standing near Tom, stooped down in dismay, and whispered :

“Have you anything to say to all this?”

“Nothing ; it is perfectly true.”

“Then your case is hopeless.”

“It has been hopeless all along,” said Tom, quietly, as Mademoiselle Jeannette descended, trembling with excitement because of the cross-examination she had undergone.

There was nothing more to be done. The evidence was summed up in one mighty mass against the prisoner, and the jury retired to find a verdict. It was not hard to find. In five minutes they were back, and the swaying and murmuring of the crowd subsided into an awful hush of expectation as the foreman arose.

“Gentlemen of the jury, is the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty of the felony with which he is charged?”

And solemnly the answer came, what everybody knew it would be :

“Guilty ! my lord.”

The judge arose with his black cap on his head. His address to the prisoner was eloquent and touching, and the crowd seemed to hush their very heart-beating to listen. There were tears in his eyes before he had done ; and his voice was tremulous as he closed with the usual ghastly formula.

“Your sentence is, that you be taken hence to the place whence you came, thence to the place of execution, to be hanged by the neck till dead, and may God have mercy on your soul !”

He sat down, but the same dead silence reigned still. It was broken at last by a sound common enough at such times—a veiled lady in the gallery had fallen forward in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL.

It was a wild night on the Sussex coast. A north wind roared over the channel—a terrible north wind, that shrieked, and raved, and lashed the waves into white fury; that tore up trees by the roots, blew off tall steeples, and filled the air with a shower of tiles and chimney-pots, and demolished frailer buildings altogether. A terrible night in Cliftonlea—the oldest inhabitant had never remembered anything like it. A terrible night in Lower Cliffe, where nobody thought of going to bed at all; for the dreadful roaring of the storm and the cannonading of the rising sea on the shore seemed to threaten entire destruction to the little village before morning. A terrible night within the park, where tall trees of a century's growth were torn up and flung aside like straws. A terrible night even within the strong walls of the old castle, where the great kitchen, and the servant's hall, and butler's pantry, and the house-keeper's room were filled with terrified footmen and house-maids; where Lady Agnes shivered as she listened to it in the ghostly solitude of her own room; where Margaret woke up, cowering and shuddering from the stupor in which she lay, and covered her eyes from the lightning, and wondered how the condemned man bore it in his prison cell.

He, sitting reading by the light of a flaring tallow candle in a little gold and purple book, lifted his pale and quiet face, and listened to it much more calmly than any of them.

Much more calmly than Colonel Shirley, pacing up and down in his own room, as the midnight hour was striking, like an uneasy ghost. It was a splendid room—splendid in green velvet and malachite, with walnut paneling and wainscotting, the furniture of massive mahogany, upholstered in green billiard-cloth, and the bed-hangings of green velvet and white satin. The same sober tints of

green and brown were repeated in the medallion carpet ; a buhl clock ticked on the carved walnut mantel, and over it a bright portrait of Vivia looked down and smiled.

There was a small armory on one side, full of Damascus swords, daggers, and poniards, pistols and muskets, eel-spears, bows and arrows, and riding-whips, all flashing in the light of a bright wood-fire burning on the marble hearth ; for though the month was August, these grand, vast old rooms were always chilly, and on this tempestuous night particularly so. A round table, on which burned two wax candles, was drawn up before the fire, and covered over with ledgers, check-books, and packages of fresher-looking documents tied up with red tape. A green cushioned arm-chair stood on either side of the table, and though they were empty now, they had not been a couple of hours previously.

In the first train to-morrow morning Colonel Shirley was leaving Cliftonlea, perhaps forever, and going where glory led him ; and he and Mr. Sweet had had a very busy afternoon and evening in settling the complicated accounts of the estate. They had finished about ten, and Mr. Sweet had gone home, despite the rising storm which was now at its height ; and ever since the colonel had been walking up and down, up and down, anxiously impatient for the morning that was to see him off.

It was the evening that had concluded Tom Shirley's trial ; and he, too, like Margaret was thinking of him in his lonely cell ; and though the lightning came blazing through the shuttered and curtained windows, and the roar of the storm, the sea, and the wind boomed an awful harmony around them, he scarcely heeded either ; and as the clock vibrated on the last silvery stroke of twelve, there was a tap at the door, and then the handle was turned, and the respectful face of Mr. Hurst looked in.

"There's a man down below, sir, that has just arrived, and he insists on seeing you. It is a matter of life or death, he says."

The colonel stopped, astonished, in his walk.

"Some one to see me on such a night ! Who is he ?"

"I don't know, sir. He looks like a sailor, in a pea-jacket and a sou'-wester hat ; but the collar of the jacket is turned up, and the hat is pulled down, and there's no seeing anything of him but his nose."

"And he said it was a matter of life or death. It ought to be, certainly, to bring him out in a night like this."

"Yes, sir. He said he would see you, if he had to search the house over for you. "He's a precious rough-looking customer, sir."

"Show him up!" was the curt reply; and Mr. Hurst bowed and withdrew.

He was leaning against the carved mantel, one elbow resting upon it, and his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the fire, when his visitor entered—a somewhat stout and not very tall man, in a large, rough pea-jacket, a shining hat of the sailor pattern, and splashed top-boots. There was more of the man splashed than his boots, for he was dripping all over like a water-god; and, as Mr. Hurst had intimated, his coat-collar was turned up, and his hat pulled down, so that, besides the nose, nothing was visible but a pair of fierce eyes.

This nocturnal intruder took the precaution to turn the key in the lock as soon as the valet disappeared, and then came slowly forward and stood before the colonel.

"Well, my friend," said that gentleman, quietly, "you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did."

"On a matter of importance, my servant said."

"If it warn't important," said the man, gruffly, "it ain't very likely I'd come here to tell it to you on a night that ain't fit for a mad dog to be out. It's something you'd give half your estates to learn, Colonel Shirley, or I'm mistaken."

"Out with it, then; and, in the meantime, suppose you sit down."

His visitor drew up one of the green arm-chairs closer to the hearth, and dropping into it, without, however, removing his hat, spread out his splashed top-boots to the genial influence of the hot wood fire. There was something familiar about the man, in his burly figure, rough voice, and fierce eyes; but the colonel could not remember where he had seen the man before; and a long silence followed, during which the man in the top-boots looked at the fire, the colonel looked at him, the lightning flashed, the wind shrieked, and the portrait of Vivia smiled down on all. At last:

"If you merely wish to warm yourself, my friend,"

said the colonel, composedly, "I presume there is a fire in the servants' hall. Allow me to inform you that it is past twelve, and I have a long journey to commence to-morrow morning."

"You'll commence no journey to-morrow morning!" the man in the pea-jacket coolly said.

"Indeed! Suppose, for politeness' sake, you remove that hat, and let me see the face of the gentleman who makes so extraordinary an assertion."

"Just you hold on a minute, and you'll see my face soon enough! As I said, it's a matter of life or death brings me here; and you'll hear it all in time, and you won't take any journey to-morrow. I've been fool enough in my time, Lord knows, but I ain't such a fool as to come out on such a night, and get half drowned, for nothing."

"Very good! I am waiting for you to go on."

"There was a murder committed here a couple of months ago," said the mysterious person in the pea-jacket, "wasn't there?"

"Yes," said the colonel, with a slight recoil, as he thought that perhaps the real murderer sat before him.

"The young gentleman as was murdered was Mr. Leicester Cliffe; and another young gentleman, Mr. Tom Shirley, has been tried and condemned for the murder?"

"Yes."

"Well," said the man in the pea-jacket, still quite coolly, "he is innocent."

"I know it."

"Do you? Perhaps you know, too, who's the guilty party?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes, I do," said the man, "and that's what brings me here to-night."

Again there was a pause. The colonel's lips had turned white, but nothing could shake his stoical composure. The man in the sailor's dress had his hands on his knees, and was leaning forward, looking up at him.

"And who—but first, my mysterious friend, before any more questions are asked or answered, I must insist on your removing that hat, and showing me who **you** are."

"All right. It's only a hanging matter, **anyway!** Look here!"

His visitor rose up, turned down the collar of the pea-jacket, lifted off the dripping sou'-wester, and glared up at him in the firelight with a pair of exceedingly green and wolfish eyes.

"Ah!" said the colonel, slowly, "I thought it was you. And you have come back, then?"

"I have come back," said his visitor, with a savage gleam in his wolfish eyes. "I have come back to be hung, very likely; but by — I'll hang over and over again a thousand times for the pleasure of seeing *him* hang beside me once! Hunted down! hunted down! He's been at it for the last six years, until he's got me to the end of the rope at last! My dog's life hasn't been such a comfort to me, Lord knows, that I should care to lose it; but when I do hang, he'll hang beside me, by —!"

"Have the goodness to calm yourself, Mr. Black, and become intelligible. Whom are you talking about?"

"My name ain't Black, and you know it! My name is Wildman—Jack Wildman, as was transported for life; and I don't care if the Old Boy heard it! Who am I talking about? I'm talking about a man as I hate, as I've hated for years; and if I had him here, I would tear the eyes out of his head, and the black heart out of his body, and dash his brains out against this here wall! I would, by the Eternal!"

The man's oaths were appalling. The colonel shuddered slightly with disgust and repulsion as he heard him, for his face was like that of a demon.

"Will you come to the point, Mr. Black, or Mr. Wildman, whichever you choose? You say you know the real murderer of Leicester Cliffe—who is he?"

"Him as I am talking of—a yellow devil, with a black heart, and his name is Sweet!"

Colonel Shirley started up, and grasped the mantel against which he leaned.

"Man!" he cried, "what have you said?"

"I have said the truth, and I can prove it! That yellow dog, that I would strangle if I had him near me, that Lawyer Sweet—he killed the young gentleman; I saw him with my own eyes!"

The colonel stood looking a hundred questions he

could not speak—struck for the moment perfectly speechless.

“Yes, you may wonder,” said Mr. Black, subsiding into his chair again, and letting himself cool down like a bottle of soda-water after the first explosion; “but it’s true as gospel. I saw him do the deed myself the night of the wedding; and Mr. Tom Shirley—he is innocent.”

“Tell me all,” said the colonel, finding voice; “and, for Heaven’s sake, do it instantly.”

“I am going to. I have taken all this journey in the wind and rain to-night to do it; and I’ll hunt him down, as he has hunted me, if they were to hang me the next minute. You know that evening I went away, and I don’t think anybody here ever heard of me since.”

“Go on.”

“I had been out that day, and it was nigh on to sundown when I came home. I found my old mother on the ground, just recovering from a fit, and just able to tell me that that yellow villain had been with her, and was going to tell all—the secret he had kept so long. That was the first I ever knew of Barbara’s being your daughter, instead of mine; though I did know he had some power over the old woman I could not get at the bottom of. Whatever he may say, he knowed the secret all along; and it was that made him marry Barbara.

“From the time he met you in the grave-yard, the night you buried your wife, he never lost sight of my wife and that baby. But when she told me it all, and how he threatened to peach about my being a returned convict, I believe the very old Satan got into me, and I started up, and went out to find him and kill him. They say a worm will turn if trodden on; he had trodden on me long enough, Heaven knows! and it was my turn now. If I had met him in the middle of the town, with all the people in it looking on, I would have torn his heart out as I would a mad dog’s. I would have done it if they was to burn me alive for it the next minute.

“As I got up near his house, I saw him come out, and I hid behind a tree to watch him. Before he got far he stopped, and began watching somebody himself; it was Mr. Leicester Cliffe, who came along High street without

seeing either of us, and went in. Then Sweet dodged round the back way, and went into the house after him, and I was left alone waiting behind the tree, and waiting for my game to come out.

"I don't know exactly what passed, but I have a notion that Mr. Leicester wanted Barbara to run away with him, and that the yellow viper was listening, and heard it all. It was nigh onto dark when Mr. Leicester came out, and set off like a steam-engine toward Lower Cliffe, to take a short cut, I expect, to the castle; and Sweet came sneaking after him, like the snake in the grass he is. There we was, a-dodging after each other, the three of us, and Sweet and me trying to keep out of sight as well as we could, and getting into alley-ways and behind trees whenever we saw anybody coming. There wasn't many out to see us, for that matter; for all the town, and the village, too, was up in the park, and Mr. Leicester went up through the park gates, and we two sneaked after him without meeting a soul. Instead of going straight up to the castle, as he'd ought to do, Mr. Leicester turned off to that lonesome spot they call the Nun's Grave; and still we two was dodging in through the trees after him. When he got there he stopped and stood, with his arms crossed, looking down at it; and there was that yellow devil Sweet behind him, and I could see his face in the moonlight, and he looked more like a devil than ever. There was a club lying on the grass, just as if Old Nick had left it there for his favorite son—a big knotted stick, that would have felled an ox; and Sweet he raised it, his grinning mouth grinning more than you ever saw it, and, with one blow, knocked the young gentleman stiff on the ground."

Mr. Black paused in his long narration to turn the other side of his steaming legs to the influence of the blaze, and to look up searchingly at the colonel. But, as that gentleman stood as rigid as the marble guest in Don Giovanni, and made no comment, he went on:

"The minute he did the deed, as if he knew his work was finished, he dropped the club, made a rush through the trees, and I lost him. So there I was foiled again, with the young gentleman lying as stiff as if he had been a month dead at my feet. I shouldn't at all have minded being hung for murdering Sweet; I wouldn't have cared

a curse for it ; but I didn't want to hang for a murder I hadn't done ; so I took leg bail, and got away from the place, as he had done. I knew Cliftonlea would be too hot to hold me now. I didn't know but what that lying villain would make me out to be the murderer ; so my notion was to be off in the evening train for London, and take my time for revenge. Just as I got through the park gates, whom should I see but Barbara on the beach, pushing off in a boat from the shore. I sung out to her, but it was no use ; she wouldn't stop ; so I just swam up to her, got on board, and asked her where she was going. I don't know what she said. I think she was out of her mind ; but I found out that she was running away from that villain, Sweet—from Cliftonlea ; and then it struck me, as I was in the boat, the best thing I could do was to row to Lisleham, take the cars for London there, and so throw folks off the scent. And that is the way it happened you couldn't hear anything from either of us."

"Well," said the colonel, "you went to London?"

"No, we didn't. The first person we met on the wharf at Lisleham was an old chum of mine. He had been with me from New South Wales, but he was well-off now, and the captain of a schooner. I had nothing to do but to tell him the police were on my track, and I was sure of safe quarters on board his craft until the heat of the hunt was over. We sailed that very day for Dover ; and before we were two hours out, Barbara was down, raving mad, with brain fever. There was no doctor on board, and she had to get out of it the best way she could ; but we made the voyage, stayed awhile in France, and was back in Lisleham long before she stopped raving or knew anybody. I got some English papers in Dover, and there I saw all about the murder ; I read how Mr. Tom were took up for it ; and I knew I had held my tongue about long enough. I would have come posting back by express, but I couldn't leave Barbara alone in the schooner, and I knew I was time enough. We got in two hours ago. The schooner is at anchor out there now ; and, in spite of the storm, I came on shore. And now, sir, that's the whole story. Sweet, he's the murderer ; and I'll see him hung for it, if I hang myself beside him."

There was a long pause. The storm seemed to increas●

in fury, and the uproar without had become terrific. The colonel lifted his head and listened to it.

"Barbara, you say, is in the schooner?"

"She is—but more like a ghost or a skeleton, than anything living."

"You are sure the schooner is safely anchored, and not exposed to the fury of this storm?"

Mr. Black opened his mouth to reply in the affirmative, when he was ominously stopped by the sharp report of a minute-gun echoing through the roar of the hurricane, and rapidly followed by another and another.

"I thought it would come to that," said the colonel. "The coast in the morning will be strewn with wrecks. I am going down to the shore."

"All right," said Mr. Black, "we can't be of any use, you know; but I have got cramped with sitting here, and want to stretch my legs a bit. Heaven, how it's storming!"

The colonel rapidly donned cap and overcoat, and, followed by Mr. Black, left his bright fire and pleasant room, and hastened out into the night and storm. The sharp report of the minute-guns still rang through the uproar; but though they were met in the door by a rush of wind and rain, that for an instant beat them back—though the lightning still flashed, and the thunder rolled, the storm had passed its meridian, and was subsiding. Dawn was lifting a leaden eye, too, above the mountains of black cloud, and lighting up with a pale and ghastly glimmer the black and foam-crested sea and the storm-beaten earth.

Long before they reached the shore in the lashing tempest, the mournful minute-guns had ceased their signal for help, and the vessel, whatever it was, must inevitably have sunk with all its crew. Despite the wind, and rain, and lightning, the shore was lined, when they reached it, by the fishermen, and thrown up high on the shingly beach, were broken spars, fragments of wreck, and, most ghastly sight of all, the stark bodies of drowned men. A crowd had collected in one spot around a man who, it turned out, was the only survivor, and who was telling the story of the disaster, as the new-comers came up.

"We were scudding along like old Nick in a gale of

wind," the man was saying, "our spars snapped off like knitting-needles, when we run afoul of the other craft, smashed her like an egg-shell, and down she went, head foremost, like a stone."

A shrill screech from Mr. Black, and off he darted like one possessed. Something had just been washed ashore, something his quick eye had caught, and over which he was bending now with a face as ghastly as that of the drowned men. With an awful presentiment, the colonel followed him, and his presentiment was realized to its utmost extent of horror. In the ooze and mud of the beach, her long hair streaming around her, her soaking dress clinging to her slender form, lay the drowned heiress of Castle Cliffe, with her face in the loathsome slime.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RETribUTION.

MAN proposes, but God disposes! Colonel Shirley was not the only one who had intended starting on a journey that morning, and was doomed to disappointment. Mr. Sylvester Sweet, having settled all the affairs of the estate, and having nothing to do for the next month or two, intended, in his bereavement, to give himself a long holiday, and to go post-haste to Paris. Perhaps, too, being such an uncommonly tender-hearted gentleman, he did not wish to stay to witness the execution of his young friend, Tom Shirley. Or, perhaps he was anxious to drown his grief for the recent loss of his wife in the delights of that delightful city.

At all events, whatever his motive, Mr. Sweet was going on a journey, and was sitting down to an early breakfast in the back parlor. Most elaborately was he got up: always radiant, he was considerably more so this morning than ever; his buff waistcoat had the gloss of spick-span newness, his breastpin and studs were dazzling, the opal rings he wore on his fingers made you wink, his pocket-handkerchief was of the brightest yellow China

silk, his Malacca cane had a gold head, his canary-colored gloves were as new as his waistcoat, and his watch-chain with its glistening ornaments, his yellow whiskers and hair, and white teeth gleamed out with more than ordinary brilliance, and his smile was so bland and debonaire, it would have done your heart good to see it. He had so far recovered from his late bereavement that he laughed a little silvery laugh as he sat down to breakfast—whether at it, or at his own cleverness, or at his expected two months' holiday, would be hard to say. So he was sitting, pleasantly sipping his coffee, and eating his eggs and rolls, when the door-bell rang sharply; and two minutes after, Colonel Shirley stood in the doorway regarding him. Mr. Sweet arose in a little surprise.

"Good-morning, colonel. This is an unexpected pleasure. I thought you were off in the six o'clock train?"

"I have been delayed. Will you be good enough to order your horse and ride back with me to Castle Cliffe!"

"Certainly, colonel!" But Mr. Sweet hesitated a little, with his hand on the bell-rope. "I have purchased my ticket for London, but if the business is pressing——"

"It is most pressing. Order your horse immediately!"

Mr. Sweet knew better than to disobey the Indian officer when his dark eye flashed and his voice rang out in that ringing tone of command; so he ordered his horse, drew on his overcoat, and substituted buckskin gloves for the yellow kids, with a little disappointment and a great deal of curiosity in his fallow face. But his unceremonious companion seemed no way inclined to satisfy curiosity, and was in a mood Mr. Sweet dared not question. So they mounted their horses, and drove through the town as rapidly as they had ridden once before, when on the search for Barbara.

The storm had subsided, the rain had entirely ceased, but the wind still blew in long, lamentable blasts; and between keeping his seat in the saddle and his hat on his head, Mr. Sweet had enough to do until Castle Cliffe was gained. And still, in grim silence, its master strode into the hall and into the morning-room, where that memorable inquest had been held, and where Mr. Sweet again found Mr. Channing, the magistrate, and the head doctor of the town.

Lying on a long table, at the farther end of the room, was something that looked like a human figure; but it was so muffled from sight, in a great cloak, that he could scarcely tell what to make of it. He turned from it to the others, and their stern faces and ominous silence sent a sudden and strange chill to his heart. Trying to look easy and composed, he pulled out his watch and glanced at it.

"Half-past seven! If the business is brief, perhaps I may be in time to catch the nine o'clock train yet."

"You need not trouble yourself about the nine o'clock train. You will not catch it!" said the colonel, frigidly.

"Excuse me! Of course I am willing to wait any time you please. I merely thought it might have been some unimportant matter we had forgotten last night. A terrible night last night, gentlemen—was it not?"

No one spoke. Mr. Sweet felt as if their three pairs of eyes were three pairs of burning-glasses scorching into his very skin. At last the silence was broken.

"Your wife has returned, Mr. Sweet," said the colonel, in a voice that thrilled with the same nameless terror to Mr. Sweet's inmost heart.

"Returned! When—where—how!"

"Last night, in the storm."

"Good Heaven! Alone?"

"Quite alone."

"And where is she now?"

"She is here. Will you come and look at her?"

He walked toward the table whereon the muffled figure lay. Mr. Sweet, with his knees knocking together followed.

The muffling was removed, the dead face, livid and bruised, the dark eyes staring wide open, the white teeth gleaming behind the blue lips, as if she were grinning up at him a ghastly grin.

He was an awful sight, and Mr. Sweet recoiled with a sort of shriek, and made a frantic rush for the door. But a man in a blue coat and brass buttons, the captain of the Cliftonlea Police, stood suddenly between him and it, and laid his hand forcibly on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, Mr. Sweet. You are my prisoner."

That brought Mr. Sweet to his senses faster than cold water or smelling-salts. He stood stock-still and looked at the man.

"What!"

"Just so, sir. You are my prisoner. I arrest you for the murder of Leicester Cliffe!"

The shock was so sudden, so unexpected; Mr. Sweet's nerves were so unstrung by the appalling sight he had just seen, that his self-control left him. His sallow face turned to a blue white, his eyes seemed starting; he stood there, paralyzed, glaring at the man. Then, with a yell that was more like the cry of a wild beast than anything human, he dashed his clenched fist into the constable's face, tore him from the door, and rushed out and into the arms of Mr. Peter Black, who stood airing his eye at the keyhole.

There was another screech, wilder than the first, an appalling volley of oaths, and then Mr. Black's hand was twisted in Mr. Sweet's canary-colored necktie, and Mr. Sweet was black in the face and foaming at the mouth.

Then he was down, and Peter Black's knee was on his breast, and the lawyer's eyes were bursting from their sockets and the blood flowing from his mouth, nose, and ears; but the others crowded round, and were tearing the avenger off. Not in time, however; for a murderous clasp-knife, with which the returned convict was wont in days gone by to slice his bread and beef, was out, and up to the hilt in the lawyer's breast. The hot blood spouted upon Mr. Black's face as he withdrew the blade; but they flung him off, and the constable lifted the bleeding form from the ground.

"I have done it!" said Mr. Black, whose own face was purple, and whose teeth were clenched. "I swore I would, and now you may hang me as soon as you like!"

Both were brought back into the morning-room, Mr. Black, like a perfect lamb, offering no resistance, and Mr. Sweet altogether unable to do so. He lay, a ghastly spectacle, in the arms of the constable, catching his breath in short gasps, and the life-blood pumping out of the wound with each throb.

"Lay him on this sofa," said the doctor, "and stand out of the way until I examine the wound."

Mr. Sweet was not insensible. As they laid him down and the doctor bent over him, he fixed his protruding eyes on that functionary's face with an intensely eager look.

The examination was soon ended ; the doctor arose and shook his head dismally.

"It's of no use ; the wound is fatal. If you have anything to say, Mr. Sweet, you had better say it at once, for your hours are numbered."

Mr. Sweet's face by no earthly possibility could turn more ghastly than it was ; so he only let his head fall back with a hollow groan, and lay perfectly motionless. Mr. Channing, with a business-like air, drew up a seat and sat down beside him.

"You have heard what the doctor says, Sweet. You had better make a clean breast of it before you go."

Another hollow groan was Mr. Sweet's answer. All his courage seemed to have fled, leaving nothing behind but most abject terror.

"Out with it, Sweet ! It may ease your conscience. We will send for a clergyman, if you like."

"No ; it would be of no use ; he could do me no good. Oh-oh-oh !"

Another prolonged and dismal groan.

"Commence, then, at once ; do one act of justice before you die. It was you who murdered Leicester Cliffe, was it not ?" said Mr. Channing, briskly producing notebook and pencil.

"It was. It's of no use denying it now."

"Why did you do it ? What was your motive ?"

"Jealousy. I heard him urging my wife to elope with him. I was mad with jealousy, and I followed and killed him."

"You came here directly after the murder ?"

"I did."

"Would you have let Tom Shirley hang for your crime ?"

"How could I help it ? Either he or I must hang for it. Oh-oh-oh-oh !"

Another prolonged groan.

"You've been a nice hypocrite !" said Mr. Channing. "Is this other story about your wife having been the daughter of Colonel Shirley quite true ?"

"It is—every word of it."

"Not every word. You knew it all along, of course ?"

"Yes."

"You said you didn't, though. And Miss Vivia is really the daughter of that man at the door?"

"Yes—curse him!" cried Mr. Sweet, with momentary fury. "And he is an escaped convict; and you know what the penalty of that is?"

"I know very well. Another thing, Mr. Sweet, Black mentioned, while the colonel was absent fetching you, that before you struck Leicester Cliffe, a mysterious voice arose from the grave and told him his doom was come, or something to that effect. Can you account for that little circumstance?"

"Very easily. I am a ventriloquist, and I have made use of my power more than once to terrify Barbara and him at the Nun's Grave."

"Humph! They say open confessions are good for the soul, and yours ought to feel relieved after this. Is there anything else, Colonel?"

"I think not. What miserable dupes we have all been!"

"Ah, you may say that. It's a thousand pities so clever a rascal should have cheated the hangman!"

"He hasn't cheated him," said the doctor, composedly. "He is no more likely to die than I am. The stab is a mere trifle, that some lint and linen bandages will set all right in no time. Colonel, ring the bell, and order both articles, while I stop the blood, which is flowing rather fast."

"You said—you said," gasped Mr. Sweet, with horrible eagerness—"you said the wound was fatal!"

"So I did, my dear sir, so I did; but I just wanted to frighten you a little, and so get all the truth. All is fair in war, you know, and white lies are excusable in such cases. Here's the lint. Now, the bandages. Thank you, Colonel. Don't twitch so; I wouldn't hurt you for the world. Please the pigs! we'll have you all ready to stand your trial in a week."

Every one drew a deep breath of relief, not even excepting Mr. Black, who felt, upon after thought, a little sorry he had ended Mr. Sweet's sufferings so soon. But, whether from the reaction or the loss of blood, Mr. Sweet himself had no sooner heard the conclusion of the doctor's speech than he fell back on the sofa, fainting.

"Can he be removed, Doctor?" asked the colonel.

"Of course he can. Put him in the carriage, and drive slowly, and he can go to the jail as safely as any of us. I shall make a point of conscience of visiting him there every day. I never knew a gentleman I shall have more pleasure in restoring to health than my dear friend Mr. Sweet."

"Of course Tom is free to leave immediately, Mr. Channing?"

"Of course, Colonel! of course! Poor boy! how shamefully he has been wronged! and what a providential thing the wrong did not go still further!"

"It's all right now!" said the doctor. "The wheel turns slowly, but it turns surely. Blood will cry for vengeance, and murder will out."

A carriage was ordered round and the blinds closely drawn down. Mr. Sweet, still insensible, was placed in the back seat, in charge of the doctor and Mr. Channing, and Mr. Black and the constable were accommodated with the opposite one. The colonel mounted his horse and rode on in advance, to bring glad tidings of great joy to Tom Shirley in his prison cell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN.

THE sun shines on the just and the unjust—yes, for it shone, one sunny afternoon, on the glistening spires, and domes, and palaces, and thronged streets of a great city, and on a large, quiet-looking gray building, enshrined in tall trees, away from the ceaseless hum of busy life, in a remote street; and the great city was gay, brilliant, wicked Paris, and the quiet gray building among the trees was the Ursuline convent.

It is fourteen months since we were in Cliftonlea; fourteen months since Colonel Shirley and Tom left for the scene of war, Egypt; fourteen months since Cliftonlea was thrown into a state of unparalleled excitement upon seeing Mr. Sweet, with a rope round his neck, dancing

on nothing ; fourteen months since Margaret Shirley joined the band of devoted women who went as nurses to the soldiers at the scene of conflict. Fourteen months is a long time, with room for many changes. The war was over ; the victorious troops had returned to their own country. Colonel Shirley had won, by hard fighting, a baronetage, and the Cross of the Bath, and was now General Sir Cliffe Shirley. Margaret had joined the Sisters of Charity, whom she met in the hospitals, and was now the humble servant of the very humblest class in London.

But all this was passed, and on this summer afternoon you are going through an iron gate, up an avenue of golden laburnums, and are ringing a bell at the great convent door. An old portress admits you, and you pass through a long hall into the convent church. The sunshine, coming through the magnificent stained-glass windows, fills it with a solemn gloom ; an immense golden lamp, suspended from the carved ceiling by a long chain, burns before the grand altar ; superb pictures line the walls, and lovely statues look down from niches and brackets. The solemn air is filled with music ; for a young nun, lovely of face, slender of figure, sits up in the organ-loft, playing and singing the "Stabat Mater." It is Sister Ignacia, once Mademoiselle de St. Hilary, Vivia Shirley's old friend.

One other figure only is in the church, and it kneels before a magnificent picture, a copy of Paul Rubens' "Descent from the Cross." It is not a nun who kneels before this picture—not even a novice ; for she wears no veil, either white or black ; her golden hair, like Magdalen's own, in the picture, is pushed from her face and confined in a silken net ; her dress is unrelieved black. You cannot see her face, it is hidden in her hands as she kneels ; but you can tell she is young by the exquisite beauty of those hands, and the slender, delicate figure.

While she kneels and prays, the door softly opens ; Sister Anastasia, the old portress, glides in and taps her softly on the shoulder, and the kneeler rises and follows her softly out to the vestibule.

You can see now that the face is youthful and lovely—made more lovely by the marvelous purity and calm that look at you through the dark violet eyes, than by any perfection of feature or of complexion ; for the face is thin, wan, and wasted to a degree.

Sister Anastasia takes a card out of her pocket and hands it to the young lady, who becomes vivid crimson the moment she looks at it, and who covers her face with her hands, and turns away even from the averted eyes of the portress.

"They are in the parlor," Sister Anastasia says, quietly, and goes back to her chair at the door.

The young girl stood for a moment in the same attitude, her bowed face hidden in her hands; and then starting suddenly up, hastened along a corridor, up a flight of stairs, and tapped at a door on the landing above.

"Enter!" said a sweet voice; and obeying the order, the young lady went in and knelt at the feet of the stately Lady Abbess, who sat, with a pile of letters before her, reading.

"Well, dear child," said the lady, laying her hand kindly on the bowed head; "what is it?"

For all answer the young lady placed in her hand the card she had just received, and bowed her head lower than ever.

The nun looked at it, gravely at first; and then, with a little smile:

"My dear, it is well; you have my permission to receive your visitors."

"But not alone, mother!—dear mother, not alone!"

The lady still sat and looked at her, with the same quiet smile.

"Will you not come with me, mother? I—I—should like it so much."

"Certainly, my dear, if you wish it."

Both arose, descended the stairs, passed through the vestibule, and opening a door to the left, entered the very plainest of convent parlors.

The room had two occupants. One was a gentleman, stalwart and tall, in undress military uniform, bronzed, and moustached, and looking wonderfully out of place within those monastic walls.

Seated beside him was a younger man, also bronzed in face, and with a marked military bearing.

They arose as the ladies entered, and General Shiriey hastily advanced and warmly embraced Vivia. A pang—of only momentary duration, however—seized the general as he saw that Vivia, when Tom turned toward her,

impulsively threw herself into his arms, and permitted her head to sink upon his breast. The greeting to the general had been affectionate, but not at all like this.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" she exclaimed, without raising her head, "how you must have suffered!"

She, of course, had been duly apprised of all the events which had occurred fourteen months before, and this was her first meeting with Tom since his release from the prison.

No wonder that she lingered close to that heart which she knew had long enshrined her, for it was the heart of the only man she had ever really loved.

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The next morning was balmy and spring-like, and the very twitter of the birds, as a small bridal party halted before the Church of Notre Dame, was auspicious of happiness to the young couple who, after troubles deep and dire, had at last agreed to join heart and hand in that union which only death can sever. It was a quiet wedding, witnessed only by a few friends of the general; and immediately afterward the principals took the express train for Calais.

Just before the radiant and happy bride entered the carriage which was to convey her and Tom Shirley to the depot, the general fondly kissed her, and said:

"Now, my darling, you have a right to the name of Shirley. But I forgot to mention that, for valiant services in the field, your impetuous wooer, but now sedate, husband won rapid promotion, and his intimates familiarly speak of him as Colonel Tom Shirley."

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Once more the joy bells were ringing in Cliftonlea, once more the charity-children turned out to strew the streets with flowers, once more triumphal arches were raised, and the flag of welcome floated from the cupola of Castle Cliffe, once more bonfires were kindled, fireworks went off, and music and dancing, drinking and feasting, were to be had for the asking, and crowds upon crowds of well-dressed people filled the park.

Castle Cliffe, from cellar to battlement was one blaze of light, once more the German band came down from Lon-

don to delight the ears of hundreds of guests, once more Lady Agnes was blazing resplendent in velvet and diamonds, and once more Sir Roland, on his gold-headed cane, limped from room to room, in spite of his gout, in perfect ecstasies at seeing his pet, Vivia, again—it was so delightfully like the old times.

And Vivia was there again, robed as a bride, in white lace and satin, and orange blossoms and jewels, lovely as a vision; and this time the bridegroom was not absent. He stood there in his becoming colonel's uniform; and no shadow from the past was permitted to dim the brightness of that night. Not even Lady Agnes could think of her obscure birth; for no princess could look more noble and stately than did she; no one thought of that father of hers who had broken so artfully from jail, and made his escape to parts unknown—helped, rumor said, by the man she had long believed to be her father. No one thought of anything but that the bride and bridegroom were the handsomest and happiest couple in the world.

"Come out here, Vivia," he said to her, opening a glass door leading down to the terrace. "It is a lovely night, and this ball-room is oppressively hot."

He drew her arm within his, and Colonel Tom and Lady Shirley walked along the terrace in the serene moonlight. The park, looking like fairy-land, lay at their feet, filled with hundreds of happy guests, and music, and merry voices; the town lay quiet and tranquil, looking pretty and picturesque, as all places do in the moonlight; and far away spread out the wide sea, its ceaseless waves surging the same old song to the shore they had sung when she heard them first, a happy, careless child.

"Dear, dear Cliftonlea!" said Vivia, her eyes filling with happy tears. "How glad I am to see it again."

Colonel Tom did not speak. He merely pressed a rapturous kiss upon the willing lips, and then turned his own tear-dimmed eyes from the lovely face, to conceal the emotion he experienced; and in silence the bronzed young soldier and his pretty bride stood on the terrace watching the young moon rise.

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