

GARVICE CHARLES

THE SPIDER
AND THE FLY

Charles Garvice

The Spider and the Fly

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Charles Garvice

The Spider and the Fly / or, An Undesired Love

CHAPTER I

A SWIM FOR LIFE

It is sunset; a dusky red is spreading out from the horizon and throwing a dusker reflection upon the sullen sea and its more sullen shore. A weird, awful shore it is, encumbered with huge rocks and strangely hewn stone.

A grim, shuddering waste, made grimmer and more terrible by strange, stray specks of humanity, that, seen in the falling sunlight seemed rather distorted creations of fancy than actual human beings; from stone to stone they pace, stepping with a peculiar, halting, laborious gait, and looking sullenly earthward as if their eyes were chained to the hateful, barren shore and the looking upward were death.

Look closer and gain fresh cause for wonderment. There is a strange likeness in these dim figures. They move alike, their gaze is directed sullenly downward alike, they are dressed alike. A sad, dingy, gray garment, half shirt, half tunic, relieved in all cases by a patch of crimson across the arm, upon which is stamped, in letters of black relief, a number. Their feet are shod with thick, heavy, iron-soled boots; a coarse, hideous cap is upon their heads, and the hair beneath it is cut almost to the skin.

The faces – ah, no! who could describe those faces? Who can speak of those crime-stamped brows, those passion-distorted lips, and those despairing eyes?

Listen! There is no sound but the sudden crash, crash of the falling stone that the coarse-grained hands are pushing, and the bent, gray-clad shoulders are heaving, from the quarries. One other sound still, heard only at intervals when the stone is silent, and that is the tramp, tramp of the sentries, who, like the figures of Death and Eternity in the old Roman temple, forever, day and night, march to and fro on the battlements, forever, night and day, keeping watch and ward on the terrible, gray-clad figures, that despairingly toil upon the barren plain below.

It is the convict station at Portland, and the figures are the shadows of some of England's vilest criminals.

The sun sinks lower, the warders, stationed at measured intervals between the various gangs, yawn with weary impatience and long for the sound of the prison bell. When that rings, which it will do within half an hour, the gangs will have finished their work for the day and the march for the gloomy prison upon the heights will commence.

The warders yawn impatiently, but the silent, gray-clad figures feel no impatience. They have nothing to long for, nothing to hope for.

One and all toiling on this particular plain toil on till death, and that has been longed for so long that it seems so far off as to be hopeless.

Death comes to men free and happy, but them it seems to avoid; it leaves them to their most awful punishment of life.

The quarter has chimed, the warders have grown more impatient, perhaps less vigilant, or does this tall, thin figure with No. 108 stamped upon his arm only fancy so? For he has broken the rule which says that no man shall separate himself from his particular gang, and is crouching behind a boulder. Is he resting? His hazel, hunted eyes flash from the nearest warder to the sentinels upon the battlements. His hand grasps the chain at his leg to deaden its rattle as he glides along. His eyes drop from the sentinel and travel swiftly but keenly along the grim rank of the next gang. They rest upon one gray-clad figure numbered ninety-nine. His breath comes faster, he crouches until his breast

touches the ground, and, though his lips are too tightly pressed for speech, his eyes seem to speak in the intensity of their gaze.

Perhaps No. 99 feels their gaze, for as he stoops with the gang to heave the hard, cruel stone he lifts his small, villainous eyes and sees the dark, piercing ones fixed so earnestly upon him. A start, imperceptible, thrills through him, and, as he raises his shoulder, he contrives to lift one hand as a signal that he has seen and understands.

No. 108 seems satisfied, he drops his eyes with a sigh, and waits with sullen impatience.

The stone is upheaved. The gang moves round and pauses to gain breath.

A few of the miserable figures drop upon the stones.

No. 99 flings himself sullenly upon the stone behind which crouches No. 108, and so effectually conceals the piercing eyes from the warders' catlike vigilance.

"Jem," says a low, hoarse voice from below the stone. "Can you hear me? Don't turn your head, and speak low."

"I hear," replies No. 99, with a hoarse voice.

"Jem, there's a chance; don't start or I'll kill you. There's a chance, but it wants working. I've been wanting to speak to you for six weeks. Warder No. 24 drinks like a fish. He'll be drunk to-night – to-night at seven. I've the stuff in the corridor. Our cells are opposite. He carries the keys in his breast pocket. At half-past seven to-night, Jem, he or I will be a dead man. You know me and my stroke. If I can get a clear blow with the iron jug and without noise we are free. Once in the corridor with his keys, we can gain this cursed cliff. Don't speak – he's looking this way! The tide comes in at ten; we must swim for it – go this minute, or we are lost."

A warder leaps along the stones; No. 99 rises as if rested; No. 108 crawls like a serpent back to his proper gang.

Crash, crash, the last stone is lifted for to-night; the bell chimes the hour, the gangs form with listless, weary sullenness into lines, stalwart warders, well armed, order them sternly to march. Another dreary, hopeless day of toil is done.

The sun has sunk, the red glow has left the sky, darkness has fallen upon the surging sea and barren shore.

The tramp of the sentinels can just be heard above the rattle of the falling beach. It is too dark to see them, but two figures are crawling under the beetling cliffs, they crawl hand in hand, fearful of losing each other for a moment. Not a word is spoken, their movement makes no sound. Five, ten, twenty minutes pass, and then they stop and draw long, husky gasps of relief.

"Jem," says one, "where are we?"

No. 99 shakes his head and peers into the darkness.

"Under the cliff," returns the other. "Right under the guardhouse, I think; if so, far enough."

"Quite far enough, captain," is the hoarse reply. "And now we are here, what's the next move?"

The other remains silent for a moment, while he fumbles at his leg, then touches his breast and face.

"What's the matter, guv'nor, are you hurt?"

"A little," is the reply. "I'm bleeding like an ox."

No. 99 emits a grim, guttural laugh.

"There's enough of that with both on us," he says. "It's like our luck as the beast should turn. I thought you'd struck him straight, too, guv'nor."

"So did I," is the curt retort. "No matter; we are here and that's luck enough."

"But we can't stop here."

"We must till the tide's up, and it's coming now, half an hour and the fishing yawls will be in front of us."

His companion shudders.

"The fishing yawls!" he repeats. "D'ye mean we're to swim for them, guv'nor, through this, in the pitch dark? Why, it's death!"

"Or freedom. Death! Jem, my man, you're worse than an idiot. What's the name you'll give to what we've left behind us? If that's life, we take death, Jem, and be thankful for it."

As he speaks, with a bitterness beyond description, he stoops and fumbles at his leg again. The sharp ears of his companion catch the grating of steel on iron.

"What's that, guv'nor?"

"A file," was the reply.

"Where did you get it from?" asks the other, with undisguised astonishment.

"I made it, Jem," replies his companion, quietly.

"What with?"

"An old piece of iron and my brains. It's a good one; try it for yourself."

As he speaks, he shakes the horrible link of iron from his foot and passes the instrument to the other.

No. 99 takes it, with a muttered oath.

"You're a wonderful man, captain, a wonderful man. There ain't nothing as you can't do – or won't do if we gets clear of this frightful torment. I'll be sworn, the game's all planned out a'ready."

"It is," replies the other, with quiet coolness.

The grating of the file stops for a moment.

"I thought so! S'help me, if I didn't! Might a humble pal, as has always stood by you, captain, ask what the move is? It 'u'd pass the time away and keep the shivers off. There's a curse in the very air o' this place that cramps a man's heart and a'most chokes him. Tell us the plot, captain. I'm yourn, and you know it."

The captain looks into the darkness before him in silence for a moment; then, speaking in the whisper above which their voices had never for a moment been raised, he says:

"I'll tell you, Jem, as we swim together, as you say. We must, taking all things into consideration, and so – Jem, give me your hand."

The man he called Jem feels about in the darkness until his hard-grimed hand is clasped in the softer one of his companion, and waits silently.

"I'm going to take your oath," says the captain, coolly. "Swear that you'll follow me faithfully – as, to give you your due, you always have done – right to the end of what is to come. Swear it, Jem, and I'll open up the game. You'll keep your oath, I know, because I'll swear at the same time that this hand of mine shall wring your neck if you break it. You swear?"

"I swear, captain!" replies Jem, hoarsely. "I've never played you false yet, captain. Would it pay me to do it now after this little bout? Would it pay me, I asks yer?"

"No; now nor ever. Come closer; these cursed cliffs seem to me to have ears. Keep a look out all round. I'm watching for the lights of the fishing yawls."

"All right, captain," replies the other, eagerly. "Go on, if it's only for talking's sake," and he shivers under the strain of long-sustained fear and excitement.

"You're right, Jem, I have a game on the board already. It wouldn't be me if I hadn't. It's a good game, too, and worth playing. Better than the last, which landed us here – not so risky, either. Did I ever tell you where I came from? No? Well, it isn't likely, when I come to think of it. I am not one of the communicative sort. What do you say to India – to Madras? I am a captain, Jem, by something more than courtesy. Captain Murpoint's a good enough name and title, and they're my real ones. They'll do again, too."

For a moment he relapses into silence, his eyes scanning the sea before. Then he takes up the thread again, in a tone rather of soliloquy than communication; but his companion, though apparently forgotten, listens eagerly.

"Five years ago I was the most popular man in Madras. You cannot understand all that short sentence means, my friend; no matter. I was a rich man – as men went – and could count friends by the score. If there had been fewer friends and less whist I might not have been here; who knows? No one, and no one cares; not even I myself. Madras! I see it now. Bah! A high-flown description of the presidency would be lost on you, Jem, and it is a rule of mine to waste nothing. At Madras, among the host of friends, some of whom plundered me, and some of whom I had the extreme happiness to plunder, was one, the best and bravest of the lot, John Mildmay – "

"John Mildmay," repeats the man, Jem, to show his companion that he is listening carefully.

"John Mildmay, a merchant, a prince among merchants, with a fortune in England, India – and I know not where else also. He was a fine fellow, but simple – simple as a schoolgirl, and too bountifully supplied with those awkward incumbrances called feelings. We were bosom friends. I borrowed his money, and he loved me too well to remind me of the debt – you understand that, Jem – that is something within your comprehension."

Jem chuckles with hoarse enjoyment.

"He made me his confidant – told me everything of his own affairs and a great deal of other people's. He had a daughter. I remember her name – Violet. Beautiful, he said she was; but that goes for nothing. I'll be bound, my friend, that you would have called a bantam of your own, though it copied every one of your extremely plain features, a swan. The mother was dead, there was only one relation of any consequence – an aunt, and Jack Mildmay loved this little girl better than he did me – and that's saying a good deal. One night – when we were sitting in the veranda of his mansion on the hills, watching the Brahmins at their prayers, he declared his intention of making me the sole guardian of this girl. He prayed me – if anything happened to him – to be a second father to her, or at least a brother, considering that he was so much older than I. I swore – readily enough – that I'd watch over her like a guardian angel, and, after drawing tears from him by my fervid eloquence, delicately borrowed a hundred pounds. Poor Jack! we never saw each other again. A special messenger arrived that night with news from England. His business – an enormous one – required his presence to tide over an emergency, and with a hasty handshake, he left me, reminding me of my promise, and declaring his intention to draw up on parchment the declaration of his wishes as to my guardianship over his daughter.

"'Good-by, old fellow,' he said. 'It's a long journey; but I feel safe. I've written about you in every letter to my little darling; I shall be able to tell her now what a grand guardian she'll have. Good-by, and Heaven bless you!'

"Jem, my friend, don't believe the good people of this world when they talk of a special providence for honest men; Jack Mildmay was drowned on that homeward voyage, and I, Captain Howard Murpoint, was left to live and rot in a convict station.

"Yes, the ship went down, and soon after Captain Howard Murpoint went down likewise. I got tired of the army; that's the mild way of putting it, though if the truth must be spoken, the army got tired of me – or rather my wonderful luck at cards. You know my little trick with the ace? Enough. It suited me to cut the military life. How was I to do it? A fool would have deserted and got shot. I, not being a fool, managed differently. There was a slight skirmish on the frontier one moonlight night. My men were cut to pieces like packthread. I, by a miracle, escaped. Walking over the corpse-strewn field, one of those happy thoughts which are the inspiration of knaves, struck me. My corporal, a good fellow, had fallen at his post. I knew it was my corporal by his accoutrements, his face and features had been obliterated by a cannon ball. Supposing, was my thought, that Captain Howard Murpoint's regimentals were upon that poor fellow, then every one would say that the said Captain Murpoint had fallen with glory and honor, and that the missing corporal had either been carried away by the Sepoys or deserted.

"Jem, my friend, I lost not a moment, but there and then exchanged clothes with the corpse, threw a cloak over my new corporal's regimentals and started for the coast.

"I reached Paris – unfortunately for the Parisians. When Paris grew too hot I gracefully fluttered to my native land. My native land for eighteen months proved as rich a harvest as a man of talent could wish.

"During those eighteen months I cleared – no matter – it is all gone, swallowed up in that fiasco. Idiot that I was to descend to the level of such poor vermin as you! What could I expect? Were these hands made for burglary, were these brains? Bah! this is wasting time. Some sweet friends of yours persuaded me to change my line, and I came to grief; dragging you in for revenge's sake. Plain truth, you see, Jem. I scorn to tell a falsehood – when there is nothing to be got by it. Transportation for life! It was a hard sentence, and I wished when I heard it, and a hundred times since, that they had not balked Jack Ketch. I wished it every day till a week ago.

"What changed me? A mere bagatelle. A newspaper. A year-old newspaper, which that lout of a warder had dropped from his pocket. I snatched it up and hid it in my bosom. It would lighten many a hateful hour in that horrible cell. I opened it next morning, and the first words my eyes rested on were:

"Grand Fête at Mildmay Park, Penruddie. – On the occasion of Miss Mildmay's sixteenth birthday a large party of personal friends and the tenants of the Mildmay estate was gathered at the Park, where most extensive preparations have been for some time in progress to insure success for the various festivities. In the morning the numerous gayly dressed visitors gave themselves with a zest to the enjoyment of archery, boating and the subtleties of croquet. In the evening the grand hall – which was decorated by Owen Jones – was opened for a ball to which invitations to the number of two hundred had been issued. It is needless to say that the whole affair was brilliantly successful, and that the twelfth of July will be a white stone in the lives of Miss Mildmay's tenants and those fortunate friends who were enabled to partake of her hospitality. Miss Mildmay is at present staying, in company with her aunt, Mrs. W. Mildmay, at her residence, Mildmay Park.'

"That is something like it, Jem – all glitter and sparkle, diamonds and rubies. I swear, much as I reveled in that greasy paper a moment before, I could not read another line of it. Every time I tried my eyes looked back to Mildmay Park and the wealthy Miss Mildmay.

"This Violet was to have been my ward, and Jack's money, his enormous estates, ay, the very diamonds she wore, were to have been under my charge. What an opportunity I had lost! With such a chance, what might I not have accomplished? I might have feathered my nest, ay, have filled it even, with every penny of Jack's gold; for what was a puny little bit of a girl to count for? – if I had been free. Free! that was the word, and it haunted me. One day it rang in my ears, making a chorus to the grand doings at Mildmay Park, and at last I swore that I'd give this place the slip or die in the attempt. Once away from here – once in England, the way to Jack Mildmay's gold is as plain as the road to Rome. I am once more Captain Murpoint. I turn up, looking the gentleman that I am, at the Park in the character of her father's friend. She knows all about me, remembers me almost as well as she does her father. Keeps all his letters, those letters in which he tells her that he is hunting, fighting, playing, or dining with his dear Murpoint, on her bosom, perhaps. Here is dear Murpoint, and she welcomes me to Mildmay Park with open arms and a shower of tears."

There was a moment's pause; Jem crept closer to the daring schemer.

"And me, captain? You won't forget me?"

"No; you go with me as my servant. No thanks. I shouldn't take you if I didn't want you, my friend. I never did a generous action in my life, I leave that for idiots. I want you for a hundred things. I want a man who is completely under my thumb – in my power. You are in both those situations, so I help you to escape and take you with me. If you have any gratitude, keep it bottled up, don't let it evaporate in words. Well?"

The man mutters something, faintly.

"But, captain, is that all the game? Don't we hold no more cards than that? It seems a chance, a regular chance."

"And what else is life?" says the captain, with a short laugh of contempt. "But those are not all the cards. Even to you, my bosom friend, I do not choose to show my whole hand. Enough that I hold sufficient cards to play the game, and that I have sufficient brains to win it. You, my poor Jem, have neither cards nor brains! Stop! what's that?" and his low, subtle voice sinks to a sharp hiss.

"That's the light of the fishing smack," hoarsely returns his companion.

"Not that, idiot!" is the retort, in a sharper voice. "That up above. A thousand fiends! It is the moon!"

A smothered cry breaks from the parched lips of the convict Jem.

He springs to his feet, then falls to the ground with a quiver of excitement.

"Captain, we are lost! In two minutes it will be like day! The soldiers can see every speck on the water for a mile round!"

"Silence!" cries the captain, crouching so motionless that his gray-clad figure looks part and parcel of the rock against which it presses. "The tide is in. That is the smack before us. Swim like the fiend! If we reach it we are safe. I have enough to bribe them. Swim for liberty and life! – now!"

And, with the word, he rises to his feet, leaps over the patch of beach that intervenes between cliff and sea, and plunges into the foremost wave.

His companion follows, and not a moment too soon.

The moon that had been battling with the dark mass of clouds, rises conqueror at last, and swims majestically into the clear heavens, lighting up the sea till it glows like a plain of diamonds.

Not a moment too soon, for the monotonous tramp, tramp of the nearest sentinel upon the ramparts above is suddenly broken, and his sharp voice gives the challenge:

"Who goes there?"

For answer the moon shoots a bright beam of light full upon the dark figures swimming toward the smack.

With a shout of alarm, the sentinel brings his musket to his shoulder.

"Dive!" hisses the white lips of the captain.

Crack! ping! and a bullet cleaves the air.

Another moment, and the rampart is alive.

Lights flash to and fro, showing up for a moment the excited faces of the soldiers.

Shouts of warning and anger break through the silence and affright the seagulls.

Then an officer's voice rises above the din.

"There they are, close by the smack! Ready – present! – fire!"

Crack! crack! crack!

"Ah! that's got them! There they go – eh, what? couldn't see them?" says the commandant, angrily, repeating the hesitating suggestion of a subordinate that the moon was obscured and that he couldn't see the men as he fired. "Nonsense! You winged them right enough. Anyway, we must say we did. There have been too many escapes lately to allow of any more. We shall have the authorities down upon us for negligence. It's a singular thing that I can't run down to the town to get a rubber at whist but that somebody must go to sleep. It isn't often I take a little pleasure, but sure as I leave my post for an hour or two some foolhardy or sleepy-headed warder lets one of those vermin get away. There's warder No. 24 got his back broken, and the Lord Harry knows what. Serves him right! It must be hushed up, mind! There have been too many escapes lately by far. If there's any inquiring, mind you winged them twice, and they are dead as nails at the bottom of the sea."

The sentinels give the salute, and the officer starts off to finish the interrupted rubber.

Next morning the official whose business it was to draw up such statements reported that convicts Nos. 108 and 99 had attempted escape, but were shot down by the sentinel while swimming toward a fishing smack.

CHAPTER II

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

In the drawing-room at Mildmay Park was seated, in her own particular easy-chair, Mrs. Henry Mildmay.

Mrs. Henry Mildmay was a lady of that good old sort of whom our modern demoiselles are rather tired of receiving as models for imitation. Herself ladylike and *distingué* in feature, dress and manner, slight of figure, delicate of hand and more delicate of nerve, she was deeply imbued with a love of good birth, elegant manners and a large income, all of which she possessed in a fair and comfortable degree.

Mrs. Mildmay was John Mildmay's only sister, and at his death she had undertaken the sole charge of his daughter Violet, whom she loved as a daughter, and by whom she was beloved in return as a mother, with just this difference, that, whereas, the dear old lady was rather afraid of her beautiful, high-spirited ward, the girl was as fearless as a lioness, and gave her love unalloyed and unshadowed.

Violet Mildmay had inherited the brave, simple nature of the merchant prince, and was a realization of that most glorious ideal – a pure-minded, tender-hearted English girl.

Mrs. Mildmay was knitting – a favorite amusement, or occupation, as she would have dignified it, for the results of her pastime were distributed among the Penruddie poor – and sinking into a comfortable doze, from which the sharp striking of an ormolu clock aroused her.

"Dear me!" she murmured, placidly smiling; "dear me, Violet, I was nearly asleep."

The remark finding no answer, the old lady turned in her chair, and found the handsomely furnished room was empty.

"Violet, where are you, my dear? What a restless girl it is. She was here five minutes ago, and now she has gone. Just like poor John, never still ten minutes together."

At that moment the conservatory door was thrown open with a suddenness that made the old lady drop her needle, and a sweet, but full, voice immediately behind her said:

"Whom am I like, auntie?"

"No one in particular, my dear," faltered the old lady, with a pleasant smile and a "Thank you" for the needle, which the owner of the voice had sprung forward to recover before the old lady could stoop.

"Where have you been, my dear? I did not know you had left the room."

"No? Only on the lawn. It was so hot in here, and you were falling so comfortably asleep that I thought I would creep away before it was too late, for I know I frighten you if I move when you are fast asleep, auntie mine. Am I not careful now? Am I not improving?"

"You are everything that is good and dear, Violet," said the old lady, stroking the girl's head, as it leaned itself to a level with her white hand. "But don't sit on the floor, my love, you will crease that pretty muslin."

"Shall I?" said the sweet voice, absently, and Violet sprang to her feet.

Her aunt, with another little start – she started on the average twice in every ten minutes when her niece was near – looked up with mild nervousness at the tall, graceful figure, her gaze gradually changing to one of affectionate admiration.

And who could withhold admiration?

There was beauty in the cleanly cut, oval face, with its clear, brunette skin and deep, brown eyes; there were youth, strength, grace in the undulating charm about the girl, her figure, voice, and gesture, which enthralled young and old of both sexes and demanded admiration rather than won it.

"My poor dress," she said, with a laughing pout. "He was – is a dress a he or a she, auntie? – I'll say 'it,' was so clean and stately only this morning, and now! Look, that is water. The fish leaped

out of the fountain and Tray has pawed me with his wet feet. It's no use my trying to be good, you see, dear, circumstances are too strong for me," and, with a musical, rippling laugh, the light-hearted girl ran to the open piano.

The old lady sighed, but with a smile.

"I am almost beginning to think they are, Violet," she said, in her low-pitched voice, so great a contrast to the full, melodious one of the girl.

"No; you will never make me anything better than an untutored savage, auntie. You've tried so hard, so very hard, to teach me how to enter a room, steal from chair to chair, lower my voice, and smile properly. But all in vain, I can't be a model young lady, and I am always making you jump."

"Not jump, my dear."

"Well, start, then? It is all the same, auntie. Fancy you jumping! Now, I can jump. I jumped over the brook. No, not quite," and here the laugh rang out again, "but almost quite. Poor Marie, she has hard times with me. Do you know, I shouldn't like to be lady's-maid to Miss Violet Mildmay; no, not for all the mines of Peru – or is it Patagonia?"

Without waiting for an answer, she struck a chord, and dashed into a waltz.

That came to an end, however, as suddenly as it commenced, and the graceful figure was on its feet.

"It is too hot to play, is it not? How can you knit such weather as this? It makes me boil, yes, actually boil, to watch you!"

"Don't watch me, then, my dear," suggested the old lady, mildly. "Go and sit in the arbor. It will be cool there in the shade."

"Well, I will. But I warn you, auntie, I shan't sit long. I never can sit still long. I'll try the arbor, though," and, catching up her rustic hat, which for the nonce had fallen from her lovely young head to a little rest on the floor, the restless girl swept in a wave of muslin and tulle from the room.

Mrs. Mildmay rose, folded her knitting into a neat little ball, stored it away in a neat little basket, and was about to quit the room, but before she could open the door Violet had run through the conservatory again.

"Well, my dear?" said the old lady, patiently.

"Too hot in the arbor, auntie," said the girl, with a charming and decisive shake of her head. "The lawn is absolutely simmering. I shall go on the cliffs."

"My dear, you will be roasted! Come and sit in the shade here, in my chair."

"Oh! then I should be suffocated. No, I'll try the cliffs. What is the time? Just time for a quiet stroll. Good-by."

"Stop, my dear Violet. Pray don't go without your sunshade! You will be burned up!"

"Right. I'd forgotten that stupid old thing. Where is it? Let me see – where did I throw it?"

And she stood in the middle of the room, swinging her hat to and fro, and fanning herself.

"Is that it under the piano?" said Mrs. Mildmay, pointing to the sunshade where it lay, ignominiously entangled with the legs of the instrument.

"Yes, that is it. What dear, sharp eyes you have, auntie. Come along, sunshade! It's rather hard that you, being so much the weaker, should be burned to save me."

And with another happy nod and smile away she floated again, her long, diaphanous skirt whisking a current of cool air through the room and just escaping the overturning of a table of bric-a-brac by an inch.

The cliffs to which Miss Mildmay bent her steps were within five minutes' walk of the lawn, and were one of the young lady's favorite promenades.

From them, looking seaward, she could feast her eyes upon the ocean, ever restless and sportful, like herself; turning landward there jutted far a fair stretch of well-wooded scenery, with Mildmay House in the foreground, and the sparkling Tivoli, where it ran in a semicircle toward the sea as a belt to inclose the whole.

On a part of this there stood another house, larger even and more pretentious than Mildmay's. This was the Cedars, a modern residence of yellow brick and stucco erected at enormous cost by a certain Jabez Dodson, who had amassed a large fortune by the melting and manufacturing of tallow.

The Cedars and its inhabitants were the objects of Mrs. Mildmay's supreme detestation. Loving good birth and high breeding as she did, it was only natural that tallow should be detestable to her, and that the large and altogether hideous house which the retired tradesman had erected should be a perpetual eyesore to her.

Often, as the sunset lit up the yellow edifice, bringing out all its ugly points with unmerciful distinctness, the good old lady had spoken from her heart, and, with a sigh that shook the bugles in her cap, she had regretted that Providence had not been kind or considerate enough to allure Mr. Dodson's fancy to a more distant spot.

"That house spoils the view and gives me the horrors, my dear," she would often say, but never meeting with any further sympathy from Violet than expressed by a laugh.

"It is ugly, I'll admit," she would remark, "but you need not look at it so often."

"I can't help it, my dear," the old lady would avow, "I am fascinated by it. I am so glad that the dreadful man did not build his monstrosity during your poor father's lifetime. It would have been a cruel blow to him. I can't think why he didn't secure all the land around. Then you would have been safe from such a visitation. Fancy a tallow chandler or melter, or whatever he calls himself, setting up a habitation within a stone's throw of your drawing-room window."

Violet would laugh again, with pleasant enjoyment of her aunt's pet aversion.

"It doesn't very much matter, that I can see, aunt, after all," she had once urged. "Of course, it would be better without the Cedars, but, to give Mr. Dodson his due, the family have never annoyed us. I have never seen them, even. I scarcely know how many there are of them; do you?"

Mrs. Mildmay shook her head in the negative, but a nod in the affirmative showed she was doubtful.

"I think there are only the father, mother, and one son. But I have never seen them, at least, I think not."

"Nor I," said Violet. "So, you see, they are not such dreadful characters, after all. Poor people, I dare say, they are as constantly deploring the nearness of the Park, and declaring that we spoil their view – which we certainly do."

"How absurd!" said Mrs. Mildmay. "Violet, I really believe you do not dislike them half so much as one would expect."

"Wicked as I am, I can't hate people I have never seen," Violet here laughingly replied.

And in like manner she always turned her aunt's disparagement of the Cedars aside, and contrived to say a word for the obnoxious individuals whom she had never seen.

This morning as she stood on the edge of the cliff, looking first out to sea and then at the sweet landscape, a smile rested for a moment upon her face, and her lips murmured:

"Poor auntie, if she could see the Cedars now! It looks as if the tallow which built it had caught fire. It makes me hotter than ever to look at it!"

And, with a little flutter of her dainty handkerchief, she seated herself upon the dried-up grass and turned her eyes seaward again.

As she sat thus she formed a picture beautiful enough to gladden the eyes of a Veronese in her glorious youth and loveliness, standing out in its cloud of airy muslin against the vividness of the summer sky.

Perhaps an individual slowly climbing the steep path behind her was of the same opinion, for he stopped in his laborious ascent, and, baring his well-shaped head to the slight breeze, stood, lost in an admiring reverie.

How long he would have indulged in his admiring observations it would be difficult to say, but his reverie was suddenly disturbed and his fixed regard turned aside in some confusion by the movement of Violet's head.

She had been watching a seagull, and following the bird's progress with her eyes, and had suddenly become aware of the proximity of the stranger and of the fixed and admiring regard of his two dark eyes.

Almost too suddenly, for, with something that nearly approached a start, she half rose.

Regretting the movement before it was complete, she reseated herself, and in so doing loosened her hold of the sunshade, which, with the perversity of such things, instantly took advantage of its freedom to sail over the cliff.

Violet sprang to her feet, and thoughtlessly was about to peer over the precipice in search of it, but before she had reached the extreme edge she felt a strong hand upon her arm, and, turning with some astonishment, found herself face to face with the observant stranger.

For a moment they regarded each other in silence. It is worthy of notice how much and how acutely the eye can comprehend in so short a time.

Violet saw a handsome face, tanned and mustached, a tall, lithe figure, to whose strength the grasp upon her arm bore witness, a pair of earnest, fearless eyes, and a mouth which might have been grave but for the smile which made it remarkably pleasant.

"Pray, forgive me!" said the gentleman, removing his hat with his disengaged hand. "But have you fully considered the danger which attends a downward glance from this height?"

The tone was respectful, almost reverently so, but there was a dignity and a nameless music in it also that carried it even further in one's liking.

Violet blushed like a schoolgirl, as she would have expressed it and, without a word, stepped back from the danger which she certainly had not considered, and which, by the light of the gentleman's question, was now fully revealed.

"I thank you very much," she said, as his strong hand dropped from her arm, and the stranger's face allowed itself to relax into a smile. "It was foolish and thoughtless, I," and she shuddered, "I might have fallen over. People have been known to, have they not?"

"Yes, a great many," he replied. "The strongest brain might be excused a sudden dizziness on the edge of such a precipice as this."

"Of course," assented Violet, laughing, but very quietly. "I am so much obliged; I thought only of my stupid sunshade."

"Ah!" he said, quietly, "I had forgotten that. Perhaps it has lodged on one of the jutting bushes; if it has, I may recover it for you," and he approached the edge.

Violet, who had not quite recovered from the shock which the sudden sense of her peril had produced, uttered a slight cry of warning and rebuke.

"Oh, please do not look over! It is of no consequence, not the slightest in the world."

The gentleman looked back at her alarmed face, then up at the blazing sun, and smiled significantly.

"It is of great consequence," he said, and before Violet could say another word to prevent him, he had gained the edge and was upon his knees, looking over.

"I can see it," he said, "and I think I can get it. The danger was not so great, after all; there are one or two ledges here which will bear a man's weight, I should think, and below them is your sunshade."

While he was speaking, he was cautiously, but fearlessly, lowering himself onto one of the ledges of which he had spoken, and Violet's horrified eyes lost first his legs, then his body, and last of all his good-looking face, as it disappeared below the edge.

Rooted to the spot with terror which she in vain struggled to suppress, Violet grew white as death and almost as cold.

At last her terror found utterance in a deep-drawn moan.

"Oh! come back! Please come back! I am sure you will be killed! It is horrible! Do come back!"

While she was still entreating and commanding the handsome, careless face arose above the surface again, and, with slow, cautious movements, the stranger, with the recovered sunshade in his hand, was beside her.

Violet drew a long breath of relief, and then, with a smile that was better than all the thanks in the world, said:

"I won't thank you, for I think you were more foolish than even I. You said it was dangerous to look over, and you actually went over! And all for this stupid, worthless thing." And she shook the sunshade with annoyance.

"Not altogether for the sunshade," said the gentleman, smiling again. "But I am glad I have got it for you, and I assure you the danger was less than I at first imagined it; indeed, for me there was no danger. I am blessed with a steady nerve, and have had some experience in mountaineering."

Violet looked down, and then up at his calm face.

"It was very good and kind of you," she said, "and I will thank you, after all, I think." Then she made a movement, which he took in intimation that he might say good-day, and, accordingly, he raised his hat – or, rather, would have done so, had not the wind saved him the trouble.

"How provoking!" said Violet, looking after the hat, as it sailed over the cliff, in imitation of the sunshade. "I am afraid there is a fatality about this spot. I do hope you will not go down after it, too!"

"No, indeed!" he said, with a light, pleasant laugh; "my hat is really of no consequence –"

"Oh! but of more than my parasol! You have nothing to protect your head, and the sun is quite as hot as it was five minutes ago." And she smiled naïvely.

"True," he said. "But my head is used to scorching; in fact, rather likes it."

"You must take my sunshade," said Violet, with provoking gravity.

"No, thank you," he said, imitating the gravity and suppressing the smile. "I do not dread the sunstroke, and I have but a few steps to go," nodding to the blazing Cedars.

Violet was guilty of an unmistakable start.

"The Cedars!" she exclaimed, extending her beautiful eyes to their widest, "but you are not –" and she paused as if absolutely too astonished to conclude the sentence.

"My name is Leicester Dodson," said the gentleman, a slight, but not imperceptible reserve showing upon his face, and in the tone of his voice as he spoke.

"Mr. Dodson's son!" said Violet, slowly, as if the intelligence were too astonishing to be taken in instanter.

The gentleman bowed.

"Mr. Dodson's and Mrs. Dodson's son," he said, with a smile.

For a moment Violet stood still; then her face lit up with its delicious smile, and, with a frank gesture, she held out her hand.

"Then we are neighbors," she said, as Mr. Leicester Dodson, with as much surprise as his courtesy would allow his face to express, took the well-shaped, little hand. "I am Miss Mildmay."

Mr. Leicester dropped her hand as if it had grown red-hot and had burned him. Violet colored then, but understood his gesture of repudiation instantly. "He knows how aunt dislikes his people, and is sorry he rescued my sunshade," she thought.

"I am happy to have been of some slight service to you, Miss Mildmay," he said, coldly, with a careless but distant bow; then he turned and walked slowly down the steep path.

Violet, looking down after him until his bare head had dropped slowly out of sight, then said, audibly:

"Well, that is pride now; but it is proper pride, I think," smiled rather sadly, and returned homeward.

"Aunt!" she said, coming into the drawing-room just before dinner was served, and more quietly than was her wont, "I've had an adventure on the cliffs, startling and melodramatic. My sunshade blew over, and a gentleman was polite enough to go after it."

"My dear!" exclaimed the old lady, thinking it one of her darling's jokes.

"It's true, aunt. A stranger risked his neck – precious, no doubt, to himself and family – for a fifteen-and-six-penny sunshade. Imprudent, but heroic, was it not?"

"Very good and kind, but imprudent, as you say, my dear. Young men are so rash!"

"This one was not," said Violet, picking at the costly fringe on her dress; "he was as calm and cool as – as – a cucumber."

"A stranger," said Mrs. Mildmay, smiling. "Whom can it be, I wonder? Somebody staying at the Wenningfords, no doubt."

"Aunt!" said Violet; then suddenly changing the subject, "do not the vicar and his wife dine with us on Saturday?"

"Yes, my dear, and I have asked Mr. and Mrs. Giles. The vicar is a dear, good man, but – "

"Rather a bore," put in Violet, decidedly.

Mrs. Mildmay looked shocked, but Violet, without waiting for a reprimand, went on, with slow and most unusual gravity:

"Do you know, aunt, I should like to ask this heroic gentleman of mine?"

"A perfect stranger, my dear!" said Mrs. Mildmay, with a smile.

"Yes, a perfect stranger, but a gentleman. Perfect strangers who are gentlemen, and heroic enough to risk their lives for one's sunshade, are people worth knowing. Aunt, ask him. He is tall, rather dark, goldeny-brown, you know, nice eyes, a yellow mustache and – I think that's all I remember – I was going to mention the smile but, of course, he may not always wear that."

"I don't remember him, my dear," said Mrs. Mildmay. "But if you really want to know him I'll try and find out who he is from the servants."

"And ask him to dinner?" urged Violet.

Mrs. Mildmay looked bewildered and puzzled.

"Yes, my dear, if you wish it, and he really belongs to the Wenningfords."

"I do wish it, aunt," said Violet. "But he doesn't belong to the Wenningfords. He belongs to the Cedars, and is no other than Mr. Leicester Dodson, the tallow melter's son!"

It is Saturday evening, and Mrs. Mildmay's little dinner is in progress.

There are the vicar and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Giles from the Ferns, and, wonderful to say, the Dodsons from the Cedars.

Miss Violet had, as usual, had her way with her aristocratic aunt, and the Dodsons are here.

For a whole day Mrs. Mildmay, with tears in her eyes, declared that she would not call at the Cedars; and it was not until Violet had, with greater firmness, vowed that she would go to the Cedars by herself rather than not at all, that the good old lady had given in.

And when they had called, and Mrs. Dodson had accepted the invitation for herself and two menfolk, Violet had still further worried her aunt by declaring that the Dodsons, though they were tallow melters, were not snobs, and that for her part she saw nothing to find fault with in Mrs. Dodson save, perhaps, rather a redundancy of color in her morning cap.

"Which, my dear aunt," Violet said, in conclusion, "is an error in taste not confined to tallow chandlers."

So there they are. Mr. Dodson, the father, a quiet, mild-eyed old gentleman, with a partiality for clear soup; Mrs. Dodson, a smiling, homely looking lady, with a devouring admiration for her son; and the son, Mr. Leicester himself, with no particularly prominent virtues or vices save that of silence.

He had scarcely spoken a word during the soup and the fish, and Violet had almost made up her mind that he was too proud and unforgiving, and was prepared to dislike him, when suddenly

he, looking across the table, met her questioning glance, and with a smile dispelled his gravity or ill humor as a mist evaporates before the midday sun, broke out into conversation.

Then Violet understands that he is not only heroic but amusing, that he is handsomer even than she had thought him, and that, above all, his manner, speech, and bearing are those of a perfect gentleman.

The *entrées* are passed round and partaken of.

Mr. Leicester is describing the Vicani Pass to Miss Mildmay, and interesting her deeply therein.

Mrs. Dodson is comparing notes with Mrs. Mildmay, and Mr. Dodson is lost in the beauties of a curried fowl, when the butler, a model of solemn propriety, is approached by a footman, with whom he confers in stately, but rather disturbed asides.

"What is it, James?" asks Mrs. Mildmay, who has noticed the conference.

"If you please, ma'am, a gentleman – "

But all explanation is rendered unnecessary by the opening of the door, and the entrance of another servant, who says, with that clear sing-song, proper for the occasion:

"Captain Howard Murpoint!" and, stepping aside, allows a tall, dark gentleman to pass through the doorway.

Conversation immediately ceases.

Dumbly, hostess and guests regard the newcomer; dumbly still, Mrs. Mildmay rises from her chair.

"Captain Murpoint!" she repeats.

"Captain Murpoint!" suddenly echoes Violet, whose quick, thoughtful eyes have been scanning every feature of the dark, pale face from its piercing, black eye to the scar on its left cheek, and its black mustache.

"Captain Murpoint!" she repeats, "my father's dearest friend!"

Captain Murpoint came forward, with a smile evidently struggling against some emotion, and met her halfway, taking her outstretched hands, and, looking with what may well pass for tear-dimmed eyes into her pure, youthful face.

"And you are John Mildmay's daughter!" he exclaims, in a tremulous voice. "Poor Jack, poor Jack!" and evidently overcome by the likeness or some memory of the past, Captain Murpoint, after wringing the girl's slight hand, conveys his own to his eyes and – weeps!

CHAPTER III

THE RETURNED CAPTIVE

In the few minutes consumed by Captain Murpoint in mastering the emotion which the sight of his old friend's daughter had produced, Mrs. Mildmay had recovered from her astonishment, and, with her well-bred composure still a little shaken, came forward, with outstretched hand.

"And is it, indeed, poor John's old friend, Captain Murpoint?" she said, with a little smile.

"It is, indeed," said the captain, taking her hand, and bending over it with graceful *empressement*. "Alas, that I should return to find his place empty! Yet scarcely empty, for here is a beautiful reflection of my dear friend's face and form."

And he turned his eyes with affectionate admiration upon Violet again.

Mrs. Mildmay sighed, then quickly called his attention to her guests.

"We have got half through dinner, Captain Murpoint, as you see, but I am sure my friends will not mind a little extension of the meal, while fresh courses are prepared. Let me introduce you. Mrs. Dodson, this is an old friend of Violet's father, consequently a dear friend of ours, Captain Murpoint."

The captain's quick, black eyes rested for a moment upon her and Mrs. Dodson's physiognomies while the introduction was being made; as quickly passed over Mr. and Mrs. Giles' and the vicar's, but rested a little longer when Mr. Leicester's turn came, and grew more searching in their expression as they met the calm regard of the young man.

But the keenness of the scrutiny – for it was nothing more nor less – was tempered by a smile. Captain Murpoint possessed the rare art of smiling well.

"I beg that you will not delay the meal, nor change a single course. I am a case-hardened traveler, and too used to short fare to think anything of the loss of soup and fish. Indeed, my dear madam, if you will pardon me for a few moments I will exchange these dusty and really disgraceful garments for something more orthodox and suitable."

Mrs. Mildmay bowed graciously, and turned to a footman.

"I have brought my man with me – a faithful fellow, who has been my companion in fair weather and foul all over the globe," said the captain, moving toward the door. "Pray, let me implore you not to spoil your dinner."

So saying, he passed through the doorway, outside which, eyeing the elegant room with a satisfied and comprehensive gaze, stood the grim-faced, sharp-eyed "faithful fellow," the captain's servant.

Violet had not spoken a single word save those she had addressed to the captain. A sweet, solemn gravity had settled upon her fair, young face, brought there by the memories of her father, which this stranger's arrival had called up.

She sighed when his soft, pleasing voice had died away, and turned almost with a start to her neighbor, Mr. Leicester.

"How strange – is it not?" she said.

"Very," said Mr. Leicester, looking at her, thoughtfully. "Captain Murpoint came unexpectedly?"

"Quite," said Violet.

Leicester Dodson toyed with his fork.

"Do you remember him?" he asked.

"I have never seen him before," replied Violet, quietly. "But he is such an old personal friend. My father never wrote me a letter without mentioning him."

Leicester, with all the interest he felt showing plainly in his face, nodded.

"They met in India, of course. Captain Murpoint must be a younger man than Mr. Mildmay would have been."

"Yes," said Violet, "much younger. Papa told me how much once, but I have forgotten."

Then her aunt spoke to her, and Leicester fell into a muse. Captain Murpoint's advent seemed to have struck all his eloquence dumb.

The rest of the guests were chattering with quite a mild excitement, but he sat turning the fork over and following the pattern of the tablecloth with that grim silence which did not sit ill upon him, though it would have made some men look sullen.

Suddenly the hum died out, and Leicester, looking up, saw that Captain Murpoint's re-entrance was the cause.

If Captain Murpoint had looked gentlemanly in his traveling suit he certainly looked distinguished in the orthodox army dress.

Leicester Dodson's eyes, as they watched him take his place between Violet and her aunt, took in every detail of the well-proportioned figure from its breadth of shoulders to the long stretch of arm with its strength-denoting muscular development.

But when he came to regard the face he was startled.

He had, on the captain's first entrance thought him rather handsome, but now, seeing him sideface, he was surprised to find that there was a sinister look about some feature that had an unpleasant effect.

Suddenly the captain turned full face to address Violet, and the displeasing expression had gone.

Then he turned again, and Leicester understood it.

One side of Mr. Murpoint's face was better looking than the other.

On the right side, in a line with the ear, there was a scar – a small white scar – too small one would have thought to have marred the face, but mar it, it certainly did, for, whether the captain smiled or frowned, looked humorous or sad, that scar remained the same – inflexible, white, repulsive, giving the sinister cast to the right side of the face which had startled Leicester.

Was the captain aware of this blot on his beauty?

Certainly that scarred side of his face was not half so often seen as the other, and Leicester, who was observant as well as quiet, noticed that when he was spoken to, the captain invariably turned his left side with a smile to the speaker, and kept it turned until the speaker's gaze was withdrawn.

But Leicester was not allowed to continue his silent examination of Mr. Murpoint's features long, for that gentleman, having blunted his appetite upon the greater portion of a fowl, with a tact which was remarkable, soon engaged the whole table in conversation.

Then he found that he could not only smile well, but talk well also.

He started a topic, chased and ran it to death in a light, graceful way, then raised another.

The spirits of the party, which had grown somewhat low, rose rapidly.

The captain was humorous, and made Miss Mildmay laugh.

Then, with a graceful ease, he veered round into the pathetic – some little Indian story – and the ladies sighed sympathetically.

As suddenly he managed to engage Mr. Leicester Dodson in a discussion on the catacombs, and proved to that gentleman, who knew the East pretty thoroughly, that Egyptian antiquities were also not quite hidden mysteries to the wonderful captain.

All the time he managed to eat in a noiseless, well-bred way about three times as much as any one else, and contrived to divert to his own plate the nice cuts and choice corners of the poultry and saddle of mutton.

He drank, too, with a quiet enjoyment of the good wine, which met with a hearty sympathy from the butler.

"This wine," he said, lifting his glass and bowing to Miss Mildmay with infinite grace, "this wine, my dear friend brought from India – eh? my dear young lady?" turning to Violet. "Many and many glasses have your father and I drank in the hot sunset. I have a wonderful memory for wine and

faces. Do you know," he broke off, suddenly, addressing Leicester, who was regarding him with his quiet, earnest gaze, "I fancy that I have seen you before? Have I?"

"I can't say. 'Tis possible," said Leicester. "Have you any recollection beyond the indistinct surmise?"

"N – o," said the captain, hesitating. "Were you ever in India?"

"No," said Leicester. "I have traveled through the East, and know the Continent and England pretty well."

"There you have the advantage of me," said the captain, setting his wineglass down, and looking round at the attentive faces. "I left my native land when a boy of eighteen, and returned only two days since."

"Ah," said the vicar, in his nervous, jerky style, "then you have much to see, Captain Murpoint. England is small, but precious in beauty. It can compare creditably with any other spot on earth, even in its most unfair and ill features. What is softer and more beautiful than Devonshire? What more grand than the Cornish cliffs? Ay, even in picturesque business it would be difficult to eclipse our little island. We defy you to find in any other part of the globe so weird and grotesque a piece of scenery as the Portland wastes."

The captain, with a smile, had turned his left side to the well-meaning, but rather long-winded cleric, and the butler was filling his glass with the wine which he had so highly praised.

Suddenly, as the vicar's neatly turned sentence came to a close, the captain's face turned and presented the left side, which was as white as the scar itself.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the butler, for the captain, in turning his head, had also moved his hand and spilled some of the wine.

"All right, my good fellow," he said, good-naturedly, and stooped to wipe the wine from his coat. Then, looking up as placid and smiling as before, he added, "Portland! Let me see, that is on the south coast, is it not? A – er – convict station?"

"Yes," said the vicar. "A most interesting place, and well worth a visit. If you think of making an English tour, you should by all means take it *en route*."

"Thanks," said the captain, with an air of gratitude. "It's a good suggestion." Then he rose to open the door for the ladies, his left side well to the front and the good-tempered, well-bred smile shining placidly upon it.

The vicar, being the oldest friend of Mrs. Mildmay, moved to the head of the table, and did the honors of the good old port and claret with formal exactness, but the gentlemen had evidently taken all the wine they cared for, and, with a nervous, "Er, shall we join the ladies?" the vicar pushed back his chair and led the way into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Giles was seated at the piano. Mrs. Tonson, the vicar's wife, was sipping tea with her sweet, little head on one side like a tomtit, listening to Mrs. Mildmay's explanation of the intricacies of some new needlework, and Violet and Mrs. Dodson were engrossed in conversation, which had for its topic Mr. Leicester's various habits and idiosyncrasies, a topic the fond mother could expatiate upon *ad infinitum*.

The captain's quick glance flashed through the handsome room for a moment, then sank into a quiet gleam of pleasure as he walked to Violet's low chair, and, motioning with his eyes to a small, black-edged portrait of himself that hung in a recess, said:

"No wonder you recognized me so quickly, Miss Mildmay. I had forgotten the portrait."

Violet smiled.

"But for me, who see it so constantly, it seems as impossible for me to forget you, or rather fail to recognize you."

Mrs. Mildmay turned, with a smile and a little nervous flush.

"You notice that it has a black frame, Captain Murpoint?"

The captain nodded, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes, and I can guess the reason. Oh, my dear madam, I must reserve the story of my resuscitation for a more fitting opportunity. I am afraid you will find it tedious. Poor John! would that he could have lived to learn that instead of being among the killed, I was only one of the unfortunate captives."

Here the vicar, who had been vainly endeavoring to engage mild Mr. Dodson in a theological argument, turned, with very awkward interest.

"Ah, Captain Murpoint, that was a most extraordinary mistake. I am curious to hear how it occurred. My old friend mourned for you very deeply – er – er – and caused a tablet to be set upon the left side of the church aisle to your memory."

The captain smiled, then sighed.

"It was a mistake, and an extraordinary one. The facts are very simple, though. My corporal, a worthy man, poor fellow, had, the evening before the skirmish, fallen into a water tank and spoiled his uniform, the only one he had brought with him. He came to my tent at sunset, dripping wet, and I, on the impulse of the moment, lent him one of my spare suits. Poor fellow, he promised to return it before the following morning, but Providence so willed it that the loan should become a gift. Before sunrise the Sepoys were upon us. I was wounded and taken prisoner, the poor corporal was killed and mangled to such an extent as to render his identification by features impossible. The clothes by which they imagined they could ascertain his personality, were, of course, mine, and so Captain Howard Murpoint was returned as dead and buried, and Corporal Mundy was cited as captured."

Violet, who had been listening, with her dark eyes fixed upon the captain's face, drew a long breath.

"And what became of you?" she asked, with that absent, abrupt way peculiar to her.

The captain passed his hand down his thick, dark mustache, and looked at her.

"I will tell you some day," he said, "as I threatened. Suffice it for the present that I was held captive for two years far away beyond the hills – ay, outside the pale of civilization. It was a miserable time; to look back upon it even now, in this comfortable room and with your interested face, my dear young lady, before me, gives me an unpleasant sensation. The Hindoos are the connecting link between the man and the monster!"

And, with this figurative conclusion, the captain rose and walked to the bureau to turn over the leaves of the Battle of Prague, with which the vicar's wife was about to favor the company.

Leicester Dodson dropped into the vacant seat, Violet drawing her skirts out of the way of his long legs.

"And have you not played yet?" he asked.

Violet woke from her absent fit and shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "I am not fond of my own music. You will play or sing, will you not?"

"I can do neither," he said. "I have a voice that would shame a crow."

Violet laughed her full, sweet, mirthful laugh.

"I am so sorry, because now you will have to play whist. Look, the vicar is shuffling the cards and looking round for the victims already."

"Shall I hide behind you?" said Leicester, in a low whisper.

"Indeed, no; you shall do your duty!" And, catching the vicar's blinking eyes, she beckoned to him.

"Here is Mr. Leicester for one corner. He doesn't sing or play!"

Leicester looked fierce and nodded at his father.

"You will have enough without me, I think," he said, and the vicar, more nervous than ever, but quite as anxious for his rubber, shuffled over to Mr. Dodson, who, with his benevolent, expressionless face well elevated, was beating time with his first finger to the "Battle."

So the vicar seized upon him, Mrs. Dodson and Mr. Giles, and was soon in his play.

"I've escaped, you see," said Leicester, with his grim smile.

"Only out of one danger into another," said Violet, maliciously. "The 'Battle of Prague' will be fought out directly, and then you will have to go over the large scrapbook of Swiss views and tell Miss Tomson which of the places you have seen."

"Thank you," said Leicester. "If that is a necessary part of the programme I am prepared to perform it without a change of audience. If you will allow me, Miss Mildmay, I'll go over the scrapbook with you."

With two long strides, he seized the book and opened it.

"I knew you would be very much bored," said Violet. "I told you so before you came."

"And I assure you that you were wrong, which you are. I was never further from being bored in my life. That's a fine view. I climbed that on the coldest day in winter and had to have my fingers thawed in the shed at the top."

"And you learned cliff climbing in Switzerland, of course?" said Violet, naïvely. "Do you know, you frightened me so this morning? I was afraid you would fall over and be killed?"

Leicester's eyes – they were dark and deep and somewhat stern for so young a man – brightened.

"Should you have been so sorry?" he asked.

"Of course. How stupid a question!" laughed Violet, wickedly. "Cannot you surmise the consequences? I might have been accused of throwing you over, tried and condemned."

"But the motive," said Leicester, entering into the jest. "What motive could they have found?"

"Oh," said Violet, "people are always ready to find motives for other people; they would have said I resented your appearance as an interruption to a train of poetic thoughts; in fact, they would have been sure to find a motive."

"That is a pretty plain hint that I am to avoid that favorite walk of yours for the future, and beware how I interrupt your cliff reveries."

Violet flushed.

"Indeed, no. It is not a favorite walk – at least, not particularly so – and I am sure you are welcome to come. What nonsense. It is as much yours as mine, and I seem to be making you a present of it," and she laughed.

Then the "Battle of Prague" came to an end, and the captain led Mrs. Tonson to a seat with profuse compliments upon her style and touch.

"Are you fond of music, Captain Murpoint?" asked Violet.

"I adore it," said the captain, seating himself by her side, and looking, with a smile, at Leicester, who regarded him with his usual grim reserve. "Music is the language of women and angels. Are you not going to sing?"

Violet shook her head at first.

"Will you not?" said Leicester, earnestly, bending the regard of his dark eyes on her.

Then she changed her mind, and, placing her hand upon the captain's arm, allowed him to take her to the piano.

Leicester remained where he was, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, stretched out his long legs, and watched her beneath his dark, heavy eyebrows.

He had seen beautiful women of all countries – Circassians with pearly skin and rosebud lips, Spanish señoras with almond eyes and passionate, low-strung voices, Italians with fire-lit laughter and lithe grace – but none whose beauty touched and warmed him as the pure, sweet, loveliness of this willful English rose did.

Beautiful! The word was poor, tame, commonplace for such a face. Call it loveable, bewitching, which is far better than beautiful, and you were still far from a satisfactory adjective, Leicester thought; and as he sat and listened, his gaze alternating between the fair, young face and the dark, sinister one of the man by her side, he felt her heart slipping away from him.

The song finished, there arose a commotion at the whist table.

The vicar, in nervous, jerky sentences, was calling Mr. Dodson over the coals for bad play.

Mr. Dodson, with a bewildered air, was vainly endeavoring to explain, and at last managed to persuade the captain, who had stood smilingly listening to the dispute, to take his place.

The captain sat down, asserting, with a good-natured shrug of his shoulders, that he had not taken a hand at whist for a twelvemonth – which was indeed solemn truth – and the game commenced, the vicar and Mrs. Giles being partners against the captain and Mrs. Dodson.

"What are the stakes?" said the captain.

"Er – er – " stammered the vicar, in his shrill falsetto, "what you please."

"Half-crown points?" said the captain, carelessly, and the rest agreeing, the captain and Mrs. Dodson lost the first game.

Now the vicar was fond of cards, and was still more fond of winning a little money at them. The captain made one or two gross blunders, and clearly proved that he was out of practice. The vicar was but human and suggested that they should raise the stakes.

Alas, the next game was scored to the captain's side. So, also, was the next, and Mrs. Dodson, with many blushes and exclamations of comic alarm at the amount, shared ten pounds with her lucky partner.

Then the party broke up.

Leicester Dodson, who had been talking to Violet during the whole of the card playing, bowed over her small white hand with his usual gravity, wrapped his mother in her China crêpe shawl, and took her to the carriage.

The vicarage party and the Giles' followed quickly, and the captain was left alone with his old friend's daughter and her aunt.

"Captain Murpoint, I have given you rooms in the south wing. If they are not to your liking I hope you will let me change them," said Mrs. Mildmay.

"They will seem palatial apartments after Indian mud huts, my dear madam, and only too luxurious," said the captain.

"Good-night," said Violet, giving him her hand. "I hope you will sleep soundly and not dream. There are ghosts near you."

The captain laughed.

"You mean in those old ruins at the side," he said.

"Yes," said Violet. "The park was all ruins when papa bought it, but he pulled down all the old walls, excepting the tower and old chapel that adjoins the south wing, and they are fearfully haunted."

"I am not afraid," said the captain, and with another good-night he ascended the broad staircase to the apartments allotted to him.

Captain Murpoint was evidently an honored guest. The suite of rooms was of the best in the house, and beautifully furnished, the small dressing-room or boudoir exquisitely so.

As the captain opened the door of the dainty little nest a sturdy figure rose from the satin-covered couch and saluted him with a grin.

The captain set the candle down upon the unladen table and walked to the window, which he threw open, then he turned to the sturdy figure and smiled.

"You don't look so ridiculous in your swallow tails as I should have thought, Jem – no, Starling I meant; but I'm afraid appearance is the least important attribute of a gentleman's servant. Help me off with this coat."

Mr. Starling, with a grave face, tugged at the coat rather clumsily.

"Gently," said the captain, "I don't want you to take my arms with it. That will do," and he sank into the chair before the glass and stared at the reflection of his face absorbed in thought.

Starling watched him in silence for a minute or two, then fidgeted restlessly, and at last spoke out:

"Well, captain, ain't you got a word for your humble pal? How's things going? Does the plant look well?"

"Hush!" said the captain, arousing, with a start. "The window is open, doors and walls have ears. You must drop that slang and talk like the character you assume, even when we are alone, for practice. Tell me what you have seen. Is the house large?"

"Enormous!" replied Starling, sinking his voice to a disagreeable hoarseness. "It is a reg'lar palace. Bigger than the pris – "

The captain sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing, and his face white.

"Idiot! keep that word between your teeth! We're working over a powder mine, and such a word as that means destruction. Forget the past; forget that you were ever anything else than my servant – Captain Murpoint's valet. If you don't, that idiot's tongue of yours will blab and spoil the whole."

He sat down again with something of his old coolness, but his hand, as it toyed with an ivory-backed brush, trembled, and his eyes still flashed evilly.

"All right, captain," pleaded Starling, humbly. "It was a slip," he laughed, "but it shan't occur again. Cuss me for an idiot. But I never can play a close game like this right away at first. It requires genius, and I ain't that, and you are, capt'n; and that's where the difference is – "

"Answer my question," said the captain, interrupting him with a gesture of weariness.

"The place is a regular gold mine," said Starling. "Heaps o' servants and cartloads o' plate. I never see such swag. Great, big plates and basins and ornaments and spoons and forks enough to set us up for life – "

The captain interrupted him with a contemptuous:

"Pshaw! Do you think I am going to steal the plate, idiot?"

"Well, you might do wus," said Starling, scratching his head with a puzzled air. "O' course I don't know what game you're playing, captain; how should I? You're such a deep 'un. But some games want capital, and where are we going to get that?"

"Capital," repeated the captain, more to himself than in answer to the expressed doubt of his companion. "My capital is here," and he knocked his snow-white forehead with his forefinger.

Then, with a short, dry laugh, he pulled the five sovereigns out of his pocket and flung them on the table.

"Capital? You're right, my friend. Five pounds is not much to start a big thing on, but it's enough when Captain Murpoint has the undertaking in hand!"

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE TACKLE

Mildmay Park – or The Park, as it was more generally called – was peculiarly placed on the slope of a hill climbing toward the cliff.

The lower part of the building was that remnant of the old abbey of which Violet had spoken to Captain Murpoint. The upper part was the modern luxurious mansion in which the wealthy merchant prince, John Mildmay, had lived.

Money can command all things in the way of architecture and luxury, and The Park was a fitting residence for a marquis, to say nothing of an East Indian merchant.

Having passed so much of his time in the crowded, bustling streets of both hemispheres, it was only natural that Violet's father should choose a quiet resting place.

Penruddie was quiet enough to suit an Anglican monk.

Beside the Cedars there was no other house on the cliff, and the village in the valley was so small as to scarcely be deserving of the name. A few fishermen's cottages, a general shop, and an inn, picturesque and inviting, comprised it.

The fishermen were simple people, who looked upon The Park and its inmates as a place and people to be worshiped from afar; the general shop, a little more elevated in its notions, prided itself upon the custom of the "gentry," and the inn – well, the inn deserves something more than a statistical mention.

It was a pretty little place, midway in the single street, overgrown with ivy, from which its windows peered like so many eyes struggling to catch a glimpse of the glittering sign board through their lids of leaves.

This sign board was a wonder. In Martha Pettingall's opinion there had never been, or ever would be a work of art to compare with it. It bore on its crimson background a lion so blue, so fierce, and in attitude so wickedly and preposterously unnatural that, perhaps, Martha's pride was, after all, excusable. Certainly, there was some truth in her assertion that there was "ne'er a lion in the whole world like it."

Martha Pettingall was a thin old lady, with sharp eyes and a mysterious complaint. This disease – it was painless – attacked her whenever the wind was in the East, her customers troublesome, and her niece, pretty Polly Pettingall, aggravating. It proclaimed itself by sharp tones and a yellow bandanna.

The sharp tones were freely employed to all about her, and the fishermen knew when to expect them by the appearance of the yellow flag tied tightly round Martha's head and face.

At such times it was astonishing how quiet the gruff, hard-voiced men became, and how early they left the little taproom and departed to their by no means soft couches.

The day after the captain's arrival Martha appeared in the bar with the yellow bandanna and the vinegarish tones in full battle array.

Polly – light-hearted, slippery-fingered Polly – had dropped and broken one of the best jugs, one of that precious set which the late Joe Pettingall had presented to her aunt as a wedding gift, and there was wrath in the hostess' bosom and fierce ire in the bandanna.

Polly was red and flushed about the neighborhood of the eyes, and her pretty lips were fixed in a sullen, tear-threatening pout.

It was a quarter to eleven, the men had just come in from a mackerel haul and were inclined to be jovial.

"Where's the missus?" inquired Willie Sanderson, as, followed by a dozen of his mates, young and old, he trudged into the barroom. "Well, Polly, my lass, thee's as fresh as a herrin' this mornin'! There's a mack'el for ye, the biggest I've seen this season."

And Willie, a great, strapping giant with a good-natured face and a pair of dark, wide-awake eyes, threw an enormous fish upon the polished counter.

"Thank you, Willie," said Polly, with a dolorous sniggle.

"Why, what's the matter, lass?" exclaimed the brawny fisherman, taking her by the shoulders and swinging her round. "Here, you Bill, and Jim, and Jake, here's the lass piping her eye! Can't ye say a word o' comfort?"

The young fellows, fresh-cheeked, brown-eyed sons of the hamlet, gathered round sympathetically and admiringly, ready with their inquiries and their condolences, but pretty Polly with a pout stepped from among them and ran into the long bar parlor.

"Come along, lads," said Willie, "women's tears are like gurnets – no sooner here than gone again. Jake, where's the mistress?"

At that moment the door was flung open with no gentle hand, and Martha appeared with the yellow bandanna tightly bound round her head.

The young fellows looked at one another and sank into the seats round the sanded room in grim, expressive silence.

"Well!" said Martha, sharply. "Is the haul in? It's mighty early ye are, Willie Sanderson, and it's no great take, I suppose, as usual."

"Indeed you're wrong, mistress," said big Willie, with a short laugh. "The haul's as good as ye could wish, and we be come up to wet the fish afore they starts on their last journey."

"Ye'd better have sent them off and took to your drinking after," said Martha, sharply.

"That's a matter of opinion, arter all," retorted Willie, who was the only one in Penruddie who dared bandy words with the owner of the "Blue Lion" and the yellow bandanna.

"What's it to be, lads?" he continued, looking round.

"Ye'd get nothing but ale so early as this," declared Martha, decisively, and so, fully aware that any opposite opinion, however firmly delivered, would be of no avail, the "boys" nodded good-naturedly, and the shrewish hostess left the room for the ale.

Four huge tankards were soon foaming at the mouth, and Polly was bearing them into the room on a tray when the low-browed door swung open and the well-built, dapper form of Mr. Starling entered.

"Eavens, what a sight!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into an elaborate pose of ecstatic admiration and arresting Polly's progress thereby. "It's a study of Michael Hangelo," and he clasped his hands with an artistic enthusiasm.

Pretty Polly threw up her head with a pert smile and a side glance at the stranger.

"Oh, indeed!" she said, "and pray who's Mr. Hangelo? And who's a sight, I should like to know?"

"You're a sight, my dear," retorted Mr. Starling, who, however deferential and meek he might be in his master's presence, was thoroughly at home and at his ease in a public house. "You're a sight beautiful enough to gladden any hartist's eyes."

"Nonsense!" said Polly, tripping into the taproom.

Mr. Starling, with a cast of his sharp eyes in that direction, strolled up to the bar and bowed with proper respect to the landlady.

"Good-morning, ma'am. I hope I see you well. Beautiful morning for the hay – "

"Do you want anything to drink?" sternly interrupted Martha.

Not at all discomposed, Mr. Starling intimated that he should feel obliged if the lady would favor him with a glass of her very best ale, and draw it mild.

Perfectly unmoved by his grand manner and repeated bows, Martha drew the glass of ale and flung the twopence with a clash into the large pocket at her side.

Mr. Starling winked at the ceiling, chuckled noiselessly, and disposed of the ale with a peculiar drawing in of the breath and turn of the little finger.

"That's good tackle," he said.

"Ye asked for the best," said Martha, who was not to be conciliated.

"And I've got it; and I'll have another," said Mr. Starling.

This glass he dealt with more mercifully, and after taking a draught carried the remainder to the taproom door.

The sunburnt faces and bright eyes of the lads were lifted as he appeared, and Willie's sharp gray orbs seemed to take an inventory of his every inch, as Mr. Starling, with a nod and a smile, said:

"Good-morning. Any fish this morning?"

"Ay, lots," said Willie, curtly.

"Ah, glad to hear it," said Mr. Starling, edging a little farther into the room. "I'm very fond of fishing – allus was. Used to catch little bats with a umbrella handle and a bent pin when I was so high," and he put his hand about five inches from the floor.

"Oh, we don't fish with that tackle in these parts," said Willie, quietly. "Won't ye come in?" and he raised his tankard.

Mr. Starling responded candidly, and was soon seated beside the huge fisherman and discussing a fresh tankard, produced at his expense.

Mr. Starling was of a convivial turn, and the little parlor was soon echoing with short, sharp laughter and snatches of rough wit, all of which, however, did not prevent a sharp scrutiny which Big Willie was continually trying to bear upon the stranger.

Once or twice he raised his eyes and glanced significantly at an old man who had entered after Starling and was seated near the door, but the old fisherman shook his head in response to the look of inquiry, and Big Willie grew more silent and serious. At last he said, in one of the pauses of conversation:

"You seem to have traveled a main. Where be ye bound for?"

Mr. Starling nodded up toward the ceiling and jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"I'm staying at The Park," he said. "Come along with Captain Murpoint."

"You're his servant," said Willie.

"Yes, I'm his servant," said Mr. Starling, looking into the bottom of his quart pot with one eye closed.

"Oh," said the fisherman, with an air almost of relief. "Oh, that's it, is it?" he said. "I thought perhaps ye were loafing round a bit."

Mr. Starling grinned.

"I can do a bit at that trade," he said, with a wink that elicited a guffaw.

"Noo doubt," said Willie. "An' what sort of a man is the captain?" he asked.

"What sort?" said Mr. Starling. "A good sort, or he wouldn't be my master."

"And where do ye come from?"

"India."

Willie shook his head.

"Ay, that's where Master John coom from."

"Just so," said Mr. Starling. "They were sworn friends – what you may call brothers with two mothers. My guv'nor was Mr. Mildmay's particular pal, thick as thieves, and – come, what do you say to another wet?"

"No more," said Willie, answering for himself and the rest of the company.

"Well, if you won't I'll see about climbing," said Mr. Starling. "It's a rum thing to build a house on a hill; it's awkward for a gentleman after he's took his evening's glass at the pub. Now, if it was me I should 'a' built it down here in the village, just next door to the 'Blue Lion,'" and with a wink he stuck his hat well on the side of his head and walked toward the door.

At that moment, however, Martha entered, and, looking round, said, sharply:

"Are you going to sit here all day, Willie Sanderson, with all them fish to send off to Lunnon? Are ye daft, man?"

Willie Sanderson rose and looked at her, raising his hand and scratching first his right, then his left ear.

Mr. Starling, who happened to turn at the doorway to observe how the customers would take such summary ejections, noticed the action, and was somewhat struck to observe Mrs. Martha's sharp tone dropped considerably, and that with a quick pursing of the lips she raised her hand and scratched her own ears, first her right, then her left.

Now, Mr. Starling, who knew something of signs and countersigns, and had had occasion during his rather adventurous life to avail himself of such devices, instantly decided that there was some secret understanding between the hostess of the "Blue Lion" and the burly fisherman, and was confirmed in his suspicions by the silent and immediate obedience of the lads, who, at a toss of the head from their leader, rose quietly and left the house, giving Mr. Starling a gruff good-day as they strolled past.

Mr. Starling looked after them, then turned on his heel, stuck his hands into the mysterious depths of his light trousers, and commenced his climb.

Halfway up the hill, however, he stopped abruptly and swinging round smacked his leg with an emphatic thwack, muttering:

"Hang me if I can make it out. What the Villikins and his Dinah does the landlady of a village inn want a making signs with a wooden-headed fisherman?"

Mr. Starling's wits would have been still farther sharpened could he have followed Willie Sanderson down the village and watched him unseen.

The lads, once clear of the "Blue Lion," turned swiftly to the left and ran down to the beach, where, in a confused heap, were the recently taken fish and the baskets in which they were to be packed.

Willie Sanderson, however, after a word or two with the old fisherman, turned to the right and walked slowly toward the end of the village.

As he neared the row of cottages he saw, coming toward him on the road that led by many a weary mile to London, a smart tax cart.

Willie's eyes were sharp and though the little white-covered cart apparently differed in nothing from its kindred, he knew it at a glance, and, drawing a little aside, he sat down on a heap of empty baskets to wait patiently.

Presently the cart came up, and the driver, a little, thickset man, dressed in an ordinary guernsey, and thick, white trousers peculiar to the seacoast, and wearing a patch over his left eye, shot a sharp glance from the right one at the recumbent figure of the fisherman, and gruffly gave him "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Job, lad," replied Willie, and with a smile he repeated the action which had surprised Mr. Starling.

In an instant the old fellow's hand went up to his ears, and, with a reflection of Willie Sanderson's smile, he "tckd" to the horse and passed on.

Beyond the salutation not a word had passed, but Willie Sanderson rose to his feet and set off toward the beach, whistling with the satisfaction of a man who has adroitly accomplished a difficult and dangerous undertaking.

CHAPTER V IN DIFFICULTIES

To the unsophisticated inhabitants of the little seacoast village the Mildmays of the Park, and the Dodsons of the Cedars, were very great folk, indeed, but we have now to do with far greater, with no less a personage and family, indeed, than the well-known Earl of Lackland and his children.

A very great man was the Earl of Lackland. His ancestors had fought at Cressy, and at Hastings.

Lackland Hall was an immense place in the Midlands, a grand old house, with famous associations. You could not turn a page of English history without coming directly, or indirectly, upon the deeds and doings of the Lacklands.

It was a question with some politicians whether if by some dreadful chance the house of Lacklands had been extinguished, the history of England could have been written at all!

There were men who, when they wanted to illustrate the grandeur, the nobility, the importance of England, would point the admiring finger at Lacklands and exclaim:

"There is one type! Look at Lacklands and see epitomized the glory of our land!"

Certainly the Earl of Lackland was a most important individual.

Besides the great Lackland Hall there were also the great mansion in Grosvenor Square, the castle in Scotland, the villa on the banks of the Arno, and the fishing boxes in Ireland and Wales.

The present earl and countess was blessed, in addition to the places of residence above enumerated, with a son and daughter.

The former, Lord Fitz Plantagenet Boisdale, was a young man just passed his majority. Fair – insipid he would have been called had he not been heir to Lackland – somewhat simple-minded, certainly not clever, and extremely fond of dress, billiards, his betting-book, and his cigar.

Lady Ethel Boisdale, his sister, presented a marked contrast to him.

She was tall, dark, by no means insipid, and if not positively clever, certainly possessed of the average quantity of brains.

To say in what direction her taste inclined would be perhaps at present rather premature.

It is difficult to analyze the lady's disposition, and probably the reader at some future time might be dissatisfied and inclined to pooh, pooh our opinion of Lady Ethel if we pronounced it thus early. Suffice it to say she was fond of reading, was deeply attached to her brother, and would have been equally so to her parents had they encouraged or even permitted her to be so.

Perhaps such great personages as the Earl and Countess of Lackland were too exalted to possess those emotions of affection and tenderness which fall to the lot of commoner people.

If they did not possess them they managed to conceal them with infinite art, and no one could accuse them of the common folly of wearing their hearts upon their sleeves.

Assuredly Lady Ethel must have had a warm heart and a generous nature or the coldness of her exalted parents would have chilled her and rendered her cold likewise.

That she was not the reader will soon perceive.

Thousands of persons envied my Lord and Lady Lackland. Never did their carriage roll through the streets, or their names appear in the paper among the fashionable intelligence, but hundreds exclaimed:

"I wish I were a Lackland."

But not one of the envious many knew what they were really envying.

There is a skeleton in every house; there was one ever present in all the great and small houses of Lackland. Sometimes he kept discreetly to his cupboard; at others he stepped boldly out and rattled his bones, and grinned in a manner horrible to see.

Oh, yes, reader, other people besides yourself have a skeleton, and there are some persons unfortunate enough to have two.

If we entered the Grosvenor Square mansion, say on the morning after that memorable little dinner party at Mildmay Park far away in Penruddie, we might perhaps have caught a glimpse of that skeleton starting out of the cupboard.

Lord Lackland was seated at the morocco-lined writing table in his own room, with a few newspapers, a decanter of light wine, and a box of biscuits before him.

The door opened, and a young man, no other than Lord Fitz Plantagenet Boisdale, entered.

There was a flush on his fair face, and a look of doubt and distrustful nervousness in his rather simple blue eyes.

"Good-morning, sir," he said, holding out his hand.

"Good-morning, Fitz," said the earl, extending two fingers and glancing coldly at a chair which stood near the table ready for any visitor on business. "You are ten minutes behind your time."

"I am very sorry, sir," said the boy, for he was little more in years or appearance, "but I'd promised to ride with Ethel this morning, and I forgot it until after I left you, so I went down to the stable to tell Markham to saddle the two bays, and he kept me to talk about that chestnut – "

The earl interrupted what promised to be a lengthy explanatory excuse with his cold, little bow, and glanced at the ormolu timepiece on the table.

"It is of little consequence to me; I am obliged to leave at the half hour to meet an appointment, therefore I shall only be able to give you the time I promised to give you. You wished to speak to me."

"Yes, sir," said Lord Fitz, looking down at his boots nervously, and then up at the ceiling. "I wanted to ask you if you could let me have a couple of hundred pounds beyond my allowance to – to – pay a few debts, which – which, of course, I could not help running into while I was in Paris."

Lord Lackland walked to the bureau, and took out a bundle – a very small bundle – of banknotes; from this he counted out a hundred pounds' worth, and, holding them in his hand, said:

"Here are a hundred pounds; I cannot give you any more, for a very good reason, I cannot afford to do so."

Lord Fitz looked up with a simple stare which extended his mouth as well as his eyes.

"I cannot afford to do so," said the metallic voice. "It is quite time that you should be placed in possession of the truth as regards my – I may say our – pecuniary position. I ought, perhaps, to have informed you of the condition of my affairs long earlier, but consideration for your feelings deterred me. Fitz, the estates in London, in Italy, in England, are mortgaged to their fullest extent. The revenue is nearly swallowed up by the interest, and there is so little ready money in the house that if the servants were to demand their wages I should not be in a position to pay them."

Lord Fitz stared, pale and aghast.

The skeleton was out grimly walking before him. For the first time Lord Boisdale learned that he was heir to a rich crop of embarrassments, and that the great Earl of Lackland, his father, was a poor man.

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that, sir!" unlike his father, showing his emotion unmistakably.

"I have said it," replied the earl, "and now you know my – our – real position. Credit, Fitz, has kept our heads above water for a great many years – credit alone. How much longer it may do so I cannot say, but I can estimate if your bills for necessaries amount to the sums which they here represent."

"What – what's to be done?" asked Lord Fitz, staring at his calm parent with bewildered horror. "We must sell some of the places, the horses, the diamonds, by jingo! – the – the – everything!"

"We cannot sell what is sold or out of our hands already. You do not understand business matters, unfortunately, or you would at once comprehend that the houses, the land, being mortgaged,

and the diamonds at the – ahem – pawnbroker's, it is simply impossible to make further money of them."

The young man jumped up and took three paces up and down.

"But," said he, suddenly, and with incredulity upon his face, "I saw my mother wear the diamonds at the last drawing-room."

"Not exactly," said the earl, "paste imitations only; the real are in the possession of a pawnbroker. But if you have any taste or inclination for an investigation or examination of our finances, you have my permission to examine the documents which you will find in this case – "

"Great Heaven, no!" said young Fitz. "I don't doubt your word, my lord; I'm only stunned, knocked all of a heap as one may say. It seems so incredible! Why, by jingo, the fellows are always asking me to lend them money – and – and saying how rich we are; and you say that – "

"That I cannot afford to let you have the other hundred pounds," said the earl, replacing the bundle in the bureau. "While we are upon the subject, which is too painful to be renewed, I will remind you that you are heir to the estate, and that it is in your power to clear it of the encumbrances."

"In mine!" exclaimed Lord Fitz.

"Exactly," said the earl. "By a judicious marriage. You must marry an heiress, Fitz. There are a number of them to be met with; and a great many are extremely anxious to purchase position with their money. I speak plainly because the matter is too serious for mere insinuation. You must marry well, and – ahem – so, of course, must your sister."

He glanced at the timepiece significantly.

The young lad rose at the hint and took up his hat.

"I won't detain you any longer, sir," he said. "I am very much obliged for – for the money, and, of course, I'm very sorry to hear such a bad account of the estate."

"Exactly," said the earl, with a cold smile, looking out of the window. "You are riding that bay, I see, and I trust you will take care of it. I had to pay a heavy bill for the mare whose knees you cut last month. Let me beg of you to be careful with the bay."

"Certainly, sir," said Lord Boisdale, and with a very uncomfortable air he left the room.

As he passed into the corridor a sweet, clear voice rose from the hall.

"Fitz, are you coming?"

Fitz smothered a sigh, and as cheerfully as he could, replied:

"All right; here I am," and ran down the stairs.

In the hall stood Lady Ethel Boisdale.

"How long you have been!" she said, with a smile. "Are you not ashamed to keep a lady waiting? Well, I think brothers imagine they are privileged to take advantage of a sister."

As she spoke her eyes noted the disappointment and embarrassment on his countenance, and when they were mounted and turning out of the square she said:

"What is the matter, Fitz? Will not papa give you the money?"

"No," said Fitz, with an uncomfortable laugh, "no; and supplies an excellent reason for not complying with my modest request. Oh, dear me, I'm very miserable. There! don't ask me what about, because I shan't tell you. It would only worry you, and you're too good a fellow – I mean girl – to be worried. Let's put these lazy animals into something sharper; I hate this square and those streets."

Lady Ethel touched her horse gently, and in silence they cantered into the Park.

"Look," said Ethel, presently, "who is that lifting his hat?"

"Eh? where?" said Lord Fitz. "Oh, it's Bertie Fairfax and Leicester Dodson – capital fellow, Bertie. Let's pull up a minute, Ethel."

And with a smile of welcome he steered his horse near the rails, upon which the two gentlemen who had raised their hats were leaning.

One of them, Leicester Dodson, we know, the other was a tall, splendidly built fellow, with a frank, genial face, and a noble yet peculiarly free and graceful bearing.

"Hello, Bertie! Good-morning, Mr. Dodson. Delighted to see you. Ethel, you will let me introduce my friends, Mr. Dodson, Mr. Bertie Fairfax. Bertie, Mr. Dodson, this is my sister, Lady Ethel Boisdale."

Both the gentlemen raised their hats; Lady Ethel bent her beautiful head with her rare smile.

She always liked to know any friends of her brother whom he chose to introduce, for with all his simplicity he was too wise to fall into the mistake of showing her any but the most unexceptionable of them.

Bertie Fairfax looked up at the lady and then at the horse. He was a connoisseur of both.

"It is a beautiful day," he said, opening the conversation with the usual weatherwise remark. "Your horse looks as if he enjoyed it."

"Which he does," said Ethel. "I am sure I do. It is delightful – walking or riding."

"I should prefer the latter," said Bertie Fairfax, "but my horse is lamed temporarily and I am compelled to pedestrianize."

"What a pity," said Ethel, adding, with her sweet smile, "Perhaps the change will be good for you."

Bertie Fairfax looked up at her with his frank eyes to see if she was quizzing him, then laughed musically.

"Perhaps he thought so and tumbled down on purpose. It doesn't much matter – I like walking, but not here; I like more room. My friend, Mr. Dodson, however, insisted upon this promenade. He is an observer of human nature – a cynic, I regret to say – and finds material for bitter and scornful reflection in the gay and thoughtless crowd. Are you going to Lady Darefield's ball to-night?"

"Yes," said Ethel. "I presume you, also, by your question, are going?"

"Yes," said Bertie Fairfax, "I am glad to say."

Five minutes before he had sworn to Mr. Leicester Dodson that he wouldn't go to my Lady Darefield's ball for five hundred pounds, and five hundreds pounds were of some consequence to Mr. Bertie Fairfax.

"It is very hot for balls, but one must do his duty. I hope I may be able to persuade you to give me a dance?"

"I don't know," said Ethel, with a smile.

At that moment her horse walked on a little. Mr. Fairfax moved farther up the rail, and then conversation, no more confidential than that we have already given, continued until Lord Fitz was heard to exclaim "Good-by," and then joined his sister.

Both the gentlemen on foot raised their hats, Bertie Fairfax with his cordial, pleasant smile, Leicester Dodson with his grave and also pleasant grace, and after a return of the salutations the four young people parted.

"Well," said Lord Fitz, from whose mind the recent meeting had expunged the unpleasant remembrances of his morning interview, "what do you think of them?"

Ethel was silent for a moment.

"I don't know which was the handsomer," she said, thoughtfully.

"That's just like you women, Eth; you always think of the graces first."

"Well," said Ethel, "there was no time to know anything more about them. I think Mr. Fairfax is very pleasant – he has a nice voice and such frank eyes. There are some men with whom you feel friendly in the first ten minutes; he is one of them."

"You're right," said Lord Fitz. "Bertie's the jolliest and dearest old fellow going. Poor old Bert!"

"Why poor?" said Ethel.

"Because he is poor, deuced poor," said Lord Fitz, muttering under his breath, with a sigh, "Like some more of us."

"How do you mean?" said Ethel.

"Well," said Lord Fitz, "he has to work for his living. He's a barrister or something of that sort. But he writes and draws things for books, you know. I don't quite understand. He can sing like a nightingale and tell a story better than any man I know."

"He looks very happy," said Ethel, "although he is poor."

"Happy!" said Lord Fitz. "He's always happy. He's the best company going."

"And who is his friend? Mr. Dodson, is not his name?" asked Ethel.

"Yes, Leicester Dodson," said Lord Fitz. "He's one of your clever men. You can't understand whether he's serious or joking sometimes, and I've often thought he was making fun of me, only –"

"Only what?" asked his sister.

"Only I didn't think he'd have the impudence," said Lord Fitz, proudly. "It isn't nice to be sneered at by a tallow chandler."

"A what?" said Ethel.

"Well, the son of a tallow chandler. That's what his father was. A nice, quiet old boy. Haven't you heard of 'em? They live at Penruddie, which is about nine miles from that shooting box in Herefordshire – Coombe Lodge."

"So near," said Ethel. "No, I had not heard of him. He looks to be a gentleman, but I did not notice him very much. I like his friend's face best, yes, I am sure I do, though both the faces were nice."

"You don't take into account Leicester Dodson's coin," said Lord Fitz. "His people are immensely rich; tallow turns into gold, you know, if you only melt it long enough."

"That's a joke or a pun, Fitz," laughed Lady Ethel. "And really rather clever for you. And where does Mr. Fairfax live?"

"Oh, in chambers in the Temple – quite the clever bachelor, you know. Very snug they are, too, much more comfortable than any of the places. He gives good dinners sometimes – when he's in luck, as he calls it. Eth, you ought to have been a man, then you could have known some jolly good fellows."

"Thank you, if I were not on horseback I'd curtsy," said Ethel. "Can't I know good fellows as I am?"

"No," said simple Lord Fitz, "you can't! They won't let you; it's dangerous. You must only know men with long handles to their names like ours, and with their pockets full of money – unlike ours. You mustn't know Bertie Fairfax, for instance. The mother wouldn't allow it."

At that moment Ethel's horse started – his rider had, in reality, touched him with a spur – and got in front of Lord Fitz, so that the blush which suddenly crimsoned Ethel's beautiful face was hidden from her brother's light blue eyes.

Now, why should Lady Ethel Boisdale blush at the simple little speech of Lord Fitz? It could be of little consequence to her, surely, if her eyes were fated never to rest on Mr. Bertie Fairfax again. Why did she blush, and why, during the remainder of that park gallop, did she look forward to Lady Darefield's little ball?

"Well," said Leicester, as the two equestrians rode away, and left the pedestrians looking after them, "what do you think of the Lady Ethel Boisdale? You have been wrapped in a silence unusual and remarkable for the last three minutes; unusual because on such occasions as the present you generally indulge in a rhapsody of admiration, or a deluge of candid abuse, extraordinary because silence at any time is extraordinary in you."

"Hold your tongue, you cynical fellow," exclaimed Bertie, still looking after the brother and sister. "So that is the sister of whom simple Fitz is always talking – Lady Ethel! A pretty name, and it suits her. An Ethel should be dark, or at least brown shadowed; an Ethel should have deep, thoughtful eyes, a pleasant, rather dreamy smile, and a touch of hauteur over face, figure, and voice. She has all these –"

"And fifty more virtues, attributes, and peculiarities which your confounded imagination can endow her with! Nonsense! She's a nice-looking girl, with a sensible face, and the pride proper for her station. You can't make anything more of her."

"Can't I?" said his friend; "you can't, you mean. I call her beautiful. She is going to Lady Darefield's ball to-night; I – I shall go, after all, I think, Leicester."

"I thought so," said Leicester Dodson, with a smile of ineffable wisdom and sagacity. "I thought somebody said they wouldn't go to the confounded ball for five hundred pounds, and that the same somebody was pitying me for having promised to grace it with my presence."

"I thought you'd die if I didn't keep you company, and so, as I like to borrow your money, and don't want you to die, I'll go. I say, Leicester, haven't the Lacklands a small place in Herefordshire near you? What do they call it – Coombe Lodge?"

"Perhaps they have," said Mr. Leicester. "I believe that there are few counties which are not honored by the Lacklands in that way. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, merely for idle curiosity."

"H'm! you promised to come and spend a week or two with me," said Mr. Leicester. "Will you come?"

"Oh, chaff away," said Bertie Fairfax, good-temperedly. "But I'll take you seriously; I will come."

"Done," said Leicester, still chaffing as his light-hearted friend called it. "I'm going down next week. Come with me?"

"Thanks," said Bertie, "I'll think it over. I'll come and cut you out with the Mildmay heiress! Hah! hah!"

He laughed as Leicester turned to him with a look of mild surprise.

"You didn't know that I was posted up in that intelligence! I've a dozen little birds who bring me news night and morning, and I've heard – "

"Pshaw!" interrupted Leicester. "I've dined with mamma and papa at Mildmay Park, and that – that's positively all. My dear Bertie. I am not a marrying man; now you are, but, mark me, Lady Ethel Boisdale is not meant for you."

"Thank you," said Bertie, "I'm very much obliged, but who said that she was?"

And with a light laugh the subject was dropped.

That night when Lady Ethel Boisdale entered the magnificent saloons of Lady Darefield's mansion in Park Place she looked round the room with calm, yet expectant eyes, and dropped them very suddenly as they met the also searching and expectant gaze of Mr. Bertie Fairfax.

It is one thing to exchange glances and smiles with a belle in a ballroom, but quite another matter to get a dance with her.

The saloons were crowded by the best of the land, eligible parties were in abundance, and Mr. Bertie Fairfax, handsome, sweet-natured and lovable though he was, found himself somewhat out in the cold.

It was not an unusual position for him, and on other occasions he had laughed good-naturedly in the smoking-room of his club, saying that there had been too many iron pitchers going down the stream for such a fragile, unsatisfactory delf affair as himself to hope for success.

But to-night it was different.

He wanted to dance with Lady Ethel Boisdale; why he could scarcely have told.

She was very beautiful; but he had seen faces far more lovely even than hers; she was very graceful, tall and full of a sweet, proud dignity, but Bertie Fairfax had seen some of the ladies of the Papal court, and remembered their faces.

She was, as it happened, just the realization of the young fellow's ideal, and – yet it must be written – he was already half in love with her.

Round her, forming a sort of bodyguard or watchdog, continually hovered in majestic grace the Countess of Lackland, her mamma.

Bertie was aware that her ladyship knew all about him, and that it was utterly vain to hope that he might be allowed to fill a vacant line in the Lady Ethel's little dancing programme.

He watched her dancing for some time, watched her as she spun round in two waltzes with Leicester Dodson for her partner, then the disappointed Bertie made his way out on to the corridor and leaned against the balustrade, gnawing his tawny mustache and trying to make up his mind to go to his club.

Just then, as he had almost decided, Leicester Dodson came out, hot and flushed, but with his usual grave reserve about his mouth and eyes.

"Ah! Bert!" he said. "Taking a cooler; you're wise in your generation. They ought to keep a weighing machine outside in the lobbies, so that a man could see how much he'd fined down after each dance. I've lost pounds since the Lancers. It's hotter than a siesta hour in Madrid. You look cool."

"I don't feel particularly hot. I haven't been dancing. I feel like the skeleton at the feast; I think I shall carry my bones to the club. Will you come?"

"I'm engaged for another turn with Lady Ethel Boisdale," said Leicester Dodson, leaning over the balustrade and skillfully concealing a yawn.

"Lucky dog," said Bertie, enviously.

"Eh?" said Leicester. "By the way, you said she'd half promised you a dance; you don't mean to say you haven't called for payment, Bert; she's the best-looking woman in the room, and the most sensible –"

"Too sensible to dance with Mr. Fairfax, or her mamma has had all her training trouble for nothing," said Bertie.

"Nonsense! She's looking this way; go and ask her, man. I'll wait until the waltz is over, then we'll go on to the club, for, between you and me and that hideous statue, which is all out of drawing, by the way, I have had pretty well enough; and you seem, to judge by your face, to have had a great deal too much."

Bertie, without a word left his friend, fought his way through the crowd, and, after some maneuvering, gained Lady Ethel's side.

"Have you saved me that dance which you half promised me this morning?" he said.

Lady Ethel turned – she did not know that he was so near – and a smile, bright, but transient, passed across her face.

"There is one dance – it is only a quadrille," she said; "all the waltzes are gone."

"I am grateful for the quadrille only, and do not deserve that," he said.

"I thought you had gone," said Ethel. "My brother was looking for you just now, and I told him that I had seen you go out."

"I was in the corridor cooling," said Bertie Fairfax.

"Is it cool there?" she asked; "I thought it could not be cool anywhere to-night."

Then Lord Fitz came up, his simple face all flushed with the heat and the last dance.

"Hello, Bert, I've been looking for you. I say –"

"You must tell me when the dance is over," said Bertie, "there is no time."

And he led his partner to her place in a set.

A quadrille has the advantage over its more popular sister, the waltz; it allows of conversation. Bertie could talk well; he had always something light and pleasant to say, and he had a musical voice in which to say it.

He was generally too indolent to talk much, but neither his natural laziness nor the heat seemed to weigh upon him to-night, and he talked about this matter and on that until Ethel, who was not only beautiful but cultivated, was delighted.

Too delighted, perhaps, for my Lady Lackland, from her place of espionage in a corner, put up her eyeglass and scanned her daughter's rapt and sometimes smiling face with something that was not altogether a pleased expression.

"Who is that good-looking young fellow with whom Ethel's dancing?" she asked of the dowager Lady Barnwell, a noted scandalmonger, and an authority on every one's position and eligibilities.

"That is young Fairfax. Handsome, is he not? Pity he's so poor."

"Poor, is he?" said the countess, grimly.

"Oh, yes, dreadfully. Works for his living – a writer, artist, or something of that sort. Really, I don't know exactly. He is in the Temple. Very amusing companion, evidently. Lady Ethel looks charmed with her partner."

"Yes," said Lady Lackland, coldly, in her heart of hearts she determined that her daughter should receive a lecture upon the imprudence of wasting a dance upon such doubtful and dangerous men as Bertie Fairfax.

Meanwhile, Ethel was enjoying herself, and when Bertie, whose handsome face was beaming with quiet satisfaction and pleasure, softly suggested that they should try the corridor, Lady Ethel, after a moment's hesitation, on the score of prudence, replied with an affirmative, and they sought the lobby.

Here there were a seat for the lady and a leaning-post for Mr. Fairfax, and the conversation which had been interrupted was taken up again.

Bertie was in the midst of an eloquent defense of a favorite artist, of whom Lady Ethel did not quite approve, when Lord Fitz again appeared.

"What an eel you are, Bert! I've been everywhere for you. I say, we're going down to Coombe Lodge; it's so beastly hot up here in town, and we're going to make a little summer picnic party; you know, just a nice number. Cecil Carlton, Leonard Waltham and his sister, and two or three more. My sister is going, ain't you, Ethel? Will you come?"

"Thanks," said Bertie, with something like a flush, and certainly a sparkle in his light eyes. "But I am booked to Leicester Dodson."

"Oh, yes, the Cedars; what a bore for us. Never mind, the Lodge isn't far off, and, if you go down, we shall all be together."

"Yes," said Bertie, glancing at the fair face beneath him, which was turned, with a quiet look of interest, to her brother; "yes. When do you go?"

"Next week, if Ethel can get herself away from this sort of thing."

"I shall be very glad to go," said Ethel; "I am longing for the green trees and a little country air."

"It's done, then; all the odds taken," said simple Lord Fitz.

At that moment came up Ethel's next partner.

Bertie relinquished her, with a smothered sigh. He knew that he should not see her again that night, for her programme was full.

"We may meet in a country lane next week," he said, softly.

"We may," she said, with a smile that parted her lips bewitchingly, and then she was called away.

Bertie looked after her, then slowly descended the broad stairs, got his crush hat and strolled into the open street.

"That's the most sensible thing you've done for the last two hours," said Leicester Dodson's voice, behind him. "I'll follow your example," and he took out his cigar case. "Here, my man," he added, as his neat brougham drove up.

"Let us walk," said Bertie.

And they started slowly for the club.

It was very hot there, however, and the pair were soon in Leicester's chambers, which were in the same inn and only one floor below Bertie's.

Leicester Dodson was a wealthy man, and quite able to afford luxurious apartments in the Albany, or at Meurice's, but he preferred a quiet set of chambers near those of his fast friend, Bertie.

He did not work in them, but he read a great deal, and he enjoyed half an hour now and then spent in watching his hard-working friend.

He would sit in Bertie's armchair, with his legs extended before him, watching Bertie engaged on some article or poem or drawing, and, as he watched, would almost wish that he also had to work for his living.

So Mr. Leicester was somewhat of a philosopher and a cynic, as Bertie had said, and at times found life rather wearisome.

To-night he drew himself a chair – Bertie was extended upon an ancient, but comfortable, sofa, and, lighting a fresh cigar, rang for claret and ice.

"Dreadfully hot, Bert. What on earth makes us hang about this horrible town, in this terrible weather? Fancy staying in London when all the green fields are holding out their hands and shouting, 'Come, and roll on us'! Fashion is a wonderful thing – so are you. Why on earth don't you speak? I never knew you so silent for so many minutes together, in my life. Are you asleep?"

"No," said Bertie. "Push the claret across the table with the poker, will you? When did you say you were going down to the Cedars, Les?"

"When you like," said Leicester Dodson, coloring slightly and turning his face away from his companion. "To-morrow, if you like; I was going to say I wish I'd never left it, but I came up this week because – "

"Because what?" asked Bertie, as he stopped.

"Because," said Leicester Dodson, looking hard at the fire, in his grave, sedate way, "discretion is the better part of valor."

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Bertie Fairfax. "You never mean to tell me you were afraid of a man?"

"No," said Leicester, with his cynical smile; "of a woman. There, don't ask me any more. I am not going to make a fool of myself, Bert, but while we're on the subject, I'll say that it would never do for either of us to do that."

"No," said Bertie Fairfax, with an unusual bitterness. "We can never marry, Les. You, because you are too – "

"Selfish," interrupted Mr. Dodson, placidly.

"And I, because I am too poor – "

"You will be rich enough some day, you clever dog," said Mr. Dodson, sententiously.

"Yes, when I'm an old man, gray-headed and bent double. Never mind."

"I won't. Don't you, either," said Leicester; "and now for the Cedars. Suppose we say the end of the week?"

"Yes, that will do," said Bertie. "The Lacklands – at least, some of them – are going down to Coombe Lodge next week."

"Oh," said Leicester, significantly, glancing at the frank, pleasant face of his friend.

"Yes," retorted Bertie, "and the Mildmays are still at the Park, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Leicester, shrugging his shoulders with an air of indifference he was far from feeling. "So that we shall be all together – like moths round a candle," he added, cynically, as Bertie rose, with a yawn, to mount to his own chambers.

Yes, all together, and near the meshes of that web which a skillful, cunning spider was weaving for them.

Captain Murpoint had laid his delicate web ready for his flies.

CHAPTER VI

"LOVE ME, LOVE MY DOG."

Captain Howard Murpoint had not exaggerated his powers of pleasing when making that important communication and revelation to his accomplice, Jem, under the Portland cliffs.

He had not been in possession of the marvelously comfortable suite of rooms at Mildmay Park many days before young and old, mistress and servants, were ready to pronounce the captain a most agreeable man, and his servant, Jem, a most amusing and obliging fellow.

The morning after his arrival the captain came down to breakfast elegantly attired in a loose velvet shooting-coat, which set off his strong, well-made figure to advantage.

His smooth face was set with a pleasant smile, and his voice was toned to a half-affectionate interest as he shook hands with Mrs. Mildmay.

"I hope you slept well, Captain Murpoint?" she murmured.

The captain declared that he had never slept better, and that his quarters were all that could be wished.

"Violet is not down yet," said Mrs. Mildmay. "She is late, but we were rather later than usual last night, and, I dare say, the excitement of your arrival made her feel tired. Ah, there she is."

And Violet entered at the moment, and came up to give her aunt the morning kiss.

Then she turned to the captain, and once again his bold, watchful eyes shrank for a moment before the clear, calm gaze of her pure ones.

His salutation was a finished piece of acting, so reverential, so paternally affectionate, and so respectful.

Violet shook hands with him, and tripped to her seat.

"And did the ghosts annoy you?" she asked, as the captain spoke of his night's rest.

"No; they were considerate to their guest. Perhaps when we are more familiar they may be more troublesome. You have had a good night's sleep, 'tis evident," he continued, glancing admiringly at her fair, fresh, blooming face.

"I always sleep well," said Violet, simply. "Neither ghosts nor indigestion disturb me."

"I thought perhaps that our little party had tired you, my dear," said Mrs. Mildmay.

"No, aunt," replied Violet. "It was a very pleasant one," she added, musingly.

"Very, the pleasantest I have participated in for some time," said the captain, with some truth. "I must congratulate you upon having some really agreeable neighbors. The vicar was a most delightful man, and Mr. and Mrs. Giles are most amiable."

"And what did you think of the Dodsons?" asked Mrs. Mildmay, with a half sigh.

"Most agreeable people," replied the captain. "So original and unaffected. The young fellow pleased me exceedingly," and he glanced at Violet, under his dark brows.

"They are quite new friends – acquaintances," said Mrs. Mildmay. "Last night was the first time we have had the pleasure of their company."

"Indeed!" said the captain, with interest. "Newcomers, I suppose?"

"No; they have been here some time," answered Mrs. Mildmay. "They live in the large, red house, the Cedars; perhaps you did not notice it? You can see it from the dining-room windows. They are friends of Violet's making and – and though very agreeable people, still –"

"Still, they are – tallow chandlers," put in Violet, wickedly, "and aunt cannot forgive them."

Captain Murpoint smiled a peculiar smile of conciliation for both the ladies.

"Tallow chandlers," he said, "can be very agreeable people; but I understand your aunt's prejudice, my dear Miss Mildmay –"

"And I cannot," said Violet, with quiet gravity. "My father," and her voice lowered softly, "must have bought tallow when he traded with Russia, as I have heard, and I cannot see much difference between buying it in the first instance and melting it in the second."

"There is a difference," said the captain, softly. "But, putting the question aside, I thought the Dodsons extremely nice people, and Mr. Leicester Dodson a well-informed person."

Violet looked at her plate. She did not echo the captain's praise or qualify it, so one could not tell whether she thought Mr. Leicester clever or not.

"Violet made their acquaintance in quite a romantic fashion," said Mrs. Mildmay, harping upon the subject, and she proceeded to recount the adventure of the parasol upon the cliffs.

While they were talking, Violet, who was facing the window which overlooked the lawn, saw the tall, graceful figure of Leicester Dodson sauntering up the path toward the house, in the indolent way which distinguished him.

"There is Mr. Dodson," she said. "I'll tap at the window; he may as well come in this way as walk up to the front."

And so she tapped.

Mr. Leicester looked over the whole of the house, as usual, before settling upon the right window, then, when he did, he lifted his hat, with a grave smile that was also a very pleased one, and came across the lawn.

"Will you consent to make such an undignified entry?" said Violet.

"Yes," said Mr. Leicester, and, stooping, stepped into the room. "I'm afraid I'm too early," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Mildmay and the captain. "But I thought if I left it till the middle of the day it would be too hot, and if I left it till the evening it would be too near dinner, and that after dinner – "

"We should be all asleep," said Violet, quietly.

"Exactly," assented Mr. Leicester, gravely.

"We are very glad to see you at any time," said Mrs. Mildmay. "And I think it is very kind of you to take the trouble on such a warm day, to come and see Violet's dog; poor fellow! we cannot think what ails his leg."

"We shall perhaps be able to find out," said Mr. Leicester.

"Will you take a cup of coffee?" asked Violet.

"Yes, I will, please," he said. "Coffee is a good antidote to the heat, is it not, Captain Murpoint?"

"Yes," said the captain, who had taken the opportunity to scrutinize the young man's face during the exchange of remarks; "yes, with a little curry powder added. We used to take it with chillies every morning at Madras."

Mr. Leicester sipped his coffee and chatted in his grave way; then, when the coffee had disappeared, Violet rose to conduct him to the stables.

When they reached the stables, where Violet was welcomed by many a groom and stable-help with smiles and hat-touchings, the great mastiff Leo came limping out of his kennel, baying and throwing up its head, with mingled pain and pleasure.

"Poor old fellow," said Violet. "See, isn't it a pity? He is very fierce," she added, as the dog eyed the stranger with suspicious, threatening aspect.

"I'm not afraid of a dog," said Mr. Leicester, quietly, and without hesitation he knelt down and stroked the thick, smooth neck. The dog growled and put its paws on his shoulder.

"Oh, please be careful!" said Violet, apprehensively. "Quiet, Leo! Quiet, sir."

Mr. Dodson, however, did not seem at all nervous and, with a grave, "Poor old man!" took hold of the bad foot and examined it.

"There's a thorn in this foot, or there was, and it is festering. I prescribe a poultice," he said.

"Oh, dear me! who is to put it on?" said Violet.

"I will," said Mr. Leicester, "if you will be kind enough to order some warm water and linseed."

Violet, without any further fuss, sent one of the grooms for the required articles, and Mr. Leicester seated himself on the top of the kennel and talked to the dog until they came.

Then he mixed the poultice, applied it, and washed his hands, all with the same self-composed gravity which half amused Violet and half awed her.

This Mr. Leicester, whom she had once almost despised for being the son of a tallow melter was gradually winning her respect and setting her thinking.

"How kind of you," she said. "I am really very grateful. But I am ashamed that you should have had so much trouble."

"Not at all. I am very fond of dogs," said Mr. Leicester, and the speech, though it seemed ungracious, was pleasantly spoken.

"If you are fond of horses, come and see my ponies," said Violet, in her frank way, and they turned to the stables.

"They are a pretty pair; they'd go well in tandem," said Mr. Leicester, thoughtfully.

"Would they?" said Violet, eagerly. "How I should like to drive them. Is it difficult?"

"No," said Mr. Leicester, "not at all, when you have acquired the knack. If you will allow me, I will show you how to drive the ponies tandem."

"Thank you so much," said Violet, gratefully; "but are you sure that it will not bore you? I know gentlemen dislike being bored."

"No, it will give me great pleasure," he said, simply. "When will you take the first lesson?"

"Oh, you shall say the time."

"This afternoon, at five?"

"Yes," said Violet; "I shall be delighted! Oh, I forgot!" she added, quickly, and with an unmistakable air of disappointment. "I am to drive Captain Murpoint over to the village, and perhaps he would not care to risk his neck."

Captain Murpoint came from the house at that moment to answer the question.

"Will you be present at a little equestrian experiment, Captain Murpoint?" asked Mr. Leicester. The captain smiled.

"Are you going to ride three of Miss Mildmay's horses a-row?" he said, with his smooth smile.

"No; Mr. Dodson has been kind enough to offer to teach me how to drive tandem," said Violet.

"I shall be only too delighted to make a spectator."

"Will you come into the house again?" she asked, as Mr. Leicester raised his hat and paused at the walk leading to the gate.

"No thank you," he said. "I am going down to the village for my mother. Good-morning. Good-morning, Captain Murpoint." And he sauntered off.

They repaired to the drawing-room, that being the coolest part of the house, and there the captain was most attentive. The conversation got on to the topic of music, and Violet turned over her new songs, and at last, in answer to a question whether he sang or not, the captain offered to sing.

He seated himself at the piano, struck a few chords, and commenced a barcarole in so sweet and yet powerful a voice that Violet was charmed.

The music drew Mrs. Mildmay into the room from another part of the house, and the morning, which Violet had feared would be extremely dull, promised to pass away most pleasantly.

While he was singing, Violet heard her door open.

She was standing at the piano, and she did not turn her head, but raised her eyes to a mirror which hung over the instrument, and which reflected the whole of the room.

As she did so, she saw that the door was opened by the captain's servant, and her gaze was riveted by the picture which the mirror showed her.

The man, thinking himself unobserved was standing, with the door handle in his hand, with such an expression of infinite mockery and sardonic amusement on his evil face that Violet felt herself fascinated and strangely impressed by it.

Suddenly the captain raised his eyes, and she knew by the look of mingled anger, alarm, and suspicion which displaced the smile upon his face that he was conscious of her fixed attention upon the mirror.

He finished the song abruptly, turned his head, and saw Jem Starling, whose face instantly resumed its usual snug demureness.

"Well, James?"

"A letter, captain," said James, "marked 'immediate.'"

The captain took it.

Jem left the room.

"Pray, do not mind us," said Mrs. Mildmay, and, with a bow, the captain took out his letter, which he had thrust into his pocket.

He was almost on the point of returning into the hiding place, for at a glance he saw that it was only a sham one – an old envelope sealed up.

However, with his usual quickness, he decided to open it, and, accordingly, made a slight fuss with the seal, and, taking out a piece of paper, read:

"The pleece inspector's cum down to-day."

Captain Murpoint smiled.

"Business, my dear madam; business men always mark their letters 'immediate,'" and he thrust the letter into his pocket, and commenced talking as if the matter were of no moment.

Violet played a little, and practiced some new song, and Mrs. Mildmay ventured to pass through the French window into the garden, the captain accompanying her.

It was after they had left the room that Violet, happening to glance at the carpet, saw a scrap of paper by her side.

It was the captain's note.

"The pleece inspector's cum down to-day," she said; "why, where can this have come from?"

For the moment she thought that it must be the letter which the captain had received, but the scrap of paper had so little of the appearance of a missive that had come through the post, and the information seemed to have still less connection with the captain, that she dismissed the idea.

"Strange," she said, and, with a laugh, she put the piece of paper in her pocket.

The captain had pulled it from his with his pocket handkerchief.

CHAPTER VII

IMPRESSIONS

Five o'clock came, and with it Leicester Dodson.

It had been very warm out all day; it was warm still, but Mr. Dodson did not look at all distressed, and his velvet lounging jacket hung loosely and comfortably upon his strong, muscular frame.

"Have you courage enough to face the weather?" he said, putting his head through the window frame, "or do you give in?"

"No," said Violet, laughing; "on the contrary, I feel quite brave. I will not keep you long. Will you take a seat while I get my hat?"

He entered, sauntered to a chair, and dropped into it, prepared to wait the three-quarters of an hour which ladies usually require for donning hat and cape.

But Violet was quick and impulsive in all her actions, and before ten minutes had passed he heard her voice on the stairs again, speaking to a servant.

Before she entered the room, however, the door opened, and Captain Murpoint came in.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Dodson," he said. "Can you tell me at what time the post goes out?"

"Six o'clock," said Leicester.

"So soon?" returned the captain. "I am afraid I shall be compelled to deprive myself of the pleasure of accompanying you. I have some rather important letters to write, and shall barely have time to get through them."

"I am sorry for that," said Leicester Dodson, quietly telling a polite falsehood, for he was in reality rather glad than otherwise, and looked forward with no little satisfaction to a *tête-à-tête* with Violet.

"So am I," said the captain, and, as he spoke, he looked round about the room, as if searching for something.

"Lost anything?" asked the other, in his slow, indolent way.

"Y – es," said Captain Murpoint, "a letter. I have dropped it from my pocket, and I fancied I should see it in this room."

At that moment the door opened and Violet entered.

The captain ceased his hunt immediately, and, murmuring softly, "It's of no consequence," turned to Violet and told her that he should be compelled to remain at home.

"I am sorry," said Violet, echoing Leicester's words, and with as little truth.

And she passed out onto the lawn.

"I don't know whether James has harnessed the ponies properly," she said, doubtfully, as the groom appeared, leading up the pretty pair tandem fashion.

"No, he hasn't," said Leicester, after examining them.

And he quietly explained to the man how the operation should be performed.

Then he handed Violet into the little toy phaeton, and took the reins.

At first the ponies, unused to their novel positions and quite fresh after two days' rest, showed signs of rebellion, and started first to one side, then the other, and at last the leader ventured to attempt the feat of walking on his hind legs.

But Mr. Leicester's iron hand drew him to earth again, and, with a touch of the long whip, hinted to him that a very different driver than Miss Violet sat behind him.

After a few minutes they settled down more quietly, and, as the feathery phaeton was rattled down the well-kept road to the village, Violet's face flushed and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed; "and how easy it looks!"

"Come and try," said Mr. Leicester, and he pulled the ponies up until he had changed seats with her.

Then Violet found that tandem-driving was one of those feats which look easier to perform than they really are. Her hold on the reins was not tight enough; the artful little creatures knew her gentle touch, and the leader commenced his old trick, and, in spite of all Violet's skill, insisted upon turning round, as if he meant to enter the carriage and take a ride himself.

Mr. Leicester smiled, and Violet pouted.

"Hold the reins tighter," he said, "and give Master Dot – or Spot? which is it? – a clean, little cut on the left side."

She did so, and Master Dot immediately spun round to the right.

Then Mr. Leicester showed her how to keep him straight by whipping him on the right, and Violet managed to drive him straight for some little distance until they came to a sharp corner.

"Now, take care," said Mr. Leicester; but his warning came too late.

Dot cut the corner rather close, Spot, of course, cut it closer, and the phaeton would have been over, and its contents spilled like eggs, had not Mr. Dodson's hand closed on the small ones of Violet, and tugged the leader round.

For the second time Violet learned how hard and firm that hand was, and involuntarily she uttered a little, sharp cry of pain.

"I am so sorry!" said Leicester, and his voice, naturally so cold and grave, grew wonderfully gentle and anxious. "I did not mean to hurt you."

"No, no; it's nothing," Violet said, coloring with shame at her weakness. "I am really very grateful. You did not hurt me. May I keep the reins a little longer? I don't deserve to after such a silly mistake."

"Yes," he said, "there is a bit of straight road now."

He seemed so genuinely kind that Violet could not refrain from thanking him again.

"You are very good-natured, Mr. Dodson," she said. "I might have thought you proud if I had judged by first impressions."

"Why?" he asked.

"Why?" she repeated. "Are you sure that I shall not offend you?"

"Quite," he said, with a short laugh. "Pray, go on."

"Well, then, if you remember how abruptly you turned away from me that morning when you so foolishly and recklessly, but so heroically, risked your life for my paltry sunshade? You actually refused to shake hands," and she laughed, "and turned away with the cut direct."

He laughed, and looked up at her with a half-amused smile.

"I did, did I?" he said. "Come, I will be candid. I had judged you, not by first impressions, but by hearsay. The unkind things said of one always get repeated – one's friends always see to that. And I have heard some of the mighty civil things your aunt, and perhaps you had said of tallow chandlers in general, and ourselves and the Cedars in particular."

Violet crimsoned, and whipped Dot almost angrily for very shame.

"And," he exclaimed, laughing again, "I thought when you told me your name, 'Well, she shan't be compelled to know me because I picked up her sunshade,' and so I took myself off with all humility."

"Some one's darling sin is the pride that apes humility," answered Violet, with an arch smile.

"Exactly," said Mr. Leicester, "I did not choose that the acquaintanceship should be one of my commencing. If you chose to look down with contempt upon tallow melters – "

Violet stopped him, with a look almost of pain.

"You are unjust," she said, in a low voice. "And you forget that I never thought less of you for what you were. You are not a tallow melter – and – and – oh, I do not know what to say, save that I am not guilty of the meanness you lay to my charge."

"Forgive me," he said, gently and earnestly. "I was only half serious. I did not think so really. But," he added, laughing, "it is a fact that we made our money from tallow, and there's no getting over it. Ah! here is Captain Murpoint," he broke off, as the captain's tall and powerful figure stepped out on to the path beside the drive.

So sudden was his appearance, seeming to grow out of her thoughts, as it were, that Violet, who was by no means a nervous or sentimental young lady, half started, and certainly paled.

In starting, she tugged the reins.

Dot and Spot took the jerk as an excuse for a little freshness, and started off, with their heads down viciously.

Leicester, who had noticed her start, and the sudden pallor, caught hold of her hand, and soon pulled the sprightly ponies into a trot again.

But Violet's hands and his had met once more, and the contact had produced a strange thrill, which was as wonderful as that feeling which they had been speaking of, but it was certainly not one of antipathy.

Leicester stepped out, handed Violet to the steps; then, after patting the ponies, held out his hand.

"Will you not come in?" said Violet.

"No, thank you. It is nearly dinner time. I hope you are not tired."

"No," said Violet, giving him her hand, which he kept while she finished speaking. "No, and I am very much obliged. Good-by."

"Good-by," he said, and perhaps unconsciously he pressed her little hand as he released it.

Then he turned, and Violet, watching him, saw him stand for a moment to exchange a good-day with Captain Murpoint, then stride on.

It was nearly dinner time, as he had said, and he sauntered up to his room, and put himself into the hands of his valet with his usual indolence.

Then he came down to dinner, and ate it with rather more than his usual gravity, talking little, save to his mother, to whom he was always the perfection of knightly courtesy.

Once only he seemed cold, and that was when she said, "Leicester, we have been talking of returning the Mildmays' dinner party. What day would you like me to ask them?" for she always consulted her darling son on every matter, important or trifling.

"I do not care," he said; "I am going to town to-morrow, and I may not return for a week or two. You might ask them next week."

"Going to town," said Mrs. Dodson, ruefully. "Why my dear Leicester, you said you would stay a month with us!"

"I must go to-morrow, mother," he said, and she knew that it was useless to contend against the fiat when pronounced in that calm, cold tone.

After dinner he strolled out on to the cliffs and lit a cigar.

"Yes," he muttered, looking at the sea, lying like a great opal in the low sunset. "I will go to town; I am better there out of mischief. She is very pretty – beautiful, I think, if any woman's face did deserve the word; and there is something about her – is it her voice, or her look, or that swift turn of the head? – which moves me as never voice or look or gesture of woman moved me yet. She is a beautiful, bewitching snare, and, as I have no desire to be snared, as I am too selfish, too cynical, too philosophical to make any woman happy, I will fly. Yes, I will go to town before the danger grows greater." And, as to resolve and perform were nearly one with Mr. Leicester Dodson, to town he went, and Violet saw his dogcart rattling down to Burfield from her bedroom window.

He went to town, but, as we have seen, he could not be happy, contented, or even satisfied, and before the fortnight had passed, he was on his way back to Penruddie, with Bertie Fairfax accompanying him.

Fate stands at the crossroads of life and beckons with inexorable finger, and man, though he strive against the stern command and struggles to avoid that particular path up which the great fate beckons him, must yield at last and walk on to his happiness or his doom.

Fate beckons you, Leicester Dodson, and, though you proudly set your face against its decree, you cannot avoid the inevitable.

CHAPTER VIII

SYMPATHY OR ANTIPATHY?

The captain, as he opened his bedroom window, saw Mr. Leicester Dodson's departure, and was rather surprised.

Captain Murpoint was too shrewd an observer of human nature not to have noticed Mr. Leicester's evident partiality for Miss Violet's society, and, although it would seem to be antagonistic to the captain's plans that the young man should be hanging about the house, yet, in reality, he was quite willing that Violet's attention should be absorbed by handsome Mr. Leicester, or any one else, so that it was drawn for the present from Captain Murpoint.

He could not understand Mr. Leicester's sudden flight, and Mr. Starling, when interrogated, could not very much enlighten him.

Jem or "Starling," as the captain now called him, entered his master's bedroom with the water for the bath, and found the captain still in bed, but with his head resting on one strong hand, and his face turned dreamily to the window.

Starling grunted his morning salutation, and the captain nodded.

"Go to the window," he said, "and tell me if that young Dodson's dogcart has come back; if I have calculated correctly, it has just had about time enough to get to the station and back."

"Here it comes, captain."

"Without Mr. Leicester?"

"Without Mr. Leicester," replied Starling.

"Then he has gone to town," said the captain, springing out of bed and stretching himself thoughtfully. "Gone to town! What the deuce has he gone to town for?"

"That's what everybody wants to know," said Jem, from the next room, where he was spreading out the towels and pouring the water into the bath.

"Did you make friends with the people in the servants' hall at the Cedars?" asked the captain.

"I did, captain, obedient to your commands," said Jem with a wink. "And a very nice, genteel lot o' people they are, though I prefer the hall here, if there's any choice. Oh, yes, I walked up last night, permiscous like, and when they knew as I was your man they made me welcome, drewed me some of the best October and would 'a' opened a bottle of Madery, but I wouldn't hear on it – I allus was so modest. I had a cut of duck and a helpin' o' some sort o' cream with a long, furrin name – "

"Tush! I don't want to know what you had to eat and drink," interrupted the captain. "What did you hear?"

"Not much," he said, laying out the captain's ready-brushed morning suit. "I heard that Mr. Leicester was going up to London this morning, quite sudden like – and he ain't one of your impulse gents, neither. His man didn't know what was up, and depended to stop here for another month at the least. There wasn't anything awkward between the old people and the young 'un, neither, for the butler – which is a more high and mighty swell, in a bigger shirt front, than our chap – he heard Mr. Dodson beg o' Mr. Leicester to stop. But, no, he said he'd go, and gone he has, sure enough."

"And now you can go," said the captain. "Stay! did you find that piece of paper which I told you to look for in the drawing room?"

"No, captain, and I looked everywhere."

"Idiot!" said the captain, between his teeth, "let that be a warning to you never to put your clumsy paw to paper again. How do I know who may have picked that up, with its cursed, telltale sentence?"

"I beg pardon," said Jem, humbly, "but I thought I was doing right. This 'ere inspector was a man from London, and he might have spotted either of us – "

"Enough," said the captain, with a displeased frown.

"You were right to be cautious, and to give me warning, but you should have taken a better way in which to do it. Your grinning face and that stupid business of the letter were enough to arouse the suspicions of a child. Has the inspector gone?"

"Yes, captain," said Jem, "went last night. Found everythink satisfactory; the force in fine condition, and the reserve able and active. He! he!"

"What are you laughing at?" said the captain.

"There's only one policeman – bar the coastguard, which don't count – in the place," grinned Jem.

"Only one policeman – and the coastguard!" mused the captain.

Then he muttered, "All the better," and, dismissing his faithful servant, he prepared for his bath.

For a week Violet felt very dull, and the captain, who watched her closely behind his well-assumed simplicity and carelessness, found that all his amusing stories, songs and little pieces of acting failed to amuse her, and he was not surprised to hear Mrs. Mildmay say at breakfast one morning:

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