

MAY AGNES FLEMING

SHARING HER CRIME: A
NOVEL

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CHAPTER I. THE PLOTTERS

"'Tis a woman hard of feature,
Old, and void of all good nature.
'Tis an ugly, envious shrew,
Railing forever at me and you." – Pope.

It was Christmas Eve. All day long crowds of gayly dressed people had walked the streets, basking in the bright wintry sunshine. Sleigh after sleigh went dashing past, with merrily jingling bells, freighted with rosy cheeks, and bright eyes, and youthful faces, all aglow with happiness.

But the sun must set on Christmas Eve, as on all other days; and redly, threateningly, angrily, he sank down in the far west. Dark, sullen clouds came rolling ominously over the heavens; the wind blew piercingly cold, accompanied with a thin, drizzling rain that froze ere it fell.

Gradually the streets were deserted as the storm increased in fury; but the Yule logs were piled high, the curtains drawn, and every house, *save one*, in the handsome street to which my story leads me, was all aglow, all ablaze with light.

In a lull of the storm the sounds of music and merry-making would rise and swell on the air, as light feet tripped merrily amid the mazes of the dance; or a silvery peal of laughter would break easily on the wayfarer's ear. The reflection of the light through the crimson curtains shed a warm, rosy glow over the snowy ground, brightening the gloom of that stormy winter's night.

But rising dark, grim, and gloomy amid those gayly lighted mansions, stood a large, quaint building of dark-red sandstone. It stood by itself, spectral, shadowy, and grand. No ray of light came from the gloomy windows that seemed to be hermetically sealed. All around was stern, black, and forbidding.

And yet – yes, from one solitary window there *did* stream a long, thin line of light. But even this did not look bright and cheerful like the rest; it had a cold, yellowish glare, making the utter blackness of the rest of the mansion blacker still by contrast.

The room from which the light issued was high and lofty. The uncarpeted floor was of black polished oak, as also were the wainscoting and mantel. The walls were covered with landscape paper, representing the hideous Dance of Death, in all its variety of frightful forms. The high windows were hung with heavy green damask, now black with dirt and age. A large circular table of black marble stood in one shadowy corner, and a dark, hard sofa, so long and black that it resembled a coffin, stood in the other.

A smoldering sea-coal fire, the only cheerful thing in that gloomy room, struggled for life in the wide, yawning chimney. Now it would die away, enveloping the apartment in gloom, and anon flame fitfully up, until the ghostly shadows on the wall would seem like a train of ghastly specters flitting by in the darkness. The elm trees in front of the house trailed their long arms against the window with a sound inexpressibly dreary; and the driving hail beat clamorously, as if for admittance.

On either side of the fire-place stood two large easy-chairs, cushioned with deep crimson velvet. In these, facing each other, sat two persons – a man and a woman – the only occupants of the room.

The woman was tall, straight, and stiff, and seemingly about fifty years of age. Her dress was a rustling black satin, with a small crape handkerchief fastened on her bosom with a magnificent diamond pin. Her hands, still small and white, were flashing with jewels as they lay quietly folded in her lap. A widow's cap rested on her head, which was alternately streaked with gray and jet. But her face – so stern, so rigid, no one could look upon it without a feeling of fear. The lips – so thin that she seemed to have no lips at all – were compressed with a look of unswerving determination. Her forehead was low and retreating, with thick black eyebrows meeting across the long, sharp nose, with a look at once haughty and sinister. And from under those midnight brows glittered and gleamed a pair of eyes so small, so sharp and keen – with such a look of cold, searching, *steely* brightness – that the boldest gaze might well quail before them. On that grim, hard face no trace of womanly feeling seemed ever to have lingered – all was stern, harsh, and freezingly cold. She sat rigidly erect in her chair, with her needle-like eyes riveted immovably on the face of her companion, who shifted with evident uneasiness beneath her uncompromising stare.

He was a man of forty, or thereabouts, so small of stature that, standing side by side, he could scarcely have reached the woman's shoulder. But, notwithstanding his diminutive size, his limbs were disproportionately large for his body, giving him the appearance of being all legs and arms. His little, round bullet-head was set on a prodigiously thick, bull-like neck; and his hair, short, and bristling up over his head, gave him very much the look of the sun, as pictured in the almanacs.

This prepossessing gentleman was arrayed in an immaculate suit of black, with a spotless white dickey, bristling with starch and dignity, and a most excruciating cravat. Half a dozen rings garnished his claw-like hands, and a prodigious quantity of watch-chain dangled from his vest. The worthy twain were engaged in deep and earnest conversation.

"Well, doctor," said the lady, in a cold, measured tone, that was evidently habitual, "no doubt you are wondering why I sent for you in such haste to-night."

"I never wonder, madam," said the doctor, in a pompous tone – which, considering his size, was quite imposing. "No doubt you have some excellent reason for sending for me, which, if necessary for me to know, you will explain."

"You are right, doctor," said the lady, with a grim sort of smile. "I *have* an excellent reason for sending for you. You are fond of money, I know."

"Why, madam, although it is the root of all evil – "

"Tush, man! There is no need for Satan to quote Scripture just now," she interrupted with a sneer. "Say, doctor, what would you do to earn five hundred dollars to-night?"

"Five hundred dollars?" said the doctor, his small eyes sparkling, while a gleam of satisfaction lighted up his withered face.

"Yes," said the lady, "and if well done, I may double the sum. What would you do for such a price?"

"Rather ask me what I would *not* do."

"Well, the job is an easy one. 'Tis but to – "

She paused, and fixed her eyes on his face with such a wild sort of gleam that, involuntarily, he quailed before her.

"Pray go on, madam. I'm all attention," he said, almost fearing to break the dismal silence. "'Tis but to —*what?*"

"Make away with – a woman and child!"

"Murder them?" said the doctor, involuntarily recoiling.

"Do not use that word!" she said, sharply. "Coward! do you really blanch and draw back! Methought one of your profession would not hesitate to send a patient to heaven."

"But, madam," said the startled doctor, "you know the penalty which the law awards for murder."

"Oh, I perceive," said the woman, scornfully, "it is not the crime you are thinking of, but your own precious neck. Fear not, my good friend; there is no danger of its ever being discovered."

"But, my *dear* madam," said the doctor, glancing uneasily at the stern, bitter face before him, "I have not the nerve, the strength, nor the –"

"*Courage!*" she broke in, passionately. "Oh, craven – weak, chicken-hearted, miserable craven! Go, then – leave me, and I will do it myself. You dare not betray me – you *could* not without bringing your neck to the halter – so I fear you not. Oh, coward! coward! why did not heaven make *me* a man?"

In her fierce outburst of passion she arose to her feet, and her tall figure loomed up like some unnaturally large, dark shadow. The man quailed in fear before her.

"Go!" she said, fiercely, pointing to the door, "You have refused to *share my crime*. Go! poor cowardly poltroon! but remember, Madge Oranmore never forgives nor forgets!"

"But, my dear Mrs. Oranmore, just listen to me one moment," said the doctor, alarmed by this threat. "I have not refused, I only objected. If you will have the goodness to explain – to tell me what I must do, I will – see about it."

"See about it!" hastily interrupted the lady. "You *can* do it – it is in your power; and yes, or no, must be your answer, immediately."

"But –"

"No buts, sir. I will not have them. If you answer yes, one thousand dollars and my future patronage shall be yours. If you say no, yonder is the door; and once you have crossed the threshold, beware! Now, Doctor Wiseman, I await your reply."

She seated herself again in her chair; and, folding her hands in her lap, fixed her hawk-like eyes on his face, with her keen, searching gaze. His eyes were bent in troubled thought on the floor. Not that the crime appalled him; but if detected —*that* was the rub. Doctor Wiseman was, as his name implies, a man of sense, with an exceedingly accommodating conscience, that would stretch *ad libitum*, and never troubled him with any such nonsense as remorse. But if it were discovered! With rather unpleasant vividness, the vision of a hangman and halter arose before him, and he involuntarily loosened his cravat. Still, one thousand dollars *were* tempting. Doctor Nicholas Wiseman had never been so perplexed in his life.

"Well, doctor, well," impatiently broke in the lady, "have you decided —*yes or no?*"

"Yes," said the doctor, driven to desperation by her sneering tone.

"'Tis well," she replied, with a mocking smile, "I knew you were too sensible a man to refuse. After all, 'tis but a moment's work, and all is over."

"Will you be good enough to give me the explanation now, madam?" said the doctor, almost shuddering at the cold, unfeeling tone in which she spoke.

"Certainly. You are aware, doctor, that when I married my late husband, Mr. Oranmore, he was a widower with one son, then three years old."

"I am aware of that fact, madam."

"Well, you also know that when this child, Alfred, was five years of age, *my* son, Barry, was born."

"Yes, madam."

"Perhaps you think it unnecessary for me to go so far back, doctor, but I wish everything to be perfectly understood. Well, these two boys grew up together, were sent to school and college together, and treated in every way alike, *outwardly*; but, of course, when at home, Barry was treated best. Alfred Oranmore had all the pride of his English forefathers, and scorned to complain; but I could see, in his flashing eyes and curling lips, that every slight was noticed. Mr. Oranmore never interfered with me in my household arrangements, nor did his son ever complain to him; though, if he had, Mr. Oranmore had too much good sense to mention it to *me*."

The lady compressed her lips with stately dignity, and the doctor looked down with something as near a smile as his wrinkled lips could wear. *He* knew very well Mr. Oranmore would not have

interfered; for never after his marriage had the poor man dared to call his soul his own. The lady, however, did not perceive the smile, and went on:

"When Barry left college, he expressed a desire to travel for two or three years on the Continent; and I readily gave him permission, for Mr. Oranmore was then dead. Alfred was studying law, and I knew his dearest wish was to travel; but, as a matter of course, it was out of the question for *him* to go. I told him I could not afford it, that it would cost a great deal to pay Barry's expenses, and that he must give up all idea of it. Barry went, and Alfred staid; though, as things afterward turned out, it would have been better had I allowed him to go."

Her eyes flashed, and her brows knit with rising anger, as she continued;

"You know old Magnus Erliston – Squire Erliston, as they call him. You know also how very wealthy he is reputed to be – owning, besides the magnificent estate of Mount Sunset, a goodly portion of the village of St. Mark's. Well, Squire Erliston has two daughters, to the eldest of whom, in accordance with the will of his father (from whom he received the property), Mount Sunset Hall will descend. Before my husband's death, I caused him to will his whole property to my son Barry, leaving Alfred penniless. Barry's fortune, therefore, is large, though far from being as enormous as that Esther Erliston was to have. Well, the squire and I agreed that, as soon as Barry returned from Europe they should be married, and thus unite the estates of Oranmore and Erliston. Neither Barry nor Esther, with the usual absurdity of youth, would agree to this arrangement; but, of course, their objection mattered little. I knew I could easily manage Barry by the power of my stronger will; and the squire, who is rough and blustering, could, without much difficulty, frighten Esther into compliance – when all our schemes were suddenly frustrated by that meddler, that busy-body, Alfred Oranmore."

She paused, and again her eyes gleamed with concentrated hatred and passion.

"He went to Mount Sunset, and by some means met Esther Erliston. Being what romantic writers would call one of 'nature's princes,' he easily succeeded in making a fool of her; they eloped, were married secretly, and Squire Erliston woke up one morning to learn that his dainty heiress had abandoned papa for the arms of a *beggar*, and was, as the wife of a penniless lawyer, residing in the goodly city of Washington.

"Pretty Esther doubtless imagined that she had only to throw herself at papa's feet and bathe them with her tears, to be received with open arms. But the young lady found herself slightly mistaken. Squire Erliston stamped, and raged, and swore, and frightened every one in St. Mark's out of their wits; and then, calming down, 'vowed a vow' never to see or acknowledge his daughter more. Esther was then eighteen. If she lived to reach her majority, Mount Sunset would be hers in spite of him. But the squire had vowed that before she should get it, he would burn Sunset Hall to the ground and plow the land with salt. Now, doctor, I heard that, and set myself to work. Squire Erliston has a younger daughter; and I knew that, if Esther died, that younger daughter would become heiress to all the property, and she would then be just as good a wife for Barry as her sister. Well, I resolved that Esther should no longer stand in my way, that she should never live to reach her majority. Start not, doctor, I see that you do not yet know Madge Oranmore."

She looked like a very fiend, as she sat smiling grimly at him from her seat.

"Fortune favored me," she continued. "Alfred Oranmore, with two or three other young men, going out one day for a sail, was overtaken by a sudden squall – they knew little about managing a boat, and all on board were drowned. I read it in the papers and set out for Washington. After much difficulty I discovered Esther in a wretched boarding-house; for, after her husband's death, all their property was taken for debt. She did not know me, and I had little difficulty in persuading her to accompany me home. Three days ago we arrived. I caused a report to be circulated at Washington that the wife of the late Alfred Oranmore had died in great poverty and destitution. The story found its way into the papers; I sent one containing the account of her death to Squire Erliston; so all trouble in that quarter is over."

"And *Esther*?" said the doctor, in a husky whisper.

"Of her we will speak by and by," said the lady, with a wave of her hand; "at present I must say a few words of my son Barry. Three weeks ago he returned home; but has, from some inexplicable cause, refused to reside here. He boards now in a distant quarter of the city. Doctor, what says the world about this – is there any reason given?"

"Well, yes, madam," said the doctor, with evident reluctance.

"And what is it, may I ask?"

"I fear, madam, you will be offended."

"Sdeath! man, go on!" she broke in passionately. "What sayeth the far-seeing, all-wise world of him?"

"'Tis said he has brought a wife with him from Europe, whom he wishes to conceal."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the lady, scornfully. "Yes, I heard it too – a barefooted bog-trotter, forsooth! But 'tis false, doctor! false, I tell you! You must contradict the report everywhere you hear it. That any one should dare to say that my son – my proud, handsome Barry – would marry a potato-eating Biddy! Oh! but for my indignation I could laugh at the utter absurdity."

But the fierce gleam of her eye, and the passionate clenching of her hand, bespoke her in anything but a laughing humor.

"I would not for worlds this report should reach Lizzie Erliston," she said, somewhat more calmly. "And speaking of her brings me back to her sister. Doctor, Esther Oranmore lies in yonder room."

He startled slightly, and glanced uneasily in the direction, but said nothing.

"Doctor," continued Mrs. Oranmore, in a low, stern, impressive voice, while her piercing eyes seemed reading his very soul, "*she must never live to see the sun rise again!*"

"Madam!" he exclaimed, recoiling suddenly.

"You hear me, doctor, and you *must* obey. She must not live to see Christmas morning dawn."

"Would you have me murder her?" he inquired, in a voice quivering between fear and horror.

"If you will call it by that name, yes," she replied, still keeping her blazing eyes fixed immovably on his face. "She and her child must die."

"Her child!"

"Yes, come and see it. The night of its birth must be that of its death."

She rose, and making a motion for him to follow her, led the way from the apartment. Opening a heavy oaken door, she ushered him into a dim bed-room, furnished with a lounge, a square bedstead, whose dark drapery gave it the appearance of a hearse, and a small table covered with bottles and glasses. Going to the lounge, she pointed to something wrapped in a large shawl. He bent down, and the faint wail of an infant met his ear.

"*She* is yonder," said the lady, pointing to the bed; "examine these bottles; she will ask you for a drink, *give* it to her – you understand! Remember, you have promised." And before he could speak, she glided from the room.

CHAPTER II. THE DEATH OF ESTHER

"What shrieking spirit in that bloody room
Its mortal frame hath violently quitted?
Across the moonbeam, with a sudden gleam,
A ghostly shadow flitted." – Hood.

For a moment he stood still, stunned and bewildered. Understand? Yes, he understood her too well.

He approached the bed, and softly drew back the heavy, dark curtains. Lying there, in a troubled sleep, lay a young girl, whose face was whiter than the pillow which supported her. Her long hair streamed in wild disorder over her shoulders, and added to the wanness of her pale face.

She moaned and turned restlessly on her pillow, and opened a pair of large, wild eyes, and fixed them on the unprepossessing face bending over her. With lips and eyes opened with terror, she lay gazing, until he said, in as gentle a voice as he could assume;

"Do not be afraid of me – I am the doctor. Can I do anything for you, child?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, faintly; "give me a drink."

He turned hastily toward the table, feeling so giddy he could scarcely stand. A tiny vial, containing a clear, colorless liquid, attracted his eye. He took it up and examined it, and setting his teeth hard together, poured its contents into a glass. Then filling it with water he approached the bed, and raising her head, pressed it to her lips. His hand trembled so he spilt it on the quilt. The young girl lifted her wild, troubled eyes, and fixed them on his face with a gaze so long and steady that his own fell beneath it.

"Drink!" he said, hoarsely, still pressing it to her lips.

Without a word she obeyed, draining it to the last drop. Then laying her back on the pillow, he drew the curtain and left the room.

Mrs. Oranmore was sitting, as she had sat all the evening, stern and upright in her chair. She lifted her keen eyes as he entered, and encountered a face so pallid and ghastly that she almost started. Doctor Wiseman tottered rather than walked to a seat.

"Well?" she said, inquiringly.

"Well," he replied, hoarsely, "I have obeyed you."

"That *is* well. But pray, Doctor Wiseman, take a glass of wine; you are positively trembling like a whipped schoolboy. Go to the sideboard; nay, do not hesitate; *it* is not poisoned."

Her withering sneer did more toward reviving him than any wine could have done. His excitement was gradually cooling down beneath those calm, steady eyes, bent so contemptuously upon him.

He drank a glass of wine, and resumed his seat before the fire, watching sullenly the dying embers.

"Well, you have performed your task?"

"I have, madam, and earned my reward."

"Not quite, doctor; the infant is yet to be disposed of."

"Must it die, too?"

"Yes, but not here. You must remove it, in any way you please, but death is the safest, the surest."

"And why not here?"

"Because I do not wish it," she answered, haughtily; "that is enough for you, sirrah! You must take the child away to-night."

"What shall I do with it?"

"Dolt! blockhead! have you no brains?" she said, passionately. "Are you aware ten minutes' walk will bring you to the sea-side? Do you know the waves refuse nothing, and tell no tales? Never hesitate, man! You have gone too far to draw back. Think of the reward; one thousand dollars for ten minutes' work! Tush, doctor! I protest, you're trembling like a nervous girl."

"Is it not enough to make one tremble?" retorted the doctor, roused to something like passion by her deriding tone; "two murders in one night – is that *nothing*?"

"Pshaw! no – a sickly girl and a puling child more or less in the world is no great loss. Hark!" she added, rising suddenly, as a wild, piercing shriek of more than mortal agony broke from the room where Esther lay. "Did you hear that?"

Hear it! The man's face was horribly ghastly and livid, as shriek after shriek, wild, piercing, and shrill with anguish, burst upon his ear. Great drops of perspiration stood on his brow – his teeth chattered as though by an ague fit, and he trembled so perceptibly that he was forced to grasp the chair for support.

Not so the woman. She stood calm, listening with perfect composure to the agonizing cries, that were growing fainter and fainter each moment.

"It is well none of the servants are in this end of the house," she said, quietly; "or those loud screams would be overheard, and might give rise to disagreeable remarks."

Receiving no answer from her companion, she turned to him, and seeing the look of horror on his ghastly face, her lip curled with involuntary scorn. It was strange she could stand there so unmoved, knowing herself to be a murderess, with the dying cries of her victim still ringing in her ears.

They ceased at last – died away in a low, despairing moan, and then all grew still. The deep, solemn silence was more appalling than her shrieks had been, for they well knew they were stilled forever in death.

"All is over!" said Mrs. Oranmore, drawing a deep breath.

"Yes," was the answer, in a voice so hoarse and unnatural, that it seemed to issue from the jaws of death.

Again she looked at him, and again the mocking smile curled her lip.

"Doctor," she said, quietly, "you are a greater coward than I ever took you to be. I am going in now to see her – you had better follow me, if you are not *afraid*."

How sardonic was the smile which accompanied these words. Stunned, terrified as he was, it stung him, and he started after her from the room.

They entered the chamber of the invalid. Mrs. Oranmore walked to the bed, drew back the curtains, and disclosed a frightful spectacle.

Half sitting, half lying, in a strange, distorted attitude she had thrown herself into in her dying agony, her lips swollen and purple, her eyes protruding, her hair torn fiercely out by the roots, as she had clutched it in her fierce anguish, was Esther.

The straining eyeballs were ghastly to look upon – the once beautiful face was now swollen and hideous, as she lay stark dead in that lonely room.

Moment after moment passed away, while the murderers stood silently gazing on their victim. The deep silence of midnight was around – nothing was heard save the occasional drifting of the snow against the windows.

A stern, grave smile hovered on the lips of Mrs. Oranmore, as she gazed on the convulsed face of the dead girl. Drawing the quilt at last over her, she turned away, saying, mockingly:

"Where now, Esther Oranmore, is the beauty of which you were so proud? This stark form and ghastly face is now all that remains of the beauty and heiress of Squire Erliston. Such shall be the fate, sooner or later, of all who dare to thwart me."

Her eyes flamed upon the shrinking man beside her, with an expression that made him quake. A grim smile of self-satisfied power broke over her dark face as she observed it, and her voice had a steely tone of command, as she said:

"Now for the child. It must be immediately disposed of."

"And *she*?" said the doctor, pointing to the bed.

"I shall attend to that."

"If you like, madam, I will save you the trouble."

"No, sir," she replied, sharply; "though in life my enemy, her remains shall never be given up to the dissecting-knife. I have not forgotten she is a gentleman's daughter, and as such she shall be interred. Now you may go. Wrap the child in this, and —*return without her!*"

"You shall be obeyed, madam," said Doctor Wiseman, catching the infection of her reckless spirit. He stooped and raised the infant, who was still in a deep sleep.

Muffling it carefully in the shawl, he followed the lady from the room, and cautiously quitted the house.

The storm had now passed away; the piercing wind had died out, and the midnight moon sailed in unclouded majesty through the deep blue sky, studded with myriads of burning stars.

The cool night air restored him completely to himself.

Holding the still sleeping infant closer in his arms, he hurried on, until he stood on the sloping bank commanding a view of the bay.

The tide was rising. The waves came splashing in on the beach – the white foam gleaming coldly brilliant in the moonlight. The waters beyond looked cold, and sluggish, and dark – moaning in a strange, dreary way as they swept over the rocks. How *could* he commit the slumbering infant to those merciless waves? Depraved and guilty as he was, he hesitated. It lay so confidingly in his arms, slumbering so sweetly, that his heart smote him. Yet it must be done.

He descended carefully to the beach, and laying his living bundle on the snowy sands, stood like Hagar, a distance off, to see it die.

In less than ten minutes, he knew, the waves would have washed it far away.

As he stood, with set teeth and folded arms, the merry jingle of approaching sleigh-bells broke upon his startled ear. They were evidently approaching the place where he stood. Moved by a sudden impulse of terror, he turned and fled from the spot.

Guilt is ever cowardly. He sped on, scarcely knowing whither he went, until in his blind haste he ran against a watchman.

The unexpected shock sent both rolling over in the snow, which considerably cooled the fever in Doctor Wiseman's blood. The indignant "guardian of night," with an exclamation which wouldn't look well in print, laid hold of the doctor's collar. But there was vigor in Doctor Wiseman's dwarfed body, and strength in his long, lean arms; and with a violent effort he wrenched himself free from the policeman's tenacious grasp, and fled.

"Charley" started in pursuit, and seeing he would soon be overtaken, the doctor suddenly darted into the high, dark portico of an imposing-looking house, and soon had the satisfaction of beholding the angry watchman tear past like a comet, in full pursuit.

CHAPTER III. THE ASTROLOGER

"He fed on poisons, and they had no power,
But were a kind of nutriment; he lived
Through that which had been death to many men.
To him the book of night was opened wide,
And voices from the deep abyss revealed
A marvel and a secret." – Byron.

Having assured himself that all danger was past, Doctor Wiseman was about to start from the building, when a sudden moonbeam fell on the polished door-plate, and he started back to see the name it revealed.

"The astrologer, Ali Hamed!" he exclaimed. "Now what foul fiend has driven me to his accursed den to-night? 'Tis said he can read the future; and surely no man ever needed to know it more than I. Can it be that the hand of destiny has driven me here, to show me what is yet to come. Well, it is useless going home or attempting to sleep to-night; so, Ali Hamed, I shall try what your magical black art can do for me."

He rang the bell sharply, but moment after moment passed, and no one came. Losing all patience, he again rang a deafening peal, which echoed and re-echoed through the house.

Presently the sound of footsteps clattering down stairs struck his ear, and in a moment more the door was cautiously opened, and a dark, swarthy face protruded through the opening. Seeing but one, he stood aside to allow him to enter, and then securely locked and bolted the door.

"The astrologer, Ali Hamed, resides here?" said the doctor.

Accustomed to visitors at all hours of the day and night, the man betrayed no surprise at the unreasonable time he had taken to inquire, but answered quietly in the affirmative.

"Can I see him?"

"I think so; step in here one moment, and I will see."

He ushered Dr. Wiseman into a small and plainly furnished parlor, while he again went up stairs. In a few moments he reappeared, and, bidding his visitor follow him, led the way up the long staircase through a spacious suite of apartments, and finally into a long, dark room, where the astrologer usually received visitors.

The doctor glanced around with intense curiosity, not unmingled with awe. The floor was painted black, and the walls were hung with dark tapestry, covered with all manner of cabalistic figures. Skulls, crucibles, magic mirrors, tame serpents, vipers, and all manner of hideous things were scattered profusely around.

While the doctor still stood contemplating the strange things around him, the door opened and the astrologer himself entered. He was an imposing-looking personage, tall and majestic, with grave, Asiatic features, and arrayed with Eastern magnificence. He bent his head with grave dignity in return to the doctor's profound bow, and stood for a few moments silently regarding him.

"You would know the future?" said the astrologer, at length, in his slow, impressive voice.

"Such is my business here to-night."

"You would have your horoscope cast, probably?"

"Yes."

"Then give me the day and hour of your birth, and return to-morrow morning."

"No, I cannot wait until then; I must know all to-night."

The astrologer bowed, and after many tedious preliminaries, directed the doctor to quit the room until he should send for him. Dr. Wiseman then entered one of the long suite of apartments through which he had passed, and seated himself in a state of feverish anxiety to hear the result. Some time elapsed ere the swarthy individual who had admitted him presented himself at the door and announced that the astrologer was ready to receive him.

Dr. Wiseman found Ali Hamed standing beside a smoking caldron, with his cross-bones, and lizards, and mystic figures around him, awaiting his entrance.

Not much given to credulity, the doctor determined to test his skill before placing implicit belief in his predictions; and therefore, bluntly announcing his skepticism, he demanded to know something of the past.

"You are a widower, with one child," said the astrologer, calmly.

The doctor bowed assent.

"You are not rich, but avaricious; there is nothing you would not do for money. You are liked by none; by nature you are treacherous, cunning, and unscrupulous; your hands are dyed, and your heart is black with crime; you – "

"Enough!" interrupted the doctor, turning as pale as his saffron visage would permit; "no more of the past. What has the future in store for me?"

"A life of disgrace, and death *on the scaffold!*"

A suppressed cry of horror burst from the white lips of the doctor, who reeled as if struck by some sudden blow.

"To-night," continued the astrologer, unheeding the interruption, "*a child has been born whose destiny shall be united with yours through life; some strange, mystic tie will bind you together for a time. But the hand of this child will yet bring your head to the halter.*"

He paused. Dr. Wiseman stood stiff, rooted to the ground with horror.

"Such is your future; you may go," said the Egyptian, waving his hand.

With his blood freezing in his veins, with hands trembling and lips palsied with horror, he quitted the house. An hour had scarcely passed since his entrance; but that hour seemed to have added ten years to his age. He felt not the cold, keen air as he slowly moved along, every sense paralyzed by the appalling prediction he had just heard.

"Die on the scaffold!" His crime deserved it. But the bare thought made his blood run cold. And through a child born that night he was to perish! Was it the child of Esther Oranmore? Oh, absurd! it had been swept far away by the waves long ere this. Whose, then, could it be? There were more children born this Christmas Eve than that one; but how could any one ever know what he had done? No one knew of it but Mrs. Oranmore; and he well knew she would never tell.

He plunged blindly onward through the heaps of drifted snow, heeding not, caring not, whither his steps wended. Once or twice he met a watchman going his rounds, and he shrank away like the guilty thing that he was, dreading lest the word "*murder*" should be stamped on his brow. He thought with cowardly terror of the coming day, when every eye, he fancied, would turn upon him with a look of suspicion.

Involuntarily he wandered to the sea-shore, and stood on the bank where he had been one hour before. The waves were dashing now almost to his feet; no trace of any living thing was to be seen around.

"It *has* perished, then!" he exclaimed, with a feeling of intense relief. "I knew it! I knew it! *It*, then, is not the child which is to cause my death. But, pshaw! why do I credit all that *soi-disant* prophet told me! Yet he spoke so truly of the past, I cannot avoid believing him. Perish on the scaffold! Heavens! if I felt sure of it, I would go mad. Ha! what is that? Can it be the ghastly white face of a child?"

He leaned over and bent down to see, but nothing met his eye save the white caps of the waves.

"Fool that I am!" he exclaimed, turning away impatiently. "Well might stony Madam Oranmore deem me a coward did she see me now. I will hasten back to her, and report the success of my mission."

He turned away, and strode in the direction of her house as fast as he could walk over the frozen ground, quite unconscious of what was at that same moment passing in another quarter of the city on that same eventful night.

CHAPTER IV. BARRY ORANMORE

– "Pray for the dead —
Why for the dead, who are at rest?
Pray for the living, in whose breast
The struggle between right and wrong
Is raging, terrible and strong." – Longfellow.

It was a luxuriously furnished apartment. A thick, soft carpet, where blue violets peeped from glowing green leaves so naturally that one involuntarily stooped to cull them, covered the floor. Rare old paintings adorned the wall, and the cornices were fretted with gold. The heavy crimson curtains shut out the sound of the wintry wind, and a glowing coal fire shed a living, radiant glow over everything around. The air was redolent of intoxicating perfume, breathing of summer and sunshine. On the marble-topped center-table stood bottles and glasses, a cigar-case, a smoking-cap, and a pair of elegant, silver-mounted pistols. It was evidently a gentleman's room, judging by the disorder. A beautiful marble Flora stood in one corner, arrayed in a gaudy dressing-gown, and opposite stood a dainty little Peri adorned with a beaver hat. Jupiter himself was there, with a violin suspended gracefully around his neck, and Cupid was leaning against the wall, heels uppermost, with bent bow, evidently taking deliberate aim at the flies on the ceiling.

Among the many exquisite paintings hanging on the wall, there was one of surpassing beauty; it represented a bleak hill-side, with a flock of sheep grazing on the scanty herbage, a lowering, troubled sky above; and one could almost see the fitful gusts of wind sighing over the gray hill-tops. Standing erect was a young girl – a mere child in years – her long golden hair streaming wildly in the breeze, her straw hat swinging in her hand, her fair, bright face and large blue eyes raised with mingled shyness and sauciness to a horseman bending over her, as if speaking. His fiery steed seemed pawing with impatience; but his rider held him with a firm hand. He was a tall, slight youth, with raven black hair and eyes, and a dark, handsome face. There was a wild look about the dark horseman and darker steed, reminding one of the Black Horseman of the Hartz Mountains. Underneath was written, in a dashing masculine hand, "The first meeting." There was something strikingly, vividly life-like in the whole scene; even the characters – the slender girl, with her pretty, piquant face, and the handsome, graceful rider – were more like living beings than creations of fancy.

And – yes, standing by the fire, his arm resting on the mantel, his eyes fixed on the hearth, stood the original of the picture. The same tall, superb form; the same clear olive complexion; the same curling locks of jet, and black eyes of fire; the same firm, proud mouth, shaded by a thick black mustache – there he stood, his eyes riveted on the glowing coals, his brow knit as though in deep and painful thought. Now and then the muscles of his face would twitch, and his white hands involuntarily clench at some passing thought.

At intervals the noise of doors shutting and opening would reach his ear, and he would start as though he had received a galvanic shock, and listen for a moment intently. Nothing could be heard but the crackling of the fire at such times, and again he would relapse into gloomy musing.

"What a fool I have been!" he exclaimed, at length between his clenched teeth, as he shook back with fierce impatience his glossy hair, "to burden myself with this girl! Dolt, idiot that I was, to allow myself to be bewitched by her blue eyes and yellow hair! What demon could have possessed me to make her my wife? My wife! Just fancy me presenting that little blushing, shrinking Galway girl as my wife to my lady mother, or to that princess of coquettes, Lizzie Erliston! I wish to heaven I

had blown my brains out instead of putting my head into such a confounded noose – making myself the laughing-stock of all my gallant friends and lady acquaintances! No, by heaven! they shall never laugh at Barry Oranmore. Eveleen shall be sent back to her friends. They will be glad enough to get her on any terms; and she will soon forget me, and be happy tending her sheep once more. And yet – and yet – poor Eveleen!" he said, suddenly, pausing before the picture, while his dark eyes filled with a softer light, and his voice assumed a gentler tone; "she loves me so well yet – far more than I do her. I hardly like the thought of sending her away; but it cannot be helped. My mother's purse is running low, I fear; Erliston's coffers must replenish it. Yes, there is no help for it; Eveleen must go, and I must marry little Lizzie. Poor child; she left home, and friends, and all for me; and it *does* seem a villainous act in me to desert her for another. But go she must; there is no alternative."

He was walking up and down in his intense excitement – sometimes pausing suddenly for a few moments, and then walking on faster than before. Thus half an hour passed, during which he seemed to have formed some determination; for his mouth grew stern, and his clear eyes cold and calm, as he once more leaned against the mantel, and fell into thought.

Presently the door opened and a woman entered. She was a stout, corpulent person, with coarse, bloated face, and small, bleared eyes. As she entered, she cast an affectionate glance toward the brandy bottle on the table – a glance which said plainly she would have no objection to trying its quality. She was arrayed for the street, with a large cloak enveloping her ample person, and a warm quilted hood tied over her substantial double chin.

"Well, sir, I'll be movin', I reckon," said the woman, adjusting her cloak. "The young lady's doing very nicely, and the baby's sleeping like an angel. So they'll get along very well to-night without me."

The young man started at the sound of her voice, and, looking up, said carelessly:

"Oh, it's you, is it? Are you for leaving?"

"Yes, sir; it's time I was home and to bed. I ain't used to bein' up late nights now – don't agree with my constitution; it's sorter delicate. Shouldn't wonder if I was fallin' into a decline."

The quizzical dark eyes of the young man surveyed the rotund person before him, and in spite of himself he burst out laughing.

"Well, now, if you was in a decline yourself, you'd laugh t'other side of your mouth, I reckon," said the offended matron. "S'pose you think it's very funny laughing at a poor, lone 'oman, without chick nor child. But I can tell you – "

"Ten thousand pardons, madam, for my offense," he interrupted, courteously, though there was still a wicked twinkle in his eye. "Pray sit down for a moment; I have something to say to you."

"Well, now, it don't seem exactly right to sit here with you at this hour of the night. Howsomever, I will, to oblige you," and the worthy dame placed her ample frame in a cushioned elbow-chair.

"Perhaps this argument may aid in overcoming your scruples," said the young man, filling her a glass of wine, and throwing himself on a lounge; "and now to business. You are a widow?"

"Yes, sir. My blessed husband died a martyr to his country – died in the discharge of his duty. He was a custom-house officer, and felt it his duty always to examine liquors before destroying them. Well, one day he took too much, caught the devil-rum tremendous, and left me a disconsolate widder. The coroner of the jury set onto him, and – "

"There, there! never mind particulars. You have no children?"

"No," said the old woman stiffly, rather offended by his unceremonious interruption.

"If you were well paid, you would have no objection to taking one and bringing it up as your own?" said the young man, speaking quietly, though there was a look of restless anxiety in his fine eyes.

"Well, no; I'd have no objection, if – " and here she slapped her pocket expressively, by way of finishing the sentence.

"Money shall be no object; but remember, the world must think it is your own —*I* am never to be troubled about it more."

"All right – I understand," said the nurse, nodding her head sagely. "S'pose it's the little one in there?"

"It is. Can you take it away now?"

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"But laws! ain't it too cold and stormy. Better wait till to-morrow."

"No," was the quick and peremptory answer. "To-night, now, within this very hour, it must be removed; and I am never to hear of it more."

"And the poor young lady? Seems sorter hard, now don't it? she'll take on wonderfully, I'm feared."

A spasm of pain passed over his handsome face, and for a moment he was silent. Then, looking up, he said, with brief sternness:

"It cannot be helped. You must go without disturbing her, and I will break the news to her myself. Here is my purse for the present. What is your address?"

The woman gave it.

"Very well, you shall hear from me regularly; but should we ever meet again, in the street or elsewhere, you are not to know me, and you must forget all that has transpired to-night."

"Hum!" said the fat widow, doubtfully.

"And now you had better depart. The storm has almost ceased, and the night is passing away. Is Ev – is my wife awake?"

"No; I left her sleeping."

"So much the better. You can take *it* with you without disturbing her. Go."

The buxom widow arose and quitted the room. Oranmore lay on a lounge, rigidly motionless, his face hidden by his hand. A fierce storm was raging in his breast – "the struggle between right and wrong." Pride and ambition struggled with love and remorse, but the fear of the world conquered: and when the old woman re-entered, bearing a sleeping infant in her arms, he looked up as composedly as herself.

"Pretty little dear," said the widow, wrapping the child in a thick woolen shawl, "how nicely she sleeps! Very image of her mother, and she's the beautifulest girl I ever saw in my life. I gave her some paregoric to make her sleep till I go home. Well, good-night, sir. Our business is over."

"Yes, good-night. Remember the secret; forget what has transpired to-night, and your fortune is made. You will care for *it*" – and he pointed to the child – "as though it were your own."

"Be sure I will, dear little duck. Who could help liking such a sweet, pretty darling? I s'pose you'll come to see it sometimes, sir?"

"No. You can send me word of its welfare now and then. Go, madam, go."

The widow turned to leave the room, and, unobserved by the young man, who had once more thrown himself on his face on the sofa, she seized a well-filled brandy-flask and concealed it beneath her shawl.

Quitting the house, she walked as rapidly as her bulksome proportions would permit over the snowy ground. The road leading to her home lay in the direction of the sea-shore; and, as she reached the beach, she was thoroughly chilled by the cold, in spite of her warm wrappings.

"It's as cold as the Arctic Ocean, and I've heerd say that's the coldest country in the world. A drop of comfort won't come amiss just now. Lucky I thought on't. This little monkey's as sound as a top. It's my 'pinion that young gent's no better than he ought to be, to treat such a lovely young lady in this fashion. Well, it's no business of mine, so's I'm well paid. Lor! I hope I hain't gin it too much paregoric; wouldn't for anything 'twould die. S'pose I'd get no more tin then. That's prime," she added, placing the flask to her lips and draining a long draught.

As the powerful fumes of the brandy arose to her head, the worthy lady's senses became rather confused; and, falling rather than sitting on the bank, the child, muffled like a mummy in its plaid, rolled from her arms into a snow-wreath. At the same moment the loud ringing of bells and the cry of "Fire! fire!" fell upon her ear. It roused her; and, in the excitement of the moment forgetting her little charge, she sprang up as well as she could, and, by a strange fascination, was soon involuntarily drawn away to mingle with the crowd, who were hurrying in the direction of her abode.

Scarcely five minutes before, Dr. Wiseman had quitted that very spot: and there, within a few yards of each other, the two unconscious infants lay, little knowing how singularly their future lives were to be united – little dreaming how fatal an influence *one* of them was yet to wield over *him*.

Some time after, when the flames were extinguished and the crowd had quitted the streets for their beds – when the unbroken silence of coming morning had fallen over the city – the widow returned to seek for her child.

But she sought in vain; the rising tide had swept over the bank, and was again retreating sullenly to the sea.

Sobered by terror and remorse, the wretched woman trod up and down the dreary, deserted snowy beach until morning broke; but she sought and searched in vain. The child was gone.

CHAPTER V. MOUNT SUNSET HALL

"A jolly place, 'twas said, in days of old."
Wordsworth.

The jingle of the approaching sleigh-bells, which had frightened Dr. Wiseman from the beach, had been unheard by the drunken nurse; but ten minutes after she had left, a sleigh came slowly along the narrow, slippery path.

It contained but two persons. One was an elderly woman, wrapped and muffled in furs. A round, rosy, cheery face beamed out from a black velvet bonnet, and two small, twinkling, merry gray eyes, lit up the pleasantest countenance in the world.

Her companion, who sat in the driver's seat, was a tall, jolly-looking darkey, with a pair of huge, rolling eyes, looking like a couple of snow-drifts in a black ground. A towering fur cap ornamented the place where the "wool ought to grow," and was the only portion of this son of darkness which could be discovered for his voluminous wrappings.

The path was wet, slippery, and dangerous in the extreme. The horses were restive, and a single false step would have overturned them into the water.

"Missus Scour, if you please, missus, you'd better git out," said the negro, reining in the horses, in evident alarm; "this yer's the wussest road I've ever traveled. These wishious brutes 'll spill me and you, and the sleigh, and then the Lor only knows what 'll ever become of us."

"Do you think there's any danger, Jupiter?" said Mrs. Gower (for such was the name her sable attendant had transformed into *Scour*), in a voice of alarm.

"This road's sort o' 'spicious anyhow," replied Jupiter. "I'd 'vise you, Missus Scour, mum, to get out and walk till we is past this yer beach. 'Sides the snow, this yer funnelly beach is full o' holes, an' if we got upshot inter one of 'em, ole marse might whistle for you and me, and the sleigh arter that!"

With much difficulty, and with any amount of whoaing, Jupiter managed to stop the sleigh, and assisted stout Mrs. Gower to alight. This was no easy job, for that worthy lady was rather unwieldy, and panted like a stranded porpoise, as she slowly plunged through the wet snow-drifts.

Suddenly, above the jingling sleigh-bells, the wail of an infant met her ear. She paused in amazement, and looked around. Again she heard it – this time seemingly at her feet. She looked down and beheld a small, dark bundle, lying amid the deep snow.

Once more the piteous cry met her ear, and stooping down, she raised the little dark object in her arms.

Unfolding the shawl, she beheld the infant whose cries had first arrested her ear.

"Good heavens! a baby exposed to this weather – left here to perish!" exclaimed good Mrs. Gower, in horror. "Poor little thing, it's half frozen. Who could have done so unnatural a deed?"

"Laws! Missus Scour, what ye got dar?" inquired Jupiter.

"A baby, Jupe! A poor little helpless infant whom some unnatural wretch has left here to die!" exclaimed Mrs. Gower, with more indignation than she had ever before felt in her life.

"Good Lor! so 'tis! What you gwine to do wid it, Missus Scour, mum?"

"Do with it?" said Mrs. Gower, looking at him in surprise. "Why, take it with me, of course. You wouldn't have me leave the poor infant here to perish, would you?"

"'Deed, Missus Scour, I wouldn't bring it 'long ef I was you. Jes' 'flect how tarin' mad ole marse 'll be 'bout it. Don't never want to see no babies roun'. Deed, honey, you'd better take my 'vice an' leave it whar it was," said Jupiter.

"What? Leave it here to die. I'm ashamed of you, Jupiter," said the old lady, rebukingly.

"But Lor! Missus Scour! ole marse 'll trow it out de winder fust thing. Shouldn't be s'prised, nudder, ef he'd wollop me for bringing it. Jes' 'flect upon it, Missus Scour, nobody can't put no 'pendence onto him, de forsooken ole sinner. Trowed his 'fernal ole stick at me, t'other day, and like to knock my brains out, jes' for nothin' at all. 'Deed, honey, I wouldn't try sich a 'sperriment, no how."

"Now, Jupiter, you needn't say another word. My mind's made up, and I'm going to keep this child, let 'ole marse' rage as he will. I'm just as sure as I can be, that the Lord sent it to me, to-night, as a Christmas gift, in place of my poor, dear Aurora, that he took to heaven," said good Mrs. Gower, folding the wailing infant closer still to her warm, motherly bosom.

"Sartin, missus, in course you knows best, but ef you'd only 'flect. 'Pears to me, ole marse 'll tar roun worsen dan ever, when he sees it, and discharge you in you 'sponsible ole age o' life 'count of it."

"And if he *does* discharge me, Jupiter, after twenty years' service, I have enough to support myself and this little one to the end of my life, thank the Lord!" said Mrs. Gower, her honest, ruddy face all aglow with generous enthusiasm.

"Well, I s'pose 'taint no sorter use talking," said Jupiter, with a sigh, as he gathered up the reins; "but ef anything happens, jes 'member I 'vised you of it 'forehand. Here we is on de road now, so you'd better get in ef you's agoin' to take de little 'un wid you."

With considerable squeezing, and much panting, and some groaning, good Mrs. Gower was assisted into the sleigh, and muffled up in the buffalo robes.

Wrapping the child in her warm, fur-lined mantle, to protect it from the chill night air, they sped merrily along over the hard, frozen ground.

Christmas morning dawned bright, sunshiny, and warm. The occupants of the sleigh had long since left the city behind them, and were now driving along the more open country. The keen, frosty air deepened the rosy glow on Mrs. Gower's good-humored face. Warmly protected from the cold, the baby lay sleeping sweetly in her arms, and even Jupiter's sable face relaxed into a grin as he whistled "Coal Black Rose."

The sun was about three hours high when they drew up before a solitary inn. And here Jupiter assisted Mrs. Gower into the house, while he himself looked after his horses.

Mrs. Gower was shown by the hostess into the parlor, where a huge wood-fire roared up the wide chimney. Removing the large shawl that enveloped it, Mrs. Gower turned for the first time to examine her prize.

It did not differ much from other babies, save in being the tiniest little creature that ever was seen; with small, pretty features, and an unusual profusion of brown hair. As it awoke, it disclosed a pair of large blue eyes – rather vacant-looking, it must be confessed – and immediately set up a most vigorous squealing. Small as it was, it evidently possessed lungs that would not have disgraced a newsboy, and seemed bent upon fully exercising them; for in spite of Mrs. Gower's cooing and kissing, it cried and screamed "and would not be comforted."

"Poor little dear, it's so hungry," said the good old lady, rocking it gently. "What a pretty little darling it is. I'm *sure* it looks like little Aurora!"

"What is the matter with baby?" inquired the hostess, at this moment entering.

"It's hungry, poor thing. Bring in some warm milk, please," replied Mrs. Gower.

The milk was brought, and baby, like a sensible child, as it doubtless was, did ample justice to it. Then rolling it up in the shawl, Mrs. Gower placed it in the rocking-chair, and left it to its own reflections, while she sat down to a comfortable breakfast of fragrant coffee, hot rolls, and fried ham.

When breakfast was over Jupiter brought round the horses and sleigh, and Mrs. Gower entered, holding her prize, and they drove off.

It was noon when they reached the end of their long journey, and entered the little village of St. Mark's. Sloping upward from the bay on one side, and encircled by a dense primeval forest on the other, the village stood. St. Mark's was a great place in the eyes of its inhabitants, and considered by them the only spot on the globe fit for rational beings to live in. It was rather an unpretending-

looking place, though, to strangers, who sometimes came from the city to spend the hot summer months there, in preference to any fashionable watering-place. It contained a church, a school-house, a lecture-room, a post-office, and an inn.

But the principal building, and pride of the village, was Mount Sunset Hall. It stood upon a sloping eminence, which the villagers dignified with the title of hill, but which in reality was no such thing. The hall itself was a large, quaint, old mansion of gray stone, built in the Elizabethan style, with high turrets, peaked gables, and long, high windows. It was finely situated, commanding on one side a view of the entire village and the bay, and on the other the dark pine forest and far-spreading hills beyond. A carriage-path wound up toward the front, through an avenue of magnificent horse chestnuts, now bare and leafless. A wide porch, on which the sun seemed always shining, led into a long, high hall, flanked on each side by doors, opening into the separate apartments. A wide staircase of dark polished oak led to the upper chambers of the old mansion.

The owner of Sunset Hall was Squire Erliston, the one great man of the village, the supreme autocrat of St. Mark's. The squire was a rough, gruff, choleric old bear, before whom children and poultry and other inferior animals quaked in terror. He had been once given to high living and riotous excesses, and Sunset Hall had then been a place of drunkenness and debauchery. But these excesses at last brought on a dangerous disease, and for a long time his life was despaired of; then the squire awoke to a sense of his situation, took a "pious streak" – as he called it himself – and registered a vow, that if it pleased Providence not to deprive the world in general, and St. Marks in particular, of so valuable an ornament as himself, he would eschew all his evil deeds and meditate seriously on his latter end. Whether his prayer was heard or not I cannot undertake to say; but certain it is the squire recovered; and, casting over in his mind the ways and means by which he could best do penance for his past sins, he resolved to go through a course of Solomon's Proverbs, and – get married. Deeming it best to make the greatest sacrifice first, he got married; and, after the honeymoon was past, surprised his wife one day by taking down the huge family Bible left him by his father, and reading the first chapter. This he continued for a week – yawning fearfully all the time; but after that he resolved to make his wife read them aloud to him, and thereby save him the trouble.

"For," said the squire sagely, "what's the use of having a wife if she can't make herself useful. 'A good wife's a crown to her husband,' as Solomon says."

So Mrs. Erliston was commanded each morning to read one of the chapters by way of morning prayers. The squire would stretch himself on a lounge, light a cigar, lay his head on her lap, and prepare to listen. But before the conclusion of the third verse Squire Erliston and his good resolutions would be as sound as one of the Seven Sleepers.

When his meek little wife would hint at this, her worthy liege lord would fly into a passion, and indignantly deny the assertion. *He* asleep, indeed! Preposterous! – he had heard every word! And, in proof of it, he vociferated every text he could remember, and insisted upon making Solomon the author of them all. This habit he had retained through life – often to the great amusement of his friends – setting the most absurd phrases down to the charge of the Wise Monarch. His wife died, leaving him with two daughters; the fate of the eldest, Esther, is already known to the reader.

Up the carriage-road, in front, the sleigh containing our travelers drove. Good Mrs. Gower – who for many years had been Squire Erliston's housekeeper – alighted, and, passing through the long hall, entered a cheerful-looking apartment known as the "housekeeper's room."

Seating herself in an elbow-chair to recover her breath, Mrs. Gower laid the baby in her bed, and rang the bell. The summons was answered by a tidy little darkey, who rushed in all of a flutter.

"Laws! Missus Scour, I's 'stonished, I is! Whar's de young 'un! Jupe say you fotch one from the city."

"So I did; there it is on the bed."

"Sakes alive, ain't it a mite of a critter! Gemini! what'll old marse say? Can't abide babies no how! 'spect he neber was a baby hisself!"

"Totty, you mustn't speak that way of your master. Remember, it's not respectful," said Mrs. Gower, rebukingly.

"Oh, I'll 'member of it – 'specially when I's near him, and he's got a stick in his hand," said Totty, turning again to the baby, and eying it as one might some natural curiosity. "Good Lor! ain't it a funny little critter? What's its name, Miss Scour?"

"I intend calling it Aurora, after my poor little daughter," replied Mrs. Gower, tears filling her eyes.

"*Roarer!* Laws! ain't it funny? Heigh! dar's de bell. 'Spect it's for me," said Totty, running off.

In a few moments she reappeared; and, shoving her curly head and ebony phiz through the door, announced, in pompous tones, "dat marse wanted de honor ob a few moments' private specification wid Missus Scour in de parlor."

"Very well, Totty; stay in here and mind the baby until I come back," said Mrs. Gower, rising to obey.

Totty, nothing loth, seated herself by the bed and resumed the scrutiny of the baby. Whether that young lady remarked the impertinent stare of the darkey or not, it would be hard to say; for, having bent her whole heart and soul on the desperate and rather cannibal-like task of devouring her own little fists, she treated Totty with silent contempt.

Meantime, Mrs. Gower, with a look of firm determination, but with a heart which, it must be owned, throbbed faster than usual, approached the room wherein sat the lord and master of Sunset Hall. A gruff voice shouted: "Come in!" in reply to her "tapping at the chamber-door;" and good Mrs. Gower, in fear and trembling, entered the awful presence.

In a large easy-chair in the middle of the floor – his feet supported by a high ottoman – reclined Squire Erliston. He was evidently about fifty years of age, below the middle size, stout and squarely built, and of ponderous proportions. His countenance was fat, purple, and bloated, as if from high living and strong drink; and his short, thick, bull-like neck could not fail to bring before the mind of the beholder most unpleasant ideas of apoplexy. His little, round, popping eyes seemed in danger of starting from their sockets; while the firm compression of his square mouth betokened an unusual degree of obstinacy.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Gower. Fine day, this! Got home, I see. Shut the door! – shut the door! – draughts always bring on the gout; so beware of 'em. Don't run into danger, or you'll perish in it, as Solomon says. There! sit down, sit down, sit down!"

Repeating this request a very unnecessary number of times – for worthy Mrs. Gower had immediately taken a seat on entering – Squire Erliston adjusted his spectacles carefully on the bridge of his nose, and glanced severely at his housekeeper over the top of them. That good lady sat with her eyes fixed upon the carpet – her hands folded demurely in her lap – the very personification of mingled dignity and good-nature.

"Hem! madam," began the squire.

"Yes, sir," replied Mrs. Gower, meekly.

"Jupe tells me – that is, he told me – I mean, ma'am, the short and long of it is, you've brought a baby home with you – eh?"

"Yes, sir," replied the housekeeper.

"And how dare you, ma'am – how *dare* you bring such a thing here?" roared the squire, in a rage. "Don't you know I detest the whole persuasion under twelve years of age? Yes, ma'am! you know it; and yet you went and brought one here. 'The way of the transgressor is hard,' as Solomon says; and I'll make it confoundedly hard for you if you don't pitch the squalling brat this minute out of the window! D'ye hear that?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mrs. Gower, quietly.

"And why the deuce don't you go and do it, then – eh?"

"Because, Squire Erliston, I am resolved to keep the child," said Mrs. Gower, firmly.

"What! *what!* WHAT!" exclaimed the squire, speechless with mingled rage and astonishment at the audacious reply.

"Yes, sir," reiterated Mrs. Gower, resolutely. "I consider that child sent to me by Heaven, and I cannot part with it."

"Fudge! stuff! fiddlesticks! Sent to you by heaven, indeed! S'pose heaven ever dropped a young one on the beach? Likely story!"

"Well, I consider it the same thing. Some one left it on the beach, and heaven destined me to save it."

"Nonsense! no such thing! 'twas that stupid rascal, Jupe, making you get out. I'll horsewhip him within an inch of his life for it!" roared the old man, in a passion.

"I beg you will do no such thing, sir. It was no fault of Jupiter's. If you insist on its quitting the house, there remains but one course for me."

"Confound it, ma'am! you'd make a saint swear, as Solomon says. Pray tell me what *is* that course you speak of?"

"I must leave with it."

"What?" exclaimed the squire, perfectly aghast with amazement.

"I must leave with it!" repeated Mrs. Gower, rising from her seat, and speaking quietly, but firmly.

"Sit down, ma'am – sit down, sit down! Oh, Lord! let me catch my breath! Leave with it! Just say that over again, will you? I don't think I heard right."

"Your ears have not deceived you, Squire Erliston. I repeat it, if that child leaves, I leave, too!"

You should have seen Squire Erliston then, as he sat bolt upright, his little round eyes ready to pop from their sockets with consternation, staring at good Mrs. Gower much like a huge turkey gobbler. That good lady stood complacently waiting, with her hand on the handle of the door, for what was to come next.

She had not to long wait; for such a storm of rage burst upon her devoted head, that anybody else would have fled in dismay. But she, "good, easy soul," was quite accustomed to that sort of thing, and stood gazing upon him as serenely as a well-fed Biddy might on an enraged barn-yard chanticleer. And still the storm of abuse raged, interspersed with numerous quotations from Solomon – by way, doubtless, of impressing her that his wrath was righteous. And still Mrs. Gower stood serene and unruffled by his terrible denunciations, looking as placid as a mountain lake sleeping in the sunlight.

"Well, ma'am, well; what do you think of your conduct *now*?" exclaimed the squire, when the violence of his rage was somewhat exhausted.

"Just what I did before, sir."

"And what was that, eh? – what was that?"

"That I have done right, sir; and that I will keep the child!"

"*You will?*" thundered the squire, in an awful voice.

"Yes, sir!" replied Mrs. Gower, slightly appalled by his terrible look, but never flinching in her determination.

"You – you – you – abominable – female, you!" stammered the squire, unable to speak calmly, from rage. Then he added: "Well, well! I won't get excited – no, ma'am. You can keep the brat, ma'am! But mind you, if it ever comes across me, I'll wring its neck for it as I would a chicken's!"

"Then I *may* keep the little darling?" said good Mrs. Gower, gratefully. "I am sure I am much obliged, and –"

"There! there! there! Hold your tongue, ma'am! Don't let me hear another word about it – the pest! the plague! Be off with you now, and send up dinner. Let the turkey be overdone, or the pudding burned, at your peril! 'Better a stalled ox with quietness, than a dry morsel,' as Solomon says. Hurry up there, and ring for Lizzie!"

Mrs. Gower hastened from the room, chuckling at having got over the difficulty so easily. And from that day forth, little Aurora, as her kind benefactress called her, was domesticated at Mount Sunset Hall.

CHAPTER VI. LIZZIE'S LOVER

"Fond girl! no saint nor angel he
Who woos thy young simplicity;
But one of earth's impassioned sons,
As warm in love, as fierce in ire,
As the best heart whose current runs
Full of the day-god's living fire."

Fire Worshipers.

The inn of St. Mark's was an old, brown, wooden house, with huge, unpainted shutters, and great oak doors, that in summer lay always invitingly open. It stood in the center of the village, with the forest stretching away behind, and the beach spreading out in front. Over the door swung a huge signboard, on which some rustic artist had endeavored to paint an eagle, but which, unfortunately, more closely resembled a frightened goose.

Within the "Eagle," as it was generally called, everything was spotlessly neat and clean; for the landlord's pretty daughter was the tidiest of housewives. The huge, oaken door in front, directly under the above-mentioned signboard, opened into the bar-room, behind the counter of which the worthy host sat, in his huge leathern chair, from "early morn till dewy eve." Another door, at the farther end, opened into the "big parlor," the pine floor of which was scrubbed as white as human hands could make it; and the two high, square windows at either end absolutely glittered with cleanliness. The wooden chairs were polished till they shone, and never blazed a fire on a cleaner swept hearth than that which now roared up the wide fire-place of the "Eagle."

It was a gusty January night. The wind came raw and cold over the distant hills, now rising fierce and high, and anon dying away in low, moaning sighs among the shivering trees. On the beach the waves came tramping inward, their dull, hollow voices booming like distant thunder on the ear.

But within the parlor of the "Eagle" the mirth and laughter were loud and boisterous. Gathered around the blazing fire, drinking, smoking, swearing, arguing, were fifteen or twenty men – drovers, farmers, fishermen, and loafers.

"This yer's what *I* calls comfortable," said a lusty drover, as he raised a foaming mug of ale to his lips and drained it to the last drop.

"I swan to man if it ain't a rouser of a night," said a rather good-looking young fellow, dressed in the coarse garb of a fisherman, as a sudden gust of wind and hail came driving against the windows.

"Better here than out on the bay to-night, eh, Jim?" said the drover, turning to the last speaker.

"Them's my sentiments," was the reply, as Jim filled his pipe.

"I reckon Jim hain't no objection to stayin' anywhere where Cassie is," remarked another, dryly.

"Who's taking my name in vain here?" called a clear, ringing voice, as a young girl, of some eighteen years of age, entered. Below the middle size, plump and round, with merry, black eyes, a complexion decidedly brown, full, red lips, overflowing with fun and good-nature – such was Cassie Fox, the pretty little hostess of the "Eagle."

Before any one could reply, an unusual noise in the bar-room fell upon their ears. The next moment, Sally, the black maid-of-all-work, came into the "big parlor," with mouth and eyes agape.

"Laws, misses," she said, addressing Cassie, "dar's a gemman – a rale big-bug – out'n de bar-room; a 'spectable, 'sponsible, 'greeable gemman, powerful hansom, wid brack eyes an' har, an' a carpet-bag!"

"Sakes alive!" ejaculated Cassie, dropping the tray, and turning to the looking-glass; "he's handsome, and —*my hair's awfully mussed!* Gracious! what brings him here, Sally?"

"Got cotch in de storm; 'deed he did, chile — heard him tell marse so my own blessed self."

"Goodness!" again ejaculated the little hostess. "I'm all in a flusterfication. Handsome! dear, dear! — my hair's all out of curl! Black eyes! — I must unpin my dress. Nice hair! Jim Loker, take your legs out of the fire, nobody wants you to make andirons of 'em."

"Cass! Cass, I say! Come here, you Cass!" called the voice of mine host from the bar-room.

Cassie bustled out of the room and entered the bar. Old Giles Fox stood respectfully before the stranger, a young man wrapped in a cloak, tall and handsome, with a sort of dashing, reckless air, that well became him.

"Here, Cass," said her father, "this gentleman's going to stay all night. Show him into the best room, and get supper ready. Be spry, now."

"Yes, sir," said Cassie, demurely, courtesying before the handsome stranger, who glanced half carelessly, half admiringly, at her pretty face. "This way, sir, if you please."

The stranger followed her into the parlor, and encountered the battery of a score of eyes fixed full upon him. He paused in the doorway and glanced around.

"Beg pardon," he said, in the refined tone of a gentleman, "but I thought this room was unoccupied. Can I not have a private apartment?" he added, turning to Cassie.

"Oh, yes, to be sure," replied the little hostess; "step this way, sir," and Cassie ran up-stairs, followed by the new-comer, whose dark eyes had already made a deep impression in the susceptible heart of Cassie.

He threw himself into a chair before the fire and fixed his eyes thoughtfully on the glowing coals. Cassie, having placed his dripping cloak before the fire to dry, ran down stairs, where he could distinctly hear her shrill voice giving hasty orders to the servants.

Supper was at length brought in by Cassie, and the stranger fell to with the readiness of one to whom a long journey has given an appetite.

"There," he said at last, pushing back his chair. "I think I have done justice to your cookery, my dear — Cassie — isn't that what they call you?"

"Yes, sir; after Cassiopia, who was queen in furrin parts long ago. Efiopia, I think, was the name of the place," said Cassie, complacently.

"What?" said the stranger, repressing a laugh. "What do you say was the name of the place?"

"Efiopia!" repeated Cassie, with emphasis.

"Ethiopia! Oh, I understand! And who named you after that fair queen, who now resides among the stars?"

"Mother, of course, before she died," replied the namesake of that Ethiopian queen. "She read about her in some book, and named me accordingly."

The stranger smiled, and fixed his eyes steadily on the complacent face of Cassie, with an expression of mingled amusement and curiosity. There was a moment's pause, and then he asked:

"And what sort of place is St. Mark's — I mean, what sort of people are there in it?"

"Oh, pretty nice," replied Cassie; "most all like those you saw down stairs in the parlor."

"But, I mean the gentry."

"Oh, the big-bugs. Well, yes, there is some of 'em here. First, there's the squire —"

"Squire who?" interrupted the stranger, with a look of interest.

"Squire Erliston, of course; he lives up there in a place called Mount Sunset."

"Yes?" said the young man, inquiringly.

"Yes," repeated Cassiopia, "with his daughter, Miss Lizzie."

"Has he only one daughter?"

"That's all, now. He had two; but Miss Esther ran off with a wild young fellow, an' I've hearn tell as how they were both dead, poor things! So powerful handsome as they were too — 'specially him."

"And Miss Lizzie?"

"Oh, yes. Well, you see she ain't married – she's more sense. She's awful pretty, too, though she ain't a mite like Miss Esther was. Laws, she might have bin married dozens of times, I'm sure, if she'd have all the gents who want her. She's only been home for two or three months; she was off somewhere to boardin'-school to larn to play the pianner and make picters and sich."

"And the papa of these interesting damsels, what is he like?" inquired the young man.

"He? – sakes alive! Why, he's the ugliest-tempered, crossest, hatefullest, disagreeablest old snapping-turtle ever you saw. He's as cross as two sticks, and as savage as a bear with a sore head. My stars and garters! I'd sooner run a mile out of my way than meet him in the street."

"Whew! pleasant, upon my word! Are all your country magnates as amiable as Squire Erliston?"

"There ain't many more, 'cepting Doctor Nick Wiseman, and that queer old witch, Miss Hagar."

"Has he any grown-up daughters?" inquired the stranger, carelessly.

Cassie paused, and regarded him with a peculiar look for an instant.

"Ahem!" she said, after a pause. "No; he's a widderer, with only one child, a daughter, 'bout nine months old, and a nevvie a year or so older. No, there ain't no young ladies – I mean real ladies – in the village, 'cept Miss Lizzie Erliston."

He paid no attention to the meaning tone in which this was spoken, and after lingering a few moments longer, Cassie took her leave, inwardly wondering who the handsome and inquisitive stranger could be.

"Praps this'll tell," said Cassie, as she lifted the stranger's portmanteau, and examined it carefully for name and initials. "Here it is, I declare!" she exclaimed, as her eyes fell on the letters "B. O.," inscribed on the steel clasp. "B. O. I wonder what them stands for! 'B O' *bo*. Shouldn't wonder if he was a beau. Sakes alive! what can his name be and what can he want? Well, I ain't likely to tell anybody, 'cause I don't know myself. 'Has he got any grown-up darters?'" she muttered, as the young man's question came again to her mind. "Maybe he's a fortin' hunter. I've hern tell o' sich. Well, I hope Miss Lizzie won't have anything to do with him if he is, and go throw herself away on a graceless scamp like Miss Esther did. Well, I guess, if he goes courtin' there, old Thunderclap will be in his wool, and – O, massy on us! – if that Sally hain't let the fire go dead out, while I was talkin' up-stairs with 'B. O.' Little black imp! won't I give it to her?"

The morning after the storm dawned clear and cold. All traces of the preceding night's tempest had passed away, and the sun shone forth brightly in a sky of clear, cloudless blue.

The handsome young stranger stood in the bar-room of the "Eagle," gazing from the open door at the bay, sparkling and flashing in the sun's light, and dotted all over with fishing-boats. Behind the counter sat worthy Giles Fox, smoking his pipe placidly. From the interior of the building came at intervals the voice of Cassie, scolding right and left at "You Sally" and "little black imp."

Suddenly the stranger beheld, emerging from a forest path on the right of the inn, a gentleman on horseback. He rode slowly, and the stranger observed that all the villagers he encountered saluted him respectfully, the men pulling off their hats, the women dropping profound courtesies, and the children, on their way to school, by scampering in evident alarm across meadows and fields.

As he drew rein before the inn-door, the stranger drew back. The old gentleman entered and approached the bar.

"Good-morning, Giles," he said, addressing the proprietor of the "Eagle" in a patronizing tone.

"Good-morning, squire – good-morning, sir. Fine day after the storm last night," said the host, rising.

"Great deal of damage done last night – great deal," said the old man, speaking rapidly, as was his custom: "one or two of the fishermen's huts down by the shore washed completely away. Yes, *sir* – *r*! Careless fools! Served 'em right. Always said it would happen — *I* knew it. 'Coming events cast their shadows afore,' as Solomon says."

The young stranger stepped forward and stood before him.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, with a slight bow; "have I the honor of addressing Squire Erliston?"

"Yes, yes – to be sure you have; that's me. Yes, *sir*. Who're you, eh? – who're you?" said the squire, staring at him with his round, bullet eyes.

"If Squire Erliston will glance over this, it will answer his question," said the young man, presenting a letter.

The squire held the letter in his hand, and stared at him a moment longer; then wiped his spectacles and adjusted them upon his nose, opened the letter, and began to read.

The stranger stood, in his usual careless manner, leaning against the counter, and watched him during its perusal.

"Lord bless me!" exclaimed the squire, as he finished the letter. "So you're the son of my old friend, Oranmore? Who'd think it? You weren't the size of a well-grown pup when I saw you last. And you're his son? Well, well! Give us your hand. 'Who knows what a day may bring forth?' as Solomon says. I'd as soon have thought of seeing the Khan of Tartary here as you. Oranmore's son! Well, well, well! You're his very image – a trifle better-looking. And you're Barry Oranmore? When did you come, eh? – when did you come?"

"Last night, sir."

"Last night, in all the storm? Bless my soul! Why didn't you come up to Mount Sunset? Eh, sir? Why didn't you come?"

"Really, sir, I feared – "

"Pooh! – pshaw! – nonsense! – no, you did not. 'Innocence is bold; but the guilty flee-eth when no one pursues,' as Solomon says. What were you afraid of? S'pose everybody told you I was a demon incarnate – confound their impudence! But I ain't; no, *sir*! 'The devil's not as black as he's painted,' as Solomon says – or if he didn't say it, he ought to."

"Indeed, sir, I should be sorry to think of my father's old friend in any such way, I beg to assure you."

"No, you won't – haven't time. Come up to Mount Sunset – come, right off! Must, sir – no excuse; Liz'll be delighted to see you. Come – come – come along!"

"Since you insist upon it, squire, I shall do myself the pleasure of accepting your invitation."

"Yes, yes – to be sure you will!" again interrupted the impatient squire. "Bless my heart! – and you're little Barry. Well, well!"

"I am Barry, certainly," said the young man, smiling; "but whether the adjective 'little' is well applied or not, I feel somewhat doubtful. I have a dim recollection of measuring some six feet odd inches when I left home."

"Ha, ha, ha! – to be sure! to be sure!" laughed the lusty old squire. "Little! – by Jove! you're a head and shoulders taller than I am myself. Yes, sir – true as gospel. 'Bad weeds grow fast,' as Solomon says. Lord! *won't* my Liz be astonished, though?"

"I hope your daughter is quite well, squire."

"Well! – you'd better believe it. My daughter is *never* sick. No, sir; got too much sense – specially Liz. Esther always *was* a simpleton – ran away, and all that, before she was out of her bibs and tuckers. Both died – knew they would. 'The days of the transgressors shall be short on the earth,' as Solomon says. But Liz has got her eye-teeth cut. Smart girl, my Liz."

"I anticipate great pleasure in making the acquaintance of Miss Erliston," said Oranmore, carelessly; "her beauty and accomplishments have made her name familiar to me long ago."

"Yes, yes, Liz is good-looking – deucedly good-looking; very like what I was at her age. Ah, you're laughing, you rascal! Well, I dare say I'm no beauty *now*; but never mind that at present. 'Handsome is as handsome does,' as Solomon says. Come, get your traps and come along. Giles, fly round – we're in a hurry."

Thus adjured, Giles kindly consented to "fly round." All was soon ready; and, after giving orders to have his portmanteau sent after him, young Oranmore mounted his horse, and, accompanied by

the squire, rode off toward Mount Sunset Hall, the squire enlivening the way by numerous quotations from Solomon.

On reaching the Hall, his host ushered him into the parlor, where, seated at the piano, was the squire's daughter, Lizzie, singing, by some singular coincidence:

"There's somebody coming to marry me —
There's somebody coming to woo."

Whether Miss Lizzie had seen that *somebody* coming through the window, I cannot say. She rose abruptly from her seat as they entered, exclaiming:

"Oh, papa! I'm so glad you have come."

Then, seeing the stranger, she drew back with the prettiest affectation of embarrassment in the world.

Lizzie Erliston was pretty – decidedly pretty – with a little round, graceful figure, snowy complexion, rosebud lips, and sparkling, vivacious blue eyes. Graceful, thoughtless, airy, dressy, and a most finished flirt was little Lizzie.

"Mr. Oranmore, my daughter Liz; Liz, Mr. Oranmore, son of my old friend. Fact! Hurry up breakfast now – I'm starving."

"I am delighted to welcome the son of papa's friend." said Lizzie, courtesying to the handsome stranger, who returned the salutation with easy gallantry.

Breakfast was brought in, and the trio, together with worthy Mrs. Gower, were soon seated around the table.

"I am afraid, Mr. Oranmore, you will find it very dull here, after being accustomed to the gayety of city life. Our village is the quietest place in the world."

"Dull!" repeated Oranmore. "Did angels ever condescend to dwell on this earth. I should say they had taken up their abode in St. Mark's."

He fixed his large dark eyes on her face, and bowed with a look of such ardent yet respectful admiration as he spoke, that Lizzie blushed "celestial, rosy red," and thought it the prettiest speech she had ever heard.

"Fudge!" grunted the squire.

"Ah, Mr. Oranmore, I see you are a sad flatterer," said the little lady, smilingly, buttering another roll.

"Not so, Miss Erliston. Dare I speak what I think, I should indeed be deemed a flatterer," replied Oranmore, gallantly.

"Bah!" muttered the squire, with a look of intense disgust.

At this moment a child's shrill screams resounded in one of the rooms above, growing louder and louder each moment.

"There – that's Aurora! Just listen to the little wretch!" exclaimed Lizzie. "That child will be the death of us yet, with her horrid yells. Her lungs must be made of cast-iron, or something harder, for she is incessantly screaming."

The Squire darted an angry look at Mrs. Gower, who faltered out: She was very sorry – that she had told Totty to be sure and keep her quiet – that she didn't know what was the matter, she was sure —

"Ring the bell!" said the squire, savagely cutting her short. The summons was answered by the little darkey, Totty.

"Well, Totty, what's the matter?" said Lizzie. "Don't you hear the baby squalling there like a little tempest? Why don't you attend to her?"

"Lor! Miss Lizzie, 'twan't none o' my fault – 'deed 'twan't," said the little darkey. "Miss Roarer's a-roarin' 'cause she can't put her feet in de sugar-bowl. 'Deed I can't 'vent her, to save my precious life. Nobody can't do nothing wid dat 'ar little limb."

"I'll do something to *you* you won't like if you don't make her stop!" said the angry squire. "Be off with you now; and, if I hear another word, I'll – I'll twist your neck for you!"

"Marse, I declare I can't stop her," said Totty, dodging in alarm toward the door.

"Be off!" thundered the squire, in a rage, hurling a hot roll at the black head of Totty, who adroitly dodged and vanished instanter.

"Of all diabolical inventions, young ones are the worst!" snappishly exclaimed Squire Erliston, bringing down his fist on the table. "Pests! plagues! abominations! Mrs. Gower, ma'am, if you don't give it a sleeping draught when it takes to yelling, I'll – I'll – I'll – "

"By the way, Mr. Oranmore, as you are from the city," broke in Lizzie, "perhaps you may have heard of some one there who has lost a child?"

"What – what did you say? – a child?" exclaimed Oranmore, starting so suddenly and looking so wild, that all looked at him in surprise.

"Yes. But, dear me, how pale you look! Are you ill?"

"Ill! Oh, no; pray go on," said Oranmore, recovering himself by an effort.

"Well; last Christmas eve, Mrs. Gower was returning from the city, where she had been to make purchases, and taking the shore road, picked up an infant on the beach, and brought it home. It is a wonder no inquiries were made about it."

Barry Oranmore breathed freely again. It could not be *his* child, for he had seen the nurse before leaving the city; and she, fearing to lose her annuity, had told him the child was alive and well: therefore it must be another.

A week passed rapidly away at Sunset Hall. There were sails on the bay, and rides over the hills, and shady forest walks, and drives through the village, and long romantic rambles in the moonlight. And Lizzie Erliston was in love. Was *he*? She thought so sometimes when his deep, dark eyes would rest on her, and fill with softest languor as they wandered side by side. But, then, had she not discovered his restlessness, his evident longing to be away, though he still remained? Something in his conduct saddened and troubled her; for she loved him as devotedly as it was in the power of a nature essentially shallow and selfish to love. But the dangerous spell of his voice and smile threw a glamour over her senses. She could almost have loved his very faults, had she known them. And, yielding herself to that witching spell, Lizzie Erliston, who had often caught others, at last found herself caught.

CHAPTER VII. THE CYPRESS WREATH

"Bride, upon thy marriage-day,
Did the fluttering of thy breath
Speak of joy or woe beneath?
And the hue that went and came
On thy cheek like waving flame,
Flowed that crimson from the unrest,
Or the gladness of thy breast?" – Hemans.

"Squire Erliston, can I have a few moments' private conversation with you this morning?" said Oranmore, as he sought the squire, whom Mrs. Gower was just helping to ensconce in his easy-chair.

"Certainly, certainly, my boy. Mrs. Gower, bring the rest of the pillows by and by. 'Time for everything,' as Solomon says. Clear out now, ma'am, while I attend to this young man's case."

Barry Oranmore stood in the middle of the floor, resting one hand lightly on the back of a chair. Squire Erliston, propped up in an easy-chair with pillows and cushions, and wearing an unusually benign expression of countenance – caused, probably, by Miss Aurora's extraordinary quietness on that morning.

"You have doubtless perceived, sir, my attentions to your daughter," went on the young man, in a tone that was almost careless. "Miss Lizzie, I am happy to say, returns my affection; and, in short, sir, I have asked this interview to solicit your daughter's hand."

He bowed slightly, and stood awaiting a reply. The squire jumped from his seat, kicked one pillow to the other end of the room, waved another above his head, and shouted:

"Bless my soul! it's just what I wanted! Give us your hand, my dear boy. Solicit her hand! Take it, take it, with all my heart. If she had a dozen of hands, you should have them all."

"I thank you sincerely, Squire Erliston. Believe me, it only needed your consent to our union to fill my cup of *happiness* to the brim."

His voice was low – almost scornful; and the emphasis upon "happiness" was bitter, indeed. But the squire, in his delight, neither heeded nor noticed.

"The wedding must come off immediately, my dear fellow. We'll have a rousing one, and no mistake. I was afraid Liz might run off with some penniless scamp, as Esther did; but now it's all right. Yes, the sooner the wedding comes off the better. 'He who giveth not his daughter in marriage, doeth well; but he who giveth her doeth better,' as Solomon ought to know, seeing he had some thousands of 'em. Be off now, and arrange with Lizzie the day for the wedding, while I take a sleep. When it's all over, wake me up. There, go! Mrs. Gower! hallo! Mrs. Gower, I say! come here with the pillows."

Oranmore hurried out, while Mrs. Gower hurried in – he to tell Lizzie of the success of his mission, and she to prepare her master for the arms of Morpheus.

That day fortnight was fixed upon as their marriage-day. The Bishop of P – was to visit St. Mark's, and during his advent in the village the nuptials were to be celebrated.

And such a busy place as Sunset Hall became after the important fact was announced! Poor Mrs. Gower lost, perceptibly, fifty pounds of flesh, with running in and out, and up and down stairs. Old carpets and old servants were turned out, and new curtains and French cooks turned in. Carpets and custards, and ice-creams and Aurora's screams, and milliners and feathers, and flowers and flounces, and jellies and jams, and upholstery reigned supreme, until the squire swore by all the "fiends in

flames" that it was worse than pandemonium, and rushed from the place in despair to seek refuge with Giles Fox, and smoke his pipe in peace at the "Eagle."

Barry Oranmore, finding his bride so busily engaged superintending jewels, and satins, and laces, as to be able to dispense with his services, mounted his horse each day, and seldom returned before night. And, amid all the bustle and confusion, no one noticed that he grew thinner and paler day after day; nor the deep melancholy filling his dark eyes; nor the bitter, self-scorning look his proud, handsome face ever wore. They knew not how he paced up and down his room, night after night, trying to still the sound of *one* voice that was ever mournfully calling his name. They knew not that when he quitted the brilliantly-lighted rooms, and plunged into the deep, dark forest, it was to shut out the sight of a sad, reproachful face, that ever haunted him, day and night.

Lizzie was in her glory, flitting about like a bird from morning till night. Such wonderful things as she had manufactured out of white satin and Mechlin lace, and such confusion as she caused – flying through the house, boxing the servants' ears, and lecturing Mrs. Gower and shaking Aurora – who had leave now to yell to her heart's content – and turning everything topsy-turvy, until the squire brought down his fist with a thump, and declared that though Solomon had said there was a time for everything, neither Solomon, nor any other man, could ever convince him that there was a time allotted for such a racket and rumpus as *that*.

But out of chaos, long ago, was brought forth order; and the "eve before the bridal" everything in Sunset Hall was restored to peace and quietness once more. The rooms were perfectly dazzling with the glitter of new furniture and the blaze of myriads of lusters. And such a crowd as on the wedding night filled those splendid rooms! There was Mrs. Gower, magnificent in brown velvet, preserved for state occasions like the present, with such a miraculous combination of white ribbons and lace on her head. There was the squire, edifying the public generally with copious extracts from Solomon and some that were *not* from Solomon. There was Mrs. Oranmore, grim and gray as ever, moving like the guilty shadow of a lost soul, through those gorgeous rooms and that glittering crowd, with the miserable feeling at her heart, that her only son was to be offered that night a sacrifice on the altar of her pride and ambition. There was Doctor Wiseman, all legs and arms, as usual, slinking among the guests. There was the bishop, a fat, pompous, oily-looking gentleman, in full canonicals, waiting to tie the Gordian knot.

There was a bustle near the door, a swaying to and fro of the crowd, and the bridal party entered. Every voice was instantaneously hushed, every eye was fixed upon them. How beautiful the bride looked, with her elegant robes and gleaming jewels, her downcast eyes, and rose-flushed cheeks, and half-smiling lips. The eyes of all the gentlemen present were fixed wistfully upon her. And the eyes of the ladies wandered to the bridegroom, with something very like a feeling of awe, as they saw how pale and cold he was looking – how different from any bridegroom they had ever seen before. Were his thoughts wandering to *another* bridal, in a land beyond the sea, with one for whose blue eyes and golden hair he would *then* willingly have surrendered fame, and wealth, and ambition? And now, she who had left friends, and home, and country for his sake, was deserted for another. Yet still that unknown, penniless girl was dearer than all the world beside. Well might he look and feel unlike a bridegroom, with but one image filling his heart, but one name on his lips – "*Eveleen! Eveleen!*"

But no one there could read the heart, throbbing so tumultuously beneath that cold, proud exterior. They passed through the long rooms – the bishop stood before them – the service began. To *him* it seemed like the service for the dead – to *her* it was the most delightful thing in the world. There was fluttering of fans, flirting of perfumed handkerchiefs, smiling lips and eyes, and

"With decorum all things carried;
Miss smiled, and blushed, and then was – married."

The ceremony was over, and Lizzie Erliston was Lizzie Erliston no longer.

But just at that moment, when the crowd around were about to press forward to offer their congratulations, a loud, ringing footstep, that sounded as though shod with steel, was heard approaching. A moment more, and an uninvited guest stood among them. The tall, thin, sharp, angular figure of a woman past middle age, with a grim, weird, old-maidenish face; a stiff, rustling dress of iron-gray; a black net cap over her grizzled locks, and a tramp like that of a dragoon, completed the external of this rather unprepossessing figure.

All fell back and made way for her, while a murmur: "Miss Hagar! What brings Miss Hagar here?" passed through the room.

She advanced straight to where Lizzie stood, leaning proudly and fondly on the arm of Oranmore, and drawing forth a wreath of mingled cypress and dismal yew, laid it amid the orange blossoms on the head of the bride.

With a shriek of superstitious terror, Lizzie tore the ominous wreath from her head, and flung it on the floor. Heeding not the action, the woman raised her long, gaunt, fleshless arm like an inspired sibyl, and chanted in a voice so wild and dreary, that every heart stood still:

"Oh, bride! woe to thee!
Ere the spring leaves deck the tree,
Those locks you now with jewels twine
Shall wear this cypress wreath of mine."

Then striding through the awe-struck crowd, she passed out and disappeared.

Faint and sick with terror, Lizzie hid her face in the arm that supported her. A moment's silence ensued, broken by the squire, who came stamping along, exclaiming:

"Hallo! what's the matter here! Have either of these good people repented of their bargain, already. 'Better late than never,' as Solomon says."

"It was only my sister Hagar, who came here to predict fortunes, as usual," said Doctor Wiseman, with an uneasy attempt at a laugh, "and succeeded in scaring Miss Lizzie – Mrs. Oranmore, I mean – half out of her wits."

"Pooh! pooh! is that all. Liz, don't be such a little fool! There goes the music. Let every youngster be off, on penalty of death, to the dancing-room. 'Time to dance,' as Solomon says, and if it's not at weddings, I'd like to know when it is. Clear!"

Thus adjured, with a great deal of laughing and chatting, the company dispersed. The folding-doors flew open, and merry feet were soon tripping gayly to the music, and flirting, and laughing, and love-making, and ice-creams were soon at their height, and Lizzie, as she floated airily around the room in the waltz, soon forgot all about Miss Hagar's prediction. Barry Oranmore, by an effort, shook off his gloom, and laughed with the merriest, and waltzed with his bride, and the pretty bride-maids; and all the time his heart was far away with that haunting shape that had stood by his side all the night.

A month had passed away. Their bridal tour had been a short one, and the newly wedded pair had returned to Sunset Hall. And Lizzie was at last beginning to open her eyes, and wonder what ailed her husband. So silent, so absent, so restless, growing more and more so day after day. His long rides over the hills were now taken alone; and he would only return to lie on a lounge in some darkened room, with his face hidden from view by his long, neglected locks. At first she pouted a little at this; but seeing it produced no effect, she at last concluded to let him have his own way, and she would take hers. So evening after evening, while he lay alone, so still and motionless, in his darkened chamber, Lizzie frequented parties and *soirees*, giving plausible excuses for her husband's absence, and was the gayest of the gay.

One morning, returning with the gray dawn, from an unusually brilliant *soiree*, she inquired for her husband, and learned that, half an hour before, he had called for his horse and ridden off. This did

not surprise her, for it had often happened so before; so, without giving the matter a second thought, she flung herself on her bed, and fell fast asleep.

Half an hour after the sound of many feet, and a confused murmur of many voices below, fell on her ear.

Wondering what it could mean, she raised herself on her elbow to listen, when the door was burst open; and Totty, gray, gasping, horror-stricken, stood before her.

"Totty, what in the name of heaven is the matter!" exclaimed Lizzie, in surprise and alarm.

"Oh, missus! Oh, missus!" were the only words the frightened negress could utter.

"Merciful heaven! what has happened?" exclaimed Lizzie, springing to her feet, in undefined terror. "Totty, Totty, tell me, or I shall go and see."

"Oh, Miss Lizzie! Oh, Miss Lizzie!" cried the girl, falling on her knees, "for de dear Lord's sake, don't go. Oh, Miss Lizzie, it's too drefful to tell! It would kill you!"

With a wild cry, Lizzie snatched her robe from the clinging hands that held it, and fled from the room down the long staircase. There was a crowd round the parlor door; all the servants were collected there, and inside she could see many of the neighbors gathered. She strove to force her way through the throng of appalled servants, who mechanically made way for her to pass.

"Keep her back – keep her back, I tell you," cried the voice of Dr. Wiseman, "would you kill her?"

A score of hands were extended to keep her back, but they were too late. She had entered, and a sight met her eyes that sent the blood curdling with horror to her heart. A wild, terrific shriek rang through the house, as she threw up both arms and fell, in strong convulsions, on the floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

Gipsy

"A little, wild-eyed, tawny child,
A fairy sprite, untamed and wild,
Like to no one save herself,
A laughing, mocking, gipsy elf."

Year after year glides away, and we wonder vaguely that they can have passed. On our way to the grave we may meet many troubles, but time obliterates them all, and we learn to laugh and talk as merrily again as though the grass was not growing between our face and one we could never love enough. But such is life.

Ten years have passed away at St. Mark's since the close of our last chapter; ten years of dull, tedious monotony. The terrible sight that had met Lizzie Oranmore's eyes that morning, was the dead form of her young husband. He had been riding along at his usual reckless, headlong pace, and had been thrown from his horse and killed.

Under the greensward in the village church-yard, they laid his world-weary form to rest, with only the name inscribed on the cold, white marble to tell he had ever existed. And no one dreamed of the youthful romance that had darkened all the life of Barry Oranmore. Lying on the still heart, that had once beat so tumultuously, they found the miniature of a fair young face and a long tress of sunny hair. Wondering silently to whom they belonged, good Mrs. Gower laid them aside, little dreaming of what they were one day to discover.

Lizzie, with her usual impulsiveness, wept and sobbed for a time inconsolably. But it was not in her shallow, thoughtless nature to grieve long for any one; and ere a year had passed, she laughed as gayly and sang as merrily as ever.

Sometimes, it may be, when her child – her boy – would look up in her face with the large dark eyes of him who had once stolen her girlish heart away, tears for a moment would weigh down her golden eyelashes; but the next instant the passing memory was forgotten, and her laugh again rang out merry and clear.

And so the ten years had passed, and no change had taken place at Sunset Hill save that it was far from being the quiet place it had been formerly.

Has the reader forgotten Aurora, the little foundling of yelling notoriety? If so, it is no fault of hers, for that shrill-voiced young lady never allowed herself to be pushed aside to make room for any one. Those ten years at least made a change in her.

See her now, as she stands with her dog by her side, for a moment, to rest, in the quaint old porch fronting Sunset Hill. She has been romping with Lion this morning, and now, panting and breathless, she pauses for an instant to prepare for a fresh race. There she stands! A little, slight, wiry, agile figure, a little thin, dark, but bright and sparkling face, with small, irregular features, never for a moment at rest. With a shower of short, crisp, dark curls streaming in the breeze, every shining ring dancing with life, and fire, and mirth, and mischief. And with such eyes, looking in her face you forgot every other feature gazing in those "bonny wells of brown," that seemed fairly scintillating wickedness. How they did dance, and flash, and sparkle, with youth, and glee, and irrepressible fun – albeit the darker flame that now and then leaped from their shining depths bespoke a wild, fierce spirit, untamed and daring, slumbering in her heart, quiet and unaroused as yet, but which would one day burst forth, scathing, blighting all on whom it fell.

And such is Aurora Gower. A wild, dark, elfish changeling, not at all pretty, but the most bewitching sprite withal, that ever kept a household in confusion. Continually getting into scrapes and making mischief, and doing deeds that would have been unpardonable in any one else, Aurora, in some mysterious way of her own, escaped censure, and the most extravagant actions were passed over with the remark, that it was "just like her – just what you might expect from a gipsy." Owing to her dark skin and wild habits, "Gipsy" was the name by which Mrs. Gower's *protegee* was universally known. With every one she was a favorite, for though always saucy, often impertinent, and invariably provoking, it was impossible to be angry with a little fairy of a creature whom they could almost hold up between their finger and thumb.

As for the burly old squire, he could as soon think of getting along without his brandy as without Gipsy. For though they continually quarreled, he abusing her unmercifully, and she retorting impudently, yet, when Gipsy at the end would flounce out in a towering passion, she was sure a few hours after to find a peace-offering from the old man, in the shape of a costly gift, lying on her table. After some coaxing she would consent to forgive him, and Squire Erliston and his little ward would smoke the calumet of peace (figuratively speaking); but, alas! for the short-lived truce – ere another hour the war of words would be raging "fast and furious" once more.

Good Mrs. Gower zealously strove to impress on the wayward elf a becoming respect for the head of the household; and sometimes, in a fit of penitence, Aurora would promise "not to give Guardy any more bile," but being by nature woefully deficient in the bump of reverence, the promise had never been kept; and at last the worthy housekeeper gave up the task in despair.

And so Aurora was left pretty much to follow her "own sweet will," and no one need wonder that she grew up the maddest, merriest elf that ever danced in the moonlight. At the age of eleven she could ride with the best horseman for miles around, hunt like a practiced sportsman, bring down a bird on the wing with her unerring bullet, and manage a boat with the smartest fisherman in St. Marks. Needle-work, dolls, and other amusements suitable for her age, she regarded with the utmost contempt, and with her curls streaming behind her, her hat swinging in her hand, she might be seen flying about the village from morning till night, always running, for she was too quick and impetuous to walk. In the stormiest weather, when the winds were highest and the sea roughest, she would leap into one of the fishermen's boats, and unheeding storm and danger, go out with them, in spite of commands and entreaties to the contrary, until danger and daring became with her second nature. But while Aurora has been standing for her picture the rest of the family have assembled in the breakfast-parlor of Mount Sunset Hall. Languidly stretched on a sofa lay Lizzie Oranmore. Those ten years have made no change in her; just the same rose-leaf complexion, the same round, little graceful figure, the same coquettish airs and graces as when we saw her last. She might readily have been taken for the elder sister of her son, Louis, who stood by the window sketching the view before him.

There was a striking resemblance between Louis and his dead father; the same clear, olive complexion, the same sable locks and bold black eyes, the same scornful, curving upper lip, and the same hot, rash, impetuous nature. But with all his fiery impetuosity he was candid, open and generous, the soul of honor and frankness, but with a nature which, according as it was trained, must be powerful for good or evil.

Sitting propped up in an easy-chair, with his gouty leg, swathed in flannel, stretched on two chairs, was the squire, looking in no very sweet frame of mind. The morning paper, yet damp from the press, lay before him; but the squire's attention would wander from it every moment to the door.

"Where's that little wretch this morning?" broke out the squire, at last, throwing down his paper impatiently.

"I really can't say," replied Lizzie, opening her eyes languidly. "I saw her racing over the hills this morning, with those dreadful dogs of hers. I expect she will be back soon."

"And we must wait for her ladyship!" growled the squire. "I'll cane her within an inch of her life if she doesn't learn to behave herself. 'Spare the child and spoil the rod,' as Solomon says."

"Here she comes!" exclaimed Louis, looking up. "Speak of Satan and he'll appear."

"Satan! She's no Satan, I'd have you know, you young jackanapes!" said the squire, angrily, for though always abusing the "little vixen," Aurora, himself, he would suffer no one else to do it.

"Look, look how she dashes along!" exclaimed Louis, with kindling eyes, unheeding the reproof. "There! she has leaped her pony over the gate, and now she is standing up in her saddle; and – bravo! well done, Gipsy! She has actually sprung over black Jupe's head in a flying leap."

While he spoke Gipsy came running up the lawn toward the house, singing, in a high, shrill voice, as she ran:

"He died long, long ago, long ago —
He had no hair on the top of his head,
The place where the wool ought to grow,
Lay down the shovel and the hoe-o-o,
Hang up – "

"Stop that, stop that, you vixen! Stop it, I tell you, or I'll hang *you* up!" said the squire, angrily. "Where do you learn those vulgar doggerels?"

"Make 'em up, Guardy – every one of 'em. Ain't I a genius?"

"I don't believe it, you scapegrace."

"No wonder you don't, seeing there never was a genius in the family before; but 'better late than never,' you know."

"None of your impertinence, miss. Give an account of yourself, if you please. Where were you this morning? Answer me *that*!"

"Nowhere, sir."

"Don't tell stories, you little sinner. Where is nowhere?"

"Over to Doctor Spider's."

"Gipsy, my dear, why will you persist in calling Doctor Wiseman nicknames?" remonstrated Lizzie.

"Why, Aunt Liz, because he's just like a spider, for all the world – all legs," flippantly replied Gipsy.

"And what business had you there, monkey? Didn't I tell you not to go? I thought I told you *never* to go there!" said the squire, in rising wrath.

"Know it, Guardy, and that's just the reason I went."

"Because I forbade you, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"You – you – you disobedient little hussy, you! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Ashamed! – what of? I haven't got the gout in my leg."

"Gipsy, you dreadful child, hush!" said Lizzie, in alarm.

"Oh, let her go on! She's just as you taught her, madam. And as to you, Miss Gipsy, or Aurora, or whatever your name is, let me tell you, the gout is nothing to be ashamed of. It runs in the most respectable families, miss."

"Lord, Guardy! What a pity I can't have it, too, and help to keep up the respectability of the family!"

Louis turned to the window, and struggled violently with a laugh, which he endeavored to change into a cough, and the laugh and cough meeting, produced a choking sensation. This sent Gipsy to his aid, who, after administering sundry thumps on his back with her little closed fists, restored him to composure, and the squire returned to the charge.

"And now, to 'return to our mutton,' as Solomon says; or – hold on a minute – was it Solomon who said that?"

The squire paused, and placed his finger reflectively on the point of his nose, in deep thought; but being unable to decide, he looked up, and went on:

"Yes, miss, as I was saying, what took you over to Deep Dale so early this morning? Tell me that."

"Well, if I must, I must, I s'pose – so here goes."

"Hallo, Gipsy!" interrupted Louis. "Take care – you're making poetry."

"No, sir! I scorn the accusation!" said Gipsy, drawing herself up. "But, Guardy, since I *must* tell you, I went over to see – ahem! – Archie!"

"You did!" grunted Guardy. "Humph! humph! humph!"

"Don't take it so much to heart, Guardy. No use grieving – 'specially as the grief might settle in your poor afflicted leg – limb, I mean."

"And may I ask, young lady, what you could possibly want with him?" said the squire, sternly.

"Oh, fifty things! He's my beau, you know."

"Your beau! —*your* beau! – your BEAU! My conscience!"

"Yes, sir, we're engaged."

"You are? 'Oh, Jupiter,' as Solomon says. Pray, madam (for such I presume you consider yourself), when will you be twelve years old?"

"Oh, as soon as I can. I don't want to be an old maid."

"So it seems, you confounded little Will-o'-the-wisp. And will you be good enough to inform us how this precious engagement came about?" said the squire, with a savage frown.

"With pleasure, sir. You see, we went out to gather grapes in the wood one day, and we had a splendiferous time. And says I, 'Archie, ain't this nice?' – and says he 'Yes' – and says I, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we'd get married?' – and says he, 'Yes' – and says I, '*Will* you have me, though?' – and says he, 'Yes' – and says I – "

"Ain't we a precious pair of fools?' and says he, 'Yes,'" interrupted the squire, mimicking her. "Oh, you're a nice gal – you're a pretty young lady!"

"Yes, ain't I, now? You and I are of one opinion there, exactly. Ain't you proud of me?"

"*Proud* of you, you barefaced little wretch! I'd like to twist your neck for you!" thundered the squire.

"Better not, Guardy; you'd be hung for *man*-slaughter if you did, you know."

"*You* don't call yourself a man, I hope!" said Louis.

"Well, if I don't, I'm a girl – which is a thousand times nicer. And speaking of girls, reminds me that Miss Hagar's got the dearest, darlingest, *beautifullest* little girl you ever set your eyes on."

"Miss Hagar?" they all exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, to be sure. Law! you needn't look so astonished; this is a free country. And why can't Miss Hagar have a little girl, if she wants to, as well as anybody else, I'd like to know?" exclaimed Gipsy, rather indignantly.

"To be sure," said Louis, who took the same view of the case as Gipsy.

"Where did she get it? – whose little girl is it?" inquired Lizzie, slightly roused from her languor by the news.

"Don't know, I'm sure; nobody don't. She was off somewhere poking round all day yesterday, and came home at night with this little girl. Oh, Louis, she's such a dear little thing!"

"Is she?" said Louis, absently.

"Yes, indeed – with a face like double-refined moonlight, and long, yellow hair, and blue eyes, and pink dress, and cheeks to match. She's twice as pretty as Minette; and Miss Hagar's going to keep her, and teach her to tell fortunes, I expect."

"I wonder Dr. Wiseman allows Miss Hagar to fill the house with little beggars," said Lizzie.

"Oh, Spider's got nothing to do with it. Miss Hagar has money of her own, and can keep her if she likes. Pity if she'd have to ask permission of that 'thing of legs and arms,' everything she wants to do."

"Gipsy, my dear, you really must not speak so of Dr. Wiseman: it's positively shocking," said the highly-scandalized Mrs. Oranmore.

"Well, I don't care; he *is* a 'thing of legs and arms.' There, now!"

"What's the little girl's name, Gipsy?" inquired Louis.

"*Celeste*— isn't it pretty? And she — oh, she's a darling, and no mistake. *Wouldn't* I marry her if I was a man — maybe I wouldn't."

"What's her other name?"

"Got none — at least she said so; and, as I didn't like to tell her she told a story, I asked Miss Hagar, and *she* told me to mind my own business; yes, she actually did. Nobody minds how they talk to me. People haven't a bit of respect for me; and I have to put up with *sass* from every one. I won't stand it much longer, either. There!"

"No, I wouldn't advise you to," said Louis. "Better *sit* down; no use in standing it."

"Wiseman's a fool if he lets that crazy tramp, his sister, support beggars in his house," exclaimed the squire, in a threatening tone. "Lunatics like her should not be allowed to go at large. He has no business to permit it."

"I'd like to see him trying to stop it," said Gipsy. "I'd be in his wool."

"*You!*" said the squire, contemptuously. "What could a little Tom Thumb in petticoats, like you, do?"

"Look here, now, Guardy, don't call a lady names. When you speak of Tom Thumb, you know, it's getting personal. What could I do? Why, I'd set his house on fire some night about his ears, or some day, when out shooting, a bullet might strike him accidentally on purpose. It takes me to defend injured innocence," said Gipsy, getting up, and squaring-off in an attitude of defiance, as she exclaimed: "Come on, old Wiseman, I'm ready for you!"

"Well, I can't allow you to associate with beggars. You must never go to Deep Dale again. I can't countenance his proceedings. If he choose to make a fool of himself, it's no reason why I should do so too."

"None in the world, sir — especially as nature has saved you that trouble."

"You audacious little demon, you! what do you mean?"

"Ahem! I was just observing, sir, that it's time for breakfast," said Gipsy, demurely.

"Humph! humph! well, ring for Mrs. Gower, and hold your tongue."

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Guardy. But how can I hold my tongue and eat?"

"I wish I could find something to take the edge off it; it's altogether too sharp," growled the old man to himself.

Mrs. Gower, fat and good-natured as ever, entered at this moment; and, as they assembled round the table, the squire — who, though he generally got the worst of the argument, would never let Gipsy rest — again resumed the subject.

"Mind, monkey, you're not to go to Deep Dale again; I forbid you — positively forbid you."

"Lor! Guardy, you don't say so!"

"Don't be disrespectful, minx. If I'm your guardian, you shall obey me. You heard me say so before, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, I think so; but, then, you say so many things, a body can't be expected to remember them all. You *must* be talking, you know; and you might as well be saying that as anything else."

"But I am determined you shall obey me this time. Do you hear? At your peril, minion, *dare* to go there again!" thundered the squire.

"That very pretty, Guardy, won't you say it over again," replied the tantalizing elf.

"Gipsy! oh, Gipsy, my dear!" chanted the ladies Gower and Oranmore, in a horrified duet.

"You – you – you – little, yellow abomination you! You – you – skinny – "

"Squire Erliston," said Gipsy, drawing herself up with stately dignity, "let me remind you, you are getting to be personal. How would you like it if I called *you*– you – you red-faced old fright – you – you – you gouty-legged – "

"There! there! that'll do," hastily interrupted the squire, while a universal shout of laughter went round the table at the ludicrous manner in which the little imp mimicked his blustering tone. "There, there! don't say a word about it; but mind, if you dare to go to Dr. Wiseman's, you'll rue it. Mind that."

"All right, sir; let me help you to another roll," said Gipsy, with her sweetest smile, as she passed the plate to the old man, who looked, not only daggers, but bowie-knives at the very least.

CHAPTER IX. A STORM AT MOUNT SUNSET HALL

"At this Sir Knight grew high in wrath,
And lifting hands and eyes up both,
Three times he smote his stomach stout,
From whence, at length, fierce words broke out."

Hudibras.

"Totty! Totty! I say, Totty, where are you? I declare to screech, I never saw such a provoking darkey in my life. Nobody never can find her when she's wanted! Totty! Totty! hallo, Totty! I want you dreadfully, it's a matter of life and death! If that girl doesn't pay more attention to me, I'll – I'll discharge her; *I will*, so help me Jimmy Johnston! Totty! Totty-y-y!" So called and shouted Gipsy, as she flew in and out, and up and down stairs, banging doors after her with a noise that made the old house ring, and scolding at the top of her voice all the time.

"Laws! Miss Roarer, here I is," said Totty, hurrying as fast as possible into the presence of the little virago, to get rid of the noise.

"Oh, it's a wonder you came! I s'pose you'd rather be lounging down in the kitchen than 'tending to your mistress. How dare you go away, when you don't know what minute I may want you? Hey?"

"Good Lor! Miss Roarer, I only went down to de kitchen to get my breakfas' 'long o' the res'. How you 'spec I's gwine to live 'thout eatin'? You allers *does* call jes' the contrariest time, allers – "

"Hold your tongue!" exclaimed her imperious little mistress; "don't give me any of your *imperunce*! There, curl my hair, and put on my pretty purple riding-habit, and make me just as pretty as ever you can. Hurry up!"

"Make you pretty, indeed!" muttered the indignant Totty; "'deed, when de Lord couldn't do it, 'taint very likely I can. Come 'long and keep still, two or free minutes, if you can. I never knew such a res'less little critter in all my life."

While Gipsy was standing as quietly as her fidgety nature would allow, to have her hair curled, Mrs. Gower entered.

"Well, 'Rora, my dear, where are you going this morning, that you are dressing in your best?" said Mrs. Gower, glancing at the gay purple riding-habit – for dress was a thing Gipsy seldom troubled herself about.

"Why, aunty, where *would* I be going; over to Spider's, of course."

"Oh, Gipsy, my dear, pray don't think of such a thing!" exclaimed the good woman, in a tone of alarm. "Your guardian will be dreadfully angry."

"Lor! aunty, I know that; there wouldn't be any fun in it if he wasn't," replied the elf.

"Oh, Aurora, child! you don't know what you're doing. Consider all he has done for you, and how ungrateful it is of you to disobey him in this manner. Now, he has set his heart on keeping you from Deep Dale (you know he never liked the doctor nor his family), and he will be terribly, frightfully angry if he finds you have disobeyed him. Ride over the hills, go out sailing or shooting, but do not go there."

Gipsy, who had been yawning fearfully during this address, now jerked herself away from Totty, and replied, impatiently:

"Well, *let* him get frightfully angry; I'll get 'frightfully angry' too, and so there will be a pair of us. Do you s'pose I'd miss seeing that dear, sweet, little girl again, just because Guardy will stamp, and fume, and roar, and scare all mankind into fits? Not I, indeed. Let him come on, who's afraid," and

Gipsy threw herself into a stage attitude, and shouted the words in a voice that was quite imposing, coming as it did from so small a body.

"Oh, Gipsy, child! consider," again began Mrs. Gower.

"Oh, aunty, dear! I won't consider, never did; don't agree with my constitution, no how you can fix it. Archie told me one day when I was doing something he considered a crazy trick, to 'consider.' Well, for his sake, I tried to, and before ten minutes, aunty, I felt symptoms of falling into a decline. There now!"

"Oh, my dear! my dear! you are incorrigible," sighed Mrs. Gower; "but what would you do if your guardian some day turned you out of doors? You have no claim on him, and he *might* do it, you know, in a fit of anger."

"If he did" – exclaimed Gipsy, springing up with flashing eyes.

"Well, and if he did, what would you do?"

"Why, I'd defy him to his face, and then I'd run off, and go to sea, and make my fortune, and come back, and marry you – no, I couldn't do that, but I'd marry Archie. Lor! I'd get along splendidly."

"Oh, Gipsy! Gipsy! rightly named Gipsy! how little you know what it is to be friendless in the world, you poor little fairy you! Now, child, be quiet, and talk sensibly to me for a few minutes."

"Oh, bother, aunty! I can't be quiet; and as to talking sensibly, why I rather think I am doing that just now. There, now – now do, please, bottle up that lecture you've got for me, and it'll keep, for I'm off!" And darting past them, she ran down stairs, through the long hall, and was flying toward the stables in a twinkling.

On her way she met our old friend, Jupiter.

"Hallo, Jupe! Oh, there you are! Go and saddle Mignonne *'mediately*. I want him; quick, now!"

"Why, Miss Roarer, honey, I'se sorry for ter diserbilige yer, chile, but ole mas'r he tole me not to let yer get Minnin to-day," said Jupiter, looking rather uneasily at the dark, wild, little face, and large, lustrous eyes, in which a storm was fast brewing.

"Do you mean to say he told you not to let me have my pony?" she said, or rather hissed, through her tightly-clenched teeth.

"Jes' so, Miss Roarer; he tell me so not ten minutes ago."

"Now, Jupiter, look here; you go right off and saddle Mignonne, or it'll be the worse for you. D'ye hear?"

"Miss Roarer, I 'clare for't I dassent. Mas'r'll half kill me."

"And I'll *whole* kill you if you don't," said Gipsy, with a wild flash of her black eyes, as she sprang lightly on a high stone bench, and raised her riding-whip over the head of the trembling darkey; "go, sir; go right off and do as I tell you!"

"Laws! I can't – 'deed chile! I can't – "

Whack! whack! whack! with no gentle hand went the whip across his shoulders, interrupting his apology.

"There, you black rascal! will you dare to disobey your mistress again!" Whack! whack! whack!" If you don't bring Mignonne out this minute, I'll shoot you dead as a mackerel! There; does that argument overcome your scruples?" whack! whack! *whack!*

With something between a yell and a howl, poor Jupiter sprang back, and commenced rubbing his afflicted back.

"Will you go?" demanded Gipsy, raising her whip once more.

"Yes! yes! Who ever did see such a 'bolical little limb as dat ar. Ole mas'r'll kill me, I knows he will," whimpered poor Jupiter as he slunk away to the stables, closely followed by his vixenish little mistress, still poising the dangerous whip.

Mignonne, a small, black, fleet-footed, spirited Arabian, was led forth, pawing the ground and tossing his head, as impatient to be off, even, as his young mistress.

"That's right, Jupe," said Gipsy, as she sprang into the saddle and gathered up the reins; "but mind, for the future, never dare to disobey *me*, no matter what anybody says. Mind, if you do, look out for a pistol-ball, some night, through your head."

Jupiter, who had not the slightest doubt but what the mad-headed little witch would do it as soon as not, began whimpering like a whipped schoolboy. Between the Scylla of his master's wrath, and the Charybdis of his willful little mistress, poor Jupiter knew not which way to steer.

"Don't cry, Jupe – there's a good fellow," said Gipsy, touched by his distress. "Keep out of your master's sight till I come back, and I'll take all the blame upon myself. There, now – off we go, Mignonne!"

And waving her plumed hat above her head, with a shout of triumphant defiance as she passed the house, Gipsy went galloping down the road like a flash.

The sky, which all the morning had looked threatening, was rapidly growing darker and darker. About half an hour after the departure of Gipsy, the storm burst upon them in full fury. The wind howled fiercely through the forest, the rain fell in torrents, the lightning flashed in one continued sheet of blue electric flame, the thunder crashed peal upon peal, until heaven and earth seemed rending asunder.

The frightened inmates of Sunset Hall were huddled together, shivering with fear. The doors and windows were closed fast, and the servants, gray with terror, were cowering in alarm down in the kitchen.

"Lor' have massy 'pon us! who ever seed sich lightnin'? 'Pears as though all de worl' was 'luminated, and de las' day come!" said Jupiter, his teeth chattering with terror.

"An' Miss Roarer, she's out in all de storm, an' ole mas'r don't know it," said Totty. "She *would* go, spite of all Missus Scour said. I 'clare to man, that dat ar rampin', tarryfyin' little limb's 'nuff to drive one clar 'stracted. I ain't no peace night nor day 'long o' her capers. Dar!"

"Won't we cotch it when mas'r finds out she's gone," said a cunning-looking, curly-headed little darkey, whom Gipsy had nicknamed Bob-o-link, with something like a chuckle; "good Lor! jes' see ole mas'r a swearin' an' tearin' round', an' kickin' de dogs an' niggers, an' smashin' de res' ob de furnitur'. Oh, Lor!" And evidently overcome by the ludicrous scene which fancy had conjured up, Bob-o-link threw himself back, and went off into a perfect convulsion of laughter, to the horror of the rest.

While this discussion was going on below stairs, a far different scene was enacting above.

At the first burst of the storm, Lizzie and Mrs. Gower hastened in affright to the parlor, where the squire was peacefully snoring in his arm-chair, and Louis was still finishing his sketch.

The noise and bustle of their entrance aroused the squire from his slumbers, and after sundry short snorts he woke up, and seeing the state of affairs, his first inquiry was for Gipsy.

"Where's that little abomination, now?" he abruptly demanded, in a tone that denoted his temper was not improved by the sudden breaking up of his nap.

All were silent. Mrs. Gower through fear, and the others through ignorance.

"Where is she? where is she, I say?" thundered the squire. "Doesn't somebody know?"

"Most likely up stairs somewhere," said Louis. "Shall I go and see?"

"No, you sha'n't 'go and see.' It's the duty of the women there to look after her, but they don't do it. She might be lost, or murdered, or killed, fifty times a day, for all they care. 'Who trusteth in the ungodly shall be deceived,' as Solomon says. Ring that bell."

Louis obeyed; and in a few minutes Totty, quaking with terror, made her appearance.

"Where's your young mistress? Where's Miss Gipsy, eh?" demanded the squire, in an awful voice.

"Deed, mas'r, she's rode off. I couldn't stop her nohow, 'deed – "

"Rode off!" shouted the squire, as, forgetful of his gouty leg, he sprang to his feet; "rode off in this storm? Villains! wretches! demons! I'll murder every one of you! Out in this storm! Good Lord!"

Clear out, every living soul of you, and if one of you return without her, I'll – I'll blow his brains out!" roared the old man, purple with rage.

"Why, grandfather," said Louis, while the rest cowered with fear, "it is not likely Gipsy is out exposed to the storm. There are many places of shelter well-known to her among the hills, and there she will stay until this hurricane is over. It would be impossible for any one to find her now, even though they could ride through this storm."

"Silence!" thundered the squire; "they must find her! Here, Jupe, Jake, Bob, and the rest of you, mount, and off in search of Miss Aurora over the hills, and at the peril of your life, return without her. Be off! go! vanish! and mind ye, be sure to bring her home."

"Law! mas'r, Miss Roarer ain't over de hills. She's gone over to Deep Dale," said Totty.

"What!" exclaimed the squire, pausing in his rage, aghast, thunderstruck at the news.

"Deed, Lord knows, mas'r, I couldn't stop her."

"You – you – you – diabolical imp you!" roared the old man, seizing his crutch, and hurling it at her head, as Totty, in mortal alarm, dodged and fled from the room. "Oh, the little demon! the little wretch! won't I pay her for this, when I get hold of her! the – the disobedient, ungrateful, undutiful hussy! I'll cane her within an inch of her life! I'll lock her up on bread and water! I'll keep her in the house day and night! I'll – oh, Lord, my leg," he exclaimed, with a groan, as he fell back, powerless, between rage and despair, in his seat.

Mrs. Gower and Lizzie, still quaking with terror, drew farther into the corner to escape his notice, while Louis bent still lower over his drawing to hide a smile that was breaking over his face.

At this moment a fresh burst of rain and wind shook the doors and windows of the old house, and with it the squire's rage broke out afresh.

"Call Jupe! Be off, Louis, and tell him to ride over to Deep Dale this instant, and bring that little fiend home! And tell him if he doesn't return with her in less than half an hour, I'll break every bone in his body! Go!"

Louis accordingly repaired to the kitchen and delivered the order to poor Jupiter – who, bemoaning his hard fate in being obliged to serve so whimsical a master, was forced to set out in the storm in search of the capricious Gipsy.

Half an hour, three-quarters passed, and then Jupiter, soaking with rain, and reeking with sweat, came galloping back; but like young Lochinvar, immortalized in the song:

"He rode unattended and rode all alone,"

and gray, and shaking, and trembling with fear and expectation of the "wrath which was to come," he presented himself before his master.

"Well, sir, where's Miss Gipsy?" shouted the old man, as he entered.

"Mas'r, I couldn't bring her, to save my precious life; she wouldn't come, nohow. I tell her you wanted her in a desprit hurry; and she said, s'posin' you waited till your hurry was over. I said you tole me not to come home 'thout her; and she said, very well, I might stay all night, if I liked, 'cause she warn't comin' home till to-morrer. I tole her you was t'arin' mad; and she said, you'd better have patience, and smoke your pipe. I couldn't do nothin' 'tall with her, so I left, an' come back, an' dat's all." And without waiting for the burst of wrath which he saw coming, Jupiter beat a precipitate retreat to the lower regions.

You should have seen the wrath of Squire Erliston then. How he stamped, and raged, and swore, and threatened, until he nearly frightened Lizzie into hysterics, used as she was to his fits of passion. And then, at last, when utterly exhausted, he ordered the servants to go and prepare a large, empty room, which had long been unused, as a prison for Gipsy, upon her return. Everything was taken out of it, and here the squire vowed she should remain until she had learned to obey him for the future. Then, relapsing into sulky silence, he sat down, "nursing his wrath to keep it warm," until the return of the little delinquent.

CHAPTER X. MISS HAGAR

"Let me gaze for a moment, that ere I die,
I may read thee, lady, a prophecy:
That brow may beam in glory awhile,
That cheek may bloom, and that lip may smile;
But clouds shall darken that brow of snow,
And sorrows blight that bosom's glow."

– *L. Davison.*

Meantime, while the squire was throwing the household of Sunset Hall into terror and consternation, the object of his wrath was enjoying herself with audacious coolness at Deep Dale.

The family of Doctor Nicholas Wiseman consisted of one daughter, a year or two older than Gipsy, a nephew called Archie Rivers, and a maiden step-sister, Miss Hagar Dedley. The doctor, who was naturally grasping and avaricious, would not have burdened himself with the care of those two had it been anything out of his own pocket. The parents of Archie Rivers had been tolerably wealthy, and at their death had left him quite a fortune, and amply remunerated the doctor for taking charge of him until he should be of age. Miss Hagar had a slender income, sufficient for her wants, and was permitted a room in his house as long as she should continue to take care of herself.

Deep Dale had once been the residence of a wealthy and aristocratic family, but had by some unknown means passed from their hands to those of Doctor Wiseman.

It was, as its name implied, a long, deep, sloping dale, with the forest of St. Mark's towering darkly behind, and a wide, grassy lawn sloping down from the front. The house itself was a long, low, irregular mansion of gray sandstone, with a quaint, pleasant, old-fashioned look.

Evening was now approaching. The curtains were drawn, the lamps lighted, and the family assembled in the plainly, almost scantily, furnished sitting-room.

By the fire, in a large leathern arm-chair, sat our old acquaintance, the doctor, with one long, lean leg crossed over the other, one eye closed, and the other fixed so intently on the floor that he seemed to be counting the threads in the carpet. Years have done anything but add to his charms, his face never looked so much like yellow parchment as it did then, his arms and legs were longer and skinnier-looking than ever, and altogether, a more unprepossessing face could hardly have been discovered.

By the table, knitting, sat Miss Hagar. Her tall, thin figure, and grave, solemn face, made her look almost majestic, as, with her lips firmly compressed, she knit away in grim silence. Unlike other spinsters, she neither petted dogs nor cats, but had a most unaccountable mania for fortune-telling, and had been, for years, the seeress and sibyl of the whole neighborhood.

In a distant corner of the room sat the little *protegee* of Miss Hagar, with Gipsy on one side of her, and Archie Rivers on the other, regarding her as though she were some sort of natural curiosity. And, truly, a more lovely child could scarcely have been found.

She appeared to be about the same age as Gipsy, but was taller and more graceful, with a beautifully rounded figure, not plump, like that of most children, but slender and elegant, and lithe as a willow wand. A small, fair, sweet face, with long, golden hair, and soft, dreamy eyes of blue, and a smile like an angel's.

Such was Celeste!

Such a contrast as she was to Gipsy, as she sat with her little white hands folded in her lap, the long golden lashes falling shyly over the blue eyes; her low, sweet voice and timid manner, so still and gentle; and her elfish companion, with her dark, bright face, her eager, sparkling, restless eyes, her short, sable locks, and her every motion so quick and startling, as to make one nervous watching her.

Archie Rivers, a merry, good-looking lad, with roguish blue eyes and a laughing face, sat, alternately watching the fair, downcast face of Celeste, and the piquant, gipsyish countenance of the other.

At the table sat Minnette Wiseman, a proud, superb-looking girl of twelve. Her long, jet-black hair fell in glossy braids over her shoulders; her elbows rested on the table; her chin supported by her hands; her large, glittering black eyes fixed on Celeste, with a look of fixed dislike and jealousy that was never to die out during life.

"And so you have no other name but Celeste," said Gipsy, trying to peer under the drooping lashes resting on the blue-veined cheek. "Now, if that isn't funny! Everybody has two names but you – even *me*. I have two names."

"Yes, Gipsy Gower. There is something odd and elfinish in the very name," said Archie, laughing.

"Elfinish? It's no such thing. It's a great deal prettier than yours, Archie Rivers! And where did you live before you came here, Celeste?" continued Gipsy, returning to the charge.

"With Aunt Katie," replied Celeste, softly.

"And where is she now?" went on Gipsy.

"Dead!" said the child, while her lip trembled, and a tear fell on the little brown hand lying on her own.

"Do tell! and I've made you cry, too. Now, if that ain't too bad. Do you know, Celeste, I never cried in my life?"

"Oh, what a fib!" exclaimed Archie. "You were the horriddest young one to cry ever I heard in my life. You did nothing but yell and roar from morning till night."

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" indignantly exclaimed Gipsy. "I'm sure I was too sensible a baby to do anything of the kind. Anyway, I have never cried since I can remember. And as to fear – were you ever afraid?" she asked, suddenly, of Celeste.

"Oh, yes – often."

"Did you ever? Why, you look afraid now. Are you?"

"Yes."

"My! What of?"

"Of *you*," said Celeste, shrinking back, shyly, from her impetuous little questioner.

"Oh, my stars and garters! Afraid of *me*, and after I've been so quiet and good with her all the evening!" ejaculated Gipsy; while Archie, who was blessed with a lively sense of the ridiculous, leaned back and laughed heartily.

"Well, after that I'm never going to believe there's anything but ingratitude in *this* world," said Gipsy, with an emphasis on the "*this*" which seemed to denote she *had* met with gratitude in another.

But tears filled the gentle eyes of Celeste, as she looked up, and said:

"Oh, I hope you're not angry with me. I didn't mean to offend you, I'm sure. I'm *so* sorry."

"Oh, it's no matter. Nobody minds what they say to me. I'm used to it. But it's so funny you should be afraid. Why, I never was afraid in my life."

"That's true enough, anyway," said Archie, with an assenting nod.

"There's Guardy now. Oh! won't he be awful when I get home – but laws! who cares! I'll pay him off for it, if he makes a fuss. I sha'n't be in his debt long, that's one comfort."

"Do you remember how dolefully Jupiter looked as he came in for you, all dripping wet; and when you told him you wouldn't go, he – " and overcome by the ludicrous recollection, Master Archie again fell back in a paroxysm of laughter.

"What a fellow you are to laugh, Archie!" remarked Gipsy. "You astonish me, I declare. Do you laugh much, Celeste?"

"No, not much."

"That's right – I don't laugh much either – I'm too dignified, you know; but somehow I make other people laugh. There's Archie now, for everlasting laughing; but Minnette – do you know I never saw her laugh yet – that is, really laugh. She smiles sometimes; not a pleasant smile either, but a scornful smile like. I say, Minnette," she added, raising her voice, "what is the reason you never laugh?"

"None of your business," rudely replied Minnette.

"The Lord never intended her face for a smiling one," said Miss Hagar, breaking in, suddenly. "And you, you poor little wild eaglet, who, a moment ago, boasted you had never wept, you shall yet shed tears of blood. The bird has its eyes put out with red-hot iron before it can be made to sing sweetly; and so you, too, poor bird, must be blinded, even though you should flutter and beat yourself to death, trying to break through the bars of your cage."

"Humph! I'd like to see them trying to put my eyes out," said Gipsy. "I guess I'd make them sing, and on the wrong side of their mouths, too – at least, I think I should!"

"Oh, Miss Hagar, tell us our fortunes – you haven't done so this long time," exclaimed Archie, jumping up. "Here is Gipsy wants to know hers, and Celeste's, too; and as for me, I know the future must have something splendid in store for so clever a fellow, and I'm anxious to know it beforehand."

"Don't be too anxious," said Miss Hagar, fixing her gloomy eyes prophetically on his eager, happy face; "troubles are soon enough when they come, without wishing to forestall them."

"Why, Miss Hagar, you don't mean to say I'm to have troubles?" cried Archie, laughing. "If they do come, I'll laugh in their face, and cry, 'Never surrender.' I don't believe, though, my troubles will be very heavy."

"Yes, the heaviest troubles that man can ever know shall be thine," said the oracle, in her deep, gloomy voice. "The day will come when despair, instead of laughter, will fill your beaming eyes; when the smile shall have left your lip, and the hue of health will give place to the dusky glow of the grave. Yes, the day will come when the wrong you may not quell shall cling to you like a garment of flame, crushing and overwhelming you and all you love, in its fiery, burning shame. The day will come when one for whom you would give your life shall desert you for your deadliest enemy, and leave you to despair and woe. Such is the fate I have read in the stars for you."

"La! Archie, what a nice time you're going to have," said the incorrigible Gipsy, breaking the impressive silence that followed the sibyl's words – "when all that comes to pass! It will be as good as a play to you."

"Miss Hagar must have sat up all last night getting that pretty speech by heart," said Minnette, fixing her mocking black eyes on the face of the spinster. "How well she repeated it! She'd make her fortune on the stage as a tragedy queen."

"Scoffer!" said the sibyl, turning her prophetic eyes on the deriding face of the speaker, while her face darkened, and her stern mouth grew sterner still. "One day that iron heart of thine shall melt; that heart, which, as yet, is sealed with granite, shall feel every fiber drawn out by the roots, to be cast at your feet quivering and bleeding, unvalued and uncared for. Come hither, and let me read your future in your eyes."

"No, no!" said Minnette, shaking back, scornfully, her glossy black hair. "Prate your old prophecies to the fools who believe you. I'll not be among the number."

"Unbeliever, I heed it not!" said Miss Hagar as she rose slowly to her feet; and the light of inspiration gathered in her eyes of gray, as, swaying to and fro, she chanted, in a wild, dirge-like tone:

"Beware! beware! for the time will come —
A blighted heart, a ruined home.

In the dim future I foresee
A fate far worse than death for thee."

Her eyes were still riveted on the deriding face and bold, bright eyes, that, in spite of all their boldness, quailed before her steady gaze.

"Good-gracious, Miss Hagar, if you haven't nearly frightened this little atomy into fits!" said Gipsy. "I declare, of all the little cowards ever was, she's the greatest! Now, if I thought it wouldn't scare the life out of her, I'd have my fortune told. If everybody else is going to have such pretty things happen to them, I don't see why I shouldn't, too."

"Come here, then, and let me read thy fate," said Miss Hagar. "The spirit is upon me to-night, and it may never come more."

"All right. Archie, stop grinning and 'tend this little scary thing. Now, go ahead, Miss Hagar."

The seeress looked down solemnly into the dark, piquant little face upturned so gravely to her own; into the wicked brown eyes, twinkling and glittering with such insufferable mischief and mirth; and, bending her tall body down, she again chanted, in her dreary tone:

"Thou wast doomed from thy birth, oh, ill-fated child;

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