LEVER CHARLES JAMES

THAT BOY OF NORCOTT'S

Charles Lever

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Lever C.

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Содержание

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TO BARON EMILE ERLANGER

My dear Erlanger, – Through the many anxieties which beset me while I was writing this story, your name was continually recurring, and always with some act of kindness, or some proof of affection. Let me, then, in simple gratitude dedicate to you a volume of which, in a measure, you stand sponsor, and say to the world at large what I have so often said to my own,

How sincerely and heartily I am

Your friend,

CHARLES LEVER. Trieste, February 20th, 1869.

CHAPTER I. THE TRIAL

Some years ago there was a trial in Dublin, which, partly because the parties in the cause were in a well-to-do condition of life, and partly because the case in some measure involved the interests of the two conflicting Churches, excited considerable sensation and much comment.

The contention was the right to the guardianship of a boy whose father and mother had ceased to live together. On their separation they had come to a sort of amicable arrangement that the child – then seven years old – should live alternate years with each; and though the mother's friends warmly urged her not to consent to a plan so full of danger to her child, and so certain to result in the worst effects on his character, the poor woman, whose rank in life was far inferior to her husband's, yielded, partly from habit of deference to his wishes, and more still because she believed, in refusing these terms, she might have found herself reduced to accept even worse ones. The marriage had been unfortunate in every way. Sir Roger Norcott had accompanied his regiment, the – th Dragoons, to Ireland, where some violent disturbances in the south had called for an increase of military force. When the riots had been suppressed, the troops, broken up into small detachments, were quartered through the counties, as opportunity and convenience served; Norcott s troop – for he was a captain – being stationed in that very miserable and poverty-stricken town called Macroom. Here the dashing soldier, who for years had been a Guardsman, mixing in all the gayeties of a London life, passed days and weeks of dreary despondency. His two subs, who happened to be sons of men in trade, he treated with a cold and distant politeness, but never entered into their projects, nor accepted their companionship; and though they messed together each day, no other intimacy passed between them than the courtesies of the table.

It chanced that while thus hipped, and out of sorts, sick of the place and the service that had condemned him to it, he made acquaintance with a watchmaker, when paying for some slight service, and subsequently with his daughter, a very pretty, modest-looking, gentle girl of eighteen. The utter vacuity of his life, the tiresome hours of barrack-room solitude, the want of some one to talk to him, but, still more, of some one to listen, – for he liked to talk, and talked almost well, – led him to pass more than half his days and all his evenings at their house. Nor was the fact that his visits had become a sort of town scandal without its charm for a man who actually pined for a sensation, even though painful; and there was, too, an impertinence that, while declining the society of the supposed upper classes of the neighborhood, he found congenial companionship with these humble people, had a marvellous attraction for a man who had no small share of resentfulness in his nature, and was seldom so near being happy as when flouting some prejudice or outraging some popular opinion.

It had been his passion through life to be ever doing or saying something that no one could have anticipated. For the pleasure of astonishing the world, no sacrifice was too costly; and whether he rode, or shot, or played, or yachted, his first thought was notoriety. An ample fortune lent considerable aid to this tendency; but every year's extravagance was now telling on his resources, and he was forced to draw on his ingenuity where before he needed but to draw on his banker.

There was nothing that his friends thought less likely than that he would marry, except that, if he should, his wife would not be a woman of family: to bowl over both of these beliefs together, he married the watchmaker's daughter, and Mary Owen became a baronet's bride.

Perhaps – I 'm not very sure of even that – her marriage gave her one entire day of unbroken happiness, – I do not believe it gave her a week, and I know it did not a month. Whether it was that his friends were less shocked than he had hoped for, or that the shock wore out sooner, he was frantic at the failure of his grand coup, and immediately set about revenging on his unhappy wife all the disappointment she had caused him. After a series of cruelties – some of which savored of madness – but which she bore without complaint, or even murmur, he bethought him that her religious belief offered a groundwork for torment which he had hitherto neglected. He accordingly determined to

make his profession to the Church of Rome, and to call on her to follow. This she stoutly refused; and he declared that they should separate. The menace had no longer a terror for her. She accepted whatever terms he was pleased to dictate; she only stipulated as to the child, and for him but to the extent we have already seen. The first year after the separation the boy passed with his father; the second he spent with his mother. At the end of the third year, when her turn again came round, Sir Roger refused to part with him; and when reminded of his promise, coarsely replied that his boy, above all things, must be "a gentleman," and that he was now arrived at an age when association with low and vulgar people would attach a tone to his mind and a fashion to his thoughts that all the education in the world would not eradicate; and that rather than yield to such a desecration, he would litigate the matter to the last shilling of his estate. Such was the cause before the Barons of the Exchequer: the mother pleading that her child should be restored to her; the father opposing the demand that the mother's habits and associates were not in accordance with the prospects of one who should inherit title and fortune; and, last of all, that the boy was devotedly attached to him, and bore scarcely a trace of affection for his mother.

So painful were the disclosures that came out during the trial, so subversive of every feeling that pertains to the sanctity of the family, and so certain to work injuriously on the character of the child whose interests were at stake, that the Judge, made more than one attempt to arrest the proceedings and refer the case to arbitration, but Sir Roger would not agree to this. He was once more in his element, he was before the world, – the newspapers were full of him, and, better than all, in attack and reprobation. He had demanded to be put on the table as a witness, and they who saw, it is said, never forgot the insolent defiance of public opinion that he on that day displayed; how boldly he paraded opinions in opposition to every sense of right and justice, and how openly he avowed his principle of education to be – to strip off from youth every delusion as to the existence of truth and honor in life, and to teach a child, from his earliest years, that trickery and falsehood were the daily weapons of mankind, and that he who would not consent to be the dupe of his fellow-men must be their despot and their persecutor. If he had the satisfaction of outraging the feelings of all in court, and insulting every sense of propriety and decorum, he paid heavily for the brief triumph. The judge delivered a most stern denunciation of his doctrines, and declared that no case had ever come before the court where so little hesitation existed as to the judgment to be pronounced. The sentence was that, up to the age of twelve, the child was to be confided to the mother's charge; after which period the court would, on application, deliberate and determine on the future guardianship.

"Will you leave me, Digby?" asked the father; and his lips trembled, and his cheek blanched as he uttered the words. The boy sprang into his arms, and kissed him wildly and passionately; and the two clung to each other in close embrace, and their mingled sobs echoed through the now silent court. "You see, my Lord, you see – " cried the father; but the boy's struggles were choking him, and, with his own emotions, would not suffer him to continue. His sufferings were now real, and a murmur ran through the court that showed how public feeling was trembling in the balance. The bustle of a new cause that was coming on soon closed the scene. The child was handed over to an officer of the court, while the mother's friends concerted together, and all was over.

Over as regarded the first act of a life-long drama; and ere the curtain rises, it only remains to say that the cause which that day decided was mine, and that I, who write this, was the boy "Digby Norcott."

CHAPTER II. WITH MY MOTHER

My mother lived in a little cottage at a place called the Green Lanes, about three miles from Dublin. The name was happily given, for on every side there were narrow roads overshadowed by leafy trees, which met above and gave only glimpses of sky and cloud through their feathery foliage. The close hedgerows of white or pink thorn limited the view on either side, and imparted a something of gloom to a spot whose silence was rarely broken, for it was not a rich man's neighborhood. They who frequented it were persons of small fortune, retired subalterns in the army, or clerks in public offices, and such like petty respectabilities who preferred to herd together, and make no contrasts of their humble means with larger, greater incomes.

Amongst the sensations I shall never forget – and which, while I write, are as fresh as the moment I first felt them – were my feelings when the car stopped opposite a low wicket, and Mr. McBride, the attorney, helped me down and said, "This is your home, Digby; your mother lives here." The next moment a pale but very handsome young woman came rushing down the little path and clasped me in her arms. She had dropped on her knees to bring her face to mine, and she kissed me madly and wildly, so that my cap fell off. "See how my frill is all rumpled," said I, unused as I was to such disconcerting warmth, and caring far more for my smart appearance than for demonstrations of affection. "Oh, darling, never mind it," sobbed she. "You shall have another and a nicer. I will make it myself, for my own boy, – for you are mine, Digby. You are mine, dearest, ain't you?"

"I am papa's boy," said I, doggedly.

"But you will love mamma too, Digby, won't you? – poor mamma, that has no one to love her, or care for her if you do not; and who will so love you in return, and do everything for you, – everything to make you happy, – happy and good, Digby."

"Then let us go back to Earls Court. It's far prettier than this, and there are great lions over the gateway, and wide steps up to the door. I don't like this. It looks so dark and dreary, – it makes me cry." And to prove it, I burst out into a full torrent of weeping, and my mother hung over me and sobbed too; and long after the car had driven away, we sat there on the grass weeping bitterly together, though there was no concert in our sorrow, nor any soul to our grief.

That whole afternoon was passed in attempts to comfort and caress me by my mother, and in petulant demands on my part for this or that luxury I had left behind me. I wanted my nice bed with the pink curtains, and my little tool-case. I wanted my little punt, my pony, my fishing-rod. I wanted the obsequious servants, who ran at my bidding, and whose respectful manner was a homage I loved to exact. Not one of these was forthcoming, and how could I believe her who soothingly told me that her love would replace them, and that her heart's affection would soon be dearer to roe than all my toys and all the glittering presents that littered my room? "But I want my pony," I cried; "I want my little dog Fan, and I want to sit beside papa, and see him drive four horses, and he lets me whip them too, and *you* won't." And so I cried hysterically again, and in these fretful paroxysms I passed my evening.

The first week of my life there was to me – it still is to me – like a dream, – a sad, monotonous dream. Repulsed in every form, my mother still persisted in trying to amuse or interest me, and I either sat in moody silence, refusing all attention, or went off into passionate grief, sobbing as if my heart would break. "Let him cry his fill," said old Biddy the maid, – "let him cry his fill, and it will do him good." And I could have killed her on the spot as she said it.

If Biddy Cassidy really opined that a hearty fit of crying would have been a good alterative for me, she ought not to have expressed the opinion in my presence, for there was that much of my father in me that quickly suggested resistance, and I at once resolved that, no matter what it might cost me, or by what other means I might find a vent for my grief, I 'd cry no more. All my poor mother's caresses, all her tenderness, and all her watchful care never acted on my character with half the force or one-tenth of the rapidity that did this old hag's attempt to thwart and oppose me. Her

system was, by a continual comparison between my present life and my past, to show how much better off I was now than in my former high estate, and by a travesty of all I had been used to, to pretend that anything like complaint from me would be sheer ingratitude. “Here’s the pony, darlin’, waitin’ for you to ride him,” she would say, as she would lay an old walking-stick beside my door; and though the blood would rush to my head at the insult, and something very nigh choking rise to my throat, I would master my passion and make no reply. This demeanor was set down to sulkiness, and Biddy warmly entreated my mother to suppress the temper it indicated, and, as she mildly suggested, “cut it out of me when I was young” – a counsel, I must own, she did not follow.

Too straitened in her means to keep a governess for me, and unwilling to send me to a school, my mother became my teacher herself; and, not having had any but the very commonest education, she was obliged to acquire in advance what she desired to impart. Many a night would she pore over the Latin Grammar, that she might be even one stage before me in the morning. Over and over did she get up the bit of geography that was to test my knowledge the next day; and in this way, while leading *me* on, she acquired, almost without being aware of it, a considerable amount of information. Her faculties were above the common, and her zeal could not be surpassed; so that, while I was stumbling and blundering over “Swaine’s Sentences,” she had read all Sallust’s “Catiline,” and most of the “Odes” of Horace; and long before I had mastered my German declensions, she was reading “Grimm’s Stories” and Auerbach’s “Village Sketches.” Year after year went over quietly, uneventfully. I had long ceased to remember my former life of splendor, or, if it recurred to me, it came with no more of reality than the events of a dream. One day, indeed, – I shall never forget it, – the past revealed itself before me with the vivid distinctness of a picture, and, I shame to say, rendered me unhappy and discontented for several days after. I was returning one afternoon from a favorite haunt, where I used to spend hours, – the old churchyard of Killester, a long-unused cemetery, with a ruined church beside it, – when four spanking chestnuts came to the foot of the little rise on which the ruin stood, and the servants, jumping down, undid the bearing-reins, to breathe the cattle up the ascent. It was my father was on the box; and as he skilfully brushed the flies from his horses with his whip, gently soothing the hot-mettled creatures with his voice, I bethought me of the proud time when I sat beside him, and when he talked to me of the different tempers of each horse in the team, instilling into me that interest and that love for them, as thinking sentient creatures, which gives the horse a distinct character to all who have learned thus to think of him from childhood. He never looked at me as he passed. How should he recognize the little boy in the gray linen blouse he was wont to see in black velvet with silver buttons? Perhaps I was not sorry he did not know me. Perhaps I felt it easier to fight my own shame alone than if it had been confessed and witnessed. At all events, the sight sent me home sad and depressed, no longer able to take pleasure in my usual pursuits, and turning from my toys and books with actual aversion.

Remembering how all mention of my father used to affect my mother long ago, seeing how painfully his mere name acted upon her, I forbore to speak of this incident, and buried it in my heart, to think and ruminate over when alone.

Time went on and on till I wanted but a few months of twelve, and my lessons were all but dropped, as my mother’s mornings were passed either in letter-writing or in interviews with her lawyer. It was on the conclusion of one of these councils that Mr. McBride led me into the garden, and, seating me beside him on a bench, said, “I have something to say to you, Digby; and I don’t know that I ‘d venture to say it, if I had not seen that you are a thoughtful boy, and an affectionate son of the best mother that ever lived. You are old enough, besides, to have a right to know something about yourself and your future prospects, and it is for that I have come out to-day.” And with this brief preface he told me the whole story of my father’s and mother’s marriage and separation; and how it came to pass that I had been taken from one to live with the other; and how the time was now drawing nigh – it wanted but two months and ten days – when I should be once more under my father’s guidance, and totally removed from the influence of that mother who loved me so dearly.

"We might fight the matter in the courts, it is true," said he. "There are circumstances which might weigh with a judge whether he 'd remove you from a position of safety and advantage to one of danger and difficulty; but it would be the fight of a weak purse against a strong one, not to say that it would also be the struggle of a poor mother's heart against the law of the land; and I have at last persuaded her it would be wiser and safer not to embitter the relations with your father, – to submit to the inevitable; and not improbably you may be permitted to see her from time to time, and, at all events, to write to her." It took a long time for him to go through what I have so briefly set down here; for there were many pros and cons, and he omitted none of them; and while he studiously abstained from applying to my father any expression of censure or reprobation, he could not conceal from me that he regarded him as a very cold-hearted, unfeeling man, from whom little kindness could be expected, and to whom entreaty or petition would be lost time. I will not dwell on the impression this revelation produced on me, nor will I linger on the time that followed on it, – the very saddest of my life. Our lessons were stopped, – all the occupations that once filled the day ceased, – a mournful silence fell upon us, as though there was a death in the house; and there was, indeed, the death of that peaceful existence in which we had glided along for years, and we sat grieving over a time that was to return no more. My mother tried to employ herself in setting my clothes in order, getting my books decently bound, and enabling me in every way to make a respectable appearance in that new life I was about to enter on; but her grief usually overcame her in these attempts, and she would hang in tears over the little trunk that recalled every memory she was so soon to regard as the last traces of her child. Biddy, who had long, for years back, ceased to torment or annoy me, came back with an arrear of bitterness to her mockeries and sneers. "I was going to be a lord, and I'd not know the mother that nursed me if I saw her in the street! Fine clothes and fine treatment was more to me than love and affection; signs on it, I was turning my back on my own mother, and going to live with the blackguard" – she did n't mince the word – "that left her to starve." These neatly turned compliments met me at every moment, and by good fortune served to arm me with a sort of indignant courage that carried me well through all my perils.

To spare my poor mother the pain of parting, Mr. McBride – I cannot say how judiciously – contrived that I should be taken out for a drive and put on board the packet bound for Holyhead, under the charge of a courier, whom my father had sent to fetch me, to Brussels, where he was then living. Of how I left Ireland, and journeyed on afterwards, I know nothing; it was all confusion and turmoil. The frequent changes from place to place, the noise, the new people, the intense haste that seemed to pervade all that went on, addled me to that degree that I had few collected thoughts at the time, and no memory of them afterwards.

From certain droppings of the courier, however, and his heartily expressed joy as Brussels came in sight, I gathered that I had been a very troublesome charge, and refractory to the very limit of actual rebellion.

CHAPTER III. WITH MY FATHER

At the time I speak of, my father dwelt in a villa near Brussels, which had been built by or for Madame Malibran. It was a strange though somewhat incongruous edifice, and more resembled a public building than a private gentleman's residence. It stood in a vast garden, or rather park, where fruit and forest trees abounded, and patches of flowers came suddenly into view in most unexpected places. There were carriage drives, too, so ingeniously managed that the visitor could be led to believe the space ten times greater than it was in reality. The whole inside and out savored strongly of the theatre, and every device of good or bad taste – the latter largely predominating – had its inspiration in the stage.

As we drove under the arched entrance gate, over which a crowned leopard – the Norcott crest – was proudly rampant, I felt a strange throb at my heart that proved the old leaven was still alive within me, and that the feeling of being the son of a man of rank and fortune had a strong root in my heart.

From the deep reverence of the gorgeous porter, who wore an embroidered leather belt over his shoulder, to the trim propriety and order of the noiseless avenue, all bespoke an amount of state and grandeur that appealed very powerfully to me, and I can still recall how the bronze lamps that served to light the approach struck me as something wonderfully fine, as the morning's sun glanced on their crested tops.

The carriage drew up at the foot of a large flight of marble steps, which led to a terrace covered by a long veranda.

Under, the shade of this two gentlemen sat at breakfast, both unknown to me. "Whom have we here?" cried the elder, a fat, middle-aged man of coarse features and stern expression, – "whom have we here?"

The younger – conspicuous by a dressing-gown and cap that glittered with gold embroidery – looked lazily over the top of his newspaper, and said, "That boy of Norcott's, I take it; he was to arrive to-day."

This was the first time I heard an expression that my ears were soon to be well familiar to, and I cannot tell how bitterly the words insulted me. "Who were they," I asked myself, "who, under my father's roof, could dare so to call me! and why was I not styled Sir Roger Norcott's son, and not thus disparagingly, 'that boy of Norcott's'?"

I walked slowly up the steps among these men as defiantly as though there was a declared enmity between us, and was proceeding straight towards the door, when the elder called out, "Holloa, youngster, come here and report yourself! You 've just come, have n't you?"

"I have just come," said I, slowly; "but when I report myself it shall be to my father, Sir Roger Norcott."

"You got that, Hotham, and I must say you deserved it too," said the younger in a low tone, which my quick hearing, however, caught.

"Will you have some breakfast with us?" said the elder, with a faint laugh, as though he enjoyed the encounter.

"No, I thank you, sir," said I, stiffly, and passed on into the house.

"Master Digby," said a smart little man in black, who for a moment or two puzzled me whether he was a guest or a servant, "may I show you to your room, sir? Sir Roger is not up; he seldom rings for his bath before one o'clock; but he said he would have it earlier to-day."

"And what is your name, pray?"

"Nixon, sir. Mr. Nixon, Sir Roger is pleased to call me for distinction' sake; the lower servants require it."

"Tell me then, Mr. Nixon, who are the two gentlemen I saw at breakfast outside?"

"The stoutish gentleman, sir, is Captain Hotham, of the Royal Navy; the other, with the Turkish pipe, is Mr. Cleremont, Secretary to the Legation here. Great friends of Sir Roger's, sir. Dine here three or four times a week, and have their rooms always kept for them."

The appearance of my room, into which Nixon now ushered me, went far to restore me to a condition of satisfaction. It was the most perfect little bedroom it is possible to imagine, and Nixon never wearied in doing the honors of displaying it.

"Here's your library, sir. You've only to slide this mirror into the wall; and here are all your books. This press is your armory. Sir Roger gave the order himself for that breech-loader at Liège. This small closet has your bath, – always ready, as you see, sir, – hot and cold; and that knob yonder commands the shower-bath. It smells fresh of paint here just now, sir, for it was only finished on Saturday; and the men are coming to-day to fix a small iron staircase from your balcony down to the garden. Sir Roger said he was sure you would like it."

I was silent for a moment, – a moment of exquisite revery, – and then I asked if there were always people visitors at the Villa.

"I may say, sir, indeed, next to always. We haven't dined alone since March last."

"How many usually come to dinner?"

"Five or seven, sir; always an odd number. Seldom more than seven, and never above eleven, except a state dinner to some great swell going through."

"No ladies, of course?"

"Pardon me, sir. The Countess Vander Neeve dined here yesterday; Madam Van Straaten, and Mrs. Cleremont – Excuse me, sir, there's Sir Roger's bell. I must go and tell him you've arrived."

When Nixon left me, I sat for full twenty minutes, like one walking out of a trance, and asking myself how much was real, and how much fiction, of all around me?

My eyes wandered over the room, and from the beautiful little Gothic clock on the mantelpiece to the gilded pineapple from which my bed-curtains descended, – everything seemed of matchless beauty to me. Could I ever weary of admiring them? Would they seem to me every morning as I awoke as tasteful and as elegant as now they appeared to me? Oh, if dear mamma could but see them! If she but knew with what honor I was received, would not the thought go far to assuage the grief our separation cost her? And, last of all, came the thought, if she herself were here to live with me, to read with me, to be my companion as she used to be, – could life offer anything to compare with such happiness? And why should not this be? If papa really should love me, why might I not lead him to see to whom I owed all that made me worthy of his love?

"Breakfast is served, sir, in the small breakfast-room," said a servant, respectfully.

"You must show me where that is," said I, rising to follow him.

And now we walked along a spacious corridor, and descended a splendid stair of white marble, with gilded banisters, and across an octagon hall, with a pyramid of flowering plants in the centre, and into a large gallery with armor on the walls, that I wished greatly to linger over and examine, and then into a billiard-room, and at last into the small breakfast-parlor, where a little table was laid out, and another servant stood in readiness to serve me.

"Mr. Eccles, sir, will be down in a moment, if you 'll be pleased to wait for him," said the man.

"And who is Mr. Eccles?" asked I.

"The gentleman as is to be your tutor, sir, I believe," replied he, timidly; "and he said perhaps you 'd make the tea, sir."

"All right," said I, opening the caddy, and proceeding to make myself at home at once. "What is here?"

"Devilled kidneys, sir; and this is fried mackerel. Mr. Eccles takes oysters; but he won't have them opened till he's down. Here he is, sir."

The door was now flung open, and a good-looking young man, with a glass stuck in one eye, entered, and with a cheery but somewhat affected voice, called out, —

"Glad to see you, Digby, my boy; hope I have not starved you out waiting for me?"

"I'm very hungry, sir, but not quite starved out," said I, half amazed at the style of man selected to be my guide, and whose age at most could not be above three or four and twenty.

"You haven't seen your father yet, of course, nor won't these two hours. Yes, Gilbert, let us have the oysters. I always begin with oysters and a glass of sauterne; and, let me tell you, your father's sauterne is excellent Not that I counsel *you*, however, to start with wine at breakfast. I have n't told you that I 'm to be your tutor," said he, filling his glass; "and here's to our future fellowship."

I smiled and sipped my tea to acknowledge the toast, and he went on, —

"You mustn't be afraid that I 'll lean too heavily on you, Digby, – at least, at first. My system is, never make education a punishment. There's nothing that a gentleman – mind, I say a gentleman – ought to know that he cannot acquire as easily and as pleasantly as he does field-sports. If a man has to live by his wits, he must drudge; there's no help for it. And – But here come the oysters. Ain't they magnificent? Let me give you one piece of instruction while the occasion serves; let no one ever persuade you that Colchester oysters equal the Ostend. They have neither the plumpness nor the juiciness, and still less have they that fresh odor of the sea that gives such zest to appetite. One of these days I shall ask you what Horace says of oysters, and where. You never heard of Horace, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I was reading the 'Odes' when I came away."

"And with whom, pray?"

"With mamma, sir."

"And do you mean to say mamma knew Latin?"

"Yes, sir; she learned it to teach me. She worked far harder than I did, and I could never come up with her."

"Ah, yes, I see; but all that sort of learning – that irregular study – is a thing to be grubbed up. If I were to be frank with you, Digby, I 'd say I 'd rather have you in total ignorance than with that smattering of knowledge a mamma's teaching is sure to imply. What had you read before Horace?"

"'Caesar's Commentaries,' sir, an 'Æneid' of Virgil, two plays of Terence – "

"Any Greek? – anything of Euripedes or Aristophanes, eh?" asked he, mockingly.

"No, sir; we were to begin the New Testament after the holidays; for I had just gone over the grammar twice."

"With mamma, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

He helped himself to a cutlet, and as he poured the Harvey's sauce over it, it was plain to see that he was not thinking of what was before him, but employed in another and different direction. After a considerable pause he turned his eyes full upon me, and with a tone of far more serious import than he had yet used, said, "We 're not very long acquainted, Digby; but I have a trick of reading people through their faces, and I feel I can trust you." He waited for some remark from me, but I made none, and he went on: "With an ordinary boy of your age, – indeed, I might go farther, and say with any other boy – I 'd not venture on the confidence I am now about to make; but a certain instinct tells me I run no danger in trusting *you*."

"Is it a secret, sir?"

"Well, in one sense it *is* a secret; but why do you ask?"

"Because mamma told me to avoid secrets; to have none of my own, and know as little as I could of other people's."

"An excellent rule in general, but there are cases where it will not apply: this is one of them, for here the secret touches your own family. You are aware that papa and mamma do not live together? Don't flush up, Digby; I 'm not going to say one word that could hurt you. It is for your benefit – I might say for your absolute safety – that I speak now. Your father has one of the noblest natures a man ever possessed; he is a prince in generosity, and the very soul of honor, and, except pride, I don't believe he has a fault. This same pride, however, leads him to fancy he can never do wrong; indeed, he

does not admit that he ever made a mistake in his life, and, consequently, he does not readily forgive those to whom he imputes any disasters that befall him. Your mother's family are included in this condemned list, – I can't exactly say why; and for the same reason, or no reason, your mother herself. You must, therefore, take especial care that you never speak of one of these people."

"And mamma?"

"*Her* name least of all. There may come a time – indeed, it is sure to come – when this difficulty can be got over; but any imprudence now – the smallest mistake – would destroy this chance. Of course it's very hard on you, my poor fellow, to be debarred from the very theme you 'd like best to dwell on; but when you know the danger – not merely danger, but the positive certainty of mischief – a chance word might bring about, I read you very ill, or you 'll profit by my warning."

I bent my head to mean assent, but I could not speak.

"Papa will question you whether you have been to school, and what books you are reading, and your answer will be, 'Never at school; had all my lessons at home.' Not a word more, mind that, Digby. Say it now after me, that I may see if you can be exact to a syllable."

I repeated the words correctly, and he patted me affectionately on the shoulder, and said, —

"You and I are sure to get on well together. When I meet with a boy, who, besides being intelligent, is a born gentleman, I never hesitate about treating him as my equal, save in that knowledge of life I 'm quite ready to share with him. I don't want to be a Pope with my pupil, and say, 'You are not to do this, or think that,' and give no reason why. You 'll always find me ready to discuss with you, and talk over anything that puzzles you. I was not treated in that fashion myself, and I know well what the repressive system has cost me. You follow me, don't you, in what I say?"

"Yes, sir; I think I understand it all."

Whether I looked as if my words had more meaning than they expressed, or that some sort of misgiving was working within him that he had been hasty in his confidence, I know not; but he arose suddenly, and said, "I must go and get a cigarette." And with that he left me.

CHAPTER IV. THE VILLA MALIBRAN

For some hours I wandered over the house, admiring the pictures and the bronzes and the statuettes, and the hundreds of odd knick-knacks of taste or curiosity that filled the *salons*. The treasures of art were all new to me, and I thought I could never weary of gazing on some grand landscape by Both, or one of those little interiors of Dutch life by Ostade or Mieris. It seemed to me the very summit of luxury, that all these glorious objects should be there, awaiting as it were the eye of him who owned them, patient slaves of his pleasure, to be rewarded by, perhaps, a hurried glance as he passed. The tempered light, the noiseless footsteps, as one trod the triple-piled carpet, the odor of rich flowers everywhere, imparted a dreaminess to the sense of enjoyment that, after long, long years, I can recall and almost revive by an effort of memory.

I met no one as I loitered through the rooms, for I was in a part of the house only opened on great occasions or for large receptions; and so I strayed on, lost in wonderment at the extent and splendor of a scene which, to my untutored senses, seemed of an actually royal magnificence. Having reached what I believed to be the limit of the suite of rooms, I was about to retrace my steps, when I saw that a small octagon tower opened from an angle of the room, though no apparent doorway led into it. This puzzle interested me at once, and I set about to resolve it, if I might. I opened one of the windows to inspect the tower on the outside, and saw that no stairs led up to it, nor any apparent communication existed with the rest of the house. I bethought me of the sliding mirror which in my own room concealed the bookcase, and set to work to see if some similar contrivance had not been employed here; but I searched in vain. Defeated and disappointed, I was turning away when, passing my hand along the margin of a massive picture-frame, I touched a small button; and as I did so, with a faint sound like a wail, the picture moved slowly, like an opening door, and disclosed the interior of the tower. I entered at once, my curiosity now raised to a point of intensity to know what had been so carefully and cunningly guarded from public view. What a blank disappointment was mine! The little room, about nine or ten feet in diameter, contained but a few straw-bottomed chairs, and a painted table on which a tea-service of common blue-ware stood. A Dutch clock was on a bracket at one side of the window, and a stuffed bird – a grouse, I believe – occupied another. A straight-backed old sofa, covered with a vulgar chintz, stood against the wall; an open book, with a broken fan in the leaves, to mark the place, lay on the sofa. The book was “Paul and Virginia”. A common sheet almanac was nailed against the wall, but over the printed columns of the months a piece of white paper was pasted, on which, in large letters, was written “June 11, 18 – . Dies infausta.”

I started. I had read that date once before in my mother’s prayer-book, and had learned it was her marriage-day. As a ray of sunlight displays in an instant every object within its beam, I at once saw the meaning of every detail around me. These were the humble accessories of that modest home from which my dear mother was taken; these were the grim reminders of the time my father desired to perpetuate as an undying sorrow. I trembled to think what a nature I should soon be confronted with, and how terrible must be the temper of a man whose resentments asked for such aliment to maintain them! I stole away abashed at my own intrusiveness, and feeling that I was rightfully punished by the misery that overwhelmed me. How differently now did all the splendor appear to me as I retraced my steps! how defiantly I gazed on that magnificence which seemed to insult the poverty I had just quitted! What a contrast to the nurtured spitefulness of his conduct was my poor mother’s careful preservation of a picture representing my father in his uniform. A badly painted thing it was; but with enough of likeness to recall him. And as such, in defiance of neglect and ill-usage and insult, she preserved it, – a memorial, not of happier days, but of a time when she dreamed of happiness to come. While I was thus thinking, seeking in my mind comparisons between them, which certainly redounded but little to his credit, Nixon came up to me, saying, “Oh, Master Digby, we ‘ve been

looking for you in every direction. Sir Roger has asked over and over why you have not been to see him; and I 'm afraid you 'll find him displeased at your delay."

"I 'm ready now," said I, drily, and followed him.

My father was in his study, lying on a sofa, and cutting the leaves of a new book as I entered; and he did not interrupt the operation to offer me his hand.

"So, sir," said he, calmly and coldly, "you have taken your time to present yourself to me? Apparently you preferred making acquaintance with the house and the grounds."

"I am very sorry, sir," I began; "but I did not know you had risen. Nixon told me about one or two – "

"Indeed! I was not aware that you and Mr. Nixon had been discussing my habits. Come nearer; nearer still. What sort of dress is this? Is it a smock-frock you have on?"

"No, sir. It's a blouse to keep my jacket clean. I have got but one."

"And these shoes; are they of your own making?"

"No, sir. I could n't make even as good as these."

"You are a very poor-looking object, I must say. What was Antoine about that he did n't, at least, make you look like a gentleman, eh? Can you answer me that?"

"No, sir, I cannot"

"Nor I, either," said he, sighing. "Have you been equally neglected inside as out? Have you learned to read?"

"Yes, sir."

"And to write?"

"Yes, sir."

"Write my name, then, there, on that piece of paper, and let me see it."

I drew nigh, and wrote in a fall, bold hand, Roger Norcott.

"Why not Sir Roger Norcott, boy? Why not give me my name and title too?"

"You said your name, sir, and I thought – "

"No matter what you thought. This literalism comes of home breeding," muttered he to himself; "they are made truthful at the price of being vulgar. What do you know besides reading and writing?"

"A little Latin, sir, and some French, and some German, and three books of Euclid, and the Greek grammar – "

"There, there, that's more than enough. It will tax your tutor's ingenuity to stub up all this rubbish, and prepare the soil for real acquirement. I was hoping I should see you a savage: a fresh, strong-natured impulsive savage! What I 'm to do with you, with your little peddling knowledge of a score of things, I can't imagine. I 'd swear you can neither ride, row, nor fence, never handled a cricket-ball or a single-stick?"

"Quite true, sir; but I 'd like to do every one of them."

"Of course you have been taught music?"

"Yes, sir; the piano, and a little singing."

"That completes it," cried he, flinging his book from him. "They 've been preparing you for a travelling circus, while I wanted to make you a gentleman. Mind me now, sir, and don't expect that I ever repeat my orders to any one. What I say once I mean to be observed. Let your past life be entirely forgotten by you, – a thing that had no reality; begin from this day – from this very room – a new existence, which is to have neither link nor tie to what has gone before it. The persons you will see here, their ways, their manners, their tone, will be examples for your imitation; copy them, not servilely nor indiscriminately, but as you will find how their traits will blend with your own nature. Never tell an untruth, never accept an insult without redress, be slow about forming friendships, and where you hate, hate thoroughly. That's enough for the present. Ask Mr. Eccles to have the kindness to take you to his tailor and order some clothes. You must dine alone till you are suitably dressed. After that you shall come to my table. One thing more and you may go: don't ever approach me

with tales or complaints of any one; right yourself where you can, and where you cannot, bear your grievance silently. You can change nothing, alter nothing, here; you are a guest, but a guest over whom I exercise full control. If you please me, it will be well for you; if not, you understand – it will cost me little to tell you so. Go. Go now." He motioned me to leave him, and I went. Straight to my room I went, and sat down at once to write it all to mother. My heart swelled with indignation at the way I had been received, and a hundred times over did I say to myself that there was no poverty, no hardship I would not face rather than buy a life of splendor on such ignominious terms. Oh, if I could but get back again to the little home I had quitted, how I would bless the hour that restored me to peace of mind and self-respect! As I wrote, my indignation warmed with every line. I found that my passion was actually mastering my reason. Better to finish this, later on, – when I shall be cooler, thought I; and I walked to my window and opened it. There were voices of people speaking in the paddock below, and I leaned over the balcony and saw the two men I had seen at breakfast, seated on rustic chairs, watching a young horse being broken to the saddle. The well-worn ring in the grass showed that this spot was reserved for such purposes, nor was I displeased to know that such a source of interest lay so near to me.

"Isn't he one of your Mexicans, George?" asked Captain Hotham.

"No, sir, he's a Hungarian-bred 'un. Master calls him a Jucker, whatever that is."

"Plenty of action, anyhow."

"A little too much, sir; that's his fault. He's a-comin' now, and it's all they can do to keep him going over the park paling. Take this one back," said he to the groom, who was ringing a heavy-shouldered, ungainly colt in the ring.

"You 'll not gain much credit by that animal, George," said Cleremont, as he lighted a cigar.

"He ain't a beauty, sir; he 's low before, and he's cow-hocked behind; but Sir Roger says he's the best blood in Norfolk. Take care, take care, sir! the skittish devil never knows where he 'll send his hind-legs. Steady, Tom, don't check him: why, he's sweating as if he had been round the two-mile course."

The animal that called for this criticism was a dark chestnut, but so bathed in sweat as to appear almost black. He was one of those cross breeds between the Arab and the western blood, that gain all the beauty of head and crest and straightly formed croup, and yet have length of body and depth of rib denied to the pure Arab. To my thinking he was the most perfect creature I had ever seen, and as he bounded and plunged, there was a supple grace and pliancy about him indescribably beautiful.

George now unloosened the long reins which were attached to the heavy surcingle, and after walking the animal two or three times round the circle, suffered him to go free. As if astonished at his liberty, the young creature stood still for a minute or two, and sniffed the air, and then gave one wild bound and headlong plunge, as though he were going straight into the earth; after which he looked timidly about him, and then walked slowly along in the track worn by the others.

"He's far quieter than the last time I saw him," said Hotham.

"He's gettin' more sense every day, sir," replied George; "he don't scratch his head with his hind-leg now, sir, and he don't throw hisself down neither."

"He has n't given up biting, I see," said Cleremont.

"No, sir; and they tell me them breed never does; but it's only play, sir."

"I'll give you six months before you can call him fit to ride, George."

"My name ain't Spunner, sir, if the young gent as come yesterday don't back him in six weeks' time."

"And is it for the boy Norcott intends him?" asked Cleremont of Hotham.

"So he told me yesterday; and though I warned him that he hadn't another boy if that fellow should come to grief, he only said, 'If he's got *my* blood in him, he 'll keep his saddle; and if he has n't, he had better make room for another.'"

"Ain't he a-going beautiful now?" cried George, as the animal swung slowly along at a gentle trot, every step of which was as measured as clockwork.

"You 'll have to teach the youngster also, George," said Hotham. "I 'm sure he never backed a horse in his life."

"Nay, sir, he rode very pretty indeed when he was six years old. I didn't put him on a Shelty, or one of the hard-mouthed 'uns, but a nice little lively French mare, that reared up the moment he bore hard on her bit; so that he learned to sit on his beast without holdin' on by the bridle."

"He's a loutish boy," said Cleremont to the Captain. "I 'll wager what you like they'll not make a horseman of him."

"Ecoles says he's a confounded pedant," said the other; "that he wanted to cap Horace with him at breakfast."

"Poor Bob! that was n't exactly his line; but he 'd hold his own in Balzac or Fred Soulié."

"Oh, now I see what Norcott was driving at when he said, 'I wanted the stuff to make a gentleman, and they 've sent me the germ of a school-usher.' I said, 'Send him to sea with me. I shall be afloat in March, and I 'll take him.'"

"Well, what answer did he make you?"

"It was n't a civil one," said the other, gruffly. "He said, 'You misapprehend me, Hotham. A sea-captain is only a boatswain in epaulettes. I mean the boy to be a gentleman.'"

"And you bore that?"

"Yes. Just as well as you bore his telling you at dinner on Sunday last that a Legation secretary was a cross between an old lady and a clerk in the Customs."

"A man who scatters impertinences broadcast is only known for the merits of his cook or his cellar."

"Both of which are excellent."

"Shall I send him in, sir?" asked George, as he patted the young horse and caressed him.

"Well, Eccles," cried Hotham, as the tutor lounged lazily tip, "what do you say to the mount they 're going to put your pupil on?"

"I wish they 'd wait a bit I shall not be ready for orders till next spring, and I 'd rather they 'd not break his neck before February or March."

"Has Norcott promised you the presentation, Bob?"

"No. He can't make up his mind whether he 'll give it to me or to a Plymouth Brother, or to that fellow that was taken up at Salford for blasphemy, and who happens to be in full orders."

"With all his enmity to the Established Church, I think he might be satisfied with you," said Cleremont.

"Very neat, and very polite too," said Eccles; "but that this is the Palace of Truth, I might feel nettled."

"Is it, by Jove?" cried Hotham. "Then it must be in the summer months, when the house is shut up. Who has got a strong cigar? These Cubans of Norcott's have no flavor. It must be close on luncheon-time."

"I can't join you, for I 've to go into town, and get my young bear trimmed, and his nails cut. 'Make him presentable,' Norcott said, and I 've had easier tasks to do."

So saying, Eccles moved off in one direction, while Hotham and Cleremont strolled away in another; and I was left to my own reflections, which were not few.

CHAPTER V. A FIRST DINNER-PARTY

I was made “presentable” in due time, and on the fifth day after my arrival made my appearance at the dinner-table. “Sit there, sir,” said my father, “opposite me.” And I was not sorry to perceive that an enormous vase with flowers effectually screened me from his sight. The post of honor thus accorded me was a sufficient intimation to my father’s guests how he intended me to be treated by them; and as they were without an exception all hangers-on and dependants, – men who dined badly or not at all when uninvited to his table, – they were marvellously quick in understanding that I was to be accepted as his heir, and, after himself, the person of most consideration there.

Besides the three individuals I have already mentioned, our party included two foreigners, – Baron Steinmetz, an aide-de-camp of the King, and an Italian duke, San Giovanni. The Duke sat on my father’s right, the Baron on mine. The conversation during dinner was in French, which I followed imperfectly, and was considerably relieved on discovering that the German spoke French with difficulty, and blundered over his genders as hopelessly as I should have done had I attempted to talk. “Ach Gott,” muttered he to himself in German, “when people were seeking for a common language, why did n’t they take one that all humanity could pronounce?”

“So meine ich auch, Herr Baron,” cried I; “I quite agree with you.”

He turned towards me with a look of-positive affection, on seeing I knew German, and we both began to talk together at once with freedom.

“What’s the boy saying?” cried my father, as he caught the sounds of some glib speech of mine. “Don’t let him bore you with his bad French, Steinmetz.”

“He is charming me with his admirable German,” said the Baron. “I can’t tell when I have met a more agreeable companion.”

This was, of course, a double flattery, for my German was very bad, and my knowledge on any subject no better; but the fact did not diminish the delight the praise afforded me.

“Do you know German, Digby?” asked my father.

“A little, – a very little, sir.”

“The fellow would say he knew Sanscrit if you asked him,” whispered Hotham to Eccles; but my sharp ears overheard him.

“Come, that’s better than I looked for,” said my father. “What do you say, Eccles? Is there stuff there?”

“Plenty, Sir Roger; enough and to spare. I count on Digby to do me great credit yet.”

“What career do you mean your son to follow?” asked the Italian, while he nodded to me over his wine-glass in most civil recognition.

“I’ll not make a sailor of him, like that sea-wolf yonder; nor a diplomatist, like my silent friend in the corner. Neither shall he be a soldier till British armies begin to do something better than hunt out illicit stills and protect process-servers.”

“A politician, perhaps?”

“Certainly not, sir. There ‘s no credit in belonging to a Parliament brought down to the meridian of soap-boilers and bankrupt bill-brokers.”

“There’s the Church, Sir Roger,” chimed in Eccles.

“There’s the Pope’s Church, with some good prizes in the wheel; but your branch, Master Bob, is a small concern, and it is trembling, besides. No. I ‘ll make him none of these. It is in our vulgar passion for money-getting we throw our boys into this or that career in life, and we narrow to the stupid formula of some profession abilities that were meant for mankind. I mean Digby to deal with the world; and to fit him for the task, he shall learn as much of human nature as I can afford to teach him.”

"Ah, there's great truth in that, very great truth; very wise and very original too," were the comments that ran round the board.

Excited by this theme, and elated by his success, my father went on: —

"If you want a boy to ride, you don't limit him to the quiet hackney that neither pulls nor shies, neither bolts nor plunges; and so, if you wish your son to know his fellow-men, you don't keep him in a charmed circle of deans and archdeacons, but you throw him fearlessly into contact with old debauchees like Hotham, or abandoned scamps of the style of Cleremont," – and here he had to wait till the laughter subsided to add, "and, last of all, you take care to provide him with a finishing tutor like Eccles."

"I knew your turn was coming, Bob," whispered Hotham; but still all laughed heartily, well satisfied to stand ridicule themselves if others were only pilloried with them.

When dinner was over, we sat about a quarter of an hour, not more, and then adjourned to coffee in a small room that seemed half boudoir, half conservatory. As I loitered about, having no one to speak to, I found myself at last in a little shrubbery, through which a sort of labyrinth meandered. It was a taste of the day revived from olden times, and amazed me much by its novelty. While I was puzzling myself to find out the path that led out of the entanglement, I heard a voice I knew at once to be Hotham's, saying, —

"Look at that boy of Norcott's: he's not satisfied with the imbroglio within doors, but he must go out to mystify himself with another."

"I don't much fancy that young gentleman," said Cleremont.

"And I only half. Bob Eccles says we have all made a precious mistake in advising Norcott to bring him back."

"Yet it was our only chance to prevent it. Had we opposed the plan, he was sure to have determined on it. There's nothing for it but your notion, Hotham; let him send the brat to sea with you."

"Yes, I think that would do it." And now they had walked out of earshot, and I heard no more.

If I was not much reassured by these droppings, I was far more moved by the way in which I came to hear them. Over and over had my dear mother cautioned me against listening to what was not meant for me; and here, simply because I found myself the topic, I could not resist the temptation to learn how men would speak of me. I remembered well the illustration by which my mother warned me as to the utter uselessness of the sort of knowledge thus gained. She told me of a theft some visitor had made at Abbotsford, – the object stolen being a signet-ring Lord Byron had given to Sir Walter. The man who stole this could never display the treasure without avowing himself a thief. He had, therefore, taken what from the very moment of the fraud became valueless. He might gaze on it in secret with such pleasure as his self-accusings would permit. He might hug himself with the thought of possession; but how could that give pleasure, or how drown the everlasting shame the mere sight of the object must revive? So would it be, my mother said, with him who unlawfully possessed himself of certain intelligence which he could not employ without being convicted of the way he gained it The lesson thus illustrated had not ceased to be remembered by me; and though I tried all my casuistry to prove that I listened without intention, almost without being aware of it, I was shocked and grieved to find how soon I was forgetting the precepts she had labored so hard to impress upon me.

She had also said, "By the same rule which would compel you to restore to its owner what you had become possessed of wrongfully, you are bound to let him you have accidentally overheard know to what extent you are aware of his thoughts."

"This much, at least, I can do," said I: "I can tell these gentlemen that I heard a part of their conversation."

I walked about for nigh an hour revolving these things in my head, and at last returned to the house. As I entered the drawing-room, I was struck by the silence. My father, Cleremont, and the two foreigners were playing whist at one end of the room, Hotham and Eccles were seated at chess

at another. Not a word was uttered save some brief demand of the game, or a murmured “check,” by the chess-players. Taking my place noiselessly beside these latter, I watched the board eagerly, to try and acquire the moves.

“Do you understand the game?” whispered Hotham.

“No, sir,” said I, in the same cautious tone.

“I ‘ll show you the moves, when this party is over.” And I muttered my thanks for the courtesy.

“This is intolerable!” cried out my father. “That confounded whispering is far more distracting than any noise. I have lost all count of my game. I say, Eccles, why is not that boy in bed?”

“I thought you said he might sup, Sir Roger.”

“If I did, it was because I thought he knew how to conduct himself. Take him away at once.”

And Eccles rose, and with more kindness than I had expected from him, said, “Come, Digby, I ‘ll go too, for we have both to be early risers to-morrow.”

Thus ended my first day in public, and I have no need to say what a strange conflict filled my head that night as I dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER VI. HOW THE DAYS WENT OYER

If I give one day of my life, I give, with very nearly exactness, the unbroken course of my existence. I rose very early – hours ere the rest of the household was stirring – to work at my lessons, which Mr. Eccles apportioned for me with a liberality that showed he had the highest opinion of my abilities, or – as I discovered later on to be the truth – a profound indifference about them. Thus, a hundred lines of Virgil, thirty of Xenophon, three propositions of Euclid, with a sufficient amount of history, geography, and logic, would be an ordinary day's work. It is fair I should own that when the time of examination came, I found him usually imbibing seltzer and curacoa, with a wet towel round his head; or, in his robuster moments, practising the dumbbells to develop his muscles. So that the interrogatories-were generally in this wise: —

"How goes it, Digby? What of the Homer, eh?"

"'It 's Xenophon, sir."

"'To be sure it is. I was forgetting, as a man might who had my headache. And, by the way, Digby, why will your father give Burgundy at supper instead of Bordeaux? Some one must surely have told him accidentally it was a deadly poison, for he adheres to it with desperate fidelity."

"I believe I know my Greek, sir," would I say, modestly, to recall him to the theme.

"Of course you do; you'd cut a sorry figure here this morning if you did not know it. No, sir; I 'm not the man to enjoy your father's confidence, and take his money, and betray my trust His words to me were, 'Make him a gentleman, Eccles. I could find scores of fellows to cram him with Greek particles and double equations, but I want the man who can turn out the perfect article, – the gentleman.' Come now, what relations subsisted between Cyrus and Xenophon?"

"Xenophon coached him, sir."

"So he did. Just strike a light for me. My head is splitting for want of a cigar. You may have a cigarette too. I don't object Virgil we'll keep till to-morrow. Virgil was a muff, after all. Virgil was a decentish sort of Martin Tupper, Digby. He had no wit, no repartee, no smartness; he prosed about ploughs and shepherds, like a maudlin old squire; or he told a very shady sort of anecdote about Dido, which I always doubted should be put into the hands of youth. Horace is free, too, a thought too free; but he could n't help it. Horace lived the same kind of life we do here, a species of roast-partridge and pretty woman sort of life; but then he was the gentleman always. If old Flaccus had lived now, he'd have been pretty much like Bob Eccles, and putting in his divinity lectures perhaps. By the way, I hope your father won't go and give away that small rectory in Kent. 'We who live to preach, must preach to live.' That is n't exactly the line, but it will do. Pulvis et umbra sumus, Digby; and take what care we may of ourselves, we must go back, as the judges say, to the place from whence we came. There, now, you 've had classical criticism, sound morality, worldly wisdom, and the rest of it; and, with your permission, we'll pack up the books, and stand prorogued till – let me see – Saturday next."

Of course I moved no amendment, and went my way rejoicing.

From that hour I was free to follow my own inclinations, which usually took a horsey turn; and as the stable offered several mounts, I very often rode six hours a day. Hotham was always to be found in the pistol-gallery about four of an afternoon, and I usually joined him there, and speedily became more than his match.

"Well, youngster," he would say, when beaten and irritable, "I can beat your head off at billiards, anyhow."

But I was not long in robbing him of even this boast, and in less than three months I could defy the best player in the house. The fact was, I had in a remarkable degree that small talent for games of every kind which is a speciality with certain persons. I could not only learn a game quickly, but almost always attain considerable skill in it.

"So, sir," said my father to me one day at dinner, – and nothing was more rare than for him to address a word to me, and I was startled as he did so, – "so, sir, you are going to turn out an Admirable Crichton on my hands, it seems. I hear of nothing but your billiard-playing, your horsemanship, and your cricketing, while Mr. Eccles tells me that your progress with him is equally remarkable."

He stopped and seemed to expect me to make some rejoinder; but I could not utter a word, and felt overwhelmed at the observation and notice his speech had drawn upon me.

"It's better I should tell you at once," resumed my father, "that I dislike prodigies. I dislike because I distrust them. The fellow who knows at fourteen what he might reasonably have known at thirty is not unlikely to stop short at fifteen and grow no more. I don't wish to be personal, but I have heard it said Cleremont was a very clever boy."

The impertinence of this speech, and the laughter it at once excited, served to turn attention away from me; but, through the buzz and murmur around, I overheard Cleremont say to Hotham, "I shall pull him up short one of these days, and you 'll see an end of all this."

"Now," continued my father, "if Eccles had told me that the boy was a skilful hand at sherry-cobbler, or a rare judge of a Cuban cigar, I 'd have reposed more faith in the assurance than when he spoke of his classics."

"He ain't bad at a gin-sling with bitters, that I must say," said Eccles, whose self-control or good-humor, or mayhap some less worthy trait, always carried him successfully over a difficulty.

"So, sir," said my father, turning again on me, "the range of your accomplishments is complete. You might be a tapster or a jockey. When the nobility of France came to ruin in the Revolution, the best blood of the kingdom became barbers and dancing-masters: so that when some fine morning that gay gentleman yonder will discover that he is a beggar, he 'll have no difficulty in finding a calling to suit his tastes, and square with his abilities. What's Hotham grumbling about? Will any one interpret him for me?"

"Hotham is saying that this claret is corked," said the sea-captain, with a hoarse loud voice.

"Bottled at home!" said my father, "and, like your own education, Hotham, spoiled for a beggarly economy."

"I 'm glad you 've got it," muttered Cleremont, whose eyes glistened with malignant spite. "I have had enough of this; I 'm for coffee," and he arose as he spoke.

"Has Cleremont left us?" asked my father.

"Yes; that last bottle has finished him. I told you before, Nixon knows nothing about wine. I saw that hogshead lying bung up for eight weeks before it was drawn off for bottling."

"Why didn't you speak to him about it, then?"

"And be told that I'm not his master, eh? You don't seem to know, Norcott, that you 've got a houseful of the most insolent servants in Christendom. Cleremont's wife wanted the chestnuts yesterday in the phaeton, and George refused her: she might take the cobs, or nothing."

"Quite true," chimed in Eccles; "and the fellow said, 'I 'm a-taking the young horses out in the break, and if the missis wants to see the chestnuts, she'd better come with *me*.'**

"And as to a late breakfast now, it's quite impossible; they delay and delay till they run you into luncheon," growled Hotham.

"They serve me my chocolate pretty regularly," said my father, negligently, and he arose and strolled out of the room. As he went, he slipped his arm within mine, and said, in a half-whisper, "I suppose it will come to this, – I shall have to change my friends or my household. Which would you advise?"

"I 'd say the friends, sir."

"So should I, but that they would not easily find another place. There, go and see is the billiard-room lighted. I want to see you play a game with Cleremont."

Cleremont was evidently sulking under the sarcasm passed on him, and took up his cue to play with a bad grace.

"Who will have five francs on the party?" said my father. "I 'm going to back the boy."

"Make it pounds, Norcott," said Hotham.

"I'll give you six to five, in tens," said Cleremont to my father. "Will you take it?"

I was growing white and red by turns all this time. I was terrified at the thought that money was to be staked on my play, and frightened by the mere presence of my father at the table.

"The youngster is too nervous to play. Don't let him, Norcott," said Hotham, with a kindness I had not given him credit for.

"Give me the cue, Digby; I 'll take your place," said my father; and Cleremont and Hotham both drew nigh, and talked to him in a low tone.

"Eight and the stroke then be it," said my father, "and the bet in fifties." The others nodded, and Cleremont began the game.

I could not have believed I could have suffered the amount of intense anxiety that game cost me. Had my life been on the issue, I do not think I could have gone through greater alternations of hope and fear than now succeeded in my heart Cleremont started with eight points odds, and made thirty-two off the balls before my father began to play. He now took his place, and by the first stroke displayed a perfect mastery of the game. There was a sort of languid grace, an indolent elegance about all he did, that when the stroke required vigor or power made me tremble for the result; but somehow he imparted the exact amount of force needed, and the balls moved about here and there as though obedient to some subtle instinct of which the cue gave a mere sign. He scored forty-two points in a few minutes, and then drawing himself up, said, "There 's an eight-stroke now on the table. I 'll give any one three hundred Naps to two that I do it."

None spoke. "Or I 'll tell you what I 'll do. I 'll take fifty from each of you and draw the game!" Another as complete silence ensued. "Or here 's a third proposition, Give me fifty between you, and I 'll hand over the cue to the boy; he shall finish the game."

"Oh, no, sir! I beg you – I entreat – " I began; but already, "Done," had been loudly uttered by both together, and the bet was ratified.

"Don't be nervous, boy," said my father, handing me his cue. "You see what's on the balls. You cannon and hold the white, and land the red in the middle pocket. If you can't do the brilliant thing, and finish the game with an eight stroke, do the safe one, – the cannon or the hazard. But, above all, don't lose your stroke, sir. Mind that, for I've a pot of money on the game."

"I don't think you ought to counsel him, Norcott," said Cleremont. "If he's a player, he's fit to devise his own game."

"Oh, hang it, no," broke in Hotham; "Norcott has a perfect right to tell him what's on the table."

"If you object seriously, sir," said my father proudly, "the party is at an end."

"I put it to yourself," began Cleremont.

"You shall not appeal to me against myself, sir. You either withdraw your objection, or you maintain it."

"Of course he withdraws it," said Hotham, whose eyes never wandered from my father's face.

Cleremont nodded a half-unwilling assent.

"You will do me the courtesy to speak, perhaps," said my father; and every word came from him with a tremulous roll.

"Yes, yes, I agree. There was really nothing in my remark," said Cleremont, whose self-control seemed taxed to its last limit.

"There, go on, boy, and finish this stupid affair," said my father, and he turned to the chimney to light his cigar.

I leaned over the table, and a mist seemed to rise before me. I saw volumes of cloud rolling swiftly across, and meteors, or billiard-balls, I knew not which, shooting through them. I played and missed; I did not even strike a ball. A wild roar of laughter, a cry of joy, and a confused blending of several voices in various tones followed, and I stood there like one stunned into immobility.

Meanwhile Cleremont finished the game, and, clapping me gayly on the shoulder, cried, “I ‘m more grateful to you than your father is, my lad. That shaking hands of yours has made a difference of two hundred Naps to me.” I turned towards the fire; my father had left the room.

CHAPTER VII. A PRIVATE AUDIENCE

I had but reached my room when Eccles followed me to say my father wished to see me at once.

"Come, come, Digby," said Eccles, good-naturedly, "don't be frightened. Even if he should be angry with you, his passion passes soon over; and, if uncontradicted, he is never disposed to bear a grudge long. Go immediately, however, and don't keep him waiting."

I cannot tell with what a sense of abasement I entered my father's dressing-room; for, after all, it was the abject condition of my own mind that weighed me down.

"So, sir," said he, as I closed the door, "this is something I was not prepared for. You might be forty things, but I certainly did not suspect that a son of mine should be a coward."

Had my father ransacked his whole vocabulary for a term of insult, he could pot have found one to pain me like this.

"I am not a coward, sir," said I, reddening till I felt my face in a perfect glow.

"What!" cried he, passionately; "are you going to give me a proof of courage by daring to outrage *me?* Is it by sending back my words in my teeth you assume to be brave?"

"I ask pardon, sir," said I, humbly, "if I have replied rudely; but you called me by a name that made me forget myself. I hope you will forgive me."

"Sit down, there, sir; no, there." And he pointed to a more distant chair. "There are various sorts and shades of cowardice, and I would not have you tarnished with any one of them. The creature whose first thought, and indeed only one, in an emergency is his personal safety, and who, till that condition is secured, abstains from all action, is below contempt; him I will not even consider. But next to him – of course with a long interval – comes the fellow who is so afraid of a responsibility that the very thought of it unmans him. How did the fact of my wager come to influence you at all, sir? Why should you have had any thought but for the game you were playing, and how it behoved you to play it? How came I and these gentlemen to stand between you and your real object, if it were not that a craven dread of consequences had got the ascendancy in your mind? If men were to be beset by these calculations, if every fellow carried about him an armor of sophistry like this, he 'd have no hand free to wield a weapon, and the world would see neither men who storm a breach nor board an enemy. Till a man can so isolate and concentrate his faculties on what he has to do that all extraneous conditions cease to affect him, he will never be well served by his own powers; and he who is but half served is only half brave. There are times when the unreasoners are worth all the men of logic, remember that. And now go and sleep over it."

He motioned me to withdraw, but I could not bear to go till he had withdrawn the slur he had cast on me in the word coward. He looked at me steadfastly, but not harshly, for a moment or two, and then said, —

"You are not to think that it is out of regret for a lost sum of money I have read you this lecture. As to the wager itself, I am as well pleased that it ended as it did. These gentlemen are not rich, either of them. I can afford the loss. What I cannot afford is the way I lost it."

"But will you not say, sir, that I am no coward?" said I, faltering.

"I will withdraw the word," said he, slowly, "the very first time I shall see you deal with a difficulty without a thought for what it may cost you. There; good-night; leave me now. I mean to have a ride with you in the morning."

And he nodded twice, and smiled, and dismissed me.

There was nothing, certainly, very flattering to me in this reception. It cost me dearly while it lasted, and yet – I cannot explain why – I came away with a feeling of affection for my father, and a desire to stand well in his esteem, such as I had not experienced till that moment. It was his utter indifference up to this that had chilled and repelled me. Any show of interest, anything that might evidence that he cared what I was or what I might become, was so much better than this apathy

that I welcomed the change with delight. Accustomed to the tender solicitude of a loving mother, no niggard of her praise, and more given to sympathize than blame, the stern reserve of my father's manner had been a terrible reverse, and over and over had I asked myself why he took me from where I was loved and cherished, to live this life of ceremonious observance and cold deference.

To know that he felt even such interest in me as this, was to restore me to self-esteem at once. He would not have his son a coward, he said; and as I felt in my heart that I was not a coward, as I knew I was ready then and there to confront any peril he could propose to me, all that the speech left in my memory was a sense of self-satisfaction.

In each of the letters I had received from my mother she impressed on me how important it was that I should win my father's affection, and now a hope flashed across me that I might do this. I sat down to tell her all that had passed between us; but somehow, in recounting the incident of the billiard-room, I wandered away into a description of the house, its splendors and luxury, and of the life of costly pleasure that we were living. "You will ask, dearest mamma," I wrote, "how and when I find time to study amidst all these dissipations? and I grieve to own that I do very little. Mr. Eccles says he is satisfied with me; but I fear it is more because I obtrude little on his notice than that I am making any progress. We are still in the same scene of the Adrian that I began with you; and as to the Greek, we leave it over for Saturdays, and the Saturdays get skipped. I have become a good shot with the rifle; and George says I have the finest, lightest hand he knows on a horse, and that he 'll make me yet a regular steeple-chase horseman. I have a passion for riding, and sometimes get four mounts on a day. Indeed, papa takes no interest in the stable, and I give all the orders, and can have a team harnessed for me – which I do – when I am tired with the saddle. They have not quite given up calling me 'that boy of Norcott's;' only now, when they do so, it is to say how well he rides, and what a taste he shows for driving and shooting.

"Don't be afraid that I am neglecting my music. I play every day, and take singing lessons with an Italian: they call him the Count Guastalla; but I believe he is the tenor of the opera here, and only teaches me out of compliment to papa. He dines here nearly every day, and plays piquet with papa all the evening.

"There is a very beautiful lady comes here, – Madame Cleremont. She is the wife of the Secretary to the Legation. She is French, and has such pleasing ways, and is so gay, and so good-natured, and so fond of gratifying me in every way, that I delight in being with her; and we ride out together constantly, and I am now teaching her to drive the ponies, and she enjoys it just as I used myself. I don't think papa likes her, for he seldom speaks to her, and never takes her in to dinner if there is another lady in the room; and I suspect she feels this, for she is often very sad. I dislike Mr. Cleremont; he is always saying snappish things, and is never happy, no matter how merry we are. But papa seems to like him best of all the people here. Old Captain Hotham and I are great friends, though he's always saying, 'You ought to be at sea, youngster. This sort of life will only make a blackleg of you.' But I can't make out why, because I am very happy and have so much to interest and amuse me, I must become a scamp. Mdme. Cleremont says, too, it is not true; that papa is bringing me up exactly as he ought, that I will enter life as a gentleman, and not be passing the best years of my existence in learning the habits of the well-bred world. They fight bitterly over this every day; but she always gets the victory, and then kisses me, and says, 'Mon cher petit Digby, I 'll not have you spoiled, to please any vulgar prejudice of a tiresome old sea-captain,' This she whispers, for she would not offend him for anything. Dear mamma, how you would love her if you knew her! I believe I 'm to go to Rugby to school; but I hope not, for how I shall live like a schoolboy after all this happiness I don't know; and Mdme. Cleremont says she will never permit it; but she has no influence over papa, and how could she prevent it? Captain Hotham is always saying, 'If Norcott does not send that boy to Harrow or Rugby, or some of these places, he 'll graduate in the Marshalsea – that's a prison – before he's twenty.' I am so glad when a day passes without my being brought up for the subject of a discussion,

which papa always ends with, 'After all I was neither an Etonian nor Rugbeian, and I suspect I can hold my own with most men; and if that boy doesn't belie his breeding, perhaps he may do so too.'

"Nobody likes contradicting papa, especially when he says anything in a certain tone of voice, and whenever he uses this, the conversation turns away to something else.

"I forgot to say in my last, that your letters always come regularly. They arrive with papa's, and he sends them up to me at once, by his valet, Mons. Durand, who is always so nicely dressed, and has a handsomer watch-chain than papa.

"Mdme. Cleremont said yesterday: 'I'm so sorry not to know your dear mamma, Digby: but if I dared, I'd send her so many caresses, *de ma part*.' I said nothing at the time, but I send them now, and am your loving son,

"Digby Norcott."

This letter was much longer than it appears here. It filled several sides of note-paper, and occupied me till daybreak. Indeed, I heard the bell ringing for the workmen as I closed it, and shortly after a gentle tap came to my door, and George Spunner, our head groom, entered.

"I saw you at the window, Master Digby," said he, "and I thought I'd step up and tell you not to ride in spurs this morning. Sir Roger wants to see you on May Blossom, and you know she's a hot 'un, sir, and don't want the steel. Indeed, if she feels the boot, she's as much as a man can do to sit."

"You 're a good fellow, George, to think of this," said I. "Do you know where we 're going?"

"That's what I was going to tell you, sir. We are going to the Bois de Cambre, and there's two of our men gone on with hurdles, to set them up in the cross alleys of the wood, and we 're to come on 'em unawares, you see."

"Then why don't you give me Father Tom or Hunger-ford?"

"The master would n't have either. He said, 'A child of five years old could ride the Irish horse;' and as for Hungerford, he calls him a circus horse."

"But who knows if Blossom will take a fence?"

"I'll warrant she'll go high enough; how she'll come down, and where, is another matter. Only don't you go a-pullin' at her, ride her in the snaffle, and as light as you can. Face her straight at what she's got to go over, and let her choose her own pace."

"I declare I don't see how this is a fair trial of my riding, George. Do you?"

"Well, it is, and it isn't," said he, scratching his head. "You might have a very tidy hand and a nice seat, and not be able to ride the mare; but then, sir, you see, if you have the judgment to manage her coolly, and not rouse her temper too far, if you can bring her to a fence, and make her take off at a proper distance, and fly it, never changing her stride nor balk, why then he'll see you can ride."

"And if she rushes, or comes with her chest to a bank, or if – as I think she will – she refuses her fence, rears, and falls back, what then?"

"Then I think the mornin's sport will be pretty nigh over," growled he; as though I had suggested something personally offensive to him.

"What time do we go, George?"

"Sir Roger said seven, sir, but that will be eight or half-past. He's to drive over to the wood, and the horses are to meet him there."

"All right. I'll take a short sleep and be sharp to time."

As he left the room, I tore open my letter, to add a few words. I thought I'd say something that, if mischance befell me, might be a comfort to my dear mother to read over and dwell on, but for the life of me I did not know how to do it, without exciting alarm or awakening her to the dread of some impending calamity. Were I to say, I 'm off for a ride with papa, it meant nothing; and if I said, I 'm going to show him how I can manage a very hot horse, it might keep her in an agony of suspense till I wrote again.

So I merely added, "I intend to write to you very soon again, and hope I may do so within the week." These few commonplace words had a great meaning to my mind, however little they

might convey to her I wrote them to; and as I read them over, I stored them with details supplied by imagination, – details so full of incident and catastrophe that they made a perfect story. After this I lay down and slept heavily.

CHAPTER VIII. A DARK-ROOM PICTURE

Mr next letter to my mother was very short, and ran thus: —

"Dearest Mamma, – Don't be shocked at my bad writing, for I had a fall on Tuesday last, and hurt my arm a little; nothing broken, but bruised and sore to move, so that I lie on my bed and read novels. Madame never leaves me, but sits here to put ice on my shoulder and play chess with me. She reads out Balzac for me, and I don't know when I had such a jolly life. It was a rather big hurdle, and the mare took it sideways, and caught her hind leg, – at least they say so, – but we came down together, and she rolled over me. Papa cried out well done, for I did not lose my saddle, and he has given me a gold watch and a seal with the Norcott crest. Every one is so kind; and Captain Hotham comes up after dinner and tells me all the talk of the table, and we smoke and have our coffee very nicely.

"Papa comes every night before supper, and is very good to me. He says that Blossom is now my own, but I must teach her to come cooler to her fences. I can't write more, for my pain comes back when I stir my arm. You shall hear of me constantly, if I cannot write myself.

"Oh, dearest mamma, when papa is kind there is no one like him, – so gentle, so thoughtful, so soft in manner, and so dignified all the while. I wish you could see him as he stood here. A thousand loves from your own boy,

"DIGBY."

Madame Cleremont wrote by the same post. I did not see her letter; but when mamma's answer came I knew it must have been a serious version of my accident, and told how, besides a dislocated shoulder, I had got a broken collar-bone, and two ribs fractured. With all this, however, there was no danger to life; for the doctor said everything had gone luckily, and no internal parts were wounded.

Poor mamma had added a postscript that puzzled Madame greatly, and she came and showed it to me, and asked what I thought she could do about it. It was an entreaty that she might be permitted to come and see me. There was a touching humility in the request that almost choked me with emotion as I read it. "I could come and go unknown and unnoticed," wrote she. "None of Sir Roger's household have ever seen me, and my visit might pass for the devotion of some old follower of the family, and I will promise not to repeat it." She urged her plea in the most beseeching terms, and said that she would submit to any conditions if her prayer were only complied with.

"I really do not know what to do here," said Madame to me. "Without your father's concurrence this cannot be done; and who is to ask him for permission?"

"Shall I?"

"No, no, no," cried she, rapidly. "Such a step on your part would be ruin; a certain refusal, and ruin to yourself."

"Could Mr. Eccles do it?"

"He has no influence whatever."

"Has Captain Hotham?"

"Less, if less be possible."

"Mr. Cleremont, then?"

"Ah, yes, he might, and with a better chance of success; but – " She stopped, and though I waited patiently, she did not finish her sentence.

"But what?" asked I at last.

"Gaston hates doing a hazardous thing," said she; and I remarked that her expression changed, and her face assumed a hard, stern look as she spoke. "His theory is, do nothing without three to one in your favor. He says you 'll always gets these odds, if you only wait."

"But you don't believe that," cried I, eagerly.

"Sometimes – very seldom, that is, I do not whenever I can help it." There was a long pause now, in which neither of us spoke. At last she said, "I can't aid your mother in this project. She must give it up. There is no saying how your father would resent it."

"And how will you tell her that?" faltered I out.

"I can't tell. I'll try and show her the mischief it might bring upon you; and that now, standing high, as you do, in your father's favor, she would never forgive herself, if she were the cause of a change towards you. This consideration will have more weight with her than any that could touch herself personally."

"But it shall not," cried I, passionately. "Nothing in *my* fortune shall stand between my mother and her love for me."

She bent down and looked at me with an intensity in her stare that I cannot describe; it was as if, by actual steadfastness, she was able to fix me, and read me in my inmost heart.

"From which of your parents, Digby," said she, slowly, "do you derive this nature?"

"I do not know; papa always says I am very like him."

"And do you believe that papa is capable of great self-sacrifice? I mean, would he let his affections lead him against his interests?"

"That he would! He has told me over and over the head is as often wrong as right, – the heart only errs about once in five times." She fell on my neck and kissed me as I said this, with a sort of rapturous delight. "Your heart will be always right, dear boy," said she; once more she bent down and kissed me, and then hurried away.

This scene must have worked more powerfully on my nerves than I felt, or was aware of, while it was passing; at all events, it brought back my fever, and before night I was in wild delirium. Of the seven long weeks that followed, with all their alternations, I know nothing. My first consciousness was to know myself, as very weak and propped by pillows, in a half-darkened room, in which an old nurse-tender sat and mingled her heavy snorings with the ticking of the clock on the chimney. Thus drowsily pondering, with a debilitated brain, I used to fancy that I had passed away into another form of existence, in which no sights or sounds should come but these dreary breathings, and that remorseless ticking that seemed to be spelling out "eternity."

Sometimes one, sometimes two or three persons would enter the room, approach the bed, and talk together in whispers, and I would languidly lift up my eyes and look at them, and though I thought they were not altogether unknown to me, the attempt at recognition would have been an effort so full of pain that I would, rather than make it, fall back again into apathy. The first moment of perfect consciousness – when I could easily follow all that I heard, and remember it afterwards – was one evening, when a faint but delicious air came in through the open window, and the rich fragrance of the garden filled the room. Captain Hotham and the doctor were seated on the balcony smoking and chatting.

"You 're sure the tobacco won't be bad for him?" asked Hotham.

"Nothing will be bad or good now," was the answer. "Effusion has set in."

"Which means, that it's all over, eh?"

"About one in a thousand, perhaps, rub through. My own experience records no instance of recovery."

"And you certainly did not take such a gloomy view of his case at first. You told me that there were no vital parts touched?"

"Neither were there; the ribs had suffered no displacement, and as for a broken clavicle, I 've known a fellow get up and finish his race after it This boy was doing famously. I don't know that I ever saw a case going on better, when some of them here – it's not easy to say whom – sent off for his mother to come and see him. Of course, without Norcott's knowledge. It was a rash thing to do, and not well done either; for when the woman arrived, there was no preparation made, either with

the boy or herself, for their meeting; and the result was that when she crossed the threshold and saw him she fainted away. The youngster tried to get to her and fainted too; a great hubbub and noise followed; and Norcott himself appeared. The scene that ensued must have been, from what I heard, terrific. He either ordered the woman out of the house, or he dragged her away, – it's not easy to say which; but it is quite clear that he went absolutely mad with passion: some say that he told them to pack off the boy along with her, but, of course, this was sheer impossibility; the boy was insensible, and has been so ever since."

"I was at Namur that day, but they told me when I came back that Cleremont's wife had behaved so well; that she had the courage to face Norcott; and though I don't believe she did much by her bravery, she drove him off the field to his own room, and when his wife did leave the house for the railroad, it was in one of Norcott's carriages, and Madame herself accompanied her."

"Is she his wife? that's the question."

"There's not a doubt of it. Blenkworth of the Grays was at the wedding.

"If I were to be examined before a commission of lunacy to-morrow," said the doctor, solemnly, "I 'd call that man insane."

"And you'd shut him up?"

"I'd shut him up!"

"Then I 'm precious glad you are not called on to give an opinion, for you 'd shut up the best house in this quarter of Europe."

"And what security have you any moment that he won't make a clean sweep of it, and turn you all into the streets?"

"Yes; that's on the cards any day."

"He must have got through almost everything he had; besides, I never heard his property called six thousand a year, and I 'll swear twelve wouldn't pay his way here."

"What does he care! His father and he agreed to cut off the entail; and seeing the sort of marriage he made, he 'll not fret much at leaving the boy a beggar."

"But he likes him; if there's anything in the world he cares for, it's that boy!"

The other must have made some gesture of doubt or dissent, for the doctor quickly added, "No, no, I 'm right about that. It was only yesterday morning he said to me with a shake in the voice there's no mistaking, 'If you can come and tell me, doctor, that he's out of danger, I 'll give you a thousand pounds.'"

"Egad, I think I 'd have done it, even though I might have made a blunder."

"Ye 're no a doctor, sir, that's plain;" and in the emotion of the moment he spoke the words with a strong Scotch accent.

There was a silence of some minutes, and Hotham said, "That little Frenchwoman and I have no love lost between us, but I 'm glad she cut up so well."

"They 're strange natures, there 's no denying it They 'll do less from duty and more from impulse than any people in the world, and they 're never thoroughly proud of themselves except when they 're all wrong."

"That's a neat character for Frenchwomen," said Hotham, laughing.

"I think Norcott will be looking out for his whist by this time," said the other; and they both arose, and passing noiselessly through the room, moved away.

I had enough left me to think over, and I did think over it till I fell asleep.

CHAPTER IX. MADAME CLEREMONT

From that day forth I received no tidings of my mother. Whether my own letters reached her or not, I could not tell; and though I entreated Madame Cleremont, who was now my confidante in everything, to aid me in learning where my mother was, she declared that the task was beyond her; and at last, as time went over, my anxieties became blunted and my affections dulled. The life I was leading grew to have such a hold upon me, and was so full of its own varied interests, that – with shame I say it – I actually forgot the very existence of her to whom I owed any trace of good or honest or truthful that was in me.

The house in which I was living was a finishing school for every sort of dissipation, and all who frequented it were people who only lived for pleasure. Play of the highest kind went on unceasingly, and large sums were bandied about from hand to hand as carelessly as if all were men of fortune and indifferent to heavy losses.

A splendid mode of living, sumptuous dinners, a great retinue, and perfect liberty to the guests, drew around us that class who, knowing well that they have no other occupation than self-indulgence, throw an air of languid elegance over vice, which your vulgar sinner, who has only intervals of wickedness, knows nothing of; and this, be it said passingly, is, of all sections of society, the most seductive and dangerous to the young: for there are no outrages to taste amongst these people, they violate no decencies, they shock no principles. If they smash the tables of the law, it is in kid-gloves, and with a delicious odor of Ess bouquet about them. The Cleremonts lived at the Villa. Cleremont managed the household, and gave the orders for everything. Madame received the company, and did the honors; my father lounging about like an unoccupied guest, and actually amused, as it seemed, by his own unimportance. Hotham had gone to sea; but Eccles remained, in name, as my tutor; but we rarely met, save at meal-times, and his manner to me was almost slavish in subserviency, and with a habit of flattery that, even young as I was, revolted me.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.