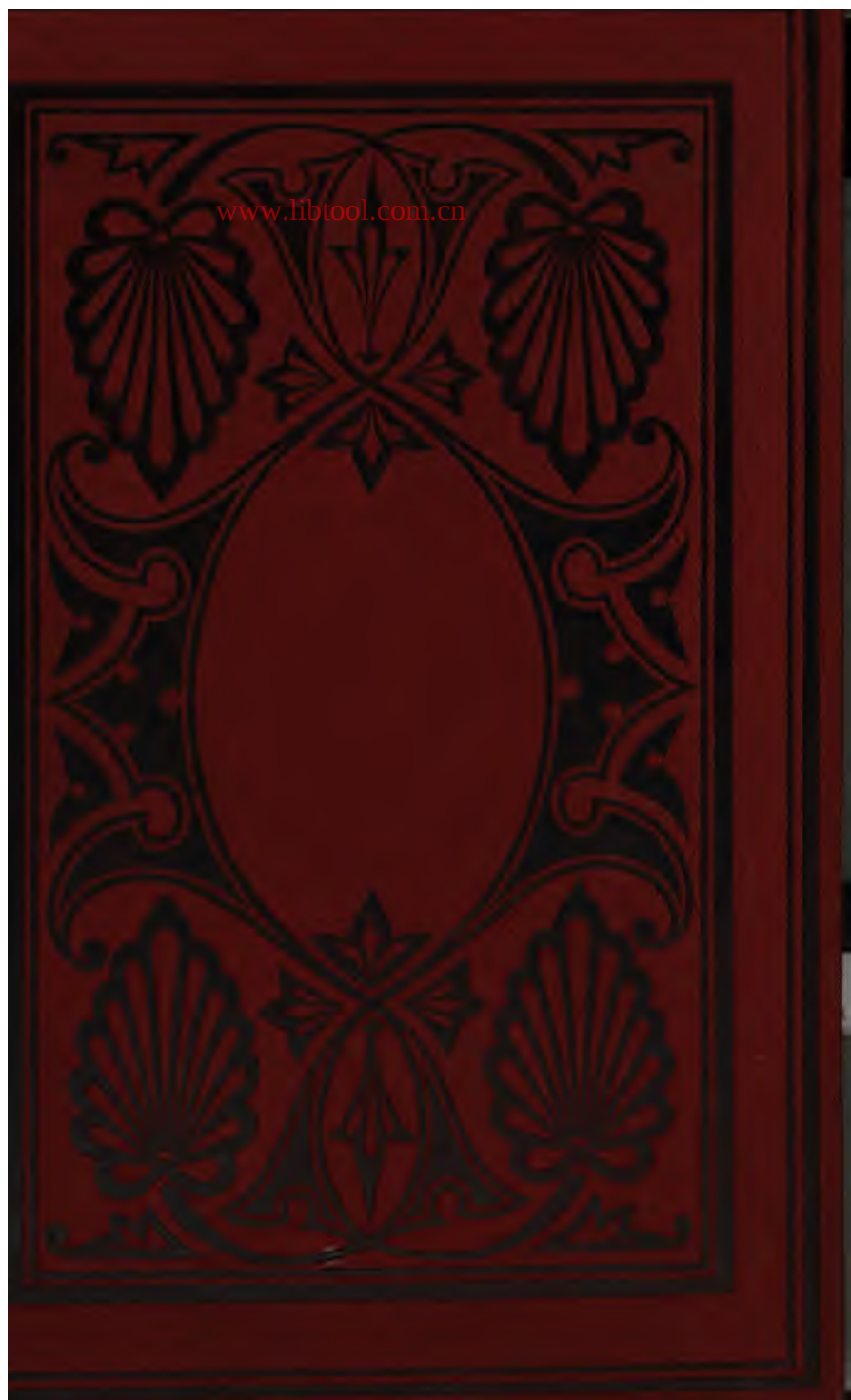


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AS THE SHADOWS FALL.

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A Nobel.

BY

J. E. MUDDOCK,

AUTHOR OF

"A WINGLESS ANGEL," "A WORLD WITHIN A WORLD," "JOHN JELLABY'S
HOUSEKEEPER," "HARD AS OAK," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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To
THOMAS WILSON REID, ESQ.,
OF
YORK HOUSE, CAMBERWELL,
~~This Work is Inscribed,~~
IN TOKEN OF A TRIED AND VALUED FRIENDSHIP.

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P R E F A C E.

As I have no doubt it will be urged against me that the plot of this story is improbable, I take leave to say that the main incidents are strictly true. Gathering up a number of romantic facts, I have woven them together; and however badly the work may have been executed, I am vain enough to hope that my characters are something more than mere lay-figures; while the passions and emotions which move them to action are, I venture to think, in no way exaggerated. In Norman Douglas I have endeavoured to represent a specimen of human nature which occasionally comes prominently before the world. His prototype I knew in the flesh. He was the son of an old and honoured family, and a young man of high scholastic attainments; but his learning and position could not counteract the effects of some moral deformity under which he laboured. He actually

separated a young married couple by means of a forged letter, and for this act he was exiled by his family. He went to China, and during the last rebellion closed a wasted life as he was leading a company of the rebels against the Imperialist troops. I had the melancholy satisfaction of saving his body from mutilation by the enraged soldiers, and helping to bury it decently in a lonely grave, on the edge of a swamp.

The search for the lost heir to the Tintagel estates also had its counterpart in real life, as in a *cause célèbre* many years ago, a celebrated firm of solicitors sent emissaries to various parts of the world to try and discover the heir to an immense property that was locked up in Chancery. Truth is stranger than fiction, and in the precedents I have cited above warrant may be found for my story.

THE AUTHOR.

LONDON, *Oct.*, 1876.

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AS THE SHADOWS FALL.

PROLOGUE.

THE DEVIL'S WASH-HAND BASIN.

WEIRD, terrible, Dantesque is the scene in which this story opens. It is a large hollow, a kind of gigantic caldron, in a wild, lonely part of the country, lying to the north of Paris. Paris, the gay, the beautiful, the frivolous; Paris, the wicked.

Down in this hollow is a huge, glowing, crackling furnace. It is a lime-kiln. Far into the air dart the red flames like angry fire-fiends wrestling with the spirits of the ether. Dull, booming, reverberatory sounds now and again awaken the echoes of the

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glen, as the great, greedy, roaring kiln receives into its maw the stony lime.

It is night. There are no stars, no moon, and yet there is a kind of faint luminous haze which prevents intense darkness. The grass in the glen, the bracken up the sides, the trees on the top are red as if they had been dyed in blood. It is the crimson glow from the fire. In one corner of the glen is a quiet, treacherous, deep, weird tarn. It is at the foot of a precipice, and over the top of the precipice runs the path by which the hollow is reached. Years ago, beyond the memory of living man, the limestone had been quarried from the spot where the water is. Then gradually the rains and the floods had filled the hole up. A stone thrown into the water falls with that strange hollow plash which tells of enormous depth. It sinks down, and down, and down, sending up great bubbles that rise and hiss long after the surface of the black water has ceased to be agitated.

The country people are superstitious about this pool ; they say it is fathomless, and they have christened it the " Devil's Wash-hand Basin."

Long ago a man had fallen in, and was never afterwards seen. Possibly his body had got jammed under some jutting piece of rock, and kept there, for it never rose to the surface. He had been a great drinker and reprobate, so the peasants said "the devil had taken him." After the accident, some rough railings had been put up, but they had slowly rotted, and fallen down.

As the water is reddened by the glow from the kiln, it looks like a pool of blood—awful. And as the overhanging ferns and creepers, swayed by the breeze, dip the surface, they appear to drip with gore.

The tutelar spirit of this lonely glen is Jacob Fienschi, the lime-burner. He inhabits a small hut, built on a ledge of rock on one side of the hollow. Here he and his wife live in gloomy solitude, for they have no children. In the day-time he is assisted in his work by four men, but they go home to the village at night. It is two miles away, and is called Trinain. It is a straggling, irregularly built village, inhabited, for the most part, by labourers, agriculturists, hewers of wood, and fishermen, for it is on the sea-coast. These people are very poor,

very superstitious, and very dirty. But the village is healthy, picturesque, and romantic.

Jacob Fienschi is a young man, about thirty. He is a broad-shouldered, powerful fellow, with a stern, sunburnt face ; his hair is dark and long, and falls about his shoulders; he has a long black beard.

There is a mystery about Jacob. He is tolerably well educated, and at some time or other occupied a superior position to his present one as a lime-burner. Of his past history he never speaks. He is generally moody and reserved. Rumour whispers that he had been secretary to a gentleman, that he robbed his master, and had been sent to the hulks at Brest, from which he had escaped.

Others hinted of his connection with a political conspiracy, in which hand-bombs had figured, and scattered death and destruction around, killing and maiming scores of inoffensive women and children. Be this as it might, he held little or no communication with the villagers. And perhaps on this account they were ready to speak ill of him. His wife was almost as taciturn as he. They

had, however, one friend and visitor to their cottage.

Some time ago there had come to live in Trinain a lady, young in years, but, alas! old in sorrow. For her face, once surpassingly beautiful, is worn and lined, and bears the unmistakable stamp of long suffering. She has two boys, little more than babies. She rents a small cottage, a little removed from the village. She keeps herself very secluded, and walks about much at night, so that people have come to look upon her as a harmless lunatic, and they call her Crazy Blanche.

Why she was called Blanche nobody knew, for she had never stated that to be her name. Where she came from, and what her history is, are a puzzle to the poor simple folk of Trinain. The only persons with whom she is at all familiar are Jacob Fienschi and Guillelmine, his wife. She is fond of rambling to the glen, and talking with Jacob as he tends his kiln at night. The villagers know this, and look upon it with grave suspicion, for it is whispered that Crazy Blanche is rich, and people shake their heads, and mutter one to another :

“Ah! some night there will be murder done in the old quarry.”

Jacob is a good-hearted fellow, in spite of the odium which, justly or unjustly, clings to him. He is much attached to Blanche's children. He makes them rough toys, he plays with them for hours together, riding them up and down on his great, broad shoulders, while Blanche chats and sews with his wife in the cottage, or seated in the little patch of garden before the door. She never breathes a syllable of the sorrow that is consuming her. It is evident, however, that her heart is broken, and, though she may not be crazed, her mind is certainly weakened by great mental suffering.

On the particular night here described, Jacob is seated before his kiln, enjoying his pipe, as is his wont before retiring to rest. His swarthy face is aglow with the red reflection; his great, brawny, sinewy arms are bare to the shoulders, so that as he sits there, his bearded chin resting on his hands, he looks a veritable Cyclops.

There is a wailing wind—not loud, but melancholy. The branches of the trees and the trailing grasses rustle with a ghostly sound.

It is altogether a strange night, and one peculiarly suited for a terrible crime or a great mystery.

The great bell of the church in the village of Trinain—for Trinain has a church—booms eleven. The sounds are borne to Jacob's ear on the moaning wind—

“ The wind it moans,
The sea it groans,
For there is trouble abroad to-night.”

The last stroke is struck ; the last vibration of the quivering bell is borne to the lime-burner, and past him, to wander ceaselessly, and for ever, as a wave of sound in the limitless ocean of space.

Silence, save for the rustling herbage, and the sighing breeze.

The man seems to be in a waking dream.

Perhaps he hears the pattering feet of melancholy ghosts of dead memories coming up from the shadowy past. Perhaps they cause him to turn towards the mystic future, and show him his thread of destiny, tangled and twisted, with many strange convolutions.

Sounds again.

Not a bell this time.

Jacob starts and straightens out his massive chest. His wrists rest on his knees. The hands hang over like great knobs ; and the muscles of his arms work as the fingers clench.

What are the sounds that startle him ?

Rattling stones, disturbed by hurrying feet as some one descends the zig-zag path that leads down into the hollow !

Jacob is a brave, fearless man ; but there is something so awe-inspiring in the night—so melancholy in the wind—so ghostly in the moving leaves—so suggestive of crime in the blood-red pool, and so unusual for any one to visit him at such an hour, that he starts to his feet, and a look of anxiety flits across his face.

Leaning against the seat he has just risen from is a heavy iron spade. He grasps it resolutely, and waits. In such powerful hands as his, it will be a fearful weapon.

The descending steps come nearer—the stones rattle faster. A figure appears, but faintly discernible at first, for it is in the shadow of some overhanging rocks. It emerges presently into the red light, and then

Jacob sees that it is Crazy Blanche. Her hair—long black hair—is hanging wildly down her back. In her arms she carries a burden.

The man drops the spade and springs up the path.

"Why, Blanche, what brings you here at such an hour?"

"You shall know—you shall know. But take the children; I am sinking."

She hands him the burden—the two boys. They are fast asleep, and wrapped in a large shawl. He holds them with one hand; with the other assists her down, for she is exhausted. He leads her to his cottage. His wife has gone to bed; he gets a light and arouses her. Blanche is very pale and faint. Jacob reaches down a wooden mug from the wall, fills it with white wine from a beaker that stands in the corner, and gives it to Blanche. She drinks and revives, while the children are laid on the bed from which the lime-burner's wife has just risen.

"Jacob, Guillelmine, my good friends," says Blanche, at last, "why have I come to you? Because you are the only friends I have left in the world! I am going away—

going a long journey, from which, perhaps, I shall never return. But I want you, Jacob, for the love of our Father in heaven, to take care of my little ones."

Jacob starts and looks at his wife.

"What say you, wife?" he asks.

"If Blanche wishes it, we will take the children until she wants them again."

"Ah! I may never want them again in this world. Better if they do not know their unhappy, broken-hearted mother. But listen. I am going away; I must go. I am going to search for the lost. To wander over the earth. But oh, good people, do not ask me why or wherefore. They say in the village that I am crazy, and I think I am. But those precious babes must not be blighted on that account. Jacob Fienschi, and you, Guillelmine," she exclaims with energy, suddenly rising to her feet, "you are good Catholics; there on the wall hangs the symbol of your faith." She points to a small stone crucifix that hangs on the bare wall opposite the door. The lime-burner and his wife cross themselves. "I know your hearts are true and kind, and therefore do I ask you to take my children—to guard them as if they were your own."

There is nearly two years' difference in their ages. When the youngest is six years old, you will take them and deliver them into the care of Monsieur Rouel, notary-public of the Rue Napoleon, Paris, together with this paper. I shall leave funds in your hands sufficient to amply compensate you for your trouble, as well as provide the children with all necessities. Say, will you undertake the task?"

The man and his wife look at each other again. Then out speaks the wife boldly and says :

"Yes."

"Yes," iterates Jacob.

"Then kneel before that cross," says Blanche, "and solemnly swear, as you value your immortal souls, that you will do as I request you to do to my children."

Jacob hesitates.

"Jacob Fienschi, you are poor ; you have often sighed for riches, that you might leave this place, and return to your native country. I will make you rich—make you so that you may once more hold your head up amongst men. Kneel."

The argument is effective. They both kneel as desired.

“ By that cross you hereby solemnly swear to be faithful to the trust I confide in you—to keep secret what passes between us to-night; under no circumstances and on no conditions to part with the children until the time I have named expires; and if you break your oath may an unutterable curse rest upon you. Swear this.”

“ We solemnly swear it,” they both answer, as they bow their heads and devoutly cross themselves.

“ That is good,” Blanche remarks, as she draws a sigh of relief; “and now listen. During the time the children are in your care you will do all in your power to strengthen their constitutions. This place is well calculated to give them rude health, so that they may grow up stalwart of limb and sound in body. Take this paper. It contains full instructions how you are to act, but you must not open it until three months after I have gone away. Here is another package. It contains two papers, with all the particulars of the children’s birth. There is a paper for each child; but this packet must not be opened until one or both the boys reach the age of twenty-one. Should they both die

before then the packet is to be destroyed. Here is yet a third paper, which, together with the other package, you will give to Monsieur Rouel, when you hand the children over to his care. In it he is instructed how to act. I now give you a bill for twelve thousand francs. It is drawn on Messieurs Franconi and Fanque, bankers, in Paris, to whom I have written, instructing them to pay you the money on presentation of the draft. Here is a second bill for twelve thousand francs, but which you will not be able to realise until you hand the children over to the custody of Monsieur Rouel. No doubt my acts and words seem strange to you, and are full of mystery; believe me, though, the solution is simple, but I dare not tell it you; my lips are sealed. Heaven pity me."

The unhappy woman bursts into tears, and presses her head upon the breast of Guillemine.

"You are a woman," she murmurs, "and can feel for me. Oh, be a mother to my children, and blessings will pour upon your head."

She grows calmer in a little while, and continues :

"It only remains for me to say that each

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child bears upon its body a distinctive and peculiar mark, fully described in the papers I have given you. By these marks they may be recognised at any time."

She crosses the room where the children are laid and still slumber. She kneels by the bedside, and offers up a fervent prayer. Then she rises and passionately kisses the sleepers. Her hot tears fall upon their little faces, so that they nearly awake. When Blanche returns to the room where are Jacob and Guillemine, her face is very pale, and her eyes wild and restless.

"The struggle is over now," she says; "farewell."

She takes the hands of the wife, shakes them, and kisses her. Then she holds out her hand to the man.

"I will accompany you up the glen," he remarks; "the path is steep and narrow, and where it overhangs the pool, it is dangerous to one unaccustomed to it."

"No, you must remain," she answers. "I have come down and gone up that path frequently. I have no fear of the precipice; I can pass it in safety. Farewell. Some day the mystery will be cleared."

Before they can utter another word, she is gone. Jacob stands at the door, and watches her for some time.

The wind is still moaning. The flames from the kiln are leaping higher and redder, and the hue as of blood has deepened.

There is an awful, ghastly weirdness about the whole scene. The night is so solemn, the wind so melancholy, the fire so red, the rustle of the leaves so ghostly, that even Jacob is impressed, but then his nerves have been unstrung a little by the strange event of the last hour.

The bell of Trinain tolls midnight.

Jacob turns in to his cottage again.

"Wife, I don't know whether we have done right in this matter or not."

"Nor I," she answers; "I fear we have acted rashly, and that trouble will come out of it. We ought to have known where Blanche was going to before we consented to take the children; but the fact is, I was quite bewildered, and this woman seemed to exert a spell over me."

"The same with me," the man answers.

"Jacob," the wife continues, "I think you

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ought to follow her, and see if you cannot persuade her to tell you."

"You are right, wife; I'll go."

He catches up his hat, seizes an oaken staff, and passes out of the house. He does not get many yards away before there rises on the night-air a shrill, heart-rending, piercing shriek. It comes from the direction of the precipice over which Blanche would have to pass!

It dies down the night-wind like a wailing echo which has had its birth in the chambers of Death itself.

Silence again.

For a moment Jacob is riveted to the spot. In that moment his wife stands by his side, for she has heard the shriek, and rushed out of the cottage.

"In the name of the Virgin run quickly," she says.

He needs no second bidding.

He is gone like a startled hare. Up the zig-zag path, his heavy wooden shoes sending the stones flying in all directions, he rushes.

He pauses breathless when he reaches the summit of the rock. He listens. There is no sound save that horrible moaning of the

wind. He peers over, and down—down into that fathomless tarn, into “the Devil’s Wash-hand Basin,” the water in which is appallingly like blood as it catches the reflection of the dancing fire, which to Jacob seems madder, redder, than ever.

The awful suspense of that moment is unbearable. The air appears full of mystery, of trouble, of death.

Suddenly he utters a suppressed cry. He sees something—there on the surface of that horrible water. What is it? The still figure of a human being—a woman. He bounds down the path again, scarcely feeling the ground beneath his feet. He rushes to the edge of the pool. He throws himself flat on the ground, amongst the dank grass and weeds, and slimy reptiles that crawl there. He hangs over the rocky ledge, and looks into that awful water. Glaring red eyes meet his, then suddenly disappear. They look like fiends—they are toads. There is the thing he is looking for—out there in the centre of the pool. The face is turned upward. The glow from the flames falls upon it. It is Blanche’s face! He tries frantically to clutch the garments which are spread out, inflated

with air, and support the body. He nearly topples in himself, but he cannot effect his purpose.

There is not a move—she is quite dead. He can see, as he strains his eyes, that there is real blood on her forehead. It flows from a horrible, gaping wound, and makes the red water more red. She has evidently struck her head against the rocks in her descent.

Horror-stricken, he rushes back to the cottage for a rope.

“Blanche drowned in the pool!” he ejaculates, in answer to his wife’s inquiring looks.

They both return to the water, he making a running noose in the rope as he goes along. It is all useless ; the body has sunk, and great air bubbles are coming up with a sibilant sound, Guillelmine falls upon her knees, and raising her hands aloft, cries :

“May the blessed Virgin protect us!”

The man almost drags her back to the cottage, for she is bewildered.

“What is to be done?” he asks.

“I know not,” she moans. “The saints defend us!”

“This woman will be missed,” he continues; “the monetary arrangements she has made

with us through her bankers will be soon known; her body will be found; that wound on her forehead will be damning evidence; we shall be accused of murder, tried, and guillotined. Wife, we must fly."

"Yes, yes, quick! There is no time to be lost," she cries, as she springs to her feet.

The man takes the documents, and carefully puts them into the pocket of his blouse. The woman wraps the sleeping children warmly up in shawls. She hands one child to her husband. Their few little relics and valuables are soon collected. The crucifix is taken down from the wall. Before it they make their vow. That vow must be kept, and the children protected. Perhaps in God's good time all will come right.

They go out into the night as if they were guilty of some horrid crime.

Rain has commenced to fall. It patters ceaselessly, and silences the voices of the night birds, and the croaking reptiles.

Jacob and his wife, each bearing a child, hurry along the great lonely highway, leaving that awful glen and its flickering lime-kiln far behind. As they fly, the dead body of

poor Crazy Blanche is swirling down into the silent depths of that dismal tarn.

Is her death the result of suicide or accident?

It is a mystery. Time alone can solve it.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

RAVENSHALL.

WITHIN a dozen miles of the great, roaring, bustling, smoky town of Leeds, and close to the main railway line from London, stands the village of Springdale.

Springdale, some few years ago, was one of those pleasant rural retreats to which the merchants and banking clerks of Leeds retired after the duties of the day had ended. It was a quaint, irregularly-built, old-fashioned kind of village, with an air of decorum about it that immediately arrested the attention of a stranger. There was something in Springdale quite different to any other place. The blinds at the windows of its houses were painfully white ; its streets scrupulously clean.

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Springdale seemed proud of distinguishing itself as a brassy village. Its knockers and door-handles were all highly polished, and, in addition, a severe epidemic of brass name-plates raged violently. The result of all this was, that in sunny weather Springdale flashed and scintillated after the manner of a very big paste diamond.

It would have appeared that the special mission of the [population, or that portion of it represented by the softer sex, was to constantly clean and scour the little village up. At a certain hour in the 'morning, as if by preconcerted signal, the doors of all the houses opened. Then there was much rubbing of knockers, scouring of handles, and polishing of name-plates. This process being completed, the doors were closed again as if by some connected mechanism, and the good female folk appeared at their respective windows, and there was a general adjustment of blinds. To see a crooked blind, a dimmed knocker, or unpolished name-plate in Springdale would have been to see a curiosity.

If the good people were particular about their mundane affairs, they were none the less attentive to their morals; and on the

Sabbath there was much spiritual scouring performed in the old square-towered, ivy-covered, Norman church, that stood, sentinel-like, on a hill that overlooked the village; and after these weekly meetings the Springdalers were as painfully bright as were the bright ornaments of their doors and gates.

The presiding genius of this excellent town was John Dudley, Esq., M.P., who had had the honour of representing the constituency of the borough in the House of Commons for three consecutive sessions. For be it distinctly understood that Springdale was an important borough, and its chief trade was vegetables and birch brooms; these useful commodities being sent every week in enormous quantities to Leeds and other market towns.

John Dudley was, moreover, the wealthy owner of the demesne of Ravenshall; and Ravenshall was the pride of every resident in the old-fashioned little town. It was one of the few baronial halls left standing entire in that part of Yorkshire. It represented an age when the lasting qualities of a building were studied more than its architectural beauty. And yet Ravenshall was unique in

its style, and was the shrine to which many an archæological pilgrim wended his way to reverently study its antiquity. Withal there was something sombre, almost melancholy, about the great pile of buildings. Its heavily-mullioned windows, its moss-covered walls, its massive chimney-stacks, and its long-teraced walks spoke too plainly of the far away past. Generations upon generations of men had been gathered to their fathers, but the old building stood lonely, and like unto one who mourned for those who had gone before. It was situated in the centre of a magnificent and well-wooded park. In this respect it might be said to resemble its owner, for while indicating that a thorough Yorkshire welcome awaited all who sought its hospitality, it stood aloof from its more plebeian neighbours.

This did also John Dudley. He was a patrician. He came of a stock whose line stretched back into the dim and shadowy past, until it was lost in the remoteness of antiquity. Monumental brasses of the family filled the village church. It was the boast of the living members that the Dudleys' ancestors had espoused the cause of the Empress Matilda

against the treacherous Stephen of Blois ; that they had accompanied Cœur de Lion to the holy wars, and that they were at the conquering of the Island of Cyprus ; and that they had been amongst those who forced the hateful King John to sign Magna Charta.

On a bright June morning, years ago, Ravenshall was a scene of gaiety, for many and high-born were the guests assembled there. The occasion was the welcoming home from India of John Dudley's nephew and affianced husband of his only daughter.

Norman Douglas was the son of Dudley's sister, who had long been dead, and he had just returned on leave of absence from a hill station in the Bengal Presidency, where he had been quartered for four years. He had reached his six-and-twentieth year of life, and from childhood had been the affianced of Edith Dudley.

The Scotch family of the Douglas, from which he had descended on his father's side, had given him a good deal of their proverbial ruggedness of nature. His face was not altogether a pleasing one. It was massive and hard, testifying unmistakably to its owner's acerbity. Furthermore, there was in

the keen, glittering eyes of Norman Douglas. a something that seemed to say, "Beware of the devil that lurks beneath." It certainly was an undisguisable fact that in his nature there was a good deal more of the soldier than the courtier. But whatever imperfections in this respect there might have been, they were compensated for, according to his uncle's way of thinking, by the fact that he was the scion of a noble house, and able to place his cousin in that social position her father was ambitious she should occupy.

The object of Norman's visit to England was to take Edith back to India as his wife in the fall of the year.

In making these arrangements, it had never occurred to John Dudley that his daughter's feelings should be consulted in the matter. He considered that a father had a perfect right to dispose of his daughter in marriage as he thought proper. His great aim in life had been to keep up the dignity of his house, and to stand well with the public.

He was a fine specimen of a good old Yorkshire gentleman. Portly and rubicund as to external appearance, with a very bald and polished head, and a fringe of iron-grey

whisker that set his genial face off to advantage.

Like most men of his stamp, John Dudley had forgotten, in his public character, what was due from him as a husband and a father. Not that he was arbitrary in his own home. On the contrary, as ruler of the domestic circle, he was heedless and retiring, troubling himself but little about the management of his household ; his failing being that he secluded himself too much from the society of his wife and daughter.

Mrs. Dudley had for years been a confirmed invalid, and her place had in a great measure been supplied by a maiden sister ; a lady on whose head the years pressed somewhat heavily. Miss Deborah Percy, or Aunt Deborah as she was more familiarly known in the Dudley household, was a little cross-grained and uncongenial. She was painfully methodical in her habits. With her everything was done by rule and line. She pursued an undeviating course in her management until it became monotonous. There was a total absence of warmth in her nature, and this no doubt, in a great measure, drove John Dudley into seclusion when he was at home.

At any rate, excepting when occasion compelled, he avoided coming in contact with his sister-in-law.

Edith Dudley was the flower of that quiet home, but under the slightly iron rule of Aunt Deborah she had pined a little. The magnificence and splendour with which she was surrounded did not supply the loss of those heart ties that are essential to a young girl's happiness. The frequent absence of her father from home had left her very much to her own resources, and when not in the sick-room of her mamma, she was riding about the country, for she was an accomplished horsewoman.

The rigid notions of propriety entertained by her father had in a great measure been disadvantageous to her, inasmuch as she had not benefited—or at any rate only to a very limited extent—by association with companions of her own age.

The atmosphere of a sick chamber, and the presence of a crabbed maiden aunt, are not calculated to sustain the freshness of a young girl's nature.

Edith, who had barely reached her twentieth year, was very beautiful. A wealth of dark

brown hair encircled a splendidly shaped head ; and large, liquid brown eyes added to the beauty of an almost perfect face. In manner she was slightly imperious and commanding, and so was a fitting representative of her house.

As it was well known that she had been betrothed from childhood to her cousin, no one from among the wealthy families around had ventured to solicit her hand and heart, though dozens of young men had fallen "madly in love" with her, and would have sacrificed much to have obtained her in marriage.

In all her rides her attendant, John Ranleagh, had been almost her sole companion, until a sort of companionable familiarity had sprung up between them, and was the cause of Edith receiving many a reproving lecture from Aunt Deborah.

John Ranleagh, who was a well-educated, intelligent young man, had originally been engaged by Mr. Dudley as under-steward, a position he had held for some years.

Owing, however, to his skill as a horseman, he had been induced by his master to act as a sort of private attendant on Edith in her

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rides about the country, in addition to his other duties.

There had been some mystery about his birth, but it was believed he came from good parentage, and Mr. Dudley, on the recommendation of a friend, in whose service he had been, had engaged him when quite young. And so, for a long time, John Ranleagh had played a not unimportant part in the Dudley household.

In appearance he was gentlemanly and refined. His face, without being what one would term "good-looking," was comely and attractive. He had a large square forehead, over which fell a mass of dark curly hair.

But perhaps the most noticeable feature about John Ranleagh was the eyes. They were in colour, bluish-grey; but such wondrous eyes—now laughing, now sad, now tender. Eyes that could flash with a revengeful light, or rivet one with their softness. Imperative eyes that made you look into them even against your will. Daring, discriminating eyes that shadowed forth a resolution of purpose not often met with.

These details of the personal appearance of

John Ranleagh are necessary, inasmuch as the man plays a conspicuous part in this history, and stands out prominently and boldly even as the shadows fall over those who figure in this strange drama of real life

CHAPTER II.

ROBIN ROOK MAKES A STARTLING COMMUNICA-
TION.

A GAILY-DRESSED party promenaded on the terrace slope before the Ravenshall mansion. These high-born ladies and gentlemen flirted, scandalised, criticised, and otherwise indulged in the various eccentricities peculiar to an assemblage of fashionable people.

It was a brilliant morning. The air was soft and balmy, and just stirred into a pleasant rustle the leaves of the great, tall, gloomy trees that adorned the park—if anything could be gloomy in such a picture, with the sun shedding his sweetness and light upon it. During the few days that had passed since Norman Douglas's return, but few opportunities had

occurred for any private conversation between him and Edith. The number of visitors to his uncle's house had prevented this.

But even when he had attempted to approach his affianced in the character of a lover, he was surprised and annoyed to find that there was a desire on her part to avoid him.

On this particular morning he had drawn her away from the company, and conducted her to a secluded avenue, favourable to a *tête-à-tête*. His face was clouded, and he strode up and down, evidently labouring under some annoyance.

Edith listlessly dallied with a sunshade, and her eyes were fixed upon the ground, as if trying to avoid the stern, hard face of her lover.

A pause had occurred in their conversation ; but at length Norman turned upon her, almost fiercely, and said :

"Edith, what am I to understand by your conduct, and the evident desire on your part to avoid me ?"

She still hung her head, and remained silent. Then he stopped, and taking her hand, looked into her face.

"Why are you silent ?" he continued.

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"Surely you have sufficient command of yourself to answer my question. I had hoped that our approaching marriage would have been a subject to which you might have given some attention, and shown a desire to converse upon. We are not boy and girl, but man and woman. And for our mutual benefit you ought to think the matter of sufficient importance to discuss our future arrangements. Not only have your letters to me during the last three years been few, but they have also been matter of fact and commonplace; containing none of those expressions of warmth and love that a lover has a right to expect from the woman he looks upon as his future wife. Apart from this, my presence here the last few days has not seemed to give you the pleasure I anticipated; on the contrary, you have positively avoided me. What is the meaning of this, Edith? By the right of one who will soon be your husband, I demand to know."

He released her hand, drew his tall, gaunt figure up to its full height, and stood with his eyes fixed upon her, as if he were determined she should not escape his question.

She raised her head and met his gaze. She was pale and agitated.

"Cousin, I thank you for reminding me that I am no longer a girl," she said in a voice that trembled a little, and was yet decisive. "As a woman, then, I exercise my woman's prerogative to tell you I can never be your wife."

He staggered as though he had received a violent blow. His eyes glared, and his face darkened, as in a quick, hurried tone, he said :

"Not be my wife! What do you mean, Edith? Do you dare to go against your father's wishes, and without any apparent cause dispel the dream of years? I know that I am rough. My soldier life has worn away the softer parts of my nature, and made me forget how to plead in impassioned love tones to her who possesses my heart. But I tell you now, Edith, in plain homely language, that you have been my ruling star, and I love you. The cause of your rejecting me, then, needs some explanation, and does not my position warrant me in asking for it?"

He had grown a little eloquent—that is, as far as he was capable of becoming eloquent—

and he now stood apart, and waited for her answer. She did not speak immediately; she seemed to be collecting her thoughts. Then, meeting his gaze, and in a voice that bore no trace of its former tremulousness, she said :

“When we were children, our parents, following an absurd custom, thought proper to betroth us to each other. There can be no doubt that family pride, and the desire to still further cement the bonds which unite our houses, were at the bottom of this arrangement. But I say that not only is such a custom foolish, but cruel, for by it the heart-feelings of the children are ignored. You have been absent from me for some years, and during that time I have developed into womanhood, with all a woman’s feelings and a woman’s nature. Why then, I ask, should those feelings be sacrificed for the sake of a promise made by our parents at a time when we were not able to think for ourselves? I am sorry to have to pain you, Norman, but it is better that we should understand each other at once; and I must be candid. I do not love you, I can never love you, and consequently, can never become your wife.”

The merry laughter of the light-hearted people who promenaded on the terraces broke upon their ears. The birds filled the air with twittering music, the bees hummed drowsily from flower to flower. There was a dreaminess and peace over all things—all but the hearts of this young man and woman, who stood gazing at each other beneath the shade of the leafy trees.

For a moment Norman seemed deprived of the power of speech by the firmness and candour of his cousin, and his face twitched by reason of his nervous emotion.

"There is some truth in what you say, Edith," he answered at last. "But surely you are not serious in your intention to blight the cherished hope of my life."

"I can assure you I am perfectly serious," and she struck with her sunshade a small twig that projected over the pathway; the twig was broken by the force of the blow, and fell to the ground, as if she wished this to be an illustration of the way she had irremediably severed the bond that bound her to the man who stood before her. "I can never be wife to you, Norman Douglas"—she spurned the broken twig with her tiny foot—"and so

once, and for ever, dismiss the thought from your mind."

"But why did you not write and tell me this, and I should not then have returned to England?" he asked hurriedly.

"Because I did not know that you intended returning so soon, and I hoped that time might deaden any feeling of love you have entertained for me. And when at last I did hear of your coming, I had not the courage to write, although I made several attempts, to tell you that your journey would be a fruitless one, so far as I was concerned. You must try and forget me. You will soon find one worthier of you than I. There is my hand; take it, and let us at least be friends."

She held out her delicate, white, and jewelled hand, but he seemed undecided how to act. After a pause he seized it almost roughly, and bent his head until his face almost touched hers.

"You scarcely know what you are saying," he exclaimed, "and you have no business to trifle with my feelings in this manner. I cannot believe that you are really serious; but even if you are, the honour of our two houses

is at stake when you refuse to carry out the desire of our parents. I must appeal to your father, and in justice to myself demand your hand in marriage. Pardon this seeming rudeness, but I am deeply hurt with the manner in which you have sought to cancel our engagement. I will devote myself to you, and hope to win your love in time. But you must and shall be my wife."

He loosed her hand—almost flung it from him—and with his face scarlet with passion, strode away up the avenue, but had not gone many yards before he turned and came back to where she stood. Then in a softer tone he said :

"Forgive me for my roughness, but you have stung me, and I smart under the pain. I cannot believe that you mean what you say, and I implore you to reconsider your decision."

"Reconsideration will be useless," she answered. "I cannot, and will not be your wife."

"Cannot, and will not," he repeated. "What do you mean by that, Edith? Is there some obstacle in the way? Have you been guilty of an intrigue that you are ashamed to confess?"

"You are not my confessor, sir," she cried sharply. "You are at liberty to form whatever opinion you think proper; but I refuse to answer questions that, to say the least, are ungentlemanly."

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed—then checked himself. "Excuse me, Edith, if I forgot for a moment that I am in the presence of a lady. But if, as I suspect, there is an obstacle in the way, I'll discover it, and thwart you, as it is evident your father is not aware of it. From this moment, Miss Dudley, I consider it to be my duty to narrowly watch your movements. Therefore you cannot accuse me of not having given you due warning."

Her face wore an expression of absolute contempt for this man. She looked at him until he was obliged to avert his gaze.

"I am sorry, Mr. Douglas," she answered, with withering coolness, "I am sorry that you have thought proper to insult me; though that is a matter I can afford to treat as it deserves. But when you shamelessly avow your intention of instituting a system of espionage on my movements, from a sense of duty, permit me to say, you betray a weak-

ness at once unmanly and unworthy the name you bear.

With a hasty movement she walked towards the company, who had just sat down to luncheon spread beneath a crimson canopy on the lawn.

He stood there overwhelmed with confusion. He writhed under the merited rebuke. He was undecided how to act. He did not like to make an enemy of his cousin ; but the bitterness of this unexpected repulse made him feel that he could resort to any means to humble her.

"Her father must know of this," he muttered. "From her manner, I suspect she has formed a connection with some one who stands between me and her. But let him beware—let him beware. Norman Douglas isn't the man to be trifled with. By Heaven! I'll——"

"Excuse me, Maister Douglas," said a little grey-haired old man, stepping out from a clump of trees in time to spoil Norman's threat—"excuse me, sir"—with a profound bow—"but I've yeered summat of what's passed atween you and th' young missus."

The speaker was one of Mr. Dudley's

gardeners. He had been trimming a flower-bed only a few yards from where Norman and Edith had stood; but unperceived by them, owing to an intervening cluster of ever-greens. He was a little, weazened-face man, with small ferret-like eyes; and as he stood in the sunlight, with his head bare, and mopping the perspiration from his forehead with a large red-cotton handkerchief, he looked a very crafty and very cunning little old man indeed.

Douglas was somewhat confused by the suddenness of the man's appearance at such a moment, and was, moreover, greatly annoyed at the uncereemonious intrusion.

"What is the meaning of this, Robin?" he asked, with some severity, when he had recovered from his surprise. "If I thought you had been guilty of playing the eaves-dropper, I should request my uncle to discharge you instantly—a request that you may be assured would be at once complied with, for Mr. Dudley would not brook the insolence of a servant playing the part of a spy on his daughter's movements."

"Dunner be hard on me, sir," replied Robin Rook, making another profound obei-

sance, and fixing his keen little eyes on his master's nephew. "I weer an unwilling listener to what passed atween you. Young missus dunner like me, and I was afeard that if I showed mysel' while she weer here, she'd think as I'd been playing t' spy, and gotten me turned off. But I know summat, sir"—and the old man took out a horn snuff-box, and applied a large pinch of the pungent dust to his nostrils, returned the box to its receptacle, the pocket of his red-striped waistcoat, and with a wink of one eye that might have been caused by the snuff, or more probably was intended as an intimation that what he knew was worth hearing, he repeated—"I know summat, sir. I know why young missus won't have anything to do with you."

And the old man winked with both eyes this time, and smiled, if a contortion of his puckered lips could be called a smile.

For a moment Douglas struggled with his feelings. He felt that by recognising this man he was placing himself in a very dishonourable position. And yet, burning with indignation at the way his cousin had treated him, he was ready to grasp at anything that

promised to place her in 'his power, or, at all events, give him some influence over her. A little reflection served to convince him that the man's boldness arose from some important information he was in possession of, and which he wished to sell.

Norman Douglas was a man who, in spite of some qualms of conscience, could stoop to a mean action to gain any desired end. He was intensely selfish, and had but little thought for the feelings of others where his own were at stake.

"Are you aware, Robin, that you are making an assertion that may get you into trouble?" he observed at length; for he did not wish the fellow to think he was ready to descend from his high social position to acquire knowledge from a menial.

"Well, maister," Robin replied, "it may be that I am, and it may be that I'm not. Leastways, if I speak the truth, I don't see, Maister Douglas, as I've much to be afeear'd of. I've allers heerd as how young missus was to become your lady, and so what I've seen wee these here old eyes has surprised me, that's what it's done."

"What have you seen?" Douglas asked

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hurriedly. "Remember, the very trees may carry scandal abroad."

Robin had appealed once more for solace to his horn box, and not until he had given his nostrils a huge pinch of snuff, and restored the box to his pocket, did he condescend to answer his anxious inquirer.

"O ay, sir, I know as there are plenty of mouths as would open wide enough if they had gotten the chance. But theer need be no fear o' that, sir, if you be careful."

"Do I understand from these hints that Miss Dudley is in the habit of seeing some gentleman unknown to her papa?"

"O no, maister, not a gen'l'man," Robin answered, with a smirking laugh, the exertion of which act caused the perspiration to break forth again, and necessitated another mopping with the red handkerchief, an operation that caused a very tedious delay, at least so Norman thought.

"No, maister," the old man continued, when he had once more restored his mop to the interior of his battered hat, "no, maister, I don't mean to say anything o' the sort."

Douglas was put out of temper by the old gardener's prevarication, but consideration

showed him that a little humouring might elicit much, whereas any attempt to force the man to speak would simply have the effect of sealing his mouth.

"Come, Robin, you are beating about the bush unnecessarily," he said. "Remember, if you know anything against Miss Dudley, it is your duty as a servant, and for the honour of your master, to impart that knowledge."

"Never fear, maister, but what I knows my duty; and I knows summat else, too. I've been biding my time for a chance to speak, and I'm glad as it's come at last. No, it's not a gen'l'man Miss Dudley's been a-meeting on; I wish it weer, for th' credit of th' family; but it bain't. It's a servant, sir."

Douglas caught the old man by the arm with a grip that made him writhe.

"For Heaven's sake come farther away," he whispered, as he fairly dragged Robin across the sward, and into a more secluded spot. "What proof have you in support of your statement?" he queried, when satisfied that there was no possibility of being overheard.

"Why, maister, what proof do you want?" Robin asked, rubbing his arm, which was red

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with the vice-like pressure of Douglas's fingers. "I've gotten th' proof of my own eyes, and though I be an old man, they haven't played me false yet. There have been secret meetings, maister, and I've seen 'em."

"Where, and with whom?"

"Wee John Ranleagh, and in John Ranleagh's house."

"By heaven, I'll shoot him!"

"Don't get excited, maister; tak' things calmly—tak' 'em calmly. You know as John Ranleagh has gotten a cottage near th' lodge at th' bottom o' th' carriage drive. Well, sir, I've seen mony and mony a time Miss Dudley a-going in and out of that theer cottage, and oftentimes when a young lady like her should ha' been in her own room, or with her mamma. I tell you, maister, theer's been some queer goings on atween them two."

Once more the old man drew forth his snuff-box and refreshed himself. Douglas leaned against a tree; he was ashen pale, and seemed to be labouring under some strong emotion. The revelation had startled him, and the fact of his rival being a servant

in his uncle's service aroused the worst passions of his nature.

"Shooting would be too good for such a scoundrel!" he exclaimed with bated breath. "I'll horsewhip him within an inch of his life!"

Robin rubbed his hands, and grinned.

"Yes, maister, that's it; horsewhip him. He once thrashed me with his whip a' cause I said as how young missus ought to be ashamed on hersel' for having anything to do wee him, I told him then when he struck me, as I was an old man, and couldn't return th' blow; but that I'd be even wee him some day. I knew as you weer a-coming home, and so I bided. But I've kept my eye on him, so I have."

"You are sure what you've stated is correct?" Douglas asked.

"Sure; ay, sir, I'm sure enough. And they can't deny it, they can't deny it, maister. Ax her in his presence."

"I'll think over the best course to pursue," Douglas returned. "But remember that you do not breathe a word of this to another living soul until I tell you," and Douglas pressed a sovereign into the man's hand.

"If this news should spread to the village, some ugly things might be said."

"I'll be careful, never fear, maister," answered Robin, as he put the gold coin into his pocket.

Douglas walked away, and as the old man turned to his work again, he muttered :

"So so, I think as I've put the brand in th' stack, and theer'll be a blaze afore long. Well, I've nowt to lose, and may be as I shall gain summat."

* * * * *

"Come, young man, you're a truant," Mr. Dudley said, as Norman joined the company. "We have been wondering what had become of you. I think, sir, you owe some apologies to your cousin."

"Pardon me, uncle, but an unpleasant duty detained me, of which you shall know more at a fitting opportunity. If Miss Dudley will allow me, I will sit beside her."

"Why, what's the matter with the young folks?" cried Mr. Dudley, seeing that there were evident signs of some disagreement. "A lover's quarrel, I suppose. Come, sit down here, young sir, and make it up immediately;" and Mr. Dudley placed a chair

next his daughter, and gently and playfully forced his nephew into it.

“I am not altogether welcome here,” Douglas whispered to his cousin, at the same time scrutinising her face. “The company of John Ranleagh would possibly be more agreeable.”

The arrow hit its mark, and Edith betrayed herself. Her face flushed scarlet, and she ineffectually strove to conceal her confusion.

“Sir, my father shall know of this insult,” was all she could say.

The merry laughter of the company rose into the air, and mingled with the songs of the birds. The bees sucked honey from the gorgeous flowers, that looked like rare jewels, set in the emerald grass. All things seemed joyous and happy.

Edith joined in the laughter ; but her laugh was a mockery, for her heart was filled with pain. The brightness of her face was dimmed, and the shadows were falling.

CHAPTER III.

A MEETING AND A WATCHER.

STANDING back some yards from the carriage-drive that leads to the manor of Ravenshall, and about half a mile from the mansion itself, is the cottage of John Ranleagh. It is a picturesque little place, surrounded with a strip of garden tastefully laid out with flowers. Up the walls of the cottage climb the fragrant woodbine and jessamine, and their perfume fills the air for some distance.

The sun has gone down in a fiery sea of crimson and gold. Gradually the bright colours have faded, and one by one the glittering stars have come out in the blue expanse of over-arching ether. The beautifully plaintive song of the nightingales floats upward and

upward, as if the birds were hymning praises to the dark-robed "Queen of Night."

At the door of the cottage John Ranleagh stands, or rather leans, idly smoking his pipe, and gazing dreamily up at the star-studded sky. Suddenly he is startled by a footstep on the gravel, and a shadow comes before him. It is the shadow thrown by the figure of a woman, whose face is muffled in a shawl. She passes through the wicket-gate, and throwing back the wrapper, discloses the face of Miss Dudley.

"Edith, you here!" John exclaims, as he starts back in astonishment, almost letting his pipe fall to the ground by the suddenness of the movement.

"Yes, John," she answers in a quick hurried tone, for she is nervous and agitated; "but let me go in, for there is no telling who may be about."

They pass into the house and close the door. He leads her into the little parlour, and takes a seat beside her on the sofa. She the high-bred lady, and he her father's servant.

Outside, another figure darkens the path, and a tall gaunt man steals from the shadow

of the trees, noiselessly passes through the wicket and up the walk until he reaches the little window from which the light streams. Then this tall gaunt man goes down on his knees, presses his face against the glass, and peers through the chinks of the blind.

The delicate white hand of Edith rests in that of John Ranleagh.

"John, there is danger," she says. "My cousin spoke this morning of my becoming his wife. I told him that could not be. He got angry, and taunted me, so that I left him. I afterwards saw him in conversation with old Robin, who must have told him of our meetings, for when my cousin joined me he mentioned your name. I've come to warn you, for I am sure there is danger, and the greatest caution must be exercised. We must devise some plan to avert this danger."

Ranleagh considered for a little while, and his face was anxious and troubled.

"I see through it now," he said. "Robin has long been embittered against me because I struck him with my whip some time ago for speaking disrespectfully of you, and I suppose he has taken this course to revenge himself. Do you not think, my dear, you have been a

little indiscreet incoming this evening? Should your cousin miss you, you may depend upon it he will guess the cause of your absence."

"Ah, John," she replied, and her arms stole lovingly around his neck, "do not chide me with being indiscreet, when my only thought was to warn you of your danger."

As she thus embraced him, an expression passed over the face of the crouching figure outside, that, could she have seen it, would have frozen her blood.

"You know, love," she continued, "that my cousin is a soldier. He is hot-tempered, and I believe is capable of any rashness. We must act with great caution, or trouble will come to us. Advise me what to do; for I feel that all my presence of mind will be needed to meet papa should my cousin carry out his threat and communicate his suspicions."

"I scarcely know, my darling, what course to advise you to take," John answered; "but your good name must not be dragged into the mire by the foul-mouthed slanderers who take delight in speaking ill of others whenever they get the chance. Sooner than that, it would be better to tell all."

"No, no, John," she exclaimed, looking pleadingly into his face. "Remember your promise, that your tongue should never be loosed until I gave you leave to speak. That time has not yet come, and so you must remain silent."

"My love," he answered, "I can be actuated but by one idea, and that is to shield you from calumny. But the promise I gave to you is a sacred one, and under no circumstances will I break it, unless I have your permission. It is to be deplored that circumstances have conspired to place us in such a false position."

"Say rather, John, that it is a pity we did not have a little forethought; for we cannot disguise the fact that we have been guilty of rashness."

"It may be so, love," he answered; "but let us not waste time in idle reproaches. We have learnt to love each other; we are essential to each other's happiness; and but for the barrier of social position—a barrier that society insists upon raising—we might proclaim that love to the world. It seems a giddy height for one so humble as myself to climb to reach you—you whom fortune has placed in one of the most enviable of positions. But what will

love not dare ? If we are true to ourselves the barrier will some day be broken down. Time and patience will do wonders ; and all the difficulties that lie in my path I will surmount so long as I have the assurance of your love."

" And you know, John, that you have that. Nothing can ever change me. You are as necessary to my well-being as the sunlight is to the flowers. If we truly love each other, we have only ourselves to blame if we lose each other. But, until the right time comes we must be strangers. I think if my father knew, he would curse me."

" Do not fear that," John answered. " By exercising caution we may disarm suspicion. During your cousin's stay you had better avoid me, and spend as much time as you can with him. This course, and this course alone, will ensure our safety. I know it is hard for you to practise such deception, but there is no alternative. But come, love ; before your absence is noticed you had better get back to the hall."

They rose and affectionately embraced each other. The figure outside also rose, and passing quickly up the avenue was lost among the shadow of the trees.

John Ranleagh led Edith to the door of the cottage, and satisfying himself that the coast was clear, he again embraced her.

"Good-night, dearest," she murmured ; and, drawing the shawl over her head, she sped away.

On reaching the hall, she was hurrying to her own room, but was met by a servant, who said, " I am requested, miss, by your papa, to say that he wishes to see you in the library."

Edith turned deadly pale, and her heart palpitated violently.

" How long is it since Mr. Dudley told you to deliver this message ?" she asked.

" Nearly half an hour ago, miss."

" Did you tell him that I was absent ?"

" He knew of your absence, miss, and instructed me to wait until you arrived, no matter what time that might be."

By an almost superhuman effort Edith recovered her self-possession.

" You will tell Mr. Dudley that I will attend him in the library in a few minutes. In the meantime, send my maid to me. I shall be in my own room."

The servant departed to perform her bid-

ding, and Edith hurried to her room to change her dress and compose herself. She felt sure that her father's request for an interview portended evil, and that all her presence of mind would be required to go through the ordeal. In a few minutes her maid arrived.

"Ah, mees!" she exclaimed, "your papa has been so many times inquiring about you. And he has had so much anger with me for allowing your absence."

"And my cousin, where is he?" Edith asked hurriedly.

"Monsieur Douglas is in the library," the maid answered, with a little laugh.

Marie Corvisart, Edith Dudley's maid, was a Frenchwoman, somewhere about her mistress's own age, or perhaps a year or two older. She had intensely dark flashing eyes, and her hair was a true black. Her features were regular and handsome, but in her manner there was something cold and snake-like. She was so humble, so cringing, that one felt an aversion for her. As she gazed at you with her dark flashing eyes, while her small taper fingers, with their white nails, played nervously with her apron, one could

almost have imagined that she was a beautiful tigress preparing to spring at its victim. She had been in Edith's service for about six years.

When she had arranged Edith's hair and assisted her to change her dress, she said :

"Mees is pale to-night. I think she is not well."

"I am quite well, Marie, but a little tired. I will go and see papa now; you remain here until I return. I shall not be absent long."

When Marie Corvisart was alone, she seated herself before the mirror, and, toying with her raven locks, exclaimed :

"*Mon Dieu!* am I not as handsome as she? She is insipid; but I, I have fire, energy, spirit. But she, she is a doll! Pah, I hate her!"

The dark eyes of the little woman glittered with a cruel light, and told that the words "I hate her," were not idly uttered. Then she took up a large gold hair-pin, in the shape of a sword, that was lying on the dressing-table, and, uttering a sharp, sibilant sound between her clenched teeth, she made a violent stab at some imaginary person with

the little instrument, a dangerous frown darkening her brow the while. But it passed in a moment. Throwing aside the pin, and parting her lips with a smile, thereby displaying two rows of splendidly even and white teeth, she commenced to hum the air of a lively French chanson.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT TOOK PLACE IN THE LIBRARY.

THE library of Ravenshall, in which John Dudley was in the habit of concocting his Parliamentary speeches, or arranging the business of his estate with his steward, presented a striking picture. It was built in the mediæval style. The ceiling was painted and crossed with beams; the walls were panelled with dark oak, which, together with the heavily-mullioned windows, gave the place a sombre appearance, that was only partially relieved by the bright bindings of the thousands of volumes that filled the book-cases.

John Dudley sat at his desk, the soft light from a shaded lamp falling on his face, that

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seemed agitated and troubled. Opposite him, in a massive, covered oaken chair, his nephew, Norman Douglas, was seated; and on the other side of the room, on a carved seat without a back, was Aunt Deborah, and before her was a small writing-table, covered with writing materials.

Aunt Deborah was very straight and bony, with a firm mouth and aquiline nose. Her bony face was set in a frame of stiff iron-grey curls, surmounted with a cap trimmed with pink ribbon. On her bony hands she wore mittens, and pendent from a leather belt round her wasp-like waist was her satchel, containing the household keys, and another lesser satchel for her cambric handkerchief. Aunt Deborah also had a weakness for short dresses, open-worked hose, and sandal slippers. There was something positively awing about Aunt Deborah. She was so stiff, so formal, so polite. Everything she did was done only after mature deliberation. She bore a strong resemblance to one of the waxen effigies of ancient dames at Madame Tussaud's, and was peculiarly automatical in her movements. Her words were delivered as if they were measured off by clockwork,

so that when she had finished her speech one was half led to listen for a "click," and to expect to see the mouth close with a snap. She belonged to the past, and ought to have lived two hundred years ago.

The library door opened, and Edith entered. She was very pale, and the sight of her cousin and Aunt Deborah agitated her.

"I understand that you wish to see me, papa. Is the business of so grave a nature that the presence of my aunt and cousin is indispensable?"

Aunt Deborah rose, and, with solemn gravity, placed a chair for Edith in such a position that she faced the trio.

"Edith," said her father, when she was seated, "I have desired your aunt and cousin to be present at this interview for reasons that you will presently learn. I must now ask what necessitated your absence from the house this evening?"

Edith's face burned with indignation as the question was put, for she guessed that her cousin had been mean enough to impart whatever information he had derived from Robin to her father. She felt that she dare

not tell a falsehood, and prevarication was foreign to her nature.

"I decline to be cross-examined, papa, in the presence of Mr. Douglas," was her answer. "I request that he will withdraw. A request I should think a gentleman would hasten to comply with."

Douglas winced but did not speak. Aunt Deborah gave a little cough to clear her throat, and then with awful severity said :

"Child, you forget yourself. Mr. Douglas by my request will remain. You are the representative of a great house, and though you seem to have forgotten that important fact, I trust you will conduct yourself as becomes the daughter of a Dudley."

Poor Edith felt very much as though she were a culprit at the bar, and Aunt Deborah was a solemn old judge.

"I *will* endeavour to uphold the dignity of my race," she faltered.

John Dudley had great respect for the opinion of Aunt Deborah. He believed her to be the very incarnation of dignity ; and a firm prop of his house. He allowed her to rule in all things, and he himself owned her sway.

"Where have you been to-night?" he demanded again of his daughter.

Edith rose to her feet, her eyes flashing with passion, but she sunk into the chair again as Aunt Deborah said :

"Child, how dare you display temper in that manner?"

Edith was thoroughly cowed and could not speak.

"Brother," continued the aunt, "I trust you will not fail in your duty, however painful it may be."

"I must confess," he answered, "my duty is a painful one."

"Our family never shrink from duty, brother," chimed in the maiden aunt as she arranged her mittens.

"The honour of the family name," he continued, without noticing the interruption, "has been jeopardised by a disobedient daughter—a child on whom I have bestowed a great amount of labour in the endeavour to bring her up with proper notions of pride."

"I need scarcely remark, brother, that I have supplemented your efforts, but with the same want of success;" and Aunt Deborah

raised her chin, and imparted a shake to the stiff curls, turning her eyes to the painted ceiling, crossing her hands on her lap, and sighing as if the world were too wicked for her pure-minded spirit.

John Dudley was so used to the interruptions of his sister-in-law, that he took but little notice of them.

"I am surprised and hurt, Edith," he continued, "that you should have forgotten what was due to me as head of this house —"

"To us, brother," and the hands uncrossed, and the eyes came down from the ceiling.

"You are aware, my child," he went on, "that from your birth it was intended that if you both lived you should be the wife of your cousin, so that another binding link might be forged in the two families."

"Very great and noble families," added the sister-in-law.

"Your cousin is a member of an honourable profession," went on John Dudley, "the profession of arms ; and in which I have no doubt, if ever opportunity occurs, he will maintain the reputation for prowess so long borne by the houses of the Dudley and the Douglas."

"Ah, their deeds will be handed down to posterity on history's pages," sighed Aunt Deborah.

"It was the desire of my heart that you should become a soldier's wife. And surely a worthier husband than your noble cousin could scarcely have been chosen for you. But all our schemes for your welfare you have thought proper to nullify by rudely repulsing your kinsman for the sake of one of my servants."

Edith's face reddened again, but she still remained silent; while her aunt with a long-drawn sigh murmured:

"Too true, and too shocking."

"I am glad to see, Edith," her father continued, "that by your silence you show that you are sensible of the error into which you have fallen."

She spoke at last.

"Father, I beg that you will not attribute my silence to the wrong cause. It comes from a respectful desire to hear all you have to bring against me, and at the proper time I doubt not I shall be able to answer you. At present I admit or deny nothing. But I submit that until you have indisputable

proof, you are scarcely justified in accusing me."

"My child," said Aunt Deborah, "this boldness is unbecoming, and I cannot permit you to speak in such a manner in my presence."

"I regret," replied Mr. Dudley, "that we are in possession of proof so trustworthy as not to admit of a single doubt."

"The bare and unsupported testimony of an imbecile old gardener," his daughter remarked warmly, and looking at her cousin.

Aunt Deborah clasped her hands in astonishment.

"Child, child," she exclaimed, "this is unpardonable."

"There is stronger proof than that," John Dudley answered. "Your cousin has been an eye-witness of the scene that took place this evening in John Ranleagh's cottage."

"Ah!" was the only exclamation that escaped from Edith's lips, but she looked at Douglas with a look that told how great was her contempt for him far more eloquently than words could have done. He felt that it was necessary to make some explanation,

and so he spoke for the first time since Edith had entered the library.

“The somewhat rude manner in which my fair cousin repulsed me this morning,” he said, “would have caused me but little uneasiness, as I should have endeavoured to have won her gracious favour by patiently waiting until she deigned to meet me more courteously, believing that she would at least respect her father’s wishes, and do me the honour of becoming my wife. But I could not turn a deaf ear to a communication made to me by Robin, a communication of such a nature, and involving the honour of our family to such an extent, that I felt I should be justified in taking any course to prove it true or false.”

He paused, and it was an opportunity for Aunt Deborah to chime in with “Worthy representative of a great race.”

“I did not forget, cousin,” he continued, “the object that had brought me to England, nor that I had the permission of your father to watch over your interest, as over one likely to become my wife. Moreover, I felt it was necessary to nip the scandal in the bud, for should it get abroad it would take years to

wipe out the stain it would cause. I therefore made it my business to watch you, cousin. It was a painful duty, but I was willing to incur the pain, for the sake of the good results that might arise."

"Generous, self-sacrificing youth," Aunt Deborah murmured, as she proceeded to wipe an imaginary tear away with an elaborate lace handkerchief.

Mr. Dudley was evidently much affected. He took down his gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and re-adjusted them with the air of a man who was ill at ease. He loved his daughter, but he allowed her to be secondary to his love for superiority over his neighbours.

Douglas continued : " I saw you leave the house this evening, and guessing that you were going to keep an assignation I followed ; to be pained and shocked to witness you in the arms of one of your father's menials. I should have been wanting in respect and duty to that father if I had failed to bring the matter under his notice. But I trust that my uncle will be lenient, for I cannot help but think that your indiscretion has been the result of a girlish freak, due in some measure no doubt to your seclusion. I think that the require-

ments of the case will be met by the instant dismissal of this impudent fellow, and I hope, cousin, that a few days' reflection will serve to convince you of your folly. You may rest assured that when you have become my wife no word of reproach from me shall ever remind you of it."

Edith turned towards him. She seemed to struggle to show him by her looks how great was her scorn. Her eyes flashed, her face was crimson with suppressed rage.

"Your wife I shall never be, Norman Douglas," she said, in a tone that caused Aunt Deborah to open her eyes in astonishment and exclaim with her favourite prefix :

"Child! I cannot permit you to talk in this way; it is unbecoming."

"Aunt, I do not ask your permission," Edith answered quickly, "and you forget that I am not a child. I demand the right to be heard."

This was almost more than Aunt Deborah could stand, and she was obliged to have recourse to her smelling-bottle, and repeatedly to cast her eyes to the painted ceiling before she obtained relief.

"I am glad that I have been so frequently

reminded of the dignity of my house," Edith continued, "it enables me to tell you, Norman Douglas, that you are a coward, and that the man you have been pleased to speak of as my father's menial, is in every way your superior. I have not sufficient command of language, sir, to tell you how great my contempt for you is. I ask you, father, by what right you seek to barter away the happiness of your daughter? I am no longer a girl, but a woman, with a woman's discrimination and feeling. Do you forget that I have a heart, and do you deny me the right—the sacred right of every woman, to use my own instincts and discretion in selecting a husband. I know that you have pledged me in marriage to your nephew, but I tell you most solemnly that under no circumstances will I become his wife. Norman Douglas, to your face I tell it you, that you are unworthy alike of your name and your profession."

She had spoken with such vehemence that her listeners were unable to find tongue to interrupt. But when she sunk back exhausted it seemed to remove the spell that had bound them. Aunt Deborah was the first to speak,

and raising her hands in an attitude of pious horror, she exclaimed :

“ Oh, that I should have lived to have heard such language from my sister’s child !” Then applying the lace handkerchief to her eyes, she wiped away any number of imaginary tears, and hurried from the room.

John Dudley strove hard to control his feelings, but his rising passion showed itself in his face. He could not brook defeat, especially when that defeat was accompanied by the overthrow of his particular hobby.

“ Daughter,” he cried sternly, “ I blush for you. Do not imagine that I can allow such unprecedented disobedience to pass without some strong mark of my displeasure. Not satisfied with bringing disgrace upon your house, you insult not only your aunt, and your noble, generous cousin, but even my feelings are outraged.”

John Dudley was visibly affected, and his emotion caused him to pause. Edith threw herself at his feet and cried :

“ Oh, father, you judge me harshly. I had no desire to wound or pain you.”

He waved her sternly away, and she returned to her seat.

"I regret," he continued, "that your conduct cannot be lightly passed over, and some immediate steps must be taken to prevent this cruel scandal from spreading beyond our own family. John Ranleagh shall leave my service at once, and I forbid you—do you hear, Edith?"—seeing that she had covered her face with her hands—"I forbid you ever seeing the rascal again, on pain of incurring my severest displeasure. I promised my late sister that I would give you to her son, and I must insist upon you becoming Norman's wife. The nuptials shall be celebrated with all decent despatch, so that, as your husband, Norman may have the right to repudiate any calumny that may arise out of your foolish escapade. If you fail to comply with my wishes, I will totally disown you, and my house shall know you no more. This is an extreme measure, but one I shall not hesitate to resort to if my authority is not respected. It is to be hoped that, for your mother's sake at least, you will spare me the pain of having to resort to such a course. For in her present shattered state of health it might be fatal to her. Go to your room now, reflect upon what has passed, and let prompt obedience to

my commands make amends for your past foolishness."

Edith rose, and said :

"Father, it is useless for you to entertain any hope of my becoming the wife of Norman. I hate him."

She left the library and fled to her chamber, where her maid was waiting her coming ; then falling on her knees, and burying her face in the lap of Marie Corvisart, she wept as if her heart would break. She was struggling in the shadows, and the light was going out of her life.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

FOR a long time Edith continued to sob, and all the efforts of her maid failed to arouse her from the hysterical fit that had seized her.

The dark eyes of Marie, as she bent over her young mistress, seemed to sparkle with an unnatural light; and though she was importunate in her requests that Edith would be calm, it was obvious that no very great amount of genuine concern for her mistress's condition filled her breast. Edith at length gained a sufficient amount of composure to speak. Then she looked up imploringly to her maid, as though she expected help and consolation from her.

"O Marie," she exclaimed, "I am very

unhappy. The high estate to which I have been born seems to mean for me nothing but misery. Why should my papa and aunt wish to coerce me into a marriage that cannot but be distasteful to me? Are my feelings of so little consequence that they are not worth a moment's consideration? But were I ever so willing to marry my cousin, there is an obstacle in the way that would prevent me."

"Ah, mees," answered Marie, "I am very humble, but I am a woman and can feel. May I ask the honour of being entrusted with the cause of your trouble? I may be able to advise, to comfort you, mees. Pardon, but let me be your confidante. I do so long to share your sorrow. Why should my young meestress, so sweet, so young, so beautiful; why should she have so much great sorrow?"

As Marie spoke she wrung her hands as if in real concern, but there was a look in her dark eyes that too plainly told how treacherous the nature of the woman was.

Edith was touched by the apparent devotion of her maid. Wounded in spirit as she was, she grasped, as is ever a woman's wont, at the first sympathy offered. Besides, she felt that in her extremity it was necessary to have

a confidant and friend who could assist and advise her.

"Marie, I am very, very much obliged to you," she said, as she took the hands of the maid between her own. "You can aid me, do me a service, the importance of which I cannot rightly estimate. I am in great trouble. My papa and aunt wish to force me into a marriage with my cousin Norman, but I do not like him, I can never like him. Ah, Marie, you are a woman, you have a woman's nature. Has that nature ever been stirred to its depths by love?"

For a moment Marie seemed to tremble; every muscle quivered as if an electric shock was passing through her. Then she hung her head, and something like a blush mounted to her temples, though it was in reality caused by suppressed passion.

"Love, mees," she answered; "yes, I have loved, I do love now. But, *mon Dieu!* I have a rival, and my love is not returned."

"I am deeply and truly sorry for you, Marie," Edith said as she pressed the hands closer, and looked into the dark glittering eyes. "If I could be of service to you, I would. But I am more fortunate than you."

I love. I have no rival. The object of my love is a husband—my husband, for I am married.”

Marie uttered a half-smothered scream. Her white teeth closed upon the under lip until all the blood left it. Her face went scarlet, and the cruel eyes were positively fierce in their unnatural brilliancy. She resembled some savage animal that had just seized its prey, and then been suddenly startled by the approach of the hunters.

“Married!” she echoed.

“Yes, Marie ; do you not understand ?”

A smile of scorn wreathed itself round the woman’s lips as she said :

“Yes, mees, I understand. And your husband, mees, is, is——”

“John Ranleagh.”

A gasp was all that escaped from Marie’s lips ; but her face was ashen now, and she pressed her left hand to her heart, as if there was a torturing pain there.

There was something in Marie’s appearance that should have alarmed her listener, had she not been so absorbed in her own reflections. But Edith did not notice it, nor the effect the communication had had upon

her servant, for she had risen and gone to a small writing-table, and was busy turning over some papers, as if seeking something.

“ I dare say I have been very foolish,” she continued ; “ but he pressed me to become his wife, and I loved him, oh so much ! I was afraid that if I did not consent he would go away, and I should never see him again. His position is lowly now, but some day it will be better. He is very sanguine about that. I ought to have waited. I know that I have done very, very wrong. But we are only man and wife in name, for our marriage has never been consummated. He vowed to me that he would never make the marriage known until I gave him leave. I know he will keep his word, for he is too honourable to break it, especially when my happiness is at stake. My father intends to dismiss him in the morning, and I shall not have an opportunity of seeing him before he goes. Therefore, you must help me, good Marie. I know you will. I will write him a letter, telling him that I will always be faithful, and wait patiently until he is in a position to come forward and claim me. You will do me this service, will you not ?”

Marie had regained her composure now. She smoothed her dark hair back from the white forehead, and in a voice that bore no trace of emotion she said :

“ I am your devoted servant, mees. I shall do your bidding, and convey the note to Meester John Ranleagh. Will you please to write it, and repose in me your confidence ?”

Edith sat down at the table and penned the following note :—

“ MY DEAR HUSBAND,

I have had to endure a painful ordeal in the library this evening. My cousin was a witness to our interview in your cottage, and has informed my papa, who intends to dismiss you. He insists upon my marriage with Norman. You know how impossible that is ; but at present I dare not tell my papa that I have a husband already. I think that if he were to discover it now it would break his heart, and he would curse me. Our marriage must be concealed. I enclose the certificate. It will be safer in your possession than mine. When the right time arrives you can come forward and boldly claim me. But till then we must be as strangers.

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Send back a few comforting words. My maid, who is in our secret, can be trusted ; and when an opportunity occurs communicate your address, so that I may write. But let every caution be exercised, for there is no doubt that we shall be closely watched.

“ Farewell, my husband, and always believe me your faithful, loving wife,

“ EDITH.”

She folded this note up together with her marriage certificate, and, sealing them in an envelope, handed it to Marie.

“ Take it at once,” she said. “ You can easily pass out of the house without being noticed. But do not fail to be wary, for my cousin, Norman, will be doubly vigilant now.”

“ I shall in all things obey your instructions, madam,” answered Marie, with a malicious smile playing about her mouth. Then she concealed the package in her bosom and left the room.

“ I shall crush you, you fly,” she hissed rather than muttered, when she had gained the passage.

Norman Douglas after the interview in the

library had retired to his apartments in the left wing of the mansion. One of these rooms was a pleasant little place, lighted by a French window that opened on to a lawn. Here he nightly sat and smoked a cigar before retiring, a habit he had acquired in India.

He sat there now reflecting on all that had passed. His cousin had openly defied him ; called him a coward, and said he was inferior to John Ranleagh. As he thought of these things he felt that no sacrifice would be too great for him to make so that he could conquer his proud cousin. " As for John Ranleagh, nothing would be too bad for him," he muttered.

Douglas had led a soldier's life, and in the wild Indian station where he had been quartered, his nature, always rough and unsympathetic, had been injured by the absence of the softening and humanising influences of society. He had acquired a sourness of temper and harshness of character that were conspicuous in a cultivated man. He knew that he possessed influence with his uncle, and he was determined to use it to compel Edith to become his wife. She was devoted to her

father, and a little pressure, he argued, from that quarter would, he was sure, have effect. "I do not expect ever to gain her love," he thought, "but it will be something to conquer her, and when she gets to India she shall soon learn that Norman Douglas knows how to rule a wife."

As these thoughts passed through his mind he was startled by seeing the figure of a woman flit past the window and vanish in the shade of the trees.

He rose and stepped on to the lawn. It was a sultry night, and the stars seemed to quiver in a haze. Not a bough stirred, not a sound save the deep and plaintive notes of the nightingale and the chirping of a grasshopper broke the stillness. But few lights were visible in the mansion, for the hour was late and nearly all the occupants had retired.

There was something so impressive in the stillness that a kind of nervous feeling that danger was near forced itself on Norman, and thinking that it would be well to possess himself of a stick or some other weapon, he was about to step back into the room when his arm was suddenly seized and a voice whispered :

“Pardon this strange intrusion, Monsieur Douglas. I am only a woman, but I can tell you much.”

Startled by the suddenness of the woman's appearance he turned round, and his gaze met the white face and glittering eyes of Marie Corvisart.

“What is the meaning of this liberty?” he asked roughly, as he recognised his cousin's maid. “How is it that you are not with your mistress?”

“I shall explain, monsieur, at your pleasure, but if you please do not be angry with me. I am very humble, monsieur, and your servant to command. I could not come to you any other way. I shall communicate something that will make you start. May I have your attention, Monsieur Douglas?”

At first Norman felt inclined to repulse the woman, as from her excited manner he thought she was not quite responsible for her actions. Reflection, however, served to convince him that there was something momentous at the bottom of all, and though he felt that he was guilty of despicable and dishonourable conduct in thus receiving information likely to compromise his cousin, he had

taken the one false step in having listened to Robin, and he might as well go on.

“Well, what you have to tell, tell quickly,” he said, as he came to this conclusion in his own mind.

“Not here, not here, monsieur. It is for you alone, and must be in private. It is about mees. Ah, so strange, so strange, you will be startled.”

He was puzzled how to act. To be seen in company with the woman would give rise to unpleasant suspicion. There was only the alternative of taking her to his room, and that he hesitated about.

“Is your information so extraordinary that you cannot impart it here?” he asked.

“It is, Meester Douglas. You will be sorry if I spoke it where other ears might hear.”

“Follow me, then,” he said, as he led the way through the open window, which he closed, and screened by pulling the heavy curtains across it. He drew a chair into a corner, and motioned Marie to be seated. She declined, and throwing back the hood of her cloak, which she had worn on her head, she said :

"I cannot sit, Meester Douglas, I am on fire. There is a burning pain in my breast. I am hurt here, here, monsieur," and she struck herself in the region of the heart. "Hurt, ah, so much. *Mon Dieu!* is it ever to be so with my sex?"

Her incoherence alarmed her listener, who from this, and the flushed state of her face, and unusual brilliancy of the eyes, began to think she was under the influence of drink.

"You are very excited," he said; "will it not be better for you to see me to-morrow? We are not safe from intrusion here, and I am compromising myself by holding a secret interview with you."

"No, not to-morrow, but now. You think that I am strange, that I am excited. So I am, but it's with rage, Monsieur Douglas. I am a woman, an injured woman, and I am revengeful. I have loved, I have been deceived, wronged, and my blood is on fire."

She paced the room, and clenched her hands in her passion, until he really began to think she was not quite right in her mind.

"I must request, Miss Corvisart," he said, "that you will be a little calmer. This unseemly behaviour certainly calls for some

explanation. Moreover, if you have not more command over yourself, I fear that your presence here will be detected. And for your own sake, if not for mine, you should endeavour to avoid such an unpleasant contingency."

"Oh, Monsieur Douglas, forgive me," she said, as she turned and faced him. "I am very humble, but I have very much feeling. What I have learnt to-night I could have told to the gossips in the village, and she would have been pointed at with scorn. But I know that you came home to marry her; that she has thrown you off, deceived you, and so I came to tell you, and to plan my revenge."

"If you allude to Miss Dudley's foolish conduct in connection with Ranleagh, I may at once say that I am acquainted with all the particulars of the affair, which, after all, has been but a girlish flirtation, and with the dismissal of this fellow the affair will soon blow over, and be forgotten."

She smiled at him, not a pleasant smile, but a sort of grin, in which the mouth was slightly drawn down, the lips widely parted, revealing both rows of white teeth. It was

the only approach to a laugh that Marie Corvisart was capable of.

"If all you know is that she has visited John Ranleagh's cottage, you know but little," she answered. "I know more than that."

Douglas started, and his brow darkened. There was something ominous in this woman's words; a concealed meaning, and yet he could not guess what it was.

"You speak strangely," he said, "and as though you were desirous of blackening Miss Dudley's character. You must be careful, for unsupported statements in such an affair are dangerous, and are apt to bring trouble on those who make them."

He said this with a good deal of earnestness, for he had still sufficient honour left in his nature to shrink from giving ear to scandal about one for whom if he possessed no real love, he still had some respect.

Marie showed her teeth again.

"I shall make no rash statement," she answered. "I dare say you wonder why I speak at all against my meestress. You shall hear. Five years ago John Ranleagh came into the service of my master. I was then a

young girl, and my face was as fair as Mees Dudley's. John Ranleagh thought so. He spoke to me words that I had never heard before. He thrilled me. He made me his slave. He made me love him, Monsieur Douglas. I was happy then. Ah, I shall never be so again. For two years he made me think that this was a good world, and all things were fair. It was a dream, an accursed dream, because when I awoke from it the world was black to me and all things foul. When he was privileged to ride about with Mees Dudley, his manner changed to me. He grew cold. He told me that we had both been very foolish, and must only be friends in future. He threw off the maid for the meestress. The maid's heart might break, but John Ranleagh cared not. I bore my trouble without complaining, until I found that my meestress visited his cottage. Then my nature changed. I was determined to be revenged. I told him so, but he only laughed. And I said I will bide my time; those who wait and endure, conquer. I watched them, for I hoped that some day they might place themselves in my power."

She paused for breath, for she had spoken

very hurriedly, and her voice had grown husky.

"Are you not paining yourself unnecessarily?" Douglas asked. "A stop will be put to this ridiculous affair as far as Miss Dudley is concerned, and you may yet hope to convince John Ranleagh of his folly and win him to you."

She laughed outright this time. A mocking, devilish laugh. Such as only a jealous woman burning for revenge could give. She placed both hands on the table, and leant over, glaring at him. At least so it seemed as the lamp-light streamed over her face, and caused her eyes to gleam with a kind of metallic lustre.

"Monsieur Douglas, you know not what you say. I can never win John Ranleagh. I hate him"—she fairly hissed this—"I hate Mees Dudley. Is it not strange that I, a woman, and a young one, should talk like this? But you must remember I have been deceived by this man. He might have made me good, and he has made me bad, very bad, Monsieur Douglas, so that I care not what I do or what becomes of me if I can but crush them."

She paused again, for the perspiration had broken out on her face and stood in great beads. She drew herself up and paced the room, wiping her face with her handkerchief, and biting her nether lip. She was labouring under strong hysterical excitement, and her listener felt uneasy, for he was fearful that if she became unmanageable her presence might be discovered.

"You are really very excited," he said soothingly, drawing near and laying his hand upon her shoulder. "I think it will be better for you to go to your room now and see me at some other time."

She turned round, sharp and quick, so that he started back. Her arms extended behind her, her hands clenched, her lips quivering, the veins in her forehead distended, she looked really terrible in her passion.

"You are very anxious to get rid of me," she cried, in a voice that scarcely rose above a whisper. "But you have not heard all yet. You came home to marry this high-born cousin. But she will never be your wife. She cannot be your wife."

She ceased speaking, and pressed her hand

on her throat, and coughed, as if something had risen there, and was choking her.

For the first time some suspicion of the truth dawned upon Douglas. He grasped the woman's wrist, and cried :

"For Heaven's sake speak and tell me what you know, for your words convey a terrible meaning."

"I thought you would get interested at last," she answered. "Hear it, then, for this is what I know. That your high-born cousin has come between me and the man I loved. She has robbed me of him, and the great Mees Dudley is the wife—hear it again, Monsieur Douglas, the *wife* of her father's servant."

"You lie, woman!" cried Norman, his face colourless, and his heart throbbing violently. "She may have been guilty of rashness, but never of throwing herself away upon this worthless vagabond."

"I lie, do I?" sneered Marie; "I lie, do I?" she repeated with emphasis. "You shall eat your words, Monsieur Douglas. Read that."

She drew Edith's letter and the marriage certificate from her bosom and flung them on

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the table. Douglas caught them up, and staggered rather than walked to the lamp. Then he read, read until his brain seemed to be on fire.

"I do eat my words," he faltered, when he had finished the perusal of the documents. "I ask your pardon. What you have told me is too true." He made a great effort to be calm, but the lurking devil in his nature had risen, and he felt some of the revengeful feeling that had half maddened the woman before him. "We must keep this secret to ourselves," he continued, "at least for the present. I will consider what are the best steps to be taken in the matter. Should the news be noised abroad, and come to Mrs. Dudley's ears, it would kill her. Let it go no further. Leave these papers with me, and rest assured if I can aid you, you shall have ample revenge. Go away now, and to-morrow we will speak further on the subject."

He opened the window and peered out. Clouds had gathered in the sky, and the night was dark. Not a sound save the rustling leaves broke the stillness.

Marie Corvisart drew her cloak up over

her head, and as she passed out, she put her face close to his, and whispered, "I should like to kill him."

The darkness closed around her, and she was gone. He stood there gazing in the direction she had taken. The cool night air fanned his heated forehead, and refreshed him. But his heart throbbed unnaturally, his brain burned, and in his ear still rang the parting words of his visitor :

"I should like to kill him."

CHAPTER VI.

LORD TINTAGEL'S STORY.

IN one of the dingy courts abutting on Holborn, and leading to nowhere, one end being blocked by some rusty iron railings, were situated the offices of Messrs. Ranson & Reeler, solicitors.

The firm of Ranson & Reeler was a highly respectable one. The professional services of its representatives had been employed in some of the most celebrated cases, and the firm, in consequence, had gained a very wide popularity. Messrs. Ranson & Reeler—speaking professionally—seemed to flourish best, after the manner of their kind, in the sickliest of atmospheres, for the court known as Garden Row was a most unsalubrious

spot. Why it had been so christened was very hard to define, for generations must have lived and died since even the simplest of flowers had bloomed there.

Garden Row was an ancient place. The houses were tall and rickety, and nearly all the windows were fitted with reflectors, so that what few rays of light penetrated the prevailing gloom might be caught and multiplied for the benefit of those who drove the quills in the various offices; for the houses in Garden Row were all occupied by representatives of the law. The "Row" was terminated by a square patch of ground, railed in by decaying iron railings. Perhaps at a very remote period this square had been the garden; but now it was a neglected wilderness; the hunting-grounds of numberless half-wild cats, for the rank weeds and docks that overran the place gave precarious harbourage to swarms of rats and mice.

The offices of Messrs. Ranson & Reeler were in the same neglected condition as the square. The prevailing characteristics were mouldiness. Not the blue, rich mould of Stilton cheese, but the rottenness of decayed rags, old boots, and worm-eaten books. The

rooms were furnished with mouldy furniture, the dingy curtains hung in tatters, and thick coats of dust were gathered on the tops of the tables and desks. The pens and ink seemed to be more given to spluttering and blotching than in any other office. In every room deed boxes were piled up to the ceiling, like rows of tin coffins; and when these boxes were opened there issued an odour like unto that of the grave. The clerks who sat on the high stools were a mouldy race; a faded, dingy, melancholy lot. Even the boys who did the copying seemed old, dejected boys, without one spark of childhood in their weazened faces. Mouldy hats, coats, and scarfs hung on mouldy pegs; and mouldy umbrellas rested in dark, unwholesome corners. Mouldiness irretrievable and universal pervaded these dismal chambers. The very atmosphere of the place seemed to distil mildew and scatter mouldiness around. The chambers might be likened to cobwebs, and the mouldy, faded things in black who sat on the high stools to huge spiders, who spun webs all day to catch human flies. And yet in these dismal mills life and death had been meted out; human hopes raised and blighted;

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fates decided, destinies woven, and the records of all these things were contained in the tin coffins that lumbered every room.

To this place one morning, while the sun was struggling to pierce the prevailing gloom of Garden Row, there entered a tall, gentlemanly man. His face was prematurely aged, and his hair was turning from iron-grey to white. He expressed a wish to see the senior member of the firm, and on being asked for his name he handed a card bearing the inscription, "Lord Tintagel."

Not even the fact that a real live lord had entered the dusty precincts of the "chambers" could stir the clerks into activity. They were used to lords ; and it is doubtful if even a king or a queen could have moved them from their habitual, slow, and undeviating course. They were like ants. They had but one pace, and what they could not go over they went round ; but always on, on, never turning back.

Lord Tintagel had to wait. Lord Tintagel had to wait at least half-an-hour, much to his lordship's annoyance. Then he was conducted into the presence of Mr. Ranson, a

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gentleman who had exceeded by some half dozen years the allotted span, and yet was hale and hearty.

"Your firm, Mr. Ranson," said his lordship, after the usual salutation, "is celebrated for finding lost people."

"I believe we have the honour of being considered one of the first, as we are certainly one of the oldest firms in the profession which make the tracing of lost persons a special branch of their business. While for legal acumen, and an unwearying watchfulness of the interests of our clients, we, I am justified in saying, stand unrivalled."

This was Mr. Ranson's set speech in return for any compliment paid to the firm. He had given utterance to it hundreds of times without ever varying a word. It was always said with a good deal of pride, and during the time that the speaker was rubbing his eye-glasses with his silk handkerchief and fixing them in position.

"The business I wish to entrust to your care," continued his lordship, "is of a somewhat delicate nature, and it will be necessary for me to tell rather a long story in order

that you may thoroughly understand the case."

Mr. Ranson touched the bell; an old boy appeared.

"Send Mr. Winkle here, George."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Joseph Winkle is my confidential clerk," said Mr. Ranson; "he has a wonderful memory, and I always like him to be present in special cases."

"But may I suggest," answered his lordship, "that a third party will be somewhat out of place?"

"You need have no reserve in the presence of Mr. Winkle, sir. He never speaks but when spoken to. He has grown old in our service; and all cases where lost heirs to property have to be traced are left entirely in the hands of Mr. Winkle. He has peculiar aptitude for this sort of work, and we call him our *spécialité*."

Mr. Ranson laughed at what he considered a joke. A little, weazy, shaky laugh, ending with a cough. He had just sufficient time to cough himself into professional gravity again when a single knock came to the door. Then the door opened, and there entered

Joseph Winkle, who, with a slight inclination of the head to the new client, crossed the room, perched himself on the top of a high stool, in a corner, at a small desk, and resting his head on his hand, struck an attitude of profound attention.

Mr. Winkle was a sort of moral fungus that had grown up in, and derived its nourishment from, the gloom and dust and decay of Garden Row.

It would have been difficult to have guessed his age. It might have been fifty, it might have been seventy. For though his face was very wrinkled, and his head very bald, Mr. Winkle was as straight as a lath, and free from the usual accompaniments of old age. He was a little man was Mr. Winkle ; and so thin that the bony angularities of his frame were painfully conspicuous through his thin, faded, and closely-buttoned coat. The clothing of his lower limbs was deficient in length, but this deficiency was compensated for by black gaiters, fitting over his boot tops, and tightly held in their place by leather straps. His scraggy throat was encircled with several folds of a very broad and thick cravat, that painfully suggested the idea of strangulation.

Mr. Winkle's eyes were very small, and his nose very large; while the mouth was a little screwed orifice, opened regularly at certain hours of the day for the admission of food, but rarely to give utterance to words. In short, Mr. Winkle was the oracle of the firm, and when he spoke, to use his own favourite phrase, he meant something!

"If your lordship will kindly proceed, I think we are all attention now," said Mr. Ranson, as he saw that his confidential clerk, like a solemn raven, had settled on his perch.

"About five-and-twenty years ago, commenced his lordship, I was a young man. A little wild I am bound to confess, for I was engaged in the interesting process of sowing my wild oats. I had just finished my studies and taken a degree at college.

"Circumstances at this time took me to Italy, and while residing at Naples I formed the acquaintance of a lady, young, beautiful, and accomplished. Her name was Sophronia Floresto. She was highly connected. Her father was a count, and at one time had been possessed of great wealth. But during one of the many political storms which occa-

sionally desolated that country his estates had been confiscated, and he himself exiled. Sophronia and I were much together, and as a consequence learned to love each other. A sister and her mother were her only relations resident in Naples, and unlike the majority of young Italian ladies she enjoyed much freedom. Without any thought of the consequences that might ensue I pressed her to become my wife, for I believed then that I worshipped her, and without her I could never be happy.

“At first she hesitated, but after a time consented. As she professed Catholicism, while I was a Protestant, we were married secretly according to the rights of both churches. A week after the ceremony I began to repent my folly, and wish that I had not been so precipitate, for I knew that my father had cherished views with reference to my future, and he would look upon my marriage as a grave offence that could never be forgiven. I explained this to my beautiful wife, and she, so strong was her love for me, consented to remain in privacy, and never to divulge the secret of our marriage until I gave her permission. To make this

binding on her conscience, I induced her to register a vow of secrecy at the altar of her church, that on no conditions, and under no circumstances, would she make our marriage known. To be brief, the result of the union was two children, both boys. Soon after the birth of my second son, a revolution broke out in Italy, and it became unsafe for foreigners to remain. I was forced to leave hurriedly, but my wife, together with her children, remained, owing to the precarious state of her mother's health. I returned to England, and circumstances then caused me to bitterly regret my marriage. My father was anxious to arrange for my union with a wealthy and titled English lady, but I declined to listen to any proposals, on the ground that I had no desire to marry until I met a lady I could really love. This gave my father great offence, and we became thoroughly estranged. Soon afterwards he died suddenly from an attack of apoplexy, and without forgiving me.

"I returned to Italy and sought out my wife, for whom I felt that I no longer possessed any love. Not so with her. Her love for me if anything had grown stronger.

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She chided me gently for my long absence, and for not writing. I grew irritable, and told her that she was a burden to me, and stood in the way of my happiness. She was heart-broken with grief. Pressed me to avow our marriage for the children's sake. But I resolutely refused; reminded her of her vow, and hurried off to England. I never saw my wife again. I made arrangements for her to draw the sum of one hundred pounds quarterly through a Naples banker. She continued to apply for the money regularly for a year, and then suddenly ceased. I hoped then she had died, but inquiries instituted in Italy proved that this was not the case, but that she had left Naples with her children and gone to Rome. There all traces of her were lost. Six months afterwards I received a letter from her. It bore the Paris post-mark, but no address. She reproached me with cruelty, and yet every line of her letter breathed love. Said that but for her oath she would proclaim our marriage to the world for the children's sake. As it was, she was determined never to trouble me again, and she bade me farewell. That letter awakened me to a sense

of my iniquitous conduct, and I hastened to Paris to try and find my unfortunate wife, and implore her forgiveness. But my journey was fruitless. I could obtain no clue to her whereabouts, although I advertised and employed some of the ablest Parisian detectives. Years went by, and the burden of my guilt grew heavier. I tried various means to discover my lost wife and children, but without avail. I have reason to believe that she changed her name and retired into seclusion. I am determined now to make one final effort to discover their whereabouts if living, and proof of their deaths if dead, as, should I die without an heir, a very large amount of property will pass from the family. No member of that family is aware of this marriage, but I intend to brave all now, and publicly proclaim it, and advertise for my children. You will have gathered what my object is in seeking your assistance, and I shall be glad to have your opinion as to the possibility of success."

As his lordship ceased speaking Mr. Ranson coughed, wiped his glasses, and became professionally grave.

"It is five-and-twenty years, you say, since

the marriage took place," he remarked, as he dipped his quill in the ink and commenced to write.

"Yes."

"And how long since you heard from your wife?"

"About two-and-twenty years."

"Umph! a long time, and the case presents many difficulties. I would suggest, however, that it would be highly injudicious to proclaim the marriage at the present time. What is your opinion, Mr. Winkle?"

Mr. Winkle, who had never once shifted his position during his lordship's narrative, now removed his hand from his chin; placed the index finger of his left hand thoughtfully over his left eye, slowly opened his mouth, and in a husky voice said:

"Secrecy. To proclaim the marriage would be to bring down upon us a host of impostors whose claims we should have to disprove, by long and expensive processes."

The mouth closed, and Mr. Winkle rested his chin on his hand again.

"I quite agree with that," remarked Mr. Ranson.

"I shall be guided entirely by your judgment. At the same time, I should like to know what you think of our prospects of success," said Lord Tintagel.

Mr. Ranson looked at his confidential clerk, and the confidential clerk took his hand from his chin, placed his finger as before on his forehead, and made answer very cautiously :

"I think we may say that we shall not fail to gain some information."

"Of course your lordship will give us absolute power to move in the matter," said Mr. Ranson.

"Absolute power, and I authorise you to spend any reasonable amount of money, and to take any steps you may deem necessary."

"I think this is a case which, from its peculiar nature, and caution required, we must leave entirely in your hands, Mr. Winkle," said the lawyer.

"You must leave entirely in my hands," echoed the confidential clerk, thereby implying that he and he alone was the man who could take up the lost scent and follow it home, and that without it *was* left entirely

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in his hands he would fail to interest himself in it.

"And what are the first steps you propose to take?" asked his lordship.

The lawyer looked at the confidential clerk, and that gentleman made answer again :

"Make inquiries in Italy."

"What means will you employ?" said the client.

"My own tongue."

"Do I understand that you will personally undertake this search?"

"That is my intention, subject to the approval of my firm." But though Mr. Winkle said this, as he always did, he knew well enough that the firm looked to him for decision in such matters, and that decision once given, was never questioned by the firm. In short, that when Mr. Joseph Winkle said yes, the firm knew better than to say no.

"Then you will go to Italy, Mr. Winkle," said his lordship.

"I shall go to Italy, my lord."

"And, failing to elicit anything particular there?"

"I shall go to Rome."

"And then?"

"To Paris. For the rest, shall be guided by circumstances."

"Then should you be successful, Mr. Winkle," said Lord Tintagel, "I shall have very great pleasure in acknowledging your services in a most substantial manner, apart from all professional charges."

"I thank your lordship," made answer Mr. Joseph Winkle. "Your lordship may rest assured that I shall endeavour to do justice to you and credit to the firm I have the honour to represent. Will you furnish me with the name of the bankers in Naples who were authorised to pay the money to your wife?"

"Borcaccio and Garcia."

"Thank you."

Mr. Winkle having said his say, and feeling that his duty had ended, dropped from his perch, and with a stiff bow to his lordship, left the room.

"I think, my lord," remarked the lawyer, when the clerk had left, "I think, my lord, that this business could not have got into better hands than those of Mr. Winkle. It

is very seldom that he volunteers to go abroad now. When he was younger, he used to do all our foreign business, but of late years has pleaded his age as an excuse for not travelling. I therefore think that the unusual interest he manifests in your lordship's case augurs well. Joseph Winkle is like a well-bred foxhound, when once he gets on the scent it must be something extraordinary that will cause him to lose it."

"I sincerely hope he may be successful," his lordship said as he rose to go.

"I hope so," answered the lawyer. "I think I may venture to say that if your lordship's children are alive Mr. Winkle will discover them."

As Lord Tintagel drove away from Garden Row, the confidential clerk was busy committing to paper the particulars of the case of the lost children, for whom he would immediately commence a search, the end whereof no man could see.

CHAPTER VII.

NORMAN DOUGLAS TAKES A DOWNWARD STEP.

WHEN Norman Douglas turned into his room again, after having seen Marie Corvisart out, he mused upon the best course to pursue. The news imparted was startling in the extreme, and though he held in his possession the marriage certificate and Edith's letter, he found it difficult to realise the fact that his cousin was really the wife of John Ranleagh. He threw himself into an easy-chair, and pondered upon the unwelcome intelligence, until it almost took a bodily shape and appeared as a jeering phantom—as a something that mocked him, and cried, “Ah, ah, you are foiled ! you the scion of a great and ancient house, you the

soldier and the gentleman, foiled by a plebeian and a servant !”

He sprang from the chair and paced the room with rapid strides, his whole nature undergoing a transformation the while, as the insidious devil jealousy gradually possessed him.

“What shall I do ?” he asked ; “ what will the consequences be if I lay the matter before my uncle ? he can but turn the girl out, and this Ranleagh will laugh as he thinks how easily he has been able to obtain a high-born wife. Why should my uncle know it at all ?” He asked the latter question with strange significance, as if out of the inner depths of his consciousness there had been evolved some terrible idea, shapeless and confused as yet, but withal a deadly seed, so to speak, that if nourished would grow until it bore fruit—that should emit a poison more fatal than the awful upas tree, since it would be capable of slaying the soul. The man was positively startled by his own words, so that he crossed to a sideboard and poured out a wine-glassful of neat brandy, and this he drained at a draught. Then he went to the French window, for the room was sultry

and he was hot and restless. As the night air sighed around him it seemed to his heated imagination to repeat the parting words of the strange woman who had but just now left, "I should like to kill him," and even the rustling leaves echoed them.

Who is there who in the solemn hours of night has stood in the country gazing out into the darkness, and not felt impressed with a strange sense of the mystery of all that surrounds him? The sighing of the wind as it sweeps by sounds like the mournful wail of some suffering soul. There are voices abroad—voices that speak in no known language, and yet every heart can interpret them. The world of the night is so different to the world of the day, a thousand things that hide their heads when the sun shines creep forth when the mantle of darkness has covered the earth. The flutter of a bird's wing, the stir of a leaf, the whirr of an insect have the same effect on one's nerves that a heavy blow struck on a table would have on the strings of a well-strung harp standing in the same room. And all these things are intensified a hundredfold when the nerves are stretched to the highest

tension by unusual excitement. This was the case with Douglas as he stood there passing his hand through his hair and drinking in the cool and refreshing breeze. The branches as they waved before his eyes seemed spectral. The trees assumed the figures of gigantic beings, and the chirping of a grass cricket was so intensified as to be positively awing. He turned into the room again, and once more threw himself into the chair, drawing it up to the table, and resting his head upon his hands. In a little while he took Edith's letter and the certificate from his pocket and read them word for word. According to the certificate the marriage had been solemnised at a church in a north-east suburb of London, between Edith Percy—her mother's maiden name—and John Ranleagh; and as Norman read, the words burned into his brain.

The shapeless idea began to take shape, and he mused, "Can all traces of this marriage be destroyed? I have heard of a register of a marriage being surreptitiously abstracted from the books of a church. Supposing I could get this done, would that be effectual? No! not without the husband could be removed. That is a difficulty not

so easily effected. I should like to conquer this cousin of mine : to break her proud spirit. But how am I to do it ? If I could but see the handwriting of this fellow I might try a stratagem. I used to be good at imitating caligraphy. No doubt there will be some specimens of his writing in the books in the office. I will see at any rate."

He rose and took the lamp from the table, and made his way through the great hall, and along a passage at the end of which was a large room, used by Mr. Dudley as a private office. The door was unlocked, and Douglas passed in. There was a bewildering assortment of ledgers and account-books ; some of them dating back scores of years. He was well acquainted with the place, for he had often been here with his uncle, and so he had no difficulty in finding one of the books which Ranleagh, in his capacity as under-steward, had charge of. He turned over the leaves hurriedly, and at last came to a statement of accounts signed by John Ranleagh. This was what Norman wanted. He studied the character of the writing well. There was no peculiarity or eccentricity in it. It was a plain, neat, clerkly hand. He took out his

pocket-book and pencil, and made several extracts, so nearly imitating the writing that it would have been difficult to have told that both manuscripts were not written by one and the same hand. Having finished his task he restored the account-book to its place, and returned to his room.

“Upon my word I don’t exactly see how I am to utilise the material I have collected,” he murmured, as he sunk into a chair, and played with a gold pencil-case that he held in his hand. “Umph! it’s a difficult matter; and yet I must do something. If I could make sure that this Ranleagh would leave the neighbourhood altogether, I would write a letter to Edith, as if coming from her low-bred husband, that would cure her for ever of her mad infatuation. But I am in an awkward position. I must not compromise myself. As they are legally married they can only be separated by stratagem. If the marriage was known, my uncle would fly into a passion and turn Edith out of doors. She would care little for that, but would at once join her husband. Scandal would have a nice fling at the family, and I should become the laughing-stock of all my friends. These

things must not be, shall not be, at least if it is in my power to prevent them, and I think it is, though at present I must confess I do not see very clearly the course I am to pursue. In this cold-blooded and law-ridden country, where it is almost necessary to have an Act of Parliament to legalise smoking on a Sunday, it does not do to take the law into one's own hand. If I were on the Continent, and a gentleman insulted me, I could challenge him; and if a ruffian like this plebeian vagabond were to dare to outrage the honour of a noble family, as this fellow has done, I could horsewhip him within an inch of his life, or have him shot down like a mangey dog. But here it is another matter; and yet it almost makes one feel inclined to take the law in his own hands, and shoot the fellow. Pshaw! what am I talking about? Such carrion wouldn't be worth the powder, to say nothing of the risk. No, no. I must try some other means. Let me see now"—he drew toward him a small writing-desk and inkstand, and, spreading out some paper, he prepared to write—"let me see," he continued musingly, and tapping his forehead with his fingers. "I think it is pretty sure that Edith won't

see this precious husband of hers in the morning. She will, of course, suppose that he has received her letter and the certificate she forwarded by Marie Corvisart. In return she must receive a letter from him written by me. How shall I word it, now ?

“MY DEAR EDITH,

“Your letter and certificate have been safely conveyed to me by Marie Corvisart. I must confess that I was not prepared for the course you have taken, and I am surprised and hurt, for I can draw but one inference from your conduct, and that is that you regret our marriage, and your heart's desire is now that an unbridgeable gulf may be placed between us. My first impulse was to claim my legal rights and insist upon you sharing my lot, but this was only an impulse. It passed at once, and I saw, on reflection, that such a course could only lead to misery for us both, and a broken life has no charms for me. I take what I deem the nobler course. I sever the bond that binds us. What the future may have in store for you I know not. You have made a fatal error. You can atone for it when I am gone. Our

paths now lie widely apart. We must not meet again. I gratify your desire and go away for ever. Farewell.

“JOHN RANLEAGH.”

When Douglas had finished this letter he read it over two or three times, and compared the writing with the notes he had made from the books in the office. The resemblance between the two hands was complete, and it would have defied the powers of an expert to have detected that they were not written by the same person.

“I think that will do,” he murmured, as he folded the letter up and put it into an envelope, which he addressed to Edith. “But stay,” he suddenly exclaimed, “I am putting the cart before the horse. I must make assurance doubly sure. Ranleagh must receive a letter from Edith, also written by me, for it will never do to send the one she gave to Marie. Something laconic and decisive is what is required.” He took out Edith’s letter and studied the formation of the writing for a little while, then he indited the following, the resemblance in the two writings being remarkable :—

“DEAR JOHN,

“If you have one atom of pity or love for me go away without the loss of a moment before all is known. My cousin was a witness of our meeting in your cottage to-night. After I returned to the house, I had a terrible scene with my father and aunt in the library. Of course they do not know of our marriage, nor must not under any circumstances. I think I must have been mad when I consented to become your wife. I was infatuated, blinded, and now when it is too late I see my folly. But if your nature is not dead to all pity, release me from this bond, so far as you can, by going to the extreme ends of the earth—anywhere, so that the contingency of a chance meeting between us may be rendered as remote as possible. One thing I most solemnly assert. If you attempt to claim me as your wife, I will not survive the disgrace an hour. My mind is made up on this point, and nothing can alter my determination. This end would be the penalty of my mad folly. We were both to blame, but what reparation you can make do, and rest assured I will always think of you with pity and respect.

“Yours unhappily, EDITH.”

He smiled as he finished perusing this letter, and murmured, "I think that will do capitally. If these two letters have not the desired effect, well then I have less tact than I give myself credit for. As for the rest, it must be left to the chapter of accidents. The fellow may die; who knows, being one of the namby-pamby sort, it is just possible he might blow his own brains out. Many a fellow has done so for a less disappointment. But supposing my scheme miscarries? Umph! that will be awkward, and place me in a delicate position. The probable gains, however, are worth the risks, and I'll run them."

Having come to this conclusion, he sealed up both letters and put them safely into his pocket-book. Then he turned down the lamp, and walked to the door. The sultriness of the atmosphere was oppressive, and he stood for some time gazing abstractedly into the darkness.

"I feel strangely upset," he murmured. "My brain is excited, and I must have a stroll before I can hope to get any sleep."

He turned back into the room, lit a cigar, took up a heavy walking-stick, put on his hat, and went out.

He strolled down the avenue for some distance until he reached a small stile from which a path ran through a game preserve. He leant on the stile, and puffed his cigar in a restless kind of way. He struggled hard with his feelings, for like all men who, for the first time, lend themselves to dishonourable actions, he felt dissatisfied with himself. His conscience told him he was wrong, though he tried hard to argue himself into a belief that he was justified in some measure in the course he was taking. In a little while he was startled from his reverie by voices. They evidently came from two men who were holding a conversation in an undertone in the wood. Norman's first impulse was to get over the stile and discover who the intruders were, but on second thoughts he decided that it would be better to wait for a few minutes. He had not to wait long. A startled pheasant suddenly rose in the air, with a whirr and a scream, and almost at the same moment one of the men uttered an oath. Norman guessed at once that the fellows were poachers.

Grasping his stick firmly he got over the stile and advanced a few paces very cauti-

ously into the wood, and in the direction from whence the sounds proceeded. His foot, however, caught in a mass of tangled undergrowth, which caused him to trip, and the noise made by the dried sticks alarmed the men, who started up within a few yards of where Norman had fallen. He sprang to his feet in an instant, and rushing forward seized one of the men, while the other one fled. And the man whom Douglas had captured abused his companion in a volley of oaths for his cowardice in running away.

"You scoundrel!" cried Douglas, as he firmly grasped the fellow by the collar, and held his stick over his head in a menacing manner, "what are you doing here? I need scarcely ask the question though, for I see by your nets that your object is to trap Mr. Dudley's game."

The man was very short and thin, and was powerless in the hands of his captor.

"Look here, sir," he managed to stammer, "you needn't throttle me. I give in because I am no match for you. If yon mate of mine hadn't been such a cur I might have got away, but I'm beaten and there's an end of it. Do what you like with me."

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There was something in the man's manner, together with his submission, that rather surprised Norman, so that he released his hold, but kept his eyes fixed upon the fellow, for the struggling light of the early morning rendered things visible.

"You must come with me," said Douglas threateningly, "and I will put you in safe keeping till the morning."

"All right, sir, I'm willing to go," the man answered. "But what are you going to charge me with?"

"Trespassing in pursuit of game."

"Well, you may think that's a crime, but I don't. It is a greater crime for you to shut these birds and hares up. I served her Majesty as long as I could, and then when they kicked me out, they gave me a pension of three shillings a week. That's not enough to keep body and soul together, and, as I can't get work, I must do something for a living."

"You have been in the army then?" Douglas answered in astonishment.

"Yes, sir, I was in the — regiment, and was stationed in Jamaica for four years. I was wounded with a musket ball in the chest

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during the riots, and was sent home and discharged."

A few other questions convinced Douglas that the man was speaking the truth, and his manner changed towards his captive.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Richard Carruthers, sir."

"I've heard of you. You bear a very bad character in the village, and I believe you have been convicted several times for poaching on my uncle's preserves."

"Your uncle, sir. Then you are Captain Douglas," and the man made a military salute. "Then, sir, don't be hard on one as has served his country faithfully. I am not half as bad as people say I am. But give a dog a bad name, sir, and it sticks to him."

"I am not disposed to be hard with you," Norman answered. "And on consideration of your having been a soldier, I am strongly inclined to give you one more chance of bettering yourself."

"Indeed, sir, you will never regret it," the man answered with great earnestness. "A helping hand just now would make a different chap of me."

Douglas was thoughtful for a few minutes, then he asked,

“Who is your companion?”

“He’s a stranger in the neighbourhood, sir. He comes from the other side of Leeds. But he is a great cur, and would sell his father for a pint of beer.”

“And where do you live, Richard?”

“Just the other side of the two-acre field there, sir, down by the mill-stream. I’ve got a small hut there, which Mr. Robinson, the owner of the mill, lets me have cheap.”

“I know the place. Now look here, Carruthers, I’ll let you go home if you promise me that you will not trespass here any more.”

“I make that promise, sir, and thank you very much.”

“I may be inclined,” continued Douglas, “to do something more for you. Now get away as fast as you can.”

“You are the best-hearted gentleman, sir, I’ve met for a long time. And you’ll find, sir, that I’m not ungrateful. I am your humble servant, sir, in anything you like to bid me do. Good-night, sir.”

The man moved away, and Douglas re-

turned to the stile and seated himself on the step.

“ I wonder if I could make this fellow useful in any way,” he mused. “ He might be able to find out for me what John Ranleagh’s intentions are. I’ve a good mind to avail myself of the fellow’s services. I will too.”

As he came to this determination he rose from his seat and went off in the direction Carruthers had taken.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY HAS GONE NEVER
TO RETURN.

DOUGLAS hurried along, but did not overtake Carruthers. When he had cleared the wood he stood and deliberated as to whether he should follow him any farther, and, as he so stood, he rapidly reviewed the events of the last few hours. The more he dwelt upon the fact of his cousin's marriage with his uncle's servant, the more exasperated he became.

"This fellow has been guilty of a cowardly act," he mused. "He has used his man's influence to triumph over the woman's weakness; therefore, he is morally guilty of an act of treachery. The law has no punishment for this sort of thing. He has nothing

to lose, but all to win by his marriage. But my family suffer, are degraded, dragged into the mud by the fellow's dastardly conduct. In Italy or Spain such disgrace might be avoided by a very summary proceeding, but here it is another matter. Some diplomacy is required. Possibly a sum of money might induce him to go away and never turn up again, but that course would not set Edith free. She is still a wife while he lives. While he lives," he repeated, and he looked round almost nervously, as though his own words had startled him. The first flush of morning was in the sky, and the birds were just beginning to proclaim that the darkness had fled, and a new day was dawning over the earth. The man stood there pale and agitated. His heart was full of bitterness. Neither his position nor education were strong enough to keep down the human passions which rose up, until the heart's "dumb voice" cried out, "John Ranleagh, I hate you." He bit his lip and clutched his stick nervously, as though he felt that if his enemy had stood there before him at that moment he would have beaten him down until he lay on the ground a corpse. "While

he lives," he murmured again, as though the words had somehow fascinated him, were drawing him away from the good, on towards the bad. "Why should he live?" he asked with measured slowness. Marie Corvisart said she would like to kill him. If he were dead—if *he were dead*, Edith would no longer be a wife. Bah, I am a fool. I am allowing my feelings to override my discretion. In fair fight I could kill a man without any compunction, but to slay a fellow in cold blood—ugh! the idea is unpleasant. No, no, I must get him away. That is the only alternative. I must buy him, make a slave of him with money. Such fellows as he can always be bought for a price. This Carruthers may aid me. I will try it at any rate. I can but fail.

A rapid walk soon took him across the two acre field, and he reached the mill stream. An old and picturesque mill stood upon its banks. The great water wheel was revolving very slowly, and the water as it flowed away with a musical sound looked crimson in the morning light.

Douglas peered cautiously round to see that no one was about. But the windows and

doors of the mill were closed, and no living soul was in sight. A dilapidated hut stood before him. It had formerly been a cow-shed, but Carruthers had been allowed to inhabit it, and he had put a window in and built a door, and trained some creepers up the sides, so that as it stood out boldly defined against the sky, it looked picturesque and snug. Douglas approached the cottage, and knocked. But he had to knock several times before the door was opened.

"Not very hospitable to keep a visitor so long outside," he said as Carruthers appeared.

"I beg your pardon, sir," answered the man in astonishment, as he made a military salute, and stared at his visitor as though he could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I don't suppose you did. But I want to have a few words with you. Can I come in?"

"Certainly, sir, if you don't mind the rough place."

"I didn't come to see your place, but you," was the answer; and as Douglas walked into the cottage, the man closed the door, and barred it with a heavy wooden bar.

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A partition divided the hut into two compartments. Three or four broken chairs and an old table comprised the furniture of the room in which Douglas found himself.

"You said just now that you would serve me if you could," he commenced, as he seated himself on one of the chairs, and his listener stood in an attitude of "attention."

"I did, sir, and if there is anything I can do, I don't care what it is, I am open to do it."

"We will see," Douglas answered. "It appears to me, now, that you are a kind of social outcast, and that any position would be better than the one you now occupy."

"Indeed it would. But when a fellow has been knocked down as I have, what can he do? I don't know any trade, and nobody will give me work, excepting now and again when I get an odd job at gardening, and—"

"Well, well, never mind a rigmarol," Douglas interrupted impatiently. "I know your position and the difficulties that surround you. I am willing to do something for you, but I shall want you to do something in return." The man's face brightened. It was

by no means a bad or brutal face, though it was tanned and scarred with exposure to the weather at all hours, and it was a little bloated with dissipation. As he listened to his visitor's words, his eyes sparkled, and they seemed to express a yearning for a better life. Circumstances had made Carruthers what he was, for he was not naturally of a hardened disposition. He had, after spending the best years of his life as a soldier, returned to his native village to find all his relations gone away or dead. The miserable pittance allowed him by Government was not sufficient to provide him even with dry bread, and as many of his class do, he became a night prowler, until every man's hand seemed against him. And though he knew that to trespass in search of game was an offence against the law, he believed, as thousands of others do, that it was a cruel and unjust law that made it so. And his creed was that he had an equal right with the rich to take a share of the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. Carruthers' creed was right; and the day is coming when it will be recognised. At that moment all the good in his nature might have been brought to the surface, and

the man would have kissed the hand that would have dragged him out of the slough, and placed him in a position so that he might have stood amongst men an honest man. Douglas could have saved him. It was the golden opportunity. Good and evil stood facing each other. The weight of a straw would give the man to either one or the other. But Douglas had not come with any philanthropic intentions. His motives were purely selfish; Carruthers was nothing to him. Chance had thrown him in his way, and he saw that he might be useful. There was nothing beyond this. The man's moral welfare was about the last thing he thought of—or rather he did not think of it at all.

“What can I do for you, sir?” the man asked anxiously, as Douglas paused.

“First of all, do you know how to keep your own counsel?”

“I think I do.”

“You have been a soldier, used to discipline, and know that it is a soldier's duty, when commanded, to be silent; to be silent even at the peril of his life.”

“I know that also.”

— “Very well then, I am going to take you into my service on one condition.”

“Name it,” cried his listener eagerly.

“That you will keep secret whatever passes between you and me. That at the peril of your life you will never breathe to living soul a syllable of anything I may impart to you.”

The man drew himself up straight and soldierly, and in a firm voice he answered :

“I don’t think I have altogether forgotten my duty, sir, to a superior officer. You will find me a most obedient servant ; and I will protect your interests with my life.” He said this a little proudly, and the grime on his face could not hide the joy that was there, as in imagination he saw a better course opening out before him.

“That is good,” Douglas answered. “I want you to become a sort of spy.”

In an instant the expression on his listener’s face changed. The goodness went out. The golden opportunity had gone never to return again. Douglas might have made him good, but he had confirmed his badness.

“I understand, sir. Something dirty,”

Carruthers replied, with a cunning leer, and feeling now that the barrier between him and his new master was a very narrow one indeed.

"Well, not exactly," said Douglas, with some severity. "You have no business to use such a term as that."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I won't offend again."

"Well, well; we won't split straws. You are probably acquainted with a person in the employ of Mr. Dudley known as John Ranleagh?"

Carruthers' face darkened, and a malicious look came into it as he replied :

"I should think I was : my last conviction was entirely owing to Ranleagh."

"Then I can understand that you bear him no very great love?"

"No," was the monosyllabic answer, and the man stood stiff and attentive again.

"This fellow," Douglas proceeded, "has presumed upon the opportunities which he has had, to make advances to Miss Dudley"—he did not deem it prudent to mention about the marriage—"and I am sorry to say that he has so far made an impression on the

lady that she is inclined to forget her duty to her parents for the sake of this plebeian lover. Now, if the influence was removed the infatuation might wear off. Of course, we can discharge Ranleagh, but we cannot compel him to leave the village. I am inclined to try and purchase his silence and obedience; but, should I fail, you can perhaps aid me in suggesting some scheme to get him away. Should we be successful in that, it will be your duty to follow him, and never lose sight of him, but keep me well posted up in his movements; and, should he die, you would have to supply me immediately with indisputable proofs of his death. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," answered the other thoughtfully. There was a pause. Douglas seemed to wait for Carruthers to speak, but he merely said, "I await your orders, sir."

"Do you think now you can induce Ranleagh to be here in your cottage to-night at, say eight o'clock, to meet me. Stay, a thought strikes me; to get over any objections he might raise, suppose you say that Miss Edith promised to meet him here."

Douglas blushed scarlet as he made this

suggestion, and he could not disguise his confusion. For however innately bad he might be he was yet young in dishonourable actions.

"I think I can manage it," Carruthers answered, "and when once he is here it might not be a very difficult matter to get rid of him."

"What do you mean?" asked Douglas sharply.

"Nothing," the other answered equally sharp.

"You did mean something. Your words were significant."

"Well, I don't exactly see why there should be any beating about the bush. I am told that about ten years ago one of Mr. Dudley's gamekeepers, who had given evidence against some chaps who had been caught in a preserve, was crossing the little bridge that spans the stream just above the mill. It happened to be a stormy night, and the stream was swollen. The gamekeeper's body was found next morning frightfully mutilated and jammed in the spokes of the wheel. 'Found drowned' was the verdict, but I have heard some strange rumours about how that chap came to be drowned."

Carruthers told the story with a good deal of nonchalance, and Douglas watched him from under his eyebrows, and when he ceased speaking, Norman said somewhat petulantly :

“ But what has this got to do with Ranleagh ?”

“ Nothing, only if the mill stream could drown a gamekeeper it could drown a steward as well.”

Douglas rose to his feet. He was pale now, and his lips trembled a little. He moved quite close to Carruthers, and said as sternly as he could :

“ Look here, don’t you ever hint at such a thing again.”

“ I won’t, sir ;” and the man made a salute, and stood as firmly as if he had been carved out of stone.

“ I shall be here at eight o’clock to-night. You must by some means or other induce Ranleagh to come. The rest leave to me. Good morning.”

“ Good morning, sir.”

Douglas hurried away across the field and was soon lost in the wood ; and as Carruthers turned into his cottage again, he muttered,

“I think this will be a good day’s work for me. I don’t much care what I do so long as I can get clear of this infernal place. But good or bad, Dick Carruthers knows how to keep his own counsel.”

He passed into the inner apartment, and divesting himself of his boots and coat, he threw himself on to a heap of straw, and was soon locked in sound sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

IF THERE WERE NO SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS, IT
WOULD BE A SORRY WORLD INDEED.

WHEN Douglas reached his room he laid down upon his bed for a little while, for he was tired and jaded. But sleep refused to visit his eyes. A dozen conflicting emotions tortured him. At one moment he felt strongly inclined to rise, and boldly tell his uncle all, and at the next he reproached himself for being weak and vacillating.

"I think I could have forgiven her any indiscrimination she might have been guilty of," he thought, "but the fact of her having thrown herself away upon this low-bred hound is unbearable. She must have been mad, for no woman in her sane senses could have been

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guilty of such an act of indiscretion. Such matches always bring deadly repentance. In a very short time she will realise the degraded position she has placed herself in, and then bitterness and recklessness will follow, when she finds how irrevocably the law has tied her to her plebeian husband. In removing him out of the way now, am I not serving her, serving all the family, and doing an act of good? I believe that I am, and that the time will come when she will thank me for the part I play."

Arguing thus with himself he rose from the bed, and having performed his toilet he descended to the breakfast-room.

"You are late this morning, Norman," said his uncle. "You haven't been ill I hope," seeing how pale and fagged his nephew looked.

"Well, no, not exactly ill, but I have been troubled and anxious and couldn't sleep. The discovery I have unhappily made with reference to my cousin is well calculated to make us all anxious."

"True, true," his uncle answered thoughtfully. "But if we can only prevent the scandal from spreading I do not think the matter is so

serious after all. You see Edith has been kept very secluded. I fear I have been too strict in this respect. This Ranleagh has often been her only companion for days together. He is agreeable and attractive in his manner, so really, after all, some allowance must be made for your cousin. When Ranleagh has gone I have no doubt the girl will come to her senses, and your marriage shall take place as soon as it can be arranged."

Mr. Dudley spoke hopefully, but Norman knew how impossible such a marriage was. His blood almost boiled with indignation and wounded pride, and he was half tempted to tell his uncle that Edith was a wife already. But he conquered the feeling as he remembered that the only result of such a communication would be, that Mr. Dudley would turn his daughter away, and the scandal would spread with the rapidity of wildfire, while such a course might be far from objectionable to Edith and her husband. Tact and strategy he hoped might effect much, whereas open warfare could only result in his own defeat.

"Ranleagh and my cousin have been cunning enough to hoodwink everybody else," he thought, "and I must meet them

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with their own weapons, cunning and secrecy. What do you purpose doing?" he asked, suddenly turning to his uncle.

"You mean with reference to this wretched affair?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have sent word to Ranleagh that I wish to see him after breakfast. I shall pay him his wages and despatch him about his business. As for Edith, she must go away for some time. You may depend upon it that in a very short time the affair will be almost forgotten, and your cousin will reproach herself for her folly. This is by no means an isolated case you know. Girls are so stupid and changeable, especially when left so much to their own resources as Edith has been."

"I sincerely hope, sir," Norman answered, "that you will not find the affair any more serious than you anticipate now."

"What do you mean?" his uncle asked hurriedly, and pausing in the act of shelling an egg, while a look of alarm flitted across his face. "Surely you have no reason to think——"

"You mistake me," Douglas said quickly, startled himself at the look on his uncle's face,

and no longer having the slightest doubt how terrible the consequences would be if Mr. Dudley were to know all. "You mistake my meaning altogether," he continued. "What I meant to say was that these young people may have become so used to each other that Edith will not readily forget him."

"Oh, nonsense; we mustn't think that;" and Mr. Dudley tried to treat the matter lightly, but it was evident that the vague hint thrown out by his nephew had affected him far more than he cared to show. When the breakfast was ended Mr. Dudley retired to his office, and Norman took the opportunity of sending a message to Marie Corvisart that he wished to see her. The maid soon obeyed the summons. She was pale, but beyond that she bore no trace of the mental excitement she had gone through the previous night.

"How is your mistress this morning, Marie?" he asked.

"She is very much unwell, Monsieur Douglas, and has been crying all night."

"I am sorry to hear that. But we have no time to waste in words. I want you to go down with all speed to John Ranleagh's

cottage and deliver this letter, and this one you will give to Miss Edith when you return."

He handed the two letters to Marie, which he himself had penned, and as she took them her white teeth were revealed by the sinister smile that played about her mouth.

"These letters you have written, Monsieur Douglas?" she asked in a whisper, as she placed the two missives in her bosom.

"Yes, yes," he answered, in confusion, and averting his face from the woman's piercing gaze. "It is the best plan I could think of."

"That is good. But what of mees? Will she see him again?"

"No; I think not."

"He will go away. Your letter will send him!"

"Yes."

"Will he come back any more?"

"I hope not."

"Pah, he should be dead."

With a look of scorn upon her face she turned round and left the room, and as Norman watched her a few minutes later hurrying down the carriage drive, in the direction

of Ranleagh's cottage, he muttered to himself:

"That woman is a fiend, and decidedly dangerous. I must be cautious in my dealings with her."

The interview between Mr. Dudley and Ranleagh was brief. Mr. Dudley was not a man of many words. He was peremptory in his order for John to immediately leave his service. Ranleagh was prepared for this from what Edith told him on the previous evening. Mr. Dudley had accused him of taking a dishonourable advantage of his position, and though John had felt this reproach keenly he had made no reply, for he was under a solemn promise to Edith never to divulge the secret until she gave him permission. He felt that his lips were sealed, and that he must bear reproach and ignominy without a murmur.

"I regret, sir," he said to Mr. Dudley, "that my services with you should terminate so abruptly and unpleasantly. My connection with your house, however, may be renewed some day with equal abruptness. I shall not cease to hope that, humble as I am, I may yet have the honour of calling your

daughter by the name of wife. In the meantime I shall never do anything that would bring a blush to her cheeks or cause me any regret."

Mr. Dudley grew very red in the face as John said this, and his feeling of indignation almost prevented him speaking, but he did manage to exclaim :

"This is audacity, sir, and the high opinion I have had of you is fast giving place to one of disgust. After all I have done for you it is a bad return to try and rob me of my child, and bring disgrace upon my house."

"I have yet to learn, Mr. Dudley, that my connection would be a disgrace; however, I have no desire to quibble. I am quite content to leave the affair to time and chance. If your daughter and I love each other there should be no reason why we should be kept apart, excepting the one which pride itself suggests."

"You are talking nonsense, sir, empty nonsense," his master exclaimed with passion. "If there were no social distinction in the world, it would be a sorry world indeed. You have a right to recognise and respect the high estate to which my daughter has

been born, and I have a perfect right to protect her from being dragged down in the scale by an unequal marriage. I have nothing to say against your personal character. You may be all that you should be, but your humble origin and poverty are insurmountable barriers, at least so far as marriage with my daughter is concerned. Seek for a worthy woman in your own sphere, and you will gain happiness."

"Then you will give me no hope with reference to your daughter?"

"None. You have no right to ask it."

"Upon that point, sir, you are resolute?"

"Yes. Nothing can alter my determination."

"Further discussion then, Mr. Dudley, will simply be waste of time and words. I thank you for your good opinion of me, and for the many services I have received at your hands. I wish you good-bye, sir."

John Ranleagh sighed heavily as he went out. One word, one pressure of the hand, one kiss from the wife he loved, would have given him hope and heart. But he must leave without them, was leaving now, an out-cast, as it were. With no fixed purpose, no

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goal in view, he felt that the world was before him; and until the vow of secrecy was removed from his lips, he could not claim his wife unless he broke his word of honour, and that he would not do. He felt almost callous as he saw that he must for ever leave the place where he had known so much happiness. It had been a home to him, filled with loving and tender associations that must be severed now, and the future that lay before him appeared dark and loveless.

When he reached his cottage he was surprised to find Richard Carruthers waiting at the garden gate.

"Well, Dick, what are you doing here?" he asked, trying to conceal his annoyance and astonishment.

"I have got a message for you," the man answered.

"A message for me?"

"Yes; from the young lady up at the hall."

"Who do you mean?" asked John eagerly, his astonishment increasing.

"Why, who should I mean? There is only one young lady there."

"But how is it you are the bearer of a message?" John asked with some confusion

and annoyance, for he was inclined to think that the news of his expulsion had by some means leaked out, and Dick was making a fool of him.

"Why shouldn't I bring a message?" the man retorted; "am I not good enough? Well, I've got a message, that's all; and if you don't like to receive it, you are not bound to. At any rate, I don't care whether you do or not."

"There, there, don't get cross, Dick. I didn't mean to offend you. What is this message?"

"It is from Miss Edith. She wants to see you to-night."

The colour mounted to John's face, and his confusion increased. Pleasure and annoyance were mingled. Pleasure at the thought of seeing her, and annoyance that the man before him should have been the bearer of the message.

"How is it that she commissioned you to bring this message?" he asked.

Dick sneered as he replied:

"Why not I as well as any one else? Miss Edith has always been kind to me, and chance happened to place me in her way

early this morning. She asked me to let her meet you to-night at eight o'clock in my cottage. So if you like to come the place is at your disposal. That is all I have to say, and I've done my errand; so I wish you good-morning."

Carruthers made a movement as if about to go away, but John caught his arm and detained him.

"You are sure you are not playing with me, Dick?" he asked, as he peered into the face of the man he held.

Dick seemed annoyed, and, as he released his arm from John's grasp, he said in a tone of injured innocence:

"If you don't like to believe me you have the other alternative. It is rather a bad return for the trouble I have taken to come up here. However, I've done my part. You can come or not as you think proper."

As Carruthers walked away, John stood in doubt as to what course to pursue. It seemed so improbable that Edith should have made such an assignation through Carruthers. And yet how could the man have planned the thing himself? This was John's query, as he turned into his cottage, and it set all doubt

at rest; for it seemed impossible, so Ranleagh thought, that Dick could have invented the story, and he determined to be there to time.

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE.

RANLEAGH'S preparations for departure are soon made. His little household treasures are gathered up, and safely packed away. His cottage has been to him a place full of peace and happiness. But all is over now, and he must cast himself upon the stream of events, to hurry on wherever chance may lead him. He has no relations, not a living soul in the world, to his knowledge, with whom he can claim kindredship. He determines to go to London. Why, he does not exactly know; only it is a big place, and for a time he may lose his identity there, until he decides upon his future course of action.

It was in London that his marriage with

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Edith had taken place. He and Marie Corvisart had accompanied their mistress to the Metropolis ; and it had been arranged between him and Miss Dudley that the opportunity should be taken to unite themselves to each other. It was a rash and foolish step ; but they were young and enthusiastic and did not stop to calculate consequences. They loved each other, Edith had no hope of obtaining her father's consent, and so, yielding to the entreaties of her lover, she consented to become his wife, but made it a binding condition that he should never divulge the secret until she gave him permission.

Soon after arrival in London they had completed all their arrangements, and one day Marie Corvisart was sent away to make some purchases, and during her absence Miss Dudley became Mrs. Ranleagh. But she was wife only in name, for, according to the condition, they were mistress and servant again the moment they left the church.

John had often felt strongly tempted since to claim his wife ; but, as he remembered how he had influenced her, almost coerced her to the step, his high sense of honour rebelled against any violation of the promise he had

made, and he felt now as strongly bound by that promise as if he had taken an oath in the most solemn and sacred manner.

"To claim her now," he mused, as he busied himself with packing up his things, "would be to bring misery and ruin upon us both. Her father would assuredly turn her out of doors penniless, and I have no means of my own. I must better my position; and will. But until I have done that I must wait, however hard it may be to do so." It was a good resolution he made, and the man's nature was strong and noble enough to keep it.

John was disturbed in his musings by a knock at the door, and on opening the door he was astonished to find his visitor was Marie Corvisart. He was somewhat more than astonished. He was confused. For he could scarcely help the thought that the woman who stood before him was a victim to his unfaithfulness. There was no other word for it. His connection with Marie had been his one great error. It was a foolish dream from which he soon awoke, but not before he had done much harm. He had breathed love into the woman's ears, and what should have been a softening influence

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had now become a destroying passion—that is, so far as she was concerned.

There was nothing absolutely craven in John's nature. He was bold and heroic when circumstances necessitated heroism. But that is a bold man indeed who can gaze into the face of the woman he has wronged, without some inward shrinking and a strong desire to rush away and hide from the reproachful looks.

"Why, Marie!" he exclaimed, when he had recovered his self-possession a little, "I did not expect to see you here."

Her face was very pale, and she ground her teeth with mingled passion and defiance.

"I am not welcome," she answered in her broken English. "It is not necessary that you should tell me so, I can read it in your looks. But I must come in—I have a mission."

He half hesitated for a moment about admitting her, but she walked boldly into the passage, and so he closed the door, and led the way into the parlour.

"You will pardon me, Marie," he said softly, "but don't you think for both our

sakes we had better part before bitter words, that can only bring regret, are uttered."

"Bah!" she fairly hissed, "you are a coward. I am come here on an errand, or I should not have come at all. Read that."

As she spoke she flung the letter of which she was the bearer down on the table, and then she narrowly scrutinised his features.

He looked at the superscription on the envelope, and recognising Edith's hand, he hurriedly caught the letter up, and was about to put it in his pocket, but Marie stopped him.

"Read it!" she exclaimed authoritatively. "It is from her. She has told me you have talked love to her. You should have much anxiety to know what she writes. I can wait till you have done."

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he obeyed his visitor's command, and tore open the envelope. As he perused the letter Marie's eyes never left his face. She gloated over his discomfiture, for almost every line of the letter caused a pang of pain to shoot through John's heart. His hopes were crushed, and he felt that he was indeed an outcast now. As he folded the letter up and

put it into his pocket, Marie's lips wreathed themselves into a scornful laugh.

"This great lady throws you off, and you are a nameless beggar," she cried, with terrible bitterness in her voice.

"Miss Corvisart," he answered, with as much dignity as he could command, "I refuse to listen to your taunts. If you don't leave this house I shall."

She strode over to where he stood. She was livid with passion. She drew herself up, so that her face almost touched his, and with her hands extended behind her, and the nails of her fingers digging into her palms, she hissed between her closed teeth :

"Jean Ranleagh, you are no better zan the snakes that crawl on ze earth. You call me Mees now. You called me one time Marie. I was a girl zen. You told me my face was beautiful. Did you not charm me, just as ze snakes charm ze birds, until you had befouled me. I am a woman now, but I cannot be an honest wife to any man. You said that I should be your wife." She modified her tone and put one of her hands on his arm. "Keep zat promise now. Make me an honourable wife. Lift me out of the mire so

that I may say, though I am humble, I am honest. Do this for me. I command you, Jean Ranleagh, to do it. I shall be a good wife to you. I shall be true and faithful. My face is fair, my hair is long, I am young. Am I not as good as she in all save that I am poor?"

She paused. The excitement had caused the blood to flow into her face again, and she was scarlet.

John trembled, not from fear, but by reason of the emotion that surged in his breast. His brain was bewildered, so that he could scarcely find words to express himself in. He could only say in a hoarse voice :

"Marie, if you have any pity for me go away. I can never, never make you my wife."

She recoiled and beat her breast with her hands.

"I did but try you," she exclaimed. "I knew I could not be your wife, because you have a wife already. Ah, ah! you grow pale, Jean Ranleagh. The great Mees Dudley is bound to you, but she flung you off, and I fling you off and spit at you."

"For God's sake, Marie, do not pervert your woman's nature in such a manner."

He would have said more, but she interrupted him with a passionate gesture.

"Woman's nature," she echoed, with a horrid laugh of bitterness, "woman's nature; have you not perverted it, made me a wreck, and then left me to drift to perdition. What can you do to restore me now? Can you make me what I was? Can you give me back that you have stolen from me?"

He found words at last to reply to her. He felt that he must end the interview or he should go mad.

"Marie, I have been guilty. I confess my fault; but I thought then that I loved you. Though we were both to blame because you encouraged me. But I have no wish to palliate my own sin. If it is possible for a man to make reparation to the woman he has wronged, as I have wronged you, I will make you reparation. The past, however, cannot be recalled. Repentance can never cure the injury caused by our youthful follies; but sincere and heartfelt repentance ought to ensure for us at least pardon from those we have wronged. If I were free now I would

make you my wife. But that is impossible. You have told me that you are aware of the barrier which stands in the way of my doing that. I don't know how you gained that knowledge——”

“She told me with her own lips—the toad,” Marie almost shrieked.

“Then I am sorry that Miss Dudley has so misplaced her confidence,” he went on. “Still I cannot believe that you are dead to every womanly instinct. And I implore you, I appeal to you, to bear this wrong and sorrow with that dignity that a true woman should be able to call up to her aid. Keep this matter secret. Not for my sake, but for the sake of the unhappy lady who has been a friend and kind mistress to you. I am going away. I am indifferent as to what my fate may be. It would be better perhaps for us all if I were dead. I think I must have been mad in the past. I am certain I shall become mad in the future if you torture me with your reproaches. My sin is scarlet, that I know. I may weep tears of phosphorus or some other scorching matter, but I can never wipe that sin away. But you at least can afford to be generous. In my hour of trouble you can

give me one feeling of pity, even if it is only the pity of silence. Oh, Marie, for the sake of what we have been to each other, do not let me appeal to you in vain. Comfort the lady whom I have dishonoured by making her my wife. Strengthen her in her affliction, pity her if you cannot pity me."

He had drawn close to her, and taken her hand. He had pleaded to her eloquently. Her bosom heaved, and she was weeping passionately. But they were tears of bitterness. She threw his hand violently off, and quivered with rage.

"If you had not made zat toad your wife I would have forgiven you. I would have laid down and let you have walked on my body if zat would have made you happy. But when you married her your deception was complete. You know what you had made of me, and yet no pity for the wretched woman you have wronged was in your heart zen. Why should I have pity now for you? You are a coward, and I hate you. Do not fear that I shall make this marriage known. I have reasons for keeping it secret at present. But I tell you again zat you are a villain. You have brought misery upon two women."

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She drew closer to him again, and hissed in his face, "Jean Ranleagh, if I saw you dead at my feet I should be happy."

She drew herself up defiantly. She looked at him with a look of withering scorn. He could not answer her. He was dumbfounded by her awful passion. But at that moment he felt that it would almost be a mercy if her wish could be realised, and he could fall down stone dead before her. She turned quickly on her heel, flung the door open violently, and left him standing there like one who had been suddenly petrified.

Some minutes passed before he had recovered sufficient presence of mind to act, or even to think. Then the remembrance of all that had taken place surged through his brain, until he felt that he could bow down and weep like a stricken child. But the feeling did not last long. Grief could avail nothing. Time would, he thought, change the awfully bitter feeling in Marie's heart, and he would try, in a small measure, to make amends for his error, by watching over her as long as he lived. This was his resolution. Then he took out the letter Marie had brought him and read it again.

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“It is strange,” he muttered, “that she should have sent this letter by Marie, and have made an appointment to meet me through Carruthers. Possibly the meeting was an after-thought. The poor girl is terribly upset, no doubt. But I shall see her once more, whisper a sad farewell, and then part, perhaps never to see her again. Well, perhaps it is better that it should be so. I have done her a wrong, an irreparable injury, and I must suffer the penalty of my folly.”

He completed his preparations for his departure, and then he sent the key of his cottage up to Mr. Dudley by the lodge-keeper.

This done he procured a conveyance, drove down into the village, and deposited his luggage at the railway station.

Finding that he could not proceed to London until the following morning owing to the appointment he had made with Carruthers, he determined to go over to Leeds and obtain a bed for the night at a hotel there. But he found that there were still a couple of hours to wait before the next train

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went, and so he strolled out into the village to pass the time away.

Springdale was in a considerable state of excitement. The Springdalers seemed almost to a man and woman, to say nothing of the children, to be wending their way to a large field some little distance off, where a fair was being held. It was the annual fair, and an event that for a time caused Springdale to lose its decorum, and even its brightness, for at these yearly gatherings the whole of the inhabitants seemed to give themselves up to pleasure and feasting, even to the neglect of their window blinds and doorplates, so that the brassiness of Springdale was somewhat blurred, but the spirits of its people were brightened in a corresponding ratio, and a balance was consequently struck. It was clear that during the three days this annual fair lasted the good folks felt that they had a right to enjoy themselves, and flinging dull care aside, spend their money freely, and live a life of reckless ease.

Excitement is infectious, and John Ranleagh found himself mingling with the stream that poured forth in the direction from whence issued a Babel of ear-splitting sound.

The din of thousands of human voices, the blare of trumpets, the clash of cymbals, the beating of big drums, and the conflicting shouts of the rival showmen and itinerant vendors of nuts and gingerbread produced a sense of confusion in his brain that served to deaden the pangs of disappointment that racked him. He found himself in the thick of the crowd, and almost induced to laugh at the drolleries of a poor buffoon as he endeavoured to set the crowd in a roar by his antics before the painted canvas of a show.

The restless and surging human tide at length drifted Ranleagh in front of a large menagerie. A brass band was discoursing sweet sounds for the edification of the multitude, and enormous sheets of canvas, on which were painted impossible tigers, gigantic boa-constrictors, and other huge animals and reptiles, which to name would have taxed the powers of the most learned zoologist that ever lived, excited the imagination of the onlookers and induced hundreds of them to struggle to "be in time and walk up."

A large painted placard in front of the show set forth that it was Signor Manetti's original menagerie, and the only one in which

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the "world-renowned Rococo," the celebrated lion-tamer, performed. A stout man, of almost Herculean build, his lips shaded by a heavy black moustache, his legs encased in long leather boots, and his throat encircled by a huge snake, whose head moved up and down before the man's face, as if beating time to the music, stood on the top of the ladder, and in a stentorian voice invited the people to be in time and see the wonderful "Rococo" go through his astounding performance with the lions and tigers. In one hand the man held a whip with which he pointed to the paintings, and his other hand he used as a trumpet to give effect to his words, while the heavy folds of the great snake hung down over his massive chest like a gigantic chain. There was something about this man that arrested John's attention. In external appearance save for his massive proportions, he was every inch a showman. But there was something refined in his movements, a something in his delivery so superior to the generality of persons of his class, that Ranleagh was struck, and he determined, if possible, to become better acquainted with him. Not that he had any direct motive in

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so doing. It was one of those strange desires that spring up in the human heart, and which seem to be governed by no fixed laws.

In a few minutes John was on the platform. A nearer view revealed the fact that the showman's moustache was dyed, for at the roots the hair was greyish. The skin of his face was rough and tanned, and on the forehead and beneath the eyes there were lines of age and care, for the man had passed the meridian of life by some years. John paid his money at the little pigeon-hole, where a woman sat to receive it.

"Who is that big man with the snake round his neck?" he asked, as he took up the cheque that was handed to him in return for his coin.

"That, sir," answered the woman respectfully, and with a smile, "that is my husband, Signor Manetti."

CHAPTER XI.

SIGNOR MANETTI MAKES A PROPOSAL.

RANLEAGH had no time to put any further questions even if he had been inclined, for dozens of other people were pressing behind him, anxious to pay their money and see the sights. So he descended the ladder, and found himself in the midst of a gaping crowd, that was staring at the animals and monkeys in the caravans.

The collection was a large one, and Ranleagh became absorbed, so that he had almost forgotten all about the showman outside, until his interest was re-awakened by the appearance of Manetti himself, who, with his strange "muffler" still round his neck, advanced to the centre of the show, where he divested

himself of the snake and restored it to the reptile case. Having done this, he procured a ladder, and, whip in hand, proceeded in a clear and distinct voice to describe the animals. His task completed, he informed his patrons that :

“ Rococo, the world-renowned lion tamer, would next have the honour of performing in the den of lions and tigers.”

This was the great event for which people had paid, for there was something so fascinating in the idea of seeing a fellow creature enter a den of savage beasts, at the risk of being mangled to death.

Manetti ranged the people in such a manner that nearly every one had an opportunity of witnessing the performance, and when all was ready “ Rococo ” descended from a house caravan in the show, and walked with a steady step to the cage of beasts he performed with.

He was a young man, with a keen and intensely bright pair of eyes. His limbs were powerful and muscular. He had great width and depth of chest, and though he was considerably less in height than Manetti, the two men might have passed for father and

son. Rococo was armed with a heavy whip. He wore a pair of long boots, shod with iron at the toes and heels, and a blue spangled tunic, fastened at the waist with a large belt. His hair was dark and long, and kept in its place by a narrow coronet that encircled his forehead.

He bowed gracefully, and the crowd cheered him as he entered the cage; and many were the flattering remarks passed upon his splendid figure and handsome face—handsome in spite of its swarthiness, the long and constant exposure to wind and weather, and possibly tropical suns. For although Rococo was not an African as people were led to believe, it was evident that he had been born in a less fickle climate than that of England. His performance was similar to all such performances, with the exception, perhaps, that his own movements were more dignified and graceful, and he seemed to control the brutes, not so much by absolute force, as strength of will and his keen eyes. And the animals obeyed him with a docility that was wonderful.

Having finished his work, Rococo descended from the cage, and bowing several

times in response to the plaudits of the multitude, several of whom grasped his hand and shook it warmly, he retired to the seclusion of the caravan. Then a door was opened at the end of the show to allow the people to go out. And while the crowd was struggling to get free, Ranleagh sauntered about and gained the opposite end to that at which the people were making their exit. At one corner a canvas screen was hung, and meaningless curiosity led him to peep behind this. He almost immediately started back, and stammered an apology, for seated on a stool was Signor Manetti. Before him was a broken drum, on the top a board was placed which served for a table, and on this improvised table were spread bread and cheese and salad and a foaming tankard of beer, and upon these things the Signor was regaling himself.

“I really beg your pardon,” said Ranleagh, as he drew back, feeling ashamed of himself for having intruded.

“Oh, no offence, sir; no offence,” exclaimed the showman, with a good-natured laugh. “I’m just snatching a morsel of bread and cheese before the next lot of people come

in. It is a busy time with us, and we have to get our meals the best way we can. Here, sir, take the head off that," and Manetti handed his visitor the pot of beer.

Struck with the man's frankness and good-humour, John took the pot, and wishing Manetti success, drank a deep draught. As he put the pot down he said :

" You must allow me now to replenish that. I suppose you have somebody you can send out for a fresh supply ?"

" Oh, nonsense," replied the other. " There is more here than I shall require ; besides, it's a pity if we can't give away a friendly bite and a sup without expecting to have them returned immediately."

" You are really a good-natured fellow," said Ranleagh, being anxious to prolong the conversation.

" Am I ?" observed Manetti, as he paused in the act of conveying a morsel of bread and cheese to his mouth, and burst into a loud laugh. " I am glad you think so. Here is your health," and he washed the bread and cheese down with a copious draught of the beer.

" I suppose now," Ranleagh pursued, " that

there is a good deal of fascination about this kind of life, rough as it is."

"Lor' bless you, yes. It was some time before I took to it; but, upon my word, I wouldn't like to give it up for anything else now. I am not rolling in riches, for the expenses, you see, are heavy. Still, my wife and I and our son manage to make a living."

"You have a son, then?"

"Well, that is, we call him our son. We brought him up. I refer to the young fellow who performs with the animals."

"What, Rococo?"

"Yes."

"Do you travel all the year round?"

"Yes, but we always leave England about the end of summer and go to Russia."

"To Russia!" exclaimed John in surprise.

"That is rather a long journey to take, is it not?"

"Well, yes, and it is an expensive one. But you see there is not much to be done in this country for more than about six months in the year, and Russians are very fond of this class of entertainment, and we manage to make a lot of money there. And as I happen

to be a native of that country, I get on very well."

"Upon my word I almost envy you your Bohemian life, for, in spite of its rough side, there must be a good deal that is enjoyable. And you no doubt see a wonderful variety of human nature."

"You are right," answered Manetti, looking at the speaker in astonishment. "It might not suit everybody, but it suits me, though I wasn't born a showman, and it took some time to break myself in. But if you envy me, why don't you go in for this sort of thing? It is a good business if properly managed, and there is plenty of money to be made out of it. But there I am talking nonsense. A man can't sever his connections in a moment, to become a—well, a vagabond some people would say;" and Manetti laughed as he once more buried his nose in the pewter pot. And having finished his repast he rose and stretched himself like a giant refreshed.

"You are right," Ranleagh answered thoughtfully, "to sever one's connections suddenly is difficult, but where there are no connections the matter is simple. I am at the present moment seeking for some place

in which to cast my lines, and if an opportunity occurred, I believe I should be strongly tempted to go in for something of this kind for a time ; in fact, I may say that I am perfectly indifferent as to what I do. Of course by that I don't mean to say I should lend myself to anything dishonourable."

Manetti laid his heavy hands upon Rangleagh's shoulders, and, looking him full in the face, said :

"Are you in earnest, young fellow ?"

"Never more so in my life."

"But, judging from your appearance, I should say you have been used to some good position."

"That may be, but I have a desire, for reasons that I cannot explain, to lose myself for a time."

"If that is really your desire I can aid you," answered Manetti. "I have long wanted a young man as a sort of secretary and manager. The work is too much for my wife, whose health is delicate. I think I could make it worth your while. There is something about you that I like. What do you say now : will you join me ?"

"Do you come here every year ?"

"No. It is quite by accident we came this. We had a few vacant days to fill up on our route, and heard of this fair. In two months' time we shall be on our way to Russia."

"That would suit me admirably, but if I joined you I should like to do so on some equal footing. I have a small sum of money, say a couple of hundred pounds, that I should like to invest. I should be willing to take a share to this amount if you are agreeable."

"I am perfectly agreeable. The whole of the business belongs to our son, or rather will do, if anything happens to me or my wife. The caravans, all the paraphernalia, and the collections of animals, including the elephants, are worth between eight and ten thousand pounds, so that you see our show represents considerable capital. If you like to join us, do; but it must be entirely of your own free will. I shall not try to influence you in any way."

"You are an honest fellow at any rate, Mr. Manetti."

"I hope so. I know I try to be. However, I must go now. Think the matter over. We shall be here for two days. We

then go on to Bradford, and work up to London."

"My mind is already made up. I will join you."

"Come; I like that way of doing business. The man who hesitates is lost," exclaimed Manetti, as he seized the other's hand and shook it heartily. "The show closes at nine o'clock. Be here then, and we can talk the matter over. We have a spare sleeping caravan, you will find it comfortable enough if you want a bed, and I daresay we shall be able to give you a fairish supper. Till then, good-bye."

In a few minutes Ranleagh had left the show, and was drifting about in the crowd, like a cork on an angry stream. He was perfectly indifferent almost as to where he went to. He would have liked to have got away from himself: to have deadened the feeling which tortured him, by a round of ceaseless excitement.

It wanted some hours yet to the time appointed for him to be at the hut by the mill stream. The time seemed to go by leaden-footed now, and he found it difficult to restrain his impatience. He was anxious

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in the extreme to see his wife, though he inferred from the tone of her letter that the meeting would be a painful one, and the last ; and, as he dwelt upon this, he reproached himself bitterly, and could it have been possible by any sacrifice, however great, to have undone the mischief he considered he had been guilty of, he would gladly have made such sacrifice. But the past was irretrievable. The present was full of sorrow and pain, and the future was a mystery.

CHAPTER XII.

AS MAN FELL, MAN FALLS BY WOMAN STILL.

WHEN Marie Corvisart left John Ranleagh's cottage, instead of going direct back to the hall, she turned off into the high road. Leading from this road was a by-path that skirted the park, and by means of which the house could be gained by a pretty long walk.

Marie's reason for thus going out of her way was to allow her passion to cool down. She felt as if her very heart would break with rage—the maddening rage born of a jealous disposition. Whatever love she had possessed for Ranleagh, if such a feeling had found lodgment in her breast for a single moment, was out now, and in its place had come a dangerous hatred. She knew that the man was lost to

her; that she had been deceived by him, and that now she might drift down the stream of time a hardened reckless woman. And it was this knowledge that made her deadly in her bitterness.

It is possible that, if circumstances had not conspired to fan the flames still higher, her wrath might have expended itself harmlessly. But it was fated otherwise.

After proceeding down the road for some distance, she came to the stile over which it was necessary to get to gain the path round by the park. A man was seated on the step of the stile. He was amusing himself by smoking a short black pipe, and drawing figures in the dust of the road with a stick he had evidently pulled from the hedge. As Marie approached the man looked up, and she recognised Richard Carruthers. They had often met before, for Edith had sometimes strolled in the neighbourhood of the mill in company with her maid, and Miss Dudley was in the habit of saying a kindly word to Dick whenever she met him, and on one or two occasions she had sent Marie down to him with presents of small sums of money and parcels of food, for she pitied

the man's forlorn condition. And the worst crime that anybody had ever been able to bring against him was the fact that he had been caught snaring hares and rabbits in Mr. Dudley's preserves. As he saw now who the person was who was approaching, he rose from his seat, and said :

"Good-day to you, miss. It's a warm day this, but there is a storm gathering up in the west there. We shall have it before long."

The common-place remark so ill accorded with the woman's frame of mind that she felt annoyed, and did not answer him, but got over the stile and proceeded some yards along the path.

"Well, she's a polite sort of party I must say," growled Dick, as he resumed his seat, and savagely drew with his stick several algebraic figures, not that Dick understood algebra. "These servants give themselves a deused sight more airs than their mistresses," with which philosophical reflection Dick might have dismissed the subject altogether from his mind, had he not been startled by somebody saying behind him :

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"I am rude. You must excuse me, if you please."

He turned round suddenly, and beheld Marie, who had come back again. And so he rose, and resting one foot upon the step of the stile as a prop for his elbow, he rescinded his former resolution as he contemplated the speaker, and came to the conclusion that she was an uncommonly polite young woman after all.

"I don't know that I have anything to excuse, miss," he made answer, as he puffed vigorously at his black cutty. "I suppose you were admiring the country, or perhaps thinking of your future husband;" and Dick laughed coarsely at what he considered a joke. But he changed his laugh almost immediately to an exclamation of surprise, as he saw that instead of Marie smiling at his banter, she was glowering at him fiercely. So that, from her strange behaviour, he was very much inclined to think, as Norman Douglas had thought on the previous evening, that she was suffering from the effects of drink. But it was the warm southern blood of the woman that was on fire, not with alcohol, but disappointment and jealousy.

And he had unwittingly added fuel to the already fierce flames.

"What for do you speak to me of husband?" she asked angrily; then she immediately checked herself and said, "I am very stupid to talk like this, but I have much sorrow here," and she placed her hand over her heart. "I have been treated badly, oh, so badly." She burst into a fit of crying again, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

Of course Dick had no means of knowing what was the cause of her grief, but he made a haphazard guess and remarked:

"I hear there have been strange doings up at the hall."

"Ah! how do you know that?" she cried so vehemently that he drew back a pace or two although the stile was between them.

He knew nothing but what he had gathered from Douglas, but she imagined that he was probably in possession of all the particulars. In turning back as she had done she had been actuated by the sole desire to apologise to the man for what she really considered to be unpardonable.

rudeness, and feeling, like most women of her class, that a little sympathy even from such a rough fellow as he was was worth having, she felt very strongly inclined to unburden herself to him to some extent.

"Well," he replied to her last question, "I only speak from hearsay. I've heard it rumoured that John Ranleagh has been sacked. Of course I don't know that there is any truth in it."

Marie's brow darkened, and she bit her lip until she left the marks of her teeth in it. The very mention of the name of the man by whom she had been discarded seemed to frenzy her.

"If you mean that he has been turned away like a dog, it is true," she cried. "Oh, I hate him," she added quickly, as if in response to her listener's inquiring look.

"Oh, oh, I understand," he replied, with a sort of whistle. "A lover's quarrel."

"What do you mean?" she asked passionately.

"There, there, don't bite my head off. I don't mean anything. Only old Robin the

gardener once told me that you and Ranleagh were going to get married."

Marie stamped her foot violently, and she beat her breast with her hands, a movement that she invariably resorted to during paroxysms of rage. Dick stood staring at her in astonishment. Presently she seized his wrist with one hand, and with the other she pointed to the ground.

"If there was a snake crawling there," she cried, "I should put down my foot on it and crush it. I should be glad to crush Jean Ranleagh as I should crush ze snake. He is as worse zan ze snake. He is a villain, and I could kill him."

She gnashed her teeth, and ground her feet on the grass as if in imagination she was crushing the life out of John Ranleagh's heart. She looked very terrible in her rage. Her face and neck were scarlet, and her eyes glistened strangely. Some of her dark hair had become loosened from its bands, and straggled in the wind, so that it added to the wildness of her looks. The spirit of hatred which seemed to be raging in her bosom affected her listener. Carruthers bore Ranleagh no very great love. In fact, to use his

own expression, he owed him a grudge, for on John's evidence he once got three months' imprisonment for poaching.

"Is there no chance of your making the quarrel up again?" he asked as a sort of feeler.

"No, never, never, never," she repeated with great energy.

Carruthers was thoughtful for some moments, then he said :

"Where is Ranleagh going to?"

"I don't know."

The man was looking at her. Looking at her with a half-averted gaze, as it were. His face betrayed that there was some idea that had shaped itself in his brain, struggling to find a vent in words. His features wore a nervous agitated expression. He looked up and down the road two or three times. He twisted his cutty pipe about, and rattled on the stile with his stick in a meaningless way. These two beings stood alone. No living soul was in sight. There was the blue sky above them, the birds around them, the fragrance of flowers everywhere. But at the core of this man and woman's hearts there was something diabolical hatching. A fearful

thought was in the man's mind—so fearful that he hesitated to breathe it. Marie looked at her companion. Did she understand something of what was stirring him? It might have been so. There are moments when by a sort of intuitive perception we comprehend the thoughts of others. Perhaps it was one of these moments for Marie Corvisart. Her eyes were fixed on him. Her lips were half unclosed, just revealing the white and even teeth as she stood there in an attitude of expectancy. There was an expression of terrible cruelty on her face, and yet she was beautiful. Whatever his thoughts were, however, he did not give utterance to them then, for he merely said :

“ Shall I walk along the path with you a little way ? ”

“ Why ? ” she asked.

“ Because I will tell you a secret.”

“ You shall come zen.”

He got over the stile, and walked with her for some distance. Neither of them spoke.

The path was bounded by a tall oak fence that was covered with moss and ivy, and on the right of the path was a dense copse. The spot was very lonely and secluded.

"What is ze secret?" she asked suddenly, as she stopped and faced him.

He bent his head a little, so as to bring his mouth opposite to her ear.

"John Ranleagh is coming to my cottage to-night."

"Ah!" she cried as she grasped the man's wrist, for the words seemed to positively startle her. "Why is he going to your cottage?" she whispered, and her whole frame quivered with excitement. The man hesitated about answering. He remembered the promise he had made to Douglas not to disclose the secret. But he had compromised himself now. And his greed for gain, as the chance of gain came in his way, grew stronger.

"What will you give me if I tell you?" he asked.

"Pah, you want to get ze money from me. I understand you." She recoiled from him as if in disgust. But a new idea seemed to flash through her mind; she seized his wrist again, and saideagerly, "Tell me, tell me what you know, and I will give you some money."

An almost imperceptible smile passed over his features as he saw how eager she was, and he began to have thoughts of handling

more money than ever he had done before in his life.

"Well, I will tell you. The gentleman who is staying at the hall—I don't know his name, but the one who has come home from India——"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur Douglas."

"Monseer Douglas, that's his name, is it? Well, he is coming down, and he told me to say to John Ranleagh that Miss Dudley wished to meet him there."

"Well, well, go on," she cried, as he paused. "What does Monsieur Douglas want Jean Ranleagh there for?"

"He wants to send him away. To get him to go across the sea somewhere—anywhere in fact—the farther the better."

"I comprehend, I comprehend," she murmured. Then she drew very close to him indeed, and, grasping his arm with nervous energy, she whispered, "I should like to kill Jean Ranleagh."

The man started. Not that he was surprised, for she did but echo his own thoughts.

But even he, illiterate and waif as he was, could not repress a feeling of horror that beneath the beautiful exterior of this woman

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there should lurk such a depth of deadly hatred. He was not yet hardened in crime.

If he had for a long time stood upon the brink of it, he had not gone down into the gulf. But his life was one long struggle against hunger and misery ; and now a way seemed to be opening out by which he might enrich himself, and as the vista spread before him wherein he saw plenty of food and clothes, the sacredness of life—if ever he had held it sacred—vanished, and he was sinking rapidly into the gulf. Though he had himself ventured to hint that very morning to Norman Douglas that Ranleagh might easily be disposed of, if it was desired to get rid of him, he fairly trembled now as he saw how near he was drifting to the very thing that had been, up to the present moment, but a half-formed thought in his mind. He did not reply to her. He could not. He seemed to lack words to say what he wished. Perhaps there was yet a faint and lingering desire in his heart to be far away—far away from temptation ; but there was Temptation embodied in this half-maddened woman before him, and he could not fly from it. She spoke again.

"This man, Jean Ranleagh, has wronged me. He has thrown me off for the sake of another woman. He has given me a great pain in my heart, and so I hate him, and should like to kill him. Listen to me. I have one hundred pounds in ze bank. I will give you all zat money if you will kill this man."

A shudder passed over Carruthers. He drew a little away from Marie. A hundred pounds was a tremendous sum to him. He could not let such a chance slip.

"It might be done," he answered thoughtfully.

"It might be done easily," she added. Then she lowered her voice to a scarcely audible whisper, and said, "It might be done in the mill stream, and seem as if it was an accident."

"When would you give me the money?" he asked.

"To-night."

"Where?"

"I will bring it."

"You?"

"Yes. I will come to your cottage. I will wait outside until Jean Ranleagh goes.

We will follow him. He must cross ze little bridge. If you are quick and sudden, it can be done zere, and who is to know?"

"It seems easy," Dick answered. "But it must be quick and sudden, or we should fail. But about the money. If it is in the bank, you could not bring it to-night."

"Yes I can. It is in the savings bank at Springdale. I can draw it out immediately."

"Let it be so then. Be near my hut not later than nine o'clock."

"I shall be there."

Each felt that they had said all they had to say, and so they parted. And when Carruthers got some distance away he plunged into the copse, and, throwing himself down on the long grass, wept—actually wept. Presently he murmured :

"This is very horrible. It will be blood-money. But I am a needy starving wretch. The devil tempts me, and I cannot resist him."

This strange half-maudlin feeling did not trouble Dick long. It was the last lingering trace of good in the man's nature. But he was thoroughly hardened now, and, spring-

ing up from the ground, he went on his way
whistling.

The human heart is more incomprehensible
than the mystery of infinity.

CHAPTER XIII.

“THE NEVER-FAILING BROOK, THE BUSY MILL.”

THE mill stream on the banks of which Richard Carruthers had long eked out a miserable existence, in a dwelling that seemed as forlorn and neglected as himself, was something too small to be dignified by the name of a river, and something too large for a brook. It was a deep and rapidly-flowing stream. A brawling burn at first, far up in the breezy hills, where it had its birth. Rushing impetuously over the stones and broken rocks that endeavoured to impede its course. Careering madly past the nodding grass, the quivering harebells, and rich ferns that grew in profusion in the dreamy solitudes where this mad rivulet rushed forth in its

headlong course towards the sea. But when it reached the peaceful valley where Dick dwelt, it had sobered down into steady, practical, and useful life. It had joined issues with man, and its giant labours ground the corn that made the bread of millions. The mill itself was hoary, for it had seen generations of men in and out. It stood in majestic loneliness. Behind it and around it ancient elms, that towered sentinel-like in the gloomy winter, but beneath the summer sky were glorious and beautiful in their spreading masses of dense green foliage. At its feet the bound giant, that sung a lusty song as it turned the huge wheel. It was a mighty monster this said wheel, that gave life to the whirling shafts up in the strong building. At this particular place the stream had been artificially widened, so that the giant might gain strength and force to accomplish his task. For half a mile round about it was in truth a sylvan glade,

"With spots of sunny openings, and with nooks
To lie and read in, sloping into brooks."

Just above the mill race was a rustic bridge, with a single rail. This bridge connected

two paths. One led down from Springdale, the other trended away over the hills to a neighbouring town. The whole surroundings were those of peace and music. The peace of solitude and retirement, the music of birds and falling waters. Wild flowers grew in profusion. A hundred hues mingled and blended in exquisite harmony. It was the ferns' paradise. They flourished in rank luxuriance. The eye, look which way it would, was almost satiated with Nature's richness. It was a favourite spot with Edith Dudley. She was fond of rambling and sketching here. She had sketched the ancient mill from a dozen different points of view. It was to her as an old friend, and she loved it.

The day was dying as Dick Carruthers sauntered leisurely towards his hovel to keep the double appointment with Norman Douglas and Marie Corvisart. The day was dying in gloom, as Dick himself had predicted. Heavy banks of dark clouds were massing themselves in the western sky. A storm was brewing. It could be felt in the air. There was an oppressive silence, save for the lazy click of the mill wheel, and the wash of the water. It

wanted as yet an hour to the time named for Ranleagh to be at the cottage.

As Dick approached his door, and fumbled for the key in the pocket of his tattered jacket, he whistled. It might have been from lightness of heart, but was more probably from a desire to keep his thoughts from dwelling too long upon the business he had in hand. For, to say the least, it was far from pleasant business, and the man was a new hand at it. To have set off on a prowling expedition in search of game, and to have matched his cunning against the watchfulness of keepers, would have given him pleasure. For he believed, as thousands of his class believe through the length and breadth of the land, that he was not guilty of any crime in trapping wild game, but that the law sinned against him in punishing him. And the opinion may be safely hazarded, that if there had been no game laws Richard Carruthers would never have been a vagabond gaol bird. But the business before him to-night was vastly different to his usual avocation, if his "profession" might be so termed, and he was a little fidgety, possibly nervous.

Somehow he couldn't insert the key in the keyhole as readily as he was wont. He fumbled a good deal, heavy raindrops were beginning to fall, and the black clouds had already blotted every streak of light out of the sky. A breeze was springing up, and the song of the mill stream and the music of the wheel seemed to have changed. The giant was groaning, as it were, as if he knew that his brother, the Storm-wind, was coming down, and he wished to gain his sympathy. So that, though he might not break his bonds, additional strength would be given to him, and he could writhe and lash himself into fury with his brother's help, and show his enemy man how mighty he was in his wrath.

The men in the mill saw the storm coming, and they opened the sluice-gates, and the great wheel ceased its revolutions and was silent, while the erstwhile imprisoned giant, freed for a brief period from his thralldom, roared with a hoarse voice that mingled with the rising wind, and was answered by a peal of thunder that broke with startling suddenness.

Dick had opened his door at last, but he

had not crossed the threshold, when from out of some long rank grass that grew by the side of the cottage a man rose up. He had been lying there for some time dozing, but the thunder and the rain had aroused him, and he sprang to his feet, so that a momentary thrill of alarm caused Dick's heart to beat beyond its normal rate. But he recognised the intruder and ejaculated :

"Hollo, Nicky, what the deuce are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, mate," answered the person addressed as Nicky, a young man tattered and torn as to external appearances, and who was unmistakably one of the human waifs who live Heaven knows how, and who die even as homeless dogs die, unknown and uncared for.

Nicky was Dick's companion, the man who had been with him on the previous night, and who had shown the white feather when Norman Douglas had surprised them in their maraudings.

Dick stood in the doorway facing his companion, as if he wished to bar his farther progress into the cottage.

"Look here, Nicky," he cried, "I wish

you would stop away. I told you this morning that I didn't care about your company. A chap as can't stand by his chum when he is in danger ain't worth having anything to do with. Besides, you told me that you were going to tramp up to London. Why haven't you gone?"

Carruthers was evidently annoyed. He could not conceal the annoyance, for he did not wish Nicky to be a party to the arrangements he had made with Douglas and Marie. The two men were almost strangers to each other. Some weeks previous Nicky, in roaming about the country, had come upon Dick's retreat.

Carrying out the principles of Bohemianism, the two waifs fraternised. Nicky was in a state of utter destitution. Dick gave him shelter, and the men had since "hunted" together. Beyond this Dick knew nothing of his companion, neither his name, nor his antecedents, nor where he had come from, nor where he was going to. These were points which men of their class seldom troubled themselves about. Such people meet and part, and then forget all about each other. Dick was particularly anxious that

Nicky should get away, but the intruder was by no means equally anxious to go.

"I've altered my mind, mate," he answered, in reply to Dick's last remark. "I'm just as well here as I should be anywhere else."

The rain was coming down now in a perfect deluge, and the mill stream was roaring. The thunder and lightning were terrific, so that Carruthers moved on one side to allow Nicky to enter, and then he closed the door.

"Well, I tell you what it is, Nicky," Dick said angrily, "you will have to clear out when the storm is over, that's all about it."

"You needn't turn round on a fellow like this, because you've fell into a stroke of luck," Nicky retorted with a sneer.

"A stroke of luck, what do you mean?" and Dick's face grew red with anger.

"There, now, don't bite a fellow's head off, I don't mean anything. Have you got any tobacco?"

Nicky seated himself on one of the rickety chairs, and producing a dirty pipe, about an inch and a half in length, he commenced to twist his little finger about in the bowl to clear the dirt out.

“That’s all I’ve got,” Dick growled, as he tossed a screwed-up piece of paper to Nicky. He next proceeded to stick a small tallow candle into the neck of a bottle, and having done this he lighted the candle, for the cottage was quite dark. He was exercised in his mind as to the course to pursue to get rid of his unwelcome visitor. For obvious reasons he did not feel disposed to take him into his confidence. Words had passed between them that morning. Dick had accused his companion of cowardice. But it could scarcely be said that they had quarrelled, for Nicky was by no means of a quarrelsome nature, but he had wished his companion good-bye, and distinctly stated that he intended tramping towards London, therefore Dick was more than surprised to see him back at such an inopportune moment. Having filled his pipe, Nicky lit it at the candle, and then returned the remnants of the tobacco to Dick.

“Thank you, mate,” he remarked, “you are not a bad sort of fellow, but I don’t see what you want to turn me up for now. I happened to hear this morning something that passed between you and that gent as

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came down here. You thought I was asleep in the straw yonder, but I wasn't."

Dick turned upon his companion almost savagely, and exclaimed :

"What did you hear?"

"Well, nowt to make a great fuss about. But I heard him say as he was coming down here to-night. And I've got brains enough to know that a gentleman doesn't come to a place like this here without some particular reason."

"And what of that? Haven't I a right to do as I like in my own place?"

"Of course you have, mate. I said nowt against that. All that I've got to say is, if you've got a job on you might let a fellow share it."

"I shan't. That's plain enough, isn't it? The gentleman wishes the business he has engaged me to do kept quiet, so it is no use you trying to poke your nose in. And you had better clear out."

"All right, my friend, we've pulled together so long that I thought we might row in the same boat a little longer."

"Well, the fact is we can't," Dick answered in a modified tone. For Nicky's lethargy and

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quiet manner turned away his wrath. But perhaps in the place of this wrath had come a feeling of contempt, for he began to think that Nicky was somewhat of a milk and water sort of fellow. One thing he was pretty clear upon, and that was, that the sooner he and Nicky parted company the better.

The fury of the storm had now passed. The rain had been extraordinarily heavy, but had almost ceased suddenly. The thunder rumbled and growled afar off, and the jagged fork had given place to blue sheet lightning that played incessantly around the horizon.

Dick went to the door and looked out. The air was delicious after the storm. There were the odours of a hundred things that had been languishing for the want of moisture; and, having drank their fill now, they seemed to rejoice, and gave forth their scents in gratitude for the blessing they had received. The stream was brawling hoarsely, like a reveller that had drunk beyond discretion point. The night was dark, save for the fitful and weird gleam of the blue lightning. Dick felt uneasy. He didn't want Nicky to be there when Douglas arrived, but he had discernment enough to see that if Nicky

turned obstinate, it would be difficult to get rid of him ; and so the better course would be to humour him. Turning round and facing his companion, who, with legs stretched out, and his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, was reflectively smoking his pipe, he said :

"Look here, Nicky. I'm always willing to do a turn for a fellow where I can. But the gent as is coming down to-night wants to see me alone, so I must ask you to clear out. But if you like to come back to-night you are welcome to a shake-down here, and I will give you the price of some beer and bacca to see you on your road to-morrow. What do you say ?"

"Why, just this here"—and Nicky rose with a touch of dignity in his manner—"I ain't agoing to stop anywhere where I ain't wanted. You can keep your bacca and beer, mate, for yourself. It's not the first time I've had to make my supper off the air, and had the sky for a covering. But look here, old friend. Just a word afore I go. Keep your hands clean. You understand me." Dick started, but made no answer. "The worst I ever done was to trap some game, and there

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ain't much sin in that, as far as I can see. But I wouldn't do anything worse nor that, not even for a gent. Good-night to you."

He had passed out of the doorway and was lost in the darkness before Dick had recovered from the surprise this little speech caused him. Nicky, as a rule, was rather reticent, and he had spoken more at one time than Dick had ever heard him do before.

The outcast did not go very far from the cottage. Far enough, however, to be lost to view, and to be out of hearing. Then he seated himself at the foot of a tree, amongst the dripping grass ; but in sight of Dick Caruthers' glimmering light, which sent a ray through the little window of the hut like a guiding beacon.

"I wonder what the game is," Nicky mused, as he leant his head on his hands. "It's something strange that has caused Dick to turn like this ; and something bad too, I'll bet. At any rate I'll watch. I may learn something that might be useful."

When Nicky had gone Dick turned into his room and closed the door. Then he put some sticks upon the hearth and set light to

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them. He filled a tin kettle with water from a small cask that stood in the corner, and placed the kettle on the fire. He had scarcely completed these preparations for his supper when somebody knocked at the door, which was speedily opened by Dick, and John Ranleagh entered.

"I suppose Miss Dudley hasn't arrived," said John, as he shook the wet from his hat.

"No, not yet."

"Do you think she will come? I am very much afraid myself that the storm will prevent her."

"Maybe it will," Dick answered sullenly, at least so his visitor thought. But Dick was anxious and nervous. He felt that he was in the presence of one upon whose life a price was set, and he was to be the recipient of the blood-money. He stood in the shadow of guilt, and he trembled.

"I shall be very much disappointed if she does not come," John remarked, as he placed his hat on the table, for the want of a better place, and seated himself on one of the chairs.

"I daresay you will, Mr. Ranleagh," was Dick's pointed answer.

"Ah, she is here," John cried, springing

to his feet, as a knock was heard at the door.

Carruthers crossed the room, and threw the door open. Ranleagh put forth his hand to grasp, as he thought, the hands of his wife, but he fell back in amazement, for Norman Douglas stood before him.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT WAS ALL THE WORK OF A FEW BRIEF
MINUTES.

"MR. DOUGLAS, you here!" Ranleagh exclaimed in profound astonishment as he saw who the new-comer was.

"Yes, and my presence is no doubt as unexpected as it is unwelcome," Douglas replied, as by the help of Carruthers he divested his shoulders of a large cloak he had been wearing to protect himself from the rain.

Ranleagh's surprise gave place to indignation as he realised that he had been deceived, and he turned angrily upon Carruthers :

"What do you mean by playing a trick of this kind upon me?" he demanded.

Dick made no answer. The discipline of

his soldier days had not altogether left him, and he felt that in the presence of a superior officer he had no right to speak. He stood in an attitude of "attention," with his eyes fixed upon the dark hard face of Douglas.

"I will answer for him," said Norman. "He acted under my orders."

"Then permit me to tell you, sir, that you are lacking in those high principles of honour and truth which should distinguish an officer and a gentleman," was Ranleagh's indignant retort as he stood firm and erect, looking fiercely at Douglas, and feeling considerable contempt for him.

Douglas smiled. A cold cynical smile. The victory so far was on his side, and galling though it was to have to listen to such language from an inferior, he felt that as the victor he could bear it.

"I did not come here to quarrel with you," he answered. "But permit me to tell you that had a soldier in my regiment addressed me in the manner that you have, I would have had him tried by court-martial."

"Thank Heaven that I do not stand in that position, or I might be induced to resent your tyranny," Ranleagh said.

“Do not lose your temper, my man,” was Douglas’s reply.

But though he tried to speak calmly, it was evident he was only keeping his passion from showing itself by a desperate effort. He could not help, however, displaying the exceeding great bitterness which filled his heart. If his opponent had been a soldier it might have gone ill with him. But he was a civilian. Douglas felt the full force of that. He knew that the civil rights were the same for one as another. Moreover he was fully sensible to the fact that the game he was playing was unequal. He was trying to separate a man and woman who were legally bound to each other. He wanted to put those asunder whom God had joined. He knew also from Edith’s letter that Marie Corvisart had given him that Ranleagh’s high sense of honour alone kept him from claiming his wife. He had pledged his word not to do so until she gave him permission. And as Douglas remembered this he could not blind himself to the fact that the man he affected to despise was his superior in that high moral nature by which a true man is judged.

“There is no necessity to get angry,” he

continued. "The end justifies the means. It was necessary to practise some deception in order to induce you to come here."

"Then I denounce such deception as scandalous."

"Such a remark does not come well from a person who has been practising the worst of deceit for a considerable time," Douglas retorted.

"I deny you the right to be my accuser," Ranleagh exclaimed angrily.

"Perhaps you do. Still I take upon myself the right to tell you that you should be branded with infamy for the part you have played towards a generous employer, and the mean advantage you have taken of your position to impose upon a warm-hearted and trusting girl."

Ranleagh writhed inwardly. The words probed him painfully, but he made no reply. Douglas saw that he was gaining ground, and he followed up his advantage.

"You are aware," he went on, "that you have committed yourself in a manner that would cause you to be ostracised if your—your—what shall I call it?—crime, for it almost amounts to that, were known. By

your insidious wiles you have won this high-born lady from her allegiance to a proud and honourable family. And if it should become known that you had been in the habit of meeting her secretly, could anything save her from the foul breath of slander? Would not her fame and the fame of her family be tarnished, and her own maidenly purity be fouled by the calumny that idle gossip would give birth to. In the face of such facts as these, can you look at me and say you are an honest man? Does your conscience tell you that you are justified in accusing me of deception?"

He paused. He had spoken hurriedly and excitedly, and he felt that he could scarcely improve upon what he had said.

His words had evidently had an effect upon his listener. Ranleagh was astonished and puzzled. He scarcely knew what to understand by Norman's speech. Did it indicate that he was aware of the marriage? At one moment Ranleagh thought it did; at the next it didn't. For how was it possible, he reasoned with himself, that Douglas could know of it, unless he had gained the information from Edith herself. And he dismissed

that idea from his mind at once, as not being worthy of a moment's consideration. For he would not believe that Edith could so far have committed herself.

"There is some truth in what you say, Mr. Douglas," he answered at last.

"I suppose deception is only capable of one construction. If a man does things in the dark that he is afraid of doing openly, then I suppose the word is peculiarly applicable, and so I plead guilty to deceptiveness. There are, however, palliating circumstances in the case; since men and women have practised such deception from the commencement of time, without for a moment taking into consideration social position or class privileges. A king, ere now, has intrigued with a beggar, and high-born ladies have stooped to grant favours to nameless men."

"Cease such twaddle," Douglas cried impatiently, "it is irrelevant to the subject."

"I beg your pardon," Ranleagh pursued. "If I stand accused, I have a right to speak in my own defence. And though the fact of thousands of people having done the same thing does not make that thing right, I can assert fearlessly that my error arises from

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that weakness—or it may be called strength—which is the inheritance of all humanity. The love of the human heart is not governed by social distinctions. It has been truly called a ‘leveller.’ It brings the man up to the woman, or the woman down to the man. But it is none the less pure and holy because there happens to be wealth on one side and poverty on the other.”

“This is a mere waste of words,” Douglas cried, unable longer to control himself; “and such presumption on your part is deserving of the severest punishment. If there has been some mad passion on your part, you have no right to assume that you have inspired this unfortunate lady with any such feeling as *love* for you. It is unpardonable arrogance to think so. Her youth, her inexperience, and her want of proper guardianship have laid her open to your insidious advances; and though she may have listened to some of the balderdash you have been pleased to pour into her ear, love for you has no place in her heart. Like most girls who have few or no companions of their own age or sex, she has found a certain amount of pleasure in your society, because you have

made it a study to be agreeable and attentive to her. Given the same conditions, and any man can make an impression upon a girl. But the ease with which it can be accomplished does not lessen the cowardliness of the act."

"I repudiate your charge of cowardice," cried Ranleagh.

"You seem to be nice about the choice of terms," Douglas answered. "But I fail to see how conduct that will not bear the light of day can be otherwise designated. However, though you may not like the sound of the word, the construction I put upon your acts would be endorsed by all right-thinking men and women. Not to waste further time in idle quibbles, let me inform you that if you think the lady with whom I have the honour to claim kindredship bears anything like affection for you, you labour under a most mistaken notion, and the sooner you dismiss it from your mind the better it will be for yourself. However foolish Miss Dudley may have been, she has, I believe, too much sound sense to throw herself away upon a common and vulgar person."

Ranleagh crimsoned a little as this last

thrust was made. But in a sense it gave him some relief, since it conveyed the idea that the marriage was still a secret, and for Edith's sake he rejoiced at this. He was willing to endure and suffer, to sacrifice himself if that were necessary, but he could not bear the thought of her being a sufferer by his indiscretion.

"Common I may be socially," he answered, "but I will not plead guilty to vulgarity. You come here as Miss Dudley's champion, and you pretend to expound her feelings, but I take the liberty of inquiring upon what authority you do this?"

Ranleagh asked the question, not that he thought any good would arise from his so doing, but he felt annoyed at Norman's superciliousness, and he was rather glad to get the opportunity of making the retort courteous.

Douglas, however, felt insulted by it. His passion was aroused, and he exclaimed :

"You are a cad for daring to ask such a thing. I am the lady's cousin, I have always looked upon her as my future wife, and yet you, a plebeian rascal, whose origin is unknown, dare to ask me by what right I

champion her. I am degrading myself by holding parley with such a knave, and if I had a horsewhip in my possession I would lay it about your shoulders."

Ranleagh was very heated and flushed now. He moved close to Douglas and said passionately :

"I refute your vile epithet. I am neither knave nor cad. While you confined yourself to the language of a gentleman I was willing to respectfully listen to you as such, but since you have made yourself a blackguard I refuse to hold further conversation with you."

To be thus bearded was more than Norman's powers of endurance could tolerate. His passion rose and got the better of his discretion. He raised his open hand and with a rapid movement struck Ranleagh across the face. In an instant the blow was returned with interest. John clenched his fist and struck his opponent heavily in the chest so that he reeled and staggered. Douglas quickly recovered himself, and Ranleagh stood upon the defensive. Douglas seemed astounded. He certainly was cowed. His face was pale and his lips were colourless. It was man to man, each armed with only

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nature's weapons, but Norman was by no means inclined to try conclusions with his redoubtable foe. Such a mode of battle was new to him, and whether he came out victor or vanquished, the result would be unsatisfactory in the extreme. Some moments passed before he had gained sufficient command of himself to speak. Then he turned to Carruthers, who had stood unmoved during the contest, and said :

"I call upon you to witness that this ruffian has assaulted me."

"You lie," cried Ranleagh fiercely. "You have accused me of cowardice. You struck me in the face, and whether it be lord or beggar, the man is not born from whom I would take a blow without just cause. I am neither slave nor craven, and I resolutely refuse now to acknowledge you as my superior. I command you to move away and let me pass."

Douglas was standing right in front of and close to the doorway. John's language stirred his blood, and aroused the lurking devil in his nature, and he felt that at that moment he could, if it had been possible, have ground his enemy into the dust. But

John Ranleagh was a powerful and muscular man. His face was full of stern, defiant resolution. And though Norman knew that Dick was ranged on his side, and only waited the word of command from him, he was sufficiently a diplomatist to see that under the circumstances negotiations were better than open warfare. His object was to get John out of the way, and by quarrelling with him he would frustrate this object. In a voice that was not free from trepidation, he said :

“Your language is insulting in the extreme. But I am willing to confess that I have in some measure forgotten myself. Your own conduct, however, is so bad that I do not feel it is incumbent upon me to offer you an apology. If you were a gentleman by birth and position, I might act differently. I did not come down here, however, to quarrel with you. That was very far from my intention or wish. We have had blow for blow. We have both been a little hot, a little irrational, though it must be confessed that you were the aggressor in the first instance. Inasmuch that, if you had kept your position, and not dared

to have aspired to winning the affections of a lady so far above you, such a scene as this might have been avoided. I feel that I am considerably degraded. But for that lady's sake I am willing to let this matter drop, though I must make certain stipulations. Before Miss Dudley's honour is compromised by this scandal getting abroad, you must go away ; and it was to make this proposal to you that I condescended to come here. If you have any sense of honour or one spark of manhood, you will not hesitate to adopt the course I suggest. The lady will also be sent away for a time, so that her silly infatuation may wear off. What I have to suggest now is that you should go abroad. Whatever place you like to name, I will give you a sufficient sum of money to pay all your expenses. I do not wish you to look upon this in the light of a bribe. But something must be done for all our sakes to hush up this painful affair in which you have played such an unworthy and unprincipled part. I don't know that there is anything more to be said. If you consent to my arrangement, I will lodge a sufficient sum of money in your hands for all your necessities to-morrow

morning, if you tell me where you are to be found."

He ceased speaking, he almost held his breath with anxiety, lest the man he was appealing to should reject the offer, and announce his intention of claiming the wife that the law had given him, and whom no man could legally take away.

But Ranleagh had no such intention. He naturally inferred that Douglas was in ignorance about the marriage. The forged letter, which he believed to be from his wife, not Norman's words, was the power that moved him.

"I treat your offer with the scorn it merits," was his indignant answer. Douglas clenched his teeth, and his brow darkened with a frown. "Were I suffering from the direst necessity, I would not touch a pennypiece of your money. I hold you in contempt, Mr. Douglas; for the man who could stoop to play the spy, as you did last night, is unworthy the name of a gentleman." The listener winced, and he regretted that he had made a statement in the letter about having been a witness to the meeting in the cottage. "You will be satisfied, however, to hear,"

John continued, "that it is my intention to go away. But no word that you have said has influenced me to take this step. I shall go away ; go to the ends of the earth if I can; but let me inform you, sir, that I shall do so because Miss Dudley herself has requested me to go, and I bow in deference to her wishes."

It was Norman's moment of triumph. A sinister smile wreathed itself about his lips. He was the victor after all, and his foe was at his mercy. He felt that he had played a good game, and that the triumph was worth what he had suffered and risked.

"Then I am to understand that you totally reject my offer," he said haughtily.

"I totally and scornfully reject it," John answered.

"Very well, then ; further negotiations are useless. I was willing to give you pecuniary aid, but since you refuse to accept it, my mission ends, and I wish you good-night. I am obliged to you, Dick," turning to Caruthers, "for having granted me the use of your cottage. I have implicit confidence in you, and charge you not to mention under any

circumstances what has transpired here this evening."

Dick saluted his employer, then walking to the door he threw it open. The rain was pouring down steadily again, and the night was very dark though the lightning was still playing about the horizon.

"I think you had better wait a bit, sir," Dick observed. "This rain can't last long."

"No, thank you, I shall not wait. I came armed against the weather. Help me on with my cloak. That will do. Thank you. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Douglas went out into the darkness, and his hurrying footsteps were soon lost to hearing. Then Dick turned to John, who stood debating in his own mind whether he should wait for a few minutes or go at once, and said :

"Perhaps you will wait for a while. You are welcome if you will."

"Yes ; I think I will wait," said John. "I have nothing but a thin coat on, and this rain will soon saturate it."

"Then you won't mind being alone for a

few minutes?" Dick replied. "I want to go into the mill and get a loaf of bread from one of the chaps for my supper. He obliges me sometimes if my cupboard happens to be bare."

"O no; I have no objections to being left alone. You won't be absent long, I suppose?"

"No."

"Well, if you are, I shall go if the rain clears off at all."

"All right, mate. Go when you like. You can leave the shanty by itself. I am not afraid of any one running away with my plate."

Dick hurried off, and Ranleagh seated himself in a chair and commenced to smoke, thinking it would help to smooth his ruffled feelings. Carruthers soon reached the foot of the little bridge. Then he stopped and listened. The water was roaring hoarsely, and breaking with great force against the mill wheel. But he strained his ears, for above the roar of the water he heard other sounds—the sounds of approaching footsteps. And he strained his eyes too, for as the fitful gleams of lightning lit up the

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horizon he fancied he could see a figure approaching him. It was a moment of terrible suspense. He had trapped his victim. That was easy enough; but to slay him was another matter. Such a deed required a certain amount of physical strength and reckless daring—two qualities that Dick was not rich in. He had eyed the stalwart and muscular form of Ranleagh, and seen something of his determination, and as he thought of this he felt that it was a job that he was not equal to himself; and if the means had been at hand he would have liked to have primed himself with “Dutch courage.” But the means were not there, and there was no time to be lost. If he succeeded he would become the possessor of a hundred pounds—a sum that seemed to him so enormous as to outweigh any lingering feeling of pity he might have had. His heart almost leaped into his mouth as his arm was grasped, but next moment he was reassured by a voice whispering :

“Deek, are you Deek Cruthers?”

He recognised Marie Corvisart, and stammered :

“Yes, yes, but how you startled me, why did you come upon me like that?”

“Hist!” she answered; “we must be careful. Where is he?”

“In my cottage.”

“That is good. And where is Monsieur Douglas?”

“Gone.”

“Ah! then it was his footstep I heard some time ago. I could see his figure by ze lightning as I stood in ze bushes.”

“Hark! what is that?” Dick exclaimed as he trembled with fear.

“Nozing but ze rain on ze trees,” she whispered.

“No, I could swear it was footsteps close to us.”

“Pah! you are like ze child, afraid of your shadow. But what is he doing?”

“Waiting for the rain to give over. I told him I was going to the mill, but that was an excuse to get out. He will not wait long.”

“Is he sure to come this way?”

“Yes, if he is going to Springdale.”

Dick started again, and almost clung to the woman beside him.

“By Heaven I could swear I heard some one moving among those bushes. Did you not hear something?”

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"Yes, I heard somezing crackling, but it is ze rabbits on ze sticks."

The guilty pair were silent for some minutes, then Carruthers asked :

"Have you got the money?"

"Yes," was her only answer.

For a moment a thought came into his head that it would be easy to rob her. But the next instant he saw what a rash move that would be. She was a desperate woman. Her screams would rise above the roaring stream and reach the dwellers in the mill, and the complicated difficulties that would thereby arise would involve him in a net from which he would not be able to escape. The contemplated murder was far easier of accomplishment. An unsuspecting victim came up. Two persons sprang out of ambush. A dexterous push, and the victim would be struggling in the hissing water, from which it would be almost impossible to escape alive.

"Hark, he is coming," he whispered, as he drew the woman on one side, and they both crouched down.

John Ranleagh sat in the cottage until he

grew tired of waiting. Moreover, the candle that Dick had put into the bottle had burnt out with a fizz and a splutter, and John was left in darkness. The rain having lessened considerably, he determined to go, and closing the door he took his way towards the bridge. The rain beat in his face, so he buttoned up his coat, and bending his head pushed along.

"You must have ze courage," Marie whispered to her trembling companion. "If we fail we shall be all undone."

It was a desperate moment for Carruthers. He wished himself far away, and might even then have retreated if he had not been in such close proximity to the hundred pounds. One supreme effort and the money was his. He had little time for thought, however. The unsuspecting victim drew near.

The rest was one of those quick hurried actions that one often sees in a drama, but seldom if ever in real life, though the drama is but an exact copy of that which has occurred, which does occur, and which will occur as long as time lasts.

John Ranleagh reached the foot of the bridge. Like a wild beast from its lair Carruthers darted forward, and placing his

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leg before John threw him. Marie too rushed forward, and bringing her lips close to the ear of John, she hissed :

“ Ze woman you have wronged kills you. You are a dog.”

Her fierce mad strength was united to that of her desperate and now reckless companion. There was a tearing away of the victim's hands which had grasped the sides of the bridge. There was a terrible thrust, an awful splash, and John Ranleagh was battling for life with the fierce giant the mill stream, which had borrowed strength from his brothers the storm-wind and the rain, and laughed hoarsely as he caught up this human straw, and whisked him round, and sucked him down, and drew him onwards, and cast him back, and howled “ death ” in his ears, and blinded his eyes, and choked his lungs, and then flung him with a wild shriek against the mill wheel.

It was all the work of a few brief minutes. So brief that to tell them would be to raise a smile of incredulity on the face of the reader or the listener. But such deeds are the work of moments only, though the time to the chief actors may seem hours. The thread of

human life is easily snapped when circumstances are favourable.

As their victim fell into the boiling waters, Marie and Dick peered over the bridge into the black depths. But they saw nothing—heard nothing but the giant's exultant roar, for no human cry ascended.

"Come, I must go!" Marie exclaimed, as she started to her feet and dragged her companion up. Dick was like a child in her hands. He was dumb and weak with fear. "Here, take zis," and she thrust some notes into his hand. "Good-night."

She had crossed the bridge and was gone.

Then, with an inward cry of fear, the man rushed away to his hut; and having reached it he barred the door and threw himself down on his straw, and nervously grasped the blood-money in his hand, which was thrust deep into the pocket of his ragged trousers.

CHAPTER XV.

“YOU HAVE THE HEART OF A TRUE MAN, AND
THE SOUL OF A PHILOSOPHER.”

As Carruthers rushed away, his heart almost standing still with fear, there suddenly rose up from a clump of bushes, close to the foot of the bridge, a ragged and forlorn-looking man. He rose up suddenly; he disappeared suddenly, for with one bound he sprang into the boiling mill stream. It was quite dark, and he could not see anything, save when the flashes of lightning came, but they came now at much longer intervals. The waters tried to do with him as they had done a few minutes ago with the other man. They tossed him about; they sucked him here; they threw him there, but he battled fiercely with the giant.

He was a stout and bold swimmer. In a few moments he had cleared the water from his eyes, and he was defying the giant to take him anywhere but where he wanted to go, though where that was he did not exactly know.

He raised his head up and shouted :

“ Hi ! ”

Then he tried to listen for a response, but he could hear nothing but the roar of the stream.

“ Hi ! ” he shouted again, more lustily. “ Hi ! ” he repeated for the third time, and then a response was borne to his ears. That response was a faint cry for help. It came from the direction of the mill wheel. In an instant he had shaped his course there. The water was rushing with terrific force under the sluice, so that all the swimmer's strength and all his tact were needed to avoid being sucked under. A flash of lightning came, and by its light his quick eyes were enabled to see the form of a man clinging to the wheel. A few sturdystrokes brought the swimmer into the dead water that glided under the wheel, and came round a bank, and then rushed with a roar under the sluice. He raised his hand

and grasped one of the spokes, and when he had recovered sufficient breath, he said :

“Where are you ?”

The answer he got was an almost inaudible groan. He put his other arm out in the direction from whence it came, and encircled the form of John Ranleagh, who, with that saving touch, lost all consciousness, and loosed the death-like grip he had retained of the wheel. And so supporting the inanimate body with one hand and holding on with the other, the brave man waited until he had recovered some of his spent strength. Then he took to the water again, keeping the head of Ranleagh above the stream.

It was a desperate fight now, for he had to tow his burden against the current.

The giant seemed to screech with delight as he saw what little progress the puny efforts of this pigmy enabled him to make. The giant tugged with might and main to drag the heavily-weighted man back to the sluice, so that he might dash his life out against the iron gate, and toss him about like a reed, and finally fling him over the weir a mangled mass of clay. But the man also struggled with might and main to defeat the giant.

It was nerve and brain opposed to a terrible mechanical force. The slightest failure of either, and all would be lost. But the swimmer was evidently no 'prentice hand in the art. He struggled nobly, stubbornly, defiantly. He made headway towards the bridge; slowly, it was true, but still it was progress. And when many minutes had passed, minutes that seemed hours to this bold man, who was fighting gloriously for two lives—fighting single-handed against terrible odds—the mad tumbling waters, and the darkness of the night—I say, that after many minutes of almost superhuman efforts to go against the current, the swimmer suddenly altered his course, and making a bold dash across the stream, reached the bank where the long grass and the alders gave him safe anchorage.

He was exhausted and spent; but when he had taken a few deep inspirations he got his knee on to the bank, and raised himself up by means of the branches. He clung tenaciously to the collar of Ranleagh. He tugged with might and main until he had dragged the body out of the water. Then, like a dripping dog, that had won a life from the waves, he

sunk down prostrate over the body, and breathed stertorously after his great exertion.

And thus Nicky—for he it was, who a little while ago had been branded as a coward—had done a deed of daring and heroism that the bravest of men might well have been proud of.

Nicky soon recovered, and then turned his attention to the man he had rescued. Ranleagh was breathing heavily. Nicky chafed his limbs ; he moved him about, and resorted to all the means he could think of to restore the suspended animation. His efforts were rewarded at last. Ranleagh groaned, then he turned over, then he spoke.

“Where am I?” were his first words.

“You are here, mate,” Nicky answered, which answer did not convey any accurate information as to the precise locality of “here,” and, as a consequence, owing to Nicky’s indefinite mode of expressing himself, Ranleagh was necessitated to ask again:

“And where is here?”

“Why, near the mill stream, and close to the old mill.”

“And may I ask who you are?”

"Me? Well, I—oh, that is—well, I'm nobody."

This again was by no means a satisfactory answer, but poor Nicky knew no better, and it was the best he could give.

Ranleagh managed by the aid of his rescuer to sit up. He pressed his hand to his head and moaned :

"I have an awful pain in the head. It seems to me that there is a wound there. But let me see, Mr. Nobody, I've a recollection that I was attacked by somebody. Of the latter fact I think there can be no doubt, seeing that this *somebody* hurled me into the water. The rest is a sort of dream. The whole affair was so sudden that I had no time for thought, scarcely for action. I remember battling with the water, then receiving a violent blow on the head, and I suppose I was stunned, for the rest is a blank. But am I right in thinking that I owe my life to you?"

"Well, I went in the water after you and pulled you out. But I will tell you all about it some other time. I'll run across to the mill now, and get some assistance, if you don't mind being left here until I come back."

Ranleagh grasped the arm of Nicky and held him.

"No, no, you must not go," he cried.

"And why not?"

"Because I do not want the people to know of this outrage."

"Not want them to know!" cried the other in astonishment. "But surely you will bring them as done it up for it?"

"Bring whom up?"

"Why, Dick Carruthers and the woman. I know her. I saw her once. She lives up at the hall."

"Hush!" Ranleagh murmured, as he caught the hand of Nicky.

"Be careful how you speak. You are a sterling fellow. Of that you have given practical proof in fishing me out of the water. But you must have some discretion. This attempt upon my life has been made for reasons that I am not at liberty to explain now. It will serve the purpose for me to say, that if the affair became known and should get into a police court, revelations would have to be made that might seriously compromise a lady. It is some satisfaction for me to know that the dastardly attempt to murder

me has been frustrated by your timely interference. And I am quite content to wait, feeling sure that time will bring its own revenge."

"Well, I am not much of a scholard, and may be I don't quite understand you, but you seem a queer sort of chap to want to let these people as tried to murder you get off."

"Perhaps I am queer, my good friend, but I am acting, as I think, for the best. I must go from here, however, for I am wet and cold, and the pain in my head is terrific. Help me to rise—by the way, you haven't told me your name."

"My name, sir? Well, the fact is I ain't got a name worth calling a name. I'm known as Nicky, I suppose that's cos I was christened Nicholas."

"Well, Nicholas——"

"No, no, call me Nicky, please, cos I likes it best. It sounds familiar like."

"Nicky, then, kindly help me to rise."

By putting his arm round Nicky's neck, and taking hold of one of his hands, Ranleigh struggled to his feet. But had it not been for his rescuer's support he would have fallen, for

he reeled like a drunken man, and felt giddy and sick.

"I—I—am very ill," he stammered, almost gasping for breath. "And I think there is blood trickling down my face."

Nicky put his hand on the place indicated, and then drew it away with an exclamation of alarm.

"You are wounded," he said. "Mayhap it's serious. Let me run to the mill and get summat."

"No, no, for Heaven's sake, no. I shall be better directly. I must go back to the town. I have an appointment and am compelled to keep it. Let me lean on your arm, and I think I shall be able to manage. There. Thank you. I can get on nicely now."

With his companion's help John managed to walk a considerable distance, though it was only by dint of great perseverance, for he was evidently suffering a good deal. They were drawing near the town, and had reached the high-road. Here Ranleagh became so exhausted that he was obliged to lean against a tree, and then, by the light of a lamp that stood on the opposite side, Nicky perceived that one side of John's face was

covered with clotted blood, and his clothes were torn and draggled.

"I say, mate," he whispered, "you've had a bad knock on the side of your head, and you are covered with blood. It won't do for you to go into the town like this. Hollo, old chap, hold up!" Nicky cried, as John reeled and almost fell. "See here, mate, you sit down and I'll run and get somebody."

Ranleagh gripped the supporting arm that was around his waist, and with a groan of pain he murmured :

"You must not go ; I shall be better soon. There is nothing serious the matter ; I am weak from loss of blood, that is all. Oh, dear," he suddenly exclaimed, as a twinge of pain shot through his head. "Nicky, I feel as if I was going to faint. If I do you will not leave me. Promise me that. I shall soon get over it. Promise me, promise me, Nicky."

"All right, mate ; all right," Nicky answered assuringly, as he saw the other's agitation. But the words had scarcely left his lips when Ranleagh slid to the ground. The poor simple fellow, who had rescued him

from a watery grave, was in a terrible state, and at a loss how to act. The road was deserted. Although the rain had left off, not a soul was in sight. For anything he knew, Ranleagh might be dying; and, if that were the case, Nicky thought he might be accused of having assaulted him. It was an awkward predicament, and the unfortunate fellow was distracted. He looked up and down the road, but, as far as the eye could reach, nothing human met his sight. The clouds were breaking away, and through the rifts the stars were peeping. The illiterate waif, who had risked his own life to save another, looked upward to where the stars glittered, and breathed a prayer. It was a strange prayer, though, for Nicky did not know how to pray. It was a short prayer, but full of noble eloquence notwithstanding, for it came from the man's heart. It was called into being by the dilemma in which he found himself, and because he wanted help; but there was no human help near, and so he asked help from another source. He merely said, as his eyes were fixed up there where the drifting clouds were hurrying along, and leaving the stars bare, to shine on the rain-refreshed earth, he

merely said: "Will the good God guide me, for I'm only an ignorant fellow?" Perhaps Nicky had never uttered the name of the Supreme Being for many years before. It may be he had never so much as thought of Him. But the earnest, pleading sincerity with which he put up that prayer now must have assured its being heard. Who dares to doubt it?

Perhaps one of the unseen spirits which are said to attend on human beings was sent at once to guide him, for a few yards from where Nicky was standing was a gate. He moved to this gate. It led into a field, or what had been a field, for it was full of clay-pits now, the clay having been dug out for brick-making. Nicky knew the place, and he wondered why he had not thought of it before. He remembered then that there was a large shed down in a hollow, formed by two big mounds, and that this shed was used by the navvies to get their meals in, when they were working in the field in the day-time. As Nicky remembered this he opened the gate; it was only fastened by a long wooden latch. He hurried back to the spot where John still lay in a state of insensi-

bility. He stooped down, and passed an arm under the prostrate man's neck and the other under his legs, and by these means he lifted him up. It was a weighty burden, and Nicky staggered under it. But he reached the field side of the gate, then he put the burden down, shut the gate, rested for a few moments, raised Ranleagh up again in the same way, staggered forward over the rough ground, and down into the hollow, which was not many yards off, and so he reached the navvies' hut. It was deserted now and silent. Round the sides planks resting on brick were placed to serve as seats. On one of these Nicky deposited the insensible man, taking off his own ragged jacket, and folding it up to make a pillow. That done he explored the shed. There was a heap of wood and shavings in one corner. It was the navvies' store of fuel. There was also a large iron fire-pan, standing on three legs in the centre of the shed. He quickly had some shavings and wood in this. Then he fumbled in his pockets for a match. And it took a great deal of fumbling before he found one, or what remained of one, for it was only the sulphur half; fortunately it was dry, for he

had thrown his waistcoat off before he had plunged into the water. He made a nice little hole in the shavings, and took extra precautions to ensure getting a light from his solitary match. It was an old-fashioned match, and took a good deal of coaxing and friction before it condescended to break into a spluttering, blue, sulphurous glimmer, and finally after much spluttering and the emission of a good deal of obnoxious fume, to brighten up into a red flame, which was speedily communicated to the shavings, and the wood crackled cheerfully in the fire-place.

Having procured a fire, Nicky turned his attention to his patient, who was still unconscious. A broken iron bucket lay under one of the benches. Nicky procured this, went to one of the ponds, dipped up some water, came back to the shed, and took an old coloured handkerchief from his pocket, and with this substitute for a sponge he proceeded to wipe the blood off Ranleagh's face and neck which had flowed from a large gash over the right temple, and which had no doubt been caused by coming in contact with the mill-wheel. To do this more effectually he turned down the shirt-collar, and un-

buttoned it at the front. As he did so he was surprised to see a large star—a Crimson Star—about the size of a crown piece, on Ranleagh's breast. It had evidently been tattooed in the same way that sailors tattoo themselves; but it was an artistically-designed star, with the five radiating points, and the person who had placed it there had certainly been an adept in the art of tattooing.

"Well, that's a curious mark for a fellow to have on him, anyhow," Nicky murmured, as he cleaned the clotted blood away and washed out the wound. "I wonder what's been the fancy for putting that there, now? Well, he's a queer chap altogether. I wonder what his object is in keeping this affair dark?—Well, old chap, how do you feel now?" he asked, as Ranleagh opened his eyes and stared about him in a dazed kind of way.

It was some minutes before he spoke. He did not realise his position at first, and when he did he did not answer the question, but asked another.

"What place is this? Let me see—what is your name?"

"Nicky."

"Nicky, what place is this? Where are we?"

"In the shed in the old clayfield. You tumbled down there on the road, you know, and I fetched you here, cos I had promised you not to call anybody; and I didn't know what else to do."

"You are a splendid fellow, Nicky," Ranleagh answered, with a trace of emotion in his voice, for this man's devotion touched him.

"I don't know as I am, mate; leastways, nobody else ever thought so. Most people have generally seemed to think I was a sort of vermin, and ought to be killed for the good of society. But I had better say nowt about that. I suppose I ain't much good."

"By Heavens, Nicky," Ranleagh cried enthusiastically, "if every man had such a noble heart in his breast as you have got, this would be a different world."

"Look here, mate, don't talk that way," Nicky answered, as he moved the iron fire-stand nearer his patient, so that he might get the warmth, for he was shivering. "I ain't used to being talked to in that way. My mate, Dick, told me to-night I was a skunk."

I thought I was till I found out that he weren't to be trusted, and then says I to myself, 'Well, the worst that ever I done was to trap game, but I ain't black-hearted nohow.' There, that's better, ain't it? You are warmer now?"

"Yes, thank you. Help me to sit up, Nicky; these wet things are most uncomfortable. I must get away as soon as possible, so as to change them."

"Just take 'em off, mate, and let me hold 'em to the fire; they will soon dry."

"No, thank you. I shall not hurt; I am pretty hardy. I feel terribly weak though. I suppose that is from loss of blood. Possibly if I had been a swimmer this wouldn't have happened."

"What, you ain't a swimmer?"

"No; but you are, of course."

"Well, rather. I'd swim with here and there a one. Why, Lor' bless you, I could live in the water almost. Swimming's about the only thing I can do."

"I think, Nicky, you haven't a very good opinion of yourself. But just tell me how it was you came to deliver me out of the jaws of death?"

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"Well, there's nowt much to tell, as I know on."

"Tell me what little there is, then."

"Why, I've been staying with Dick Caruthers. You know Dick?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've been stopping along with him for the last few weeks. Him and me used to go out sometimes at night to snare rabbits. Last night we was in a preserve up near the hall, and a gent comes along and cops us. I bolted, thinking my mate was after me, because, you see, it's no use a fellow getting locked up if he can help it. But Dick lagged behind, and when I saw him again he said I was a coward for bolting. Just as I had turned down on the straw in Dick's hut, and was going off to sleep, I was surprised by a gent coming in. It was the same gent as was up in the wood. I couldn't hear much what he and Dick talked about, because they spoke very low, and there was a thick partition atween us. But I made out that this gent was a soldier—I mean a hoffer. Well, you know, Dick's been a soldier, so I suppose that's how it was he made it all right with this gent. The gent said he'd come again in the

evening ; so, thinks I, there's summat in the wind that's not altogether fair. I said nowt to Dick about it though, and when we had got our sleep over he said I must clear out. I thought that rather shabby, and I tells him so ; and says I, ' I'm off to London.' But in the course of the day I changed my mind, and thinks I, I'll just see what Dick's game is ; so I goes back. Well, we had a bit of a row, and he said I must go out until after the gent had been. I went out, but I kept my eye on the cottage. I saw you go in, then I saw the gent go in. I took a peep through the window, and I guessed there was something strange on. Presently I saw a woman hanging about ; and, thinks I to myself, women don't come out in the rain like this for nothing. There's something very strange on, and I'm bound to know more about it. By-and-by the gent goes ; then Master Dick comes out. He goes in the same direction as the gent. I followed quietly, and sees the woman go up to Dick, and though I couldn't hear much, it didn't want a ' Philadelphia lawyer ' to tell that there was summat bad going on. In a little time you came up, and they had you in the water in a twinkling. It seemed to me to be so sudden like, that a

fellow couldn't even think what to do ; but as soon as I see Dick and the woman run away, I jumps in after you, and pulls you out. There, that's all. I wish I had a pipe of 'bacca now, I should feel as happy as a king."

As Ranleagh looked at this ragged, half-starved man, his admiration could find no words wherewith to express itself. The unsophisticated and modest manner with which he told his story, and the ludicrous and abrupt way in which he ended, proved that he possessed qualities vastly superior to the class which he represented. He was a thorough Bohemian—homeless and friendless—and yet he seemed to be free from care; could perform a most heroic, daring deed, and his only worldly craving at that moment was for a pipe of "'bacca."

"Nicky," said John, as he took the other's hand and grasped it warmly, "you have the heart of a true man, and the soul of a philosopher."

CHAPTER XVI.

FALLEN AMONG THIEVES.

"WHAT'S a philosopher?" Nicky asked, as he stared thoughtfully at the flickering wood in the fire-pan.

In spite of the pain he was in, Ranleagh could not help smiling.

"A philosopher, Nicky, is one who is calm and collected under difficulties, and who has a certain amount of intuitive knowledge of the science of morality, and who is able to comprehend the mysterious working of those laws which govern Nature."

"Eh!" Nicky exclaimed, as he stared open-mouthed at the speaker. "Eh, that's rather too much for me. It's a kind o' dog-latin as I don't understand. You see I'm no scholard."

"That may be, Nicky, but you are still a philosopher."

"Well, perhaps I am if you say so. I suppose it's right."

"You are a singularly contented sort of fellow, Nicky. Have you no aspirations, no ambition now?"

"What's them, mate?"

Ranleagh laughed again.

"I mean, have you any desire to move in a different position, to be something better than what you are — socially of course. For, rugged though your nature is, it could scarcely be improved as far as its qualities go."

"Why, I've never thought of that. I'm not good enough as I know on for any different position. I'm something like a rat, I has to pick my living up best way I can, and live in any hole. Chaps don't like me, you know. If I get a job of work now and again, the other chaps keep away from me as though I was poison. Well, it's no use grumbling, so I just take things as they come. If I get a bit of bread and 'bacca I'm thankful, and if I don't I go without and say nowt."

"Have you no friends, Nicky?"

"Friends!" the man exclaimed ironically, if such a nature as his was capable of expressing irony. "Why, mate, you are chaffing. I never had ne'er a friend since poor Sally died." Nicky's voice actually trembled, and his eyes were misty.

"And who was Sally?" Ranleagh asked tenderly.

"Sally? Oh, well, she weren't much. She was only a tramp, same as me. But she were the best girl as ever I met. We travelled together for two years and we never had a word of difference." Nicky paused, turned his head away, and sighed. "Poor Sally, she were a good girl," he went on. "She was always doing summat for me, and looking arter me. Heigho! But you see she was delicate in the chest. She was coughing and spitting continually. And one night we was in a barn up in the north. A farmer's man put us in, good luck to him. It was Christmas Eve, and the cold was awful. I tried to keep my poor girl warm by cuddling her up, but she died in these 'ere arms. They held a—what's that you call it?"

"A coroner's inquest," Ranleagh suggested.

"Yes, they held a coroner's inquest on her to find out what she died on. And they asked me what her name was, but I couldn't tell them. I never knowed as she had any other name but Sally. And the doctor chap says, 'Ain't she your wife?' and I says, 'Yes.' 'Where were you married?' says he. 'Married!' says I. 'Yes, you fool,' say he; 'don't you understand? What church were you married at?' But I'd never been to no church, and I told him so; and he said I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I was to be off as fast as possible or I might get into trouble. But I waited till I had seen 'em bury her. They put her into the workhouse burial ground. Eh, dear! I've never been the same sort of chap since then. I always makes my way to that town every Christmas Eve, and I has a good look at the place where they put poor Sally in. She was a good girl was Sally. I've never had ne'er a friend since then. Heigho!"

"But have you no relations, Nicky?"

"No. I never had none."

"Isn't your father or mother living?"

"Father and mother! I never had none; well, I mean I was found in a street by a

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