

MAY AGNES FLEMING

THE GYPSY QUEEN'S VOW

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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	7
CHAPTER III.	13
CHAPTER IV.	18
CHAPTER V.	21
CHAPTER VI.	25
CHAPTER VII.	32
CHAPTER VIII.	36
CHAPTER IX.	41
CHAPTER X.	46
CHAPTER XI.	51
CHAPTER XII.	57
CHAPTER XIII.	61
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	63

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CHAPTER I. NIGHT AND STORM

“The night grows wondrous dark; deep-swelling gusts
And sultry stillness take the rule by turn,
While o’er our heads the black and heavy clouds
Roll slowly on. This surely bodes a storm.”

– *Baillie.*

Overhead, the storm-clouds were scudding wildly across the sky, until all above was one dense pall of impenetrable gloom. A chill, penetrating rain was falling, and the wind came sweeping in long, fitful gusts – piercingly cold; for it was a night in March.

It was the north road to London. A thick, yellow fog, that had been rising all day from the bosom of the Thames, wrapped the great city in a blackness that might almost be felt; and its innumerable lights were shrouded in the deep gloom. Yet the solitary figure, flitting through the pelting rain and bleak wind, strained her eyes as she fled along, as though, despite the more than Egyptian darkness, she would force, by her fierce, steady glare, the obscure lights of the city to show themselves.

The night lingered and lingered, the gloom deepened and deepened, the rain plashed dismally; the wind blew in moaning, lamentable gusts, penetrating through the thick mantle she held closely around her. And still the woman fled on, stopping neither for wind, nor rain, nor storm – unheeding, unfeeling them all – keeping her fierce, devouring gaze fixed, with a look that might have pierced the very heavens, on the still far-distant city.

There was no one on the road but herself. The lateness of the hour – for it was almost midnight – and the increasing storm, kept pedestrians within doors that cheerless March night. Now and then she would pass cottages in which lights were still glaring, but most of the houses were wrapped in silence and darkness.

And still on, through night, and storm, and gloom, fled the wanderer, with the pitiless rain beating in her face – the chill blasts fluttering her thin-worn garments and long, wild, black hair. Still on, pausing not, resting not, never removing her steadfast gaze from the distant city – like a lost soul hurrying to its doom.

Suddenly, above the wailing of the wind and plashing of the rain, arose the thunder of horses’ hoofs and the crash of approaching carriage wheels. Rapidly they came on, and the woman paused for a moment and leaned against a cottage porch, as if waiting until it should pass.

A bright light was still burning in the window, and it fell on the lonely wayfarer as she stood, breathing hard and waiting, with burning, feverish impatience, for the carriage to pass. It displayed the form of a woman of forty, or thereabouts, with a tall, towering, commanding figure, gaunt and bony. Her complexion was dark; its naturally swarthy hue having been tanned by sun and wind to a dark-brown. The features were strong, stern, and prominent, yet you could see at a glance that the face had once been a handsome one. Now, however – thin, haggard, and fleshless, with the high, prominent cheek-bones; the gloomy, overhanging brows; the stern, set, unyielding mouth; the rigid, corrugated brow; the fierce, devouring, maniac, black eyes – it looked positively hideous. Such eyes! – such burning, blazing orbs of fire, never was seen in human head before! They glowed like two

live coals in a bleached skull. There was utter misery, there was despair unspeakable, mingled with fierce determination, in those lurid, flaming eyes. And that dark, stern terrific face was stamped with the unmistakable impress of a despised, degraded race. The woman was a gipsy. It needed not her peculiar dress, the costume of her tribe, to tell this, though that was significant enough. Her thick, coarse, jet-black hair, streaked with threads of gray, was pushed impatiently off her face; and her only head-covering was a handkerchief of crimson and black silk knotted under her chin. A cloak, of coarse, red woolen stuff, covered her shoulders, and a dress of the same material, but in color blue, reached hardly to her ankles. The brilliant head-dress, and unique, fiery costume, suited well the dark, fierce, passionate face of the wearer.

For an instant she paused, as if to let the carriage pass; then, as if even the delay of an instant was maddening, she started wildly up, and keeping her hungry, devouring gaze fixed on the vision of the still unseen city, she sped on more rapidly than before.

CHAPTER II. MR. TOOSYPEGS

“He bears him like a portly gentleman;
And, to say truth, Vernon brags of him
To be a virtuous and well-governed youth.”

– *Shakspeare.*

The vehicle that the gipsy had heard approaching was a light wagon drawn by two swift horses. It had two seats capable of holding four persons, though the front seat alone was now occupied.

The first of these (for his age claims the precedence) was a short, stout, burly, thick-set, little man, buttoned up in a huge great-coat, suffering under a severe eruption of capes and pockets. An immense fur cap, that, by its antediluvian looks, might have been worn by Noah's grandfather, adorned his head, and was pulled so far down on his face that nothing was visible but a round, respectable-looking bottle-nose, and a pair of small, twinkling gray eyes. This individual, who was also the driver, rejoiced in the cognomen of Mr. Bill Harkins, and made it his business to take belated wayfarers to London (either by land or water), when arriving too late for the regular conveyances. On the present occasion his sole freight consisted of a young gentleman with a brilliant-hued carpet-bag, glowing with straw-colored roses and dark-blue lilies, rising from a back-ground resembling London smoke. The young gentleman was a very remarkable young gentleman indeed. He was exceedingly tall and thin, with legs like a couple of pipe-stems, and a neck so long and slender that it reminded you of a gander's, and made you tremble for the safety of the head balanced on such a frail support. His hair and complexion were both of that indefinite color known to the initiated as “whity brown” – the latter being profusely sprinkled with large yellow freckles, and the former as straight and sleek as bear's grease could make it. For the rest, he was characterized by nothing in particular, but for being the possessor of a pair of large, pale-blue eyes, not remarkable for either brilliancy or expression, and for wearing the meekest possible expression, of countenance. He might have been eighteen years old, as far as years went; but his worldly wisdom was by no means equal to his years.

“By jingo! that 'ere was a blast!” said Mr. Harkins, bending his head as a gale swept shrieking by.

“Yes, it *does* blow, but *I* don't mind it – I'm very much obliged to you,” said the pale young man, with the white hair and freckles, holding his carpet-bag in his arms, as if it were a baby.

“Who said you did?” growled Bill Harkins. “You'll be safe in Lunnon in half an 'our, while I'll be a-drivin' back through this 'ere win' and rain, getting wetted right through. If you don't mind it, *I* does, Mr. Toosypegs.”

“Mr. Harkins,” said Mr. Toosypegs, humbly, “I'm very sorry to put you to so much trouble, I'm sure, but if two extra crowns – ”

“Mr. Toosypegs,” interrupted Mr. Harkins, with a sudden burst of feeling, “give us yer hand; yer a trump. It's easy to be perceived, them as is gentlemen from them as isn't. You're one o' the right sort; oughter to be a lord, by jingo! Get up, hold lazybones,” said Mr. Harkins, touching the near-wheeler daintily with his whip.

“Mr. Harkins, it's very good of you to say so, and I'm very much obliged to you, I'm sure,” said Mr. Toosypegs, gratefully; “but, at the same time, if you'll please to recollect. I'm an American, and consequently couldn't be a lord. There aren't any lords over in America, Mr. Harkins; though if there was, I dare say I would be one. It's real kind of you to wish it, though, and I'm much obliged to you,” added Mr. Toosypegs, with emotion.

"Hamerica must be a hodd sorter place," said Mr. Harkins, reflectively. "I've heern tell that your king –"

"He isn't a king, Mr. Harkins; he's only the President," broke in Mr. Toosypegs, with energy.

"Well, President, then," said Mr. Harkins, adopting the amendment with a look of disgust. "I've heern they call him 'mister,' jest like hany hother man."

"So they do; and he glories in the triumphant title – a title which, as an American citizen's, is a prouder one than that of king or kaiser!" said Mr. Toosypegs, enthusiastically, while he repeated the sentence he had read out of a late novel: "– It is a title for which emperors might lay down their scepters – for which potentates might doff the royal purple – for which the great ones of the earth might – a – might" – Mr. Toosypegs paused and knit his brows, having evidently lost his cue.

"Kick the bucket!" suggested Mr. Harkins, coming to his aid.

"Mr. Harkins, I'm very much obliged to you; but that wasn't exactly the word," said Mr. Toosypegs, politely, "– Might' – oh, yes! – 'might resign name and fame, and dwell under the shadow of the American eagle, whose glorious wings extend to the four quarters of the earth, and before whose soul-piercing eye the nations of the world must blush forevermore!'"

And Mr. Toosypegs, carried away by national enthusiasm, gave his arm such a flourish that it came in contact with the head of Mr. Harkins, and set more stars dancing before his eyes than there would have been had the night been ever so fine.

The outraged Mr. Harkins indignantly sprung round, and collared Mr. Toosypegs, whose complexion had turned from whity-brown to gray, with terror, and whose teeth chattered with mingled shame and fear.

"You himpertanent wagabond!" shouted Mr. Harkins, "to go for to strike a hunnoffending man like that! Blessed! if I hain't a good mind to chuck yer 'ead fust hout the waggin."

"Mr. Har – Har – Harkins," stammered the half-strangled advocate of the American eagle, "I didn't mean to do it, I'm very much obliged to you! I do assure you, Mr. Harkins, I hadn't the faintest idea of hitting you; and if money –"

"How much?" demanded Mr. Harkins, fiercely, looking bayonets at his trembling victim.

"Mr. Harkins, if five or even ten dollars –"

"Which is how many pounds?" demanded the somewhat mollified Mr. Harkins.

"Two pounds sterling," said Mr. Toosypegs, in a trembling falsetto; "and I do assure you, Mr. Harkins, I hadn't the faintest idea of hitting you that time. If two pound –"

"Done!" cried Mr. Harkins. "Never say it ag'in. I ain't a man to bear spite at no one – which is a Christian maxim, Mr. Toosypegs. A clip side the head's neither here nor there. Same time, I'll take them two-pound flimsies now, if's all the same to you?"

"Certainly – certainly, Mr. Harkins," said Mr. Toosypegs, drawing out a purse well-filled with gold, and opening it nervously. "Three – five – ten dollars, and two for the drive's twelve; and one to buy sugar-plums for your infant family – if you've got such a thing about you – is thirteen. Here's thirteen dollars, Mr. Harkins. I'm very much obliged to you."

"Same to you, Mr. Toosypegs," said Mr. Harkins, pocketing the money, with a broad grin. "May you ne'er want a frien,' nor a bottle to give him,' as the poic says."

"Mr. Harkins, I'm obliged to you," said Mr. Toosypegs, grasping his hand, which Mr. Harkins resigned with a grunt. "You have a soul, Mr. Harkins. I know it – I feel it. Everybody mightn't find it out; but I can – I perceived it from the first."

Mr. Harkins heard this startling fact with the greatest indifference, merely saying, "Humph!"

"And now, how far do you suppose we are from the city, Mr. Harkins!" said Mr. Toosypegs, in his most insinuating tone.

"Bout a mile or so."

"Could you recommend any hotel to me, Mr. Harkins. I'm a stranger in the city, you know, and should feel grateful if you would," said Mr. Toosypegs, humbly.

"Why, yes, I can," said Mr. Harkins, brightening suddenly up. "There's the 'Blue Pig,' one of the finest 'otels in Lunnon, with the best o' 'commodations for man and beast. You've heern o' the 'Blue Pig' over there in Hamerica, hain't you?"

Mr. Toosypegs wasn't sure. It was very likely he had; but, owing to his bad memory, he had forgotten.

"Well, anyhow, you won't find many 'otels to beat that 'ere. Best o' 'commodation – but I told you that hafore."

"Where is it located?" asked Mr. Toosypegs.

"St. Giles. You know where that is, in course – hevery-body does. The nicest 'otel in Lunnon – best o' 'commodations. But I told you that hafore. My hold frien' Bruisin' Bob keeps it. You'll like it, I know."

"Yes, Mr. Harkins, I dare say I will. I am very much obliged to you," said Mr. Toosypegs, in a somewhat dubious tone.

"That 'ere man's the greatest cove a-goin'," said Mr. Harkins, getting enthusiastic. "Been married ten times if he's been married once. One wife died; one left his bread-board, and run hoff with a hofficer dragoon; one was lagged for stealin' wipes, and he's got three livin' at this present writin'. Great fellar is Bob."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it, Mr. Harkins," said the proprietor of the freckles, politely; "and I anticipate a great deal of pleasure in making the acquaintance of your friends, Mr. and Mrs. Bob. But, good gracious! Mr. Harkins, just look there – if that ain't a woman hurrying on there after," said Mr. Toosypegs, pointing, in intense surprise, to the form of the gipsy, as she darted swiftly away from the cottage.

"Well, what o' that? Some tramper a-goin' to Lunnon," said Mr. Harkins, gruffly.

"But, Mr. Harkins, a woman out in such a storm at this hour of the night! Why, it ain't right," said Mr. Toosypegs, getting excited.

Mr. Harkins picked up his hat, turned down the collar of his coat, faced abruptly round, and looked Mr. Toosypegs straight in the eyes.

"Do call to her to get in, Mr. Harkins. There's plenty of room for her on the back seat," said Mr. Toosypegs, unheeding Mr. Harkins' astounded look at his philanthropy. "A woman traveling on foot in such a storm! Why, it ain't right!" repeated Mr. Toosypegs, getting still more excited.

"Mr. Toosypegs, Hamericans don't never be a little hout their mind, do they?" said Mr. Harkins, blandly.

"Not often, Mr. Harkins, I'm very much obliged to you," said Mr. Toosypegs, with his customary politeness.

"Because if they did, you know," said Mr. Harkins, in the same bland tone, "I should say you wasn't quite right yourself, you know!"

"Good gracious! Mr. Harkins, what do you mean?" exclaimed Mr. Toosypegs, in a tone of mild remonstrance. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

"Mr. Toosypegs, I don't like to be personal; so I'll only say it's my private opinion you're a brick!" said Mr. Harkins, mildly. "Perhaps, though, its the hair of Hingland wot doesn't agree with you. I thought you was wery sensible a little w'ile ago, when you gin me them two poun'."

"I'm very much obliged to you for your good opinion, Mr. Harkins," said Mr. Toosypegs, blushing. "And if you'll only call to that woman to get into the wagon, I'll be still more so."

"And have your pockets picked?" said Mr. Harkins, sharply. "I shan't do no sich thing."

"Mr. Harkins!" said Mr. Toosypegs, warmly, "she's a woman – ain't she?"

"Well, wot if she be?" said Mr. Harkins, sullenly.

"Why, that no woman should be walking at this hour when men are ridin'; more particularly when there is a back seat with nobody in it. Why, it ain't right!" said Mr. Toosypegs, who seemed unable to get beyond this point.

"Well, I don't care!" said Mr. Harkins, snappishly. "Do you s'pose, Mr. Toosypegs, I have nothing to do but buy waggins to kerry sich lumber as that 'ere? I won't do it for no one. Likely as not she's nothin' but a gipsy, or something as bad. This 'ere waggin ain't goin' to be perluted with no sich trash."

"Mr. Harkins," said Mr. Toosypegs, briskly, thrusting his hand into his pocket, "what will you take and bring her to London?"

"Hey? 'A fool and his money' – hum! What'll you give?"

"There's a crown."

"Done!" said Mr. Harkins, closing his digits on the coin, while his little eyes snapped. "Hullo! you, woman!" he shouted, rising his voice.

The gipsy – who, though but a yard or so ahead, was indistinguishable in the darkness – sped on without paying the slightest attention to his call.

"Hallo, there! Hallo!" again called Mr. Harkins, while Mr. Toosypegs followed him:

"Stop a moment, if you please, madam."

But neither for the sharp, surly order of the driver, nor the bland, courteous request of Mr. Toosypegs, did the woman stop. Casting a brief, fleeting glance over her shoulder, she again flitted on.

"You confounded old witch! Stop and take a ride to town – will you?" yelled the polite and agreeable Mr. Harkins, holding up a dark lantern and reining in his horse by the woman's side.

The dark, stern face, with its fierce, black eyes and wildly-streaming hair, was turned, and a hard, deep voice asked what he wanted.

"A gipsy! I knew it!" muttered Mr. Harkins, shrinking involuntarily from her lurid glances. "Ugh! What a face! Looks like the witch in the play?" Then aloud: "Get in, ma'am, and I'll take ye to town."

"Go play your jokes on some one else," said the woman, curtly, turning away.

"I ain't a-jokin'. Nice time o' night this to stop and play jokes – ain't it?" said Mr. Harkins, in a tone of intense irony. "This 'ere young man, which is a Hamerican from the New Knighted States, has paid yer fare to Lunnon outer his hown blessed pocket. So jump in, and don't keep me waitin' here in the wet."

"Is what he says true?" said the dark woman, turning the sharp light of her stiletto-like eyes on the freckles and pale-blue eyes of good-natured Mr. Toosypegs.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm happy to say it is," said Mr. Toosypegs. "Allow me to hand you in."

And Mr. Toosypegs got up to fulfill his offer; but Dobbin at that moment gave the wagon a malicious jerk, and dumped our patriotic American back in his seat. Before he could recover his breath, the gipsy had declined his assistance, with a wave of her hand, and had entered the wagon unassisted, and taken her seat.

"I know that tramper," said Mr. Harkins in a nervous whisper to Mr. Toosypegs. "It's the gipsy queen, Ketura, from Yetholm; most wonderful woman that ever was, 'cept Deborah, the woman the Bible tells about, you know, wot druv the nail through the fellar's head when she found him takin' a snooze. Heard a minister take her for his tex' once, and preach all about it. Our cow's name's Deborah, too," said Mr. Harkins, absently.

"And she's a gipsy queen? Lord bless us!" exclaimed Mr. Toosypegs, turning round and looking in some alarm at the fixed, stern, dark face before him – like the face of a statue in bronze. "Does she tell fortunes?"

"Yes; but you'd better not hask her to-night," said Mr. Harkins, in the same cautious whisper. "Her son's in prison, and sentenced to transportation for life for robbin' the plate of the Hearl De Courcy. He's goin' off with a lot of hothers airly to-morrow mornin'. Now, don't go exclaiming that way;" said Mr. Harkins, in a tone expressive of disgust, as he gave his companion a dig in the side.

"Poor thing! poor thing!" said Mr. Toosypegs, in a tone of sympathy. "Why, it's too bad; it really is, Mr. Harkins."

“Sarved him right, it’s my opinion,” said Mr. Harkins, sententiously. “Wot business had he for to go for to rob Hearl de Courcy, I want ter know? His mother, the hold lady ahind here, went and sot him up for a gentleman, and see wot’s come hof hit. She, a hold gipsy queen, goin’ and sendin’ her son to Heton with hall the young lordses, and baronetses, and dukeses, and makin’ believe he was somethin’ above the common. And now see what her fine gentleman’s gone and done and come to. Wonder wot she’ll think of herself, when she sees him takin’ a sea voyage for the good of his ’ealth at the ’spense of the government, to-morrow?”

“Poor thing! poor thing!” said Mr. Toosypegs, looking deeply sorry.

“Poor hold thing hindeed!” said Mr. Harkins, turning up his nose contemptuously. “Sarved ’im right, I say ag’in. That ’ere son o’ hern was the most stuck-hup chap I ever clapped my two blessed heyes on. Hafter he left Heton, I see’d ’im, one day, in the streets, hand guess who with? W’y, with nobody less than young Lord Williers, honly son o’ the Hearl De Courcy, as he has gone and robbed. There’s hingratitude for you! I didn’t know ’im then; but I ’cognized him hafterward in the court-room hat ’is trial.”

“How could *he* afford to go to Eton – he, a gipsy?” said Mr. Toosypegs, in surprise.

“Dunno! Hold woman sent ’im, I s’pose – ’owever she got the money. He was a fine-looking fellow, too, I must say, though rayther tawny, but ’andsome as Lord Williers himself. Hold Ketura was ’andsome once, too; see’d ’er w’en she was a reg’lar hout-and-hout beauty; though you mightn’t think it now. Times changes folks, yer know,” said Mr. Harkins, in a moralizing tone.

“What made him steal, if his mother was so rich?” said Mr. Toosypegs.

“His mother wasn’t rich no more’n I be. S’pose she made enough tellin’ fortunes, poachin’, and stealin’ to pay fur’im at school; hand then when he growed hup, and his cash gave out, he took hand stole the hearl’s plate. He denied it hall hat ’is trial; but then they hall do that. By jingo! he looked fierce enough to knock the judge and jury, and all the rest on ’em, hinto the middle hof next week, hif not further, that day. ’Twas no go, though; hand hover the water he goes to-morrow.”

“Poor fellow! Mr. Harkins, I’m sorry for him – I really am,” said Mr. Toosypegs, in a tone of real sincerity.

Mr. Harkins burst into a gruff laugh.

“Well, hif this ain’t good! Wot fools folks is! Sorry for a cove yer never saw! Wonder hif hall Hamericans is as green as you be?”

After this sentence, which came out in a series of little jerks, with strong notes of admiration appended to each, Mr. Harkins relapsed into silence and the collar of his great-coat, and began whistling “The Devil Among the Tailors,” in a voice like a frog with the influenza.

They were now rapidly approaching the city – the loud crash and din of which had somewhat subsided, owing to the inclemency of the weather and the lateness of the hour. The gipsy, who had not heard a word of the foregoing conversation – it having been carried on in a prudently-subdued tone – had wrapped her coarse cloak closer around her, while the gaze of her devouring eyes grew more intense, as the lights of the city began to appear. One by one, they came gleaming out through the dense fog with bug-like stars here and there; and in every direction.

The city was gained; and they were soon in the very midst of the great, throbbing heart of mighty London.

The wagon stopped, and Mr. Toosypegs sprung out to assist the woman to alight.

But waving him away with an impatient motion, she sprung out unassisted, and without one word or look of thanks, turned and flitted away in the chill night wind.

“There! I knowed that would be all the thanks ye’d get,” said Mr. Harkins, with a hoarse chuckle. “Hoff she goes, and you’ll never see her again.”

“Well, that don’t matter any. I didn’t want thanks, I’m sure,” said the kind-hearted Mr. Toosypegs. “Good-by, Mr. Harkins. Give my respects to Mrs. Harkins.”

“Good-night, hold fellar,” said Mr. Harkins, giving Mr. Toosypegs’ hand a cordial shake. “You’re a brick! How I’d like to come hacross one like you hev’ry night! Go right to Bob’s, sign o’ the ‘Blue Pig,’ St. Giles, best o’ ’commodation for man and beast; but I told you that before. Tell Bob I sent you, and I’ll call and see you in a few days.”

“You’re very good, Mr. Harkins. I’ll certainly tell Mr. Bob so when I see him!” said Mr. Toosypegs, with a severe twinge of conscience at the deception he felt himself to be using; “and I’ll be very glad to see you whenever you call. I’m very much obliged to you.”

CHAPTER III. THE LOVERS

“Oh, thou shalt be all else to me,
That heart can feel, or tongue can feign;
I'll praise, admire, and worship thee,
But must not, dare not, love again.”

– *Moore.*

While the solitary wagon was driving, through wind and rain, along the lonely north road, bearing its three strangely-contrasted inmates – the gruff, avaricious driver, the simple, kind-hearted youth, and the dark, fierce, stern woman – a far different scene was passing in another quarter of the city. At that same hour the town mansion of Hugh Seyton – Earl De Courcy – was all ablaze with lights, music and mirth. Gorgeous drawing-rooms, fretted with gold and carving, dazzling with numberless jets of light from the pendant chandeliers, odorous with the heavy perfume of costly exotics, the very air quivering with softest music, were thrown open, and were filled with the proud, the high-born, the beautiful, of London. Peers and peeresses, gallant nobles and ladies bright, moved through the glittering rooms, and with singing, talking, flirting, dancing, the night was waning apace.

Two young men stood together within the deep shadow of a bay-window, in the music-room, watching a group assembled round a young lady at the piano, and conversing in low tones.

One of these was decidedly the handsomest man present that night. In stature he was tall, somewhat above the common height, and faultless in form and figure, with a certain air of distiguue about him that stamped him as one of noble birth. His clear, fair complexion, his curling chestnut hair, and large blue eyes, betrayed his Saxon blood. His face might have seemed slightly effeminate; but no one, in looking at the high, kingly brow, the dark, flashing eyes, and firm-set mouth, would have thought that long. A dark mustache shaded his upper lip, and a strange, nameless beauty lit up and softened his handsome face whenever he smiled. Adored by the ladies, envied by the men, Lord Ernest Villiers, only son of Earl De Courcy, seemed to have nothing on earth left to wish for.

And yet, at times, over that white, intellectual brow a dark shadow would flit; from the depths of those dark, handsome eyes the bright light of a happy heart would pass; the mouth would grow stern, and a look of troubled care would darken his young face.

His companion, a good-looking young man, with a certain air about him as if he were somebody and knew it, with a listless look, and most desirable curling whiskers, leaned against a marble Hebe, and listened languidly to the singing. He wore the undress uniform of an officer, and being interpreted, was no other than Captain George Jernyngham, of the Guards.

“What a wonderful affair this is of Germaine’s – eh, Villiers?” said Captain Jernyngham, carressing his mustache. “Just like a thing in a play, or a story, where everybody turns out the most unexpected things. The Duke of B – is going crazy about it. He had invited Germaine to his house, and the fellow was making the fiercest sort of love to his pretty daughter, when all of a sudden, it turns out that he is a robber, a gipsy, a burglar, and all sorts of horrors. How the deuce came it to pass that he entered Eton with us, and passed himself off as a gentleman?”

“I cannot tell; the whole affair is involved in mystery.”

“You and he were pretty intimate – were you not, my lord?”

“Yes, I took a fancy to Germaine from the first; and I don’t believe, yet, he is guilty of the crime they charge him with.”

"You don't, eh? See what it is to have faith in human nature! How are you to get over the evidence."

"It was only circumstantial."

"Granted; but it was most conclusive. There is not another man in London has the slightest doubt of his guilt but yourself."

"Poor Germaine!" said Lord Villiers, in a tone of deep feeling; "with all his brilliant talents, his high endowments, and refined nature, to come to such a sad end! To be obliged to mate with the lowest of the low, the vilest of the vile – men degraded by every species of crime, below the level of the brute! And this for life! Poor Germaine!"

The young guardsman shrugged his shoulders.

"If refined men *will* steal – oh, I forgot! you don't believe it," he said, as Lord Villiers made an impatient motion, "Well, I confess, I thought better things of Germaine myself. There was always something of the dare-devil in him, and he was reckless and extravagant to a fault; but upon my honor, I never thought he could have come to this. Have you seen him since his trial?"

"No, I had not the heart to meet him. Death would be preferable to such a fate."

"There was a devil in his eye, if there ever was in any man's, when he heard his sentence," observed the young captain. "No one that saw him is likely to forget, in a hurry, the way he folded his arms and smiled in the judge's face, as he pronounced it. By Jove! I'm not given to nervousness, but I felt a sensation akin to an ague-shiver, as I watched him."

"With his fierce, passionate nature, it will, turn him into a perfect demon," said Lord Villiers; "and if ever he escapes, woe to those who have caused his disgrace! He is as implacable as death or doom in his hate – as relentless as a Corsican in his vengeance."

"Has he any friends or relatives among the gipsies?"

"I don't know, I think I heard of a mother, or brother, or something. I intend paying him a last visit to-night, and will deliver any message he may send to his friends."

"Will your rigorous father approve of such a visit, since it was he that prosecuted Germaine?"

"Certainly, Jernyngham. My father, believing in his guilt, thought it his duty to do so; but he bears no feeling of personal anger toward him," said Lord Villiers, gravely.

"Well, I wish Germaine a safe passage across the ocean," said Captain Jernyngham, as he listlessly admired his hand in its well-fitting glove. "He was a confoundedly good-looking fellow; cut me completely out with that pretty little prize widow of old Sir Rob Landers; but I'll be magnanimous and forgive him now. Oh, by Jove! Villiers, there goes Lady Maude Percy!" cried the guardsman, starting suddenly up, all his listlessness disappearing as if by magic. "Ye gods! what a perfectly dazzling beauty! Ah! my lord, I thought you would find the subject more interesting than that of poor Germaine," he added, with a mischievous smile at his companion's look of intense admiration.

Lord Villiers laughed, and his clear face flushed.

"The handsomest girl in London, and the greatest heiress," said the guardsman, resuming his half-drawl and languid caressing of his whiskers. "What an intensely enviable fellow you are, Villiers, if rumor is true."

"And what says rumor?" said Lord Villiers, coldly.

"Why, that you are the accepted lover of the fair Lady Maude."

Before the somewhat haughty reply of Lord Villiers was spoken, a young lady, suddenly entering the room, caught sight of them, and coming over, she addressed the guardsman with:

"George, you abominably lazy fellow, have you forgotten you are engaged for this set to Miss Ashton? Really, my lord, you and this idle brother of mine ought to be ashamed to make hermits of yourselves in this way, while so many bright eyes are watching for your coming. Lady Maude is here, and I will report you."

And, raising her finger warningly, Miss Jernyngham tripped away.

"Fare thee well – and if forever!" said Captain Jernyngham, in a tragic tone, as he turned away.

“Why, forever fare thee well!” said Lord Villiers laughing as he finished the quotation, and turned in an opposite direction.

The dancing was at its height as he passed from the music-room. Standing a little apart, his eyes went wandering over the fair forms tripping through the “mazy dance,” while they rested on one form fairer than all the rest, and his handsome face brightened, and his fine eyes lit up, as a man’s alone does, when he watches the woman he loves.

Standing at the head of one of the quadrilles was the object of his gaze – the peerless, high-born Lady Maude Percy. Eighteen summers had scarce passed over her young head, yet a thoughtful, almost sad, expression ever fell like a shadow on her beautiful face. Her form was rounded, exquisite, perfect; her oval face perfectly colorless, save for the full, crimson lips, her eyes large, dark and lustrous as stars, and fringed by long, silken-black lashes; her shining hair fell in soft, glittering, spiral curls, like raveled silk, round her fair, moonlight face; and her pallor seemed deepened by its raven hue. Her dress was of white brocade, fringed with seed-pearls; and her snowy arms and neck gleamed through misty clouds of point-lace. Pale, oriental pearls, wreathed her midnight hair, and ran in rivers of light around her neck. Queenly, peerless, dazzling, she moved through the brilliant train of beauties, eclipsing them all, as a meteor outshines lesser stars.

Drinking in the enchanting draught of her beauty to intoxication, Lord Ernest Villiers stood leaning against a marble pillar until the dance was concluded; and then moving toward her, as she stood for an instant alone, he bent over her, and whispered, in a voice that was low but full of passion:

“Maude! Maude! why have you tried to avoid me all the evening? I must see you! I must speak to you in private! I must hear my destiny from your lips tonight!”

At the first sound of his voice she had started quickly, and the “eloquent blood” had flooded cheek and bosom with its rosy light; but as he went on it faded away, and a sort of shiver passed through her frame as he ceased.

“Come with me into the music-room – it is deserted now,” he said, drawing her arm through his. “There, apart from all those prying eyes, I can learn my fate.”

Paler still grew the pale face of the lady; but, without a word, she suffered herself to be led to the shadowy and deserted room he had just left.

“And now, Maude – my own love – may I claim an answer to the question I asked you last night?” he said, bending over her.

“I answered you then, my lord,” she said, sadly.

“Yes; you told me to go – to forget you; as if such a thing were possible. Maude, I cannot, I will take that for an answer. Tell me, do you love me?”

“Oh, Ernest – oh, my dear lord! you *know* I do!” she cried, passionately.

“Then, Maude – my beautiful one – will you not be mine – my wife?”

“Oh, I cannot! I cannot! Oh, Ernest, I cannot!” she said, with a convulsive shudder.

“*Cannot!* And *why*, in Heaven’s name?”

“My lord, that is my secret. I can never, *never* be your wife. Choose some one worthier of you, and forget Maude Percy.”

She tried to steady her voice, but a stifled sob finished the sentence.

For all answer he gathered her in his strong arms, and her head dropped on his shoulder.

“My poor little romantic Maude, what is this wonderful secret?” he said, smiling. “Tell me, and we will see if your mountain does not turn out a molehill after all. Now, why cannot you be my wife?”

“You think me weak and silly, my lord,” she said, raising her head somewhat proudly, and withdrawing from his retaining arms; “but there is a reason, one sufficient to separate us forever – one that neither you nor any living mortal can ever know!”

“And you refuse to tell this reason? My father and yours are eager for this match; in worldly rank we are equals; I love you passionately, with all my heart and soul, and still you refuse. Maude, you never loved me,” he said, bitterly.

Her pale sweet face was bent in her hands now, and large tears fell through her fingers.

"Maude, you will not be so cruel," he said, with sudden hope. "Only say I may hope for this dear hand."

"No, no. Hope for nothing but to forget one so miserable as I am. Oh, Lord Ernest! there are so many better and worthier than I am, who will love you. I will be your friend – your sister, if I may; but I can never be your wife."

"Maude, is there guilt, is there crime connected with this secret of yours?" he demanded, stepping before her.

She rose to her feet impetuously, her cheeks crimsoning, her large eyes filling and darkening with indignation, her noble brow expanded, her haughty little head erect.

"And you think me capable of crime, Lord Villiers? – of guilt that needs concealment?" she said, with proud scorn.

"You, Maude? No; sooner would I believe an angel from heaven guilty of crime, than you. But I thought there might be others involved. Oh, Lady Maude! must this secret, that involves the happiness of my whole life, remain hidden from me?"

The bright light had died out from the beautiful eyes of Lady Maude; and her tone was very sad, as she replied:

"Some day, my lord, I will tell you all; but not now. Let us part here, and let this subject never be renewed between us."

"One word, Maude – do you love me?"

"I do! I do! Heaven forgive me!"

"Now, why, 'Heaven forgive me?' Maude! Maude! you will drive me mad! Is it such a crime to love me then?"

"In some it is," she said, in her low, sad voice.

"And why, fairest saint?"

"Do not ask me, my lord. Oh, Ernest! let me go, I am tired and sick, and very, very unhappy. Dearest Ernest, leave me, and never speak of this again."

"As you will, Lady Maude," he said, with a bow, turning haughtily away.

But a light touch, that thrilled to his very heart, was laid on his arm, and the low, sweet voice of Lady Maude said:

"I have offended you, my lord; pray forgive me."

"I am not offended, Lady Maude Percy; neither have I anything to forgive," he said; but his fine face was clouded with mortification. "You have rejected me, and I presume the matter ends there."

"But you are offended, I can hear it in your voice. Oh, Lord Villiers, if you knew how unhappy I am, you would forgive me the pain I have caused you."

Her tone touched him, and taking her hand gently, he said:

"It is I who should ask forgiveness, Lady Maude. Yes, I will accept the friendship you offer, until such time as I can claim a better reward. Notwithstanding all you have said, I do not despair still."

He pressed her hand to his lips and was gone.

"Excuse me, your lordship," insinuated a most aristocratic footman in his ear, at that moment, "but there is an individual downstairs who persists on seeing the earl, and and won't take no for an answer."

"Who is it?" inquired Lord Villiers, impatiently.

"A gipsy, my lord, a desperate-looking old tramper, too."

"What's that about gipsies?" said the uncereemonious little Miss Jernyngham, passing at that moment. "You must know, my lord, I fairly dote on gipsies, ever since I saw that charming young man they are going to transport."

"How I wish I were a gipsy!" said Lord Villiers, gayly, "for such a reward."

“Pray spare your pretty speeches for Lady Maude Percy, my lord,” lisped Miss Jernyngham, giving him a tap with her fan; “but about this gipsy – is it a man or woman?”

“A woman, Miss, they call her the gipsy queen, Ketura.”

“A gipsy queen! oh, delightful!” cried the young lady, clapping her hands; “my lord, we must have her up, by all means. I insist on having my fortune told.”

“Your slave hears but to obey, Miss Jernyngham,” said Lord Villiers, with a bow. “Jonson, go and bring the old lady up.”

“Yes, me lud,” said Jonson, hurrying off.

“George – George! do come here!” exclaimed the young lady, as her brother passed; “I want you!”

“What’s all this about?” said the guardsman, lounging up. “My dear Clara, the way you do get the steam up at a moment’s notice is perfectly astonishing. What can I do for you?”

“Do you want to have your fortune told?”

“If any good sibyl would predict for me a rich wife, who would pay my debts, and keep me provided with kid gloves and cigars, I wouldn’t object; but in any other case – ”

His speech was cut short by the sudden appearance of the footman with the gipsy queen, of whom he seemed considerably afraid. And truly not without reason; for a lioness in her lair might have looked about as safe an animal as the dark, fierce-eyed gipsy queen. Even the two young men started; and Miss Clara Jernyngham stifled a little scream behind her fan.

“I wish to see Earl De Courcy,” was her abrupt demand.

“And we wish our fortune told, good mother,” said Lord Villiers; “my father will attend to you presently.”

“Your father!” said the woman, fixing her piercing eyes on his handsome face, “then you are Lord Villiers?”

“You have guessed it. What has the future in store for me?”

“Nothing good for your father’s son,” she hissed through her clenched teeth. “Give me your hand.”

He extended it, with a smile, and she took it in hers, and peered into it. What a contrast they were! his, white, small, and delicate; her hand, bronzed and rough.

“Well, mother, what has destiny in store for me?”

“Much good or more evil. This night decides thy destiny; either thou shalt be blessed for life, or if the scale turns against thee – then woe to thee! Stand aside – the earl comes.”

A tall, distinguished-looking man, of middle-age, approached, and looked with grave surprise on the group before him.

“A word with you, lord-earl,” said the gipsy, confronting him.

“Speak out, then.”

“It must be in private.”

“Who are you?” said the earl, surprised and curious.

“I am called the gipsy queen, Ketura,” said the woman, drawing herself up.

“And what do you want of me, woman?”

“I tell you I must speak in private. Is your time so precious that you cannot grant ten minutes of it to me?” said the woman, with a fiercely-impatient flash of her black eyes.

“This way, then,” said the earl, impressed by the woman’s commanding look and tones, as he turned and led the way across a wide, lighted hall to a richly-furnished library.

Seating himself in a softly-cushioned lounging-chair, he waited for his singular visitor to begin.

CHAPTER IV. THE GIPSY'S VOW

“May the grass wither from thy feet! the woods
Deny thee shelter! earth, a home! the dust,
A grave! the sun, his light! and heaven, her God!”

– *Byron.*

“Well, madam, I am waiting,” said the earl, after a pause, during which the wild, black eyes of the woman were fixed immovably on his face, until he began to grow uneasy under the steady glare.

“Lord earl, behold at thy feet a mother who comes to plead for her son,” said the strange woman, sinking on her knees at his feet, and holding up her clasped hands.

“Madam, I do not understand,” said the earl, surprised, and feeling himself obliged, as it were, to use a respectful form of address, by the woman’s commanding look.

“My son is in your power! my darling, my only son! my first-born! Oh, spare him!” said the woman, still holding up her clasped hands.

“Your son? Madam, I do not understand,” said the earl, knitting his brows in perplexity.

“You have condemned him to transportation! And he is innocent – as innocent of the crime for which he is to suffer as the angels in heaven,” cried the woman, in passionate tones.

“Madam, I assure you, I do not understand. Who is your son?” said the earl, more and more perplexed.

“You know him as Germaine, but he is my son, Reginald – my only son! Oh, my lord! spare him! spare him!” wildly pleaded the gipsy queen.

“Madam, rise.”

“Not until you have pardoned my son.”

“That I will never do! Your son has been found guilty of wilful robbery, and has been very justly condemned. I can do nothing for him,” said the earl, while his brow grew dark, and his mouth hard and stern.

“My lord, he is innocent!” almost shrieked the wretched woman at his feet.

“I do not believe it! He has been proven guilty,” said the earl, coldly.

“It is false! as false as the black hearts of the perjurers who swore against him!” fiercely exclaimed the gipsy; “he is innocent of this crime, as innocent of it as thou art, lord earl. Oh, Earl De Courcy, as you hope for pardon from God, pardon him.”

“Madam, I command you to rise.”

“Never, never! while my son is in chains! Oh, my lord, you do not know, you never can dream, how I have loved that boy! I had no one else in the wide world to love; not a drop of kindred blood ran in any human heart but his; and I loved, I adored, I worshiped him! Oh, Earl De Courcy, I have suffered cold, and hunger, and thirst, and hardship, that he might never want; I have toiled for him night and day, that he might never feel pain; I have stooped to actions I loathed, that he might be happy and free from guilt. And, when he grew older, I gave him up, though it was like rending soul and body apart. I sent him away; I sent him to school with the money that years and years of unceasing toil had enabled me to save. I sent him to be educated with gentlemen. I never came near him, lest any one should suspect his mother was a gipsy. Yes; I gave him up, though it was like tearing my very heart-strings apart, content in knowing he was happy, and in seeing him at a distance at long intervals. For twenty-three years, my life has been one long dream of him; sleeping or waking, in suffering and trial, the thought that he was near me gave me joy and strength. And now he is condemned for life –

condemned to a far-off land, among convicts and felons, where I will never see him again! Oh, Lord De Courcy! mercy, mercy for my son!”

With the wild cry of a mother's agony, she shrieked out that frenzied appeal for mercy, and groveled prone to the floor at his feet.

A spasm of pain passed over the face of the earl, but he answered, sternly:

“Woman, your son is guilty. I cannot pardon him!”

“He is not guilty! Perish the soul so base as to believe such a falsehood of my high-hearted boy!” cried the gypsy, dashing fiercely back her wildly-streaming black hair. “He my proud, glorious, kindly-hearted Reginald, stoop to such a crime! Oh, sooner could the angels themselves be guilty of it than he!”

“Woman, you rave! Once again I tell you, rise!

“Pardon, pardon for my son!”

“Madam, I cannot. I pity you. Heaven knows I do! but he is guilty, and must suffer.”

“Oh, my God! how shall I convince him?” cried the wretched woman, wringing her hands in wildest despair. “Oh, Earl De Courcy! you, too, have a son, handsome, gallant and noble, the pride of your old age, the last scion of your proud race! For his sake, for the sake of your son, pardon mine!”

“Once more I tell you, I cannot. Your son is condemned; to-morrow his sentence will be executed, and I have no power to avert it. And, madam, though I pity you deeply, I must again say he deserves it. Nay – hear me out. I know you do not believe it; you think him innocent, and, being his mother, it is natural you should think so; but, believe me, he is none the less guilty. Your son deserves his fate, all the more so for his ingratitude to you, after all you have done for him. I deeply pity you, as Heaven hears me, I do!”

“Oh, then, for my sake, if there is one spark of pity for me in your heart, do not kill me! For, Lord De Courcy, it will be a double murder, his death and mine, if this sentence is executed.”

“The law must take its course; I cannot prevent it. And once more, madam, I beseech you to rise. You should kneel to God alone.”

“God would forgive him, had I pleaded to Him thus; but you, tiger-heart, *you* will not!” shrieked the woman, throwing up her arms in the impotence of her despair. “Oh, lord earl, I have never knelt to God or man before; and to have my petition spurned now! You hold my life in the hollow of your hand, and you will not grant it!”

“I tell you I cannot.”

“You can – you can! It is in your power? You are great, and rich, and powerful, and can have his sentence annulled. By your soul's salvation, by your hopes of heaven, by your mother's grave, by Him whom you worship, I conjure you to save my son!”

The haggard face was convulsed; the brow was dark, and corrugated with agony; the lips white and quivering; the eyes wild, lurid, blazing with anguish and despair; her clenched hands upraised in passionate prayer for pardon. A fearful sight was that despair-maddened woman, as she knelt at the stern earl's feet, her very voice sharp with inward agony.

He shaded his eyes with his hands to keep out the pitiful sight; but his stern determined look passed not away. His face seemed hardened with iron, despite the deep pity of his heart.

“You are yielding! He will yet be saved! Oh, I knew the iron-heart would soften!” she cried out, with maniac exultation, taking hope from his silence.

“My poor woman, you deceive yourself. I can do nothing for your son,” said the earl, sadly.

“What! Do you still refuse? Oh, it cannot be! I am going mad, I think! Tell me – tell me that my son will live!”

“Woman, I have no power over your son's life.”

“Oh, you have – you have! Do you think he could live one single day among those with whom you would send him? As you hope for pardon on that last dread day, pardon my son!”

“It is all in vain. Rise, madam.”

“You refuse?”

“I do. Rise!”

With the fearful bound of a wild beast, she sprung to her feet, and, awful in her rage, like a tigress robbed of her young, she stood before him. Even the stern earl drew back in dismay.

“Then, heart of steel, hear ME!” she cried, raising one long arm toward heaven, and speaking in a voice terrific in its very depth of despair. “Tiger-heart, listen to me! From this moment I vow, before God and all his angels, to devote my whole life to revenge on you! Living, may ruin, misery, and despair, equal to mine, be your portion; dead, may you never rest in the earth you sprung from! And, when standing before the judgment-seat of God, you sue for pardon, may He hurl your miserable soul back to perdition for an answer! May my curse descend to your children and children’s children forever! May misery here and hereafter be their portion! May every earthly and eternal evil follow a wronged mother’s curse!”

Appalled, horrified, the iron earl shrunk back from that awful, ghastly look, and that convulsive, terrific face – that face of a fiend, and not of mortal woman. A moment after, when he raised his head, he was alone, and the gipsy, Ketura, was gone. Whither?

CHAPTER V. MOTHER AND SON

"Oh, my son, Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! Would to God, I might die for thee! Oh! Absalom! my son, my son!"

That same night; that night of storm and tempest without, and still fiercer storm and tempest within; that same night – three hours later; in a narrow, dark, noisome cell, with grated window and iron-barred door, with a rude pallet of straw comprising the furniture, and one flickering, uncertain lamp lighting its tomb-like darkness, sat two young men.

One of these was a youth of three-and-twenty; tall and slender in form, with a dark, clear complexion; a strikingly-handsome face; a fierce, flashing eye of fire; thick, clustering curls of jet; a daring, reckless air, and an expression of mingled scorn, hatred, defiance and fierceness in his face. There were fetters on his slender wrists and ankles, and he wore the degrading dress of a condemned felon.

By his side sat Lord Ernest Villiers – his handsome face looking deeply sad and grave.

"And this is all, Germaine?" he said, sorrowfully. "Can I do nothing at all for you?"

"Nothing. What do you think I want? Is not the government, in its fatherly care, going to clothe, feed, and provide for me during the remainder of my mortal life? Why, man, do you think me unreasonable?"

He laughed a bitter, mocking laugh, terrible to hear.

"Germaine, Heaven knows, if I could do anything for you, I would!" said Lord Villiers, excitedly. "My father, like all the rest of the world, believes you guilty, and I can do nothing. But if it will be any consolation, remember that you leave one in England who still believes you innocent."

"Thank you, Villiers. There is another, too, who, I think, will hardly believe I have taken to petty pilfering, your father and the rest of the magnates of the land to the contrary, notwithstanding."

"Who is that, Germaine?"

"My mother."

"Where is she? Can I bring her to you?" said Lord Villiers, starting up.

"You are very kind; but it is not in your power to do so," said the prisoner, quietly. "My mother is probably in Yetholm with her tribe. You don't need to be told now I am a gipsy; my interesting family history was pretty generally made known at my trial."

Again he laughed that short, sarcastic laugh so sad to hear.

"My dear fellow, I think none the worse of you for that. Gipsy or Saxon, I cannot forget you once saved my life, and that you have for years been my best friend."

"Well, it is pleasant to know that there is one in the world who cares for me; and if I do die like a dog among my fellow-convicts, my last hour will be cheered by the thought," said the young man, drawing a deep breath. "If ever you see my mother, which is not likely, tell her I was grateful for all she did for me; you need not tell her I was innocent, for she will know that. There is another, too – "

He paused, and his dark face flushed, and then grew paler than before.

"My dear Germaine, if there is any message I can carry for you, you have only to command me," said the young lord, warmly.

"No; it is as well she should not know it – better, perhaps," muttered the prisoner, half to himself. "I thank you for your friendly kindness, Villiers; but it will not be necessary."

"And your mother, Germaine, how am I to know her?"

"Oh, I forgot! Well, she's called the gipsy Ketura, and is queen of her tribe. It is something to be a queen's son is it not?" he said, with another hard, short laugh.

"Ketura, did you say?" repeated Lord Villiers, in surprise.

"Yes. What has surprised you now?"

"Why, the simple fact that I saw her three hours ago."

"Saw her! Where?"

"At my father's house. She came to see him."

Germaine sprung up, and while his eyes fiercely flashed, he exclaimed:

"Came to see Lord De Courcy? My mother came to see him? Villiers, you do not mean to say that my mother came to beg for my life?"

"My dear fellow, I really do not know. The interview was a private one. All I do know is, that half an hour after my father returned among his guests, looking very much as if he had just seen a ghost. In fact, I never saw him with so startled a look in all my life before. Whether your mother had anything to do with it or not, I really cannot say."

"If I thought she could stoop to sue for me," exclaimed the youth, through his clenched teeth; "but no, my mother was too proud to do it. My poor, poor mother! How was she looking, Villiers?"

"Very haggard, very thin, very worn and wild; very wretched, in a word – though that was to be expected."

"Poor mother!" murmured the youth, with quivering lips, as he bowed his face in his manacled hands, and his manly chest rose and fell with strong emotion.

"My dear fellow," said Lord Villiers, with tears in his own eyes, "your mother shall never want while I live."

The prisoner wrung his hand in silence.

"If you like, I will try to discover her, and send her to you before you – "

His voice choked, and he stopped.

"My dear Villiers, you have indeed proven yourself my friend," said the convict, gratefully. "If you could see her, and send her to me before I leave England to-morrow, you would be conferring the greatest possible favor on me. There are several things of which I wish to speak to her, and which I cannot reveal to any one else – not even to you."

"Then I will instantly go in search of her," said Lord Villiers, rising and taking his hat. "My dear Germaine, good by."

"Farewell, Ernest. God bless you!"

The hand of the peer and the gipsy met in a strong clasp, but neither could speak.

And so they parted. The prison door closed between the convicted felon and his high-born friend. Did either dream how strangely they were destined to meet again? With his face shaded by his hand, the prisoner sat; that small white hand, delicate as a lady's, doomed now to the unceasing labor of the convict, when a noise as of persons in altercation in the passage without met his ears. He raised his head to listen, and recognized the gruff, hoarse voice of his jailer; then the sharp, passionate voice of a woman; and, lastly, the calm, clear tones of Lord Ernest Villiers. His words seemed to decide the matter; for the huge key turned in the rusty lock, the heavy door swung back on its hinges, and the tall form of gipsy Ketura passed into the cell.

"Mother!"

The prisoner started to his feet, and with a passionate cry: "Oh, my son! my son!" he was clasped in the arms of his mother – clasped and held there in a fierce embrace, as though she defied Heaven itself to tear them apart.

"Thank Heaven, mother, that I see you again!"

"Heaven!" she broke out, with passionate fierceness; "never mention it again! What is heaven, and God, and mercy, and happiness? All a mockery, and worse than a mockery!"

"My poor mother!"

"What have I done, that I should lose you!" she cried, with a still-increasing fierceness. "What crime have I committed, that I should be doomed to a hell upon earth? He was conceived in sin and

born in iniquity, even as I was; yet the God you call upon permits him to live happy, rich, honored, and prosperous, while I – oh! it maddens me to think of it! But I will have revenge!” – she added, while her fierce eyes blazed, and her long, bony hand clenched – “yes, fearful revenge! If I am doomed to perdition, I shall drag him down along with me!”

“Mother! mother! Do not talk so! Be calm!”

“Calm! With these flames, like eternal fires, raging in my heart and brain? Oh, for the hour when his life-blood shall cool their blazing!”

“Mother, you are going mad!” said the young man, almost sternly. “Unless you are calm, we must part.”

“Oh, yes! We will part to-morrow. You will go over the boundless sea with all the thieves, and murderers, and scum of London, and I – I will live for revenge. By-and-by you will kill yourself, and I will be hung for his murder.”

She laughed a dreary, cheerless laugh, while her eyes grew unnaturally bright with the fires of incipient insanity.

“Poor mother!” said the youth, sadly. “This is the hardest blow of all! Try and bear up, for my sake, mother. Did you see Lord De Courcy to-night?”

“I did. May Heaven’s heaviest curses light on him!” exclaimed the woman, passionately. “Oh! to think that he, that any man, should hold my son’s life in the hollow of his hand, while I am here, obliged to look on, powerless to avert the blow! May God’s worst vengeance light on him, here and hereafter!”

Her face was black with the terrific storm of inward passion; her eyes glaring, blazing, like those of a wild beast; her long, talon like fingers clenched until the nails sunk deep in the quivering flesh.

“Mother, did you stoop to sue for pardon for me tonight?” said the young man, while his brow contracted with a dark frown.

“Oh, I did! I did! I groveled at his feet. I cried, I shrieked, I adjured him to pardon you – I, who never knelt to God or man before – and he refused! I kissed the dust at his feet, and he replied by a cold refusal. But woe to thee, Earl De Courcy!” she cried, bounding to her feet, and dashing back her wild black hair. “Woe to thee, and all thy house! for it were safer to tamper with the lightning’s chain than with the aroused tigress Ketura.”

“Mother, nothing is gained by working yourself up to such a pitch of passion; you only beat the air with your breath. I am calm.”

“Yes, calm as a volcano on the verge of eruption,” she said, looking in his gleaming eyes and icy smile.

“And I am submissive, forbearing, and forgiving.”

“Yes, submissive as a crouching lion – forgiving as a tiger robbed of its young – forbearing as a serpent preparing to spring.”

He had awed her – even her, that raving maniac – into calm, by the cold, steely glitter of his dark eyes; by the quiet, chilling smile on his lip. In that fixed, iron, relentless look, she read a strong, determined purpose, relentless as death, or doom, or the grave; terrific in its very quiet, implacable in its very depth of calm, overtopping and surmounting her own.

“We understand each other, I think,” he said, quietly. “You perceive, mother, how utterly idle these mad threats and curses of yours are. They will effect nothing but to have you imprisoned as a dangerous lunatic; and it is necessary you should be free to fulfill my last bequest.”

Another mood had come over the dark, fierce woman while he spoke. The demoniac look of passion that had hitherto convulsed her face, gave way to one of despairing sorrow, and stretching out her arms, she passionately cried:

“Oh, my son! my only one! the darling of my old age! my sole earthly pride and hope! Oh, Reginald! would to God we had both died ere we had lived to see this day!”

It was the very agony of grief – the last passionate, despairing cry of a mother's utmost woe, wrung fiercely from her tortured heart.

"My poor mother – my dear mother!" said the youth, with tears in his dark eyes, "do not give way to this wild grief. Who knows what the future may bring forth?"

She made no reply; but sat with both arms clasped round her knees – her dry, burning, tearless eyes glaring before her on vacancy.

"Do not despair, mother; we may yet meet again. Who knows?" he said, musingly, after a pause.

She turned her red, inflamed eyeballs on him in voiceless inquiry.

"There are such things as breaking chains and escaping, mother."

Still that lurid, straining gaze, but no reply.

"And I, if it be in the power of man, I shall escape – I shall return, and then –"

He paused, but his eyes finished the sentence. Lucifer, taking his last look of heaven, might have worn just such a look – so full of relentless hate, burning revenge, and undying defiance.

"You may come, but I will never live to see you," said the gipsy, in a voice so deep, hollow and unnatural, that it seemed issuing from a tomb.

"You will – you must, mother. I have a sacred trust to leave you, for which you must live," he said impetuously.

"A trust, my son?"

"Yes. One that will demand all your care for many years. You shall hear my story, mother. I would not trust any living being but you; but I can confide fearlessly in you."

"You have only to name your wishes, Reginald. Though I should have to wade through blood to fulfill them, fear not."

"Nothing so desperate will be required, mother. The less blood you have on your hands the better. My advice to you is, when I am gone, to return to Yetholm, and wait with patience for my return – for return I will, in spite of everything."

Her bloodshot eyes kindled fiercely with invincible determination as he spoke, but she said nothing.

"My story is a somewhat long one," he said, after a pause, during which a sad shadow had fallen on his handsome face; "but I suppose it is necessary I should tell you all. I thought never to reveal it to any human being; but I did not dream then of ever being a convicted felon, as I am now."

He had been sitting hitherto with his head resting on his hand; now he arose and began pacing to and fro his narrow cell, while the dark, stern woman, crouching in a distant corner like a dusky shadow, watched him with her eyes of fire, and prepared to listen.

CHAPTER VI. THE CHILD-WIFE

“Oh, had we never, never met,
Or could this heart e’en now forget,
How linked, how blessed we might have been,
Had fate not frowned so dark between!”

– *Moore.*

“Eight years ago, mother,” began the prisoner, “I first entered Eton. Through your kindness, I was provided with money enough to enable me to mix on terms of equality in all things with the highest of its high-born students. No one dreamed I was a gipsy; they would as soon have thought of considering themselves one as me. I adopted the name of Reginald Germaine, and represented myself as the son of an exiled French count, and being by Nature gifted with a tolerable share of good looks, and any amount of cool assurance, I soon worked my way up above most of my titled compeers, and became ringleader and prime favorite with students and professors. They talk of good blood showing itself equally in men as in horses, mother. I don’t know how that may be, but certain it is the gipsy’s son equaled all, and was surpassed by none in college. In fencing, shooting, riding, boxing, rowing, I was as much at home as reading Virgil or translating Greek. If it is any consolation to you, mother, to know what an exceedingly talented son you have,” he said, with a bitter smile, “all this will be very consoling to you – more especially as Latin, and Greek, and all the rest of my manifold accomplishments will be extremely necessary to me among my fellow-convicts in Van Dieman’s Land. It is very probable I will establish an infant school for young thieves and pickpockets when the day’s labor is over. I wonder if our kind, fatherly, far-seeing British government dreams what an incalculable treasure they possess in the person of Germaine, the convicted burglar!”

His bitter, jeering tone was terrible to hear; but the dark, burning glare of his fierce eyes was more terrible still. Oh, it *was* a dreadful fate to look forward to – a chained, manacled convict for life – and so unjustly condemned! With his fierce, gipsy blood, is it any wonder that every noble and generous feeling in his breast should turn to gall?

The dusky form crouching in the corner moved not, spoke not; but the inflamed eyes glared in the darkness like two red-hot coals.

“Well, mother, I was boasting of my cleverness when I interrupted myself – was I not?” he said, after a pause, during which he had been pacing, like a caged lion, up and down. “It is an exciting subject, you perceive; and if I get a little incoherent at times, you must only pass it over, and wait until I come to the point. That brief *exposé* of my standing in the school was necessary, after all, as it will help to show the sort of estimation I was held in. When the vacations came, numberless were the invitations I received to accompany my fellow-students home. Having no home of my own to go to, I need hardly say those invitations were invariably accepted. How the good people who so lavishly bestowed their hospitality upon me feel now, is a question not very hard to answer. I fancy I can see the looks of horror, amazement and outraged dignity that will fill some of those aristocratic mansions, when they learn that the dashing son and heir of the exiled Count Germaine, on whom they have condescended to smile so benignly, is no other than the convicted gipsy thief. It will be a regular farce to witness, mother.”

He laughed, but the grim, shadowy face in the corner was as immovable as a figure in stone.

“Among the friends I made at Eton,” he went on, “there was one – a fine, princely-hearted fellow about my own age – called Lord Everly. He was my ‘fag’ for a time, and, owing to a similarity

of tastes and dispositions, we were soon inseparable friends, Wherever one was, there the other was sure to be, until we were nicknamed 'Damon and Pythias' by the rest. Of course, the first vacation after his coming, I received a pressing invitation to accompany him home; and, without requiring much coaxing, I went."

The young man paused, and a dark, earnest shadow passed over his fine face. When he again resumed, his voice was low and less bitter.

"I met my fate there, mother – the star of my destiny, that rose, for a few brief, fleeting moments, and then set forever for me. I was a hot-blooded, hot-headed, hotter-hearted boy of nineteen then, who followed the impulse of his own headstrong passions wherever they chose to lead, without ever stopping to *think*. At Everly Hall I met the cousin of my friend – one of the most perfectly beautiful creatures it has ever been my lot to see. Only fourteen years of age, she was so well-grown, and so superbly-proportioned, as to be, in looks, already a woman; and a woman's heart she already possessed. Her name, mother, it is not necessary to tell now. Suffice it to say, that name was one of the proudest of England's proud sons, and her family one of the highest and noblest in the land. She was at Everly Hall, spending her vacation, too, and daily we were thrown together. I had never loved before – never felt even those first moonlight-on-water affairs that most young men rave about. My nature is not one of those that love lightly; but it was as resistless, as impetuous, as fierce and consuming as a volcano's fire, when it came. Mother, I did not *love* that beautiful child-woman. Love! Pshaw! that is a cold word to express what I felt – every moonstruck youth prates about his *love*. No; I adored, I worshipped, I idolized her; the remembrance of who I was, of who *she* was – all were as walls of smoke before the impetuosity of that first consuming passion. The Everlys never dreamed – never, in the remotest degree, fancied – I, the son of an exiled count, could dare to lift my eyes to one whom a prince of the blood-royal might almost have wed without stooping. They had confidence in her, the proud daughter of a proud race, to think she would spurn me from her in contempt, did I dare to breathe my wild passion. But how little, in their cool, clear-headed calculations, did they dream that social position and worldly considerations were as a cobweb barrier before the impetuosity of first love!

"And so, secure in the difference between us in rank, the Everlys permitted their beautiful niece to ride, walk, dance and drive with the gay, agreeable son of the exiled Count Germaine. Oh! those long, breezy morning rides, over the sloping hills and wide lawns that environed the home of the Everlys! I can see her now, as side by side we rode homeward – I drinking in, until every sense was intoxicated, the bewildering draught of her beauty, as she sat on her coal-black pony, her dark riding-habit fluttering in the morning breeze; her cheek flushed with health and happiness; her brilliant eyes, more glorious to me than all the stars in heaven; her bright, black hair flashing back the radiant sunlight! Oh! those long, moonlight strolls, arm-in-arm, through the wilderness of roses, not half so beautiful as the queen-rose beside me, that bloomed in wild luxuriance in the gardens! Oh! those enchanting evenings, when, encircled by my arm, we kept time together to the delicious music of the voluptuous waltz. Then it was, there it was, that the gipsy youth wooed and won the high-born daughter of a princely race.

"For, mother, even as I loved her she loved me. No, not as I loved her – it was not in her nature to do that, but with all the passionate ardor of a first, strong passion. I had long known I was not indifferent to her; but when, one night, as I stood bending over her as she sat at the piano, and heard her stately lady-aunt whisper to a friend that, in a few more years, her 'lovely and accomplished niece' would become the bride of Lord Ernest Villiers, only son of Earl De Courcy, all that had hitherto restrained me from telling that love was forgotten. I saw her start, and turn pale as she, too, heard and caught the quick, anxious glances she cast at me. All I felt at that moment must have been revealed in my face, for her eyes fell beneath mine, and the hot blood mounted to her very brow.

"And you are engaged to another?" I said, in a tone of passionate reproach. 'Oh, why did I not know this?'

“‘It is no engagement of my making,’ she said, in a low, trembling voice. ‘I never saw Lord Villiers, nor he me. Our fathers wish we should marry, that is all.’

“‘And will you obey?’ I said, in a thrilling whisper.

“‘No,’ she said, impulsively; ‘never.’

“The look that accompanied the words made me forget all I had hitherto striven to remember. In an instant I was at her feet, pouring out my wild tale of passion; in another, she was in my arms, whispering the words that made me the happiest man on earth. It was well for us both the room was nearly deserted, and the corner where we were in deepest shadow, or the ecstasies into which, like all lovers, we went, would have led to somewhat unpleasant consequences. But our destinies had decreed we should, for the time, have things all our own way; and that night, wandering in the pale, solemn moonlight, I urged, with all the eloquence of a first, resistless passion, a secret marriage. I spoke of her father’s compelling us to part; of his insisting on her marriage with one whom she could not love; I drew a touching description of myself, devoted to a life of solitude and misery, and probably ending by committing suicide – which melancholy picture so worked upon her fears, that I verily believe she would have fled with me to New South Wales, had I asked it. And so I pleaded, with all the ardor of a passion that was as strong and uncontrollable as it was selfish and exacting, until she promised, the following night, to steal secretly out and fly with me to where I was to have a clergyman in waiting, and then and there become my wife.”

Once more he paused, and his fine eyes were full of bitter self-reproach now.

“Mother, that was the turning-point in my destiny. Looking back to that time now, I can wish I had been struck dead sooner than have hurried, as I did, that impulsive, warm-hearted girl into that fatal marriage. *Then*, in all the burning ardor of youth, I thought of nothing but the intoxicating happiness within my grasp; and had an angel from heaven pleaded for the postponement of my designs, I would have hurled a refusal back in his face. I thought only of the present – of the joy, too intense, almost, to be borne – and I steadily shut my eyes to the future. I knew she would loathe, hate, and despise me, if she ever discovered – as discover she must some day – how I had deceived her; for, with all her love for me, she inherited the pride and haughtiness of her noble house uncontaminated. Had she known who I really was, I know she would have considered me unworthy to touch even the hem of her garment.

“All that day she remained in her room; while I rode off to a neighboring town to engage a clergyman to unite us at the appointed hour. Midnight found me waiting, at the trysting-place; and true to the hour, my beautiful bride, brave in the strength of her love and woman’s faith in my honor, met me there, alone; for I would have no attendants to share our confidence.

“Two horses stood waiting. I lifted her into the saddle, sprung upon my own horse; and away we dashed, at a break-neck pace, to consummate our own future misery. There was no time for words; but I strove to whisper of the happy days in store for us, as we rode along. She did not utter a word; but her face was whiter than that of the dead when I lifted her from the saddle and drew her with me into the church.

“The great aisles were dimly lighted by one solitary lamp, and by its light we beheld the clergyman, standing, in full canonicals, to sanction our mad marriage. Robed in a dark, flowing dress, with her white face looking out from her damp, flowing, midnight hair I can see her before me, as she stood there, shivering at intervals with a strange presaging of future evil.

“It was an ominous bridal, mother; for, as the last words died away, and we were pronounced man and wife, the harsh, dreadful croak of a raven resounded through the vast, dim church, and the ghostly bird of omen fluttered for a moment over our heads, and fell dead at our feet. Excited by the consciousness that she was doing wrong; the solemn, unlighted old church; the dread, mystic hour – all proved too much for my little child-wife, and with a piercing shriek, she fell fainting in my arms. Mother, the unutterable reproach of that wild agonizing cry will haunt me to my dying day.”

No words can describe the bitterness of his tone, the undying self-reproach that filled his dark eyes, as he spoke.

“We bore her to the vestry; but it was long before she revived, and longer still before, with all the seductive eloquence of passionate love, I could soothe her into quiet.

“Oh, Reginald, I have done wrong!” was her sorrowful, remorseful cry to all I could say.

“We paid the clergyman, and rode home – the gipsy youth and the high born lady, united for life now by the mysterious tie of marriage. Now that the last, desperate step was taken, even I grew for a moment appalled at what I had done. But I did not repent. No; had it been again to do, I would have done it over a thousand times. I would have lost heaven sooner than her!

“Three weeks longer we continued inmates of Everly Hall; and no one ever suspected that we met other than as casual acquaintances. Looking back now on my past life, those are the only days of unalloyed sunshine I can remember in the whole course of my life; and she – she, too, closed her eyes to the future, and was for the time being perfectly happy.

“But the time came when we were forced to part. She went back to school, while I returned to London, I met her frequently, at first; but her father, after a time, began to think, perhaps, that, for the son of an exiled count, I was making too rapid progress in his daughter’s affections, and peremptorily ordered her to discontinue the acquaintance. But she loved me well enough to disobey him; and though I saw she looked forward with undisguised terror to the time when the revelation of our marriage would be made we still continued to meet at long intervals.

“So a year passed. One day, wishing to consult her about something – I forget what – we met at an appointed trysting place. She entered the light chaise I had brought with me, and we drove off. The horses were half tamed things at best, and in the outskirts of a little village, several miles from the academy, they took fright at something, and started off like the wind. I strove in vain to check them. On they flew, like lightning, until suddenly coming in contact with a garden-fence, the chaise was overthrown, and we were both flung violently out.

“I heard a faint cry from my companion, and, unheeding: a broken arm, which was my share of the accident I managed to raise her from the ground, where she lay senseless, and bear her into the cottage. Fortunately, the cottage was owned by an old widow, to whom I had once rendered some slight service which secured her everlasting gratitude; and more fortunately still, my companion had received no injury from her fall, beyond a slight wound in the head.

“Leaving her in the care of the old woman, I went to the nearest surgeon, had my wounds dressed, and my horses disposed of until such times as we could resume our journey. Then I returned to the cottage; but found to my great alarm, that my wife, during my absence, had become seriously ill, and was raving in the wild delirium of a burning fever.

“There was no doctor in the village whose skill I could trust where her life was concerned; and, half-mad with terror and alarm, I sprung on horseback, and rode off to London for medical aid. But with all my haste, nearly twelve hours elapsed before I could return accompanied by a skillful though obscure physician, chosen by me because he was obscure, and never likely to meet her again.

“As I entered, the feeble wail of an infant struck on my ear; and the first object on which my eyes rested as I went in, was the old woman sitting with a babe in her arms, while the child-mother lay still unconscious, as I had left her.

“Mother, what I felt at that moment words can never disclose. Discovery now seemed inevitable. She must wake to the knowledge that he for whom she had given up everything was a gipsy; that her child bore in its veins the tainted gipsy blood. Disowned and despised by all her high-born friends, she would hate me for the irretrievable wrong I had done her; and to lose her was worse than death to me.

“The intense anguish and remorse I endured at that moment, might have atoned for a darker crime than mine. I had never felt so fully, before, the wrong I had done her; and with the knowledge of its full enormity, came the resolution of making all the atonement in my power.

“The doctor had pronounced her illness severe, but not dangerous; and said that with careful nursing she would soon be restored to health. When he was gone, I turned to the old woman, and inquired if she was willing to undertake the care of the child. The promise of being well paid made her readily answer in the affirmative; and then we concluded a bargain that she was to take care of the infant, and keep its existence a secret from every one, and, above all, from its mother. For I knew that she would never consent to give it up, and I was resolved that it should not be the means of dragging her down to poverty and disgrace. The woman was to keep it out of her sight while she remained, and tell her it had died, should she make any inquiries.

“During the next week, I scarcely ever left the cottage; and when she was sufficiently recovered to use a pen, she wrote a few lines to the principal of the academy, saying she had gone to visit a friend, and would not return for a fortnight, at least. As she had ever been a petted child, accustomed to go and come unquestioned, her absence excited no surprise or suspicion; and secreted in the cottage, she remained for the next two weeks. How the old woman managed to conceal the child I know not; but certain it is, she did it.

“The time I had dreaded came at last. My better nature had awoke since the birth of my child; and I resolved to tell her all, cost what it might, and set her free. Mother, you can conceive the bitter humiliation such a confession must have been to me – yet I made it. I told her all; how basely I had deceived her; how deeply I had wronged her. In that moment, every spark of love she had ever felt for me was quenched forever in her majestic indignation, her scorn, and utter contempt. Silently she arose and confronted me, white as the dead, superb in her withering scorn, as far above me as the heavens from the earth. All the pride of her proud race swelled in her breast, in a loathing too deep and intense for words. But those steady, darkening eyes, that seemed scintillating sparks of fire, I will never forget.

“‘Here we must part, then, Reginald Germaine; and on this earth we must never meet again!’ she said, in a voice steady from its very depth of scorn. ‘Of the matchless wrong you have done me, I will not speak; it is too late for that now. If one spark of the honor you once professed still lingers in your breast, be silent as regards the past. I ask no more. You have forever blighted my life; but the world need never know what we once were to each other. If money is any object’ – and her beautiful lip curled with a contempt too intense for words – ‘you shall have half my wealth – the whole of it, if you will – if it only buys your silence. I will return to school, and try to forget the unutterable degradation into which I have sunk. You go your own way, and we are strangers from henceforth!’

“Mother! mother! such was our parting; in scorn and hatred on one side; in utter despair and undying remorse on the other. That day she returned to school; I fled, to drown thought in the maddening whirl and tumult of London; and we have never met since. She is unmarried still, and the reigning belle of every gilded salon in London; but I know she never will, never can, forget the abyss of humiliation into which I dragged her down. For her sake, to injure her happiness, I would willingly end this wretched existence, but that I must live for what is so dear to the gypsy heart – revenge! With all her lofty pride, what she will feel in knowing she is the wife of a convicted felon, God and her own heart alone will ever know.”

He threw himself into a seat, and shading his face with his hands, sat silent; but the convulsive heaving of his strong chest, his short, hard breathing, told, more than words could ever do, what he felt at that moment. And still the dusky shadow in the duskier corner sat silently glaring upon him with those red, lurid eyes of flame.

“To tell you this story, to commit my child to your charge, I wished to see you to-night, mother,” he said, at last, without looking up. “She does not dream of its existence; she was told it died the hour of its birth, and was buried while she was still unconscious. In this pocketbook you will find the address of the woman who keeps it; tell her the count – for as such she knows me – sent you for it. Take it with you to Yetholm, mother; try to think it is your son, Reginald, and forget the miserable convict whom you may never see more.”

Still no reply, but oh, the fixed, burning gaze of those spectral eyes of fire!

"Mother, you must leave me now," he said, lifting his head, and looking sorrowfully in her rigid, haggard face; "for the few hours that are left me, I would like to be alone. It is better for us both that we part now."

"I will not go!" said a voice so hollow, so unnatural, that it seemed to issue from the jaws of death. "I will not go. I defy heaven and earth, and God himself, to tear me from you now."

"Mother, it is my wish," he said, calmly.

"Yours, Reginald?" she cried, in a voice of unutterable reproach. "You wish that I should leave you? For fifteen years I have given you up, and in one short hour you tire of me now. Oh, Reginald, my son! my son!"

No words can describe the piercing anguish, the utter woe, that rived that wild cry up from her tortured heart.

He came over, and laid his small, delicate hand on hers, hard, coarse, and black with sun, wind and toil.

"Listen to me, my mother!" And his low, calm, soothing tones were in strong contrast to her impassioned voice. "I am not tired of you – you wrong me by thinking so; but I have letters to write, and many matters to arrange before to-morrow's sun rises. I am tired, too, and want to rest; for it is a long time since sleep has visited my eyes, mother."

"Sleep," she bitterly echoed; "and when do you think I have slept. Look at these sunken eyes, this ghastly face, this haggard form, and ask when I have slept. Think of the mighty wrong I have suffered, and ask when I shall sleep again."

"My poor, unhappy mother!"

"*He* can sleep," she broke out, with a low, wild laugh. "Oh, yes! in his bed of down, with his princely son under the same roof, with menials to come at his beck, he can sleep. Yes, he sleeps now! but the hour comes when that sleep shall last forever! Then my eyes may close, but never before!"

"You are delirious, mother; this blow has turned your brain."

She rose to her feet, her tall, gaunt form looming up in the shadowy darkness; her wild black hair streaming disheveled down her back; her fierce eyes blazing with demoniacal light, one long, bony arm raised and pointing to heaven. Dark, fierce and stern, she looked like some dread priestess of doom, invoking the wrath of Heaven on the world.

"Delirious, am I?" she said, in her deep, bell-like tones, that echoed strangely in the silent cell. "If undying hate, if unresting vengeance, if revenge that will never be satiated but by his misery, be delirium, then I am mad. I leave you now, Reginald, such is your command; and remember, when far away, you leave one behind you who will wreak fearful vengeance for all we have both suffered."

"Mother, Lord De Courcy is not so much to blame after all, since he believes me guilty. I am not alarmed by your wild threats; for I know, in the course of time, this mad hate will grow less."

"Never – never!" she fiercely hissed through her clenched teeth. "May God forget me if I ever forget my vow! Reginald, if I thought that man could go to heaven, and I by some impossibility could be saved, too, I would take a dagger and send my soul to perdition, sooner than go there with him."

Upturned in the red light of the lamp, her face, as she spoke, was the face of a demon.

"Strong hate, stronger than death!" he said, half to himself, as he gazed on that fiendish face. "Farewell, then, mother. Will you fulfill my last request?"

"About your child? – yes."

"Thank you, dearest mother. If so lost a wretch as I am dare invoke Heaven, I would ask its blessings on you."

"Ask no blessing for me!" she fiercely broke in. "I would hurl it back in the face of the angels, did they offer it."

Folding her mantle around her, she knotted the handkerchief, that had fallen off, under her chin, and stood ready to depart. The young man went to the door, and knocked loudly. A moment after, the tramp of heavy feet was heard in the corridor approaching the door.

“It is the jailer to let you out. Once more, good-by, mother.”

She was hard, and stern, and rigid now; and there were no tears in her dry, stony, burning eyes, as she turned to take a last farewell of the son she idolized – the son she might never see again. His eyes were dim, but her tears were turned to sparks of fire.

Without a word she pressed one hot, burning kiss on his handsome brow; and then the door opened, and she flitted out in the darkness like an evil shadow. The heavy door again swung to; the key turned in the lock; the son was alone in his condemned cell; and the maniac mother, out once more in the beating rain and chill night wind, was lost in the great wilderness of mighty London.

CHAPTER VII. THE MOTHER'S DESPAIR

“Go, when the hunter’s hand hath wrung
From forest-cave her shrieking young,
And calm the lonely lioness —
But soothe not, mock not, my distress.”

— *Byron.*

Away through the driving storm – through the deepening darkness of coming morn – through the long, bleak, gusty streets – through alleys, and courts, and lanes; whirled on like a leaf in the blast that knows not, cares not, whither it goes, sped the gypsy queen Ketura. There were not many abroad at that hour; but those she passed paused in terror, and gazed after the towering form, with the wild face and wilder eyes, that flew past like a lost soul returning to Hades. She stood on London bridge, and, leaning over, looked down on the black, sluggish waters beneath. Many lights were twinkling here and there upon the numerous barges rising and falling heavily on the long, lazy swell, but the river elsewhere lay wrapped in the blackness of Tartarus. One plunge, she thought, as she looked over, and all this gnawing misery that seems eating her very vitals might be ended forever. One hand was laid on the rail – the next moment she might have been in eternity; but with the rebound of a roused tigress she sprung back. Was it the thought of standing before the judgment-seat of God with all her crime on her soul – of the long eternity of misery that must follow – that appalled her? No, she would have laughed in scorn at these, but the remembrance of her vow, of her oath of vengeance, restrained her.

“No; I will live till I have wrung from his heart a tithe of the misery mine has felt,” she thought; and then a dark, lowering glance on the black, troubled waters below filled up the hiatus.

Dusky forms, like shadows from the grave, were flitting to and fro, brushing past her as they went. Restlessly they flew on, as if under the friendly mantle of darkness alone they dared leave their dens. She knew who they were – the scum, the offcasts, the street-walkers of London; and she wondered vaguely, as she caught fitful glimpses of wild, pale faces, that gleamed for an instant in the light of the lamp, and then were gone, if any of them had ever felt anguish like to hers. While she stood clutching the parapet, a female form, in light, flowing garments, was borne on, as if by the night wind, and stood gazing down into the gloomy waters beside her. One fleeting glimpse she caught of a pale young face, beautiful still, despite its look of unutterable woe; and then, with a light rustle, something went down, far down, into the waves beneath. There was a sullen plunge, and the gypsy queen leaned over to see. By the light of one of the barge lamps she saw a darker shadow rise through the darkness to the surface. For an instant that white, wild face glared above the black bosom of the Thames, and then disappeared forever; and with a hard, bitter smile, terrible to see, the dark, dread woman turned away.

Away, again, through the labyrinth of the city, leaving that “Bridge of Sighs” far behind – away from the dark dens and filthy purlieus to the wider and more fashionable part of the town, sped the gypsy queen. There could be no rest for her this last sorrowful night; as if pursued by a haunting demon she fled on, as if she would escape from the insufferable misery that was gnawing at her heart; seeking for rest, and finding it not. Clutching her breast fiercely at intervals with her dark, horny fingers, as if she would tear thence the anguish that was driving her mad, she still flew on, until once again she found herself before the brilliantly lighted mansion of Earl De Courcy. Swelling on the night air, came borne to her ear strains of softest music, as if to mock her misery. Gay forms went flitting past the windows, and, at intervals, soft musical peals of laughter mingled with the louder

sounds of gayety. Folding her arms over her breast, the gipsy leaned against a lamp-post, and looked, with a steady smile, up at the illuminated "marble hall" before her. Her commanding form, made more commanding by her free, fiery costume, stood out in bold relief, in the light of the street-lamp. Her dark face was set with a look fairly terrific in its intensity of hate. And that smile curling her thin, colorless lips – Satan himself might have envied her that demoniacal smile of unquenchable malignity!

Moving through his gorgeous rooms, Earl De Courcy dreamed not of the dark, vengeful glance that would, if it could, have pierced those solid walls of stone to seek him. And yet ever before him, to mar his festivity, would arise the haunting memory of that convulsed face, those distended eye-balls, those blanched lips, those upraised hands, pleading vainly for the mercy he could not grant. Amid all the glitter and gayety of the brilliant scene around him, he could not forget the pleadings of that strong heart in its strong agony. He thought little of her threats – of her maledictions; yet, when some hours later he missed his son from the gay scene, dark thoughts of assassination – of the unfailing subtle poisons gipsies were so skilful in, arose before him; and he shuddered with a vague presentiment of dread. But his son had returned safe; and now the stately old nobleman stood gayly chatting with a bevy of fair ladies, who clustered round him like so many gay, glittering, tropical butterflies.

"Oh! she was positively the most delightful old thing I ever saw!" exclaimed the gay voice of gay little Miss Clara Jernyngham. "Just like 'Hecate' in 'Macbeth,' for all the world – the very *beau ideal* of a delightful Satanic old sorceress! I would have given anything – my diamond ring, my French poodle, every single one of my lovers, or even a 'perfect love of a bonnet' – to have had her tell my fortune. I fairly dote on all those delightfully-mysterious, enchanting, ugly old gipsies who come poking round, stealing and telling fortunes. What in the world did she want of you, my lord?"

A shadow fell darkly over the brow of the earl for a moment, as he recollected that dark, impassioned woman pleading for her only son; but it passed away as quickly as it came, and he answered, with a smile:

"To tell my fortune, of course, little bright-eyes. Am I not an enviable man?"

"And did she really tell it? Oh, how delightful! What did she say, my lord?"

"That I was to propose to Miss Clara Jernyngham, who was to say, 'With pleasure, my lord!' – that I was to indulge her with 'loves of bonnets' and French poodles to an unlimited extent – that –"

"Now, I don't believe a word of it," said Miss Clara, pouting, while a peal of silvery laughter arose from the rest. "I wouldn't be a mere countess at any price. I'll have a ducal coronet, if I die for it! You know the old Duke of B – , my lord!" she added, in a mysterious whisper. "Well, he is not quite right in his mind, poor man! and I am going to propose to him the very first chance! The family diamonds are superb, and I will become them beautifully, you know! This is strictly *entre nous*, though; and if you don't tell, my lord, you shall have an invitation to the wedding, and drink my health in his grace's old wine!"

And, with her pretty little face all dimpled with smiles, Miss Clara danced away to a window near, and, lifting the heavy curtains, peeped out.

The earl had bowed, and, with his hand on his heart, had promised, with befitting gravity, to preserve the young lady's secret inviolate, and was now turning away, when a sudden ejaculation from Miss Clara's rosy lips brought him again to her side.

"Oh, my lord! only look!" she cried, in a breathless whisper, pointing out. "There is that dark, dreadful gipsy we were talking of, herself. Only look at that awful face; it is positively enough to make one's blood run cold. Could she have heard us, do you think, my lord?"

At any other time, the gay little lady's undisguised terror would have amused the earl; but now, with that dark, stern, terrible face gleaming like a vision from the dead, in the fitful light of the street-lamp, he felt his very blood curdle. It rose before him so unexpectedly, as if she had risen from the earth to confront him, that even his strong heart grew for a moment appalled. Her tall form looming up unnaturally large in the uncertain light; her unsheltered head, on which the rain mercilessly beat;

her steady, burning, unswerving gaze fixed on the very window where they stood – all combined, sent a thrill of terror, such as in all his life he had never felt before, to the very heart of the earl.

She saw them as they stood there; for by the brilliant jets of light, his imposing form was plainly revealed in the large window. Slowly, like an inspired sibyl of darkest doom, she raised one skinny hand, and, while her long, flickering finger pointed upward, her ominous gaze never for a single instant wandered from his face. So wild, so threatening was her look, that the shriek she had opened her mouth to utter, froze on little Miss Jernyngham's lips; and the earl, with a shudder, shaded his eyes with his hands to shut out the weird sight. One moment later, when he looked again, the dark, portentous vision was gone, and nothing met his eye but the slanting rain falling on the wet, glittering pavement.

Slowly and reluctantly, as though unwilling to go, the clouds of night rolled sullenly back, and morning, with dark, shrouded face and dismal fog, broke over London.

The crash, the din, the surging roar of busy life had commenced. The vast heart of the mighty Babel was throbbing with the unceasing stream of life. Men, looking like specters, in the thick, yellow fog, buttoned up in overcoats, and scowling at the weather, passed up and down the thronged thoroughfares. On the river, barges, yachts and boats ran against each other in the gloom, and curses, loud and deep, from hoarse throats, mingled with peals of gruff laughter, from crowds of rowdy urchins on the wharves, who, secure in their own safety, seemed hugely to enjoy the discomfiture of their fellow-heathens. The dark bosom of the sluggish Thames rose and fell calmly enough, telling no tales of all the misery, woe and shame hidden forever under its gloomy waves.

A large, black, dismal-looking ship lay moored to one of the docks, and a vast concourse of people were assembled to witness the crowd of convicts who were to be borne far away from "Merrie England" in her, that morning. Two-by-two they came, chained together hand and foot, like oxen; and the long, gloomy procession wound its tortuous way to the vessel's side, amid the laughter, scoffs and jeers of the crowd. Yet there were sad faces in that crowd, too – faces hard, rough and guilt-stained – that grew sorrowful as better men's might have grown, as some friend, son, husband or brother went by, straining their eyes to take a last look at the land they were leaving forever. Now and then, some fair young face scarcely past boyhood would pass in the felon gang – faces hard to associate with the idea of guilt; but most were dark, savage, morose men, with scowling eyes and guilt-hardened looks – men inured to crime from their very infancy, and paying crime's just penalty now.

At last came one who was greeted with an insulting cheer that rung to the very heavens. And "Hurrah! for the gentleman gipsy!" "Hurrah! hurrah! for the thief from Eton!" rung out again and again, until the welkin rung.

Proudly erect, with his fine head thrown back; his full, falcon eyes flashing with a scorn that made more than one scoffing gaze fall, walked the son of the gipsy queen.

Shout after shout of derision greeted him as he went on; for the rabble ever hate those who, belonging to their own class, raise themselves above them. But when a woman – a wild, haggard, despairing woman – rushed through the crowd, and greeted him with the passionate cry: "My son! oh, my son! – my son!" a silence like that of death fell over the vast throng. Unheeding all around her, the gipsy Ketura would have forced her way to his side; but she was held back by those who had charge of the convicts. And the dreary procession passed on its way.

All were on board at last; and the vessel, with a fair wind, was moving away from the wharf. The crowd was dispersing; and the officer, at last, who was guarding Ketura, moved away with the rest, casting a compassionate glance on the face white with woman's utmost woe.

Standing there, with straining eyeballs and clenched hands, the wretched woman watched the ship that bore away the son she so madly loved. A sort of desperate hope was in her heart; still, while it remained in sight, something might intervene to restore him yet. With parted lips and heaving breast, she stood there, as any other mother might stand, and watched the sods piled over her child's grave; and still she would not believe he had gone forever. At last the vessel disappeared; the last trace of

her white sails were gone; and then, with a terrific shriek that those who heard might never forget, she threw up both arms, and fell, in strong convulsions, to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. TOOSYPEGS "TURNS UP" AGAIN

"His looks do argue him replete with modesty."

– *Shakspeare.*

"Why, Mr. Harkins, it ain't possible, now!" exclaimed a struggling, incredulous voice. "Just to think we should meet again after such a long time! I'm sure it's real surprising."

The speaker, a pale young man, with a profusion of light hair and freckles, and a gaudy hand carpet-bag, was taking a stroll on the classic banks of the Serpentine, when suddenly espying a short, plethoric, gruff-looking, masculine individual coming toward him, he made a sudden plunge at him, and grasped his hand with an energy that was quite startling.

The short individual addressed, with a wholesome distrust of London pickpockets before his eyes, raised a stout stick he carried, with the evident intention of trying the thickness of the pale young man's skull; but before it could come down, the proprietor of the freckles began, in a tone of mild expostulation:

"Why, Mr. Harkins, you haven't forgotten me – have you? Don't you recollect the young man you brought to London in your wagon one rainy night? Why, Mr. Harkins, I'm O. C. Toosypegs!" said the pale young man, in a slightly aggrieved tone.

"Why, so hit be!" exclaimed Mr. Harkins, brightening up, and lowering his formidable weapon. "Blessed! if you 'adn't gone clean hout my 'ead! Why, Mr. Toosypegs, this is the most surprisingest thing as ever was! I hain't seen you I don't care when!"

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Harkins," said Mr. Toosypegs, gratefully. "I knew you'd be very glad to see me, and it's real kind of you to say so. I hope Mrs. Harkins and your infant family are all quite well, I thank you."

"Yes, they're hall among the middlin's" said Mr. Harkins, indifferently. "Mrs. Harkins 'as been and gone and 'ad the – what's this now?" said Mr. Harkins, pausing, with knit brows, and scratching his head in perplexity. "Blessed! if I hain't clean forgot the name, it was 'tongs,' No – yes – it was 'tongs,' hand something else."

"And poker," suggested Mr. Toosypegs, thoughtfully.

"Mr. Toosypegs," said Mr. Harkins, facing round fiercely, "I 'ope you don't mean for to hinsult a cove, do you?"

"Why, Mr. Harkins!" remonstrated the astonished and aggrieved Mr. Toosypegs. "I'm sure I never meant any such thing; I wouldn't insult you for all the world for – for – " Mr. Toosypegs paused for a figure of speech strong enough. "For any amount of money, Mr. Harkins," added Mr. Toosypegs, warmly.

"Well, it don't make no matter hif you did," said Mr. Harkins, cooling suddenly down. "But what has this Mrs. 'Arkins 'ad – tongs – tongs? Oh, yes! *tongs-will-eat-us!* that's the name, Mr. Toosypegs. Mrs. 'Arkins 'ad that," said Mr. Harkins, triumphantly.

"Tonsilitus, perhaps," insinuated Mr. Toosypegs, meekly.

"Well, hain't that wot I said?" exclaimed Mr. Harkins, rousing up again. "Hand my John Halbert, he's been and 'ad a Sarah Bell affection – "

"Cerebral," again ventured Mr. Toosypegs, humbly.

"Well, hain't that wot I said?" shouted Mr. Harkins, glaring savagely at the republican, who wilted suddenly down. "Blessed! if I hain't a good mind to bring you a clip 'long side the 'ead, for

your impudence in conderdicting me like this 'ere hev'ry time? Why, you'd perwoke a saint, so you would!" exclaimed the outraged Mr. Harkins.

"Mr. Harkins, I'm sure I never meant to offend you, and I'm real sorry for your trouble," apologized Mr. Toosypegs, in a remorse-stricken tone.

"Well, it wasn't no trouble," said Mr. Harkins, testily. "Cos he got took to the 'orsepittle for fear hany the rest hof the family would take it. Mary-Hann, she got her feet wet, and took the inn-flue-end-ways; whot yer got to say ag'in' that?" fiercely demanded Mr. Harkins.

Mr. Toosypegs, who had been muttering "influenza" to himself, and chuckling inwardly, as he thought how he could correct Mr. Harkins, in his own mind, in spite of him, was so completely overpowered by this bristling question, that the blood of conscious guilt rushed to his face, and Mr. O. C. Toosypegs stood blushing like a red cabbage.

"Because if you've got hanything to say ag'in' hit," went on Mr. Harkins, pointing one stubby forefinger at society in general, "you 'ad better let hit hout for a little hexercise, that's all. Come now!"

"Mr. Harkins, it's very kind of you to give me permission, and I am very much obliged to you," said Mr. Toosypegs, looking severely at a small boy who had a hold of his coat-tails behind. "But I hadn't the remotest idea of saying anything, whatever, against it. I'm sure it's perfectly right and proper Mary Ann should have the influenza, if she wants to."

"Ah! I didn't know but what you might think she 'adn't," said Mr. Harkins blandly. "There wasn't hany tellin', you know, but what you might say a Hinglishman's 'ouse wasn't his castle, and he couldn't 'ave whatever he likes there. Well, the baby, he got the crook, which 'ad the meloncholic heffec' hof turning 'im perfectly black in the face."

Mr. Toosypegs, though inwardly surmising Mr. Harkins meant the croup, thought it a very likely effect to be brought about by either.

"Then Sary Jane took the brown skeeters, hand I 'ad the lum-beggar hin my hown back, but on the whole we were all pretty well, thank!"

"I am real glad to hear it," said Mr. Toosypegs, with friendly warmth. "I've been pretty well myself since, too. I'm very much obliged to you."

"Let's see, it's near a month, hain't it, since the night I took you to London?" said Mr. Harkins.

"Three weeks and five days exactly," said Mr. Toosypegs, briskly.

"I suppose you don't disremember the hold gipsy has we took him that night – do you? 'I was a stranger hand you took me him.' That's in the Bible, Mr. Toosypegs," said Mr. Harkins, drawing down the corners of his mouth, and looking pious, and giving Mr. Toosypegs a dig in the ribs, to mark the beauty of the quotation.

"Yes, Mr. Harkins, but not so hard, if you please – it hurts," said Mr. Toosypegs, with tears in his eyes, as he rubbed the place.

"What does? that there piece hout the Bible?" said Mr. Harkins, with one of his sudden bursts of fierceness.

"Oh, Lor', no!" said the deeply-scandalized Mr. Toosypegs, surprised into profanity by the enormity of the charge. "It's your elbow, Mr. Harkins, it hurts," said Mr. Toosypegs, with a subdued snuffle.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Harkins; "well hit's hof no squenceyance, but you don't disremember the hold gipsy-woman we took in, do you?"

"The one with the black eyes and short frock? Oh, I remember her!" said Mr. Toosypegs. "I've never seen her since."

"No, I shouldn't s'pose you 'ad," said Mr. Harkins, gruffly, "seein' she's as mad as a March 'are, down there with her tribe. Mysterious are the ways of Providence. You blamed little rascal! hif you do that again, I'll chuck you inter the Serpentine! blessed hif I don't."

His last sentence, which began with a pious upturning of the whites, or rather the yellows, of Mr. Harkins' eyes, was abruptly cut short by a depraved youth, who, turning a course of summersaults

for the benefit of his constitution, rolled suddenly against Mr. Harkins' shins, and the next instant found himself whimpering and rubbing a portion of his person, where Mr. Harkins had planted a well-applied kick.

"The way the principuls of perliteness is neglected to be hinstilled hinto the minds of youths now-a-days, is distressin' to behold," said Mr. Harkins, with a grimace of pain; "but has I was sayin' habout the hold gipsy queen, she's gone crazy, hand" – (here Mr. Harkins lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper) – "she's went hand got a baby."

"Do tell!" ejaculated Mr. Toosypegs, who saw it was expected of him to be surprised, and who consequently was, though he could not see any earthly reason for it.

"A baby," went on Mr. Harkins, who would have emphasized his words by another dig in the ribs, but that Mr. Toosypegs dodged back in alarm; "a real baby, alive and kickin'!"

"Pshaw! it ain't possible!" said Mr Toosypegs, in a voice betraying not the slightest particle of emotion.

"It is – hincredulous as it may sound, it's true," said Mr. Harkins, solemnly. "The way I found hit hout was this: I was comin' halong 'ome, one night hafter bringing hoff a cove w'at got waylaid to Lunnon, a-singin' to myself that there song, the 'Roast Beef hof Hold Hingland,' hand a-thinkin' no more 'arm, Mr. Toosypegs, nor a lot hof young pigses goin' to market," said Mr. Harkins, giving his stick a grand flourish to mark this bold figure of speech. "It wasn't a dark night, Mr. Toosypegs, nor yet a light one; the starses was a-shinin' like heverything, when, hall hof a suddint, a 'and was laid hon the reins, hand a voice, so deep and orful-like hit made me fairly jump, said:

"Will you let me ride hin your vagging has far has you're going?"

"I looked round, Mr. Toosypegs," continued Mr. Harkins, in a husky whisper, "and there I see'd that there gipsy queen, lookin' so dark, hand fierce, and wild-like, I nearly jumped clean hout the wagging. Blessed! if I wasn't skeert! Just then I heerd a cry from a bundle she'd got in her arms, hand what do you think I saw, Mr. Toosypegs?"

The startling energy with which Mr. Harkins, carried away by the excitement of his story, asked this question, so discomposed the mild young man with the freckles, that he gave a sudden jump back, and glanced in terror at the narrator's elbow.

"Really, Mr. Harkins, I don't know, I'm sure," said Mr. Toosypegs, grasping his carpet-bag, nervously.

"A baby!" said Mr. Harkins, in the same mysterious, husky whisper; "a baby, Mr. Toosypegs! Now, the question his, where did that there baby come from?"

Mr. Harkins gave his hat a slap on the crown, for emphasis, and, resting both hands on the top of his stick, came to a sudden halt, and looked Mr. Toosypegs severely in the face.

"A – really, Mr. Harkins – I – a – I hadn't the remotest idea," said Mr. Toosypegs, blushing to the very roots of his hair, "I hope you don't suspect me –"

"Bah!" interrupted Mr. Harkins, with a look of disgust; "nobody never said nothin' about you! Well, Mr. Toosypegs, I took her hin, has she hasked, and brought her along has far has my 'ouse, where Missus 'Arkins gave her something to eat for the little 'un, which was has fine a little fellow has you'd wish to see. Then she went hoff, and the next week we heard she'd gone and went crazy."

"Poor thing. Why, I'm real sorry, Mr. Harkins. I dare say she was a real nice old lady, if she'd been let alone," said Mr. Toosypegs, in a tone of commiseration.

"Why, who tetched her?" said Mr. Harkins, testily.

"Well, they went and transported her son, and I'm sure it wasn't right at all, when he did not want to go. She looked real put out about it that night, herself, too."

"S'pose you heerd her son was drown-ded?"

"Yes; I saw it in the papers, and I was real sorry – I really was. Mr. Harkins, I dare say you was, too?"

Mr. Harkins grunted.

"All hands was lost, wasn't they?" said Mr. Harkins, after a short pause.

"Yes; all hands and feet," said Mr. Toosypegs, venturing on a weak joke; but, catching the stern look of Mr. Harkins, at this improper levity, he instantly grew serious again; "the ship struck against something –"

"A mermaid," suggested Mr. Harkins.

"Mr. Harkins, I'm very much obliged to you, but it wasn't a mermaid, it was a coral reef – that's the name – and went to the bottom with all hands and the cook."

"Which is a melancholic picture hof the treacherousness hof the hocean," said Mr. Harkins, in a moralizing tone, "hand should be a severe warning to hall, when they steal, not to let themselves get tooke hup, lest they be tooke down a peg or two, hafter."

"But you know, Mr. Harkins, it's been found out since he wasn't the one who stole the plate, at all. That man they arrested for murder, and are going to hang, confessed he did it. I'm sure you might have seen it in the papers, Mr. Harkins."

"I don't put no faith hin the papers myself," said Mr. Harkins, in a severe tone; "they hain't to be believed, none of 'em. Hif they says one thing, you may be sure hit's just hexactly the tother. That there's my opinion."

"But, Mr. Harkins, look here," said Mr. Toosypegs, deeply impressed with this profound view of the newspaper press, in general, "I dare say that's true enough, and it's real sensible of you to say so; but in this case it must be true. Why, they're going to hang the man, Mr. Harkins, and he confessed he did that, along with ever so many other unlawful things. I wonder if hanging hurts much, Mr. Harkins?" said Mr. Toosypegs, involuntarily loosening his neck-cloth, as he thought of it.

"Well, I don't know," returned Mr. Harkins, thoughtfully, "I never was 'anged myself, but I had a cousin who married a vidder." Here, Mr. Harkins, taking advantage of a moment's unguarded proximity, gave Mr. Toosypegs a facetious dig in the ribs, which caused that ill-used young gentleman to spring back with something like a howl.

"You don't know how sharp your elbow is, Mr. Harkins; and my ribs are real thin. I ain't used to such treatment, and it hurts," said Mr. Toosypegs, with whom this seemed to be the climax of wrong, and beyond which there was no proceeding further.

"I have heerd it was honly their shins as was tender hin Hamerica," said Mr. Harkins. "When are you goin' back to Hamerica, Mr. Toosypegs?"

"Not before a year – perhaps two," said Mr. Toosypegs, brightening suddenly up. "And I tell you what, Mr. Harkins, America is a real nice place, and I'll be ever so glad to get back to it. There was the nicest people round where we lived that ever was," went on Mr. Toosypegs, getting enthusiastic. "There was Judge Lawless, up at Heath Hill; and old Admiral Havenful, at the White Squall, and lots of other folks. Where I lived was called Dismal Hollow, owing to its being encircled by huge black rocks on all sides, and a dark pine forest on the other."

"Pleasant place it must 'ave been," said Mr. Harkins, with a strong sneer.

"Well, it wasn't so pleasant as you might think," seriously replied Mr. Toosypegs, on whom his companion's sarcasm was completely thrown away; "the sun never shone there; and as Dismal Creek, that run right before the house, got swelled up every time it rained, the house always made a point of getting flooded, and so we lived most of the time in the attic in the spring. There were runaway niggers in the woods, too, who used to steal and do a good many other nasty things, so it wasn't safe to go out at night, but, on the whole, it was pretty pleasant."

"Wot ever made you leave sich a nice place?" said Mr. Harkins, with a little suppressed chuckle.

"Why, Mr. Harkins, I may tell you as a friend, for I know you won't mention it again," said Mr. Toosypegs, lowering his voice to a deeply-confidential and strictly private cadence. "My pa died when I was a little shaver about so-year-old, and ma and I were pretty poor, to be candid about it. Well, then, three years ago my ma died, too, which was a serious affliction to me, Mr. Harkins, and I was left plunged in deepest sorrow and poverty. The niggers worked the farm, and I was employing

my time in cultivating a pair of whiskers to alleviate my grief when I received a letter from an uncle here in England, telling me to come right on, and, if he liked me, he'd make me his heir when he died, which was real kind of him. That's what brought me here, Mr. Harkins; and I'm stopping with my uncle and his sister, who is an unmarried woman of forty-five, or so."

"Hand the hold chap's 'live yet?" inquired Mr. Harkins.

"Mr. Harkins, my uncle, I am happy to say, still exists," answered Mr. Toosypegs, gravely.

"Humph! 'As he got much pewter, Mr. Toosypegs?"

"Much what?" said the mild owner of the freckles, completely at a loss. "You'll excuse me, I hope, Mr. Harkins, but I really don't understand."

"Green," muttered Mr. Harkins, contemptuously to himself. Then aloud: "Ow much do you think he'll leave you?"

"Well, about two thousand pounds or so," said Mr. Toosypegs, complacently.

"Two – thousand – poun'!" slowly articulated the astounded Mr. Harkins. "Oh, my heye! – w'y you'll be rich, Mr. Toosypegs! What will you do with all that there money?"

"Why, my aunt, Miss Priscilla Dorothea Toosypegs, and I are going home to Maryland (that's where I used to live, Mr. Harkins), and we're going to fit up the old place and live there. Aunt Priscilla never was in America, and wants to see it real bad."

"Two – thousand – poun'," still more slowly repeated Mr. Harkins. "Well, things is 'stonishing. Jest think hof me now, the honest and 'ard-working father of ten children, hand you won't catch nobody going hand dying hand leaving me one single blessed brass farden, while here's a cove more'n 'alf a hass. I say, Mr. Toosypegs, you wouldn't lend me a guinea or two, would you?" insinuated Mr. Harkins in his most incredulous voice.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Harkins," said Mr. Toosypegs, briskly, drawing out his purse. "I'm real happy to be able to be of service to you. Here's two guineas, and don't put yourself out about paying it."

"Mr. Toosypegs, you're a brick!" said Mr. Harkins, grasping his hand with emotion. "I won't put myself hout in the least, since you're kind enough to request it; but hif you'll come and dine with me some day, I'll give you a dinner of b'iled pertaters and roast honions fit for a king. Will you come?" urged Mr. Harkins, giving him a friendly poke with his fore-finger.

"Certainly I will, Mr. Harkins; and it's real kind in you to ask me," said Mr. Toosypegs, politely. "I see you're in a hurry, so I'll bid you good-day, now. Most certainly I'll come, Mr. Harkins. I'm very much obliged to you."

CHAPTER IX. THE SECRET REVEALED

“I was so young – I loved him so – I had
No mother – God forgive me! – and I fell!”

Browning.

And how fell the news of Reginald Germaine's innocence of the crime for which he was condemned, and his sad end, on the other personages connected with our tale?

To his mother came the news in her far-off greenwood home; and as she heard he had perished forever in the stormy sea, Reason, already tottering in her half-crazed brain, entirely gave way, and she fled, a shrieking maniac, through the dim, old woods.

To Earl De Courcy it came in his stately home, to fill his heart with deepest sorrow and remorse. Hauntingly before him arose the agonized, despairing face of the lonely woman, as on that last night she had groveled at his feet, shrieking for that mercy he had refused. Proud, stern man as he was, no words can express the deep pity, the heartfelt sorrow he felt, as he thought of that lonely, despairing, childless woman, a wanderer over the wide world.

To Lord Ernest Villiers it came, bringing deepest regret for the bold-eyed, high-hearted youth, so unjustly condemned, so wrongly accused. He thought of him as he knew him first – proud, princely, handsome, and generous. And now! that young life, under the unjust sentence of the law, had passed away; that haughty head, noble even in its degradation, lay far under the deep sea, among the bleaching bones of those guilt-hardened men.

To one, in her father's castle halls, it came, bringing a feeling of untold relief. He had cruelly wronged her; but he was dead now, and she freely forgave him for all she had suffered. While he lived, incurable sorrow must be hers; but he was gone, and happy days might dawn for her yet. She might love another now, without feeling it a crime to do so – one noble and generous, and worthy of her in every way. One deep breath of relief, one low sigh to the memory of his sad fate, and then a look of calm, deep happiness stole over the beautiful face, such as it had not worn for years, and the beautiful head, with its wealth of raven ringlets, dropped on her arm, in a voiceless thanksgiving, in a joy too intense for words.

And this was Lady Maude Percy.

In spite of her steady refusal of his suit, Lord Villiers had not despaired. He could not understand the cause of her strange melancholy and persistent refusal of her hand, knowing, as he did, that she loved him, but, believing the obstacle to be merely an imaginary one, he hoped on, and waited for the time to come when this singular fancy of hers would be gone. That time had come now. Calling, one morning, and finding her in the drawing-room, he was greeted with a brilliant smile, with a quick flush of pleasure, and a manner so different from her customary one, that his heart bounded with sudden hope.

“I am truly rejoiced to see Lady Maude recovering her spirits again,” he said, his fine eyes lit up with pleasure. “She has been shadowed by the dark cloud of her nameless melancholy long enough.”

“If Lord Villiers only knew how much cause I had for that ‘nameless melancholy,’ he would forgive me any pain it may ever have caused him,” she said, while a shadow of the past fell darkly over her bright young face.

“And may I not know? Dearest Maude, when is this mystery to end? Am I never to be made happy by the possession of this dear hand?”

He took the little, white hand, small and snowy as a lily-leaf, and it was no longer withdrawn, but nestled lovingly in his, as if there it found its rightful home.

“Maude, Maude!” he cried, in a delirium of joy, “is your dark dream, then, in reality over? Oh, Maude, speak, and tell me! Am I to be made happy yet?”

“If you can take me as I am, if you can forgive and forget the past, I am yours, Ernest!” she said, in a thrilling whisper.

In a moment she was in his arms, held to the true heart whose every throb was for her – her head upon the breast that was to pillow hers through life.

“Maude, Maude! My bride, my life, my peerless darling! Oh, Maude, this is too much happiness!” he cried, in a sort of transport between the passionate kisses pressed on her warm, yielding lips.

Blushingly she rose from his embrace, and gently extricated herself from his arms.

“Oh, Maude, my beautiful darling! May Heaven forever bless you for this!” he fervently exclaimed, all aglow with passionate love.

She had sunk into a seat, and bent her head into her hand, not daring to meet the full, falcon gaze, flashing with deepest tenderness, that she knew was bent upon her.

“Speak again, Maude! Once more let me hear those precious words from your own sweet lips, Maude! Maude, sweetest and fairest, speak!”

He wreathed his arms around her, while he seemed breathing out his very soul as he aspired her name.

“But you have not heard all, my lord. This secret – do you not wish to hear it?” she faintly said, without lifting her dark, beautiful eyes.

“Not unless it is your wish to tell it. I want to hear nothing but that you are my own.”

“Yet, when you hear it, my lord, you may reject the hand I have offered.”

“Never, never! Nothing under heaven could make me do that!”

“You speak rashly, Lord Ernest. Wait until you have heard all. I dare not accept the noble heart and hand you offer, without revealing the one great error of my youth.”

“You commit error, my beautiful saint? You, who are as perfect in soul as in body. Oh, Maude, I cannot believe it.”

“It is true, nevertheless, my lord. But oh, how shall I tell you? How can I confess what I have been – what I am?”

There was a sharp agony in her voice, and her head dropped on her hands, and her fair bosom rose and fell like a tempest-tossed sea.

Encircling her with his arm, he drew her down until her white face lay hidden in his breast, and then pressing his lips to the dark ripples of hair sweeping against his cheek, he murmured, in tenderest whisper:

“Tell me now, Maude, and fear not; for nothing you can say will convince me you are not as pure and unsullied as the angels themselves. What is this terrible secret, sweetest love?”

“Oh, my dear lord, every word you speak, every caress you give me, makes my revelation the harder!” she passionately cried. “And yet it must be made, even though you should spurn me from you in loathing after. Listen, my lord. You think me Lady Maude Percy?”

“Yes, dear love.”

“That is not my name!”

“What, Maude?”

“That is not my name. No; I am not mad, Lord Villiers, though you look as if you thought so. I have been mad once! You and all the world are deceived. I am not what I seem.”

“What, in Heaven’s name do you mean? What then are you?”

“I was a wife! I have been a mother! I am a widow!”

“Maude!”

"You recoil from me in horror! I knew it would be so. I deserve it – I deserve it! but oh, Lord Villiers, it will kill me!" she cried, passionately wringing her hands.

"Maude, are you mad?"

"I am not – oh, I am not! if a grief-crazed brain, a blighted life, a broken heart be not madness."

"But, Maude! Good heavens! You are so young – not yet eighteen! Oh, it cannot be true!" he cried, incoherently.

"Would to God it were not! Yet four years ago I was a wedded wife!"

"Wife, mother, and widow at eighteen! Maude, Maude, how can I realize this?"

"Oh, I was crazed! I was mad! and I did love him so, then! Not as I love you, Lord Ernest, with a woman's strong, undying affection, but with the wild, passionate fervor of youth. I must have inherited my dead mother's Spanish blood; for no calm-pulsed English girl ever felt love like that."

"Oh, Lady Maude! – Lady Maude! I could hardly have believed a messenger from heaven had he told me this."

"God be merciful to human error! A long life of sorrow and remorse must atone for that first rash fault."

He was pacing up and down the long room with rapid, excited strides; his fine face flushed, and his hands tightly shut, as if to keep down the bitterness that rebelliously rose at this unlooked-for avowal. He had expected to hear some light, trivial fault, magnified by a morbid imagination; but not a clandestine marriage. No man likes to hear that the woman he loves has ever loved another; and Lady Maud Percy had already seemed so angelic that this sudden "falling off" of his high ideal, brought with it a pang like the bitterness of death.

And therefore, pacing up and down – up and down, with brain and heart in a tumult – Lord Ernest Villiers' pride for one moment overcame and mastered his love. For one brief moment only – for then his eyes fell on the drooping figure and despair-bowed young head; and the anguished attitude went to his heart, bringing back a full tide of pity, love, and forgiveness. All was forgotten, but that she was the only one he ever did or could love; and lifting the sorrowing head and grief-bowed form in his arms, once more he clasped her closer to the manly young heart she could feel throbbing under her own, and whispered:

"My own life's darling still! Oh, Maude! if you must grieve, it shall be on my breast. If you have erred, so, too, have I – so have we all often. I will forget all but that you have promised my arms shall be your home forever!"

"And you forgive and love me still? Oh, Lord Ernest!" He kissed away her tears as she wept aloud.

"One thing more, dearest. Who was my Maude's first love!"

He felt a convulsive shiver run through the delicate form he held. He felt her breast heave and throb as if the name was struggling to leave it, and could not.

"Tell me, Maude, for I must know."

"Oh, saints in heaven! how can I? Oh, Lord Ernest! this humiliation is more than I can endure."

"Speak, Lady Maude! for I must know."

She lifted her eyes to his, full of unspeakable anguish, and then dropped her head heavily again; for in that fixed, grave, noble face, full of love and pity as it was, there was no yielding now.

"Tell me, Maude, who was the husband of your childhood?"

From the pale, quivering lip, in a dying whisper, dropped the words: "Reginald Germaine, the gipsy!"

There was a moment's death-like silence. The handsome face of Lord Ernest Villiers seemed turned to marble, and still motionless as if expiring, she lay in the arms that clasped her still in a close embrace. At last:

"Heaven be merciful to the dead! Look up, my precious Maude; for nothing on earth shall ever come between us more!"

Calm and clear, on the troubled wave of her tempest-tossed soul, the low words fell; but only her deep, convulsive sobs were his answer.

“Maude! – my own dear Maude!” he cried, at last, alarmed by her passion of grief, “cease this wild weeping. Forget the troubled past, dear love; for there are many happy days in store for us yet.”

But still she wept on – wildly, vehemently, at first – until her strong passion of grief had passed away. He let her sob on in quiet now, with no attempt to check her grief, except by his silent caresses.

She lifted her head and looked up, at last, thanking him by a radiant look, and the soft, thrilling clasp of her white arms.

“I will not ask you to explain now, sweet Maude,” he softly whispered. “Some other time, when you are more composed, you shall tell me all.”

“No – no; better now – far better now; and then, while life lasts, neither you nor I, Ernest, will ever breathe one word of the dark sorrowful story again. Oh, Ernest! can all the fondest love of a lifetime suffice to repay you for the forgiveness you have shown me to-day?”

“I am more than repaid now, dear love. Speak of that no more. But now that the worst is over, will my Maude tell me all?”

“I have not much to tell, Ernest; but you shall hear it. Nearly three years before you and I met, when a child of fourteen, I was on a visit to my uncle Everly’s. My cousin Hubert, home from college, brought with him a fellow-student to spend the vacation, who was presented to me as Count Germaine. What Reginald Germaine was then, you, who have seen him, do not need to know. Handsome, dashing, fascinating, he took every heart by storm, winning love by his gay, careless generosity, and respect by his talents and well-known daring. I was a dreamy, romantic school-girl; and in this bold, reckless boy, handsome as an angel, I saw the living embodiment of my most glorious ideal. From morning till night we were together; and, Ernest, can you understand that wild dream? How I loved him then, words are weak to express, how I loathed and despised him after no words can ever tell. Ernest, he persuaded me to elope with him one night; and we were married. I never stopped to think of the consequences then. I only knew I would have given up my hopes of heaven for him! Three weeks longer he remained at Everly Hall; and then papa sent me back to school, and he went to London.

“No one was in our secret, and we met frequently, unsuspected; though papa, thinking he was too presuming, had forbidden me to associate with him. One day we went out driving; the carriage was upset; I fainted; and for a long time I remembered nothing more.

“When reason returned, I was in a little cottage, nursed by an old woman; while he hovered by my bedside night and day. Then I learned that I had given birth to a child – dead now and buried. I could recollect myself as people recollect things in a confused dream – of hearing for a time the feeble cries of an infant, and seeing a baby face, with the large, black, beautiful eyes of Reginald Germaine. I turned my face to the wall and wept, at first, in childish grief; but he caressed and soothed me, and I soon grew calm. I thought, at the time, a strange, unaccountable change had come over him; though I could not tell what. When I was well again I learned. Standing before me, one morning, he calmly and quietly told me how he had deceived me – that, instead of being a French count, he was the son of a strolling gipsy; but that, having repented of what he had done, he was willing to give me up.

“The very life seemed stricken out of my heart as I listened. Then my pride – the aroused pride of my race – arose; and, oh! words are weak to tell how I loathed myself and him. That I, a Percy – the daughter of a race that had mated with royalty hitherto – had fallen so low as to wed a gipsy! I shrunk, in horror unspeakable, from the black, bottomless quagmire into which I had sunk. All my love in that instant turned to bitterest scorn, and I passionately bade him leave me, and never dare to come near me again, or breathe a word of the past. He obeyed; and from that day I never beheld him more.

“After that, I met you, Lord Ernest, and I loved you as I never loved him. For him, I cherished a blind, mad passion; for you, I felt the strong, earnest love of womanhood. You loved me; but I shrunk from the affection my very soul was crying out for, knowing I dared not love you without guilt. Now you know the secret of my coldness and mysterious melancholy.

“I heard often of Germaine; and his name was like a spear-thrust to my heart. When I was told of his arrest, trial and condemnation for grand larceny, you perhaps may imagine, but I can never tell, exactly what I felt. His name was the theme of every tongue; and day after day I was forced to listen to the agonizing details, knowing – low as he had fallen, guilty as he might be – he was my husband still. Thank God! through all his ignominy, he had honor enough never to reveal our dark secret. Then came the news of his death; and Heaven forgive me if my heart bounded as I heard it!

“Oh, Lord Ernest! you were my first thought. I felt I could dare to love you now as you deserved to be loved, without sinning. I determined to tell you all, and to love you still, even though you spurned me from you forever. Oh, Ernest! my noble-hearted! may God forever bless you for forgiving me as you have done, and loving me still!”

Her voice ceased, but the dark, eloquent eyes were full of untold love – of love that could never die for all time.

“My own! – my own! never so well beloved as now! My Maude! – my bride! – my wife! blot out from the leaves of your life that dark page – that year of passion, of error, of sorrow and shame. We will never speak or think of it more, sweet Maude. Germaine has gone to answer for what he has done; if he has sinned while living, so also he has deeply suffered and sorrow-atoned for all. Fiery, passionate and impulsive, if he has wronged others, so also has he been deeply wronged. May God forgive him!”

“Amen,” was the solemn response.

“And now, Maude, what need of further delay? When shall this dear hand be mine?”

“Whenever you claim it, dear Ernest. I shall have no will but yours now,” she answered, with all a woman’s devotion in her deep eyes, “I am yours – yours through life, and beyond death, if I may.”

CHAPTER X. THE VOICE OF COMING DOOM

“They spake not a word.
But like dumb statues or breathless stones,
Stared on each other and looked deadly pale.”

Shakspeare.

“Oh! positively, your ladyship is looking perfectly dazzling! I never, no, *never* saw anybody half so beautiful in my life! Oh, Lady Kate! isn’t she charming?” And little Miss Clara Jernyngham, in an outburst of enthusiasm, earnestly clasped her little white hands, flashing with jewels, together, and went off into a look of ecstasy wonderful to behold.

Lady Kate McGregor, the proud, dark-eyed daughter of an impoverished Scottish nobleman, smiled quietly as she replied:

“Lady Maude is always lovely, and like all brides, looks doubly so now. How many of the gentlemen will envy Lord Villiers to-night!”

“Yes, indeed!” exclaimed Miss Clara, earnestly. “I am quite sure if I was a man (which, thank the gods! I am not), I would be tempted to shoot him, or do something else equally dreadful, for carrying off the reigning belle! I really don’t see how any man in his proper senses could help falling in love with Maude. And yet there’s brother George, now, he takes it as coolly as – as – I don’t know what.” The usual fate of Miss Clara’s similes.

Had Miss Jernyngham’s eyes not been so earnestly fixed on a certain superb set of diamonds that lay on a dressing-table near, she might have seen a sudden flush in the dark, handsome face of Lady Kate as she spoke, and that the lace on her bosom fluttered perceptibly, as if with the beating of the heart beneath.

“So Captain Jernyngham does not care?” said Lady Kate, in a voice not quite steady.

“No,” answered Miss Clara, her eyes dancing from the blinding river of diamond-light on the table to a magnificent bridal veil lying near – “no; which is a horrid proof of his insensibility. The fact is, George never was in love in his life, and never will be, so far as I can see. He will, most likely, die an old bachelor, if some rich heiress does not take pity on him, marry him, and pay his debts, before long. Did you see the Duke of B – this evening, though, Lady Kate? What a dear old creature it is! Going about shaking so, like a lot of *blanc mange*. I’m going to marry him some day, for the family diamonds. Worth while, eh?”

“Miss Jernyngham is herself the best judge of that,” coldly replied Lady Kate, her handsome face growing proud and pale, as she listened to Miss Clara’s speech about her brother.

“Really, Lady Maude, it’s my duty to tell you you are looking perfectly bewildering to-night, as all brides should look. If Lord Villiers had never been in love with you before, he must certainly have fallen into that melancholy predicament this evening,” said little Miss Clara, dancing off on a new tack. “This orange wreath and bridal veil are vastly becoming. I am sure no one would think you had been ill this morning, to look at you now.”

It was a pleasant scene on which the light of the rose-shaded chandelier fell. The superbly-furnished dressing-room of Lady Maude Percy was all ablaze with numberless little jets of flame, which the immense mirrors magnified four-fold. Priceless jewels lay carelessly strewn about on the inlaid dressing-table, mingling with rare bouquets, laces, gloves, and tiny satin slippers, that would scarcely have fitted Cinderella herself. Lady Kate McGregor, proud and stately, in white satin, and point-lace, and pale, delicate pearls, stood leaning against the marble mantel, her handsome eyes

growing cold and scornful whenever they rested on Miss Clara Jernyngham. That frivolous little lady, quite bewildering in the same snowy robes, was all unconscious of those icy glances, as she fluttered, like a butterfly over a rose, around another lady standing before a full-length mirror, while her maid arranged the mist-like bridal veil on her head, and set the orange wreath on her dark, shining curls.

It was Lady Maude Percy; and this was her bridal eve. Peerlessly lovely she looked as she stood there, with the light of a happy heart flushing her rounded cheeks, swelling her white bosom, and flashing from her dark, Syrian eyes. The bridal dress she wore was worth a duke's ransom. It fell around her like a summer cloud, three glistening folds of richest lace, so light, so gauzy, so brilliant, that it looked like a flashing mist. Diamonds that blinded the eyes with their insufferable light rose and fell on her white bosom with every tumultuous throb of the heart beneath. Like a floating cloud fell over all the bridal veil, and glittering above it rose the orange wreath of rarest jewels. There was a streaming light in her magnificent eyes, a living, glowing flush on her cheek, all unusual there; and little Miss Clara stood up and clasped her hands as she gazed in speechless admiration.

It was one month after the interview recorded in the last chapter. Lord Villiers, with a lover's impatience, would consent to wait no longer; and as Lady Maude had not opposed him, this day had been fixed. The marriage was to have taken place at St. George's, in the morning; but early that eventful day the bride had been seized with so severe a headache that she was unable to leave her room. Therefore, the ceremony had been necessarily delayed until the evening, when the august bishop of C – himself was to come and perform the nuptial rite at the Percy mansion. Some were inclined to look upon this interruption in the light of an evil omen; but Lady Maude only smiled, and inwardly thought that, as his bride, nothing on earth could ever darken her life more. How little did she dream of the bitter cup of sorrow she was destined yet to drain to the dregs! How little did she dream of the dark, scathing, unrelenting revenge that hovered around her like a vulture waiting for its prey!

The old earl, her father, who was somewhat old-fashioned in his notions, and liked ancient customs kept up, had determined his daughter's bridal should be celebrated by the grandest ball of the season.

"I don't like this new-fangled way young people nowadays have, of getting married in the morning, coming home for a hasty breakfast, and then tearing off, post-haste, for France, or Germany, or somewhere, as if they wanted change of scene to reconcile them to what they have done," said the old gentleman, in strict confidence, to Lord De Courcy. "It wasn't so in my time. Then we had all our friends assembled, and enjoyed ourselves together over a bottle or two of old wine until morning. Ah! those were the days." And the old earl heaved a deep sigh, and looked ruefully at his gouty foot.

Resolving, therefore, to keep up those halcyon days at all hazards, the great saloons of the stately hall were thrown open, and now they were filled with the *elite* of the city, all waiting impatiently for the coming of the bride.

Lord Hugh De Courcy, suave, stately, courteous, and bland, was there, conversing with the father of the bride, and two or three of the most distinguished politicians of the day – his eyes now and then wandering from the faces of his friends, to rest proudly on the handsome form of his son, who, in the absence of Lady Maude, was the cynosure of all eyes, the "observed of all observers."

The venerable and high-salaried bishop, attended by several other "journeyman soul-savers," as Captain George Jernyngham irreverently called them, was there, too, in full pontificals, all ready, and waiting to tie the Gordian knot.

The rooms were filled with the low hum of conversation. There were waving of fans, and flirting of bouquets, and dropping of handkerchiefs, and rustling silks and satins, and flashing of jewels, and turning of many bright, impatient eyes towards the door where the bride and her attendants were presently expected to make their appearance. Ladies coquetted, and flirted, and turned masculine heads with brilliant smiles and entrancing glances, and gentlemen bowed and complimented, and talked all sorts of nonsense, just like gentlemen in general, and all things went "merry as a marriage-bell."

Standing by themselves, as when we first saw them, were Lord Ernest Villiers and his friend, Captain Jernyngham, of the Guards.

Handsome, stately, and noble, Lord Villiers always looked; but more so now than ever. What man does not look well when happy, faultless in costume, and about to be married to the woman he loves?

Captain Jernyngham, first groomsman, etc., was also looking remarkably well – a fact of which the young gentleman himself was well aware; and lounging in his usual listless attitude against a marble column, he languidly admired his aristocratically small foot in its shining boot.

“There are some men born to good luck, just as others are born to be hanged” – he was saying, with the air of a man delivering an oration – “born with a silver spoon in their mouths, to use a common, but rather incredible figure of speech. You, *mi lor* Villiers, are one of them; you were born above the power of Fortune – consequently, the toadying jade shows you a face all smiles, and gives the cold shoulder to poor devils like me, who really stand in need of her good graces. This world’s a humbug! Virtuous poverty, illustrated in the person of Captain George Jernyngham, is snubbed and sent to Coventry, while potent, rich, and depraved youths like you are borne along on beds of roses. Yes, I repeat it, the world’s a humbug! society’s a nuisance! friendship’s a word of two syllables found in dictionaries, nowhere else! and cigars, kid gloves and pale ale are the only things worth living for. There’s an ‘opinion as is an opinion.’”

“Oh, come now, Jernyngham! things are by no means so desperate as you would have me believe,” said Lord Villiers, laughing. “Young, good-looking, and adored by the ladies, what more would you have?”

“Well, there is a vulgar prejudice existing in favor of bread and butter, and neither of the three items mentioned will exactly supply me with that useful article. I intend trying the matrimonial dodge, some day, if I can pick up anything under fifty, with three or four thousand a year, who wants a nice youth to spend it for her.”

“Love, of course, being out of the question.”

“Love!” said the guardsman, contemptuously. “I lost all faith in that article since I was fourteen years old, when I fell in love with our cook, a young lady of six-and-thirty. My father forbade the banns; she ran off with a hump-backed chimney-sweep, and I awoke to the unpleasant consciousness that ‘Love’s young dream’ was all bosh.”

“And you have been heart whole ever since?”

“Well, I rather think so. I have felt a peculiar sensation under my vest-pocket now and then, when Kate McGregor’s black eyes met mine. But pshaw! where’s the use of talking? She’s as poor as a church-mouse, and so am I; and, unless we should set up a chandler-shop, there would be a paragraph in the *Times* headed: ‘Melancholy death by starvation. The bodies of an unfortunate couple were found yesterday in the attic of a rickety, six-story house, and the coroner’s inquest returned a verdict of “Death for want of something to eat.” The unfortunate man was dressed in a pair of spurs and a military shako – having pawned the rest of his clothing, and held in his hand the jugular bone of a red herring half-devoured.’ Not any, thank you!”

Captain George stroked his mustache complacently, while Lord Villiers laughed.

“A pleasant picture that! Well, I shouldn’t wonder if it’s what ‘love in a cottage’ often comes to.”

A servant approached at this moment, and whispered something to Lord Villiers.

“The ladies are waiting, Jernyngham,” he said hastily. “Call Howard, and come along.”

He hastened out to the lofty hall, and at the foot of the grand staircase he was joined by Jernyngham and Howard, the second groomsman, Lord De Courcy, Earl Percy and a few other intimate family friends.

The bride and her attendants had already left her “maiden bower,” and Lady Maude was met at the foot of the stairs by Lord Villiers, who drew her arm within his, and whispered, in a thrilling voice:

“My bride! my wife! my queen! my beautiful Maude! never so beautiful as now! Mine, mine forever!”

“Yes, yours forever!” she softly and earnestly said, looking up in his face with a joy too intense for smiles.

There was no time for further speech. Captain Jernyngham had drawn the willing hand of the proud Kate within his arm, and felt his heart throb in a most unaccountable manner beneath her light touch. Young Howard took possession of our gay Miss Clara, whose whole heart and soul was bent on the conquest she was about to make of that “dear, old thing,” the Duke of B – , and the bridal *cortege* passed into the grand, flower-strewn saloon.

The company parted on either side as they advanced, and under the battery of many hundred eyes they approached the bishop. Book in hand, that reverend personage stood, patiently awaiting their coming, and looked approvingly over his spectacles at the beautiful bride and handsome, stately bridegroom as they stood up before him.

And then, amid the profoundest silence, the marriage ceremony was begun.

You might have heard a pin drop, so deep was the stillness that reigned – as every one held their breath to catch each word of that most interesting of rites – doubly interesting to ladies. Of the three standing before him, one heart was beating with a joy too deep and intense for words to tell. Lady Kate’s handsome eyes stole quick glances now and then at the gay, young guardsman, as she thought, with a thrilling heart, how much she could love him, but for the humiliation of loving unsought. Little Miss Clara, with her head poised on one side, and her finger on her lip, was building a castle in Spain, where she saw herself blazing with “family diamonds,” and addressed as “Duchess of B – .” As for the gentlemen, I don’t intend describing their sensation – never having been a gentleman myself (more’s the pity!) but will leave it to the imagination of my readers.

The last “I will” had been uttered; and amid that breathless silence Ernest Seyton, Viscount Villiers, and Maude Percy were pronounced man and wife.

There was an instant’s pause, and the guests were about to press forward to offer their congratulations, when pealing through the silence came an unseen voice, in clear, bell-like tones that thrilled every heart, with the words:

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life! My curse, and the curse of Heaven rest on all of the house of De Courcy!”

Blanched with wonder, horror and consternation, every face was turned in the direction whence the voice came; but nothing was to be seen. So sudden, so unlooked for was this awful interruption; so terrific was that deep, hollow voice, that the shrieks they would have uttered were frozen to the lips of the terrified women. And while they still stood speechless, horror-struck, gazing in silence, the deep, direful voice pealed again through the silent apartment like the knell of doom.

“As the rich man who stole the one ewe-lamb was accursed, so also be all who bear the name of De Courcy! May their bridal robes turn to funeral-palls! may their hours of rejoicing end in blackest misery! Blighted be their lives! doomed be all they love – hated by earth, and accursed by Heaven!”

The voice ceased. A wild shriek resounded through the room and the bride fell fainting on the ground.

In an instant all was confusion. Ladies shrieked and screamed; servants came rushing in; gentlemen, pale and horror-struck, hurried hither and thither in wildest confusion. All was uproar and dismay. Lord Villiers, with his senseless bride in his arms, was struggling to force his way from the room; and then high above the din resounded the clear, commanding voice of Earl De Courcy:

“Let all be quiet! There is no danger! Secure the doors, and look for the intruder. This is the trick of some evil-minded person to create a sensation.”

His words broke the spell of superstitious terror that bound them. Every one flew to obey – guests, servants and all. Each room was searched – every corner and crevice was examined. If a pin

had been lost, it must have been found; but they searched in vain. The owner of the mysterious voice could not be discovered.

Looking in each other's faces, white with wonder, they gave up the fruitless search, and returned to the saloon.

Like a flock of frightened birds, the ladies, pale with mortal apprehension, were huddled together – not daring even to speak. In brief, awe-struck whispers the result was told; and then, chill with apprehension, the guests began rapidly to disperse. And in less than an hour the stately house of Maude Percy was wrapt in silence, solitude and gloom. The bride, surrounded by her attendants, lay still unconscious, while all over London the news was spreading of the appalling termination of the wedding.

CHAPTER XI. LITTLE ERMINIE

“Sleep, little baby, sleep,
Not in thy cradle bed,
Not on thy mother’s breast,
But with the quiet dead.”

– *Mrs. Southey.*

Into the great dark gulf of the Past, nearly two years, like two waves from an ever-flowing sea, had vanished, freighted with their usual modicum of sorrow, joy, happiness, and despair.

And what changes had those two years brought to the various personages connected with our tale?

First, Mr. O. C. Toosytags, in whom I hope my fair readers feel an interest, had closed the eyes of his rich uncle, pocketed two thousand pounds, attired himself in the very deepest weeds, and began to turn his thoughts toward Dismal Hollow, and all “the real nice people around there.”

Miss Clara Jernyngham had obtained the desire of her heart at last, was “Her Grace of B.,” and, blazing in “family diamonds,” was toasted as one of the reigning beauties and belles of the London *haut ton*. As to that “dear old thing,” the duke, the pretty little duchess troubled her head very little about him; and he was left at home, to amuse himself with alternate fits of the palsy and gout, and the other diseases old gentlemen are heir to.

Captain George Jernyngham had risen to the rank of colonel, now, having been promoted for his bravery in a certain action; and an old uncle, whom he had hardly heard of before, coming at the same time from the East Indies with an uncountable lot of money, and the liver disease, was accommodating enough to die in the nick of time, leaving all his wealth to our gay guardsman. These two strokes of good fortune enabled Master George to offer his hand, with a safe conscience, to handsome Lady Kate, which he did, without even hinting at such a thing as a Chandler’s shop. Lady Kate showed her good taste in the selection of a husband, by accepting him on the spot; and two weeks after, the *Times*, under the heading of “Marriage in High Life,” announced the melancholy fact that Colonel Jernyngham was a bachelor no longer.

Of the gipsy Ketura, nothing was known. Now and then, at intervals, Earl De Courcy would catch a glimpse of a dark, wild face, with streaming hair, and hollow, sunken eyes, flitting after him like a haunting shadow from the grave. Wherever he went, night or day, that dusky, ominous shadow followed, dogging his steps like a sleuth-hound, until the dread of it grew to be a horror unspeakable – the vague, mysterious terror of his life. No precautions could rid him of it, until it became the very bane of his existence. If he walked, looking over his shoulder he would see that tall, spectral figure coming after; if he sat in his carriage, and it chanced to stop for a moment, a white, wild face, with great burning eyes, would gleam in upon him for an instant with deadly hate and menace in every feature, and then vanish like a face from the dead. Neither night or day was he safe from his terrible pursuer, until the dread of this ghostly ghoul wore the very flesh off his bones, reduced him to a mere living skeleton, poisoned every joy of his existence, made death and life a blank and a horror, until the birth of his little granddaughter. And the only tender feeling in his stony heart centered in her; she became the only thing that rendered life desirable. His love for the child amounted to idolatry; in its infant innocence and beauty, it seemed like a protecting angel between him and his terrible pursuer, lighting the gloom of that awful haunting shadow with the brightness of unseen wings.

The last cold gleam of yellow sunshine faded from the dull March sky. Night, with black, starless, moonless face, with cold, piercing wind and sleet, was falling over London.

The gorgeous rooms, the glittering salons, the spacious halls of the De Courcy mansion were one blaze of light and magnificence, just as they were that very night two years before – that awful night of darkest doom. By all but one that night was forgotten now; for a gay family-party were to meet to celebrate the first birthnight of Lord De Courcy's grandchild. Strange, that on the very anniversary of that dreadful night, another scion should be born to the house of De Courcy.

The guests had not yet begun to assemble; and standing by himself, wrapt in gloomy thought, the earl gazed darkly out into the deepening night. You would scarcely have known him, so changed had he grown by the blighting influence of that horrible incubus. Thin and haggard, with sunken eyes, projecting brows, snow-white hair and care-worn look, he stood the very shadow of his former self – a stricken, bowed, gloomy old man.

Through the inky darkness the rays from the street-lamp sent long lines of light and shade across the pavement. That very night, two years before, a face, white with woman's utmost woe, had gleamed upon him in that very light, as he stood in that self-same spot. He thought of it now with a convulsive shudder; and the flickering light seemed like a finger of blood-red flame pointing up to heaven, and invoking its wrath upon him. With an inward presentiment he looked through the darkness as if expecting that same dark, unearthly face to appear; and, lo! while he gazed, as if she had sprung up through the earth, a tall, shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, and that awful spectral face, he dreaded more than that of the arch fiend himself, gleamed white and awful through the gloom. She beheld him there in the light, and again that long, bony arm was raised, and that flickering finger pointed up to the lowering sky above, in darkest, voiceless menace. Then, flitting away in the darkness, to which she seemed to belong, the ghastly vision was gone, and Earl De Courcy stood frozen with horror to the spot, unable to speak or move.

At that same hour, a far pleasanter scene was going on in one of the rooms above.

It was the dressing-room of Lady Maude, into which we once before introduced the reader. Once again she stood before the mirror while her maid assisted at her toilet, and chatted with the little Duchess of B., who, magnificent in white velvet and emeralds, sat (or rather lay) half-buried in the downy depths of a lounge – having taken advantage of her girlhood's intimacy with Lady Maude to come early, and indulge in what she phrased the "sweetest of talks," before she should descend to the drawing-room, and begin her nightly occupation of breaking masculine hearts.

Very fair, very sweet, very lovely looked Lady Maude, as she stood there with a soft smile on her gentle lips, and a calm, deep joy welling from the brooding depths of her soft dark eyes.

Her dress was white, even as it had been that night – white blonde over white satin – with her favorite jewels (pale oriental pearls) wreathing her shining ringlets of jet, and fluttering and shimmering in sparks of subdued fire on her white arms and bosom. The lovely young face looking out from those silky curls was sweeter and fairer now in her gentle maturity than it had ever been in the brilliant beauty of her girlhood. Scarcely twenty, her form had not attained the roundness of perfect womanhood, but was slight and slender as a girl of fourteen, yet perfect in its elegant contour.

"And the baby is well?" the duchess was languidly saying, as she played with a beautiful little water-spaniel.

"Quite well, thank you," replied the low, sweet voice of Lady Maude, with her soft, musing smile.

"I need not ask for his lordship, for I saw him last night at the *bal masque* of Madame la Comtesse De St. Rimy!" said the duchess, with some animation. "He was looking quite kingly as 'Leicester.' By the way, Lady Maude, why were you not there?"

"Erminie seemed slightly indisposed, I fancied, and I would not leave her," answered the young mother.

“Is it possible? Well, I am very fond of children; but I do not think I could give up so brilliant an affair as last night’s masquerade even for such a sweet little angel as Erminie. What do you think, I made a complete conquest of that handsome melancholy Turkish ambassador, who is all the rage now! I had him all to myself the whole evening!”

“Was his grace present?” said Lady Maude, a little gravely.

The question took the little duchess so much by surprise, that she raised herself on her elbow, opened her blue eyes to their widest extent, and stared in silence at her questioner. Then, seeing Lady Maude was quite serious, she lay back among the velvet pillows, and burst into a silvery peal of laughter.

“His grace! Oh, that is too good! Why, Lady Maude, the last time I saw the poor, dear, old man, which is a week or two ago, he could not stir either hand or foot, and had to be carried about by that odious Italian valet of his, in a chair, whenever he wanted to move. The dear, helpless old thing! he did look so old and so absurd, shaking all over with that disagreeable palsy of his, that I could not bear to go into his room since. My maid, Fanchette, always finds out how he is, and tells me. But the idea of his going to the masquerade! Oh, dear me!”

And the affectionate wife went off into another low, musical peal that made the pretty, soft-eyed water-spaniel shake his necklace of tiny silver bells from sympathy, till they tingled again.

Lady Maude looked as she felt – a little shocked – at this heartless levity; and madame la duchesse perceiving it, began:

“Now, Maude, there is no use in your looking so profoundly scandalized about it, because I have done nothing so very naughty. You don’t expect me to go and shut myself up, and nurse him – do you? Though I dare say you, having the elements of a martyr in you, would do it just as soon as not!”

“I would not flirt with that Turkish ambassador, at all events!” said Lady Maude, in a tone of slight rebuke. “Have you not heard he has four wives already?”

“Perhaps he thinks I’ll make a fifth some day!” said the duchess, laughing. “Well, I wouldn’t mind much; he is handsome enough for anything. There! I knew I would shock you again. How saintly you have grown of late, Maude!”

“Oh, Clara! – Clara! what a mad little flirt you are!” said Lady Maude, half-smiling – half sorrowful.

“Well, you see it’s my nature. What a love of a little dog this is! I made a *mariage de convenance*; and what other result could you anticipate? I married the Duke of B. for his coronet; he married me because he wanted some one to nurse him, and poultice up his constitution, and sit at the head of his table, and make herself generally useful. I got what I aimed at; and if he has not, it shows I am the better politician of the two. Stand upon your hind-legs, Prince! And, therefore, oh, wise and discreet Lady Villiers! model wife and happy mother, you must not expect one who is neither to do otherwise than as she does. If my sole earthly happiness consists in a ‘coach-and-four,’ superb diamonds, an unlimited number of lovers, and a box at the opera, why, I rather think I should be permitted to enjoy them, since I am really not a bad girl after all, and never mean to be. And now, as your toilet is completed, and I have made quite a long speech, will your ladyship be good enough to lead the way to the nursery? I want to see this little stray angel of yours before I descend among the sinners below.”

Smiling, and passing her arm around the slender waist of the thoughtless little duchess, Lady Maude passed with her from the room, and the two young girls entered the nursery.

It was a beautiful room, all draped in white and pale-green, pure and peaceful as a glimpse of heaven. And in the center of the room stood a little rosewood crib, with snowy hangings, wherein lay a young infant, so surpassingly lovely that the duchess might well call it a “stray angel.”

Little Erminie – sweet Erminie – the child of noble, princely Lord Villiers and beautiful Maude Percy – how shall I describe her? It is not often young babies are really pretty – doting grandmamas and aunties to the contrary notwithstanding; but this one really was. A snow-white complexion, with the softest pink tinge on the rounded cheeks and lips, as faint and delicate as the heart of a sea-shell; a

profusion of palest golden hair falling in slight, rippling waves, like raveled silk, on the white, rounded forehead. Two tiny blue-veined hands grasped, even in sleep, a pretty French doll, holding it close to the soft, white bosom, and the long, golden lashes lay brightly on the rosy, sleep-flushed cheeks.

The lovely face of Lady Maude flushed with pride, love and happiness; and bending down, softly as the west wind kisses the sleeping flowers, her lips touched the babe's.

Light as the caress was, it awoke little Erminie. The golden lashes slowly lifted, and a pair of sweet blue eyes looked fearlessly up.

"Mamma," she cried, joyfully, holding up her rosy little arms, "mamma, tate Minnie."

"Oh, the little darling!" exclaimed the duchess, catching her impulsively up, and half-smothering her with kisses. "Oh, did you ever see such a sweet little cherub? Oh, there never was such a lovely little angel! It's just the sweetest, dearest, b'essed, tidsy ickle sing that ever was, so it is!"

Baby, who evidently was an adept in broken English, and fully understood that profoundly-mysterious language known as "baby-talk," immediately, as if in reward for these exclamatory sentences, emphasized by the strongest italics, held up her rosy little mouth to be kissed again, being evidently (like all of her sex) fond of that operation.

"Oh, I never never, saw such a perfectly lovely little duck!" exclaimed the Duchess Clara, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "Such sweet hair, and such splendid eyes! Who does she look like, Maude? Not like you, I'm sure."

"She has her father's blue eyes and fair hair," said the happy young mother, smiling at Clara's emphasis, which rendered every other word not only into italics, but, in some cases, even into capitals.

"Oh, she is the most charming little ducks o' diamonds I ever beheld in my life! Such a beautiful skin, just like white satin!" reiterated the duchess, punctuating her remarks by a series of short, sharp little kisses, that made sweet Erminie open her large blue eyes in subdued wonder. "Oh, Maude! I don't wonder you are so saintly, with this little beautiful seraph ever with you! Sweet little angel Erminie! thou almost persuadest me to be a Christian!"

There was a soft tap at the door, and the nurse, who had hitherto remained in the back-ground, and listened with professional stoicism to these raptures, went and opened it; and Lord Villiers entered.

He started in some surprise, as he beheld how the room was tenanted, and then advanced with a smile. Lady Maude, with more than the adoring love of two years before, went over, and, laying her hand on his shoulder, said:

"Clara wanted to see Erminie before we descended to the drawing-room, dearest Ernest, and has fallen even more deeply in love with her than she has with the Turkish ambassador, the fortunate possessor of the interestingly melancholy dark eyes."

Lord Villiers smiled, and looked, with eyes full of love, on sweet Erminie, who sprung up, crowing gleefully, and crying, "Papa!"

"Wait one moment, till I see. Why, she's the very picture of your lordship! Keep still, little girl, till I compare you with your papa. There's the same large, blue, Saxon eyes; the same fair, curling hair; the same high, princely forehead; the same handsome mouth (no harm to compliment a married man – eh, Maude); the same long, aristocratic, white fingers – your very image, my lord!"

"I had rather she looked like Maude," said the young husband, encircling his wife's small waist fondly with his arm.

"Well, so she does when she smiles. Don't you perceive the resemblance now? Miss Erminie, will you be still? What a restless little creature it is."

"Papa, papa, tate Minnie," crowed that small individual, holding out her little arms, and looking pathetic and imploring.

"Here, papa, take the young lady," said the duchess, depositing her in the young man's arms, and shaking out her glittering plumage, slightly discomposed by the frantic exertions of the "young

lady” in question. “She is fonder of gentlemen than ladies, I perceive. She wouldn’t be a true female, though, if she wasn’t.”

Miss Erminie, in a paroxysm of delight, immediately buried her “long, aristocratic, white fingers” in papa’s thick burnished locks, with variations of pulling his whiskers and mustache and then tenderly kissing the above hirsute appendages to make them well again. And papa, like all other young papas, looked, as if he thought her the most wonderful baby that ever lived, and danced her up and down until she forgot all sense of etiquette and propriety, and fairly screamed with delight.

“Now, nurse, take Miss Minnie,” he said, rising at last, and laughingly shaking back his thick, fair hair. “Come, Minnie, be good now; papa must go.”

Still crowing as if she considered she had done something rather extraordinary than otherwise, Miss Minnie allowed herself to be taken by the nurse, and saw papa and mamma, and the little lady in velvet and diamonds, smile a good-bye, and turn to leave the room.

“Foolish little wife,” said Lord Villiers, laughing, as he saw Lady Maude cast a “longing, lingering look behind” at her heart’s treasure, “can you not even tear yourself away from your darling for a few hours, without straining your eyes to catch a last glimpse?”

“I know it is foolish,” said Lady Maude, half-apologetically, yet still keeping her yearning eyes fixed on little Erminie; “but I feel so strangely about leaving her tonight. You will be sure to take good care of her, Martha?”

“Sartin, my lady,” responded Martha, rather offended at their want of trust in her care.

“Now, Maude,” said Lord Villiers, amused at her still-apparent anxiety.

Half-laughing, half-reluctant, she allowed herself to be drawn from the room, and saw the door close between her and her child.

Down in the spacious drawing-room, Lady Maude soon found herself fully occupied in receiving the guests, who began to arrive thick and fast. But this did not remove her strange anxiety concerning Erminie; and about an hour after, she stole away for a moment to pay a hurried visit to the nursery.

All was calm and peaceful there. Little Erminie lay asleep once more in her crib, and Martha sat dozing in her rocking-chair. Half ashamed of her groundless fears, Lady Maude lightly kissed her sleeping infant and hurried away. Little did she dream how many suns would rise and set – how many years would come and go – before they two should meet again.

The night in mirth and music was passing on, and the hour of midnight approached.

The Duchess of B., Earl De Courcy, and Lady Maude were standing conversing together, when, as if struck by a sudden thought, the duchess exclaimed:

“Oh! by the way, Lady Maude, do you recollect the strange voice that interrupted the ceremony the night you were married? Have you ever discovered who that was?”

Both Lady Maude and the earl grew pale.

“Never! The whole affair has been wrapped in mystery ever since,” said Lady Maude, with a slight shudder.

“Dear me, how frightened I was that night!” said the duchess, arranging her bracelets. “It was quite dreadful; the most mysterious thing – just like a ghost, or something in a play.”

The duchess broke off suddenly and listened, as the great hall-clock tolled the hour of twelve.

And just as the last stroke died away, that same terrific voice they had heard years before pealed through the spacious room like the deep tolling of a death-bell.

“Two years ago this night a legal murder was committed, and now the hour of retribution is at hand. The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children, and the children’s children, even to the third and fourth generations. Woe to all the house of De Courcy.”

As if the angel of death had suddenly descended in their midst, every face blanched, and every heart stood still with nameless horror. For one moment the silence of the grave reigned, then a wild,

piercing shriek was heard through the house, and the nurse Martha, with terror-blanced face, and uplifted arms, rushed into the midst of the assembled guests, screaming:

“Oh, Miss Minnie! Miss Minnie! Miss Minnie!”

“Oh, God! my child!” came from the white lips of Lady Maude, in a voice that those who heard never forgot, as she fled from the room, up the long staircase, and into the nursery.

But the crib was empty; the babe was gone.

The wild, wild shriek of a mother's woe resounded through the house, and Lady Maude fell in a deadly swoon on the floor.

And when Lord Villiers – his own noble face white and set with unutterable anguish – burst into the room, he found her lying cold and lifeless on the floor.

Meantime, some of the most self-possessed of the guests had assembled round Martha, in order to extract from her, if possible, what had happened.

But half insane with terror already, the continuous screaming of the frightened ladies completely drove every remaining gleam of sense out of her head, and her words were so wild and incoherent, that but little could be made out of them. It appeared from what she said, that she had been sitting half asleep in her chair, with her little charge wholly asleep in the cradle beside her, when suddenly a tall, dark shadow seemed to obscure the light in the room; and looking up with a start of terror, she beheld the most awful monster – whether man, or woman, or demon, she could not tell – in the act of snatching little Erminie from the cradle, and flying from the room. Frozen with horror, she had remained in her seat unable to move, until at last, fully conscious of what had taken place, she had fled screaming down-stairs. And that was all she could tell. In vain they questioned and cross-questioned; they could obtain nothing further from the terrified Martha, and only succeeded in driving the few remaining wits she had, out of her head.

Lord Villiers, leaving his still-senseless wife in the care of her maid, with a face that seemed turned to marble, gave orders to have the house, the grounds, the whole of London, if necessary, ransacked in search of the abductor.

But there was one who sat bowed, collapsed, shuddering in his seat, who recognized that voice, and knew what those awful words meant; and that one was Earl De Courcy.

“She has murdered her! she has murdered her!” was the cry that seemed rending his very heart with horror and despair.

CHAPTER XII. WOMAN'S HATE

“Oh! woman wronged can cherish hate
More deep and dark than manhood may;
And when the mockery of fate
Hath left revenge her chosen way,
Then all the wrongs which time hath nursed
Upon her spoiler's head shall burst,
And all her grief, and woe, and pain,
Burn fiercely on his heart and brain.”

– *Whittier.*

Maddened, despairing, blaspheming, cursing earth and heaven, God and man, hating life, and sunshine, and the world, the wretched gypsy queen had fled from those who gathered around her on that morning full of woe, and fled far away, she neither knew nor cared whither.

She sped along through lanes, streets, and crowded thoroughfares, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, conscious of nothing but her own maddening wrongs, glaring before her like a maniac, and dashing fiercely to the ground with her clenched fist all those who, moved by pity, would have stopped her. On, like a bolt from a bow, until the city seemed to fade away, and she saw green fields, and pretty cottages, and waving trees, and knew that she had left London behind her.

Night came on before she thought of stopping for a single instant to rest. She had walked far that day; her feet were bleeding and blistered; for nearly three days she had touched nothing but cold water, yet her iron frame was unsubdued – she felt no weariness, no faintness, no hunger. The indomitable spirit within, sustained her. She thought of nothing, cared for nothing, but revenge; and for that her very soul was crying out with a longing – a hunger that nothing could appease. She dared not stop for one moment to think; she felt she would go mad if she did; so she hurried on and on, as if driven on by some fierce, inward power, against which it was useless to contend.

How the night passed, how the morning came, how she found herself in the peaceful depths of the forest, she never could tell. How, ere that sun set, she found herself with her tribe, lying prostrate on the cold ground, conscious, like one in the most frightful nightmare, of what was passing around her, yet unable to comprehend what it meant – all was vague and unreal still. Past, and present, and future, all were mingled together in one dark, dreadful chaos, of which nothing was real but the dull, muffled pain at her heart, and the word revenge, that kept ever dancing in letters of blood-red flame before her hot, scorching eyes.

She was conscious, in a lost, dreamy sort of way, that suns rose and set, and the insufferable light departed, and the dark, cool night came again and again; of seeing anxious eyes bent on her, and hearing hushed voices and subdued footfalls, and dusky, troubled faces stooping over her; but, like all the rest, it was a mocking unreality. The first shock of the blow had crushed and stunned her, numbing the sense of pain, and leaving nothing but the heavy throbbing aching at her strong, fierce heart. The woman of mighty frame, and fierce, stormy passions, lay there, motionless – stricken to the dust.

And then this departed, and another mood came.

One by one the broken links of memory returned, and then all other feelings were submerged and lost in a strong, deadly, burning desire of revenge – a revenge as fierce and undying as that of a tigress robbed of her cubs – a revenge as strong and unconquerable as the heart that bore it. With it came the recollection of his child; and drawing from her bosom the packet he had given her, she

read (for gipsy as she was she could read) the woman's address. There were two motives to preserve life; and, like a lioness rousing herself from a lethargy, the gypsy queen arose, and resolutely set her face to the task. One determination she made, never to lose sight of him whom she hated, until her revenge was satiated. For she could wait – there would be no sudden stabbing or killing; she did not believe in such vengeance as that – vengeance that tortures its victim but for a moment. Revenge might be slow, but it would be sure – she would hunt him, pursue him, torture him, until life was worse than death, until he would look upon death as a mercy; then he would have felt a tithe of the misery he had made her endure.

Another determination was, to leave her son's child with the tribe until such time as she should again claim it. She knew it would be well cared for with them, for they all loved their queen. And taking with her a lad whom she could trust, she left them one morning, and started for the child.

Leaving the gypsy youth some miles from the place, she approached the cottage, which was opened by the widow herself, who looked considerably startled by her dark, stern visitor. In the briefest possible terms, Ketura made known her errand, and imperiously demanded the child.

The woman, a mild, gentle-looking person, seemed grieved and troubled, and began something about her affection for the little one, and her hope that it would not be taken away.

"I want the child! – bring it here!" broke in the gipsy, with a fiercely-impatient gesture.

The woman, terrified into silence by her dark, imperious visitor went to the door and called:

"Ray, Ray!"

"Here, Susan," answered a spirited young voice; and, with a gleeful laugh, a bright little fellow of three years bounded into the room, dragging after him, by the collar, a huge, savage-looking bulldog, who snapped fiercely at his captor.

The woman Susan uttered a scream, and fled from the dog to the other side of the room.

"I caught him, Susan, and pulled him in! He can't bite me!" said the little fellow, triumphantly, his black eyes flashing with the consciousness of victory. Then, catching sight of the stranger, he stopped, and stared at her in silent wonder.

"He does beat all I ever seen – he bean't afeerd o' nothin'," said the woman, half-apologetically. "It be no fault o' mine, mistress; he will ha'e his own way, spite o' all I can say."

The gypsy fixed her piercing eyes keenly upon him, and started to behold the living counterpart of her own son when at the same age. There was the same clear olive complexion, with a warm, healthy flush on the cheeks and lips; the same bold, bright-black eyes, fringed by long silken lashes; the same high, noble brow; the same daring, undaunted, fearless spirit, flashing already in his young eyes. Her hard face softened for an instant; but when she saw the thick, curling black hair clustering round his head; noted the small, aristocratically fastidious mouth, the long, delicate hand, she knew he must have inherited them from his mother – and she grew dark and stern again. His smile, too, that lit up his beautiful face, and softened its dazzling splendor, was not his father's; but still he was sufficiently like him to bring a last ray of human feeling back to her iron heart.

"Little boy, come here," she said, holding out her hand.

Any other child would have been frightened by her odd dress, her harsh voice, and darkly-gleaming face; but he was not. It might be that, child as he was, he had an inherent liking for strength and power; or it might have been his kindred blood that drew him to her – for he fearlessly went over, put his hand in hers, and looked up in her face.

"What is your name?" she said, in a softer voice, as she parted his thick, silky curls, and looked down into the dark splendor of his eyes.

"Raymond Germaine," was his answer.

The gypsy looked at Susan.

"His father's name was Germaine," the woman hastened to explain, "and I called him Raymond because I saw R. G. on his father's handkerchief; and I thought maybe it might have been that."

"Very good. Will you come with me, Raymond?"

"If Susan lets me," answered the boy, looking at his foster-mother.

"She will let you," said the gipsy, calmly. "Get him ready instantly. I have no time to lose."

The woman, though looking deeply grieved and sorry, did not hesitate to obey, for there was something in the age of Ketura that might have made a bolder woman yield. So she dressed little Raymond in silence, made up the rest of his clothing in a bundle, kissed him, and said good-by amid many tears and sobs, and saw him depart with Ketura.

"Let me carry you – we have a long way to go," said the gipsy, stooping to lift him in her strong arms.

"I don't want to be carried. I'll walk," said Master Ray, kicking manfully.

The gipsy smiled a hard, grim smile.

"His father's spirit," she muttered. "I like it. We'll see how long he will hold out."

For nearly an hour the little hero trudged sturdily along, but at the end of that time his steps began to grow slow and weary.

"Ain't we most there?" he said, looking ruefully down the long muddy road.

"No; we're a long way off. You had better let me carry you."

With a somewhat sleepy look of mortification, Master Ray, permitted his grandmother to lift him up; and scarcely had she taken him in her arms, before his curly head dropped heavily on her shoulder, and he was fast asleep.

With the approach of night, feeling somewhat fatigued and footsore herself, she overtook our friend Mr. Harkins, who, as he related to Mr. Toosypegs, "took 'er hin," and brought her to his own house, where "Missis 'Arkins" regaled young Mr. Germaine with a supper of bread and milk, to which that small youth did ample justice.

Another hour brought her to the place where the gipsy boy was waiting, and to his care she consigned her still-sleeping grandson, with many injunctions that he was to be taken the best care of. These commands were, however, unnecessary; for, looking upon the sleeping child as the future king of his tribe, the lad bore him along as reverentially as though he were a prince of the blood-royal.

Then the gipsy queen, Ketura, giving up all other thoughts but that of vengeance, turned her steps in the direction of London, where, by fortune-telling, and the other arts of her people, she could live and never lose sight of her deadly foe.

Everything concerning the De Courcys she learned. She heard of the marriage of Lord Villiers to Lady Maude Percy; and on the night of the wedding she had entered, unobserved by all, in the bustle, and, screened from view behind a side-door, she had uttered the words that had thrown the whole assembly into such dismay. Then, knowing what must be the consequence, she had fled instantly, and was far from danger ere the terrified guests had recovered sufficient presence of mind to begin the search.

How after that she haunted, harassed, and followed the earl, is well-known to the reader, and the success of this course was sufficient even to satisfy her, implacable as she was. She saw that life was beginning to be slow torture to him – that his dread of her was amounting to a monomania with him; and still she pursued him, like some awful nightmare, wherever he went, keeping him still in view.

With the birth of little Erminie, she saw a still more exquisite torture in store for him. Her very soul bounded with the thought of the life-long misery she might heap upon him through the means of this child, whom she had heard he idolized. From the first moment she had heard of its birth, her determination was to steal it – to make 'way with it – murder it – anything – she did not care what, only something to make him feel what she had felt. She had been, for a time, delirious, when she first heard of her son's death: but that grief lasted but for a short time; and then she rejoiced – yes, actually rejoiced – that he was dead and free from all future earthly misery. Death would have been to her a relief, had she not been determined to live for revenge. She had lost a child – so should they; and then, perhaps, they would be able to comprehend the wrong they had made her suffer.

But in spite of all her attempts, a year passed and she had found no means of carrying this threat into execution. The baby was so seldom taken out, and then always in a carriage with its mother and the nurse, that it was impossible to think of obtaining it. To enter the house, except on the occasion of a ball, or party, when servants and all would be busily occupied, was not to be thought of, either. But on the night of the abduction, hearing of the party to be given at the mansion, and remembering that it was the anniversary of her son's death, she had been wrought up to a perfect frenzy of madness, and, resolved to obtain the child, even at the cost of her life.

Toward midnight, she had cautiously entered, thinking all were most likely to be in the drawing-rooms at that hour, and having previously heard from the servants, by apparently careless questions, where the nursery was situated, bent her steps in that direction. Pausing at the door, which was ajar, she had glanced through, and beheld child and nurse both asleep.

To steal cautiously in, snatch up the child, muffle it so tightly in her cloak that if it cried it could not be heard, and fly down the staircase, was but the work of an instant. Pausing, for an instant, before the door of the grand salon, in her fleet descent, she had boldly uttered her denunciation, and then, with the speed of the wind, had flown through the long hall, out of the door, and away through the wind and sleet, as if pursued by the arch-demon himself.

When she paused, at last, from exhaustion, she was on London Bridge. Darkly came back the memory of the night, just two years before, when, with deadly despair in her heart, she had stood in that self-same spot, on the point of committing self-murder. With a fierce impulse, she opened her cloak and lifted the half-smothered infant high above her head, to dash it into the dark waters below. For one moment she held it poised in the air, and then she drew it back.

"No," she said, with a fiendish smile; "it will be a greater revenge to let it live – to let it grow up a tainted, corrupted, miserable outcast; and then, when spurned alike by God and man, present it to them as their child. Ha! ha! ha! that *will* be revenge indeed! Live, pretty one – live! You are far too precious to die yet."

Awakened from her sound sleep by the unusual and unpleasant sensation of the bitter March storm beating in her face, little Erminie began to cry. Wrapping it once more in her thick mantle, the gipsy, knowing there was no time to lose, fled away in the direction of a low house in St. Giles, where, with others of her tribe, she had often been, and the proprietor of which was a gipsy himself, and a member of her own tribe. Here, safe from all pursuit, she could stay with the child until the first heat of the search was past, and then – then to begin her tortures once more.

Little Erminie grieved without ceasing for "mamma," at first, and seemed almost to know the difference between the miserable den wherein she was now located and the princely home she had left. It was not in any heart, however hard, to dislike the lovely infant; and much as Ketura hated the race from which she sprung, she really pitied the little, gentle, helpless babe. So, from two motives – one a feeling of commiseration for the child, and the other a fierce, demoniacal desire that she should live to be the instrument of her vengeance – she procured a nurse for little Erminie, a woman a shade better than the rest of her class, who had lately lost a child of her own; and owing to her care, little Erminie lived. Lived – but for what fate?

CHAPTER XIII. RETRIBUTION

“Ay, think upon the cause —
Forget it not. When you lie down to rest,
Let it be black among your dreams; and when
The morn returns, so let it stand between
The sun and you, as an ill-omened cloud
Upon a summer-day of festival.”

— *Byron.*

A month passed. Night and day the search had been carried on; enormous rewards were offered; detectives were sent in every direction; but all in vain. No trace of the lost child was to be found.

Lady Maude had awoke from that deadly swoon, only to fall into another, and another, until her friends grew seriously alarmed for her life. From this, she sunk into a sort of low stupor; and for weeks, she lay still and motionless, unconscious of everything passing around her. White, frail, and shadowy, she lay, a breathing corpse, dead to the world and all it contained. She scarcely realized her loss, she felt like one who has received a heavy blow, stunning her for a time, and rendering her unable to comprehend the full extent of her loss. She received what they gave her in a passive sort of way, heard without understanding what they said, and watched them moving about from under her heavy eyelids without recognizing them. She did not even know her husband, who, the very shadow of his former self, gave up everything to remain by her bedside, night and day. They began to be alarmed for her reason, at last; but her physician said there was no danger — she would arouse from this dull, death-like lethargy, at last: they must only let nature have her way.

Earl De Courcy never left his room now. Feeling as if in some sort he was the cause of this awful calamity, he remained, day and night, in his chamber, a miserable, heart-broken, wretched old man.

Late one evening, early in May, as he sat bowed and collapsed in his chair, a servant entered to announce a stranger below, who earnestly desired to see his lordship.

“Is it a woman?” asked the earl, turning ghastly.

“No, my lord, a man, I think, wrapped in a long cloak, and with a hat slouched down over his face. He said he had something of the utmost importance to reveal to your lordship.”

“Show him up,” said the earl eagerly: while his heart gave a sudden bound, as he thought it might be some one with news of Erminie.

The next moment the door was thrown open, and a tall, dark figure, muffled in a cloak reaching to the ground, and with a hat pulled far over the face, entered, and stood silently confronting the earl.

“Well? Do you bring news of my son’s child? Speak quickly, for God’s sake, if you do!” said the earl, half rising in his eagerness.

Two fierce, black eyes, like living coals, glared at him from under the hat; but the tall stranger spoke not a word.

A deadly fear, like an iron hand, clutched the heart of the earl. That tall, motionless form; those glaring eyes; that ominous silence, made his very blood curdle. White and trembling, he fell back in his seat, for all his undaunted strength was gone now.

“Leave the room,” said the stranger, in a deep, stern voice, turning to the servant, who stood gazing from one to the other.

The man vanished — the door closed. And Earl De Courcy was alone with his mysterious visitor, who still stood erect, towering and silent, before him.

“Man or devil, speak! With what evil purpose have you sought me to-night?” said the earl, at last finding voice.

Silently the stranger lifted his hat, and cast it on the floor. A mass of thick, streaming, black hair, on which, one wild March night, the pitiless rain had beat, fell over her shoulders. The long cloak was dropped off, and, stern, dark and menacing, he saw the lofty, commanding form, the fierce, black eyes, and dark, lowering brow of the wronged gipsy queen, Ketura, his relentless, implacable foe.

The last hue of life faded from the white face of the earl at the terrible sight; a horror unspeakable thrilled through his very soul. Twice he essayed to speak; his lips moved, but no sound came forth.

Silent, still, she stood before him, as rigid as a figure in bronze, her arms folded over her breast, her lips tightly compressed, every feature in perfect repose. You might have thought her some dark statue, but that life – burning life – was concentrated in those wild, dark eyes, that never for a single instant removed their uncompromising glare from his face.

So they stood for nearly five minutes, and then words came, at last, to the trembling lips of the earl.

“Dark, dreadful woman! what new crime have you come to perpetrate this night?”

“No crime, lord earl. I come to answer the questions you asked as I entered.”

“Of the child? You have stolen it?” he wildly demanded.

Her malignant eyes were on him still; her arms were still folded over her breast; no feature had moved; but now a strange, inexplicable smile flickered round her thin lips, as she quickly answered:

“I have!”

“And, woman! – demon in woman’s form! what wrong had that helpless babe done you?” he cried out, in passionate grief.

No change came over the set, dark face, as from the lips, still wreathed with that dreadful, ominous smile, slowly dropped the words:

“The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children’s children, even to the third and fourth generation. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life, saith the Lord of Hosts!”

“Devil incarnate! blaspheme not! Oh, Heaven of heavens! how had you the heart to murder that child?”

“You had the heart, lord earl, to murder mine.”

“I believed him guilty. You know I did! And she was an innocent babe, as pure from all guile as an angel from heaven.”

“So was he, my lord. He was as free from that crime as that babe; and yet for it you took his life.”

It was awful to hear her speak in that low, even voice, so unnaturally deep and calm. No pitch of passion could be half so terrific as that unearthly quiet.

“Devil! – fiend! you shall die for this!” he cried, madly springing up. “What ho! without there! Secure this hag of perdition before – ”

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