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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

By Nobel.

By J. S. LE FANU,

AUTHOR OF "UNCLE SILAS," "GUY DEVERELL," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

1869.

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LONDON:
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Dedication.

MY DEAR JUDGE KEOUGH,

You, who take an interest in all Literature, will not disdain the dedication of these trifling Volumes, in testimony of an early friendship, never interrupted, and of an admiration everywhere inspired by your brilliant talents.

Ever yours most faithfully,

J. S. LE FANU.

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THE WYVERN MYSTERY.

CHAPTER I.

ALICE MAYBELL.

In the small breakfast parlour of Oulton, a pretty girl, Miss Alice Maybell, with her furs and wrappers about her, and a journey of forty miles before her—not by rail—to Wyvern, had stood up to hug and kiss her old aunt, and bid her good-bye.

"Now, do sit down again; you need not be in such a hurry—you're not to go for ten minutes or more," said the old lady; "do, there's a darling."

"If I'm not home before the sun goes down, aunt, Mr. Fairfield will be so angry," said the girl, laying a hand on each shoulder of kind old Lady Wyndale, and looking fondly, but also sadly, into her face.

"Which Mr. Fairfield, dear—the old or the young one?"

"Old Mr. Fairfield, the Squire, as we call him at Wyvern. He'll really be angry, and I'm a little bit afraid of him, and I would not vex him for the world—he has always been so kind."

As she answered, the young lady blushed a beautiful crimson, and the old lady, not observing it, said—

"Indeed, I don't know why I said young—young Mr. Fairfield is old enough, I think, to be your father; but I want to know how you liked Lord Tremaine. I told you how much he liked you. I'm a great believer in first impressions. He was so charmed with you, when he saw you in Wyvern Church. Of course he ought to have been thinking of something better; but no matter—the fact was so, and now he is, I really think, in love—very much—and who knows? He's such a charming person, and there is everything to make it—I don't know what word to use—but you know Tremaine is quite a beautiful place, and he does not owe a guinea."

"You dear old auntie," said the girl, kissing her again on the cheek, "wicked old darling—always making great matches for me. If you had remained in India, you'd have married me, I'm sure, to a native prince."

"Native fiddlestick; of course I could if I had liked, but you never should have married a Mahomedan with my consent. Never mind though; you're sure to do well; marriages are made in heaven, and I really believe there is no use in plotting and planning. There was your darling mamma, when we were both girls together, I said I should never consent to marry a soldier or live out of England, and I did marry a soldier, and lived twelve years of my life in India; and she, poor darling, said again and again, she did not care who her husband might be, provided he was not a clergyman, nor a person living all the year round in the country—that no power could induce her to consent to, and yet she did consent, and to both one and the other, and married a clergyman, and a poor one, and lived and died in the country. So, after all, there's not much use in planning beforehand."

"Very true, auntie; none in the world, I believe."

The girl was looking partly over her shoulder, out of the window, upward towards the clouds, and she sighed heavily; and recollecting herself, looked again in her aunt's face and smiled.

"I wish you could have stayed a little longer here," said her aunt.

"I wish I could," she answered slowly, "I was thinking of talking over a great many things with you—that is, of telling you all my long stories; but while those people were staying here I could not, and now there is not time."

"What long stories, my dear?"

"Stupid stories, I should have said," answered Alice.

"Well come, is there anything to tell?" demanded the old lady, looking in her large, dark eyes.

"Nothing worth telling — nothing that is—" and she paused for the continuation of her sentence.

"That is what?" asked her aunt.

"I was going to talk to you, darling," answered the girl, "but I could not in so short a time—so short a time as remains now," and she looked at her watch—a gift of old Squire Fairfield's. "I should not know how to make myself understood, I have so many hundred things, and all jumbled up in my head, and should not know how to begin."

"Well, I'll begin for you. Come—have any visitors looked in at Wyvern lately?" said her aunt.

"Not one," she answered.

"No new faces?"

"No, indeed."

"Are there any new neighbours?" persisted the old lady.

"Not one. No, aunt, it isn't that."

"And where are these elderly young gentlemen, the two Mr. Fairfields?" asked the old lady.

The girl laughed, and shook her head.

"Wandering at present. Captain Fairfield is in London."

"And his charming younger brother—where is he?" asked Lady Wyndale.

"At some fair, I suppose, or horse-race; or, goodness knows where," answered the girl.

"I was going to ask you whether there was an affair of the heart," said her aunt. "But there does not seem much material; and what was the subject? Though I can't hear it all, you may tell me what it was to be about."

"About fifty things, or nothings. There's no one on earth, auntie, darling, but you I can talk anything over with; and I'll write, or, if you let me, come again for a day or two, very soon—may I?"

"Of course, *no*," said her aunt gaily. "But we are not to be quite alone, all the time, mind. There are people who would not forgive me if I were to do anything so selfish, but I promise you ample time to talk—you and I to ourselves; and now that I think, I should like to hear by the post, if you will write and say anything you like. You may be quite sure nobody shall hear a word about it."

By this time they had got to the hall-door.

"I'm sure of that, darling," and she kissed the kind old lady.

"And are you *quite* sure you would not like a servant to travel with you; he could sit beside the driver?"

"No, dear auntie, my trusty old Dulcibella sits inside to take care of me."

"Well, dear, are you quite sure? I should not miss him the least."

"Quite, dear aunt, I assure you."

"And you know you told me you were quite happy at Wyvern," said Lady Wyndale, returning her farewell caress, and speaking low, for a servant stood at the chaise-door.

"Did I? Well, I shouldn't have said that, for—I'm *not* happy," whispered Alice Maybell, and the tears sprang to her eyes as she kissed her old kinswoman; and then, with her arms still about her neck, there was a brief look from her large, brimming eyes, while her lip trembled; and suddenly she turned, and before Lady Wyndale had recovered from that little shock, her pretty guest was seated in the chaise, the door shut, and she drove away.

"What can it be, poor little thing?" thought Lady Wyndale, as her eyes anxiously followed the carriage in its flight down the avenue.

"They have shot her pet-pigeon, or the dog has killed her guinea-pig, or old Fairfield won't allow her to sit up till twelve o'clock at night, reading her novel. Some childish misery, I dare say, poor little soul!"

But for all that she was not satisfied, and her poor, pale, troubled look haunted her.

CHAPTER II.

THE VALE OF CARWELL.

In about an hour and a half this chaise reached the Pied Horse, on Elverstone Moor. Having changed horses at this inn, they resumed their journey, and Miss Alice Maybell, who had been sad and abstracted, now lowered the window beside her, and looked out upon the broad, shaggy heath, rising in low hillocks, and breaking here and there into pools—a wild, and on the whole a monotonous and rather dismal expanse.

"How fresh and pleasant the air is here, and how beautiful the purple of the heath!" exclaimed the young lady with animation.

"There now—that's right—beautiful it is, my darling; that's how I like to see my child—pleasant-like and 'appy, and not mopin' and dull, like a sick bird. Be that way always; *do*, dear."

"You're a kind old thing," said the young lady, placing her slender hand fondly on her old nurse's arm, "good old Dulcibella: you're always to come with me wherever I go."

"That's just what Dulcibella'd like," answered the old woman, who was fat, and liked her comforts, and loved Miss Alice more than many mothers love their own children, and had answered the same reminders, in the same terms, a good many thousand times in her life.

Again the young lady was looking out of the window—not like one enjoying a landscape as it comes, but with something of anxiety in her countenance, with her head through the open window, and gazing forward as if in search of some expected object.

"Do you remember some old trees standing together at the end of this moor, and a ruined windmill, on a hillock?" she asked suddenly.

"Well," answered Dulcibella, who was not of an observant turn, "I suppose I do, Miss Alice; perhaps there is."

"I remember it very well, but not *where* it is; and when last we passed, it was dark," murmured the young lady to herself, rather than to Dulcibella, whom upon such points she did not much mind. "Suppose we ask the driver?"

She tapped at the window behind the box, and signed to the man, who looked over his shoulder. When he had pulled up she opened the front window and said—

"There's a village a little way on—isn't there?"

"Shuldon—yes'm, two mile and a bit," he answered.

"Well, before we come to it, on the left there is a grove of tall trees and an old windmill," continued the pretty young lady, looking pale.

"Gryce's mill we call it, but it don't go this many a day."

"Yes, I dare say; and there is a road that turns off to the left, just under that old mill?"

"That'll be the road to Church Carwell."

"You must drive about three miles along that road."

"That'll be out o' the way, ma'am—three, and three back—six miles—I don't know about the hosses."

"You must try, I'll pay you—listen," and she lowered her voice. "There's one house—an old house—on the way, in the Vale of Carwell; it is called Carwell Grange—do you know it?"

"Yes'm; but there's no one livin' there."

"No matter—there is; there is an old woman whom I want to see; that's where I want to go, and you must manage it, I

shan't delay you many minutes, and you're to tell no one, either on the way or when you get home, and I'll give you two pounds for yourself."

"All right," he answered, looking hard in the pale face and large dark eyes that gazed on him eagerly from the window. "Thank'ye, Miss, all right, we'll wet their mouths at the Grange, or you wouldn't mind waiting till they get a mouthful of oats, I dessay?"

"No, certainly; anything that is necessary, only I have a good way still to go before evening, and you won't delay more than you can help?"

"Get along, then," said the man, briskly to his horses, and forthwith they were again in motion.

The young lady pulled up the window, and leaned back for some minutes in her place.

"And where are we going to, dear Miss Alice?" inquired Dulcibella, who dimly apprehended that they were about to deviate from the straight way home, and feared the old Squire, as other Wyvern folk did.

"A very little way, nothing of any consequence; and Dulcibella, if you really love me as you say, one word about it, to living being at Wyvern or anywhere else, you'll never say—you promise?"

"You know me well, Miss Alice—I don't talk to no one; but I'm sorry-like to hear there's anything like a secret. I dread secrets."

"You need not fear this—it is nothing, no secret, if people were not unreasonable, and it shan't be a secret long, perhaps, only be true to me."

"True to you! Well, who should I be true to if not to you, darling, and never a word about it will pass old Dulcibella's lips, talk who will; and are we pretty near it?"

"Very near, I think; it's only to see an old woman, and get some information from her, nothing, only I don't wish it to be talked about, and I know you won't."

"Not a word, dear. I never talk to any one, not I, for all the world."

In a few minutes more they crossed a little bridge spanning a brawling stream, and the chaise turned the corner of a by-road to the left, under the shadow of a group of tall and sombre elms, overtopped by the roofless tower of the old windmill. Utterly lonely was the road, but at first with only a solitariness that partook of the wildness and melancholy of the moor which they had been traversing. Soon, however, the uplands at either side drew nearer, grew steeper, and the scattered bushes gathered into groups, and rose into trees, thickening as the road proceeded. Steeper grew the banks, higher and gloomier. Precipitous rocks showed their fronts, overtopped by trees and copse. The hollow which they had entered by the old windmill had deepened into a valley and was now contracted to a dark glen, overgrown by forest, and relieved from utter silence only by the moan and tinkle of the brook that wound its way through stones and brambles, in its unseen depths. Along the side of this melancholy glen about half way down, ran the narrow road, near the point where they now were, it makes an ascent, and as they were slowly mounting this an open carriage—a shabby, hired, nondescript vehicle—appeared in the deep shadow, at some distance, descending towards them. The road is so narrow that two carriages could not pass one another without risk. Here and there the inconvenience is provided against by a recess in the bank, and into one of these the distant carriage drew aside. A tall female figure, with feet extended on the opposite cushion, sat or rather reclined in the back seat. There was no one else in the carriage. She was wrapped in gray tweed, and the driver had now turned his face towards her, and was plainly receiving some orders.

Miss Maybell, as the carriage entered this melancholy pass, had grown more and more anxious; and pale and silent, was looking forward through the window, as they advanced. At sight of this vehicle, drawn up before them, a sudden fear chilled the young lady with, perhaps, a remote prescience.

CHAPTER III.

THE GRANGE.

The excited nerves of children people the darkness of the nursery with phantoms. The moral and mental darkness of suspense provokes, after its sort, a similar phantasmagoria. Alice Maybell's heart grew still, and her cheeks paled as she looked with most unreasonable alarm upon the carriage, which had come to a standstill.

There was, however, the sense of a great stake, of great helplessness, of great but undefined possible mischiefs, such as to the "look-out" of a rich galleon in the old piratical days, would have made a strange sail, on the high seas, always an anxious object on the horizon.

And now Miss Alice Maybell was not reassured by observing the enemy's driver get down, and taking the horses by the head, back the carriage far enough across the road, to obstruct their passage, and this had clearly been done by the direction of the lady in the carriage.

They had now reached the point of obstruction, the driver pulled up, Miss Maybell had lowered the chaise window and was peeping. She saw a tall woman, wrapped up and reclining, as I have said. Her face she could not see, for it was thickly veiled, but she held her hand, from which she had pulled her glove, to her ear, and it was not a young hand nor very refined,—lean and masculine, on the contrary, and its veins and sinews rather strongly marked. The woman was listening, evidently, with attention, and her face, veiled as it was, was turned away so as to bring her ear towards the speakers in the expected colloquy.

Miss Alice Maybell saw the driver exchange a look with hers that seemed to betoken old acquaintance.

"I say, give us room to pass, will ye?" said Miss Maybell's man.

"Where will you be going to?" inquired the other, and followed the question with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder, toward the lady in the tweed wrappers, putting out his tongue and winking at the same time.

"To Church Carwell," answered the man.

"To Church Carwell, ma'am," repeated the driver over his shoulder to the reclining figure.

"What to do there?" said she, in a sharp, under tone, and with a decided foreign accent.

"What to do there?" repeated the man.

"Change hosses, and go on."

"On *where*?" repeated the lady to her driver.

"On where?" repeated he.

"Doughton," fibbed Miss Maybell's man, and the same repetition ensued.

"Not going to the Grange?" prompted the lady, in the same under-tone and foreign accent, and the question was transmitted as before—

"What Grange?" demanded the driver.

"Carwell Grange."

"No."

Miss Alice Maybell was very much frightened as she heard this home-question put, and, relieved by the audacity of her friend on the box, who continued—

"Now then, you move out of that."

The tall woman in the wrappers nodded, and her driver accordingly pulled the horses aside, with another grin and a

wink to his friend, and Miss Maybell drove by to her own great relief.

The reclining figure did not care to turn her face enough to catch a passing sight of the people whom she had thus arbitrarily detained.

She went her way toward Gryce's mill, and Miss Maybell pursuing hers toward Carwell Grange, was quickly out of sight.

A few minutes more and the glen expanded gently, so as to leave a long oval pasture of two or three acres visible beneath, with the little stream winding its way through the soft sward among scattered trees. Two or three cows were peacefully grazing there, and at the same point a converging hollow made its way into the glen at their right, and through this also spread the forest, under whose shadow they had already been driving for more than two miles.

Into this, from the main road, diverged a ruder track, with a rather steep ascent. This by-road leads up to the Grange, rather a stiff pull. The driver had to dismount and lead his horses, and once or twice expressed doubts as to whether they could pull their burden up the hill.

Alice Maybell, however, offered not to get out. She was nervous, and like a frightened child who gets its bed-clothes about its head, the instinct of concealment prevailed, and she trembled lest some other inquirer should cross her way less easily satisfied than the first.

They soon reached a level platform, under the deep shadow of huge old trees, nearly meeting over head. The hoarse cawing of a rookery came mellowed by short distance on the air. For all else, the place was silence itself.

The man came to the door of the carriage to tell his "fare" that they had reached the Grange.

"Stay where you are, Dulcibella, I shan't be away many minutes," said the young lady, looking pale, as if she was going to execution.

"I will, Miss Alice; but you must get a bit to eat, dear, you're hungry, I know by your looks; get a bit of bread and butter."

"Yes, yes, Dulcie," said the young lady, not having heard a syllable of this little speech, as looking curiously at the old place, under whose walls they had arrived, she descended from the chaise.

Under the leafy darkness stood two time-stained piers of stone, with a wicket open in the gate. Through this she peeped into a paved yard, all grass-grown, and surrounded by a high wall, with a fine mantle of ivy, through which showed dimly the neglected doors and windows of out-offices and stables. At the right rose, three stories high, with melancholy gables and tall chimneys, the old stone house.

So this was Carwell Grange. Nettles grew in the corners of the yard, and tufts of grass in the chinks of the stone steps, and the worn masonry was tinted with moss and lichens, and all around rose the solemn melancholy screen of darksome foliage, high over the surrounding walls, and outtopping the gray roof of the house.

She hesitated at the door, and then raised the latch; but a bolt secured it. Another hesitation, and she ventured to knock with a stone, that was probably placed there for the purpose.

A lean old woman, whose countenance did not indicate a pleasant temper, put out her head from a window, and asked:

"Well, an' what brings *you* here?"

"I expected—to see a friend here," she answered timidly; "and—and you are Mrs. Tarnley—I *think*?"

"I'm the person," answered the woman.

"And I was told to show you this—and that you would admit me."

And she handed her, through the iron bars of the window, a little oval picture in a shagreen case, hardly bigger than a pennypiece.

The old lady turned it to the light and looked hard at it, saying, "Ay—ay—my old eyes—they won't see as they used to—but it is so—the old missus—yes—it's all right, Miss," and she viewed the young lady with some curiosity, but her tones

were much more respectful as she handed her back the miniature.

"I'll open the door, please 'm."

And almost instantly Miss Maybell heard the bolts withdrawn.

"Would you please to walk in—my lady? I can only bring ye into the kitchen. The apples is in the parlour, and the big room's full o' straw—and the rest o' them is locked up. It'll be Master I know who ye'll be looking arter?"

The young lady blushed deeply—the question was hardly shaped in the most delicate way.

"There was a woman in a *barooche*, I think they call it, asking was any one here, and asking very sharp after Master, and I told her he wasn't here this many a day, nor like to be—and 'twas that made me a bit shy o' you; you'll understand, just for a bit."

"And is he—is your master?"—and she looked round the interior of the house.

"No, he b'aint come; but here's a letter—what's your name?" she added abruptly, with a sudden access of suspicion.

"Miss Maybell," answered she.

"Yes—well—you'll excuse me, Miss, but I was told to be sharp, and wide-awake, you see. Will you come into the kitchen?"

And without awaiting her answer the old woman led the way into the kitchen—a melancholy chamber, with two narrow windows, darkened by the trees not far off, that overshadowed the house.

A crooked little cur dog, with protruding ribs, and an air of starvation, flew furiously at Miss Maybell, as she entered, and was rolled over on his back by a lusty kick from the old woman's shoe; and a cat sitting before the fire, bounced under the table to escape the chances of battle.

A little bit of fire smouldered in a corner of the grate. An oak stool, a deal chair, and a battered balloon-backed one, imported from better company, in a crazed and faded state, had grown weaker in the joints, and more ragged and dirty in its antique finery in its present fallen fortunes. There was some cracked delf on the dresser, and something was stewing in a tall saucepan, covered with a broken plate, and to this the old woman directed her attention first, stirring its contents, and peering into it for a while; and when she had replaced it carefully, she took the letter from her pocket, and gave it to Miss Maybell, who read it standing near the window.

As she read this letter, which was a short one, the young lady looked angry, with bright eyes and a brilliant flush, then pale, and then the tears started to her eyes, and turning quite away from the old woman, and still holding up the letter as if reading it, she wept in silence.

The old woman, if she saw this, evinced no sympathy, but continued to fidget about, muttering to herself, shoving her miserable furniture this way or that, arranging her crockery on the dresser, visiting the saucepan that sat patiently on the embers, and sometimes kicking the dog, with an unwomanly curse, when he growled. Drying her eyes, the young lady took her departure, and with a heavy heart left this dismal abode; but with the instinct of propitiation, strong in the unhappy, and with the melancholy hope of even buying a momentary sympathy, she placed some money in the dark hard hand of the crone, who made her a courtesy and a thankless "thankee, Miss," on the step, as her eye counted over the silver with a greedy ogle, that lay on her lean palm.

"Nothing for nothing." On the whole a somewhat mercenary type of creation is the human. The post-boy reminded the young lady, as she came to the chaise-door, that she might as well gratify him, there and then, with the two pounds which she had promised. And this done, she took her place beside old Dulcibella, who had dropped into a reverie near akin to a doze, and so, without adventure they retraced their way, and once more passing under the shadow of Gryce's mill, entered on their direct journey to Wyvern.

The sun was near the western horizon, and threw the melancholy tints of sunset over a landscape, undulating and wooded, that spread before them, as they entered the short, broad avenue that leads through two files of noble old trees, to the gray front of many-chimneyed Wyvern.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD SQUIRE AND ALICE MAYBELL.

Wyvern is a very pretty old house. It is built of a light gray stone, in the later Tudor style. A portion of it is overgrown with thick ivy. It stands not far away from the high road, among grand old trees, and is one of the most interesting features in a richly wooded landscape, that rises into little hills, and, breaking into rocky and forest-darkened glens, and sometimes into dimpling hollows, where the cattle pasture beside pleasant brooks, presents one of the prettiest countries to be found in England.

The old squire, Henry Fairfield, has seen his summer and his autumn days out. It is winter with him now.

He is not a pleasant picture of an English squire, but such, nevertheless, as the old portraits on the walls of Wyvern here and there testify, the family of Fairfield have occasionally turned out.

He is not cheery nor kindly. Bleak, dark, and austere as a northern winter, is the age of that gaunt old man.

He is too proud to grumble, and never asked any one for sympathy. But it is plain that he parts with his strength and his pleasures bitterly. Of course, seeing the old churchyard, down in the hollow at the left, as he stands of an evening on the steps, thoughts will strike him. He does not acquiesce in death. He resents the order of things. But he keeps his repinings to himself, and retaliates his mortification on the people about him.

Though his hair is snowy, and his shoulders stooped, there is that in his length of bone and his stature that accords with the tradition of his early prowess and activity.

He has long been a widower—fully thirty years. He has two sons, and no daughter. Two sons whom he does not much trust—neither of them young—Charles and Henry.

By no means young are they. The elder, now forty-three, the younger only a year or two less. Charles has led a wandering life, and tried a good many things. He had been fond of play, and other expensive follies. He had sobered, however, people thought, and it might be his mission, notwithstanding his wild and wasteful young days, to pay off the debts of the estate.

Henry, the younger son, a shrewd dealer in horses, liked being king of his company, condescended to strong ale, made love to the bar-maid at the "George," in the little town of Wyvern, and affected the conversation of dog-fanciers, horse-jockeys, wrestlers, and similar celebrities.

The old Squire was not much considered, and less beloved, by his sons. The gaunt old man was, however, more feared by these matured scions than their pride would have easily allowed. The fears of childhood survive its pleasures. Something of the ghostly terrors of the nursery haunt us through life, and the tyrant of early days maintains a strange and unavowed ascendancy over the imagination, long after his real power to inflict pain or privation has quite come to an end.

As this tall, grim, handsome old man moves about the room, as he stands, or sits down, or turns eastward at the Creed in church—as he marches slowly toppling along the terrace, with his gold-headed cane in his hand, surveying the long familiar scenes which will soon bloom and brown no more for him—with sullen eyes, thinking his solitary thoughts—as in the long summer evenings he dozes in the great chair by the fire, which even in the dog-days smoulders in the drawing-room grate—looking like a gigantic effigy of winter—a pair of large and soft gray eyes follow, or steal towards him—removed when observed—but ever and anon returning. People have remarked this, and talked it over, and laughed and shook their heads, and built odd speculations upon it.

Alice Maybell had grown up from orphan childhood under the roof of Wyvern. The old squire had been, after a fashion, kind to that pretty waif of humanity, which a chance wave of fortune had thrown at his door. She was the child of a distant cousin, who had happened, being a clergyman, to die in occupation of the vicarage of Wyvern. Her young mother lay, under the branches of the two great trees, in the lonely corner of the village churchyard; and not two years later the Vicar died, and was buried beside her.

Melancholy, gentle Vicar! Some good judges, I believe, pronounced his sermons admirable. Seedily clothed, with kindly

patience visiting his poor; very frugal—his pretty young wife and he were yet happy in the light and glow of the true love that is eternal. He was to her the nonpareil of vicars—the loveliest, wisest, wittiest, and best of men. She to him—what shall I say? The *same* beautiful first love. Never a day older. Every summer threw new gold on her rich hair, and a softer and brighter bloom on her cheeks, and made her dearer and dearer than he could speak. He could only look and feel his heart swelling with a vain yearning to tell the love that lighted his face with its glory and called a mist to his kind eye.

And then came a time when she had a secret to tell her Willie. Full of a wild fear and delight, in their tiny drawing-room, clasped in each other's arms, they wept for joy, and a kind of wonder and some dim unspoken tremblings of fear, and loved one another, it seemed, as it were more desperately than ever.

And then, as he read aloud to her in the evenings, her pretty fingers were busy with a new sort of work, full of wonderful and delightful interest. A little guest was coming, a little creature with an immortal soul, that was to be as clever and handsome as Willie.

"And, oh, Willie, darling, don't you hope I may live to see it? Ah, Willie, would not it be sad?"

And then the Vicar, smiling through tears, would put his arms round her, and comfort her, breaking into a rapturous castle-building and a painting of pictures of this great new happiness and treasure that was coming.

And so in due time the little caps and frocks and all the tiny wardrobe were finished; and the day came when the long-pictured treasure was to come. It was there; but its young mother's eyes were dim, and the pretty hands that had made its little dress and longed to clasp it were laid beside her, never to stir again.

"The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away—blessed be the name of the Lord." Yes, blessed be the name of the Lord for that love that outlives the separation of death—that saddens and glorifies memory with its melancholy light, and illuminates far futurity with a lamp whose trembling ray is the thread that draws us toward heaven. Blessed in giving and in taking—blessed for the yearning remembrances, and for the agony of hope.

The little baby—the relic—the treasure—was there. Poor little forlorn baby! And with this little mute companion to look at and sit by, his sorrow was stealing away into a wonderful love; and in this love a consolation and a living fountain of sympathy with his darling who was gone.

A trouble of a new kind had come. Squire Fairfield, who wanted money, raised a claim for rent for the vicarage and its little garden. The Vicar hated law and feared it, and would no doubt have submitted; but this was a battle in which the Bishop took command, and insisted on fighting it out. It was a tedious business.

It had lasted two years nearly, and was still alive and angry, when the Reverend William Maybell took a cold, which no one thought would signify. A brother clergyman from Willowford kindly undertook his duty for one Sunday, and on the next he had died.

The Wyvern doctor said the vis-vitae was wanting—he had lived quite too low, and had not stamina, and so sank like a child.

But there was more. When on Sundays, as the sweet bell of Wyvern trembled in the air, the Vicar had walked alone up to the old gray porch, and saw the two trees near the ivied nook of the churchyard-wall, a home sickness yearned at his heart, and when the hour came his spirit acquiesced in death.

Old Squire Fairfield knew that it was the Bishop who really, and, as I believe, rightly opposed him, for to this day the vicarage pays no rent; but the proud and violent man chose to make the Vicar feel his resentment. He beheld him with a gloomy and thunderous aspect, never a word more would he exchange with him; he turned his back upon him; he forbid him the footpath across the fields of Wyvern, that made the way to church shorter. He walked out of church grimly when his sermon began. He turned the Vicar's cow off the common, and made him every way feel the weight of his displeasure.

Well, now the Vicar was dead. He had borne it all very gently and sadly, and it was over, a page in the past, no line erasable, no line addible for ever.

"So, Parson's dead and buried; serve him right," said the Squire of Wyvern. "Thankless rascal. You go down and tell them I must have the house up on the 24th, and if they don't go, you bundle 'em out, Thomas Rooke."

"There'll be the Vicar's little child there; who's to take it in, Squire?" asked Tom Rooke, after a hesitation.

"You may, or the Bishop, d—— him."

"I'm a poor man, and, for the Bishop, he's not like to——"

"Let 'em try the workhouse," said the Squire, "where many a better man's brat is."

And he gave Tom Rooke a look that might have knocked him down, and turned his back on him and walked away.

A week or so after he went down himself to the vicarage with Tom Rooke. Old Dulcibella Crane went over the lower part of the house with Tom, and the Squire strode up the stairs, and stooping his tall head as he entered the door, walked into the first room he met with, in a surly mood.

The clatter of his boots prevented his hearing, till he had got well into the room, the low crying of a little child in a cradle. He stayed his step for a moment. He had quite forgotten that unimportant being, and he half turned to go out again, but changed his mind. He stooped over the cradle, and the little child's crying ceased. It was a very pretty face and large eyes, still wet with tears, that looked up with an earnest wondering gaze at him from out the tiny blankets.

Old Dulcibella Crane had gone down, and the solitude, no doubt, affrighted it, and there was consolation even in the presence of the grim Squire, into whose face those large eyes looked with innocent trust.

Who would have thought it? Below lay the little image of utter human weakness; above stooped a statue of inflexibility and power, a strong statue with a grim contracted eye. There was a heart, steeled against man's remonstrance, and a pride that would have burst into fury at a hint of reproof. Below lay the mere wonder and vagueness of dumb infancy. Could contest be imagined more hopeless! But "the faithful Creator," who loved the poor Vicar, had brought those eyes to meet.

The little child's crying was hushed; big tears hung in its great wondering eyes, and the little face looked up pale and forlorn. It was a gaze that lasted while you might count four or five. But its mysterious work of love was done. "All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made."

Squire Fairfield walked round this room, and went out and examined the others, and went downstairs in silence, and when he was going out at the hall-door he stopped and looked at old Dulcibella Crane, who stood courtesying at it in great fear, and said he,—

"The child'll be better at home wi' me, up at Wyvern, and I'll send down for it and you in the afternoon, till—something's settled."

And on this invitation little Alice Maybell and her nurse, Dulcibella Crane, came to Wyvern Manor, and had remained there now for twenty years.

CHAPTER V.

THE TERRACE GARDEN.

Alice Maybell grew up very pretty; not a riant beauty, without much colour, rather pale, indeed, and a little sad. What struck one at first sight was a slender figure, with a prettiness in every motion. A clear-tinted oval face, with very large dark gray eyes, such as Chaucer describes in his beauties as "ey-es gray as glass," with very long lashes; her lips of a very brilliant red, with even little teeth, and when she smiled a great many tiny soft dimples.

This pretty creature led a lonely life at Wyvern. Between her and the young squires, Charles and Henry, there intervened the great gulf of twenty years, and she was left very much to herself.

Sometimes she rode into the village with the old Squire; she sat in the Wyvern pew every Sunday; but except on those and like occasions, the townsfolk saw little of her.

"Taint after her father or mother she takes with them airs of hers; there was no pride in the Vicar or poor Mrs. Maybell, and she'll never be like her mother, a nice little thing she was."

So said Mrs. Ford of the George Inn at Wyvern—but what she called pride was in reality shyness.

About Miss Maybell there was a very odd rumour afloat in the town. It had got about that this beautiful young lady was in love with old Squire Fairfield—or at least with his estate of Wyvern.

The village doctor was standing with his back to his drawing-room fire, and the newspaper in his left hand lowered to his knee—as he held forth to his wife, and romantic old Mrs. Diaper—at the tea-table.

"If she is in love with that old man, as they say, take my word for it, she'll not be long out of a mad-house."

"How do you mean, my dear?" asked his wife.

"I mean it is not love at all, but incipient mania. Her lonely life up there at Wyvern, would make any girl odd, and it's setting her mad—that's how I mean."

"My dear sir," remonstrated fat Mrs. Diaper, who was learned as well as romantic, "romance takes very whimsical shape at times; Vanessa was in love with Dean Swift, and very young men were passionately in love with Ninon de l'Enclos."

"Tut—stuff—did I ever hear!" exclaimed Mrs. Buttle, derisively, "who ever thought of love or romance in the matter? The young lady thinks it would be very well to be mistress of Wyvern, and secure a comfortable jointure, and so it would; and if she can make that unfortunate old man fancy her in love with him, she'll bring him to that, I have very little doubt. I never knew a quiet minx that wasn't sly—smooth water."

In fact, through the little town of Wyvern, shut out for the most part from the forest grounds, and old gray manor-house of the same name, it came to be buzzed abroad and about that, whether for love, or from a motive more sane, though less refined, pretty Miss Alice Maybell had set her heart on marrying her surly old benefactor, whose years were enough for her grandfather.

It was an odd idea to get into people's heads; but why were her large soft gray eyes always following the Squire by stealth?

And, after all, what is incredible of the insanities of ambition? or the subtlety of women?

In the stable-yard of Wyvern Master Charles had his foot in the stirrup, and the old fellow with a mulberry-coloured face, and little gray eyes, who held the stirrup-leather at the other side, said, grinning—

"I wish ye may get it."

"Get what?" said Charles Fairfield, arresting his spring for a moment and turning his dark and still handsome face, with a hard look at the man, for there was something dry and sly in his face and voice.

"What we was talking of—the old house and the land," said the man.

"Hey, is that all?" said the young squire as he was still called at four-and-forty, throwing himself lightly into the saddle.
"I'm pretty easy about that, why, what's the matter?"

"What if the old fellow took it in his head to marry?"

"Marry—eh? well, if he did, I don't care; but what the devil makes you talk like that? why, man, there's black and white, seal and parchment for that, the house and acres are settled, Tom; and who do you think would marry him?"

"You're the last to hear it; any child in the town could tell you, Miss Alice Maybell."

"Oh! do they really? I did not think of that," said the young squire, first looking in old Tom's hard gray eyes. Then for a moment at his own boot thoughtfully, and then he swung himself into the saddle, and struck his spur in his horse's side, and away he plunged, without another word.

"He don't like it, not a bit," said Tom, following him with askance look as he rode down the avenue. "No more do I, she's always a-watching of the Squire, and old Harry does throw a sheep's eye at her, and she's a likely lass; what though he be old, it's an old rat that won't eat cheese."

As Tom stood thus, he received a poke on the shoulder with the end of a stick, and looking round saw old Squire Harry.

The Squire's face was threatening. "Turn about, d—n ye, what were you saying to that boy o' mine?"

"Nothin' as I remember," lied Tom, bluntly.

"Come, what was it?" said the hard old voice, sternly.

"I said Blackie'd be the better of a brushin-boot, that's all, I mind."

"You lie, I saw you look over your shoulder before you said it, and while he was talkin' he saw me acomin', and he looked away—I caught ye at it, ye pair of false, pratin' scoundrels; ye were talkin' o' me—come, what did he say, sirrah?"

"Narra word about ye."

"You lie; out wi' it, sir, or I'll make your head sing like the church bell."

And he shook his stick in his great tremulous fist, with a look that Tom well knew.

"Narra word about you from first to last," said Tom; and he cursed and swore in support of his statement, for a violent master makes liars of his servants, and the servile vices crop up fast and rank under the shadow of tyranny.

"I don't believe you," said the Squire irresolutely, "you're a liar, Tom, a black liar; ye'll choke wi' lies some day—you fool!"

But the Squire seemed partly appeased, and stood with the point of his stick now upon the ground, looking down on little Tom, with a somewhat grim and dubious visage, and after a few moment's silence he asked—

"Where's Miss Alice?"

"Takin' a walk, sir."

"*Where*, I say?"

"She went towards the terrace-garden," answered Tom.

And toward the terrace-garden walked with a stately, tottering step the old Squire, with his great mastiff at his heels. Under the shadow of tall trees, one side of their rugged stems lighted with the yellow sunset, the other in soft gray, while the small birds were singing pleasantly high over his head among quivering leaves.

He entered the garden, ascending five worn steps of stone, between two weather-worn stone-urns. It is a pretty garden,

all the prettier though sadder for its neglected state. Tall trees overtop its walls from without, and those gray walls are here and there overgrown with a luxuriant mantle of ivy; within are yew-trees and wonderfully tall old myrtles; laurels not headed down for fifty years, and grown from shrubs into straggling, melancholy trees. Its broad walls are now overgrown with grass, and it has the air and solitude of a ruin.

In this conventional seclusion, seated under the shade of a great old tree, he saw her. The old-fashioned rustic seat on which she sat is confronted by another, with what was once a gravel walk between.

More erect, shaking himself up as it were, he strode slowly toward her. Her head was supported by her hand—her book on her lap—she seemed lost in a reverie, as he approached unawares over the thick carpet of grass and weeds.

"Well, lass, what brings you here? You'll be sneezing and coughing for this; won't you—sneezing and coughing—a moist, dark nook ye've chosen," said Squire Harry, placing himself, nevertheless, on the seat opposite.

She started at the sound of his voice, and as she looked up in his face, he saw that she had been crying.

The Squire said nothing, but stiffly scuffed and poked the weeds and grass at his feet, for a while, with the end of his stick, and whistled low, some dreary old bars to himself.

At length he said abruptly, but in a kind tone—

"You're no child, now; you've grown up; you're a well-thriven, handsome young woman, little Alice. There's not one to compare wi' ye; of all the lasses that comes to Wyvern Church ye bear the bell, ye do, ye bear the bell; ye know it. Don't ye? Come, say lass; don't ye know there's none to compare wi' ye?"

"Thank you, sir. It's very good of you to think so—you're always so kind," said pretty Alice, looking very earnestly up in his face, her large tearful eyes wider than usual, and wondering, and, perhaps, hoping for what might come next.

"I'll be kinder, maybe; never ye mind; ye like Wyvern, lass—the old house; well, it's snug, it is. It's a good old English house; none o' your thin brick walls and Greek pillars, and scrape o' rotten plaster, like my Lord Wrybroke's sprawling house, they think so fine—but they don't think it, only they say so, and they lie, just to flatter the peer; d—— them. They go to London and learn courtiers' ways there; that wasn't so when I was a boy; a good old gentleman that kept house and hounds here was more, by a long score, than half a dozen fine Lunnon lords; and you're handsomer, Alice, and a deal better, and a better lady, too, than the best o' them painted, fine ladies, that's too nice to eat good beef or mutton, and can't call a cabbage a cabbage, I'm told, and would turn up their eyes, like a duck in thunder, if a body told 'em to put on their pattens, and walk out, as my mother used, to look over the poultry. But what was that you were saying—I forgot?"

"I don't think, sir—I don't remember—was I saying anything? I—I don't recollect," said Alice, who knew that she had contributed nothing to the talk.

"And you like Wyvern," pursued the old man, with a gruff sort of kindness, "well, you're right; it's not bin a bad home for ye, and ye'd grieve to leave it. Ay—you're right, there's no place like it—there's no air like it, and ye love Wyvern, and ye *shan't* leave it, Alice."

Alice Maybell looked hard at him; she was frightened, and also agitated. She grew suddenly pale, but the Squire not observing this, continued—

"That is, unless ye be the greatest fool in the country's side. You'd miss Wyvern, and the old woods, and glens, and spinnies, and, mayhap, ye'd miss the old man a bit too—not so old as they give out though, and 'tisn't always the old dog gives in first—mind ye—nor the young un that's the best dog, neither. I don't care that stick for my sons—no more than they for me—that's reason. They're no comfort to me, nor never was. They'd be devilish glad I was carried out o' Wyvern Hall feet foremost."

"Oh, sir, you can't think—"

"Hold your little fool's tongue; I'm wiser than you. If it warn't for you, child, I don't see much my life would be good for. You don't wish me dead, like those cubs. Hold your tongue, lass. I see some one's bin frightenin' you; but I'm not going to die for a bit. Don't you take on; gie us your hand."

And he took it, and held it fast in his massive grasp.

"Ye've been cryin', ye fool. Them fellows bin sayin' I'm breakin' up. It's a d—d lie. I've a mind to send them about their business. I'd do it as ready as put a horse over a three-foot wall; but I've twelve years' life in me yet. I'm good for fourteen years, if I live as long as my father did. He took his time about it, and no one heard me grumble, and I'll take mine. Don't ye be a fool; I tell you there's no one goin' to die here, that I know of. There's gentle blood in your veins, and you're a kind lass, and I'll take care o' you—mind, I'll do it, and I'll talk to you again."

And so saying, he gave her hand a parting shake, and let it drop, and rising, he turned away, and strode stiffly from the garden. He was not often so voluble; and now the whole of this talk seemed to Alice Maybell a riddle. He could not be thinking of marrying; but was he thinking of leaving her the house and a provision for her life!

CHAPTER VI.

THE OLD SQUIRE UNLIKE HIMSELF.

He talked very little that night in the old-fashioned drawing-room, where Alice played his favourite old airs for him on the piano, which he still called the "harpsichord." He sat sometimes dozing, sometimes listening to her music, in the great chair by the fire. He ruminated, perhaps, but he did not open the subject, whatever it might be, which he had hinted at.

But before ten o'clock came, he got up and stood with his back to the fire. Is there any age at which folly has quite done with us, and we cease from building castles in the air?

"My wife was a tartar," said he rather abruptly, "and she was always telling me I'd marry again before she was cold in her grave, and I made answer, 'I've had enough of that market, I thank you; one wife in a life is one too many.' But she wasn't like you—no more than chalk to cheese—a head devil she was. Play me the 'Week before Easter' again, lass."

And the young lady thrice over played that pretty but vulgar old air; and when she paused the gaunt old Squire chanted the refrain from the hearth-rug, somewhat quaveringly and discordantly.

"You should have heard Tom Snedly sing that round a bowl of punch. My sons, a pair o' dull dogs—we were pleasanter fellows then—I don't care if they was at the bottom of the Lunnon canal. Gi'e us the 'Lincolnshire Poacher,' lass. Pippin-squeezing rascals—and never loved me. I sometimes think I don't know what the world's a comin' to. I'd be a younger lad by a score o' years, if neighbours were as I remember 'em."

At that moment entered old Tom Ward, who, like his master, had seen younger, if not better days, bearing something hot in a silver tankard on a little tray. Tom looked at the Squire. The Squire pointed to the little table by the hearth-rug, and pulled out his great gold watch, and found it was time for his "night-cap."

Tom was skilled in the brew that pleased his master, and stood with his shrewd gray eye on him, till he had swallowed his first glass, then the Squire nodded gruffly, and he knew all was right, and was relieved, for every one stood in awe of old Fairfield.

Tom was gone, and the Squire drank a second glass, slowly, and then a third, and stood up again with his back to the fire and filled his glass with the last precious drops of his cordial, and placed it on the chimney-piece, and looked steadfastly on the girl, whose eyes looked sad on the notes, while her slender fingers played those hilarious airs which Squire Fairfield delighted to listen to.

"Down in the mouth, lass—hey?" said the Squire with a suddenness that made the unconscious girl start.

When she looked up he was standing grinning upon her, from the hearth-rug, with his glass in his fingers, and his face flushed.

"You girls, when you like a lad, you're always in the dumps—ain't ye?—mopin' and moultin' like a sick bird, till the fellow comes out wi' his mind, and then all's right, flutter and song and new feathers, and—come, what do you think o' me, lass?"

She looked at him dumbly, with a colourless and frightened face. She saw no object in the room but the tall figure of the old man, flushed with punch, and leering with a horrid jollity, straight before her like a vivid magic-lantern figure in the dark. He was grinning and wagging his head with exulting encouragement.

Had Squire Fairfield, as men have done, all on a sudden grown insane; and was that leering mask, the furrows and contortions of which, and its glittering eyes, were fixing themselves horribly on her brain, a familiar face transformed by madness?

"Come, lass, do ye like me?" demanded the phantom.

"Well, you're tongue-tied, ye little fool—shame-faced, and all that, I see," he resumed after a little pause. "But you *shall* answer—ye must; you do—you like old Wyvern, the old Squire. You'd feel strange in another place—ye would, and a

younger fellow would not be a tithe so kind as me—and I like ye well, chick-a-biddy, chick-a-biddy—ye'll be my little queen, and I'll keep ye brave satins and ribbons, and laces, and lawn; and I'll gi'e ye the jewellery—d'ye hear?—necklaces, and ear-rings, and bodkins, and all the rest, for your own, mind; for the Captain nor Jack shall never hang them on wife o' theirs, mind ye—and ye'll be the grandest lady has ever bin in Wyvern this hundred years—and ye'll have nothing to do but sit all day in the window, or ride in the coach, and order your maids about; and I'll leave you every acre and stick and stone, and silver spoon, that's in or round about Wyvern—for you're a good lass, and I'll make a woman of you; and I'd like to break them young rascals' necks—they never deserved a shilling o' mine; so gie's your hand, lass, and the bargain's made."

So the Squire strode a step or two nearer, extending his huge bony hand, and Alice, aghast, stared with wide open eyes fixed on him, and exclaiming faintly, "Oh, sir!—oh, Mr. Fairfield!"

"*Oh!* to be sure, and *oh*, Squire Fairfield!" chuckled he, mimicking the young lady, as he drew near; "ye need not be shy, nor scared by me, little Alice; I like you too well to hurt the tip o' your little finger, look ye—and you'll sleep on't, and tell me all to-morrow morning."

And he laid his mighty hands, that had lifted wrestlers from the earth, and hurled boxers headlong in his day, tremulously on her two little shoulders. "And ye'll say good-night, and gi'e me a buss; good-night to ye, lass, and we'll talk again in the morning, and ye'll say naught, mind, to the boys, d——n 'em, till all's settled—ye smooth-cheeked, bright-eyed, cherry-lipped little"—

And here the ancient Squire boisterously "bussed" the young lady, as he had threatened, and two or three times again, till scrubbed by the white stubble of his chin, she broke away, with her cheeks flaming, and still more alarmed, reached the door.

"Say good-night, won't ye, hey?" bawled the Squire, still in a chuckle and shoving the chairs out of his way as he stumbled after her.

"Good-night, sir," cried she, and made her escape through the door, and under the arch that opened from the hall, and up the stairs toward her room, calling as unconcernedly as she could, but with tremulous eagerness to her old servant, "Dulcibella, are you there?" and immensely relieved when she heard her kindly old voice, and saw the light of her candle.

"I say—hallo—why wench, what the devil's come over ye?" hallooed the voice of the old man from the foot of the stairs. "That's the trick of you rogues all—ye run away to draw us after; well, it won't do—another time. I say, good-night, ye wild bird."

"Thank you, sir—good night, sir—good night, sir," repeated the voice of Alice, higher and higher up the stairs, and he heard her door shut.

He stood with a flushed face, and a sardonic grin for a while, looking up the stairs, with his big bony hand on the banister, and wondering how young he was; and he laughed and muttered pleasantly, and resolved it should all be settled between them next evening; and so again he looked at his watch, and found that she had not gone, after all, earlier than usual, and went back to his fire, and rang the bell, and got a second 'night-cap,' as he called his flagon of punch.

Tom remarked how straight the Squire stood that night, with his back to the fire, eyeing him as he entered from the corners of his eyes, with a grin, and a wicked wag of his head.

"A dull dog, Tom. Who's a-goin' to hang ye? D—n ye, look brighter, or I'll stir ye up with the poker. Never shake your head, man; ye may brew yourself a tankard o' this, and ye'll find you're younger than ye think for, and some of the wenches will be throwing a sheep's eye at you—who knows?"

Tom did not quite know what to make of this fierce lighting up of gaiety and benevolence. An inquisitive glance he fixed stealthily on his master, and thanked him dubiously—for he was habitually afraid of him; and as he walked away through the passages, he sometimes thought the letter that came that afternoon might have told of the death of old Lady Drayton, or some other relief of the estate; and sometimes his suspicions were nearer to the truth, for in drowsy houses like Wyvern, where events are few, all theses of conversation are valuable and speculation is active, and you may be sure that what was talked of in the town, was no mystery in the servants' hall, though more gossipped over than believed.

Men who are kings in very small dominions are whimsical, as well as imperious—eccentricity is the companion of seclusion—and the Squire had a jealous custom, in his house, which was among the oddities of his despotism; it was simply this: the staircase up which Alice Maybell flew, that night, to old Dulcibella and her room, is that which ascends the northern wing of the house. A strong door in the short passage leading to it from the hall, shuts it off from the rest of the building on that level.

For this young lady then, while she was still a child, Squire Fairfield had easily made an Oriental seclusion in his household, by locking, with his own hand, that door every night, and securing more permanently the doors which, on other levels, afforded access to the same wing.

He had a slight opinion of the other sex, and an evil one of his own, and would have no Romeo and Juliet tragedies. As he locked this door after Miss Alice Maybell's "good-night," he would sometimes wag his head shrewdly and wink to himself in the lonely oak hall, as he dropped the key into his deep coat pocket—"safe bind, safe find," "better sure than sorry," and other wise saws seconding the precaution.

So this night he recollected the key, as usual, which in the early morning, when he drank his glass of beer at his room-door, he handed to old Mrs. Durdin, who turned it in the lock, and restored access for the day.

This custom was too ancient-reaching back beyond her earliest memory—to suggest the idea of an affront, and so it was acquiesced in and never troubled Miss Maybell; the lock was not tampered with, the door was never passed, although the Squire, versed in old saws, was simple to rely on that security against a power that laughs at locksmiths.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SQUIRE'S ELDEST SON COMES HOME.

Thus was old Squire Fairfield unexpectedly transformed, and much to the horror of pretty Alice Maybell, appeared in the character of a lover, grim, ungainly, and without the least chance of that brighter transformation which ultimately more than reconciles "beauty" to her conjugal relations with the "beast."

Grotesque and even ghastly it would have seemed at any time. But now it was positively dismaying, and poor troubled little Alice Maybell, on reaching her room, sat down on the side of her bed, and to the horror and bewilderment of old Dulcibella, wept bitterly and long.

The harmless gabble of the old nurse, who placed herself by her side, patting her all the time upon the shoulder, was as the sound of a humming in the woods in summer time, or the crooning of a brook. Though her ear was hardly conscious of it, perhaps it soothed her.

Next day there was a little stir at Wyvern, for Charles—or as he was oftener called, Captain Fairfield—arrived. This "elderly young gentleman," as Lady Wyndale called him, led a listless life there. He did not much affect rustic amusements; he fished now and then, but cared little for shooting, and less for hunting. His time hung heavy on his hands, and he did not well know what to do with himself. He smoked and strolled about a good deal, and rode into Wyvern and talked with the townspeople. But the country plainly bored him, and not the less that his sojourn had been in London, and the contrast made matters worse. Alice Maybell had a headache that morning, and not caring to meet the Squire earlier than was inevitable, chose to say so.

The Captain, who, travelling by the mail, had arrived at eight o'clock, took his place at the breakfast-table at nine, and received for welcome a gruff nod from the Squire, and the tacit permission to grasp the knuckles which he grudgingly extended to him to shake.

In that little drama in which the old Squire chose now to figure, his son Charles was confoundedly in the way.

"Well, and what were you doin' in Lunnon all this time?" grumbled Squire Harry when he had finished his rasher and his cup of coffee, after a long, hard look at Charles, who, in happy unconsciousness, crunched his toast, and read the county paper.

"I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't hear—you were saying?" said Charles, looking up and lowering the paper.

"Hoo—yes—I was saying, I don't think you went all the way to Lunnon to say your prayers in St. Paul's; you've bin losing money in those hells and places; when your pocket's full away you go and leave it wi' them town blackguards, and back you come as empty as a broken sack to live on me, and so on. Come, now, how much rent do you take by the year from that place your fool of a mother left ye—the tartar!—hey?"

"I think, sir, about three hundred a year," answered Charles.

"Three hundred *and eighty*," said the old man, with a grin and a wag of his head. "I'm not so old that I can't remember *that*—three hundred and eighty; and ye flung that away in Lunnon taverns and operas, on dancers and dicers, and ye come back here without a shillin' left to bless yourself, to ride my horses and drink my wine; and ye call that fair play. Come along, here."

And, followed by his mastiff, he marched stiffly out of the room.

Charles was surprised at this explosion, and sat looking after the grim old man, not knowing well what to make of it, for Squire Harry was openhearted enough, and never counted the cost of his hospitalities, and had never grudged him his home at Wyvern before.

"Much he knows about it," thought Charles; "time enough, though. If I'm *de trop* here I can take my portmanteau and umbrella, and make my bow and go cheerfully."

The tall Captain, however, did not look cheerful, but pale and angry, as he stood up and kicked the newspaper, which

fell across his foot, fiercely. He looked out of the window, with one hand in his pocket, in sour rumination. Then he took his rod and flies and cigar-case, and strolled down to the river, where, in that engrossing and monotonous delight, celebrated of old by Venables and Walton, he dreamed away the dull hours.

Blessed resource for those mysterious mortals to whom nature accords it—stealing away, as they wander solitary along the devious river-bank, the memory, the remorse, and the miseries of life, like the flow and music of the shadowy Lethe.

This Captain did not look like the man his father had described him—an anxious man, rather than a man of pleasure—a man who was no sooner alone than he seemed to brood over some intolerable care, and, except during the exercise of his "gentle craft," his looks were seldom happy or serene.

The hour of dinner came. A party of three, by no means well assorted. The old Squire in no genial mood and awfully silent. Charles silent and abstracted too; his body sitting there eating its dinner, and his soul wandering with black care and other phantoms by far-off Styx. The young lady had her own thoughts to herself, uncomfortable thoughts.

At last the Squire spoke to the intruder, with a look that might have laid him in the Red Sea.

"In my time young fellows were more alive, and had something to say for themselves. I don't want your talk myself over my victuals, but you should 'a spoke to *her*'tisn't civil—'tweren't the way in my day. I don't think ye asked her 'How are ye?' since ye came back. Lunnon manners, may be."

"Oh, but I assure you I did. I could not have made such an omission. Alice will tell you I was not quite so stupid," said Charles, raising his eyes, and looking at her.

"Not that it signifies, mind ye, the crack of a whip, whether ye did or no," continued the Squire; "but ye may as well remember that ye're not brother and sister exactly, and ye'll call her Miss Maybell, and not Alice no longer."

The Captain stared. The old Squire looked resolutely at the brandy-flask from which he was pouring into his tumbler. Alice Maybell's eyes were lowered to the edge of her plate, and with the tip of her finger she fiddled with the crumbs on the table-cloth. She did not know what to say, or what might be coming.

So soon as the Squire had quite compounded his brandy-and-water he lifted his surly eyes to his son with a flush on his aged cheek, and wagged his head with oracular grimness, and silence descended again for a time upon the three kinsfolk.

This uncomfortable party, I suppose, were off again, each on their own thoughts, in another minute. But no one said a word for some time.

"By-the-bye, Alice—Miss Maybell, I mean—I saw in London a little picture that would have interested you," said the Captain, "an enamelled miniature of Marie Antoinette, a pretty little thing, only the size of your watch; you can't think how spirited and beautiful it was."

"And why the dickens didn't ye buy it, and make her a compliment of it? Much good tellin' her how pretty it was," said the Squire, sulkily; "'twasn't for want o' money. D—— it, in my day a young fellow 'd be ashamed to talk o' such a thing without he had it in his pocket to make an offer of;" and the old Squire muttered sardonically to his brandy-and-water, and neither Miss Alice nor Captain Fairfield knew well what to say. The old man seemed bent on extinguishing every little symptom of a lighting up of the gloom which his presence induced.

They came at last into the drawing-room. The Squire took his accustomed place by the fire. In due time came his "night-cap." Miss Alice played his airs over and over on the piano. The Captain yawned stealthily into his hand at intervals, and at last stole away.

"Well, Ally, here we are at last, girl. That moping rascal's gone to his bed; I thought he'd never 'a gone. And now come here, ye little fool, I want to talk to ye. Come, I say, what the devil be ye afeared on? I'd like to see the fellow 'd be uncivil to you. My wife, as soon as the lawyers can write out the parchments, the best settlements has ever bin made on a Fairfield's wife since my great uncle's time. Why, ye look as frightened, ye pretty little fool, as if I was a-going to rob ye, instead of making ye lady o' Wyvern, and giving ye every blessed thing I have on earth. That's right!"

He had taken her timid little hand in his bony and tremulous grasp.

"I'll have ye grander than any that ever has been"—he was looking in her face with an exulting glare of admiration—"and

I'll give ye the diamonds for your own, mind, and I'll have your picture took by a painter. There was never a lady o' Wyvern fit to hold a candle to ye, and I'm a better man than half the young fellows that's going; and ye'll do as ye like—wi' servants, and house, and horses and all—I'll deny ye in nothing. And why, sweetheart, didn't you come down this morning? Was you ailing, child—was pretty Ally sick in earnest?"

"A headache, sir. I—I have it still—if—if you would not mind, I'll be better, sir, in my room. I've had a very bad headache. It will be quite well, I dare say, by to-morrow. You are very kind, sir; you have always been very kind, sir; I never can thank you—never, never, sir, as I feel."

"Tut, folly, nonsense, child; wait till all's done, and thank me then, if ye will. I'll make ye as fine as the queen, and finer." Every now and then he emphasized his harangue by kissing her cheeks and lips, which added to her perplexity and terror, and made her skin flame with the boisterous rasp of his stubbled chin. "And ye'll be my little duchess, my beauty; ye will, my queen o' diamonds, you roguey-poguey-woguey, as cunning as a dog-fox;" and in the midst of these tumultuous endearments she managed to break away from the amorous ogre, and was out of the door, and up the stairs to her room, and old Dulcibella, before his tardy pursuit had reached the cross-door.

An hour has passed, and the young lady stood up, and placing her arms about her neck, kissed old Dulcibella.

"Will you take a candle, darling," she said, "and go down and see whether the cross-door is shut?"

Down went Dulcibella, the stairs creaking under her, and the young lady, drying her eyes, looked at her watch, drew the curtain at the window, placed the candle on the table near it, and then, shading her eyes with her hand, looked out earnestly.

The window did not command the avenue, it was placed in the side of the house. A moonlighted view she looked out upon; a soft declivity, from whose grassy slopes rose grand old trees, some in isolation, some in groups of twos and threes, all slumbering in the hazy light and still air, and beyond rose, softer in the distance, gentle undulating uplands, studded with trees, and near their summits, more thickly clothed in forest.

She opened the window softly, and looking out, sighed in the fresh air of night, and heard from the hollow the distant rush and moan of running waters, and her eye searched the foreground of this landscape. The trunk of one of the great trees near the house seemed to become animated, and projected a human figure, nothing awful or ghastly—a man in a short cloak, with a wide-awake hat on. Seeing the figure in the window, he lifted his hand, looking towards her, and approaching the side of the house with caution, glanced this way and that till he reached the house.

The old servant at the same time returned and told her that the door *was* locked as usual.

"You remain here, Dulcibella—no—I shan't take a candle," and with a heavy sigh she left the room, and treading lightly descended the stairs, and entered a wainscoted room, on the ground floor—with two windows, through which came a faint reflected light. Standing close to the nearer of these was the man with whom she had exchanged from the upper room the signals I have mentioned.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEVER DID RUN SMOOTH.

Swiftly she went to the window and raised it without noise, and in a moment they were locked in each other's arms.

"Darling, darling," was audible; and

"Oh, Ry! do you love me still?"

"Adore you, darling! adore you, my little violet, that grew in the shade—my only, only darling."

"And I have been so miserable. Oh, Ry—that heart-breaking disappointment—that dreadful moment—you'll never know half I felt; as I knocked at that door, expecting to see my own darling's face—and then—I could have thrown myself from the rock over that glen. But you're here, and I have you after all—and now I must never lose you again—never, never."

"Lose me, darling; you never did, and never shall; but I could not go—I dare not. Every fellow, you know, owes money, and I'm in that sorry plight like the rest, and just what I told you would have happened, and that you know would have been worse; but I think that's all settled, and lose me! not for one moment *ever* can you lose me, my beautiful idol."

"Oh, yes—that's so delightful, and Ry and his poor violet will be so happy, and he'll never love anyone but her."

"Never, darling, never."

And he never did.

"Never—of course, never."

"And I'm sure it could not be helped your not being at Carwell."

"Of course it couldn't—how could it! Don't you know everything? You're my own reasonable, wise little girl, and you would not like to bore and worry your poor Ry. I wish to God I were my own master, and you'd soon see then who loves you best in all the world."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, darling, you are; if we are to be happy, you must be sure of it. If there's force in language, or proof in act, you can't doubt me—you must know how I adore you—what motive on earth could I have in saying so, but one?"

"None, none, darling, darling Ry—it's only my folly, and you'll forgive your poor foolish little bird; and oh, Ry, is not this dreadful—but better, I suppose, that is, when a few miserable hours are over, and I gone—and we happy—your poor little violet and Ry happy together for the rest of our lives."

"I think so, I do, all our days; and you understand everything I told you?"

"Everything — yes — about to-morrow morning—quite."

"The walk isn't too much?"

"Oh, nothing."

"And old Dulcibella shall follow you early in the day to Draunton—you remember the name of the house?"

"Yes, the Tanzy Well."

"Quite right, wise little woman, and you know, darling, you must not stir out—quiet as it is, you might be seen; it is only a few hours' caution, and then we need not care; but I don't want pursuit, and a scene, and to agitate my poor little fluttered bird more than is avoidable. Even when you look out of the window keep your veil down; and—and just reach the Tanzy House, and do as I say, and you may leave all the rest to me. Wait a moment—who's here? No—no—nothing. But I had better leave you now—yes, darling—it is wiser—some of the people may be peeping, and I'll go."

And so a tumultuous good-night, wild tears, and hopes, and panic, and blessings, and that brief interview was over.

The window was shut, and Alice Maybell in her room—the lovers not to meet again till forty miles away; and with a throbbing heart she lay down, to think and cry, and long for the morning she dreaded.

Morning came, and the breakfast hour, and the old Squire over his cup of coffee and rasher, called for Mrs. Durdin, the housekeeper, and said he—

"Miss Alice, I hear, is ailing this morning; ye can see old Dulcibella, and make out would she like the doctor should look in, and would she like anything nice for breakfast—a slice of the goose-pie, or *what?* and send down to the town for the doctor if she or old Dulcibella thinks well of it, and if it should be in church time, call him out of his pew, and find out what she'd like to eat or drink;" and with his usual gruff nod he dismissed her.

"I should be very happy to go to the town if you wish, sir," said Charles Fairfield, desiring, it would seem, to re-establish his character for politeness, "and I'm extremely sorry, I'm sure, that poor Ally—I mean, that Miss Maybell—is so ill."

"You won't cry though, I warrant; and there's people enough in Wyvern to send of her messages without troubling you," said the Squire.

The Captain, however fiercely, had let this unpleasant speech pass unchallenged.

The old Squire was two or three times at the foot of the stairs before church-time, bawling inquiries after Miss Alice's health, and messages for her private ear, to old Dulcibella.

The Squire never missed church. He was as punctual as his ancestor, old Sir Thomas Fairfield, who was there every Sunday and feast-day, lying on his back praying, in tarnished red, blue, and gold habiliments of the reign of James I., in which he died, and took form of painted stone, and has looked straight up, with his side to the wall, and his hands joined in supplication ever since. If the old Squire did not trouble himself with reading, nor much with prayer, and thought over such topics as suited him, during divine service—he at least went through the drill of the rubrics decorously, and stood erect, sat down, or kneeled, as if he were the ordained fugleman of his tenantry assembled in the old church.

Captain Fairfield, a handsome fellow, notwithstanding his years, with the keen blue eye of his race—a lazy man, and reserved, but with the hot blood of the Fairfields in his veins, which showed itself dangerously on occasion, occupied a corner of this great oak enclosure, at the remote end from his father. Like him he pursued his private ruminations with little interruption from the liturgy in which he ostensibly joined. These ruminations were, to judge from his countenance, of a saturnine and sulky sort. He was thinking over his father's inhospitable language, and making up his mind, for though indolent, he was proud and fiery, to take steps upon it, and to turn his back, perhaps for many a day, on Wyvern.

The sweet old organ of Wyvern pealed, and young voices swelled the chorus of love and praise, and still father and son were confronted in dark antipathy. The Vicar read his text from Holy Writ, and preached on the same awful themes; the transitoriness of our days; love, truth, purity, eternal life, death eternal; and still this same unnatural chill and darkness was between them. Moloch sat unseen by the old man's side, and in the diapason of the organ moaned his thirst for his sacrifices. Evil spirits amused the young man's brain with pictures of his slights and wrongs, and with their breath heated his vengeful heart. The dreams of both were interrupted by the Vicar's sonorous blessing, and they shook their ears, and kneeled down, and their dreams came back again.

So it was Sunday—"better day, better deed"—when a smouldering quarrel broke suddenly into fire and thunder in the manor-house of Wyvern.

There is, we know, an estate of £6,000 a year, in a ring fence, round this old house. It owes something alarming, but the parish, village, and manor of Wyvern have belonged, time out of mind, to the Fairfield family.

A very red sunset, ominous of storm, floods the western sky with its wild and sullen glory. The leaves of the great trees from whose recesses the small birds are singing their cheery serenade, flash and glimmer in it, as if a dew of fire had sprinkled them, and a blood-red flush lights up the brown feathers of the little birds.

These Fairfields are a handsome race—showing handsome, proud English faces. Brown haired, sometimes light, sometimes dark, with generally blue eyes, not mild, but fierce and keen.

They are a race of athletes; tall men, famous all that country round, generation after generation, for prowess in the wrestling ring, at cudgels, and other games of strength. Famous, too, for worse matters. Strong-willed, selfish, cruel, on occasion, but with a generosity and courage that make them in a manner popular. The character of the Fairfields has the vices, and some of the better traits of feudalism.

Charles Fairfield had been making up his mind to talk to his father. He had resolved to do so on his way home from church. With the cool air and clearer light, outside the porch, came a subsidence of his haste, and nodding here and there to friend or old acquaintance, as he strode through the churchyard, he went a solitary way home, instead of opening his wounds and purposes then to his father.

"Better at home; better at Wyvern; in an hour or so I'll make all ready, and see him then."

So home, if home it was, by a lonely path, looking gloomily down on the daisies, strode Charles Fairfield.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH THE SQUIRE LOSES HIS GOLD-HEADED CANE.

The sun, as I have said, was sinking among the western clouds with a melancholy glare; Captain Fairfield was pacing slowly to and fro upon the broad terrace that extends, with a carved balustrade, and many a stone flower-pot, along the rear of the old house. The crows were winging their way home, and the air was vocal with their faint cawings high above the gray roof, and the summits of the mighty trees, now glowing in that transitory light. His horse was ready saddled, and his portmanteau and other trifling effects had been despatched some hours before.

"Is there any good in bidding him good-bye?" hesitated the Captain.

He was thinking of descending the terrace steps at the further end, and as he mounted his horse, leaving his valedictory message with the man who held it. But the spell of childhood is not easily broken when it has been respected for so many after-years. The Captain had never got rid of the childish awe which began before he could remember. The virtues are respected; but such vices as pride, violence, and hard-heartedness in a father, are more respected still.

Charles could approach a quarrel with that old despot; he could stand at the very brink, and with a resentful and defiant eye scan the abyss; but he could not quite make up his mind to the plunge. The old beast was so utterly violent and incalculable in his anger that no one could say to what weapons and extremities he might be driven in a combat with him, and where was the good in avowed hostilities? Must not a very few years, now, bring humiliation and oppression to an end?

Charles Fairfield was saved the trouble of deciding for himself, however, by the appearance of old Squire Harry, who walked forth from the handsome stone door-case upon the terrace, where his son stood ready for departure.

The old man was walking with a measured tread, holding his head very high, with an odd flush on his face, and a sardonic smile, and he was talking inaudibly to himself. Charles saw in all this the signs of storm. In the old man's hand was a letter firmly clutched. If he saw his son, who expected to be accosted by him, he passed him by with as little notice as he bestowed on the tall rose-tree that grew in the stone pot by his side.

The Squire walked down the terrace, southward, towards the steps, the wild sunset sky to his right, the flaming windows of the house to his left. When he had gone on a few steps, his tall son followed him. Perhaps he thought it better that Squire Harry should be informed of his intended departure from his lips than that he should learn it from the groom who held the bridle of his horse.

The Squire did not descend the steps, however; he stopped short of them, and sat down in one of the seats that are placed at intervals under the windows. He leaned with both hands on his cane, the point of which he ground angrily into the gravel; in his fingers was still crumpled the letter. He was looking down with a very angry face, illuminated by the wild western sky, shaking his head and muttering.

The tall, brown Captain stalked towards him, and touched his hat, according to his father's reverential rule.

"May I say a word, sir?" he asked.

The old man stared in his face and nodded fiercely, and with this ominous invitation he complied.

"You were pleased, sir," said he, "yesterday to express an opinion that, with the income I have, I ought to support myself, and no longer to trouble Wyvern. It was stupid of me not to think of that myself—very stupid—and all I can do is to lose no time about it; and so I have sent my traps away, and am going to follow now, sir; and I couldn't go, of course, sir, without saying farewell to you and—" He was on the point of adding—"thank you for all your kindness;" but he recollected himself. *Thank* him, indeed! No, he could not bring himself to that. "And I am leaving now, sir, and good-bye."

"Ho, turning your back on Wyvern, like all the rest! Well, sir, the world's wide, you can choose your road. I don't ask none o' ye to stay and see me off—not I. I'll not be without some one when I die to shut down my eyes, I dare say. Get ye gone."

"I thought, sir—in fact I was quite convinced," said Charles Fairfield, a little disconcerted, "that you had quite made up your mind, as I have mine, sir."

"So I had, sir—so I had. Don't suppose I care a rush, sir, who goes—not a d—d rush—not I. Better an empty house than a bad tenant."

Up rose the old man as he spoke, "Away with them, say I; bundle 'em out—off wi' them, bag and baggage; there's more like ye—read *that*," and he thrust the letter at him like a pistol, and leaving it in his hand, turned and stalked slowly up the terrace, while the Captain read the following note:—

"SIR,—I hardly venture to hope that you will ever again think of me with that kindness which circumstances compel me so ungratefully to requite. I owe you more than I can ever tell. I began to experience your kindness in my infancy, and it has never failed me since. Oh, sir, do not, I entreat, deny me one last proof of your generosity—your *forgiveness*. I leave Wyvern, and before these lines are in your hand, I shall have found another home. Soon, I trust, I shall be able to tell my benefactor *where*. In the meantime may God recompense you, as I never can, for all your goodness to me. I leave the place where all my life has passed amid continual and unmerited kindness with the keenest anguish. Aggravated by my utter inability at present to repay your goodness by the poor acknowledgment of my confidence. Pray, sir, pardon me; pray restore me to your good opinion, or, at least if you cannot forgive and receive me again into your favour, spare me the dreadful affliction of your detestation, and in mercy try to forget

"Your unhappy, but ever grateful

"ALICE MAYBELL."

When Charles Fairfield, having read this through, raised his eyes, they lighted on the old man, returning, and now within a few steps of him.

"Well, there's a lass for ye! I reared her like a child o' my own—better, kinder than ever child was reared, and she's hardly come to her full growth when she serves me like that. D—n ye, are ye tongue-tied? *what do you think of her?*"

"It would not be easy, sir, on that letter, to pronounce," said Charles Fairfield, disconcerted. "There's nothing there to show what her reasons are."

"Ye'r no Fairfield—ye'r not, ye'r none. If ye were, ye'd know when ye'r house was insulted; but ye'r none; ye'r a cold-blooded sneak, and no Fairfield."

"I don't see that anything I could say, sir, would mend the matter," said the Captain.

"Like enough; but I'll tell ye what I think of her," thundered the old man, half beside himself. And his language became so opprobrious and frantic, that his son said, with a proud glare and a swarthy flush on his face,

"I take my leave, sir; for language like that I'll not stay to hear."

"But ye'll not take ye'r leave, sir, till I choose, and ye shall stay," yelled the old Squire, placing himself between the Captain and the steps. "And I'd like to know why ye shouldn't hear her called what she is—a — and a — ."

"Because she's *my* wife, sir," retorted Charles Fairfield, whitening with fury.

"She is, is she?" said the old man, after a long gaping pause. "Then ye'r a worse scoundrel, ye black-hearted swindler, than I took you for—and ye'll take that—"

And trembling with fury, he whirled his heavy cane in the air. But before it could descend, Charles Fairfield caught the hand that held it.

"None o' that—none o' that, sir," he said with grim menace, as the old man with both hands and furious purpose sought to wrest the cane free.

"Do you *want* me to do it?"

The grip of old Squire Harry was still powerful, and it required an exertion of the younger man's entire strength to

wring the walking-stick from his grasp.

Over the terrace balustrade it flew whirling, and old Squire Harry in the struggle lost his feet, and fell heavily on the flags.

There was blood already on his temple and white furrowed cheek, and he looked stunned. The young man's blood was up—the wicked blood of the Fairfields—but he hesitated, stopped, and turned.

The old Squire had got to his feet again, and was holding giddily by the balustrade. His hat still lay on the ground, his cane was gone. The proud old Squire was a tower dismantled. To be met and foiled so easily in a feat of strength—to have gone down at the first tussle with the "youngster," whom he despised as a "milksop" and a "Miss Molly," was to the old Hercules, who still bragged of his early prowess, and was once the lord of the wrestling ring for five and twenty miles round, perhaps for the moment the maddest drop in the cup of his humiliation.

Squire Harry with his trembling hand clutched on the stone balustrade, his tall figure swaying a little, had drawn himself up and held his head high and defiantly. There was a little quiver in his white old features, a wild smile in his eyes, and on his thin, hard lips, showing the teeth that time had left him; and the blood that patched his white hair trickled down over his temple.

Charles Fairfield was agitated, and felt that he could have burst into tears—that it would have been a relief to fall on his knees before him for pardon. But the iron pride of the Fairfields repulsed this better emotion. He did, however, approach hurriedly, with an excited and troubled countenance, and he said hastily—

"I'm awfully sorry, but it wasn't my fault; you know it wasn't. No Fairfield ever stood to be struck yet; I only took the stick, sir. D—n it, if it had been my mother I could not have done it more gently. I could not help your tripping. I couldn't; and I'm awfully sorry, by —, and you won't remember it against me? Say you won't. It's the last time you'll ever see me in life, and there's no use in parting at worse odds than we need; and—and—won't you shake hands, sir?"

"I say, son Charlie, ye've spilled my blood," said the old man. "May God damn ye for it; and if ever ye come into Wyvern after this, while there's breath in my body I'll shoot ye like a poacher."

And with this paternal speech, Squire Harry turned his back and tottered stately and grimly into the house.

CHAPTER X.

THE DRIVE OVER CRESSLEY COMMON BY MOONLIGHT.

The old Squire of Wyvern wandered from room to room, and stood in this window and that. An hour after the scene on the terrace, he was trembling still and flushed, with his teeth grimly set, sniffing, and with a stifling weight at his heart.

Night came, and the drawing-room was lighted up, and the Squire rang the bell, and sent for old Mrs. Durdin.

That dapper old woman, with a neat little cap on, stood prim in the doorway and curtsied. She knew, of course, pretty well what the Squire was going to tell her, and waited in some alarm to learn in what tone he would make his communication.

"Well," said the Squire, sternly, holding his head very high, "Miss Alice is gone. I sent for you to tell ye, as y're housekeeper here. She's gone; she's left Wyvern."

"She'll be coming again, sir, soon?" said the old woman after a pause.

"No, not she—no," said the Squire.

"Not returnin' to Wyvern, sir?"

"While there's breath in my body she'll never darken these doors."

"Sorry she should a' displeased you, sir," said the good-natured little woman with a curtsey.

"*Displease ye!* Who said she displeased me? It ain't the turning of a pennypiece to me—*me*, by ——. Ha, ha! that's funny."

"And—what do you wish done with the bed and the furniture, sir? Shall I leave it still in the room, please?"

"Out o' window wi't—pitch it after her; let the work'us people send up and cart it off for the poor-house, where she should 'a bin, if I hadn't a bin the biggest fool in the parish."

"I'll have it took down and moved, sir," said the old woman, interpreting more moderately; "and the same with Mrs. Crane's room; Dulcibella, she's gone too?"

"Ha, ha! well for her—plotting old witch. I'll have her ducked in the pond if she's found here; and never you name them, one or t'other more, unless you want to go yourself. I'm fifty pounds better. I didn't know how to manage or look after her—they're all alike. If I chose it I could send a warrant after her for the clothes on her back; but let her be. Away wi' her—a good riddance; and get her who may, I give him joy o' her."

The Squire was glad to see Tom Ward that night, and had a second tankard of punch.

"Old servant, Tom; I believe the old folk's the best after all," said he. "It's a d—d changed world, Tom. Things were otherwise in our time; no matter, I'll pay 'em off yet."

And old Harry Fairfield fell asleep in his chair, and after an hour wakened up with a dream of little Ally's music still in his ears.

"Play it again, child, play it again," he said, and listened—to silence and looked about the empty room, and the sudden pain came again, with a dreadful yearning mixed with his anger.

The Squire cursed her for a devil, a wild-cat, a viper, and he walked round the room with his hands clenched in his coat pockets, and the proud old man was crying. With straining and squeezing the tears oozed and trickled from his wrinkled eyelids down his rugged cheeks.

"I don't care a d—n, I hate her; I don't know what it's for, I be such a fool; I'm *glad* she's gone, and I pray God the sneak she's gone wi' may break her heart, and break his own d—d neck after, over Carwell scaurs."

The old man took his candle and from old habit, in the hall, was closing the door of the staircase that led up to her room.

"Ay, ay," said he, bitterly, recollecting himself, "the stable-door when the nag's stole. I don't care if the old house was blown down to-night—I wish it was. She was a kind little thing before that d—d fellow—what could she see in him—good for nothing—old as I am, I'd pitch him over my head like a stuck o' barley. Here was a plot, she was a good little thing, but see how she was drew into it, d—n her, they're all so false. I'll find out who was in it, I will; I'll find it all out. There's Tom Sherwood, *he's* one. I'll pitch 'em all out, neck and crop, out o' Wyvern doors. I'd rather fill my house wi' rats than the two-legged vermin. Let 'em pack away to Carwell and starve with that big pippin-squeezing ninny. I hope in God's justice he'll never live to put his foot in Wyvern. I could shoot myself, I think, but for that. She might a waited till the old man died, at any rate; I was kind to her—a fool—a fool."

And the tall figure of the old man, candle in hand, stalked slowly from the dim hall and vanished up the other staircase.

While this was going on at Wyvern, nearly forty miles away, under the bright moonlight, a chaise, in which were seated the young lady whose departure had excited so strange a sensation there, and her faithful old servant, Dulcibella Crane, was driving rapidly through a melancholy but not unpleasing country.

A wide undulating plain, with here and there patches of picturesque natural wood, oak, and whitethorn, and groups of silver-stemmed birch-trees spread around them. Those were the sheep-walks of Cressley Common. The soil is little better than peat, over which grows a short velvet verdure, altogether more prized by lovers of the picturesque than by graziers of Southdowns. Could any such scene look prettier than it did in the moonlight? The solitudes, so sad and solemn, the lonely clumps and straggling trees, the gentle hollows and hills, and the misty distance in that cold illusive light acquire the interest and melancholy of mystery.

The young lady's head was continually out of the window, sometimes looking forward, sometimes back, upon the road they had traversed. With an anxious look and a heavy sigh she threw herself back in her seat.

"You're not asleep, Dulcibella?" she said, a little peevishly.

"No Miss, no dear."

"You don't seem to have much to trouble you?" continued the young lady.

"*I?* Law bless you, dear, nothing, thank God."

"None of your own, and my troubles don't vex you, that's plain," said her young mistress, reproachfully.

"I did not think, dear, you was troubled about anything—law! I hope nothing's gone wrong, darling," said the old woman with more energy and a simple stare in her mistress's face.

"Well, you know he said he'd be with us as we crossed Cressley Common, and this is it, and he's not here, and I see no sign of him."

And the young lady again popped her head out of the window, and, her survey ended, threw herself back once more with another melancholy moan.

"Why, Miss Alice, dear, you're not frettin' for that?" said Dulcibella. "Don't you know, dear, if he isn't here he's somewhere else? We're not to be troubling ourselves about every little thing like, and who knows, poor gentleman, what's happened to delay him?"

"That's just what I say, Dulcibella; you'll set me mad! Something has certainly happened. You know he owes money. Do you think they have arrested him? If they have, what's to become of us? Oh! Dulcibella, *do* tell me what you really think."

"No, no, no—there now—there's a darling, don't you be worrying yourself about nothing; look out again, and who knows but he's coming?"

So said old Dulcibella, who was constitutionally hopeful and contented, and very easy about Master Charles, as she still called Charles Fairfield.

She was not remarkable for prescience, but here the worthy creature fluked prophetically; for Alice Maybell, taking her

advice, did look out again, and she thought she saw the distant figure of a horseman in pursuit.

She rattled at the window calling to the driver, and the man who sat beside him, and succeeded in making them hear her, and pull the horses up.

"Look back and see if that is not your master coming," she cried eagerly.

He was still too distant for recognition, but the rider was approaching fast. The gentlemen of the road, once a substantial terror, were now but a picturesque tradition; the appearance of the pursuing horseman over the solitudes of Cressley Common would else have been anything but a source of pleasant anticipation. On he came, and now the clink of the horse-shoes sounded sharp on the clear night air. And now the rider passed the straggling trees they had just left behind them, and now his voice was raised and recognised, and in a few moments more, pale and sad in the white moonlight as Leonora's phantom trooper, her stalwart lover pulled up his powerful hunter at the chaise window.

A smile lighted up his gloomy face as he looked in.

"Well, darling, I *have* overtaken you at Cressley Common; and is my little woman quite well, and happy to see her Ry once more?"

His hand had grasped hers as he murmured these words through the window.

"Oh, Ry, darling—I'm so happy—you must let Tom ride the horse on, and do you come in and sit here, and Dulcibella can take my cloaks and sit by the driver. Come, darling, I want to hear everything."

And so this little arrangement was completed, as she said, and Charles Fairfield sat himself beside his beautiful young wife, and as they drove on through the moonlit scene, he pressed her hand and kissed her lovingly.

CHAPTER XI.

HOME.

"Oh, darling, I can scarcely believe it," she murmured, smiling, and gazing up with her large soft eyes into his, "it seems to me like heaven that I can look, and speak, and say everything without danger, or any more concealment, and always have my Ry with me—never to be separated again, you know, darling, while we live."

"Poor little woman," said he, fondly, looking down with an answering smile, "she does love me a little bit, I think."

"And Ry loves his poor little bird, doesn't he?"

"Adores her—idolatry—*idolatry*."

"And we'll be so happy!"

"I hope so, darling."

"Hope?" echoed she, chilled, and a little piteously.

"I'm *sure* of it, darling—quite certain," he repeated, laughing tenderly; "she's such a foolish little bird, one must watch their phrases; but I was only thinking—I'm afraid you hardly know what a place this Carwell is."

"Oh, darling, you forget I've seen it—the most picturesque spot I ever saw—the very place I should have chosen—and any place you know, with you! But that's an old story."

His answer was a kiss, and—

"Darling, I can never deserve half your love."

"All I desire on earth is to live alone with my Ry."

"Yes, darling, we'll make out life very well here, I'm sure—my only fear is for you. I'll go out with my rod, and bring you home my basket full of trout, or sometimes take my gun, and kill a hare or a rabbit, and we'll live like the old Baron and his daughters in the fairy-tale—on the produce of the streams, and solitudes about us—quite to ourselves; and I'll read to you in the evenings, or we'll play chess, or we'll chat while you work, and I'll tell you stories of my travels, and you'll sing me a song, won't you?"

"Too delighted—singing for joy," said little Alice, in a rapture at his story of the life that was opening to them, "oh, tell more."

"Well—yes—and you'll have such pretty flowers."

"Oh, yes—flowers—I love them—not expensive ones—for we are poor, you know; and you'll see how prudent I'll be—but annuals, they are so cheap—and I'll sow them myself, and I'll have the most beautiful you ever saw. Don't you love them, Ry?"

"Nothing so pretty, darling, on earth, except yourself."

"What is my Ry looking out for?"

Charles Fairfield had more than once put his head out of the window, looking as well as he could along the road in advance of the horses.

"Oh, nothing of any consequence, I only wanted to see that our man had got on with the horse, he might as well knock up the old woman, and see that things were, I was going to say, comfortable, but less miserable than they might be."

He laughed faintly as he said this, and he looked at his watch, as if he did not want her to see him consult it, and then he said—

"Well, and you were saying—oh—about the flowers—annuals—Yes."

And so they resumed. But somehow it seemed to Alice that his ardour and his gaiety were subsiding, that his thoughts were away, and pale care stealing over him like the chill of death. Again she might have remembered the ghostly Wilhelm, who grew more ominous and spectral as he and his bride neared the goal of their nocturnal journey.

"I don't think you hear me, Ry, and something has gone wrong," she said at last in a tone of disappointment, that rose even to alarm.

"Oh! tell me, Charlie, if there is anything you have not told me yet? you're afraid of frightening me."

"Nothing, nothing, I assure you, darling; what nonsense you do talk, you poor foolish little bird. No, I mean nothing, but I've had a sort of quarrel with the old man; you need not have written that letter, or at least it would have been better if you had told me about it."

"But, darling, I couldn't, I had no opportunity, and I could not leave Wyvern, where he had been so good to me all my life, without a few words to thank him, and to entreat his pardon; you're not angry, darling, with your poor little bird?"

"Angry, my foolish little wife, you little know your Ry; he loves his bird too well to be ever angry with her for anything, but it was unlucky, at least his getting it just when he did, for, you may suppose, it did not improve his temper."

"Very angry, I'm afraid, was he? But though he's so fiery, he's generous; I'm sure he'll forgive us, in a little time, and it will all be made up; don't you think so?"

"No, darling, I don't. Take this hill quietly, will you?" he called from the window to the driver; "you may walk them a bit, there's near two miles to go still."

Here was another anxious look out, and he drew his head in, muttering, and then he laid his hand on hers, and looked in her face and smiled, and he said—

"They are such fools, aren't they? and—about the old man at Wyvern—oh, no, you mistake him, he's not a man to forgive; we can reckon on nothing but mischief from that quarter, and, in fact, he knows all about it, for he chose to talk about you as if he had a right to scold, and that I couldn't allow, and I told him so, and that you were my wife, and that no man living should say a word against you."

"My own brave Ry; but oh! what a grief that I should have made this quarrel; but I love you a thousand times more; oh, my darling, we are everything now to one another."

"Ho! never mind," he exclaimed with a sudden alacrity, "there he is. All right, Tom, is it?"

"All right, sir," answered the man whom he had despatched before them on the horse, and who was now at the roadside still mounted.

"He has ridden back to tell us she'll have all ready for our arrival—oh, no, darling," he continued gaily, "don't think for a moment I care a farthing whether he's pleased or angry. He never liked me, and he cannot do us any harm, none in the world, and sooner or later Wyvern *must* be mine;" and he kissed her and smiled with the ardour of a man whose spirits are, on a sudden, quite at ease.

And as they sat, hand pressed in hand, she sidled closer to him, with the nestling instinct of the bird, as he called her, and dreamed that if there were a heaven on earth, it would be found in such a life as that on which she was entering, where she would have him "all to herself." And she felt now, as they diverged into the steeper road and more sinuous, that ascended for a mile the gentle wooded uplands to the grange of Carwell, that every step brought her nearer to Paradise.

Here is something paradoxical; is it? that this young creature should be so in love with a man double her own age. I have heard of cases like it, however, and I have read, in some old French writer—I have forgot who he is—the rule laid down with solemn audacity, that there is no such through-fire-and-water, desperate love as that of a girl for a man past forty. Till the hero has reached that period of autumnal glory, youth and beauty can but half love him. This encouraging truth is amplified and emphasized in the original. I extract its marrow for the comfort of all whom it may concern.

On the other hand, however, I can't forget that Charles Fairfield had many unusual aids to success. In the first place, by his looks, you would have honestly guessed him at from four or five years under his real age. He was handsome, dark, with white even teeth, and fine dark blue eyes, that could glow ardently. He was the only person at Wyvern with whom

she could converse. He had seen something of the world, something of foreign travel; had seen pictures, and knew at least the names of some authors; and in the barbarous isolation of Wyvern, where squires talked of little but the last new plough, fat oxen, and kindred subjects, often with a very perceptible infusion of the country *patois*—he was to a young lady with any taste either for books or art, a resource, and a companion.

And now the chaise was drawing near to Carwell Grange. With a childish delight she watched the changing scene from the window. The clumps of wild trees drew nearer to the roadside. Winding always upward, and steeper and steeper, was the narrow road. The wood gathered closer around them. The trees were loftier and more solemn, and cast sharp shadows of foliage and branches on the white roadway. All the way her ear and heart were filled with the now gay music of her lover's talk. At last through the receding trees that crowned the platform of the rising grounds they had been ascending, gables, chimneys, and glimmering windows showed themselves in the broken moonlight; and now rose before them, under a great ash tree, a gate-house that resembled a small square tower of stone, with a steep roof, and partly clothed in ivy. No light gleamed from its windows. Tom dismounted, and pushed open the old iron gate that swung over the grass-grown court with a long melancholy squeak.

It was a square court with a tolerably high wall, overtopped by the sombre trees, whose summits, like the old roofs and chimneys, were silvered by the moonlight.

This was the front of the building, which Alice had not seen before, the great entrance and hall-door of Carwell Grange.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OMEN OF CARWELL GRANGE.

The high wall that surrounded the court-yard, and the towering foliage of the old trees, were gloomy. Still if the quaint stone front of the house had shown through its many windows the glow of life and welcome, I dare say the effect of those sombre accessories would have been lost in pleasanter associations, and the house might have showed cheerily and cozily enough. As it was, with no relief but the cold moonlight that mottled the pavement and tipped the chimney tops, the silence and deep shadow were chilling, and it needed the deep enthusiasm of true love to see in that dismal frontage the delightful picture that Alice Maybell's eyes beheld.

"Welcome, darling, to our poor retreat, made bright and beautiful by your presence," said he, with a gush of tenderness; "but how unworthy to receive you none knows better than your poor Ry. Still for a short time—and it will be but short—you will endure it. Delightful your presence will make it to me; and to you, darling, my love will perhaps render it tolerable. Take my hand, and get down; and welcome to Carwell Grange."

Lightly she touched the ground, with her hand on his strong arm, for love rather than for assistance.

"I know how I shall like this quaint, quiet place," said she, "love it, and grow perhaps fit for no other, if only my darling is always with me. You'll show it all to me in daylight to-morrow—won't you?"

Their little talk was murmured, and unheard by others, under friendly cover of the snorting horses, and the talk of the men about the luggage.

"But I must get our door opened," said he with a little laugh; and with the heavy old knocker he hammered a long echoing summons at the door.

In a minute more lights flickered in the hall. The door was opened, and the old woman smiling her best, though that was far from being very pleasant. Her eye was dark and lifeless and never smiled, and there were lines of ill-temper, or worse, near them which never relaxed. Still she was doing her best, dropping little courtesies all the time, and holding her flaring tallow candle in its brass candlestick, and thus illuminating the furrows and minuter wrinkles of her forbidding face with a yellow light that suited its box-wood complexion.

Behind her, with another mutton-fat, for this was a state occasion, stood a square-shouldered little girl, some twelve years old, with a brown, somewhat flat face, and no good feature but her dark eyes and white teeth. This was Lilly Dogger, who had been called in to help the crone who stood in the foreground. With a grave, observing stare, she was watching the young lady, who, smiling, stepped into the hall.

"Welcome, my lady—very welcome to Carwell," said the old woman. "Welcome, Squire, very welcome to Carwell."

"Thank you very much. I'm sure I shall like it," said the young lady, smiling happily; "it is such a fine old place; and it's so quiet—I like quiet."

"Old enough and quiet enough, anyhow," answered the old woman. "You'll not see many new faces to trouble you here, Miss—Ma'am, my lady, I mean."

"But we'll all try to make her as pleasant and as comfortable as we can!" said Charles Fairfield, clapping the old woman on the shoulder a little impatiently.

"There don't lay much in *my* way to make her time pass pleasant, Master Charles; but I suppose we'll all do what we can?"

"And more we can't," said Charles Fairfield. "Come, darling. I suppose there's a bit of fire somewhere; it's a little cold, isn't it?"

"A fire burning all day, sir, in the cedar-room; and the kettle's a-boiling on the hob, if the lady'd like a cup o' tea?"

"Yes, of course," said Charles; "and a fire in the room upstairs?"

"Yes, so there is, sir, a great fire all day long, and everything well aired."

"Well, darling, shall we look first at the cedar-room?" he asked, and smiling, hand in hand, they walked through the hall, and by a staircase, and through a second and smaller hall, with a back stair off it, and so into a comfortable panelled-room, with a great cheery fire of mingled coal and wood, and old-fashioned furniture, which though faded, was scrupulously neat.

Old and homely as was the room, it agreeably surprised Alice, who was prepared to be delighted with everything, and at sight of this, exclaimed quite in a rapture—so honest a rapture that Charles Fairfield could not forbear laughing, though he felt also very grateful.

"Well, I admit," he said, looking round, "it does look wonderfully comfortable, all things considered; but here, I am afraid, is the beginning and the end of our magnificence—for the present, of course, and by-and-by, little by little, we may improve and extend; but I don't think in the whole house there's a habitable room—sitting-room I mean—but this," he laughed.

"It is the pleasantest room I ever was in, Charlie—a delightful room—I'm more than content," said she.

"You are a good little creature," said he, "at all events, the best little wife in the world, determined to make the best of everything, and as I said, we certainly shall be better very soon, and in the mean time, good humour and cheerfulness will make our quarters, poor as they are, brighter and better than luxury and ill-temper could find in a palace. Here are tea-things, and a kettle boiling—very primitive, very cosy—we'll be more like civilised people to-morrow or next day, when we have had time to look about us, and in the mean time, suppose I make tea while you run upstairs and put off your things—what do you say?"

"Yes, certainly," and she looked at the old woman, who stood with her ominous smile at the door.

"I ought to have told you her name, Mildred Tarnley—the *genius loci*. Mildred, you'll show your mistress to her room."

And he and his young wife smiled a mutual farewell. A little curious she was to see something more of the old house, and she peeped about her as she went up, and asked a few questions as they went along. "And this room," she asked, peeping into a door that opened from the back stairs which they were ascending, "it has such a large fireplace and little ovens, or what are they?"

"It was the still-room once, my lady, my mother remembered the time, but it was always shut up in my day."

"Oh, and can you tell me—I forget—where is my servant?"

"Upstairs, please, with your things, ma'am, when the man brought up your boxes."

Still looking about her and delaying, she went on. There was nothing stately about this house; but there was that about it which, if Alice had been in less cheerful and happy spirits, would have quelled and awed her. Thick walls, windows deep sunk, double doors now and then, wainscoting, and oak floors, warped with age.

On the landing there was an archway admitting to a gallery. In this archway was no door, and, on the landing, Alice Fairfield, as I may now call her, stood for a moment and looked round.

Happy as she was, I cannot tell what effect these faintly lighted glimpses of old and desolate rooms, aided by the repulsive companionship of her ancient guide, may have insensibly wrought upon her imagination, or what a trick that faculty may have just then played upon her senses, but turning round to enter the gallery under the open arch, the old woman standing by her, with the candle raised a little, Alice Fairfield stepped back, startled, with a little exclamation of surprise.

The ugly face of old Mildred Tarnley peeped curiously over the young lady's shoulder. She stepped before her, and peered, right and left, into the gallery; and then, with ominous inquiry into the young lady's eyes, "I thought it might be a bat, my lady; there was one last night got in," she said; "but there's no such a thing now—was you afeard of anything, my lady?"

"I—didn't you see it?" said the young lady, both frightened and disconcerted.

"I saw'd nothing, ma'am."

"It's very odd. I *did* see it; I *swear* I saw it, and felt the air all stirred about my face and dress by it."

"On here, miss—my lady; was it?"

"Yes; *here*, before us. I—weren't you looking?"

"Not that way, miss—I don't know," she said.

"Well, something fell down before us—all the way—from the top to the bottom of this place."

And with a slight movement of her hand and eyes, she indicated the open archway before which they stood.

"Oh, lawk! Well, I dare to say it may a bin a fancy, just."

"Yes; but it's very odd—a great heavy curtain of black fell down in folds from the top to the floor just as I was going to step through. It seemed to make a little cloud of dust about our feet; and I felt a wind from it quite distinctly."

"Hey, then it was a *black* curtain, I suppose," said the old woman, looking hard at her.

"Yes—but why do you suppose so?"

"Sich nonsense is always black, ye know. I see'd nothing—nothing—no more there was nothing. Didn't ye see me walk through?"

And she stepped back and forward, candle in hand, with an uncomfortable laugh.

"Oh, I know perfectly well there is nothing; but I saw it. I—I wish I hadn't," said the young lady.

"I wish ye hadn't, too," said Mildred Tarnley, pale and lowering. "Them as says their prayers, they needn't be afeard 'o sich things; and, for my part, I never see'd anything in the Grange, and I'm an old woman, and lived here girl, and woman, good sixty years and more."

"Let us go on, please," said Alice.

"At your service, my lady," said the crone, with a courtesy, and conducted her to her room.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INSPECTION OF CARWELL GRANGE.

Through an open door, at the end of this short gallery, the pleasant firelight gleamed, sufficiently indicating the room that had been prepared for her reception. She felt a little oddly and frightened, and the sight of old Dulcibella Crane in the cheerful light, busily unpacking her boxes, reassured her.

The grim old woman, Mildred Tarnley, stopped at the door.

"It's very well aired, ma'am," she said, making a little courtesy.

"It looks very comfortable; thank you—everything so neat; and such a bright nice fire," said Alice, smiling on her as well as she could.

"There's the tapestry room, and the leather room; but they're not so dry as this, though it's wainscot."

"Oak, I think—isn't it?" said the young lady, looking round.

"Yes, ma'am; and there's the pink paper chamber and dressing room; but they're gone very poor—and the bed and all that being in here, I thought 'twas the best 'o the lot; an' there's lots o' presses and cupboards in the wall, and the keys in them, and the locks all right; and I do think it's the most comfortablest room, my lady. That is the dressing-room in there, please; and do you like some more wood or coal on the fire, ma'am?"

"Not any; it is very nice—thanks."

And Alice sat down before the fire, and the smile seemed to evaporate in its glow, and she looked very grave—and even anxious. Mildred Tarnley made her courtesy, looked round the room, and withdrew.

"Well, Dulcibella, when are you going to have your tea?" asked Alice, kindly.

"I'll make a cup here, dear, if you think I may, after I've got your things in their places, in a few minutes' time."

"Would you like that better than taking it downstairs with the servant?"

"Yes, dear, I would."

"I don't think you like her, Dulcibella?"

"I can't say I mislike her, dear; I han't spoke ten words wi' her—she may be very nice—I don't know."

"There's something not very pleasant about her face, don't you think?" said Alice.

"Well, dear, but you *are* sharp; there's no hiding my thoughts from you; but there's many a face we gets used to that doesn't seem so agreeable-like at first. I think this rack'll do very nice for hanging your cloak on," she said, taking it from the young lady's hands. "You're tired a bit, I'm afeard; ye look a bit tired—ye do."

"No, nothing," said her young mistress, "only I can't help feeling sorry for poor old Wyvern and the Squire, old Mr. Fairfield—it seems so unkind; and there was a good deal to think about; and, I don't know how, I feel a little uncomfortable, in spite of so much that should cheer me; and now I must run down and take a cup of tea—come with me to the top of the stairs, and just hold the candle till I have got down."

When she reached the head of the stairs she was cheered by the sound of Charles Fairfield's voice, singing, in his exuberant jollity, the appropriate ditty, "Jenny, put the kettle on,—Barney, blow the bellows strong," &c.

And, hurrying downstairs, she found him ready to make tea, with his hand on the handle of the tea-pot, and the fire brighter than ever.

"Well, you didn't stay very long, good little woman. I was keeping up my spirits with a song; and, in spite of my music, beginning to miss you."

And, meeting her as she entered the room, he led her, with his arm about her waist, to a chair, in which, with a kiss, he placed her.

"All this seems to me like a dream. I can't believe it; but, if it be, woe to the fool who wakes me! No, darling, it's no dream, is it?" he said, smiling, and kissed her again. "The happiest day of *my* life," he said, and through his eyes smiled upon her a flood of the tenderest love.

A little more such talk, and then they sat down to that memorable cup of tea—"the first in our own house."

The delightful independence—the excitement, the importance—all our own—cups, spoons, room, servants—and the treasure secured, and the haven of all our hopes no longer doubtful or distant. Glorious, beautiful dream! from which death, wrinkles, duns, are quite obliterated. Sip while you may, your pleasant cup of—madness, from that fragile, pretty china, and may the silver spoon wherewith you stir it, prove to have come into the world at the moment of your birth, where fortune is said to place it sometimes. Next morning the sun shone clear over Carwell Grange, bringing into sharp relief the joints and wrinkles of the old gray masonry, the leaves and tendrils of the ivy, and the tufts of grass which here and there sprout fast in the chinks of the parapet, and casting, with angular distinctness upon the shingled roof, the shadows of the jackdaws that circled about the old chimney. A twittering of small birds fills the air, and the solemn cawing comes mellowed on the ear from the dark rookery at the other side of the ravine, that, crossing at the side of the Grange, debouches on the wider and deeper glen that is known as the Vale of Carwell.

Youth enjoys a change of abode, and with the instinct of change and adventure proper to its energies, delights in a new scene.

Charles Fairfield accompanied his young wife, who was full of curiosity, and her head busy with a hundred plans, as in gay and eager spirits she surveyed her little empire.

"This is the garden—I tell you, lest you should mistake it for the forest where the enchanted princess slept, surrounded by great trees and thickets—it excels even the old garden at Wyvern. There are pear-trees, and plum, and cherry, and apple. Upon my word, I forgot they were so huge, and the jungles are raspberries and gooseberries and currants. Did you ever see such thickets, and nettles between. I'm afraid you'll not make much of this. When I was a boy those great trees looked as big and mossgrown as they do now, and bore such odd crabbed little fruit, and not much even of that."

"It will be quite beautiful when it is weeded, and flowers growing in the shade, and climbing plants trained up the stems of the trees, and it shan't cost us anything; but you'll see how wonderfully pretty it will be."

"But what is to become of all your pretty plans, if flowers won't grow without sun. I defy any fairy—even my own bright little one—to make them grow here; but, if you won't be persuaded, by all means let us try. I think there's sunshine wherever you go, and I should not wonder, after all, if nature relented, and beautiful miracles were accomplished under your influence."

"I know you are laughing at me," she said.

"No, darling—I'll never laugh at you—you can make me believe whatever you choose; and now that we have looked over all the wild beauties of our neglected paradise, in which, you good little creature, you are resolved to see all kinds of capabilities and perfections—suppose we go now to the grand review of our goods and chattels, that you planned at breakfast—cups, saucers, plates, knives, forks, spoons, and all such varieties."

"Oh, yes, let us come, Ry, it will be such fun, and so useful, and old Mrs. Tarnley said she would have a list made out," said Alice, to whom the new responsibilities and dignities of her married state were full of interest and importance.

So in they came together, and called for old Mildred, with a list of their worldly goods; and they read the catalogue together, with every now and then a peal of irrepressible laughter.

"I had not an idea how near we were to our last cup and saucer," said Charles, "and the dinner-service is limited to seven plates, two of which are cracked."

The comic aspect of their poverty was heightened, perhaps, by Mrs. Tarnley's peculiar spelling. The old woman stood in the doorway of the sitting-room while the revision was proceeding, mightily displeased at this levity, looking more than usually wrinkled and bilious, and rolling her eyes upon them, from time to time, with a malignant ogle.

"I was never good at the pen—I know that—but your young lady desired me, and I did my best, and very despickable it be, no doubt," said Mildred, with grizzly scorn.

"Oh, my! I am so sorry—I assure you, Mrs. Tarnley—pray tell her, Charlie—we were laughing only at there being so few things left."

"Left! I don't know what ye mean by *left*, ma'am—there's not another woman as ever I saw would keep his bit o' delf and chaney half as long as me; I never was counted a smasher o' things—no more I was."

"But we didn't think you broke them; did we, Charlie?" appealed poor little Alice, who, being new to authority, was easily bullied.

"Nonsense, old Mildred—don't be a fool," said Charles Fairfield, not in so conciliatory a tone as Alice would have wished.

"Well, fool's easily said, and there's no lack o' fools, high or low, Master Charles, and I don't pretend to be no scholar; but I've read that o'er much laughing ends, oft times, in o'er much crying—the Lord keep us all from grief."

"Hold your tongue—what a bore you are," exclaimed he, sharply.

Mrs. Tarnley raised her chin, and looked askance, but made no answer, she was bitter.

"Why the devil, old Mildred, can't you try to look pleasant for once?" he persisted. "I believe there's not a laugh *in* you, nor even a smile, is there?"

"I'm not much given to laughin', thankee, sir, and there's people, mayhap, should be less so, if they'd only take warnin', and mind what they seed over night; and if the young lady don't want me no longer, I'd be better back in the kitchen before the chicken burns, for Lilly's out in the garden rootin' out the potatoes for dinner."

And after a moment's silence she dropped a little courtesy, and assuming permission, took her departure.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LETTER.

Alice looked a little paler, her husband a little discontented. Each had a different way of reading her unpleasant speech.

"Don't mind that old woman, darling, don't let her bore you. I do believe she has some as odious faults as are to be found on earth."

"I don't know what she means by a warning," said Alice.

"Nor I, darling, I am sure; perhaps she has had a winding-sheet on her candle, or a coffin flew out of the fire, or a death-watch ticked in the wainscot," he answered.

"A warning, what could she mean?" repeated Alice, slowly, with an anxious gaze in his eyes.

"My darling, how can you? A stupid old woman!" said he a little impatiently, "and thoroughly ill-conditioned. She's in one of her tempers, just because we laughed, and fancied it was at her; and there's nothing she'd like better than to frighten you, if she could. I'll pack her off, if I find her playing any tricks."

"Oh, the poor old thing, not for the world; she'll make it up with me, you'll find; I don't blame her the least, if she thought that, and I'll tell her we never thought of such a thing."

"Don't mind her, she's not worth it—we'll just make out a list of the things that we want; I'm afraid we want a great deal more than we can get, for you have married a fellow, in all things but love, as poor as a church mouse."

He laughed, and kissed her, and patted her smiling cheek.

"Yes, it will be such fun buying these things; such a funny little dinner service, and breakfast things, and how far away is Naunton?"

"I'm not so sure we can get them at Naunton. Things come from London so easily now," said he.

"Oh, but there is such a nice little shop, I remarked it in Naunton," said she, eagerly.

"Oh, is there?" said he, "I forgot, I believe you drove through it."

"I did," she answered, "and the whole pleasure of getting them, would be buying them with you."

"You kind little darling," he said, with a faint smile, "so it would to me, I know, choosing them with you; but are you sure there is a place there?"

"Such a nice little shop, with a great red and blue jug, hanging over the door for a sign," she insisted, cheerily, "and there is something pleasant, isn't there, in the sort of queer rustic things one would meet in such an out-of-the-way place?"

"Yes, so there is, but, however, we'll think about it, and, in fact, it doesn't matter a farthing where we get them."

Our friend Charles seemed put out a little, and his slight unaccountable embarrassment piqued her curiosity, and made her ever so little uncomfortable. She was still, however, a very young wife, and in awe of her husband. It was, therefore, rather timidly that she said,—

"And why, darling Ry, can't we decide now, and go to-morrow, and choose our plates, and cups, and saucers? it would be such a pleasant little adventure to look forward to."

"So it might, but we'll have to make up our minds to have many days go by, and weeks too, here, with nothing pleasant to look forward to. You knew very well," he continued, not so sharply, "when you married me, that I owed money, and was a poor miserable devil, and not my own master, and you really must allow me to decide what is to be done, when a trifle might any day run us into mischief. There now, your eyes are full of tears, how can you be so foolish?"

"But, indeed, Ry, I'm not," she pleaded, smiling through them. "I was only sorry, I was afraid I had vexed you."

"Vexed me! you darling; not the least, I am only teased to think I am obliged to deny you anything, much less to hesitate about gratifying so trifling a wish as this; but so it is, and such my hard fate; and though I seem to be vexed, it is not with you, you must not mistake, *never*, darling, with you; but in proportion as I love you, the sort of embarrassment into which you have ventured with your poor Ry, grieves and even enrages him, and the thought, too, that so small a thing would set it all to rights. But we are not the only people, of course, there are others as badly off, and a great deal worse; there now, darling, you must not cry, you really mustn't; you must never fancy for a moment when anything happens to vex me, that I could be such a brute as to be angry with you; what's to become of me, if you ever suffer such a chimera to enter your pretty little head? I do assure you, darling, I'd rather blow my brains out, than inflict a single unhappy hour upon you; there now, won't you kiss me, and look quite happy again? and come, we'll go out again; you did not see the kennel, and the brewhouse, and fifty other interesting ruins; we must be twice as happy as ever for the rest of the day."

And so this little cloud, light and swift, but still a cloud, blew over, and the sun shone out warm and brilliant again.

The buildings, which enclosed three sides of the quadrangle which they were now examining, were, with the exception of the stables, in such a state of dilapidation as very nearly to justify in sober earnest the term "ruins," which he had half jocularly applied to them.

"You may laugh as you will," said Alice, "but I think this might be easily made quite a beautiful place—prettier even than Wyvern."

"Yes, very easily," he laughed, "if a fellow had two or three thousand pounds to throw away upon it. Whenever I have—and I may yet,—you may restore, and transform, and do what you like, I'll give you *carte blanche*, and in better hands I believe neither house nor money could be placed. No one has such taste — though it is hardly for *me* to say that."

Just at that moment the clank of a horse-shoe was heard on the pavement, and, turning his head, Charles saw his man, Tom Sherwood, ride into the yard. Tom touched his hat and dismounted.

"A letter, sir."

"Oh!" said Charles, letting go his wife's arm, and walking quickly towards him.

The man handed him a letter. Alice was standing, forgotten for the time, on the middle of the pavement, while her husband opened and read his letter.

When he had done he turned about and walked a few steps towards her, but still thinking anxiously and plainly not seeing her, and he stopped and read it through again.

"Oh, darling, I beg your pardon, I'm so stupid. What were we talking about? Oh! yes, the house, this old place. If I live to succeed to Wyvern you shall do what you like with this place, and we'll live here if you like it best."

"Well, I don't think I should like to live here always," she said, and paused.

She was thinking of the odd incident of the night before, and there lurked in one dark corner of her mind just the faintest image of horror, very faint, but still genuine, and which, the longer she looked at it grew the darker; "and I was going to ask you if we could change our room."

"I think, darling," said he, looking at her steadily, "the one we have got is almost the only habitable bed-room in the house, and certainly the most comfortable, but if you like any other room better—have you been looking?"

"No, darling, only I'm such a coward, and so foolish; I fancied I saw something when I was going into it last night—old Mrs. Tarnley was quite close to me."

"If you saw *her* it was quite enough to frighten any one. But what was it—robber, or only a ghost?" he asked.

"Neither, only a kind of surprise and a fright. I did not care to talk about it last night, and I thought it would have quite passed away by to-day; but I can't quite get rid of it—and, shall I tell it all to you now?" answered Alice.

"You must tell me all, by-and-by," he laughed; "you shall have any room you like better, only remember they're all equally old; and now, *I* have a secret to tell you. Harry is coming to dine with us; he'll be here at six—and—look here, how oddly my letters come to me."

And he held the envelope he had just now opened by the corner before her eyes. It was thus:—

"Mr. Thomas Sherwood,

Post Office,

Naunton,

To be called for."

"There's evidence of the caution I'm obliged to practise in that part of the world. The world will never be without sin, poverty, and attorneys; and there is a cursed fellow there with eyes wide open and ears erect, and all sorts of poisoned arrows of the law to shoot at poor wayfarers like me; and that's the reason why I'd rather buy our modest teacups in London, and not be so much as heard of in Naunton. Don't look so frightened, little woman, every fellow has a dangerous dun or two, and I'm not half so much in peril as fifty I could name. Only my father's angry, you know, and when that quarrel gets to be known it mayn't help my credit, or make duns more patient. So I must keep well earthed here till the dogs are quiet again; and now, my wise little housekeeper will devise dinner enough for our hungry brother, who will arrive, in two hours' time, with the appetite that Cressley Common gives every fellow with as little to trouble him as Harry has."

CHAPTER XV.

HARRY ARRIVES.

Six o'clock came, and seven, and not until half-past seven, when they had nearly given him up, did Henry Fairfield arrive at the Grange.

"How does Madam Fairfield?" bawled Master Harry, as he strode across the floor, and kissed Alice's pretty cheek. "Odds bobbins!—as the man says in the play-house—I believe I bussed ye, did I? But don't let him be angry; I wasn't thinkin', Charlie, no more than the fellow that put farmer Gleeson's fippun-note in his pocket last Trutbury fair. And how's all wi' ye, Charlie, hey? I'm glad to see the old house is standing still with a roof on since last gale. And how do ye like it, Alice? Rayther slow I used to think it; but you two wise heads are so in love wi' one another ye'd put up in the pound, or the cow-house, or the horse-pond, for sake o' each other's company. 'I loved her sweet company better than meat,' as the song says; and that reminds me—can the house afford a hungry man a cut o' beef or mutton and a mug of ale? I asked myself to dinner, ye know, and that's a bargain there's two words to, sometimes."

Master Harry was a wag, after a clumsy rustic fashion—an habitual jester, and never joked more genially than when he was letting his companion in for what he called a "soft thing," in the shape of an unsound horse or a foolish wager.

His jocularity was supposed to cover a great deal of shrewdness, and some dangerous qualities also.

While their homely dinner was being got upon the table, honest Harry quizzed the lord and lady of Carwell Grange in the same vein of delicate banter, upon all their domestic arrangements, and when he found that there was but one sitting-room in a condition to receive them, his merriment knew no bounds.

"Upon my soul, you beat the cobbler in the song that 'lived in a stall, that served him for parlour, and kitchen, and hall,' for there's no mention of the cobbler's wife, and he, being a single man, you know, you and your lady double the wonder, don't ye, Alice, two faces under a hood, and a devilish pinched little hood, too, heh? ha, ha, ha!"

"When did you get to Wyvern?" asked Charles Fairfield, after a considerable pause.

"Last night," answered his brother.

"You saw the old man?"

"Not till morning," answered Henry, with a waggish leer, and a sly glance at Alice.

It was lost, however, for the young lady was looking dreamily and sadly away, thinking, perhaps, of the old Squire, not without self-upbraidings, and hearing nothing, I am sure, of all they said.

"Did you breakfast with him?"

"By Jove, I did, sir."

"Well?"

"Well? Nothing particular, only let me see how long his stick is—his stick and his arm, together—say five feet six. Well, I counsel you, brother, not to go within five foot six inches of the old gentleman till he cools down a bit, anyhow."

"No, we'll not try that," said Charles, "and he may cool down, as you say, or nurse his wrath, as he pleases, it doesn't much matter to me; he *was* very angry, but sometimes the thunder and flame blow off, you know, and the storm hurts no one."

"I hope so," said Henry, with a sort of laugh. "When I tell you to keep out of the way, mind, I'm advising you against myself. The more you and the old boy wool each other the better for Hal."

"He can't unsettle the place, Harry—not that I want to see him—I never owed him much love, and I think *now* he'd be glad to see me a beggar."

Harry laughed again.

"Did you ever hear of a bear with a sore head?" said Harry. "Well, that's him, at present, and I give you fair notice, I think he'll leave all he can away from you."

"So let him; if it's to you, Harry, I don't grudge it," said the elder son.

"That's a handsome speech, bless the speaker. Can you give me a glass of brandy? This claret I never could abide," said Harry, with another laugh; "besides it will break you."

"I've but two bottles, and they have been three years here. Yes, you can have brandy, it's here."

"I'll get it," said Alice, brightening up in the sense of her house-keeping importance. "It's—I *think* it's in this, ain't it?" she said, opening one of the presses inserted in the wainscot.

"Let me, darling, it's there, I ought to know, I put it there myself," said Charles, getting up, and taking the keys from her and opening another cupboard.

"I'm so stupid!" said Alice, blushing, as she surrendered them, "and so useless; but you're always right, Charlie."

"He's a wonderful fellow, ain't he?" said Harry, winking agreeably at Charles; "I never knew a bran new husband that wasn't. Wait a bit and the gold rubs off the ginger-bread—Didn't old Dulcibella—how's she?—never buy you a gingerbread husband down at Wyvern Fair? and they all went, I warrant, the same road; the gilding rubs away, and then off with his head, and eat him up slops! That's not bad cognac—where do you get it?—don't know, of course; well, it *is* good."

"Glad you like it, Harry," said his brother. "It was very kind of you coming over here so soon; you must come often—won't you?"

"Well, you know, I thought I might as well, just to tell you how things was—but, mind, is anyone here?"

He looked over his shoulder to be sure that the old servant was not near.

"Mind you're not to tell the folk over at Wyvern that I came here, because you know it wouldn't serve me, noways, with the old chap up there, and there's no use."

"You may be very easy about that, Harry. I'm a banished man, you know. I shall never see the old man's face again; and rely on it, I shan't write."

"I don't mean him alone," said Harry, replenishing his glass; "but don't tell any of them Wyvern people, nor you, Alice. Mind—I'm going back to-night, as far as Barnsley, and from there I'll go to Dawling, and round, d'ye mind, south, by Leigh Watton, up to Wyvern, and I'll tell him a thumpin' lie if he asks questions."

"Don't fear any such thing, Harry," said Charles.

"Fear! I'm not afeard on him, nor never was."

"Fancy, then," said Charles.

"Only," continued Harry, "I'm not like you—I han't a house and a bit o' land to fall back on; d'ye see? He'd have me on the ropes if I vexed him. He'd slap Wyvern door in my face, and stop my allowance, and sell my horses, and leave me to the 'sizes and the lawyers for my rights; and I couldn't be comin' here spongin' on you, you know."

"You'd always be welcome, Harry," said Charles.

"Always," echoed his wife, in whom everyone who belonged to Charlie had a welcome claim.

But Harry went right on with his speech without diverging to thank them.

"And you'll be snug enough here, you see, and I might go whistle, and dickins a chance I'll ha' left but to go list or break horses, or break stones, by jingo; and I ha' run risks enough in this thing o' yours—not but I'm willin' to run more, if need be; but there's no good in getting myself into pound, you know."

"By me, Harry. You don't imagine I could be such a fool," exclaimed Charles.

"Well, I think ye'll allow I stood to ye like a brick, and didn't funk nothin' that was needful—and I'd do it over again—I would."

Charles took one hand of the generous fellow, and Alice took the other, and the modest benefactor smiled gruffly and flushed a little, and looked down as they poured forth in concert their acknowledgments.

"Why, see how you two thanks me. I always says to fellows, 'keep your thanks to yourselves, and do me a good turn when it lies in your ways.' There's the sort o' thanks that butters a fellow's parsnips—and so—say no more."

CHAPTER XVI.

A PARTY OF THREE.

"I'd tip you a stave, only I've got a hoarseness since yesterday, and I'd ask Alice to play a bit, only there's no piano here to kick up a gingle with, and Charlie never sang a note in his life, and"—standing before the fire, he yawned long and loud—"by Jove, that wasn't over civil of me, but old friends need not be stiff, and I vote we yawn all round for company; and I'll forgive ye, for my hour's come, and I'll be taking the road."

"I wish so much I had a bed to offer you, Harry; but you know all about it—there hasn't been time to arrange anything," said Charles.

"Won't you stay and take some tea?" urged Alice.

"I never could abide it, child; thank ye all the same," said he, "I'd as soon drink a mug o' whey."

"And what about the gray hunter—you did not sell him yet?" asked Charles.

"I don't well know what to do about him," answered his brother. "I'd a sold him for fifty, only old Clinker wouldn't pass him for sound. Clinker and me, we had words about that."

"I want fifty pounds very much, if I could get it," said Charles.

"I never knew a fellow that didn't want fifty very bad, if he could get it," laughed Harry; "but you'll not be doin' that bad, I'mafeard, if ye get half the money."

"The devil! — do you really — why I thought, with luck, I might get seventy. I'm hard up, Harry, and I know you'll do your best for me," said Charles, to whom this was really a serious question.

"And with luck so you might; but chaps isn't easy done these times; and though I swear it's only his mouth, he steps short at the off side, and a fellow with an eye in his head won't mistake his action."

"You will do the best you can for me, Harry, I know," said Charles, who knew nothing about horses, and was lazy in discussion. "But it's rather a blow just now, when a poor devil wants every shilling he can get together, to find himself fifty pounds nearly out of pocket."

Was it fancy, or did Alice's pretty ear hear truly? It seemed to her that the tone in which Charlie spoke was a little more sour than need be, that it seemed to blame her as the cause of altered circumstances, and to hint, though very faintly, an unkind repentance. His eye met hers; full and sad it looked, and his heart smote him, for the intangible reproof was deserved.

"And here's the best little wife in the world," he said, "who would save a lazy man like me a little fortune in a year, and make that unlucky fifty pounds, if I could but get it, do as much as a hundred."

And his hand was fondly placed on her shoulder, as he looked in her loving eyes.

"A good house-wife is she, that's something," said Harry, who was inspecting his spur. "Though by Jove it was hardly at Wyvern she learned thrift."

"All the more merit," said Charles, "it's all her wise, good little self."

"No, no; I can't take all that praise; it's your great kindness, Charlie. But I'll try. I'll learn all I can, and I'm sure the real secret is to be very anxious to do it well."

"Ay, to be sure," interrupted Harry, who, having completed his little arrangement, placed his foot again on the ground. "The more you like it the better you'll do it—pare the cheeses, skin the flints, kill the fleas for the hide and tallow, pot the potato-skins, sweat the shillin's and all that, and now I'll be going. Good night, Alice. Will you let Charlie see me down to the end o' the lane, and I'll send him safe back to you? Come along, Charlie. God bless you, girl, and I'll look in again whenever I have a bit o' news to tell ye."

And with that elegant farewell, he shook Alice by the hand and clapped her on the shoulder, and "chucked" her under the chin.

"And don't ye be faint-hearted, mind, 'twill all come right, and I didn't think this place was so comfortable as it is. It is a snug old house with a bit o' coal and a faggot o' wood, and a pair o' bright eyes, and a glass o' that, a man might make shift for a while. I'd do it myself. I didn't think it was so snug by half, and I'd rayther stay here to-night by a long chalk than ride to Barnsley, I can tell ye. Come, Charlie, it's time I should be on the road; and she says, don't you, Alice, you may see me a bit o' the way."

And so the leave-taking came to an end, and Charlie and Harry went out together; and Alice wondered what had induced Harry to come all that way for so short a visit, with so very little to tell. Perhaps, however, his own business, for he was always looking after horses, and thought nothing of five-and-thirty miles, had brought him to the verge of Cressley Common, and if so, he would have come on the few additional miles, if only to bait his horse and get his dinner.

Perhaps the old Squire at Wyvern had broken out more angrily, and was threatening something in which there was real danger to Charlie, which the brothers did not choose to tell her. A kindly secrecy and considerate, but seldom unsuspected, and being so often fifty-fold more torturing than downright ghastly frankness.

There had been a little chill and shadow over the party of three, she thought. Charlie thought his brother Harry the most thorough partisan that ever man had, and the most entirely sympathetic. If that were so, and should not he know best? Harry had certainly laughed and joked after his fashion, and enjoyed himself, and there could not be much wrong. But Charlie—was not there something more upon his mind than she quite knew? She stood too much in awe of her husband to follow them, as she would have wished, and implore of them if there was any new danger to let her hear it all. In her ear was the dismal iteration, as it were, of this little "death-watch," and sighing, she got up and opened the window-shutter and looked out upon the moonlighted scene.

A little platform of grass stood between the wall of the house and the precipitous edge of the vale of Marlow. Tall trees stood lonely and silent sentinels without the old gray walls, and a low ivied parapet guarded the sudden descent of the riven and wooded cliff. The broken screen of the solemn forest foreground showed in the distance the thicker masses of the wood that topped the summit of the further side of that sombre glen. Stiller, sadder scene fancy never painted.

She had opened the shutter, uncertain whether the window commanded the point from which her husband and his brother might be expected to emerge, for the geography of this complicated house was still new to her, and disappointed, she lingered in contemplation of a view which so well accorded with the melancholy of her lonely misgivings.

How soon in the possession of our heart's desire comes the sense of disappointment, and the presence of the worm, and promise of the blight among the flowers of our vernal days. Pitch the tent or drop the anchor where we may, always a new campaign opening, always a new voyage beginning—quiet nowhere.

"I dare say it is only my folly—that nothing has gone wrong, and that they have no secrets to hide from me. I have no one else; he would not shut me out from his confidence, and leave me quite alone. No, Ry, you could not."

With a full heart she turned again from the window.

"He'll come again in a minute; he'll not walk far with Harry."

She went to the door, and opening it, listened. She heard a step enter the passage from the stable-yard, and called to ask who was there. It was only Tom, who had let out Master Harry's horse, and opened the gate for him. He led it out, and they walked together—Master Harry with the bridle in his hand, and Master Charles walking beside him. They took the narrow way along the little glen towards Cressley Common.

She knew that he would return probably in a few minutes; and more and more she wondered what those minutes might contain, she partly wondered at her own anxiety. So she returned to the room and waited there for him. But he remained longer away than she expected. The tea-things were on the table deserted. The fire flickered its genial invitation in vain, and she, growing more uncomfortable and lonely, and perhaps a little high at being thus forsaken, went upstairs to pay old Dulcibella Crane a visit.

CHAPTER XVII.

MILDRED TARNLEY'S WARNING STORY.

As she reached the top of the stairs she called to the old servant, not, I think, caring to traverse the haunted flooring that intervened alone. She heard Dulcibella talking, and a moment after her old nurse appeared, and standing by her shoulder Mildred Tarnley.

"Oh, Mrs. Tarnley! I'm so glad to see you—you've been paying Dulcibella a visit. Pray, come back, and tell me some stories about this old house; you've been so long here, and know it so well, that you must have a great deal to tell."

The old woman, with the unpleasant face, made a stiff courtesy.

"At your service, ma'am," she said, ungraciously.

"That is if it don't inconvenience you," pleaded Alice, who was still a little afraid of her.

"'Tis as you please, ma'am," said the old servant, with another dry courtesy.

"Well, I'm so glad you can come. Dulcibella, have we a little bit of fire? Oh, yes, I see—it looks so cheerful."

So they entered the old-fashioned bed-room.

"I hope, Mrs. Tarnley, I'm not keeping you from your tea?"

"No, I thank ye, ma'am. I've 'ad my tea an hour agone," answered the old woman.

"And you must sit down, Mrs. Tarnley," urged Alice.

"I'll stand, if ye please, ma'am," said the withered figure perversely.

"I should be so much happier if you would sit down, Mildred," urged her young mistress; "but if you prefer it—I only mean that whatever is most comfortable to you you should do. I wanted so much to hear something about this old house. You remember what happened when I was coming upstairs with you—when I was so startled."

"I didn't see it, miss—ma'am. I only heard you say summat," answered Mildred Tarnley.

"Oh, yes, I know; but you spoke to-day of a warning, and you looked when it happened as if you had heard of it before."

The old woman raised her chin, and with her hands folded together made another courtesy, which mutually seemed to say,—

"If you have anything to ask, ask it."

"Do you remember," inquired Alice, "having ever heard of anything strange being seen at that passage near the head of the stairs?"

"I ought, ma'am," answered the old woman discreetly.

"And what was it?" inquired Alice.

"I don't know, ma'am, would the master be pleased if he was to hear I was talkin' o' such things to you," suggested Mildred.

"He'd only laugh as I should, I assure you. I'm not the least a coward; so you need not be afraid of my making a fool of myself. Now, do tell me what it was!"

"Well, ma'am, you'll be pleased to remember 'tis you orders me, in case Master Charles should turn on me about it; but, as you say, ma'am, there's many thinks 'tis all nothin' but old 'oman's tales and fribble-frabble; and 'tisn't for me to say
____"

"I'll take all the blame to myself," said Alice.

"There's no blame in't as I'm aware on; and if there was I wouldn't ask no one to take it on themselves more than their right share; and that I'd take leave to lay on them myself, without stoppin' to ask whether they likes it or no; but only I told you, ma'am, that I should have your orders, and wi' them I'll comply."

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Tarnley—and now do kindly go on," said Alice.

"Well, please, ma'am, you'll tell me what you saw?"

"A heavy black drapery fell from the top of the arch through which we pass to the gallery outside the door, and for some seconds closed up the entire entrance," answered the young lady.

"Ay, ay, no doubt that's it; but there was no drapery there, ma'am, sich as this world's loom ever wove. Them as weaves that web is light o' hand and heavy o' heart, and the de'el himself speeds the shuttle," and as she said this the old woman smiled sourly. "I was talking o' that very thing to Mrs. Crane here when you came up, ma'am."

"Yes," said old Dulcibella, quietly; "it was very strange, surely."

"And there came quite a cloud of dust from it rolling along the floor," continued Alice.

"Yes, so there would—so there does; 'tis always so," said Mrs. Tarnley, with the same faint ugly smile; "not that there's a grain o' dust in all the gallery, for the child Lily Dogger and me washed it out and swept it clean. Dust ye saw; but that's no real dust, like what the minister means when he says, 'Dust to dust.' No, no, a finer dust by far—the dust o' death. No more clay in that than in yon smoke, or the mist in Carwell Glen below; no dust at all, but sich dust as a ghost might shake from its windin' sheet—an appearance, ye understand; that's all, ma'am—like the rest."

Alice smiled, but old Mildred's answering smile chilled her, and she turned to Dulcibella; but good Mrs. Crane looked in her face with round eyes of consternation and a very solemn countenance.

"I see, Dulcibella, if my courage fails I'm not to look to you for support. Well, Mrs. Tarnley, don't mind—I shan't need her help; and I'm not a bit afraid, so pray go on."

"Well, ye see, ma'am, this place and the house came into the family, my grandmother used to say, more than a hundred years ago; and I was a little thing when I used to hear her say so, and there's many a year added to the tale since then; but it was in the days o' Sir Harry Fairfield. They called him Harry Boots in his day, for he was never seen except in his boots, and for the matter o' that seldom out o' the saddle; for there was troubles in them days, and militia and yeomanry, and dear knows what all—and the Fairfields was ever a bold, dare-devil stock, and them dangerous times answered them well—and what with dragooning, and what with the hunting-field, I do suppose his foot was seldom out o' the stirrup. So my grandmother told me some called him Booted Fairfield and more called him Harry Boots—that was Sir Harry Fairfield o' them days."

"I think I've seen his picture, haven't I?—at Wyvern. It's in the hall, at the far end from the door, near the window, with a long wig and lace cravat, and a great steel breast-plate?" inquired Alice.

"Like enough, miss—ma'am, I mean—I don't know, I'm sure—but he was a great man in his time, and would have his picture took, no doubt. His wife was a Carwell—an heiress—there's not a Carwell in this country now, nor for many a day has been. 'Twas she brought Carwell Grange and the Vale o' Carwell to the Fairfields—poor thing—pretty she was. Her picture was never took to Wyvern, and much good her land, and houses, and good looks done her. The Fairfields was wild folk. I don't say there wasn't good among 'em, but whoever else they was good to, they was seldom kind to their wives. Hard, bad husbands they was—that's sure."

Alice smiled, and stirred the fire quietly, but did not interrupt, and as the story went on, she sighed.

"They said she was very lonesome here. Well, it is a lonesome place, you know—awful lonesome, and always the same. For old folk like me it doesn't matter, but young blood's different, you know, and they likes to see the world a bit, and talk and hear what's a-foot, be it fun or change, or what not; and she was very lonesome, mopin' about the old garden, plantin' flowers, or pluckin' roses—all to herself—or cryin' in the window—while Harry Boots was away wi' his excuses—now wi' his sogerin', and now wi' the hounds, and truly wi' worse matters, if all were out. So, not twice in a year was his face—handsome Harry Boots, they ca'd him—seen down here, and his pretty lady was sick and sore and

forsaken, down in her own lonesome house, by the Vale of Carwell, where I'm telling you this."

Alice smiled, and nodded in sign of attention, and the old woman went on.

"I often wonder they try to hide these things—'twould be better sometimes they were more out-spoken, for sooner or later all will out, and then there's wild work, and mayhap it's past ever makin' up between them. So stories travel a'most without legs to carry 'em, and there's no gainsaying the word o' God that said, 'let there be light,' for, sooner or later, light 'twill be, and all will be cleared up, and the wicked doin's of Harry Boots, far away, and cunning, as all was done, come clear to light, so as she could no longer have hope or doubt in the matter. Poor thing—she loved him better than life—better than her soul, mayhap, and that's all she got by't—a bad villain that was."

"He was untrue to her?" said Alice.

"Lawk! to be sure he was," replied Mrs. Tarnley, with a cynical scorn.

"And so she had that to think of all alone, along with the rest—for she might have had a greater match than Sir Harry—a lord he was. I forget his name, but he'd a given his eyes a'most to a got her. But a' wouldn't do, for she loved Booted Harry Fairfield, and him she'd have, and wouldn't hear o' no other, and so she had enough to think on here, in Carwell Grange. The house she had brought the Fairfields—poor bird alone, as we used to say—but the rest of her time wasn't very long—it wasn't to be—she used to walk out sometimes, but she talked to no one, and she cared for nothin' after that; and there's the long sheet o' water, in the thick o' the trees, with the black yew-hedge round it."

"I know," said Alice, "a very high hedge, and trees behind it—it is the darkest place I ever saw—beyond the garden. Isn't that the place?"

"Yes, that's it; she used to walk round it—sometimes cryin'—sometimes not; and there she was found drowned, poor thing. Some said 'twas by mischance, for the bank was very steep and slippery—it had been rainy weather—where she was found, and more said she made away wi' herself, and that's what was thought among the Carwell folk, as my grandmother heared; for what's a young creature to do wi' nothing more to look to, and all alone, wi' no one ever to talk to, and the heart quite broke?"

"You said, I think, that there was a picture here?" inquired Alice.

"I said 'twasn't took to Wyvern, ma'am; there was a picture here they said 'twas hers —my grandmother said so, and she should know. 'Twas the only picture I remember in the Grange."

"And where is it?" inquired Alice.

"Dropped to pieces long ago. 'Twas in the room they called the gun-room, in my day. The wall was damp; 'twas gone very poor and rotten in my time, and so black you could scarce make it out. Many a time when I was a bit of a girl, some thirteen or fourteen years old, I stood on the table, for a long time together a-looking at it. But it was dropping away that time in flakes, and the canvas as rotten as tinder, and every time it got a stir it lost something, till ye couldn't make nothing of it. It's all gone long ago, and the frame broke up I do suppose."

"What a pity!" said Alice. "Oh, what a pity! Can you, do you think, remember anything of it?"

"She was standin'—you could see the point o' the shoe—white satin it looked like, wi' a buckle that might be diamonds; there was a nosegay, I mind, in her fingers, wi' small blue flowers, and a rose, but the face was all faded and dark, except just a bit o' the mouth, red, and smilin' at the corner—very pretty. But 'twas all gone very dark, you know, and a deal o' the paintin' gone; and that's all I ever seen o' the picture."

"Well, and did anything more happen?" asked Alice.

"Hoo! yes, lots. Down comes Booted Fairfield, now there was no one left to care whether he came or went. The Carwell people didn't love him, but 'twas best to keep a civil tongue, for the Fairfields were dangerous folk always, 'twas a word and a blow wi' them, and no one cared to cross them, and he made a pother about it to be sure, and had the rooms hung wi' black, and the staircase and the drapery hung over the arch in the gallery, outside, down to the floor, for she, poor thing, lay up here."

"Not in this room!" said Alice, who even at that distance of time did not care to invade the sinister sanctity of the lady's

room.

"No, not this, the room at t'other end o' the gallery; 't would require a deal o' doing up, and plaster, and paper, before you could lie in't. But Harry Boots made a woundy fuss about his dead wife. They was cunning after a sort, them Fairfields, and I suppose he thought 'twas best to make folk think he loved his wife, at least to give 'em something good to say o' him if they liked, and he gave alms to the poor, and left a good lump o' money they say for the parish, both at Cressley Church and at Carwell Priory—they call the vicarage so—and he had a grand funeral as ever was seen from the Grange, and she was buried down at the priory, which the Carwells used to be, in a new vault, where she was laid the first, and has been the last, for Booted Fairfield married again, and was buried with his second wife away at Wyvern. So the poor thing, living and dying, has been to herself."

"But is there any story to account for what I saw as I came into the gallery with you?" asked Alice.

"I told you, miss, it was hung with black, as I heard my grandmother say, and thereupon the story came, for there was three ladies of the Fairfield family at different times before you, ma'am, as saw the same thing. Well, ma'am, at the funeral, as I've heard say, the young lord that liked her well, if she'd a had him—and liked her still in spite of all—gave Sir Harry a lick or two wi' the rough side o' his tongue, and a duel came out o' them words more than a year afterwards, and Harry Boots was killed, and he's buried away down at Wyvern."

"Well, see there! Ain't it a wonder how gentlemen that has all this world can give, will throw away their lives at a word, like that," moralized Dulcibella Crane—"and not knowing what's to become o' them, when they've lost all here—all in the snap of a pistol. If it was a poor body, 'twould be another matter, but—well it does make a body stare."

"You mentioned, Mrs. Tarnley, that something had occurred about some ladies of the Fairfield family; what was it?" inquired Alice.

"Well, they say Sir Harry—that's Booted Fairfield, you know—brought his second wife down here, only twelve months after the first one died, and she saw, at the very same place, when she was setting her first step on the gallery, the same thing ye seen yourself; and two months after he was in his grave, and she in a mad-house."

"Well, I think, Mrs. Tarnley, ye needn't be tellin' all that to frighten the young lady."

"Frighten the young lady? And why not, if she's frightened wi' truth. She has asked for the truth, and she's got it. Better to fright the young lady than fool her," answered Mildred Tarnley coldly and sternly.

"I don't say you should fool her, by no chance," answered honest Dulcibella; "but there's no need to be filling her head wi' them frightful fancies. Ye ha' scared her, and ye saw her turn pale."

"Ay, and so well she ought. There was three other women o' the Fairfields seen the same thing, in the self-same place, and everyone to her sorrow. One fell over the pixie's cliff; another died in fits, poor thing, wi' her first baby; and the last was flung beside the quarry in Cressley Common, ridin' out to see the hunt, and was never the better o't in brain or bone after. Don't tell me, woman. I know rightly what I'm doin'."

"Pray, Dulcibella, don't. I assure you, Mrs. Tarnley, I'm very much obliged," interposed Alice Fairfield, frightened at the malignant vehemence of the old woman.

"Obliged! Not you; why should you?" retorted Mildred Tarnley. "Ye're not obliged; ye're frightened, I dare say. But 'tis all true; and no Fairfield has any business bringing his wife to Carwell Grange; and Master Charles knows that as well as me; and, now, the long and the short o't's this, ma'am—ye've got your warning, and ye had better quit this without letting grass grow under your feet. You've seen your warnin', ma'am, and I a' told you, stark enough, the meanin' o't. My conscience is clear, and ye'll do as ye like; and if, after this, ye expect me to spy for you, and fetch and carry stories, and run myself into trouble with other people, to keep you out of it, ye're clean out o' your reckoning. Ye'll have no more warnings, mayhap—none from me—and so ye may take it, ma'am, or leave it, as ye see fit; and now Mildred Tarnley's said her say. Ye have my story, and ye have my counsel; and if ye despise both one and t'other, and your own eye-sight beside, ye'll even take what's coming."

"Ye shouldn't be frightening Miss Alice like that, I tell you, you should not. Don't grow frightened at any such a story, dear. I say it's a shame. Don't you see how ye have her as white as a handkercher, in a reg'lar state."

"No, Dulcibella, indeed," said Alice, smiling, very pale, and her eyes filled up with tears.

"I'll frighten her no more; and that you may be sure on; and if what I told her be frightful, 'tisn't me as made it so. Thankless work it be; but 'tisn't her nor you I sought to please, but just to take it off my shoulders, and leave her none to blame but herself if she turns a deaf ear. It's ill offering counsel to a wilful lass. Ye'll excuse me, ma'am, for speaking so plain, but better now than too late," she added, recollecting herself a little. "And can I do anything, please, ma'am, below stairs? I should be going, for who knows what that child may be a-doing all this time?"

"Thanks, very much; no, not anything," said Alice.

And Mildred Tarnley, with a hard, dark glance at her, dropped another stiff little courtesy, and withdrew.

"Well, I never see such a one as that," said old Dulcibella, gazing after her, as it were through the panel of the door. "You must not let her talk that way to you, my darling. She's no business to talk up to her mistress that way. I don't know what sort o' manners people has in these here out o' the way places, I'm sure; but I think ye'll do well, my dear, to keep that one at arm's length, and make her know her place. Nothing else but encroaching and impudence, and domineering from such as her, and no thanks for any condescension, only the more affable you'll be, the more saucy and conceited she'll grow, and I don't think she likes you, Miss Alice, no more I do."

It pains young people, and some persons always, to hear from an impartial observer such a conclusion. There is much mortification, and often some alarm.

"Well, it doesn't much matter," said Alice. "I don't think she can harm me much. I don't suppose she would if she could, and I don't mind such stories."

"Why should you, my dear? No one minds the like now-a-days."

"But I wish she liked me; there are so few of us here. It is such a little world, and I have never done anything to vex her. I can't think what good it can do her hating me."

"No good, dear; but she's bin here so long—the only hen in the house, and she doesn't like to be drove off the roost, I suppose; and I don't know why she told you all that, if it wasn't to make your mind uneasy; and, dear knows, there's enough to trouble it in this moping place without her riggamarolin' sich a yarn."

"Hush, Dulcibella; isn't that a horse? Perhaps Charles is coming home."

She opened the window, which commanded a view of the stable-yard.

"And is he gone a-riding?" asked old Dulcibella.

"No; there's nothing," said Alice, gently. "Besides, you remind me he did not take a horse; he only walked a little way with Mr. Henry; and he'll soon be back. Nothing is going wrong, I hope."

And, with a weary sigh, she threw herself into a great chair by the fire; and thought, and listened, and dreamed away a long time, before Charlie's step and voice were heard again in the old house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BROTHERS' WALK.

When the host and his guest had gone out together, to the paved yard, it was already night, and the moon was shining brilliantly.

Tom had saddled the horse, and at the first summons led him out; and Harry, with a nod and a grin, for he was more prodigal of his smiles than of his shillings, took the bridle from his fingers, and with Charlie by his side, walked forth silently from the yard gate, upon that dark and rude track which followed for some distance the precipitous edge of the ravine which opens upon the deeper glen of Carwell.

Very dark was this narrow road, overhung and crossed by towering trees, through whose boughs only here and there an angular gleam, or minute mottling of moonlight hovered and floated on the white and stony road, with the uneasy motion of the branches, like little flights of quivering wings.

There was a silence corresponding with this darkness. The clank of the horse's hoof, and their own more muffled tread were the only sounds that mingled with the sigh and rustle of the boughs above them. The one was expecting, the other meditating, no very pleasant topic, and it was not the business of either to begin, for a little.

They were not walking fast. The horse seemed to feel that the human wayfarers were in a sauntering mood, and fell accommodatingly into a lounging gait like theirs.

If there were eyes there constructed to see in the dark, they would have seen two countenances, one sincere, the other adjusted to that sort of sham sympathy and regret, which Hogarth, with all his delicacy and power, portrays in the paternal alderman who figures in the last picture of "Marriage à la Mode."

There was much anxiety in Charles' face, and a certain brooding shame and constraint which would have accounted for his silence. In that jolly dog, Harry, was discoverable, as I have said, quite another light and form of countenance. There was a face that seemed to have discharged a smile, that still would not quite go. The eyelids drooped, the eyebrows raised, a simulated condolence, such as we all have seen.

In our moral reviews of ourselves we practise optical delusions even upon our own self-scrutiny, and paint and mask our motives, and fill our ears with excuses and with downright lies. So inveterate is the habit of deceiving, and even in the dark we form our features by hypocrisy, and scarcely know all this.

"Here's the turn at last to Cressley Common; there's no talking comfortably among these trees; it's so dark, anyone might be at your elbow and you know nothing about it—and so the old man is very angry."

"Never saw a fellow so riled," answered Harry, "you know what he is when he is riled, and I never saw him so angry before. If he knew I was here—but you'll take care of me?"

"It's very kind of you, old fellow; I won't forget it, indeed I won't, but I ought to have, thought twice: I ought not to have brought poor Alice into this fix; for d—— me, if I know how we are to get on."

"Well, you know, it's only just a pinch, an ugly corner, and you are all right—it can't last."

"It may last ten years, or twenty for that matter," said Charlie. "I was a fool to sell out. I don't know what we are to do; do you?"

"You're too down in the mouth; can't ye wait and see? there's nothing yet, and it won't cost ye much carrying on down here."

"Do you think, Harry, it would be well to take up John Wauling's farm, and try whether I could not make something of it in my own hands?" asked Charles.

Harry shook his head.

"You don't?" said Charlie.

"Well, no, I don't; you'd never make the rent of it," answered Harry; "besides, if you begin upsetting things here, the people will begin to talk, and that would not answer; you'll need to be d——d quiet."

There was here a pause, and they walked on in silence until the thick shadows of the trees began to break a little before them, and the woods grew more scattered; whole trees were shadowed in distinct outline, and the wide common of Cressley, with its furze and fern, and broad undulations, stretched mistily before them.

"About money—you know, Charlie, there's money enough at present and no debts to signify; I mean, if you don't make them you needn't. You and Alice, with the house and garden, can get along on a trifle. The tenants give you three hundred a year, and you can manage with two."

"Two hundred a year!" exclaimed Charlie, opening his eyes.

"Ay, two hundred a year!—that girl don't eat sixpenn'orth in a day," said Harry.

"Alice is the best little thing in the world, and will look after everything, I know; but there are other things beside dinner and breakfast," said Charles, who did not care to hear his wife called "that girl."

"Needs must when the Devil drives, my boy; you'll want a hundred every year for contingencies," said Harry.

"Well, I suppose so," Charles winced, "and all the more need for a few more hundreds; for I don't see how anyone could manage to exist on such a pittance."

"You'll have to contrive though, my lad, unless they'll manage a *post obit* for you," said Harry.

"There is some trouble about that, and people are such d——d screws," said Charles, with a darkening face.

"Al'ays was and ever will be," said Harry, with a laugh.

"And it's all very fine talking of a 'hundred a year,' but *you* know and *I* know that won't do, and never did," exclaimed Charles, breaking forth bitterly, and then looking hurriedly over his shoulder.

"Upon my soul, Charlie, I don't know a curse about it," answered Harry, good-humouredly; "but if it won't do, it won't, that's certain."

"Quite certain," said Charles, and sighed very heavily; and again there was a little silence.

"I wish I was as sharp a fellow as you are, Harry," said Charles, regretfully.

"Do you really think I'm a sharp chap—do you though? I al'ays took myself for a bit of a muff, except about cattle—I did, upon my soul," said Harry, with an innocent laugh.

"You are a long way a cleverer fellow than I am, and you are not half so lazy; and tell me what you'd do if you were in my situation?"

"What would I do if I was in your place?" said Harry, looking up at the stars, and whistling low for a minute.

"Well, I couldn't tell you offhand; 'twould puzzle a better man's head for a bit to answer that question—only I can tell you one thing, I'd never agone into that situation, as ye call it, at no price; 'twouldn't 'av answered me by no chance. But don't you be putting your finger in your eye yet a bit; there's nothing to cry about now that I knows of; time enough to hang your mouth yet, only I thought I might as well come over and tell you."

"I knew, Harry, there was something to tell," said Charles.

"Not over much—only a trifle when all's told," answered Harry; "but you are right, for it was that brought me over here. I was in Lon'on last week, and I looked in at the place at Hoxton, and found just the usual thing, and came away pretty much as wise as I went in."

"Not more reasonable?" asked Charles.

"Not a bit," said Harry.

"Tell me what you said," asked Charles.

"Just what we agreed," he answered.

"Well, there was nothing in that that was not kind and conciliatory, and common sense—was there?" pleaded Charles.

"It did not so seem to strike the plenipotentiary," said Harry.

"You seem to think it very pleasant," said Charles.

"I wish it was pleasanter," said Harry; "but pleasant or no, I must tell my story straight. I ran in in a hurry, you know, as if I only wanted to pay over the twenty pounds—you mind."

"Ay," said Charles, "I wish to heaven I had it back again."

"Well, I don't think it made much difference in the matter of love and liking, I'll not deny; but I looked round, and I swore I wondered anyone would live in such a place when there were so many nice places where money would go three times as far in foreign countries; and I wondered you did not think of it, and take more interest yourself, and upon that I could see the old soger was thinking of fifty things, suspecting poor me of foul play among the number; and I was afraid for a minute I was going to have half a dozen claws in my smeller; but I turned it off, and I coaxed and wheedled a bit. You'd a laughed yourself black, till I had us both a purring like a pair of old maid's cats."

"I tell you what, Harry, there's madness there—literal madness," said Charles, grasping his arm as he stopped and turned towards him, so that Harry had to come also to a standstill. "Don't you know it—as mad as Bedlam? Just think!"

Harry laughed.

"Mad enough, by jingo," said he.

"But don't you think so—actually mad?" repeated Charles.

"Well, it is near the word, maybe, but I would not say quite mad—worse than mad, I dare say, by chalks; but I wouldn't place the old soger there," said Harry.

"Where?" said Charles.

"I mean exactly among the mad 'uns. No, I wouldn't say mad, but as vicious—and worse, mayhap."

"It does not matter much what we think, either of us; but I know what another fellow would have done long ago, but I could not bring myself to do that. I have thought it over often, but I couldn't—I *couldn't*."

"Well, then, it ain't no great consequence," said Harry, and he tightened his saddle-girth a hole or two—"no great consequence; but I couldn't a' put a finger to that—mind; for I think the upperworks is as sound as any, only there's many a devil beside mad 'uns. I give it in to you there."

"And what do you advise me to do?—this sort of thing is dreadful," said Charles.

"I was going to say, I think the best thing to be done is just to leave all that business, d'ye mind, to me."

Harry mounted, and leaning on his knee, he said,—

"I think I have a knack, if you leave it to me. Old Pipeclay doesn't think I have any reason to play false."

"Rather the contrary," said Charles, who was attentively listening.

"No interest at all," pursued Harry, turning his eyes towards the distant knoll of Torston, and going on without minding Charles' suggestion,—

"Look, now, that beast'll follow my hand as sweet as sugary-candy, when you'd have nothing but bolting and baulking, and rearin', or worse. There's plenty o' them little French towns or German—and don't you be botherin' your head about it; only do just as I tell ye, and I'll take all in hands."

"You're an awfully good fellow, Harry; for, upon my soul, I was at my wit's end almost; having no one to talk to, and not knowing what anyone might be thinking of; and I feel safe in your hands, Harry, for I think you understand that sort of work so much better than I do — you understand people so much better—and I never was good at managing anyone, or anything for that matter; and—and when will business bring you to town again?"

"Three weeks or so, I wouldn't wonder," said Harry.

"And I know, Harry, you won't forget me. I'm afraid to write to you almost; but if you'd think of any place we could meet and have a talk, I'd be ever so glad. You have no idea how fidgety and miserable a fellow grows that doesn't know what's going on."

"Ay, to be sure; well, I've no objection. My book's made for ten days or so—a lot of places to go to—but I'll be coming round again, and I'll tip you a stave."

"That's a good fellow; I know you won't forget me," said Charles, placing his hand on his brother's arm.

"No—of course. Good-night, and take care of yourself, and give my love to Ally."

"And—and Harry?"

"Well?" answered Harry, backing his restless horse a little bit.

"I believe that's all."

"Good-night, then."

"Good-night," echoed Charles.

Harry touched his hat with a smile, and was away the next moment, flying at a ringing trot over the narrow unfenced road that traverses the common, and dwindling in the distant moonlight.

"There he goes—light of heart; nothing to trouble him—life a holiday—the world a toy."

He walked a little bit slowly in the direction of the disappearing horseman, and paused again, and watched him moodily till he was fairly out of sight.

"I hope he won't forget; he's always so busy about those stupid horses—a lot of money he makes, I dare say. I wish I knew something about them. I must beat about for some way of turning a penny. Poor little Alice! I hope I have not made a mull of it? I'll save every way I can—of course that's due to her; but when you come to think of it, and go over it all, there's very little you *can* give up. You can lay down your horses, if you have them, except one. You must have *one* in a place like this—you'd run a risk of starving, or never getting your letters, or dying for want of the doctor. And—I won't drink wine; brandy, or Old Tom does just as well, and I'll give up smoking *totally*. A fellow must make sacrifices. I'll just work through this one box slowly, and order no more; it's all a habit, and I'll give it up."

So he took a cigar from his case, and lighted it.

"I'll not spend another pound on them, and the sooner these are out the better."

He sauntered slowly away with his hands in his pockets to a little eminence about a hundred yards to the right, and mounted it, and looked all around, smoking. I don't think he saw much of that extensive view; but you would have fancied him an artist in search of the picturesque.

His head was full of ideas of selling Carwell Grange; but he was not quite sure that he had power, and did not half like asking his attorney, to whom he already owed something. He thought how snug and pleasant they might be comparatively in one of those quaint little toy towns in Germany, where dull human nature bursts its cerements, and floats and flutters away into a butterfly life of gold and colour—where the punter and the croupier assist at the worship of the brilliant and fickle goddess, and bands play sweetly, and people ain't buried alive in deserts and forests among dogs and "chaw-bacons"—where little Alice would be all wonder and delight. Was it quite fair to bring her down here, to immure her in the mouldering cloister of Carwell Grange?

He had begun now to re-enter the wooded ascent toward that melancholy mansion; his cigar was burnt out, and he said,

looking toward his home through the darkness,—

"Poor little Alice! she does love me, I think—and that's something."

CHAPTER XIX.

COMING IN.

When at last her husband entered the room where she awaited him that night,—

"Oh! Charlie, it is very late," said Alice, a little reproachfully.

"Not very, is it, darling?" said he, glancing at his watch. "By Jove! it is. My poor little woman, I had not an idea."

"I suppose I am very foolish, but I love you so much, Charlie, that I grow quite miserable when I am out of your sight."

"I'm sorry, my darling, but I fancied he had a great deal more to tell me than he really had. I don't think I'm likely, at least for a little time, to be pressed by my duns—and—I wanted to make out exactly what money he's likely to get me for a horse he is going to sell, and I'm afraid, from what he says, it won't be very much; really, twenty pounds, one way or other, seems ridiculous, but it does make a very serious difference just now, and if I hadn't such a clever, careful little woman as you, I don't really know what I should do."

He added this little complimentary qualification with an instinctive commiseration for the pain he thought he saw in her pretty face.

"These troubles won't last very long, Charlie, *perhaps*. Something, I'm sure, will turn up, and you'll see how careful I will be. I'll learn everything old Mildred can teach me, ever so much, and you'll see what a manager I will be."

"You are my own little treasure. You always talk as if you were in the way, somehow, I don't know how. A wife like you is a greater help to me than one with two thousand a year and the reckless habits of a fine lady. Your wise little head and loving heart, my darling, are worth whole fortunes to me without them, and I do believe you are the first really good wife that ever a Fairfield married. You are the only creature I have on earth, that I'm quite sure of—the only creature."

And so saying he kissed her, folding her in his arms, and, with a big tear filling each eye, she looked up, smiling unutterable affection, in his face. As they stood together in that embrace his eyes also filled with tears and his smile met hers, and they seemed wrapt for a moment in one angelic glory, and she felt the strain of his arm draw her closer.

Such moments come suddenly and are gone; but, remaining in memory, they are the lights that illuminate a dark and troublous retrospect for ever.

"We'll make ourselves happy here, little Ally, and I—in spite of everything, my darling!—and I don't know how it happened that I staid away so long; but I walked with Harry further than I intended, and when he left me I loitered on Cressley Common for a time with my head full of business; and so, without knowing it, I was filling my poor little wife's head with alarms and condemning her to solitude. Well, all I can do is to promise to be a good boy and to keep better hours for the future."

"That's so like you, you are so good to your poor, foolish little wife," said Alice.

"I wish I could be, darling," said he; "I wish I could prove one-half my love; but the time will come yet. I shan't be so poor or powerless always."

"But you're not to speak so—you're not to think that. It is while we are poor that I can be of any use," she said, eagerly; "very little, very miserable my poor attempts, but nothing makes me so happy as trying to deserve ever so little of all the kind things my Ry says of me; and I'm sure, Charlie, although there may be cares and troubles, we will make our time pass here very happily, and perhaps we shall always look back on our days at Carwell as the happiest of our lives."

"Yes, darling, I am determined we shall be very happy," said he.

"And Ry will tell me everything that troubles him?"

Her full eyes were gazing sadly up in his face. He averted his eyes, and said,—

"Of course I will, darling."

"Oh! Ry, if you knew how happy that makes me!" she exclaimed. But there was that in the exclamation which seemed to say, "if only I could be sure that you meant it."

"Of course I will—that is, everything that could possibly interest you, for there are very small worries as well as great ones; and you know I really can't undertake to remember everything."

"Of course, darling," she answered; "I only meant that if anything were really—any great anxiety—upon your mind, you would not be afraid to tell me. I'm not such a coward as I seem. You must not think me so foolish; and really, Ry, it pains me more to think that there is any anxiety weighing upon you, and concealed from me, than any disclosure could; and so I know—won't you?"

"Haven't I told you, darling, I really will," he said, a little pettishly. "What an odd way you women have of making a fellow say the same thing over and over again. I wonder it does not tire you, I know it does *us* awfully. Now, there, see, I really do believe you are going to cry."

"Oh, no, indeed!" she said, brightening up, and smiling with a sad, little effort.

"And now, kiss me, my poor, good little woman,—you're not vexed with me?—no, I'm sure you're not," said he.

She smiled a very affectionate assurance.

"And really, you poor little thing, it is awfully late, and you must be tired, and I've been—no, *not* lecturing, I'll never lecture, I hate it—but boring or teasing; I'm an odious dog, and I hate myself."

So this little dialogue ended happily, and for a time Charles Fairfield forgot his anxieties, and a hundred pleasanter cares filled his young wife's head.

In such monastic solitudes as Carwell Grange the days pass slowly, but the retrospect of a month or a year is marvellously short. Twelve hours without an event is very slow to get over. But that very monotony, which is the soul of tediousness, robs the back-ground of all the irregularities and objects which arrest the eye and measure distance in review, and thus it cheats the eye.

An active woman may be well content with an existence of monotony which would all but stifle even an indolent man. So long as there is a household—ever so frugal—to be managed, and the more frugal the more difficult and harassing—the female energies are tasked, and healthily because usefully exercised. But in this indoor administration the man is incompetent and in the way. His ordained activities are out of doors; and if these are denied him, he mopes away his days and feels that he cumbers the ground.

With little resource but his fishing-rod, and sometimes, when a fit of unwonted energy inspired him, his walking-stick, and a lonely march over the breezy expanse of Cressley Common, days, weeks, and months, loitered their drowsy way into the past.

There were reasons why he did not care to court observation. Under other circumstances he would have ridden into the neighbouring towns and heard the news, and lunched with a friend here or there. But he did not want anyone to know that he was at the Grange; and if it should come out that he had been seen there, he would have had it thought that it was but a desultory visit.

A man less indolent, and perhaps not much more unscrupulous, would have depended upon a few offhand lies to account for his appearance, and would not have denied himself an occasional excursion into human society in those rustic haunts within his reach. But Charles Fairfield had not decision to try it, nor resource for a system of fibbing, and the easiest and dullest course he took.

In Paradise the man had his business—"to dress and to keep" the garden—and, no doubt, the woman hers, suitable to her sex. It is a mistake to fancy that it is either a sign of love or conducive to its longevity that the happy pair should always pass the entire four-and-twenty hours in each other's company or get over them in anywise without variety or usefulness.

Charles Fairfield loved his pretty wife. She made his inactive solitude more endurable than any man could have imagined. Still it was a dull existence, and being also darkened with an ever-present anxiety, was a morbid one.

Small matters harassed him now. He brooded over trifles, and the one care, which was really serious, grew and grew in

his perpetual contemplation until it became tremendous, and darkened his entire sky.

I can't say that Charles grew morose. It was not his temper, but his spirits that failed—care-worn and gloomy—his habitual melancholy depressed and even alarmed his poor little wife, who yet concealed her anxieties, and exerted her music and her invention—sang songs—told him old stories of the Wyvern folk, touched with such tragedy and comedy as may be found in such miniature centres of rural life, and played backgammon with him, and sometimes écarté, and, in fact, nursed his sick spirits, as such angelic natures will.

Now and then came Harry Fairfield, but his visits were short and seldom, and what was worse, Charles always seemed more harassed or gloomy after one of his calls. There was something going on, and by no means prosperously, she was sure, from all knowledge of which, however it might ultimately concern her, and did immediately concern her husband, she was jealously excluded.

Sometimes she felt angry—oftener pained—always troubled with untold fears and surmises. Poor little Alice! It was in the midst of these secret misgivings that a new care and hope visited her—a trembling, delightful hope, that hovers between life and death—sometimes in sad and mortal fear—sometimes in delightful anticipation of a new and already beloved life, coming so helplessly into this great world—unknown, to be her little comrade, all dependent on that beautiful love with which her young heart was already overflowing.

So almost trembling—hesitating—she told her little story with smiles and tears, in a pleading, beseeching, almost apologetic way, that melted the better nature of Charles, who told her how welcome to him, and how beloved for her dear sake the coming treasure should be, and held her beating heart to his in a long, loving embrace, and more than all, the old love revived, and he felt how lonely he would be if his adoring little wife were gone, and how gladly he would have given his life for hers.

And now came all the little cares and preparations that so mercifully and delightfully beguile the period of suspense.

What is there so helpless as a new-born babe entering this great, rude, cruel world? Yet we see how the beautiful and tender instincts which are radiated from the sublime love of God, provide everything for the unconscious comer. Let us then take heart of grace when, the sad journey ended, we, children of dust, who have entered so, are about to make the dread exit, and remembering what we have seen, and knowing that we go in the keeping of the same "faithful Creator," be sure that his love and tender forecast have provided with equal care for our entrance into another life.

CHAPTER XX.

HARRY APPEARS AT THE GRANGE.

It was about four o'clock one afternoon, while Charles was smoking a cigar—for notwithstanding his self-denying resolutions, his case was always replenished still—that his brother Harry rode into the yard, where he was puffing away contemplatively at an open stable door.

"Delighted to see you, Harry, I was thinking of you this moment, by Jove, and I can't tell you how glad I am," said Charles, smiling as he advanced, yet with an anxious inquiry in his eyes.

Harry took his extended hand, having dismounted, but he was looking at his horse, and not at Charles, as he said—

"The last mile or so I noticed something in the off fore-foot; do you? Look now—taint brushing, nor he's not gone lame, but tender-like; do you notice?" and he led him round a little bit.

"No," said Charles, "I don't see anything, but I am an ignoramus, you know—no—I think, nothing."

"Taint a great deal, anyhow," said Harry, leading him toward the open stable-door. "I got your note, you know, and how are you all, and how is Ally?"

"Very well, poor little thing, we are all very well. Did you come from Wyvern?" said Charles.

"Yes."

"And the old man just as usual, I suppose?"

"Just the same, only not growing no younger, you'll suppose."

Charles nodded.

"And a d—d deal crosser, too. There's times, I can tell you, he won't stand no one nigh him—not even old Drake, d—d vicious."

Harry laughed.

"They say he liked Ally—they do upon my soul, and I wouldn't wonder, 'tis an old rat won't eat cheese—only you took the bit out o' his mouth, when you did, and that's enough to rile a fellow, you know."

"Who says so?" asked Charles, with a flush on his face.

"The servants — yes — and the town's people—it's pretty well about, and I think if it came to the old boy's ears there would be black eyes and bloody noses about it, I do."

"Well, it's a lie," said Charles; "and don't, like a good fellow, tell poor little Alice there's any such nonsense talked about her at home, it would only vex her."

"Well, I won't, if I think of it. Where's Tom? But 'twouldn't vex her—not a bit—quite 'tother way—there's never a girl in England wouldn't be pleased if old Parr himself wor in love wi' her, so she hadn't to marry him. But the governor, by Jove, I don't know a girl twelve miles round Wyvern, as big an old brute as he is, would turn up her nose at him, wi' all he has to grease her hand. But where's Tom?, the nag must have a feed."

So they bawled for Tom, and Tom appeared, and took charge of the horse, receiving a few directions about his treatment from Master Harry, and then Charles led his brother in.

"I'm always glad to see you, Harry, but always, at the same time, a little anxious when you come," said Charles, in a low tone, as they traversed the passage toward the kitchen.

"Taint much—I have to tell you something, but first gi' me a mouthful, for I'm as hungry as a hawk, and a mug o' beer wouldn't hurt me while I'm waitin'. It's good hungry air this; you eat a lot I dessay; the air alone stands you in fifty pounds

a year, I reckon; that's paying pretty smart for what we're supposed to have for the takin'."

And Harry laughed at his joke as they entered the dark old dining-room.

"Ally not here?" said Harry, looking round.

"She can't be very far off, but I'll manage something if she's not to be found."

So Charles left Harry smiling out of the window at the tops of the trees, and drumming a devil's tattoo on the pane.

"Ho! Dulcibella. Is your mistress upstairs?"

"I think she is gone out to the garden, sir; she took her trowel and garden gloves, and the little basket wi' her," answered the old woman.

"Well, don't disturb her, we'll not mind, I'll see old Mildred."

So to old Mildred he betook himself.

"Here's Master Harry come very hungry, so send him anything you can make out, and in the mean time some beer, for he's thirsty too, and like a good old soul, make all the haste you can."

And with this conciliatory exhortation he returned to the room where he had left his brother.

"Ally has gone out to visit her flowers, but Mildred is doing the best she can for you, and we can go out and join Alice by-and-by, but we are as well to ourselves for a little. I—I want to talk to you."

"Well, fire away, my boy, with your big oak stick, as the Irishman says, though I'd rather have a mouthful first. Oh, here's the beer—thank ye, Chick-a-biddy. Where the devil did you get that queer-looking fair one?" he asked, when the Hebe, Lilly Dogger, disappeared; "I'll lay you fifty it was Ally chose that one."

And he laughed obstreperously.

And he poured out a tumbler of beer and drank it, and then another and drank it, and poured out a third to keep at hand while he conversed.

"There used to be some old pewter goblets here in the kitchen—I wonder what's gone wi' them—they were grand things for drinking beer out of—the pewter, while ye live—there's nothing like it for beer—or porter, by Jove. Have you got any porter?"

"No, not any; but do, like a good old fellow, tell me anything you have picked up that concerns me—there's nothing pleasant, I know—there can be nothing pleasant, but if there's anything, I should rather have it now, than wait, be it ever so bad."

"I wish you'd put some other fellow on this business, I know—for you'll come to hate the sight of me if I'm always bringing you bad news; but it is *not* good, that's a fact; that beast is getting unmanageable. By the law, here comes something for a hungry fellow; thank ye, my lass, God bless ye, feeding the hungry. How can I pay ye back, my dear? I don't know, unless by taking ye in—ha, ha, ha!—whenever ye want shelter, mind; but you're too sharp, I warrant, to let any fellow take you in, with them roguish eyes you've got. See how she blushes, the brown little rogue!" he giggled after her with a leer, as Lilly Dogger, having placed his extemporized luncheon on the table, edged hurriedly out of the room. "Devilish fine eyes she's got, and a nice little set of ivories, sir. By Jove, I didn't half see her; pity she's not a bit taller; and them square shoulders. But hair—she has nice hair, and teeth and eyes goes a long way."

He had stuck his fork in a rasher while making his pretty speech, and was champing away greedily by the time he had come to the end of his sentence.

"But what has turned up in that quarter? You were going to tell me something when this came in," asked Charles.

"About the old soger? Well, if you don't mind a fellow's talkin' with his mouth full, I'll try when I can think of it; but the noise of eating clears a fellow's head of everything, I think."

"Do, like a dear fellow. I can hear you perfectly," urged Charles.

"I'm afraid," said Harry, with his mouth full, as he had promised, "she'll make herself devilish troublesome."

"Tell us all about it," said Charles, uneasily.

"I told you I was running up to London—we haven't potatoes like these up at Wyvern—and so I did go, and as I promised, I saw the old beast at Hoxton; and hang me but I think some one has been putting her up to mischief."

"How do you mean?—what sort of mischief?" asked Charles.

"I think she's got uneasy about you. She was asking all sorts of questions."

"Yes—well?"

"And I wouldn't wonder if some one was telling her—I was going to say lies—but I mean something like the truth—ha, ha, ha! By the law, I've been telling such a hatful of lies about it myself, that I hardly know which is which, or one end from t'other."

"Do you mean to say she was abusing me, or *what?*" urged Charles, very uncomfortably.

"I don't suppose you care very much what the old soger says of you. It ain't pretty, you may be sure, and it don't much signify. But it ain't all talk, you know. She's always grumblin', and I don't mind *that*—her tic-dooleroo, and her nerves, and her nonsense. She wants carriage exercise, she says, and the court doctor—I forget his name—ha, ha, ha! and she says you allow her next to nothing, and keeps her always on the starving line, and she won't stand it no longer, she swears; and you'll have to come down with the dust, my boy."

And florid, stalwart Harry laughed again as if the affair was a good joke.

"I can't help it, Harry, she has always had more than her share. I've been too generous, I've been a d——d fool always."

Charles spoke with extreme bitterness, but quietly, and there was a silence of two or three minutes, during which Harry's eyes were on his plate, and the noise of his knife and fork and the crunching of his repast under his fine teeth, were the only sounds heard.

Seeing that Harry seemed disposed to confine his attention for the present to his luncheon, Charles Fairfield, who apprehended something worse, said—

"If that's all it is nothing very new. I've been hearing that sort of thing for fully ten years. She's ungrateful, and artful, and violent. There's no use in wishing or regretting now; but God knows, it was an evil day for me when first I saw that woman's face."

Charlie was looking down on the table as he spoke, and tapping on it feverishly with the tips of his fingers. Harry's countenance showed that unpleasant expression which sometimes overcame its rustic freshness. The attempt to discharge an unsuitable smile or a dubious expression from the face—the attempt, shall we bluntly say, of a rogue to look simple.

It is a loose way of talking and thinking which limits the vice of hypocrisy to the matter of religion. It counterfeits all good, and dissimulates all evil, every day and hour; and among the men who frankly admit themselves to be publicans and sinners, whose ways are notoriously worldly, and who never affected religion, are some of the worst and meanest hypocrites on earth.

Harry Fairfield having ended his luncheon, had laid his knife and fork on his plate, and leaning back in his chair was ogling them with an unmeaning stare, and mouth a little open, affecting a brown study; but no effort can quite hide the meaning and twinkle of cunning, and nothing is more repulsive than this semi-transparent mask of simplicity.

Thus the two brothers sat, neither observing the other much, with an outward seeming of sympathy, but with very divergent thoughts.

Charles, as we know, was a lazy man, with little suspicion, and rather an admiration of his brother's worldly wisdom and activity—with a wavering belief in Harry's devotion to his cause, sometimes a little disturbed when Harry seemed for a short time hard and selfish, or careless, but generally returning with a quiet self-assertion, like the tide on a summer

day.

For my part I don't exactly know how much or how little Harry cared for Charles. The Fairfields were not always what is termed a "united" family, and its individual members, in prosecuting their several objects, sometimes knocked together, and occasionally, in the family history, more violently and literally than was altogether seemly.

CHAPTER XXI.

HARRY'S BEER AND CONVERSATION.

At last Harry, looking out of the window as he leaned back in his chair, said, in a careless sort of way, but in a low tone

"Did you ever tell Alice anything about it before you came here?"

"Alice?" said Charles, wincing and looking very pale. "Well, you know, why should I?"

"You know best of course, but I thought you might, maybe," answered Harry, stretching himself with an imperfect yawn.

"No," said Charles, looking down with a flush.

"She never heard anything about it at any time, then?—and mind, my dear fellow, I'm only asking. You know much better than me what's best to be done; but the old brute will give you trouble, I'm afraid. She'll be writing letters, and maybe printing things; but you don't take in the papers here, so it won't come so much by surprise like."

"Alice knows nothing of it. She never heard of her," said Charles.

"I wish she may have heard as little of Alice," said Harry.

"Why, you don't mean to say"—began Charles, and stopped.

"I think the woman has got some sort of a maggot in her head. I think she has, more than common, and you'll find I'm right."

Charles got up and stood at the window for a little.

"I can't guess what you mean, Harry. I don't know what you think. Do tell me, if you have any clear idea, what is she thinking of?"

"I don't know what to think, and upon my soul that one's so deep," said Harry. "But I'd bet something she's heard more than we'd just like about this, and if so, there'll be wigs on the green."

"There has been nothing—I mean no letter; I have not heard from her for months—not since you saw her before. I think if there had been anything unusual in her mind she would have written. Don't you? I dare say what you saw was only one of those ungoverned outbreaks of temper that mean nothing."

"I hope so," said Harry.

"I blame myself, I'm no villain, I didn't mean badly, but I'm a cursed fool. It's all quite straight though, and it doesn't matter a farthing what she does — not a farthing," broke out Charles Fairfield. "But I would not have poor little Alice frightened and made miserable, and what had I best do, and where do you think we had best go?" He lowered his voice, and glanced toward the door as he said this, suddenly remembering that Alice might come in the midst of their consultation.

"Go? For the present arn't you well enough where you are? Wait a bit anyhow. But I wonder you didn't tell Alice; she ought to 'a known something about it—oughtn't she, before you married her, or whatever you call it."

"Before I married her? of course," said Charles sternly; "married her!—you don't mean, I fancy, to question my marriage?"

Charles was looking at him with a very grim steady gaze.

"Why, what the devil should I know, or care about lawyer's nonsense and pleadings, my dear fellow; I never could make head or tail of them, only as we are talking here so confidential, you and me, whatever came uppermost—I forgot what—I just rapped out—has that Hoxton lady any family?"

"Don't you know she has not?" replied Charles.

"I know it now, but she might have a sieve full for anything I knew," answered Harry.

"I think, Harry, if you really thought she and I were married, that was too important a question for you, wasn't it, to be forgotten so easily?" said Charles.

"Important, how so?" asked Harry.

"How so, my dear Harry? Why, you can't be serious—you haven't forgot that the succession to Wyvern depends on it," exclaimed Charles Fairfield.

"Bah! Wyvern, indeed! why, man, the thought never came near me—me Wyvern! Sich pure rot! We Fairfields lives good long lives mostly, and marries late sometimes; there's forty good years before ye. Gad, Charlie, you must think o' summat more likely if you want folk to believe ye. Ye'll not hang me on that count, no, no."

And he laughed.

"Well, I think so; I'm glad of it, for you know I wrote to tell you about what is, I hope, likely to be, it has made poor little Alice so happy, and if there should come an heir, you know he'd be another squire of Wyvern in a long line of Fairfields, and it wouldn't do, Harry, to have a doubt thrown on him, and I'm glad to hear you say the pretence of that d——d woman's marriage is a lie."

"Well, you know best," said Harry. "I'm very sorry for Alice, poor little thing, if there's ever any trouble at all about it."

And he looked through the windows along the tops of the tufted trees that caught the sunlight softly, with his last expression of condolence.

"You *have* said more than once, I don't say to-day, that you were sure — that you knew as well as I did there was nothing in that woman's story."

"Isn't that some one coming?" said Harry, turning his head toward the door.

"No, no one," said Charles after a moment's silence. "But you *did* say so, Harry—you *know* you did."

"Well, if I did I did, that's all, but I don't remember," said Harry, "and I'm sure you make a mistake."

"A mistake—what do you mean?" asked Charles.

"I mean marriage or no marriage, I never meant to say as you suppose—I know nothing about it, whatever I may think," said Harry, sturdily.

"You know everything that I know, I've told you everything," answered Charles Fairfield.

"And what o' that? How can you or me tell whether it makes a marriage or not, and I won't be quoted by you or anyone else, as having made such a mouth of myself as to lay down the law in a case that might puzzle a judge," said Harry, darkening.

"You believe the facts I've told you, I fancy," said Charles sternly.

"You meant truth, I'm sure o' that, and beyond that I believe nothing but what I have said myself, and more I won't say for the king," said Harry, putting his hands in his pockets, and looking sulkily at Charles, with his mouth a little open.

Charles looked awfully angry.

"You know very well, Harry, you have fifty times told me there was nothing in it, and you have even said that the person herself thinks so too," he said at last, restraining himself.

"That I never said, by——," said Harry, coolly, who was now standing with his back against the window-shutters, and his hands in his pockets. As he so spoke he crossed one sinewy leg over the other, and continued to direct from the corner of his eye a sullen gaze upon his brother.

With the same oath that brother told him he lied.

Here followed a pause, as when a train is fired and men are doubtful whether the mine will spring. The leaves rustled and the flies hummed happily outside as if those seconds were charged with nothing, and the big feeble bee, who had spent the morning in walking up a pane of glass and slipping down again, continued his stumbling exercise as if there was nothing else worth attending to for a mile round Carwell Grange.

Harry had set both heels on the ground at this talismanic word; one hand clenched had come from his pocket to his thigh, and from his eyes "leaped" the old Fairfield fury.

It was merely, as Harry would have said, the turn of a shilling, whether a Fairfield battle, short, sharp, and decisive, had not tried the issue at that instant.

"I don't vally a hot word spoke in haste; it's ill raising hands between brothers—let it pass. I'm about the last friend ye've left just now, and I don't see why ye should seek to put a quarrel on me. It's little to me, you know—no thanks, loss o' time, and like to be more kicks than ha'pence."

Harry spoke these words after a considerable pause.

"I was wrong, Harry, I mean, to use such a word, and I beg your pardon," said Charles, extending his hand to his brother, who took his fingers and dropped them with a rather short and cold shake.

"Ye shouldn't talk that way to a fellow that's taken some trouble about ye, and ye know I'm short tempered—we all are, and 'tisn't the way to handle me," said Harry.

"I was wrong, I know I was, and I'm sorry—I can't say more," answered Charles. "But there it is! If there's trouble about this little child that's coming, what am I to do? Wouldn't it be better for me to be in Wyvern churchyard?"

Harry lowered his eyes with his mouth still open, to the threadbare carpet. His hands were again both reposing quietly in his pockets.

After a silence he said—

"If you had told me anything about what was in your head concerning Alice Maybell, I'd a told you my mind quite straight; and if you ask it now, I can only tell you one thing, and that is, I think you're married to t'other woman—I hate her like poison, but that's nothing to do wi' it, and I'd a been for making a clear breast of it, and telling Ally everything, and let her judge for herself. But you wouldn't look before you, and you're got into a nice pound, I'm afraid."

"I'm not a bit afraid about it," said Charles, very pale. "Only for the world, I would not have her frightened and vexed just now—and, Harry, there's nothing like speaking out, as you say, and I can't help thinking that your opinion [and at another time, perhaps, he would have added, your memory] is biased by the estate."

Charles spoke bitterly or petulantly, which you will. But Harry seemed to have made up his mind to take this matter coolly, and so he did.

"Upon my soul I wouldn't wonder," he said, with a kind of laugh. "Though if it does I give you my oath I am not aware of it. But take it so if you like; it's only saying a fellow loves his shirt very well, but his skin better, and I suppose so we do, you and me, both of us; only this I'll say, 'twill be all straight and above board 'twixt you and me, and I'll do the best I can for ye—you don't doubt that?"

"No, Harry, you'll not deceive me."

"No, of course; and as I say, I think that brute—the Hoxton one—she's took a notion in her head——"

"To give me trouble?"

"A notion," continued Harry, "that there's another woman in the case; and, if you ask me, I think she'll not rest quiet for long. She says she's your wife; and one way or another she'll pitch into any girl that says the same for herself. She's like a mad horse, you know, when she's riled; and she'd kick through a wall and knock herself to pieces to get at you. I wish she was sunk in the sea."

"Tell me, what do you think she is going to do?" asked Charles, uneasily.

"Upon my soul, I can't guess; but 'twouldn't hurt you, I think, if you kept fifty pounds or so in your pocket to give her the slip, if she should begin manœuvring with any sort o' dodges that looked serious; and if I hear any more I'll let you know; and I've staid here longer than I meant; and I ha'n't seen Ally; but you'll make my compliments, and tell her I was too hurried; and my nag's had his feed by this time; and I've staid too long."

"Well, Harry, thank you very much. It's a mere form asking you to remain longer; there's nothing to offer you worth staying for; and this is such a place, and I so heart-broken—and—we part good friends—don't we?"

"The best," said Harry, carelessly. "Have you a cigar or two? Thanks; you may as well make it three—thank ye—jolly good 'uns. I've a smart ride before me; but I think I'll make something of it, *rayther*. My hands are pretty full always. I'd give ye more time if they wasn't; but keep your powder dry, and a sharp look out, and so will I, and gi' my love to Ally, and tell her to keep up her heart, and all will go right, I dare say."

By this time they had threaded the passage, and were in the stable-yard again; and mounting his horse, Harry turned, and with a wag of his head and a farewell grin, rode slowly over the pavement, and disappeared through the gate.

Charles was glad that he had gone without seeing Alice. She would certainly have perceived that something was wrong. He thought for a moment of going to the garden to look for her, but the same consideration prevented his doing so, and he took his fishing-rod instead, and went off the other way, to look for a trout in the brook that flows through Carwell Glen.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TROUT.

Down the glen, all the way to the ruined windmill, sauntered Charles Fairfield, before he put his rod together and adjusted his casting line. Very nervous he was, almost miserable. But he was not a man instinctively to strike out a course on an emergency, or to reduce his resolves promptly to action; neither was he able yet to think very clearly on his situation. Somehow his brother Harry was constantly before him in a new and dismal light. Had there not peeped out to-day, instead of the boot of that horsey, jolly fellow, the tip of a cloven hoof that cannot be mistaken? Oh, Harry, brother! Was he meditating treason and going to take arms in the cause of the murderer of his peace? He was so cunning and so energetic, that Charles stood in awe of him, and thought if his sword were pointed at his breast, that he might as well surrender and think no more of safety. Harry had been too much in his confidence, and had been too often in conference with that evil person whom he called "the old soger," to be otherwise than formidable as an enemy. An enemy he trusted he never would see him. An unscrupulous one in his position could work fearful mischief to him by a little colouring and perversion of things that had occurred. He would not assume such a transformation possible.

But always stood before him Harry in his altered mien and estranged looks, as he had seen him, sullen and threatening, that day.

What would he not have given to be sure that the wicked person whom he now dreaded more than he feared all other powers, had formed no actual design against him? If she had, what was the agency that had kindled her evil passions and excited her activity? He could not fancy Harry such a monster.

What were her plans? Did she mean legal proceedings? He would have given a good deal for light, no matter what it may disclose, anything but suspense, and the phantasmal horrors with which imagination peoples darkness.

Never did harassed brain so need the febrifuge, of the angler's solace, and quickly his cares and agitations subsided in that serene absorption.

One thing only occurred for a moment to divert his attention from his tranquillising occupation. Standing on a flat stone near midway in the stream, he was throwing his flies over a nook where he had seen a trout rise, when he heard the ring of carriage wheels on the road that passes round the base of the old windmill, and pierces the dense wood that darkened the glen of Carwell.

Raising his eyes he did see a carriage following that unfrequented track. A thin screen of scattered trees prevented his seeing this carriage very distinctly. But the road is so little a thoroughfare that except an occasional cart, few wheeled vehicles ever traversed it. A little anxiously he watched this carriage till it disappeared totally in the wood. He felt uncomfortably that its destination was Carwell Grange, and at that point conjecture failed him.

This little incident was, I think, the only one that for a moment disturbed the serene abstraction of his trout-fishing.

And now the sun beginning to approach the distant hills warned him that it was time to return. So listlessly he walked homeward, and as he ascended the narrow and melancholy track that threads the glen of Carwell, his evil companions, the fears and cares that tortured him, returned.

Near Carwell Grange the road makes a short but steep ascent, and a slight opening in the trees displays on the eminence a little platform on the verge of the declivity, from which a romantic view down the glen and over a portion of the lower side unfolds itself.

Here for a time he paused, looking west-ward on the sky already glowing in the saddened splendours of sunset. From this miserable rumination he carried away one resolution, hard and clear. It was painful to come to it—but the torture of concealment was more dreadful. He had made up his mind to tell Alice exactly how the facts were. One ingredient, and he fancied just then, the worst in his cup of madness, was the torture of secrecy, and the vigilance and the uncertainties of concealment. Poor little Alice, he felt, ought to know. It was her right. And the attempt longer to conceal it would make her much more miserable, for he could not disguise his sufferings, and she would observe them, and be abandoned to the solitary anguish of suspense.

As he entered the Grange he was reminded of the carriage which he had observed turning up the narrow Carwell road, by actually seeing it standing at the summit of the short and steep ascent to the Grange.

Coming suddenly upon this object, with its natty well-appointed air, contrasting with the old-world neglect and homeliness of all that surrounded, he stopped short with an odd Robinson Crusoe shyness and surveyed the intruding vehicle.

This survey told him nothing. He turned sharply into the back entrance of the Grange, disturbed, and a good deal vexed.

It could not be an invasion of the enemy. Carriage, harness, and servants were much too smart for that. But if the neighbours had found them out, and that this was the beginning of a series of visits, could anything in a small way be more annoying, and even dangerous? Here was a very necessary privacy violated, with what ulterior consequences who could calculate.

This was certainly Alice's doing. Women *are* such headstrong, silly creatures!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE VISITOR.

The carriage which Charles Fairfield had seen rounding the picturesque ruin of Gryce's Mill, was that of Lady Wyndale. Mrs. Tarnley opened the door to her summons, and acting on her general instructions said "not at home."

But good Lady Wyndale was not so to be put off. She had old Mildred to the side of the carriage.

"I know my niece will be glad to see me," she said. "I'm Lady Wyndale, and you are to take this card in, and tell my niece, Mrs. Fairfield, I have come to see her."

Mrs. Tarnley looked with a dubious scrutiny at Lady Wyndale, for she had no idea that Alice could have an aunt with a title and a carriage. On the whole, however, she thought it best to take the card in, and almost immediately it was answered by Alice, who ran out to meet her aunt and throw her arms about her neck, and led her into Carwell Grange.

"Oh! darling, darling! I'm so delighted to see you! It was so good of you to come. But how did you find me out?" said Alice, kissing her again and again.

"There's no use, you see, in being secret with me. I made out where you were, though you meant to keep me quite in the dark, and I really don't think I ought to have come near you, and I am very much affronted," said kind old Lady Wyndale, a little high.

"But auntie, darling, didn't you get my letter, telling you that we were married?" pleaded Alice.

"Yes, and that you had left Wyvern; but you took good care not to tell me where you were going, and in fact if it had not been for the good housekeeper at Wyvern, to whom I wrote, I suppose I should have lived and died within fifteen miles of you, thinking all the time that you had gone to France."

"We were thinking of that, I told you," pleaded Alice, eagerly.

"Well, here you have been for three months, and I've been living within a two hours' drive of you, and dreading all the time that you were four hundred miles away. I have never once seen your face. I don't think that was good-natured."

"Oh, dear aunt, forgive me," entreated Alice. "You will when you know all. If you knew how miserable I have often been, thinking how ungrateful and odious I must have appeared, how meanly reserved and basely suspicious, all the time longing for nothing on earth so much as a sight of your beloved face, and a good talk over everything with you, my best and truest friend."

"There, kiss me, child; I'm not angry, only sorry, darling, that I should have lost so much of your society, which I might have enjoyed often very much," said the placable old lady.

"But, darling aunt, I *must* tell you how it was—you must hear me. You know how I idolize you, and you can't know, but you may imagine, what, in this solitary place, and with cares and fears so often troubling me, your kind and delightful society would have been to me; but my husband made it a point, that just for the present I should divulge our retreat to no one on earth. I pleaded for you, and in fact there is not another person living to whom I should have dreamed of disclosing it; but the idea made him so miserable and he urged it with so much entreaty and earnestness that I could not without a quarrel have told you, and he promised that my silence should be enforced only for a very short time."

"Dear me! I'm so sorry," said Lady Wyndale, very much concerned. "It must be that the poor man is very much dipped and is literally hiding himself here. You poor little thing! Is he in debt?"

"I am afraid he is. I can't tell you how miserable it sometimes makes me; not that he allows me ever to feel it, except in these precautions, for we are, though in a very homely way, perfectly comfortable — you would not believe how comfortable—but we really are," said poor, loyal little Alice, making the best of their frugal and self-denying life.

"Your room is very snug. I like an old-fashioned room," said the good-natured old lady, looking round; "and you make it so pretty with your flowers. Is there any ornament like them? And you have such an exquisite way of arranging them. It is an art; no one can do it like you. You know I always got you to undertake ours at Oulton, and you remember Tremaine

standing beside you, trying, as he said, to learn the art, though I fancy he was studying something prettier."

Alice laughed; Lord Tremaine was a distant figure now, and this little triumph a dream of the past. But is not the spirit of woman conquest? Is not homage the air in which she lives and blooms? So Alice's dark, soft eyes dropped for a moment sidelong with something like the faintest blush, and a little dimpling smile.

"But all that's over, you know," said Lady Wyndale; "you would insist on putting a very effectual extinguisher upon it, so there's an end of my match-making, and I hope you may be very happy your own way, and I'm sure you will, and you know any little money trouble can't last long; for old Mr. Fairfield you know can't possibly live very long, and then I'm told Wyvern *must* be his; and the Fairfields were always thought to have some four or five thousand a year, and although the estate, they say, owes something, yet a prudent little woman like you, will get all that to rights in time."

"You are always so kind and cheery, you darling," said Alice, looking fondly and smiling in her face, as she placed a hand on each shoulder. "It is delightful seeing you at last. But you are tired, ain't you? You must take something."

"Thanks, dear. I'll have a little tea—nothing else. I lunched before we set out."

So Alice touched the bell, and the order was taken by Mildred Tarnley.

"And how is that nice, good-natured old creature, Dulcibella Crane? I like her so much. She seems so attached. I hope you have her still with you?"

"Oh, yes. I could not exist without her—dear old Dulcibella, of course."

There was here a short silence.

"I was thinking of asking you if you could all come over to Oulton for a month or so. I'm told your husband is such an agreeable man, and very unlike Mr. Harry Fairfield, his brother—a mere bear, they tell me; and do you think your husband would venture? We should be quite to ourselves if you preferred it, and we could make it almost as quiet as here."

"It is so like you, you darling, and to me would be so delightful; but no, no, it is quite out of the question; he is really—this is a great secret, and you won't say a word to anyone—I am afraid very much harassed. He is very miserable about his affairs. There has been a quarrel with old Mr. Fairfield which makes the matter worse. His brother Harry has been trying to arrange with his creditors, but I don't know how that will be; and Charlie has told me that we must be ready on very short notice to go to France or somewhere else abroad; and I'm afraid he owes a great deal—he's so reserved and nervous about it; and you may suppose how I must feel, how miserable sometimes, knowing that I am, in great measure, the cause of his being so miserably harassed. Poor Charlie! I often think how much happier it would have been for him never to have seen me."

"Did I ever hear such stuff! But I won't say half what I was going to say, for I can't think you such a fool, and I must only suppose you want me to say ever so many pretty things of you, which, in this case, I am bound to say would be, unlike common flatteries, quite true. But if there really is any trouble of that kind—of the least consequence I mean—I think it quite a scandal, not only shabby but wicked, that old Mr. Fairfield, with one foot in the grave, should do nothing. I always knew he was a mere bruin; but people said he was generous in the matter of money, and he ought to think that, in the course of nature, Wyvern should have been his son's years ago, and it is really quite abominable his not coming forward."

"There's no chance of that; there has been a quarrel," said Alice, looking down on the threadbare carpet.

"Well, darling, remember, if it should come to that—I mean if he should be advised to go away for a little, remember that your home is at Oulton. He'll not stay away very long, but if you accept my offer, the longer the happier for me. You are to come over to Oulton, you understand, and to bring old Dulcibella; and I only wish that you had been a few years married that we might set up a little nursery in that dull house. I think I should live ten years longer if I had the prattle and laughing, and pleasant noise of children in the old nursery, the same nursery where my poor dear George ran about, sixty years ago nearly, when he was a child. We should have delightful times, you and I, and I'd be your head nurse."

"My darling, I think you are an angel," said Alice, with a little laugh, and throwing her arms about her she wept on her thin old neck, and the old lady, weeping also happy and tender tears, patted her shoulder gently in that little silence.

"Well, Alice, you'll remember, and I'll write to your husband as well as to you, for this kind of invitation is never attended to, and you would think nothing of going away and leaving your old auntie to shift for herself; and if you will come it will be the kindest thing you ever did, for I'm growing old and strangers don't amuse me quite as much as they did, and I really want a little home society to exercise my affections and prevent my turning into a selfish old cat."

So the tea came in and they sipped it to the accompaniment of their little dialogue, and time glided away unperceived, and the door opened and Charles Fairfield, in his careless fishing costume, entered the room.

He glanced at Alice a look which she understood; her visitor also perceived it; but Charles had not become a mere Orson in this wilderness, so he assumed an air of welcome.

"We are so glad to see you here, Lady Wyndale, though, indeed, it ain't easy to see anyone, the room is so dark. It was so very good of you to come this long drive to see Alice."

"I hardly hoped to have seen you," replied the old lady, "for I must go in a minute or two more, and—I'm very frank, and you won't think me rude, but I have learned everything, and I know that I ought not to have come without a little more circumspection."

He laughed a little, and Alice thought, as well as the failing light enabled her to see, that he looked very pale, as, laughing, he fixed for a moment a hard look on her.

"All is not a great deal," he said, not knowing very well what to say.

"No, no," said the old lady, "there's no one on earth, almost, who has not suffered at one time or other that kind of passing annoyance. You know that Alice and I are such friends, so very intimate that I feel as if I knew her husband almost as intimately, although you were little more than a boy when I last saw you, and I'm afraid it must seem very impertinent my mentioning Alice's little anxieties, but I could not well avoid doing so without omitting an explanation which I ought to make, because this secret little creature your wife, with whom I was very near being offended, was perfectly guiltless of my visit, and I learned where she was from your old housekeeper at Wyvern, and from no one else on earth did I receive the slightest hint, and I thought it very ill-natured, being so near a relation and friend, and when you know me a little better, Mr. Fairfield, you'll not teach Alice to distrust me."

Then the kind old lady diverged into her plans about Alice and Oulton, and promised a diplomatic correspondence, and at length she took her leave for the last time, and Charles saw her into her carriage, and bid her a polite farewell.

Away drove the carriage, and Charles stood listlessly at the summit of the embowered and gloomy road that descends in one direction into the Vale of Carwell, and passes in the other, with some windings, to the wide heath of Cressley Common.

This visit, untoward as it was, was, nevertheless, a little stimulus. He felt his spirits brightening, his pulse less sluggish, and something more of confidence in his future.

"There's time enough in which to tell her my trouble," thought he, as he turned toward the house; "and by Jove! we haven't had our dinner. I must choose the time. To-night it shall be. We will both be, I think, less miserable when it is told," and he sighed heavily.

He entered the house through the back gate, and as he passed the kitchen door, called to Mildred Tarnley the emphatic word "dinner!"

END OF VOL. I.

Transcriber's Notes

Printer's errors have been corrected, all other inconsistencies are as in the original.
The author's spelling has been maintained.

The following printer's errors in the text have been corrected:-

p56 cryin' to cryin',

p137 double quote added after 'I wish I hadn't'

p163 'his stick his' to 'his stick is'

p169 double quote added after 'take some tea?'

p173 single quote added after 'a bit o'

p174 'in which there' to 'in which their'

p231 comma added after 'But where's Tom?'

[End of *The Wyvern Mystery (Volume 1 of 3)* by J. S. Le Fanu]