HENRY WOOD

JOHNNY LUDLOW, FOURTH SERIES

Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, Fourth Series

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Johnny Ludlow, Fourth Series:

Содержание

Mrs. Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, Fourth Series

"God sent his Singers upon earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again."

Longfellow.

A MYSTERY

I

"Look here, Johnny Ludlow," said Darbyshire to me—Darbyshire being, as you may chance to remember, our doctor at Timberdale—"you seem good at telling of unaccountable disappearances: why don't you tell of that disappearance which took place here?"

I had chanced to look in upon him one evening when he was taking rest in his chimney-corner, in the old red-cushioned chair, after his day's work was over, smoking his churchwarden pipe in his slippers and reading the story of "Dorothy Grape."

"We should like to see that disappearance on paper," went on Darbyshire. "It is the most curious thing that has happened in my experience."

True enough it was. Too curious for any sort of daylight to be seen through it; as you will acknowledge when you hear its details; and far more complicated than the other story.

The lawyer at Timberdale, John Delorane, was a warm-hearted and warm-tempered man of Irish extraction. He had an extensive practice, and lived in an old-fashioned, handsome red-brick house in the heart of Timberdale, with his only daughter and his sister, Hester.

You may have seen prettier girls than Ellin Delorane, but never one that the heart so quickly went out to. She was too much like her dead mother; had the same look of fragile delicacy, the same sweet face with its pensive sadness, the soft brown eyes and the lovely complexion. Mrs. Delorane had died of decline: people would say to one another, in confidence, they hoped Ellin might escape it.

The largest and best farm in the neighbourhood of Timberdale, larger than even that of the Ashtons, was called the Dower Farm. It belonged to Sir Robert Tenby, and had been occupied for many years by one Roger Brook, a genial, pleasant gentleman of large private means apart from his success in farming. Rich though he was, he did not disdain to see practically after his work himself; was up with the lark and out with his men, as a good farmer ought to be. Out-of-doors he was the keen, active, thorough farmer; indoors he lived as a gentleman. He had four children: three boys and one girl, who were all well and comprehensively educated.

But he intended his sons to work as he had worked: no idleness for him; no leading of indolent and self-indulgent lives. "Choose what calling you please," he said to them; "but stick to it when chosen, and do your very best in it." The eldest son, Charles, had no fancy for farming, no particular head for any of the learned professions; he preferred commerce. An uncle, Matthew Brook, was the head of a mercantile house in New York; he offered a post in it to Charles, who went out to him.

The second son, Reginald, chose the medical profession; after qualifying for it, he became assistant to a doctor in London to gain experience. William, the third son, went to Oxford. He thought of the Church, but being conscientious, would not decide upon it hastily.

"So that not one of you will be with me," remarked Mr. Brook. "Well, be it so. I only want you to lead good and useful lives, striving to do your duty to God and to man."

But one of those overwhelming misfortunes, that I'm sure may be compared with the falling of an avalanche, fell on Mr. Brook. In an evil hour he had become a shareholder in a stupendous undertaking which had banking for its staple basis; and the thing failed. People talked of "swindling." Its managers ran away; its books and money were nowhere; its shareholders were ruined. Some of the shareholders ran away too; Roger Brook, upright and honourable, remained to face the ruin. And utter ruin it was, for the company was one of unlimited liability.

The shock was too much for him: he died under it. Every shilling he possessed was gone; harpies (it is what Timberdale called them) came down upon his furniture and effects, and swept them away. In less time almost than it takes to tell of, not a vestige remained of what had been, save in memory: Sir Robert Tenby had another tenant at the Dower Farm, and Mrs. Brook had moved into a little cottage-villa not a stone's throw from Darbyshire's. She had about two hundred a-year of her own, which no adverse law could touch. Her daughter, Minnie,

remained with her. You will hardly believe it, but they had named her by the romantic name of Araminta.

William Brook had come down from Oxford just before, his mind made up *not* to be a clergyman, but to remain on the farm with his father. When the misfortunes fell, he was, of course, thrown out; and what to turn his hand to he did not at once know. Brought up to neither profession nor trade, no, nor to farming, it was just a dilemma. At present, he stayed with his mother.

One day he presented himself to Mr. Delorane. "Can you give me some copying to do, sir?" he asked: "either at your office here, or at home. I write a good clear hand."

"What do you mean to do, Master William?" returned the lawyer, passing over the question. The two families had always been intimate and much together.

"I don't know what; I am waiting to see," said William. He was a slender young fellow of middle height, with gentle manners, a very nice, refined face, and a pair of honest, cheery, dark-blue eyes.

"Waiting for something to turn up, like our old friend Micawber!" said the lawyer.

"If I could earn only a pound a-week while I am looking out, I should not feel myself so much of a burden on my mother—though she will not hear me say a word about that," the young man went on. "You would not take me on as clerk and give me that sum, would you, Mr. Delorane?"

Well, they talked further; and the upshot was, that Mr.

Delorane did take him on. William Brook went into the office as a clerk, and was paid a pound a-week.

The parish wondered a little, making sundry comments over this at its tea-tables: for the good old custom of going out to real tea was not out of fashion yet in Timberdale. Every one agreed that William Brook was to be commended for putting his shoulder to the wheel, but that it was a grave descent for one brought up to his expectations. Mr. St. George objected to it on another score.

Years before, there had arrived in England from the West Indies a little gentleman, named Alfred St. George. His father, a planter, had recently died, and the boy's relatives had sent him home to be educated, together with plenty of money for that purpose. Later, when of an age to leave school, he was articled to Mr. Delorane, and proved an apt, keen pupil. Next he went into the office of a renowned legal firm in London, became a qualified lawyer and conveyancer, and finally accepted an offer made him by Mr. Delorane, to return to Timberdale, as his chief and managing clerk. Mr. Delorane paid him a handsome salary, and held out to him, as report ran, hopes of a future partnership.

Alfred St. George had grown up a fine man; tall, strong, lithe and active. People thought his face handsome, but it had unmistakably a touch of the tar-brush. The features were large and well formed, the lips full, and the purple-black hair might have been woolly but for being drilled into order with oils. His complexion was a pale olive, his black eyes were round, showing

a great deal of the whites, and at times they wore a very peculiar expression. Take him for all in all, he was a handsome man, with a fluent tongue and persuasive eloquence.

It was Mr. St. George who spoke against William Brook's being taken on as clerk. Not that his objection applied to the young man himself, but to his probable capacity for work. "He will be of no use to us, sir," was the substance of his remonstrance to Mr. Delorane. "He has had no experience: and one can hardly snub Brook as one would a common clerk."

"Don't suppose he will be of much use," carelessly acquiesced Mr. Delorane, who was neither a stingy nor a covetous man. "What could I do but take him on when he asked me to? I like the young fellow; always did; and his poor father was my very good friend. You must make the best of him, St. George: dare say he won't stay long with us." At which St. George laughed good-naturedly and shrugged his shoulders.

But William Brook did prove to be of use. He got on so well, was so punctual, so attentive, so intelligent, that fault could not be found with him; and at the end of the first year Mr. Delorane voluntarily doubled his pay—raising it to two pounds per week.

Timberdale wondered again: and began to ask how it was that young Brook, highly educated, and reared to expect some position in the world, could content himself with stopping on, a lawyer's clerk? Did he mean to continue in the office for ever? Had he ceased to look out for that desirable something that was to turn up? Was he parting with all laudable ambition?

William Brook could have told them, had he dared, that it was not lack of ambition chaining him to his post, but stress of love. He and Ellin Delorane had entered a long while past into the mazes of that charming dream, than which, as Tom Moore tells us, there's nothing half so sweet in life, and the world was to them as the Garden of Eden.

It was close upon the end of the second year before Mr. Delorane found it out. He went into a storm of rage and reproaches—chiefly showered upon William Brook, partly upon Ellin, a little upon himself.

"I have been an old fool," he spluttered to his confidential clerk. "Because the young people had been intimate in the days when the Brooks were prosperous, I must needs let it go on still, and never suspect danger! Why, the fellow has had his tea here twice a-week upon an average!—and brought Ellin home at night when she has been at his mother's!—and I—I—thought no more than if it had been her brother! I could thrash myself! And where have her aunt Hester's eyes been, I should like to know!"

"Very dishonourable of Brook," assented St. George, knitting his brow. "Perhaps less harm is done than you fear, sir. They are both young, can hardly know their own minds; they will grow out of it. Shall you part them?"

"Do you suppose I shouldn't?" retorted the lawyer.

William Brook was discharged from the office: Ellin received orders to give up his acquaintanceship; she was not to think of him in private or speak to him in public. Thus a little time went

on. Ellin's bright face began to fade; Aunt Hester looked sick and sorry; the lawyer had never felt so uncomfortable in his life.

Do what he would, he could not get out of his liking for William Brook, and Ellin was dear to him as the apple of his eye. He had been in love himself once, and knew what it meant; little as you would believe it of a stout old red-faced lawyer; knew that both must be miserable. So much the better for Brook—but what of Ellin?

"One would think it was you who had had your lover sent to the right-about!" he wrathfully began to Aunt Hester, one morning when he came upon her in tears as she sat at her sewing. "I'd hide my face if I were you, unless I could show a better."

"It is that I am so sorry for Ellin, John," replied Aunt Hester, meekly wiping her tears. "I—I am afraid that some people bear sorrow worse than others."

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"Oh, not much," sighed Aunt Hester, not daring to allude to the dread lying latent in her own mind—that Ellin might fade away like her mother. "I can see what a sharp blow it has been to the child, John, and so—and so I can but feel it myself."

"Sharp blow! Deuce take it all! What business had young Brook to get talking to her about such rubbish as love?"

"Yes indeed, it is very unfortunate," said Aunt Hester. "But I do not think he has talked to her, John; I imagine he is too honourable to have said a single word. They have just gone on loving one another in secret and in silence, content to live in the

unspoken happiness that has flooded their two hearts."

"Unspoken fiddlestick? What a simpleton you are, Hester!"

Mr. Delorane turned off in a temper. He knew it must have been a "sharp blow" to Ellin, but he did not like to hear it so stated to his face. Banging the door behind him, he was crossing the hall to the office—which made a sort of wing to the house—when he met William Brook.

"Will you allow me to speak to you, sir?" asked the young man in a tone of deprecation. And, though the lawyer had the greatest mind in the world to tell him NO and send him head-foremost out again, he thought of Ellin, he thought of his dead friend, Roger Brook; so he gave a growl, and led the way into the dining-room.

In his modest winning way, William Brook spoke a little of the trouble that had come upon their family—how deeply sorry he was that Ellin and he should have learnt to care for one another for all time, as it was displeasing to Mr. Delorane–

"Hang it, man," interrupted the lawyer irascibly, too impatient to listen further—"what on earth do you propose to yourself? Suppose I did not look upon it with displeasure?—are you in a position to marry her?"

"You would not have objected to me had we been as we once were—prosperous, and–"

"What the dickens has that to do with it!" roared the lawyer. "Our business lies with the present, not the past."

"I came here to tell you, sir, that I am to leave for New York

to-night. My brother Charles has been writing to me about it for some time past. He says I cannot fail to get on well in my uncle's house, and attain to a good position. Uncle Matthew has no sons: he will do his best to advance his nephews. What I wish to ask you, sir, is this—if, when my means shall be good and my position assured, you will allow me to think of Ellin?"

"The man's mad?" broke forth Mr. Delorane, more put about than he had been at all. "Do you suppose I should let my only child go to live in a country over the seas?"

"No, sir, I have thought of that. Charles thinks, if I show an aptitude for business, they may make me their agent over here. Oh, Mr. Delorane, be kind, be merciful: for Ellin's sake and for mine! Do not send me away without hope!"

"Don't you think you possess a ready-made stock of impudence, William Brook?"

The young man threw his earnest, dark-blue eyes into the lawyer's. "I feared you would deem so, sir. But I am pleading for what is dearer to me and to her than life: our lives will be of little value to us if we must spend them apart. Only just one ray of possible hope, Mr. Delorane! It is all I ask."

"Look here; we'll drop this," cried the lawyer, his hands in his pockets, rattling away violently at the silver in them, his habit when put out, but nevertheless calming down in temper, for in spite of prejudice he did like the young man greatly, and he was not easy as to Ellin. "The best thing you can do is to go where you are going—over the Atlantic: and we'll leave the future to

take care of itself. The money you think to make may turn out all moonshine, you know. There; that's every word I'll say and every hope I'll give, though you stop all day bothering me, William Brook."

And perhaps it was as much as William Brook had expected: any way, it did not absolutely forbid him to hope. He held out his hand timidly.

"Will you not shake hands with me, sir—I start to-night—and wish me God speed."

"I'll wish you better sense; and—and I hope you'll get over safely," retorted Mr. Delorane: but he did not withhold his hand. "No correspondence with Ellin, you understand, young man; no underhand love-making."

"Yes, sir, I understand; and you may rely upon me."

He quitted the room as he spoke, to make his way out as he came—through the office. The lawyer stood in the passage and looked after him: and a thought, that had forced itself into his mind several times since this trouble set in, crossed it again. Should he make the best of a bad bargain: give Brook a chief place in his own office and let them set up in some pleasant little home near at hand? Ellin had her mother's money: and she would have a great deal more at his own death; quite enough to allow her husband to live the idle life of a gentleman—and William was a gentleman, and the nicest young fellow he knew. Should he? For a full minute Mr. Delorane stood deliberating—yes, or no; then he took a hasty step forward to call the young man back.

Then, wavering and uncertain, he stepped back again, and let the idea pass.

"Well, how have you sped?" asked Mr. St. George, as William Brook reappeared in the office. "Any hope?"

"Yes, I think so," answered William. "At least, it is not absolutely forbidden. There's a line in a poem my mother would repeat to us when we were boys—'God and an honest heart will bear us through the roughest day.' I trust He, and it, will so bear me and Ellin."

"Wish I had your chance, old fellow!"

"My chance!" repeated William.

"To go out to see the world; to go out to the countries where gold and diamonds are picked up for the stooping—instead of being chained, as I am, between four confined walls, condemned to spend my life over musty parchments."

William smiled. "I don't know where you can pick up gold and diamonds for the stooping. Not where I am going."

"No, not in New York. You should make your way to the Australian gold-fields, Brook, or to the rich Californian mines, or to the diamond mountains in Africa, and come back—as you would in no time—with a sack of money on your shoulders, large enough to satisfy even Delorane."

"Or lose my health, if not my life, in digging, and come home without a shirt to my back; a more common result than the other, I fancy," remarked William. "Well, good-bye, old friend."

St. George, towering aloft in his height and strength, put his

arm around William's shoulder and walked thus with him to the street-entrance. There they shook hands, and parted. Ellin Delorane, her face shaded behind the drawing-room curtain from the October sun, watched the parting.

There was to be no set farewell allowed to her. She understood that. But she gathered from Aunt Hester, during the day, that her father had not been altogether obdurate, and that if William could get on in the future, perhaps things might be suffered to come right. It brought to her a strange comfort. So very slight a ray, no bigger than one of the specks that fall from the sky, as children say, will serve to impart a most unreasonable amount of hope to the troubled heart.

Towards the close of the afternoon, Ellin went in her restlessness to pay a visit to her friend Grace at the Rectory, who had recently become Herbert Tanerton's wife, and sat talking with her till it was pretty late. The moon, rising over the tops of the trees, caused her to start up with an exclamation.

"What will Aunt Hester say?"

"If you don't mind going through the churchyard, Ellin," said Grace, "you would cut off that corner, and save a little time." So Ellin took that route.

"Ellin!"

"William!"

They had met face to face under the church walls. He explained that he was sparing a few minutes to say farewell to his friends at the Rectory. The moon, coming out from behind a

swiftly passing cloud, for it was rather a rough night, shone down upon them and upon the graves around them. Wildly enough beat the heart of each.

"You saw papa to-day," she whispered unevenly, as though her breath were short.

"Yes, I saw him. I cannot say that he gave me hope, Ellin, but he certainly did not wholly deny it. I think—I believe—that—if I can succeed in getting on, all may be well with us yet."

William Brook spoke with hesitation. He felt trammelled; he could not in honour say what he would have wished to say. This meeting might be unorthodox, but it was purely accidental; neither he nor Ellin had sought it.

"Good-bye, my darling," he said with emotion, clasping her hands in his. "As we have met, there cannot be much wrong in our saying it. I may not write to you, Ellin; I may not even ask you to think of me; I may not, I suppose, tell you in so many words that I shall think of you; but, believe this: I go out with one sole aim and end in view—that of striving to make a position sufficiently fair to satisfy your father."

The tears were coursing down her cheeks; she could hardly speak for agitation. Their hearts were aching to pain.

"I will be true to you always, William," she whispered. "I will wait for you, though it be to the end of life."

To be in love with a charming young lady, and to have her all to yourself in a solitary graveyard under the light of the moon, presents an irresistible temptation for taking a kiss, especially if

the kiss is to be a farewell kiss for days and for years. William Brook did not resist it; very likely did not try to. In spite of Mr. Delorane and every one else, he took his farewell kiss from Ellin's lips.

Then they parted, he going one way, she the other. Only those of us—there are not many—who have gone through this parting agony can know how it wrings the heart.

But sundry superstitious gossips, hearing of this afterwards, assured Ellin that it must be unlucky to say farewell amidst graves.

The time went on. William Brook wrote regularly to his people, and Minty whispered the news to Ellin Delorane. He would send kind remembrances to friends, love to those who cared for it. He did not dislike the work of a mercantile life, and thought he should do well—in time.

In time. There was the rub, you see. We say "in time" when we mean next Christmas, and we also say it when we mean next century. By the end of the first year William Brook was commanding a handsome salary; but the riches that might enable him to aspire to the hand of Miss Delorane loomed obscurely in the distance yet. Ellin seemed strong and well, gay and cheerful, went about Timberdale, and laughed and talked with the world, just as though she had never had a lover, or was not waiting for somebody over the water. Mr. Delorane thought she must have forgotten that scapegrace, and he hoped it was so.

It was about this time, the end of the first year, that a piece of

good luck fell to Mr. St. George. He came into a fortune. Some relative in the West Indies died and left it to him. Timberdale put it down at a thousand pounds a-year, so I suppose it might be about five hundred. It was thought he might be for giving up his post at Mr. Delorane's to be a gentleman at large. But he did nothing of the kind. He quitted his lodgings over Salmon's shop, and went into a pretty house near Timberdale Court, with a groom and old Betty Huntsman as housekeeper, and set up a handsome gig and a grey horse. And that was all the change.

As the second year went on, Ellin Delorane began to droop a little. Aunt Hester did not like it. One of the kindest friends Ellin had was Alfred St. George. After the departure of young Brook, he had been so tender with Ellin, so considerate, so indulgent to her sorrow, and so regretful (like herself) of William's absence, that he had won her regard. "It will be all right when he comes back, Ellin," he would whisper: "only be patient."

But in this, the second year, Mr. St. George's tone changed. It may be that he saw no hope of any happy return, and deemed that, for her own sake, he ought to repress any hope left in her.

"There's no more chance of his returning with a fortune than there is of my going up to the moon," he said to Tod confidentially one day when we met him striding along near the Ravine.

"Don't suppose there is—in this short time," responded Tod.

"I'm afraid Ellin sees it, too: she seems to be losing her spirits. Ah, Brook should have done as I advised him—gone a little

farther and dug in the gold-fields. He might have come back a Crœsus then. As it is—whew! I wouldn't give a copper sixpence for his chance."

"Do you know what I heard say, St. George?—that you'd like to go in for the little lady yourself."

The white eye-balls surrounding St. George's dark orbs took a tinge of yellow as they rolled on Tod. "Who said it?" he asked quietly.

"Darbyshire. He says you are in love with her as much as ever Brook was."

St. George laughed. "Old Darbyshire? Well, perhaps he is not far wrong. Any way, love's free, I believe. Were I her father, Brook should prove his eligibility to propose for her, or else give her up. Good-day, Todhetley; good-day, Johnny."

St. George went off at a quick pace. Tod, looking after him, made his comments. "Should not wonder but he wins her. He is the better man of the two–"

"The better man!" I interrupted.

"As to means, at any rate: and see what a fine upright free-limbed fellow he is! And where will you find one more agreeable?"

"In tongue, nowhere; I admit that. But I wouldn't give up William Brook for him, were I Ellin Delorane."

That St. George was in love with her grew as easy to be seen as is the round moon in harvest. Small blame to him. Who could be in the daily companionship of a sweet girl like Ellin Delorane,

and not learn to love her, I should like to know? Tod told St. George he wished he had his chance.

At last St. George spoke to her. It was in April, eighteen months after Brook's departure. Ellin was in the garden at sunset, busy with the budding flowers, when St. George came to join her, as he sometimes did, on leaving the office for the day. Aunt Hester sat sewing at the open glass-doors of the window.

"I have been gardening till I am tired," was Ellin's greeting to him, as she sat down on a bench near the sweetbriar bush.

"You look pale," said Mr. St. George. "You often do look pale now, Ellin: do you think you can be quite well?"

"Pray don't let Aunt Hester overhear you," returned Ellin in covert, jesting tones. "She begins to have fancies, she says, that I am not as well as I ought to be, and threatens to call in Mr. Darbyshire."

"You need some one to take care of you; some one near and dear to you, who would study your every look and action, who would not suffer the winds of heaven to blow upon your face too roughly," went on St. George, plunging into Shakespeare. "Oh, Ellin, if you would suffer me to be that one–"

Her face turned crimson; her lips parted with emotion; she rose up to interrupt him in a sort of terror.

"Pray do not continue, Mr. St. George. If—if I understand you rightly, that you—that you–"

"That I would be your loving husband, Ellin; that I would shelter you from all ill until death us do part. Yes, it is nothing

less than that."

"Then you must please never to speak of such a thing again; never to think of it. Oh, do not let me find that I have been mistaking you all this time," she added in uncontrollable agitation: "that while I have ever welcomed you as my friend—and his—you have been swayed by another motive!"

He did not like the agitation; he did not like the words; and he bit his lips, striving for calmness.

"This is very hard, Ellin."

"Let us understand each other once for all," she said—"and oh, I am so sorry that there's need to say it. What you have hinted at is impossible. Impossible: please not to mistake me. You have been my very kind friend, and I value you; and, if you will, we can go on still on the same pleasant terms, caring for one another in friendship. There can be nothing more."

"Tell me one thing," he said: "we had better, as you intimate, understand each other fully. Can it be that your hopes are still fixed upon William Brook?"

"Yes," she answered in a low tone, as she turned her face away. "I hope he will come home yet, and that—that matters may be smoothed for us with papa. Whilst that hope remains it is simply treason to talk to me as you would have done," she concluded with a spurt of anger.

"Ellin," called out Aunt Hester, putting her head out beyond the glass-doors, "the sun has set; you had better come in."

"One moment, Ellin," cried Mr. St. George, preventing her:

"will you forgive me?"

"Forgive and forget, too," smiled Ellin, her brow smoothing itself. "But you must never recur to the subject again."

So Mr. St. George went home, his accounts settled—as Tod would have said: and the days glided on.

"What is it that ails Ellin?"

It was a piping-hot morning in July, in one of the good old hot summers that we seem never to get now; and Aunt Hester sat in her parlour, its glass-doors open, adding up the last week's bills of the butcher and the baker, when she was interrupted by this question from her brother. He had come stalking upon her, rattling as usual, though quite unconsciously, the silver in his trousers pockets. The trousers were of nankeen: elderly gentlemen wore them in those days for coolness.

"What ails her!" repeated Aunt Hester, dropping the bills in alarm. "Why do you ask me, John?"

"Now, don't you think you should have been a Quaker?" retorted Mr. Delorane. "I put a simple question to you, and you reply to it by asking me another. Please to answer mine first. What is it that is the matter with Ellin?"

Aunt Hester sighed. Of too timid a nature to put forth her own opinion upon any subject gratuitously in her brother's house, she hardly liked to give it even when asked for. For the past few weeks Ellin had been almost palpably fading; was silent and dispirited, losing her bright colour, growing thinner; might be heard catching her breath in one of those sobbing sighs that

betoken all too surely some secret, ever-present sorrow. Aunt Hester had observed this; she now supposed it had at length penetrated to the observation of her brother.

"Can't you speak?" he demanded.

"I don't know what to say, John. Ellin does not seem well, and looks languid: of course this broiling weather is against us all. But–"

"But what?" cried the lawyer, as she paused. "As to broiling weather, that's nothing new in July."

"Well, John—only you take me up so—and I'm sure I shouldn't like to anger you. I was about to add that I think it is not so much illness of body with Ellin as illness of mind. If one's mind is ransacked with perpetual worry–"

"Racked with perpetual worry," interrupted Mr. Delorane, unconsciously correcting her mistake. "What has she to worry her?"

"Dear me! I suppose it is about William Brook. He has been gone nearly two years, John, and seems to be no nearer coming home with a fortune than he was when he left. I take it that this troubles the child: she is losing hope."

Mr. Delorane, standing before the open window, his back to his sister, turned the silver coins about in his pockets more vehemently than before. "You say she is not ailing in body?"

"Not yet. She is never very strong, you know."

"Then there's no need to be uneasy."

"Well, John—not yet, perhaps. But should this state of

despair, if I don't use too strong a word, continue, it will tell in tune upon her health, and might bring on—bring on–"

"Bring on what?" sharply asked the lawyer.

"I was thinking of her mother," said poor Aunt Hester, with as much deprecation as though he had been the Great Mogul: "but I trust, John, you won't be too angry with me for saying it."

Mr. Delorane did not say whether he was angry or not. He stood there, fingering his sixpences and shillings, gazing apparently at the grass-plat, in reality seeing nothing. He was recalling a past vision: that of his delicate wife, dying of consumption before her time; he seemed to see a future vision: that of his daughter, dying as she had died.

"When it comes to dreams," timidly went on Aunt Hester, "I can't say I like it. Not that I am one to put faith in the foolish signs old wives talk of—that if you dream of seeing a snake, you've got an enemy; or, if you seem to be in the midst of a lot of beautiful white flowers, it's a token of somebody's death. I am not so silly as that, John. But for some time past Ellin has dreamt perpetually of one theme—that of being in trouble about William Brook. Night after night she seems to be searching for him: he is lost, and she cannot tell how or where."

Had Aunt Hester suddenly begun to hold forth in the unknown tongue, it could not have brought greater surprise to Mr. Delorane. He turned short round to stare at her.

"Seeing what a wan and weary face the child has come down with of late, I taxed her with not sleeping well," continued Aunt

Hester, "and she confessed to me that she was feeling a good bit troubled by her dreams. She generally has them towards morning, and the theme is always the same. The dreams vary, but the subject is alike in all—William Brook is lost, and she is searching for him."

"Nonsense! Rubbish!" put in Mr. Delorane.

"Well, John, I dare say it is nonsense," conceded Aunt Hester meekly: "but I confess I don't like dreams that come to you persistently night after night and always upon one and the same subject. Why should they come?—that's what I ask myself. Be sure, though, I make light of the matter to Ellin, and tell her her digestion is out of order. Over and over again, she says, they seem to have the clue to his hiding place, but they never succeed in finding him. And—and I am afraid, John, that the child, through this, has taken up the notion that she shall never see him again."

Mr. Delorane, making some impatient remark about the absurdity of women in general, turned round and stood looking into the garden as before. Ellin's mind was getting unhinged with the long separation, she had begun to regard it as hopeless, and hence these dreams that Brook was "lost," he told himself, and with reason: and what was he to do?

How long he stood thus in perfect silence, no sound to be heard but the everlasting jingling of the loose silver, Aunt Hester did not know; pretty near an hour she thought. She wished he would go; she felt very uncomfortable, as she always did feel when she vexed him—and here were the bills waiting to be added

up. At length he turned sharply, with the air of one who has come to some decision, and returned to the office.

"I suppose I shall have to do it myself," he remarked to Mr. St. George.

"Do what, sir?"

"Send for that young fellow back, and let them set up in some little homestead near me. I mean Brook."

"Brook!" stammered St. George.

"Here's Ellin beginning to fade and wither. It's all very well for her aunt to talk about the heat! *I* know. She is pining after him, and I can't see her do it; so he must come home."

Of all the queer shades that can be displayed by the human countenance, about the queerest appeared in that of Mr. St. George. It was not purple, it was not green, it was not yellow; it was a mixture of all three. He gazed at his chief and master as one gazes at a madman.

"Brook can come into the office again," continued Mr. Delorane. "I don't like young men to be idle; leads 'em into temptation. We'll make him head clerk here, next to you, and give him a couple of hundred a-year. If—what's the matter?"

For the strange look on his manager's face had caught the eye of Mr. Delorane. St. George drew three or four deep breaths.

"Have you thought of Miss Delorane, sir—of her interests—in planning this?" he presently asked.

"Why, that's what I do think of; nothing else. You may be sure I shouldn't think of it for the interest of Brook. All the same, I like

the young man, and always shall. The child is moping herself into a bad way. Where shall I be if she should go into a decline like her mother? No, no; she shall marry and have proper interests around her."

"She could do that without being sacrificed to Brook," returned St. George in a low tone. "There are others, sir, of good and suitable position, who would be thankful to take her—whose pride it would be to cherish her and render every moment of her life happy."

"Oh, I know that; you are one of 'em," returned Mr. Delorane carelessly. "It's what all you young sparks are ready to say of a pretty girl, especially if she be rich as well. But don't you see, St. George, that Ellin does not care for any of you. Her heart is fixed upon Brook, and Brook it must be."

Of course this news came out to Timberdale. Some people blamed Mr. Delorane, others praised him. Delorane must be turning childish in his old age, said one; Delorane is doing a good and a wise thing, cried another. Opinions vary in this world, you know, and ever will, as proved to us in the fable of the old man and his ass.

But now—and it was a strange thing to happen the very next day Mr. Delorane received a letter from William Brook, eight closely written pages. Briefly, this was its substance. The uncle, Matthew Brook of New York, was about to establish a house in London, in correspondence with his own; he had offered the managership of it to William, with a small share of profits,

guaranteeing that the latter should not be less than seven hundred a-year.

"And if you can only be induced to think this enough for us to begin upon, sir, and will give me Ellin," wrote the young man, "I can but say that I will strive to prove my gratitude in loving care for her; and I trust you will not object to her living in London. I leave New York next month, to be in England in September, landing at Liverpool, and I shall make my way at once to Timberdale, hoping you will allow me to plead my cause in person."

"No no, Master William, you won't carry my daughter off to London," commented Mr. Delorane aloud, when he had read the letter—not but that it gratified him. "You must give up your post, young man, and settle down by me here, if you are to have Ellin. I don't see, St. George, why Brook should not make himself into a lawyer, legal and proper," added he thoughtfully. "He is young enough—and he does not dislike the work. You and he might be associated together after I am dead: 'Brook and St. George.'"

Mr. St. George's face turned crusty: he did not like to hear his name put next to Brook's. "I never feel too sure of my own future," he said in reply. "Now that I am at my ease in the world, tempting visions come often enough across me of travelling out to see it."

Mr. Delorane wrote a short, pithy note in answer to the appeal of William Brook, telling him he might come and talk to him as soon as he returned. "The young fellow may have left New

York before it can reach him," remarked the lawyer, as he put the letter in the post; "but if so, it does not much matter."

So there was Timberdale, all cock-a-hoop at the prospect of seeing William Brook again, and the wedding that was to follow. Sam Mullet, the clerk, was for setting the bells to ring beforehand.

Some people think September the pleasantest month in the year, when the heats of summer have passed and the frosts of winter have not come. Never a finer September than we had that autumn at Timberdale; the skies looked bright, the leaves of the trees were putting on their tints of many colours, and the land was not yet quite shorn of its golden grain.

All the world was looking out for William Brook. He did not come. Disappointment is the lot of man. Of woman also. When the third week was dragging itself along in expectancy, a letter came to Mrs. Brook from William. It was to say that his return home was somewhat delayed, as he should have to take Jamaica en route, to transact some business at Kingston for his uncle. He should then proceed direct from Kingston by steamer to Liverpool, which place he hoped to reach before the middle of October. "Tell all my friends this, that they may not wonder at my delay," the letter concluded; but it contained no intimation that he had received the answer written by Mr. Delorane.

A short postscript was yet added, in these words: "Alfred St. George has, I know, some relatives living in, or near Kingston—planters, I believe. Tell him I shall call upon them, if I can make

time, to see whether they have any commands for him."

Long before the middle of October, Ellin Delorane became obviously restless. A sort of uneasy impatience seemed to have taken possession of her: and without cause. One day, when we called at Mr. Delorane's to take a message from home, Ellin was in the garden with her outdoor things on, waiting to go out with her aunt.

"What a ridiculous goose you are!" began Tod. "I hear you have taken up the notion that Sweet William has gone down in the Caribbean Sea."

"I'm sure I have not," said Ellin. "Aunt Hester must have told you that fable when she was at Crabb Cot yesterday."

"Just so. She and the mater laid their gossiping caps together for the best part of an hour—and all about the foolishness of Miss Ellin Delorane."

"Why, you know, Ellin," I put in, "it is hardly the middle of October yet."

"I tell myself that it is not," she answered gravely. "But, somehow, Johnny, I don't—don't—expect—him."

"Now, what on earth do you mean?"

"I wish I knew what. All I can tell you is, that when his mother received that letter from William last month, saying his return was delayed, a sort of foreboding seized hold of me, an apprehension that he would never come. I try to shake it off, but I cannot. Each day, as the days come round, only serves to make it stronger."

"Don't you think a short visit to Droitwich would do you good, Ellin?" cried Tod, which was our Worcestershire fashion of recommending people to the lunatic asylum.

"Just listen to him, Johnny!" she exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Yes, 'just listen to him'—and just listen to yourself, Miss Ellin, and see which talks the most sense," he retorted. "Have you got over those dreams yet?"

Ellin turned her face to him quickly. "Who told you anything about that, Aunt Hester?"

Tod nodded. "It's true, you know."

"Yes, it is true," she slowly said. "I have had those strange dreams for some weeks now; I have them still."

"That William Brook is lost?"

"That he is lost, and that we are persistently searching for him. Sometimes we are seeking for him in Timberdale, sometimes at Worcester—in America, in France, in places that I have no knowledge of. There always seems to be a sadness connected with it—a sort of latent conviction that he will never be found."

"The dreams beget the dreams," said Tod, "and I should have thought you had better sense. They will soon vanish, once Sweet William makes his appearance: and mind, Miss Ellin, that you invite me to the wedding."

Ellin sighed—and smiled. And just then Aunt Hester appeared attired in her crimson silk shawl with the fancy border, and the primrose feather in her Leghorn bonnet.

A day or two went on, bringing no news of the traveller.

On the nineteenth of October—I shall never forget the date—Mr. and Mrs. Todhetley and ourselves set off in the large open phaeton for a place called Pigeon Green, to spend the day with some friends living there. On this same morning, as it chanced, a very wintry one, Mr. St. George started for Worcester in his gig, accompanied by Ellin Delorane. But of this we knew nothing. He had business in the town; she was going to spend a few days with Mary West, formerly Mary Coney.

Ellin was well wrapped up, and Mr. St. George, ever solicitous for her comfort, kept the warm fur rug well about her during the journey: the skies looked grey and threatening, the wind was high and bitterly cold. Worcester reached, he drove straight through the town, left Ellin at Mrs. West's door, in the Foregate Street, and then drove back to the Hare and Hounds Inn to put up his horse and gig.

II

I shall always say, always think, it was a curious thing we chanced to go that day, of all days, to Pigeon Green. It is not chance that brings about these strange coincidences.

> "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will."

Pigeon Green, a small colony of a dozen houses, formed a triangle, as may be said, with Timberdale and Evesham, being a few miles distant from each. Old Mr. and Mrs. Beele, life-long friends of the Squire, lived here. Their nephew had brought his newly-married wife from London to show her to them, and we were all invited to dinner. As the Squire did not care to be out in the dark, his sight not being what it used to be, the dinner-hour was fixed for two o'clock. We started in the large open phaeton, the Squire driving his favourite horses, Bob and Blister. It was the nineteenth of October. Mrs. Todhetley complained of the cold as we went along. The lovely weather of September had left us; early winter seemed to be setting in with a vengeance. The easterly wind was unusually high, and the skies were leaden.

On this same wintry morning Mr. St. George left Timberdale in his gig for Worcester, accompanied by Ellin Delorane. St. George had business to transact with Philip West, a lawyer, who

was Mr. Delorane's agent in Worcester. Philip West lived in the Foregate Street, his offices being in the same house. Ellin was very intimate with his wife, formerly Mary Coney, and was invited to spend a few days with her. It was Aunt Hester who had urged the acceptance of this invitation: seeing that Ellin was nervous at the non-arrival of her lover, William Brook, was peeping into the newspapers for accounts of shipwrecks and other calamities at sea. So they set off after breakfast, Ellin well wrapped up, in this stylish gig of Mr. St. George's. There are gigs and gigs, you know, and I assure you some gigs were yet fashionable vehicles in those days.

It was bitterly cold. St. George, remarking that they should have snow as soon as the high wind would let it come down, urged his handsome grey horse to a fleet pace, and they soon reached Worcester. He drove straight to Foregate Street, which lay at the other end of the town, set down Ellin, and then went back again to leave his horse and gig at the Hare and Hounds in College Street, the inn at which he generally put up, retracing his steps on foot to Mr. West's.

And now I must return to ourselves.

After a jolly dinner at two o'clock with the Beeles, and a jolly dessert after it, including plenty of fresh filberts and walnuts, and upon that a good cup of tea and some buttered toast, we began to think about getting home. When the phaeton came round, the Squire remarked that it was half-an-hour later than he had meant to start; upon which, old Beele laid the fault of its looking late to

the ungenial weather of the evening.

We drove off. Dusk was approaching; the leaden skies looked dark and sullen, the wind, unpleasantly high all day, had increased to nearly a hurricane. It roared round our heads, it whistled wildly through the trees and hedges, it shook the very ears of Bob and Blister; the few flakes of snow or sleet beginning then to fall were whirled about in the air like demons. It was an awful evening, no mistake about that; and a very unusual one for the middle of October.

The Squire faced the storm as well as he could, his coat-collar turned up, his cloth cap, kept for emergencies in a pocket of the carriage, tied down well on his ears. Mrs. Todhetley tied a knitted grey shawl right over her bonnet. We, in the back seat, had much ado to keep our hats on: I sat right behind the Squire, Tod behind Mrs. Todhetley. It was about the worst drive I remember. The wild wind, keen as a knife, stung our faces, and seemed at times as if it would whirl us, carriage and horses and all, in the air, as it was whirling the sleet and snow.

Tod stood up to speak to his father. "Shall I drive, sir?" he asked. "Perhaps you would be more sheltered if you sat here behind."

Tod's driving in those days was regarded by the Squire with remarkable disparagement, and Tod received only a sharp answer —which could not be heard for the wind.

We got along somehow in the teeth of the storm. The route lay chiefly through by-ways, solitary and unfrequented, not in the

good, open turnpike-roads. For about a mile, midway between Pigeon Green and Timberdale, was an ultra dreary spot; dreary in itself and dreary in its associations. It was called Dip Lane, possibly because the ground dipped there so much that it lay in a hollow; overgrown dark elm-trees grew thickly on each side of it, their branches nearly meeting overhead. In the brightest summer's day the place was gloomy, so you may guess how it looked now.

But the downward dip and the dark elm-trees did not constitute all the dreariness of Dip Lane. Many years before, a murder had been committed there. The Squire used to tell us of the commotion it caused, all the gentlemen for miles and miles round bestirring themselves to search out the murderers. He himself was a little fellow of five or six years old, and could just remember what a talk it made. A wealthy farmer, belated, riding through the lane from market one dark night, was attacked and pulled from his horse. The assailants beat him to death, rifled his pockets of a large sum, for he had been selling stock, and dragged him *through the hedge*, making a large gap in it. Across the field, near its opposite side, was the round, deep stagnant piece of water known as Dip Pond (popularly supposed to be too deep to have any bottom to it); and it was conjectured that the object of the murderers, in dragging him through the hedge, was to conceal the body beneath the dark and slimy water, and that they must have been disturbed by some one passing in the lane. Any way, the body was found in the morning lying in the field a

few yards from the gap in the hedge, pockets turned inside out, and watch and seals gone. The poor frightened horse had made its way home, and stayed whinnying by the stable-door all night.

The men were never found. A labourer, hastening through the lane earlier in the evening, with some medicine from the doctor's for his sick wife, had noticed two foot-pads, as he described them, standing under a tree. That these were the murderers, then waiting for prey, possibly for this very gentleman they attacked, no one had any doubt; but they were never traced. Whoever they were, they got clear off with their booty, and—the Squire would always add when telling the story to a stranger—with their wicked consciences, which he sincerely hoped tormented them ever afterwards.

But the most singular fact in the affair remains to be told. From that night nothing would grow on the spot in the hedge over which the murdered man was dragged, and on which his blood had fallen. The blood-stains were easily got rid of, but the hedge, though replanted more than once, never grew again; and the gap remained in it still. Report went that the farmer's ghost haunted it—that, I am sure, you will not be surprised to hear, ghosts being so popular—and might be seen hovering around it on a moonlit night.

And amidst the many small coincidences attending the story (my story) which I am trying to place clearly before you, was this one: that the history of the murder was gone over that day at Mr. Beele's. Some remark led to the subject as we sat round

the dessert-table, and Mrs. Frank Beele, who had never heard of it, inquired what it was. Upon that, the Squire and old Beele recounted it to her, each ransacking his memory to help the other with fullest particulars.

To go on with our homeward journey. Battling along, we at length plunged into Dip Lane—which, to its other recommendations, added that of being inconveniently narrow—and Tod, peering outwards in the gloomy dusk, fancied he saw some vehicle before us. Bringing his keen sight to bear upon it, he stood up to reconnoitre, and made it out to be a gig, going the same way that we were. The wind was not quite so bad in this low spot, and the snow and sleet had ceased for a bit.

"Take care, father," said Tod: "there's a gig on ahead."

"A gig, Joe?"

"Yes, it's a gig: and going at a strapping pace."

But the Squire was going at a strapping pace also, and driving two fresh horses, whereas the gig had but one horse. We caught it up in no time. It slackened speed slightly as it drew close to the hedge on that side, to give us room to pass. In a moment we saw it was St. George's gig, St. George driving.

"Halloa!" called Tod, as we shot by, and his shout was loud enough to frighten the ghost at the gap, which lively spot we were fast approaching, "there's William Brook! Father, pull up: there's William Brook!"

Brook was sitting with St. George. His coat was well buttoned up, a white woollen comforter folded round his neck and chin,

and a low-crowned, wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his brows. I confess that but for Tom's shout I should not have recognized him—muffled up in that way.

Anxious to get home, out of the storm, the Squire paid no heed to Tod's injunction of pulling up. He just turned his head for a moment towards the gig, but drove on at the same speed as before. All we could do was to call out every welcome we could think of to William Brook as we looked back, and to pull off our hats and wave them frantically.

William Brook pulled off his, and waved it to us in return. *I saw him do it.* He called out something also, no doubt a greeting. At least, I thought he did; but the wind swept by with a gust at the moment, and it might have been St. George's voice and not his.

"Johnny, lad, it's better than nuts," cried Tod to me, all excitement for once, as he fixed his hat on his head again. "How glad I am!—for Nelly's sake. But what on earth brings the pair of them—he and St. George—in Dip Lane?"

Another minute or so, and we reached the gap in the hedge. I turned my eyes to it and to the pond beyond it in a sort of fascination; I was sure to do so whenever I went by, but that was seldom; and the conversation at the dessert-table had opened the wretched details afresh. Almost immediately afterwards, the gig wheels behind us, which I could hear above the noise of the wind, seemed to me to come to a sudden standstill. "St. George has stopped," I exclaimed to Tod. "Not a bit of it," answered he; "we can no longer hear him." Almost close upon that, we passed the

turning which led out of the lane towards Evesham. Not heeding anything of all this, as indeed why should he, the Squire dashed straight onwards, and in time we gained our homestead, Crabb Cot.

The first thing the Squire did, when we were all gathered round the welcome fire, blazing and crackling with wood and coal, and the stormy blasts beat on the window-panes, but no longer upon us, was to attack us for making that noise in Dip Lane, and for shouting out that it was Brook.

"It was Brook, father," said Tod. "St. George was driving him."

"Nonsense, Joe," reprimanded the Squire. "William Brook has not landed from the high seas yet. And, if he had landed, what should bring him in Dip Lane—or St. George either?"

"It was St. George," persisted Tod.

"Well, that might have been. It looked like his grey horse. Where was he coming from, I wonder?"

"Mr. St. George went to Worcester this morning, sir," interposed Thomas, who had come in with some glasses, the Squire having asked for some hot brandy-and-water. "Giles saw his man Japhet this afternoon, and he said his master had gone off in his gig to Worcester for the day."

"Then he must have picked up Brook at Worcester," said Tod, in his decisive way.

"May be so," conceded the Squire, coming round to reason. "But I don't see what they could be doing in Dip Lane."

The storm had disappeared the following morning, but the ground was white with a thin coating of snow; and in the afternoon, when we started for Timberdale to call on William Brook, the sky was blue and the sun shining. Climbing up from the Ravine and crossing the field beyond it to the high-road, we met Darbyshire, the surgeon, striding along as fast as his legs would carry him.

"You seem to be in a hurry," remarked the Squire.

"Just sent for to a sick patient over yonder," replied Darbyshire, nodding to some cottages in the distance. "Dying, the report is; supposed to have swallowed poison. Dare say it will turn out to be a case of cucumber."

He was speeding on when Tod asked whether he had seen William Brook yet. Darbyshire turned to face him, looking surprised.

"Seen Brook yet! No; how should I see him? Brook's not come, is he?"

"He got home last night. St. George drove him from Worcester in his gig," said Tod, and went on to explain that we had passed them in Dip Lane. Darbyshire was uncommonly pleased. Brook was a favourite of his.

"I am surprised that I have not seen him," he cried; "I have been about all the morning. St. George was in Worcester yesterday, I know. Wonder, though, what induced them to make a pilgrimage through Dip Lane!"

Just, you see, as the rest of us had wondered.

We went on towards Mrs. Brook's. But in passing Mr. Delorane's, Aunt Hester's head appeared above the Venetian blind of the dining-room. She began nodding cordially.

"How lively she looks," exclaimed the Squire. "Pleased that he is back, I take it. Suppose we go in?"

The front-door was standing open, and we went in unannounced. Aunt Hester, sitting then at the little work-table, making herself a cap with lace and pink ribbons, got up and tried to shake hands with all three of us at once.

"We are on our way to call on William Brook," cried the Squire, as we sat down, and Aunt Hester was taking up her work again.

"On William Brook!—why, what do you mean?" she exclaimed. "Has he come?"

"You don't mean to say you did not know it—that he has not been to see you?" cried the Squire.

"I don't know a thing about it; I did not know he had come; no one has told me," rejoined Aunt Hester. "As to his coming to see me—well, I suppose he would not feel himself at liberty to do that until Mr. Delorane gave permission. When did he arrive? I am so glad."

"And he is not much behind his time, either," observed Tod.

"Not at all behind it, to speak of, only we were impatient. The truth is, I caught somewhat of Ellin's fears," added Aunt Hester, looking at us over her spectacles, which she rarely wore higher than the end of her nose. "Ellin has had gloomy ideas about his

never coming back at all; and one can't see a person perpetually sighing away in silence, without sighing a bit also for company. Did he get here this morning? What a pity Ellin is in Worcester!"

We told Aunt Hester all about it, just as we had told Darbyshire, but not quite so curtly, for she was not in a hurry to be off to a poisoned patient. She dropped her work to listen, and took off her spectacles, looking, however, uncommonly puzzled.

"What a singular thing—that you should chance to have been in Dip Lane just at the time they were!—and why should they have chosen that dreary route! But—but–"

"But what, ma'am?" cried the Squire.

"Well, I am thinking what could have been St. George's motive for concealing the news from me when he came round here last night to tell me he had left Ellin safely at Philip West's," replied she.

"Did he say nothing to you about William Brook?"

"Not a word. He said what a nasty drive home it had been in the teeth of the storm and wind, but he did not mention William Brook. He seemed tired, and did not stay above a minute or two. John was out. Oh, here is John."

Mr. Delorane, hearing our voices, I suppose, came in from the office. Aunt Hester told him the news at once—that William Brook was come home.

"I am downright glad," interrupted the lawyer emphatically. "What with one delay and another, one might have begun to think him lost: it was September, you know, that he originally

announced himself for. What do you say?"—his own words having partly drowned Aunt Hester's—"St. George drove him home last night from Worcester? Drove Brook? Nonsense! Had St. George brought Brook he would have told me of it."

"But he did bring him, sir," affirmed Tod: and he went over the history once more. Mr. Delorane did not take it in.

"Are these lads playing a joke upon me, Squire?" asked he.

"Look here, Delorane. That we passed St. George in Dip Lane is a fact; I knew the cut of his gig and horse. Some one was with him; I saw that much. The boys called out that it was William Brook, and began shouting to him. Whether it was he, or not, I can't say; I had enough to do with my horses, I can tell you; they did not like the wind, Blister especially."

"It was William Brook, safe enough, sir," interposed Tod. "Do you think I don't know him? We spoke to him, and he spoke to us. Why should you doubt it?"

"Well, I suppose I can't doubt it, as you speak so positively," said Mr. Delorane. "The news took me by surprise, you see. Why on earth did St. George not tell me of it? I shall take him to task when he comes in. Any way, I am glad Brook's come. We will drink his health."

He opened what was in those days called the cellaret—and a very convenient article it was for those who drank wine as a rule—and put on the table some of the glasses that were standing on the sideboard. Then we drank health and happiness to William Brook.

"And to some one else also," cried bold Tod, winking at Aunt Hester.

"You two boys can go on to Mrs. Brook's," cried the Squire; "I shall stop here a bit. Tell William I am glad he has surmounted the perils of the treacherous seas."

"And tell him he may come to see me if he likes," added the lawyer. "I expect he did not get a note I wrote to him a few months back, or he'd have been here this morning."

Away we went to Mrs. Brook's. And the first thing that flabbergasted us (the expression was Tod's, not mine) was to be met by a denial of the servant's. Upon Tod asking to see Mr. William, she stared at us and said he was not back from his travels.

"Come in," called out Minty from the parlour; "I know your voices." She sat at the table, her paint-box before her. Minty painted very nice pieces in water-colours: the one in process was a lovely bit of scenery taken from Little Malvern. Mrs. Brook was out.

"What did I hear you saying to Ann about William—that he had come home?" she began to us, without getting up from her work—for we were too intimate to be upon any ceremony with one another. "He is not come yet. I only wish he was."

"But he is come," said Tod. "He came last night. We saw him and spoke to him."

Minty put down her camel-hair pencil then, and turned round. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Mr. St. George drove William home from Worcester. We passed them in the gig in Dip Lane."

Minty retorted by asking whether we were not dreaming; and for a minute or two we kept at cross-purposes. She held to it that they had seen nothing of her brother; that he was not at Timberdale.

"Mamma never had a wink of sleep last night, for thinking of the dreadful gale William must be in at sea. Your fancy misled you," went on Minty, calmly touching-up the cottage in her painting—and Tod looked as if he would like to beat her.

But it did really seem that William had not come, and we took our departure. I don't think I had ever seen Tod look so puzzled.

"I wish I may be shot if I can understand this!" said he.

"Could we have been mistaken in thinking it was Brook?" I was beginning; and Tod turned upon me savagely.

"I swear it was Brook. There! And you know it as well as I, Mr. Johnny. Where can he be hiding himself? What is the meaning of it?"

It is my habit always to try to account for things that seem unaccountable; to search out reasons and fathom them; and you would be surprised at the light that will sometimes crop up. An idea flashed across me now.

"Can Brook be ill, Tod, think you?—done up with his voyage, or something—and St. George is nursing him at his house for a day or two before he shows himself to Timberdale?" And Tod thought it might be so.

Getting back to Mr. Delorane's, we found him and the Squire sitting at the table still. St. George, just come in, was standing by, hat in hand, and they were both tackling him at once.

"*What* do you say?" asked St. George of his master, when he found room for a word. "That I brought William Brook home here last night from Worcester! Why, what can have put such a thing into your head, sir?"

"*Didn't* you bring him?" cried the Squire. "Didn't you drive him home in your gig?"

"That I did not. I have not seen William Brook."

He spoke in a ready, though surprised tone, not at all like one who is shuffling with the truth, or telling a fable, and looked from one to another of his two questioners, as if not yet understanding them. The Squire pushed his spectacles to the top of his brow and stared at St. George. He did not understand, either.

"Look here, St. George: do you deny that it was you we passed in Dip Lane last night—and your grey horse—and your gig?"

"Why should I deny it?" quietly returned St. George. "I drew as close as I could to the hedge as a matter of precaution to let you go by, Squire, you were driving so quickly. And a fine shouting you greeted me with," he added, turning to Tod, with a slight laugh.

"The greeting was not intended for you; it was for William Brook," answered Tod, his voice bearing a spice of antagonism; for he thought he was being played with.

St. George was evidently at a loss yet, and stood in silence. All

in a moment, his face lighted up.

"Surely," he cried impulsively, "you did not take that man in the gig for William Brook!"

"It was William Brook. Who else was it?"

"A stranger. A stranger to me and to the neighbourhood. A man to whom I gave a lift."

Tod's face presented a picture. Believing, as he did still, that it was Brook in the gig, the idea suggested by me—that St. George was concealing Brook at his house out of good-fellowship—grew stronger and stronger. But he considered that, as it had come to this, St. George ought to say so.

"Where's the use of your continuing to deny it, St. George?" he asked. "You had Brook there, and you know you had."

"But I tell you that it was not Brook," returned St. George. "Should I deny it, if it had been he? You talk like a child."

"Has Brook been away so long that we shouldn't know him, do you suppose?" retorted quick-tempered Tod. "Why! as a proof that it was Brook, he shouted back his greeting to us, taking off his hat to wave it in answer to ours. Would a strange man have done that?"

"The man did nothing of the kind," said St. George.

"Yes, he did," I said, thinking it was time I spoke. "He called back a greeting to us, and he waved his hat round and round. I should not have felt so sure it was Brook but for seeing him without his hat."

"Well, I did not see him do it," conceded St. George. "When

you began to shout in passing the man seemed surprised. 'What do those people want?' he said to me; and I told him you were acquaintances of mine. It never occurred to my mind, or to his either, I should imagine, but that the shouts were meant for me. If he did take off his hat in response, as you say, he must have done it, I reckon, because I did not take off mine."

"Couldn't you hear our welcome to him? Couldn't you hear us call him 'Brook'?" persisted Tod.

"I did not distinguish a single word. The wind was too high for that."

"Then we are to understand that Brook has not come back: that you did not bring him?" interposed the Squire. "Be quiet, Joe; can't you see you were mistaken? I told you you were, you know, at the time. You and Johnny are for ever taking up odd notions, Johnny especially."

"The man was a stranger to me," spoke St. George. "I overtook him trudging along the road, soon after leaving Worcester; it was between Red Hill and the turning to Whittington. He accosted me, asking which of the two roads before us would take him to Evesham. I told him which, and was about to drive on when it occurred to me that I might as well offer to give the man a lift: it was an awful evening, and that's the truth: one that nobody would, as the saying runs, turn a dog out in. He thanked me, and got up; and I drove him as far as–"

"Then that's what took you round by Dip Lane, St. George?" interrupted Mr. Delorane.

"That's what took me round by Dip Lane," acquiesced St. George, slightly smiling; "and which seems to have led to this misapprehension. But don't give my humanity more credit than it deserves. Previously to this I had been debating in my own mind whether to take the round, seeing what a journey was before me. It was about the wildest night I ever was out in, the horse could hardly make head against the wind, and I thought we might feel it less in the small and more sheltered by-ways than in the open road. Taking up the traveller decided me."

"You put him down in Dip Lane, at the turning that leads to Evesham," remarked the Squire.

"Yes, I put him down there. It was just after you passed us. He thanked me heartily, and walked on; and I drove quickly home, glad enough to reach it. Who he was, or what he was, I do not know, and did not ask."

Tod was still in a quandary; his countenance betrayed it. "Did you notice that he resembled William Brook, St. George?"

"No. It did not strike me that he resembled any one. His face was well wrapped up from the cold, and I did not get a clear view of it: I am not sure that I should know it again. I should know his voice, though," he added quickly.

Poor Aunt Hester, listening to all this in dismay, felt the disappointment keenly: the tears were stealing down her face. "And we have been drinking his health, and—and feeling so thankful that he was safely back again!" she murmured gently.

"Hang it, yes," added Mr. Delorane. "Well, well; I dare say a

day or two more will bring him. I must say I thought it odd that you should not have mentioned it to me, St. George, if he had come."

"I should have thought it very odd, sir," spoke St. George.

"Will you take a glass of wine?"

"No, thank you; I have not time for it. Those deeds have to be gone over, you know, sir, before post-time," replied St. George; and he left the room.

"And if ever you two boys serve me such a trick again—bringing me over with a cock-and-bull story that people have come back from sea who haven't—I'll punish you," stuttered the Squire, too angry to speak clearly.

We went away in humility; heads down, metaphorically speaking, tails between legs. The Squire kept up the ball, firing away sarcastic reproaches hotly.

Tod never answered. The truth was, he felt angry himself. Not with the Squire, but with the affair altogether. Tod hated mystification, and the matter was mystifying him utterly. With all his heart, with all the sight of his eyes, he had believed it to be William Brook: and he could not drive the conviction away, that it was Brook, and that St. George was giving him house room.

"I don't like complications," spoke he resentfully.

"Complications!" retorted the Squire. "What complications are there in this? None. You two lads must have been thinking of William Brook, perhaps speaking of him, and so you thought you saw him. That's all about it, Joe."

The complications were not at an end. A curious addition to them was at hand. The Squire came to a halt at the turning to the Ravine, undecided whether to betake himself home at once, or to make a call first at Timberdale Court, to see Robert Ashton.

"I think we'll go there, lads," said he: "there's plenty of time. I want to ask him how that squabble about the hunting arrangements has been settled."

So we continued our way along the road, presently crossing it to take the one in which the Court was situated: a large handsome house, lying back on the right hand. Before gaining it, however, we had to pass the pretty villa rented by Mr. St. George, its stable and coach-house and dog-kennel beside it. The railway was on ahead; a train was shrieking itself at that moment into the station.

St. George's groom and man-of-all-work, Japhet, was sweeping up the leaves on the little lawn. Tod, who was in advance of us, put his arms on the gate. "Are you going to make a bonfire with them?" asked he.

"There's enough for't, sir," answered Japhet. "I never see such a wind as yesterday's," he ran on, dropping his besom to face Tod, for the man was a lazy fellow, always ready for a gossip. "I'm sure I thought it 'ud ha' blowed the trees down as well as the leaves."

"It was pretty strong," assented Tod, as I halted beside him, and the Squire walked on towards the Court. "We were out in it —coming home from Pigeon Green. There was one gust that I thought would have blown the horses right over."

"The master, he were out in it, too, a coming home from Worcester," cried Japhet, taking off his old hat to push his red hair back. "When he got in here, he said as he'd had enough on't for one journey. I should think the poor horse had too; his coat were all wet."

Tod lifted up his head, speaking impulsively. "Was your master alone, Japhet, when he got home? Had he any one with him?"

"Yes, he were all alone, sir," replied the man. "Miss Delorane were with him when he drove off in the morning, but she stayed at Worcester."

Had Tod taken a moment for thought he might not have asked the question. He had nothing of the sneak in him, and would have scorned to pump a servant about his master's movements. The answer tended to destroy his theory of Brook's being concealed here, and to uphold the account given by Mr. St. George.

Quitting the railings, we ran to catch up the Squire. And at that moment two or three railway passengers loomed into view, coming from the train. One of them was Ellin Delorane.

She came along briskly, with a buoyant step and a smiling face. The Squire dropped us a word of caution.

"Now don't go telling her of your stupid fancy about Brook, you two: it would only cause her disappointment." And with the last word we met her.

"Ah ha, Miss Ellin!" he exclaimed, taking her hands. "And so the truant's back again!"

"Yes, he is back again," she softly whispered, with a blush that was deep in colour.

The Squire did not quite catch the words. She and he were at cross-purposes. "We have but now left your house, my dear," he continued. "Your aunt does not expect you back to-day; she thought you would stay at Worcester till Saturday."

Ellin smiled shyly. "Have you seen him?" she asked in the same soft whisper.

"Seen whom, my dear?"

"Mr. Brook."

"Mr. Brook! Do you mean *William* Brook? He is not back, is he?"

"Yes, he is back," she answered. "I thought you might have seen him: you spoke of the return of the truant."

"Why, child, I meant you," explained the Squire. "Nobody else. Who says William Brook is back?"

"Oh, I say it," returned Ellin, her cheeks all rosy dimples. "He reached Worcester yesterday."

"And where is he now?" cried the Squire, feeling a little at sea.

"He is here, at Timberdale," answered Ellin. "Mr. St. George drove him home last night."

"There!" cried Tod with startling emphasis. "There, father, please not to disparage my sight any more."

Well, what do you think of this for another complication? It took me aback. The Squire rubbed his face, and stared.

"My dear, just let us understand how the land lies," said he,

putting his hand on Ellin's shoulder. "Do you say that William Brook reached Worcester yesterday on his return, and that St. George drove him home here at night?"

"Yes," replied Ellin. "Why should you doubt it? It is true."

"Well, we thought St. George did drive him home," was the Squire's answer, staring into her face; "we passed his gig in Dip Lane and thought that it was Brook that he had with him. But St. George denies this. He says it was not Brook; that he has not seen Brook, does not know he has come home; he says the man he had with him was a stranger, to whom he was giving a lift."

Ellin looked grave for a moment; then the smiles broke out again.

"St. George must have been joking," she cried; "he cannot mean it. He happened to be at Worcester Station yesterday when Mr. Brook arrived by the Birmingham train: we suppose he then offered to drive him home. Any way, he did do it."

"But St. George denied that he did, Ellin," I said.

"He will not deny it to me, Johnny. Gregory West, returning from a visit to some client at Spetchley, met them in the gig together."

The Squire listened as a man dazed. "I can't make head or tail of it," cried he. "What does St. George mean by denying that he brought Brook? And where *is* Brook?"

"Has no one seen him?" questioned Ellin.

"Not a soul, apparently. Ellin, my girl," added the Squire, "we will walk back with you to your father's, and get this cleared up.

Come along, boys."

So back we went to turn the tables upon St. George, Tod in a rapture of gratification. You might have thought he was treading upon eggs.

We had it out this time in Mr. Delorane's private office; the Squire walked straight into it. Not but that "having it out" must be regarded as a figure of speech, for elucidation seemed farther off than before, and the complications greater.

Mr. Delorane and his head-clerk were both bending over the same parchment when we entered. Ellin kissed her father, and turned to St. George.

"Why have you been saying that you did not drive home William Brook?" she asked as they shook hands.

"A moment, my dear; let me speak," interrupted the Squire, who never believed any one's explanation could be so lucid as his own. "Delorane, I left you just now with an apology for having brought to you a cock-and-bull story through the misleading fancies of these boys; but we have come back again to tell you the story's true. Your daughter here says that it was William Brook that St. George had in his gig. And perhaps Mr. St. George"—giving that gentleman a sharp nod—"will explain what he meant by denying it?"

"I denied it because it was not he," said Mr. St. George, not appearing to be in the least put out. "How can I tell you it was Brook when it was not Brook? If it had been–"

"You met William Brook at the Worcester railway-station

yesterday afternoon," interrupted Ellin. "Mrs. James Ashton saw you there; saw the meeting. You *were* at the station, were you not?"

"I was at the station," readily replied St. George, "and Mrs. James Ashton may have seen me there, for all I know—I did not see her. But she certainly did not see William Brook. Or, if she did, I didn't."

"Gregory West saw you and him in your gig together later, when you were leaving Worcester," continued Ellin. "It was at the top of Red Hill."

St. George shook his head. "The person I had in my gig was a stranger. Had Gregory West come up one minute earlier he would have seen me take the man into it."

"William *has* come," persisted Ellin.

"I don't say he has not," returned St. George. "All I can say is that I did not know he had come and that I have not seen him."

Who was right, and who was wrong? Any faces more hopelessly puzzled than the two old gentlemen's were, as they listened to these contradictory assertions, I'd not wish to see. Nothing came of the interview; nothing but fresh mystification. Ellin declared William Brook had arrived, had been driven out of Worcester for Timberdale in St. George's gig. We felt equally certain we had passed them in Dip Lane, sitting together in the gig; but St. George denied it in toto, affirming that the person with him was a stranger.

And perhaps it may be as well if I here say a word about the

routes. Evesham lay fifteen miles from Worcester; Timberdale not much more than half that distance, in a somewhat different direction, and on a different road. In going to Timberdale, if when about half-way there you quitted the high-road for by-ways you would come to Dip Lane. Traversing nearly the length of the lane, you would then come to a by-way leading from it on the other side, which would bring you on the direct road to Evesham, still far off. Failing to take this by-way leading to Evesham, you would presently quit the lane, and by dint of more by-ways would gain again the high-road and soon come to Timberdale. This is the route that Mr. St. George took that night.

We went home from Mr. Delorane's, hopelessly mystified, the Squire rubbing up his hair the wrong way; now blowing us both up for what he called our "fancies" in supposing we saw William Brook, and now veering round to the opposite opinion that we and Ellin must be alike correct in saying Brook had come.

Ellin's account was this: she passed a pleasant morning with Mary West, who was nearly always more or less of an invalid. At half-past one o'clock dinner was served; Philip West, his younger brother Gregory, who had recently joined him, and Mr. St. George coming in from the office to partake of it. Dinner over, they left the room, having no time to linger. In fact, Gregory rose from table before he had well finished. Mary West inquired what his haste was, and he replied that he was off to Spetchley; some one had been taken ill there and wanted a will made. It was Philip who ought to have gone, who had been sent for; but Philip

had an hour or two's business yet to do with Mr. St. George. Mrs. West told St. George that she would have tea ready at five o'clock, that he might drink a cup before starting for home.

Later on in the afternoon, when Ellin and Mrs. West were sitting over the fire, talking of things past and present, and listening to the howling of the wind, growing more furious every hour, James Ashton's wife came in, all excitement. Her husband, in medical practice at Worcester, was the brother of Robert Ashton of Timberdale. A very nice young woman was Marianne Ashton, but given to an excited manner. Taking no notice of Mrs. West, she flew to Ellin and began dancing round her like a demented Red Indian squaw.

"What will you give me for my news, Ellin?"

"Now, Marianne!" remonstrated Mrs. West. "Do be sensible, if you can."

"Be quiet, Mary: I am sensible. Your runaway lover is come, Ellin; quite safely."

They saw by her manner, heard by her earnest tone, that it was true. William Brook had indeed come, was then in the town. Throwing off her bonnet, and remarking that she meant to remain for tea, Mrs. James Ashton sat down to tell her story soberly.

"You must know that I had to go up to the Shrub Hill Station this afternoon," began she, "to meet the Birmingham train. We expected Patty Silvester in by it; and James has been since a most unearthly hour this morning with some cross-grained patient,

who must needs go and be ill at the wrong time. I went up in the brougham, and had hardly reached the platform when the train came in. There was a good deal of confusion; there always is, you know; passengers getting out and getting in. I ran about looking for Patty, and found she had not come: taken fright at the weather, I suppose. As the train cleared off, I saw a figure that seemed familiar to me; it was William Brook; and I gave a glad cry that you might have heard on the top of St. Andrew's spire. He was crossing the line with others who had alighted, a small black-leather travelling-bag in his hand. I was about to run over after him, when a porter stopped me, saying a stray engine was on the point of coming up, to take on the Malvern train. So, all I could do was to stand there, hoping he would turn his head and see me. Well: just as he reached the opposite platform, Mr. St. George stepped out of the station-master's office, and I can tell you there was some shaking of hands between the two. There's my story."

"And where is he now?"

"Oh, they are somewhere together, I suppose; on their way here perhaps," rejoined Mrs. James Ashton carelessly. "I lost sight of them: that ridiculous stray engine the man spoke of puffed up at the minute, and stopped right in front of me. When it puffed on again, leaving the way clear, both he and St. George had vanished. So I got into the brougham to bring you the news in advance, lest the sudden sight of William the deserter should cause a fainting-fit."

Ellin, unable to control herself, burst into glad tears of relief. "You don't know what a strain it has been," she said. And she sat listening for his step on the stairs. But William Brook did not come.

At five o'clock punctually the tea was brought in, and waited for some little time on the table. Presently Mr. West appeared. When they told him he was late, he replied that he had lingered in the office expecting Mr. St. George. St. George had left him some time before to go to the Shrub Hill Station, having business to see to there, and had promised to be back by tea-time. However, he was not back yet. Mr. West was very glad to hear of the arrival of William Brook, and supposed St. George was then with him.

Before the tea was quite over, Gregory West got back from Spetchley. He told them that he had met St. George just outside the town, and that he had a gentleman in his gig. He, Gregory West, who was in his brother's gig, pulled up to ask St. George whether he was not going home earlier than he had said. Yes, somewhat, St. George called back, without stopping: when he had seen what sort of a night it was going to be, he thought it best to be off as soon as he could.

"Of course it was William Brook that he had with him, Gregory!" exclaimed Mary West, forgetting that her brother-in-law had never seen William Brook.

"I cannot tell," was the only answer the young lawyer could give. "It was a stranger to me: he wore a lightish-coloured over-

coat and a white comforter."

"That's he," said Mrs. James Ashton. "And he had on new tan-coloured kid gloves: I noticed them. I think St. George might have brought him here, in spite of the roughness of the night. He is jealous, Ellin."

They all laughed. But never a shadow of doubt rested on any one of their minds that St. George was driving William Brook home to Timberdale. And we, as you have heard, saw him, or thought we saw him, in Dip Lane.

III

I scarcely know how to go on with this story so as to put its complications and discrepancies of evidence clearly before you. William Brook had been daily expected to land at Liverpool from the West Indies, and to make his way at once to Timberdale by rail, *viâ* Birmingham and Worcester.

In the afternoon of the 19th of October, Mrs. James Ashton chanced to be at the Worcester Station when the Birmingham train came in. Amidst the passengers who alighted from it she saw William Brook, whom she had known all her life. She was not near enough to speak to him, but she watched him cross the line to the opposite platform, shake hands there with Mr. St. George, and remain talking. Subsequently, Gregory West had met St. George leaving Worcester in his gig, a gentleman sitting with him; it was therefore assumed without doubt that he was driving William Brook to Timberdale, to save him the railway journey and for companionship.

That same evening, at dusk, as we (not knowing that Brook had landed) were returning home from Pigeon Green in the large phaeton, amid a great storm of wind, and slight sleet and snow, Mrs. Todhetley sitting with the Squire in front, Tod and I behind, we passed St. George's gig in Dip Lane; and saw William Brook with him—as we believed, Tod most positively. We called out to Brook, waving our hats; Brook called back to us and waved his.

But now, Mr. St. George denied that it was Brook. He said the gentleman with him was a stranger to whom he had given a lift of three or four miles on the road, and who bore no resemblance to Brook, so far as he saw. Was it Brook, or was it not? asked every one. If it was Brook, what had become of him? The only one point that seemed to be sure in the matter was this—William Brook had not reached Timberdale.

The following, elaborated, was Mr. St. George's statement.

He, as confidential clerk, soon to be partner, of Mr. Delorane, had a good deal of business to go through that day with Philip West at Worcester, and the afternoon was well on before it was concluded. He then went up to the station at Shrub Hill to inquire after a missing packet of deeds, which had been despatched by rail from Birmingham to Mr. Delorane and as yet could not be heard of. His inquiries over, St. George was traversing the platform on his way to quit the station, when one of the passengers, who had then crossed the line from the Birmingham train, stopped him to ask if he could inform him when the next train would leave for Evesham. "Very shortly," St. George replied, speaking from memory: but even as he spoke a doubt arose in his mind. "Wait a moment," he said to the stranger; "I am not sure that I am correct"—and he drew from his pocket a time-table and consulted it. There would not be a train for Evesham for more than two hours, he found, one having just gone. The stranger remarked that it was very unfortunate; he had not wanted to wait all that time at Worcester, but to get on at

once. The stranger then detained him to ask, apologizing for the trouble, and adding that it was the first time he had been in the locality, whether he could get on from Evesham to Cheltenham. St. George told him that he could, but that he could also get on to Cheltenham from Worcester direct. "Ah," remarked the stranger, "but I have to take Evesham on my way." No more passed, and St. George left him on the platform. He appeared to be a gentleman, spoke as a cultured man speaks, St. George added when questioned on these points: and his appearance and attire tallied with that given by Mrs. Ashton. St. George had not observed Mrs. James Ashton on the opposite platform; did not know she was there.

Perceiving, as he left the station, how bad the weather was getting, and what a wild night might be expected, St. George rapidly made up his mind to start for home at once, without waiting for tea at Philip West's or going back at all to the house. He made his way to the Hare-and-Hounds through the back streets, as being the nearest, ordered his gig, and set off—alone—as soon as it was ready. It was then growing dusk; snow was falling in scanty flakes mixed with sleet, and the wind was roaring and rushing like mad.

Gaining the top of Red Hill, St. George was bowling along the level road beyond it, when some wayfarer turned round just before him, put up his hand, and spoke. By the peculiar-coloured coat—a sort of slate—and white comforter, he recognized the stranger of the railway-station; he also remembered the voice. "I

beg your pardon a thousand times for stopping you," he said, "but I think I perceive that the road branches off two ways yonder: will you kindly tell me which of them will take me to Evesham? there seems to be no one about on foot that I can inquire of." "That will be your way," St. George answered, pointing with his whip. "But you are not thinking of walking to Evesham to-night, are you?" he added. "It is fifteen miles off."

The stranger replied that he had made up his mind to walk, rather than wait two hours at Worcester station: and St. George was touching his horse to move on, when a thought struck him.

"I am not going the direct Evesham road, but I can give you a lift part of the way," he said. "It will not cut off any of the distance for you, but it will save your legs three or four miles." The stranger thanked him and got up at once, St. George undoing the apron to admit him. He had the same black bag with him that St. George had noticed at the station.

St. George had thus to make a detour to accommodate the stranger. He was by no means unwilling to do it; for, apart from the wish to help a fellow-creature, he believed it would be less rough in the low-lying lands. Driving along in the teeth of the furious wind, he turned off the highway and got into Dip Lane. We saw him in it, the stranger sitting with him. He drove on after we had passed, pulled up at the proper place for the man to descend, and pointed out the route. "You have a mile or two of these by-ways," he said to him, "but keep straight on and they will bring you out into the open road. Turn to your left then, and

you will gain Evesham in time—and I wish you well through your walk."

Those were St. George's exact words—as he repeated them to us later. The stranger thanked him heartily, shook hands and went on his way, carrying his black bag. St. George said that before parting with the traveller, he suggested that he should go on with him to Timberdale, seeing the night was so cold and wild, put up at the Plough-and-Harrow, where he could get a comfortable bed, and go on to Evesham in the morning. But the stranger declined, and seemed impatient to get on.

He did not tell St. George who he was, or what he was; he did not tell his name, or what his business was in Worcestershire, or whether he was purposing to make a stay at Evesham, or whither he might be going when he left it: unless the question he had put to St. George, as to being able to get on to Cheltenham, might be taken for an indication of his route. In fact, he stated nothing whatever about himself; but, as St. George said, the state of the weather was against talking. It was difficult to hear each other speak; the blasts howled about their ears perpetually, and the sharp sleet stung their faces. As to his bearing the resemblance to Brook that was being talked of, St. George could only repeat that he did not perceive it; he might have been about Brook's height and size, but that was all. The voice was certainly not Brook's, not in the least like Brook's, neither was the face, so far as St. George saw of it: no idea of the kind struck him.

These were the different statements: and, reading them, you

have the matter in a nutshell. Mrs. James Ashton continued to affirm that it was William Brook she saw at the station, and could not be shaken out of her belief. She and William had played together as children, they had flirted together, she was pleased to declare, as youth and maiden, and *did* anybody suppose she could mistake an unknown young man for him in broad daylight? An immense favourite with all the world, Marianne Ashton was fond of holding decisively to her own opinions; all her words might have begun with capital letters.

I also maintained that the young man we saw in St. George's gig in Dip Lane, and who wore a warm great-coat of rather an unusual colour, something of a grey—or a slate—or a mouse, with the white woollen comforter on his neck and the soft low-crowned hat drawn well on his brows, was William Brook. When he took off his hat to wave it to us in response, I saw (as I fully believed) that it was Brook; and I noticed his gloves. Mrs. Todhetley, who had turned her head at our words, also saw him and felt not the slightest doubt that it was he. Tod was ready to swear to it.

To combat this, we had Mr. St. George's cool, calm, decisive assertion that the man was a stranger. Of course it outweighed ours. All the probabilities lay with it; he had been in companionship with the stranger, had talked with him face to face: we had not. Besides, if it had been Brook, where was he that he had not made his way to Timberdale? So we took up the common-sense view of the matter and dismissed our own

impressions as fancies that would not hold water, and looked out daily for the landing of the exile. Aunt Hester hoped he was not "lost at sea:" but she did not say it in the hearing of Ellin Delorane.

The days went on. November came in. William Brook did not appear; no tidings reached us of him. His continued non-appearance so effectually confirmed St. George's statement, that the other idea was exploded and forgotten by all reasonable minds. Possibly in one or two unreasonable ones, such as mine, say, a sort of hazy doubt might still hover. But, doubt of what? Ay, that was the question. Even Tod veered round to the enemy, said his sight must have misled him, and laid the blame on the wind. Both common sense and uncommon said Brook had but been detained in Jamaica, and might be expected in any day.

The first check to this security of expectation was wrought by a letter. A letter from New York, addressed to William Brook by his brother there, Charles. Mrs. Brook opened it. She was growing vaguely uneasy, and had already begun to ask herself why, were William detained in the West Indies, he did not write to tell her so.

And this, as it proved, was the chief question the letter was written to ask. "If," wrote Charles Brook to his brother, "if you have arrived at home—as we conclude you must have done, having seen in the papers the safe arrival of the *Dart* at Liverpool—how is it you have not written to say so, and to inform us how things are progressing? The uncle does not like it. 'Is William

growing negligent?' he said to me yesterday."

The phrase "how things are progressing," Mrs. Brook understood to apply to the new mercantile house about to be established in London. She sent the letter by Araminta to Mr. Delorane.

"Can William have been drowned at sea?" breathed Minty.

"No, no; I don't fear that; I'm not like that silly woman, Aunt Hester, with her dreams and her fancies," said Mr. Delorane. "It seems odd, though, where he can be."

Inquiries were made at Liverpool for the list of passengers by the *Dart*. William Brook's name was not amongst them. Timberdale waited on. There was nothing else for it to do. Waited until a second letter came from Charles Brook. It was written to his mother this time. He asked for news of William; whether he had, or had not, arrived at home.

The next West Indian mail-packet, steaming from Southampton, carried out a letter from Mr. St. George, written to his cousin in Kingston, Jamaica, at the desire of Mr. Delorane: at the desire, it may with truth be said, of Timberdale in general. The same mail also took out a letter from Reginald Brook in London, who had been made acquainted with the trouble. Both letters were to the same purport—an inquiry as to William Brook and his movements, more particularly as to the time he had departed for home, and the vessel he had sailed in.

In six or eight weeks, which seemed to some of us like so many months, Mr. St. George received an answer. His relative,

Leonard St. George, sent rather a curious story. He did not know anything of William Brook's movements himself, he wrote, and could not gain much reliable information about them. It appeared that he was to have sailed for England in the *Dart*, a steamer bound for Liverpool, not one of their regular passenger-packets. He was unable, however, to find any record that Brook had gone in her, and believed he had not: neither could he learn that Brook had departed by any other vessel. A friend of his told him that he feared Brook was dead. The day before the *Dart* went out of port, a young man, who bore out in every respect the description of Brook, was drowned in the harbour.

Comforting news! Delightfully comforting for Ellin Delorane, not to speak of Brook's people. Aunt Hester came over to Crabb Cot, and burst into tears as she told it.

But the next morning brought a turn in the tide; one less sombre, though uncertain still. Mrs. Brook, who had bedewed her pillow with salt tears, for her youngest son was very dear to her heart, received a letter from her son Reginald in London, enclosing one he had just received from the West Indies. She brought them to Mr. Delorane's office during the morning, and the Squire and I happened to be there.

"How should Reginald know anything about it?" demanded St. George, in the haughty manner he could put on when not pleased; and his countenance looked dark as he gazed across his desk at Mrs. Brook, for which I saw no occasion. Evidently he did not like having his brother's news disputed.

"Reginald wrote to Kingston by the same mail that you wrote," she said. "He received an introduction to some mercantile firm out there, and this is their answer to him."

They stated, these merchants, that they had made due inquiries according to request, and found that William Brook had secured a passage on board the *Dart*; but that, finding himself unable to go in her, his business in Kingston not being finished, he had, at the last moment, made over his berth and ticket to another gentleman, who found himself called upon to sail unexpectedly: and that he, Brook, had departed by the *Idalia*, which left two days later than the *Dart* and was also bound for Liverpool.

"I have ascertained here, dear mother," wrote Reginald from London, "that the *Idalia* made a good passage and reached Liverpool on the 18th of October. If the statement which I enclose you be correct, that William left Jamaica in her, he must have arrived in her at Liverpool, unless he died on the way. It is very strange where he can be, and what can have become of him. Of course, inquiries must now be made in Liverpool. I only wish I could go down myself, but our patients are all on my hands just now, for Dr. Croft is ill."

The first thought, flashing into the mind of Mr. Delorane, was, that the 18th of October was the eve of the day on which William Brook was said to have been seen by Mrs. James Ashton. He paused to consider, a sort of puzzled doubt on his face.

"Why, look you here," cried he quickly, "it seems as though that *was* Brook at Worcester Station. If he reached Liverpool on

the 18th, the probabilities are that he would be at Worcester on the 19th. What do you make of it?"

We could not make anything. Mrs. Brook looked pale and distressed. The Squire, in his impulsive good-nature, offered to be the one to go, off-hand, to make the inquiries at Liverpool. St. George opposed this: *he* was the proper person to go, he said; but Mrs. Delorane reminded him that he could be ill spared just then, when the assizes were at hand. For the time had gone on to spring.

"I will start to-night," said the Squire, "and take Johnny with me. My time is my own. We will turn Liverpool upside down but what we find Brook—if he is to be found on earth."

That the Squire might have turned Liverpool "upside down" with the confusion of his inquiries was likely enough, only that Jack Tanerton was there, having brought his own good ship, the *Rose of Delhi*, into port but a few days before. Jack and William Brook had been boys together, and Jack took up the cause in warm-hearted zeal. His knowledge of the town and its shipping made our way plain before us. That is, as plain as a way can be made which seems to have neither inlet nor outlet.

The *Idalia* was then lying in the Liverpool docks, not long in again from the West Indies. We ascertained that William Brook had come in her the previous autumn, making the port of Liverpool on the 18th of October.

"Then nothing happened to him half-way?" cried the Squire to the second mate, a decent sort of fellow who did all he could

for us. “He was not lost, or—or—anything of that sort?”

“Why no,” said the mate, looking surprised. “He was all right the whole of the voyage and in first-rate spirits—a very nice young fellow altogether. The *Idalia* brought him home, all taut and safe, take our word for that, sir; and he went ashore with the rest, and his luggage also: of which he had but little; just a big case and the small one that was in his cabin.”

All this was certain. But from the hour Brook stepped ashore, we were unable to trace anything certain about him. The hotels could not single him out in memory from other temporary sojourners. I think it was by no means a usual occurrence in those days for passing guests to give in their names. Any way, we found no record of Brook’s. The railway porters remembered no more of him than the hotels—and it was hardly likely they would.

Captain Tanerton—to give Jack his title—was indefatigable; winding himself in and out of all kinds of places like a detective eel. In some marvellous way he got to learn that a gentleman whose appearance tallied with Brook’s had bought some tan-coloured kid gloves and also a white comforter in a shop in Bold Street on the morning of the 19th of October. Jack took us there that we might question the people, especially the young woman who served him. She said that, while choosing the gloves, he observed that he had just come off a sea-voyage and found the weather here very chilly. He wore a lightish great-coat, a sort of slate or grey. She was setting out the window when he came in, and had to leave it to serve him; it was barely eight o’clock, and

she remarked that he was shopping betimes; he replied yes, for he was going off directly by train. He bought two pair of the gloves, putting one pair of them on in the shop; he next bought a warm knitted woollen scarf, white, and put that on. She was quite certain it was the 19th of October, and told us why she could not be mistaken. And that was the last trace we could get of Brook in Liverpool.

Well, well; it is of no use to linger. We went away from Liverpool, the Squire and I, no better off than we were when we entered it. That William Brook had arrived safely by the *Idalia*, and that he had landed safely, appeared to be a fact indisputable: but after that time he seemed to have vanished into air. Unless, mark you, it was he who had come on to Worcester.

The most concerned of all at our ill-luck was Mr. St. George. He had treated the matter lightly when thinking Brook was only lingering over the seas; now that it was proved he returned by the *Idalia*, the case was different.

"I don't like it at all," he said to the Squire frankly. "People may begin to think it was really Brook I had with me that night, and ask me what I did with him."

"What could you have done with him?" dissented the Squire.

"Not much—that I see. I couldn't pack him up in a parcel to be sent back over seas, and I couldn't bury him here. I wish with all my heart it had been Brook! I won't leave a stone unturned now but what I find him," added St. George, his eyes flashing, his face flushing hotly. "Any way, I'll find the man who was with

me."

St. George set to work. Making inquiries here, there, and everywhere for William Brook, personally and by advertising. But little came of it. A porter at the Worcester railway-station, who had seen the traveller talking with St. George on the platform, came forward to state that they (the gentleman and Mr. St. George) had left the station together, walking away from it side by side, down the road. St. George utterly denied this. He admitted that the other might have followed him so closely as to impart a possible appearance of their being together, but if so, he was not conscious of it. Just as he had denied shaking hands with the stranger, which Mrs. James Ashton insisted upon.

Next a lady came forward. She had travelled from Birmingham that afternoon, the 19th of October, with her little nephew and niece. In the same compartment, a first-class one, was another passenger, bearing, both in attire and person, the description told of—a very pleasant, gentlemanly young man, nice-looking, eyes dark blue. It was bitterly cold: he seemed to feel it greatly, and said he had recently come from a warmer climate. He also said that he ought to have got into Worcester by an earlier train, but had been detained in Birmingham, through missing his luggage, which he supposed must have been put out by mistake at some intermediate station. He had with him a small black hand-bag; nothing else that she saw. His great-coat was of a peculiar shade of grey; it did not look like an English-made coat: his well-fitting kid gloves were of fawn (or tan) colour, and

appeared to be new. Once, when the high wind seemed to shake the carriage, he remarked with a smile that one might almost as well be at sea; upon which her little nephew said: "Have you ever been to sea, sir?" "Yes, my little lad," he answered; "I landed from it only yesterday."

The only other person to come forward was a farmer named Lockett, well known to us all. He lived on the Evesham Road, close upon the turning, or by-way, which led up from Dip Lane. On the night of the storm, the 19th of October, he went out about ten o'clock to visit a neighbour, who had met with a bad accident. In passing by this turning, a man came out of it, walking pretty sharply. He looked like a gentleman, seemed to be muffled up round the neck, and carried something in his hand; whether a black bag, or not, Mr. Lockett did not observe. "A wild night," said the farmer to him in salutation. "It is that," answered the other. He took the road to Evesham, and Mr. Lockett saw him no more.

St. George was delighted at this evidence. He could have hugged old Lockett. "I knew that the truth would be corroborated sooner or later," he said, his eyes sparkling. "That was the man I put out of my gig in Dip Lane."

"Stop a bit," cried Mr. Delorane, a doubt striking him. "If it was the same man, what had he been doing to take two or three hours to get into the Evesham Road? Did he bear any resemblance to William Brook, Lockett?—you would have known Brook."

"None at all that I saw. As to knowing Brook, or any one else, I can't answer for it on such a night as that," added the farmer after a pause. "Brook would have known me, though, I take it, daylight or dark, seeing me close to my own place, and all."

"It was the other man," affirmed St. George exultantly, "and now we will find him."

An advertisement was next inserted in the local newspapers by Mr. St. George, and also in the *Times*.

"Gentleman Wanted. The traveller who got out of the Birmingham train at Worcester railway-station on the 19th of last October, towards the close of the afternoon, and who spoke to a gentleman on the platform respecting the trains to Evesham and to Cheltenham, and who was subsequently overtaken a little way out of Worcester by the same gentleman and given a few miles' lift in his gig, and was put down in a cross-country lane to continue his walk to Evesham: this traveller is earnestly requested to give an address where he may be communicated with, to Alfred St. George, Esquire, Timberdale, Worcester. By doing so, he will be conferring a great favour."

For two long weeks the advertisements brought forth no reply. At the end of that time there came to Mr. St. George a post-letter, short and sweet.

"Tell me what I am wanted for.—R. W."

It was dated Post Office, Cheltenham. To the Post Office, Cheltenham, St. George, consulting with Mr. Delorane, wrote a brief explanation. That he (R. W.) had been mistaken by some

people who saw him that night in the gig, for a gentleman named Brook, a native of Timberdale, who had been missing since about that time. This, as R. W. might perceive, was not pleasant for himself, St. George; and he begged R. W. to come forward and set the erroneous idea at rest, or to state where he could be seen. Expenses, if any, would be cheerfully paid.

This letter brought forth the following answer:—

"Dear Sir,

"I regret that your courtesy to me that stormy night should have led to misapprehension. I the more regret it that I am not able to comply with your request to come forward. At present that is impossible. The truth is, I am, and have been for some months now, lying under a cloud, partly through my own credulous fault, chiefly through the designing faults of another man, and I dare not show myself. It may be many more months yet before I am cleared: that I shall be, in time, there exists no doubt, and I shall then gladly bear personal testimony to the fact that it was I myself who was with you. Meanwhile, perhaps the following statement will suffice: which I declare upon my honour to be true.

"I was hiding at Crewe, when I received a letter from a friend at Evesham, bidding me go to him without delay. I had no scruple in complying, not being known at all in Worcestershire, and I started by one of the Liverpool trains. I had a portmanteau with me containing papers principally, and this I missed on arriving at Birmingham. The looking for it caused me to lose the Worcester train, but I went on by the next. Upon getting out there, I addressed the first

person I saw after crossing the line—yourself. I inquired of you when the next train would start for Evesham. Not for two hours, you told me: so I set off to walk, after getting some light refreshment. Barely had I left Worcester when, through the dusk of evening, I thought I saw that the road before me branched off two ways. I did not know which to take, and ventured to stop a gig, then bowling up behind me, to ask. As you answered me I recognized you for the gentleman to whom I had spoken at the station. You offered to take me a few miles on my road, and I got into the gig. I found that you would have to go out of your way to do this, and I expressed concern; you laughed my apologies off, saying you should probably have chosen the way in any case, as it was more sheltered. You drove me as far as your road lay, told me that after I got out of the cross-lanes my way would be a straight one, and I left you with hearty thanks —which I repeat now. I may as well tell you that I reached Evesham without mishap—in process of time. The storm was so bad, the wind so fierce, that I was fain to turn out of the lane close upon leaving you, and shelter myself for an hour or two under a hay-rick, hoping it would abate. How it was possible for mortal man to see enough of me that night in your gig to mistake me for some one else, I am at a loss to understand. I remember that carriage passing us in the narrow line, the people in it shouted out to you: it must have been they, I conclude, who mistook me, for I do not think we saw another soul. You are at full liberty to show them this letter: but I must ask you not to make it absolutely public. I have purposely elaborated its details. I

repeat my sacred declaration that every word of it is true—and I heartily regret that I cannot yet testify to it personally.
"R. W."

This letter set the matter at rest. We never doubted that it was genuine, or anything but a plain narrative of absolute facts. But the one great question remained—where was William Brook?

It was not answered. The disappearance, which had been a mystery at the beginning, seemed likely to remain a mystery to the end.

Another autumn had come round. Ellin Delorane, feeble now, sat in the church-porch, the graveyard lying around her under the hot September sun, soon herself to be laid there. Chancing to take that way round from buying some figs at Salmon's for Hugh and Lena, I saw her, and dashed up the churchyard path.

"You seem to have set up a love for this lively spot, Ellin! You were sitting here the last time I passed by."

"The sun is hot yet, and I get tired, so I come across here for a rest when out this way," she answered, a sweet smile on her wan face and a hectic on her thin cheeks. "Won't you stay with me for a little while, Johnny?"

"Are you better, Ellin?" I asked, taking my place on the opposite bench, which brought my knees near to hers, for the porch was not much more than big enough for a coffin to pass through.

She gently shook her head as she glanced across at me, a steadfast look in her sad brown eyes. "Don't you see how it is,

Johnny? That I shall never be better in this world?"

"Your weakness may take a turn, Ellin; it may indeed. And —*he* may come back yet."

"He will never come back: rely upon that," she quietly said. "He is waiting for me on the Eternal shores."

Her gaze went out afar, over the gravestones and the green meadows beyond, almost (one might fancy) into the blue skies, as if she could see those shores in the distant horizon.

"Is it well to lose hope, Eileen mavourneen?"

"The hope of his returning died out long ago," she answered. "Those dreams that visited me so strangely last year, night after night, night after night, seemed to take *that* from me. Perhaps they came to do it. You remember them, Johnny?"

"I cannot think, Ellin, how you could put faith in a parcel of dreams!"

"It was not in the dreams I put faith—exactly. It was in the mysterious influence—I hope I don't speak profanely—which caused me to have the dreams. A silent, undetected influence that I understood not and never grasped—but it was there. Curious dreams they were," she added, after a pause; "curious that they should have come to me. William was always lost, and I, with others, was always searching for him—and never, never found him. They lasted, Johnny, for weeks and months; and almost from the time of their first setting-in, the impression, that I should never see him again, lay latent in my heart."

"Do they visit you still?"

"No. At least, they have changed in character. Ever since the night that he seems to have been really lost, the 19th of October. How you look at me, Johnny!"

"You speak so strangely."

"The subject is strange. I was at Worcester, you know, at Mary West's, and we thought he had come. That night I had the pleasantest dream. We were no longer seeking for him; all the anxiety, the distress of that was gone. We saw him; he seemed to be with us—though yet at a distance. When I awoke, I said in my happiness, 'Ah, those sad dreams will visit me no more, now he is found.' I thought he was, you see. Since then, though the dreams continue, he is never lost in them. I see him always; we are often talking, though we are never very close together. I will be indoors, perhaps, and he outside in the garden; or maybe I am toiling up a steep hill and he stands higher up. I seem to be *always going towards him* and he to be waiting for me. And though I never quite reach him, they are happy dreams. It will not be very long first now."

I knew what she meant—and had nothing to say to it.

"Perhaps it may be as well, Johnny," she went on in speculative thought. "God does all things for the best."

"Perhaps what may be as well?"

"That he should never have come back to marry me. I do not suppose I should have lived long in any case; I am too much like mamma. And to have been left a widower—perhaps—no, it is best as it is."

"You don't give yourself a chance of getting better, Ellin—cherishing these gloomy views."

"Gloomy! They are not gloomy. I am as happy as I can be. I often picture to myself the glories of the world I am hastening to; the lovely flowers, the trees that overshadow the banks of the pure crystal river, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, and the beautiful golden light shed around us by God and the Lamb. Oh, Johnny, what a rest it will be after the weary sorrow here—and the weakness—and the pain!"

"But you should not wish to leave us before your time."

"I do not wish it; it is God who is taking me. I think if I had a wish it would be to stay here as long as papa stays. For I know what my death will be to him. And what it will be to you all," she generously added, holding out her hands to me, as the tears filled her eyes.

I held them for a minute in mine. Ellin took up her parasol, preparatory to moving away; but laid it down again.

"Johnny, tell me—I have often thought I should like to ask you—what do *you* think could have become of William? Have you ever picked up an idea, however faint, of anything that could tend to solve the mystery?"

It was a hard question to answer, and she saw my hesitation.

"I cannot admit that I have, Ellin. When looking at the affair in one light, I whisper to myself, 'It might have been this way;' when looking at it in another, I say, 'It might have been that.' Difficulties and contradictions encompass it on all sides. One

impediment to elucidation was the length of time that elapsed before we began the search in earnest. Had we known from the first that he was really lost, and gone to work then, we might have had a better chance."

Ellin nodded assent. "Marianne Ashton still maintains that it was William she saw that day at the railway-station."

"I know she does. She always will maintain it."

"Has it ever struck you, Johnny, in how rather remarkable a way any proof that it was he, or not he, seems to have been withheld?"

"Well, we could not get at any positive proof, one way or the other."

"But I mean that proof seems to *have been withheld*," repeated Ellin. "Take, to begin with, the traveller's luggage: but for its being lost (and we do not know that it was ever found), the name, sure to have been on it, would have told whether its owner was William Brook, or not. Then take Marianne Ashton: had she gained the platform but a few seconds earlier, she would have met the traveller face to face, avoiding all possibility of mistake either way. Next take the meeting of the two gigs that evening when Gregory West was returning from Spetchley. Gregory, a stranger to Worcester until recently, did not know William Brook; but had Philip West himself gone to Spetchley—as he ought to have done—he would have known him. Again, had Philip's groom, Brian, been there, he would have known him: he comes from this neighbourhood, you know. Brian was going with the gig that

afternoon, but just as it was starting Philip got a message from a client living at Lower Wick, and he had to send Brian with the answer, so Gregory went alone. You must see how very near proof was in all these moments, yet it was withheld."

Of course I saw it. And there was yet another instance: Had the Squire only pulled up when we passed the gig in Dip Lane, instead of driving on like the wind, we should have had proof that it was, or was not, Brook.

"If it was he," breathed Ellin, "it must have been that night he died. He would not, else, keep away from Timberdale."

My voice dropped to a lower key than hers. "Ellin! Do you really think it was he with St. George?"

"Oh, I cannot say that. If any such thought intrudes itself, I drive it away. I do not like St. George, but I would not be unjust to him."

"I thought St. George was one of your prime favourites."

"He was never that. He used to be very kind to me, especially after William went away, and I liked him for it. But latterly I have taken a most unreasonable dislike to him—and really without any justifiable cause. He worries me—but it is not that."

"Worries you!"

"In pressing me to be his wife," she sighed. "Of course I ought to be grateful: he tells me, he tells papa, that with a new life and new scenes, which he would carry me to, my health might be re-established. Poor papa! Only the other day he said to me, 'My dear, don't you think you might bring yourself to try it,' and I was

so silly as to burst into tears. The tears came into papa's eyes too, and he promised never to suggest it to me again."

The tears were trickling down her cheeks, now as she spoke. "What a world of crosses and contradiction it is!" she cried, smiling through them as she rose. "And, Johnny, all this is between ourselves, remember."

Yes, it was between ourselves. We strolled across the churchyard to a tomb that stood in a corner facing the western sun. It was of white marble, aromatic shrubs encircling it within ornamental railings, and an inscription on it to her who lay beneath—"Maria, the beloved wife of John Delorane."

Ellin lingered on through the frosts of winter. Except that she grew thinner and weaker and her cheeks brighter, there really did not seem to be much the matter. Darbyshire saw her every day, other medical men occasionally, but they could not save her. When the snowdrops were peeping from the ground, and the violets nestled in their mossy shelters, and the trees and hedges began to show signs of budding, tokens of the renewal of life after the death of winter, Ellin passed away to that other life, where there is no death and the flowers bloom for ever. And another inscription was added to the white tombstone in the churchyard —"Ellin Maria, the only child of John and Maria Delorane."

"You should have seen St. George at the funeral," said Tom Coney to us, as we turned aside after church one hot summer's day to look at the new name on grave, for we were away from Crabb Cot when she died. "His face was green; yes, green—hold

your tongue, Johnny!—green, not yellow; and his eyes had the queerest look. You were right, Todhetley; you used to say, you know, that St. George was wild after poor Ellin."

"Positive of it," affirmed Tod.

"And he can't bear the place now she's gone out of it," continued Tom Coney. "Report says that he means to throw up his post and his prospects, and run away for good."

"Not likely," dissented Tod, tossing his head. "A strong man like St. George does not die of love nowadays, or put himself out of good things, either. You have been reading romances, Coney."

But Tom Coney was right. When the summer was on the wane St. George bade a final adieu to Timberdale. And if it was his love for Ellin, or her death, that drove him away, he made no mention of it. He told Timberdale that he was growing tired of work and meant to travel. As he had a good income, Timberdale agreed that it was only natural he should grow tired of work and want to travel. So he said adieu, and departed: and Mr. Delorane speedily engaged another head-clerk in his place, who was to become his partner later.

St. George wrote to Sir. Delorane from Jamaica, to which place he steamed first, to take a look at his cousins. The letter contained a few words about William Brook. St. George had been instituting inquiries, and he said that, by what he could learn, it was certainly William Brook who was drowned in Kingston harbour the day before he ought to have sailed for England in the *Dart*. He, St. George, felt perfectly assured of

this fact, and also that if any man had sailed in the *Idalia* under Brook's name, it must have been an impostor who had nefariously substituted himself. St. George added that he was going "farther afield," possibly to California: he would write again from thence if he arrived without mishap.

No other letter ever came from him. So whether the sea swallowed him up, as, according to his report, it had swallowed his rival, none could tell. But it would take better evidence than that, to convince us William Brook had not come home in the *Idalia*.

And that is all I have to tell. I know you will deem it most unsatisfactory. Was it William Brook in the gig, or was it not? We found no trace of him after that stormy night: we have found none to this day. And, whether that was he, or was not he, what became of him? Questions never, as I believe, to be solved in this life.

There was a peculiar absence of proof every way, as Ellin remarked; nothing but doubt on all sides. Going over the matter with Darbyshire the other evening, when, as I have already told you, he suggested that I should relate it, we could not, either of us, see daylight through it, any more than we saw it at the time of its occurrence.

There was the certainty (yes, I say so) that Brook landed at Liverpool the evening of the 18th of October; he would no doubt start for home the morning of the 19th, by rail, which would take him through Birmingham to Worcester; there was also what

the shopwoman in Bold Street said, though hers might be called negative testimony, as well as the lady's in the train. There was Mrs. James Ashton's positive belief that she saw him arrive that afternoon at Worcester by the Birmingham train, *shake hands* with St. George and talk with him: and there was our recognition of him an hour or two later in St. George's gig in Dip Lane–

"Hold there, Johnny," cried Darbyshire, taking his long clay pipe from his mouth to interrupt me as I went over the items. "You should say *supposed* recognition."

"Yes, of course. Well, all that points to its having been Brook: you must see that, Mr. Darbyshire. But, if it was in truth he, there's a great deal that seems inexplicable. Why did he set off to *walk* from Worcester to Timberdale—and on such a night!—why not have gone on by rail? It is incredible."

"Nay, lad, we are told he—that is, the traveller—set off to walk to Evesham. St. George says he put him down in Dip Lane; and Lockett, you know, saw somebody, that seems to answer the description, turn from the lanes into the Evesham road."

I was silent, thinking out my thoughts. Or, rather, not daring to think them out. Darbyshire put his pipe in the fender and went on.

"If it was Brook and no stranger that St. George met at Worcester Station, the only possible theory I can form on that point is this, Johnny: that St. George then proposed to drive him home. He may have said to him, 'You walk on, and I will get my gig and overtake you directly:' it is a lame theory, you may say,

lad, but it is the only one I can discern, and I have thought of the matter more than you suppose. St. George started for home earlier than he had meant to start, and this may have been the reason: though *he* says it was because he saw it was going to be so wild a night. Why they should not have gone in company to the Hare-and-Hounds, and started thence, in the gig together, is another question."

"Unless Brook, being done up, wished not to show himself at Worcester that day—to get on at once to Timberdale."

Darbyshire nodded: the thought, I am sure, was not strange to him. "The most weighty question of all remains yet, lad: If St. George took up Brook in his gig, what did he do with him? *He* would not want to be put down in Dip Lane to walk to Evesham."

He caught up his churchwarden pipe, relighted it at the fire, and puffed away in silence. Presently I spoke again.

"Mr. Darbyshire, I do not like St. George. I never did. You may not believe me, perhaps, but the first time I ever saw his face—I was a little fellow—I drew back startled. There was something in its expression which frightened me."

"One of your unreasonable dislikes, Johnny?"

"Are they unreasonable? But I have not taken many such dislikes in my life as that one was. Perhaps I might say *any* such."

"St. George was liked by most people."

"I know he was. Any way, my dislike remained with me. I never spoke of it; no, not even to Tod."

"Liking him or disliking him has nothing to do with the main

question—what became of Brook. There were the letters too, sent by the traveller in answer to St. George's advertisements."

"Yes, there were the letters. But—did it ever occur to you to notice that not one word was said in those letters, or one new fact given, that we had not heard before? They bore out St. George's statement, but they afforded no proof that his statement was true."

"That is, Mr. Johnny, you would insinuate, putting it genteelly, that St. George fabricated the answers himself."

"No, not that he did, only that there was nothing in the letters to render it impossible that he did."

"After having fabricated the pretty little tale that it was a stranger he picked up, and what the stranger said to him, and all the rest of it, eh, Johnny?"

"Well"—I hesitated—"as to the letters, it seemed to me to be an unaccountable thing that the traveller could not let even one person see him in private, to hear his personal testimony: say Mr. Delorane, or a member of the Brook family. The Squire went hot over it: he asked St. George whether the fellow thought men of honour carried handcuffs in their pockets. Again, the stranger said he should be at liberty to come forward later, but he never has come."

Darbyshire smoked on. "I'd give this full of gold," he broke the silence with, touching the big bowl of the clay pipe, "to know where Brook vanished to."

My restless fingers had strayed to his old leaden tobacco jar,

on the table by me, pressing down its heavy lid and lifting it again. When I next spoke he might have thought the words came out of the tobacco, they were so low.

"Do you think St. George had a grudge against Brook, Mr. Darbyshire?—that he wished him out of the way?"

Darbyshire gave me a look through the wreathing smoke.

"Speak out, lad. What have you on your mind?"

"St. George said, you know, that he stopped the gig in Dip Lane at the turning which would lead to Evesham, for Brook—I mean the traveller—to get out. But I thought I heard it stop before that. I was almost sure of it."

"Stop where?"

"Just about opposite the gap in the hedge; hardly even quite as far as that. We had not reached the turning to Evesham ourselves when I heard this. The gig seemed to come to a sudden standstill. I said so to Tod at the time."

"Well?"

"Why should he have stopped just at the gap?"

"How can I tell, lad?"

"I suppose he could not have damaged Brook? Struck him a blow to stun him—or—or anything of that?"

"And if he had? If he (let us put it so) *killed* him, Johnny, what did he do with—what was left of him? What could he do with it?"

Darbyshire paused in his smoking. I played unconsciously with the jar. He was looking at me, waiting to be answered.

"I suppose—if that pond had been dragged—Dip Pond—if it were to be dragged now—that—that—nothing would be found–"

"Hush, lad," struck in Darbyshire, all hastily. "Walls have ears, people tell us: and we must not even whisper grave charges without sufficient grounds; grounds that we could substantiate."

True: and of course he did right to stop me.

But we cannot stay rebellious thought: and no end of gruesome ideas connected with that night in Dip Lane steal creepingly at times into my mind. If I am not mistaken they steal also into Darbyshire's.

All the same they may be but phantoms of the imagination, and St. George may have been a truthful, an innocent man. You must decide for yourselves, if you can, on which side the weight of evidence seems to lie. I have told you the story as it happened, and I cannot clear up for you what has never yet been cleared for Timberdale. It remains an unsolved mystery.

SANDSTONE TORR

I

What I am going to tell of took place before my time. But we shall get down to that by-and-by, for I had a good deal to do with the upshot when it came.

About a mile from the Manor, on the way to the Court (which at that time belonged to my father) stood a very old house built of grey stone, and called Sandstone Torr: "Torr," as every one knew, being a corruption of Tower. It was in a rather wild and solitary spot, much shut in by trees. A narrow lane led to it from the highway, the only road by which a carriage could get up to it: but in taking the field way between the Court and Dyke Manor, over stiles and across a running rivulet or two, you had to pass it close. Sandstone Torr was a rambling, high, and ugly old building, once belonging to the Druids, or some ancient race of that kind, and said to have been mighty and important in its day. The points chiefly remarkable about it now were its age, its lonesome grey walls, covered with lichen, and an amazingly lofty tower, that rose up from the middle of the house and went tapering off at the top like an aspiring sugar loaf.

Sandstone Torr belonged to the Radcliffes. Its occupier was Paul Radcliffe, who had inherited it from his father. He was a

rather unsociable man, and seemed to find his sole occupation in farming what little land lay around the Torr and belonged to it. He might have mixed with the gentry of the county, as far as descent went, for the Radcliffes could trace themselves back for ages—up to the Druids, I think, the same as the house: but he did not appear to care about it. Who his wife had been no one knew. He brought her home one day from London, and she kept herself as close as he did, or closer. She was dead now, and old Radcliffe lived in the Torr with his only son, and a man and maid servant.

Well, in those days there came to stay at Dyke Manor a clergyman, named Elliot, with his daughter Selina. Squire Todhetley was a youngish man then, and he and his mother lived at the Manor together. Mr. Elliot was out of health. He had been overworked for the past twenty years in the poor London parish of which he was curate; and old Mrs. Todhetley asked them to come down for a bit of a change. Change indeed it brought to Mr. Elliot. He died there. His illness, whatever it was, took a sudden and rapid stride onwards, and before he had been at Dyke Manor three weeks he was dead.

Selina Elliot—we have heard the Squire say it many a time—was the sweetest-looking girl that ever the sun shone on. She was homeless now. The best prospect before her was that of going out as governess. The Elliots were of good descent, and Selina had been thoroughly well educated; but of money she had just none. Old Mrs. Todhetley bid her not be in any hurry; she was welcome to stay as long as she liked at Dyke Manor. So Selina

stayed. It was summer weather then, and she was out and about in the open air all day long: a slight girl, in deep mourning, with a shrinking air that was natural to her.

One afternoon she came in, her bright face all aglow, and her shy eyes eager. Soft brown eyes they were, that had always a sadness in them. I—a little shaver—can remember that, when I knew her in later years. As she sat down on the stool at Mrs. Todhetley's feet, she took off her black straw hat, and began to play nervously with its crape ends.

"My dear, you seem to be in a heat," said Mrs. Todhetley; a stout old lady, who sat all day long in her easy-chair.

"Yes, I ran home fast," said Selina.

"Home from whence? Where have you been?"

"I was—near the Torr," replied Selina, with hesitation.

"Near the Torr, child! That's a long way for you to go strolling alone."

"The wild roses in the hedges there are so lovely," pleaded Selina. "That's why I took to go there at first."

"Took to go there!" repeated the old lady, thinking it an odd phrase. "Do you see anything of the Torr people? I hope you've not been making intimate with young Stephen Radcliffe," she added, a thought darting into her mind.

"Stephen? that's the son. No, I never saw him. I think he is away from home."

"That's well. He is by all accounts but a churlish lout of a fellow."

Selina Elliot bent her timid face over the hat, smoothing its ribbons with her restless fingers. She was evidently ill at ease. Glancing up presently, she saw the old lady was shutting her eyes for a doze: and that hastened her communication.

"I—I want to tell you something, please, ma'am. But—I don't like to begin." And, with that, Selina burst into unexpected tears, and the alarmed old lady looked up.

"Why, what ails you, child? Are you hurt? Has a wasp been at you?"

"Oh no," said Selina, brushing the tears away with fingers that trembled all over. "I—if you please—I think I am going to live at the Torr."

The old lady wondered whether Selina was dreaming. "At the Torr!" said she. "There are no children at the Torr. They don't want a governess at the Torr."

"I am going there to be with Mr. Radcliffe," spoke Selina, in her throat, as if she meant to choke.

"To be with old Radcliffe! Why, the child's gone cranky! Paul Radcliffe don't need a governess."

"He wants to marry me."

"Mercy upon us!" cried the old lady, lifting both hands in her amazement. And Selina burst into tears again.

Yes, it was true. Paul Radcliffe, who was fifty years of age, if a day, and had a son over twenty, had been proposing marriage to that bright young girl! They had met in the fields often, it turned out, and Mr. Radcliffe had been making his hay while the sun

shone. Every one went on at her.

"It would be better to go into a prison than into that gloomy Sandstone Torr—a young girl like you, Selina," said Mrs. Todhetley. "It would be sheer madness."

"Why, you'd never go and sacrifice yourself to that old man!" cried the Squire, who was just as outspoken and impulsive and good-hearted then as in these latter years. "He ought to be ashamed of himself. It would be like June and December."

But all they said was of no use in the end. It was not that Selina, poor girl, was in love with Mr. Radcliffe—one could as well have fancied her in love with the grizzly old bear, just then exhibiting himself at Church Dykely in a travelling caravan. But it was her position. Without money, without a home, without a resource of any kind for the future, save that of teaching for her bread, the prospect of becoming mistress of Sandstone Torr was something fascinating.

"I do so dislike the thought of spending my whole life in teaching!" she pleaded in apology, the bitter tears streaming down her face. "You cannot tell what it is to feel dependent."

"I'd rather sweep chimneys than marry Paul Radcliffe if I were a pretty young girl like you," stormed the old lady.

"Since papa died you don't know what the feeling has been," sobbed Selina. "Many a night have I lain awake with the misery of knowing that I had no claim to a place in the wide world."

"I am sure you are welcome to stay here," said the Squire.

"Yes; as long as I am here myself," added his mother. "After

that—well, I suppose it wouldn't be proper for you to stay."

"You are all kindness; I shall never meet with such friends again; and I know that I am welcome to stay as long as I like," she answered in the saddest of tones. "But the time of my departure must come sometime; and though the world lies before me, there is no refuge for me in it. It is very good of Mr. Radcliffe to offer to make me his wife and to give me a home at the Torr."

"Oh, is it, though!" retorted the Squire. "Trust him for knowing on which side his bread's buttered."

"He is of good descent; he has a large income–"

"Six hundred a-year," interrupted the Squire, slightingly.

"Yes, I am aware that it cannot appear much to you," she meekly said; "but to me it seems unbounded. And that is apart from the house and land."

"The house and land must both go to Stephen."

"Mr. Radcliffe told me that."

"As to the land, it's only a few acres; nothing to speak of," went on the Squire. "I'd as soon boast of my gooseberry bushes. And he can leave all his money to Stephen if he likes. In my opinion, the chances are that he will."

"He says he shall always behave fairly by me," spoke poor Selina.

"Why, you'd have a step-son older than yourself, Selina!" put in the old lady. "And I don't like him—that Stephen Radcliffe. He's no better than he should be. I saw him one day whipping a poor calf almost to death."

Well, they said all they could against it; ten thousand times more than is written down here. Selina wavered: she was not an obstinate girl, but tractable as you please. Only—she had no homestead on the face of the earth, and Mr. Radcliffe offered her one. He did not possess youth, it is true; he had never been handsome: but he was of irreproachable descent—and Selina had a little corner of ambition in her heart; and, above all, he had a fairly good income.

It was rather curious that the dread of this girl's life, the one dread above all other dreads, was that of *poverty*. In the earlier days of her parents, when she was a little girl and her mother was alive, and the parson's pay was just seventy pounds a-year, they had had such a terrible struggle with poverty that a horror of it was implanted in the child's mind for ever. Her mother died of it. She had become weaker and weaker, and perished slowly away for the want of those comforts that money alone could have bought. Mr. Elliot's stipend was increased later: but the fear of poverty never left Selina: and now, by his death, she was again brought face to face with it. That swayed her; and her choice was made.

Old Mrs. Todhetley and the Squire protested that they washed their hands of the marriage. But they could only wash them gingerly, and, so to say, in private. For, after all, excepting that Paul Radcliffe was more than old enough to be Selina's father, and had grizzly hair and a grown-up son, there was not so much to be said against it. She would be Mrs. Radcliffe of Sandstone

Torr, and might take her standing in the county.

Sandstone Torr, dull and gloomy, and buried amidst its trees, was enough to put a lively man in mind of a prison. You entered it by a sort of closed-in porch, the outer door of which was always chained back in the daytime. The inner door opened into a long, narrow passage, and that again to a circular stone hall with a heavy ceiling, just like a large dark watch-box. Four or five doors led off from it to different passages and rooms. This same kind of round place was on all the landings, shut in just as the hall was, and with no light, except what might be afforded from the doors of the passages or rooms leading to it. It was the foundation of the tower, and the house was built round it. All the walls were of immense thickness: the rooms were low, and had beams running across most of them. But the rooms were many in number, and the place altogether had a massive, grand air, telling of its past importance. It had one senseless point in it—there was no entrance to the tower. The tower had neither staircase nor door of access. People said what a grand view might be obtained if you could only get to the top of it, or even get up to look through the small slits of windows in its walls. But the builder had forgotten the staircase, and there it ended.

Mr. Radcliffe took his wife straight home from the church-door. Selina had never before been inside the Torr, and the gloominess of its aspect struck upon her unpleasantly. Leading her down the long passage into the circular hall, he opened one of its doors, and she found herself in a sitting-room. The furniture

was good but heavy; the Turkey carpet was nearly colourless with age, but soft to the feet; the window looked out only upon trees. A man-servant, who had admitted them, followed them in, asking his master if he had any orders.

"Send Holt here," said Mr. Radcliffe. "This is the parlour, Selina."

A thin, respectable woman of middle age made her appearance. She looked with curiosity at the young lady her master had brought in: at her wedding-dress of grey silk, at the pretty face blushing under the white straw bonnet.

"Mrs. Radcliffe, Holt. Show your mistress her rooms."

The woman curtsied, and led the way through another passage to the stairs; and into a bedroom and sitting-room above, that opened into one another.

"I've aired 'em well, ma'am," were the first words she said. "They've never been used since the late mistress's time, for master has slept in a little chamber near Master Stephen's. But he's coming back here now."

"Is this the drawing-room?" asked Selina, observing that the furniture, though faded, was prettier and lighter than that in the room downstairs.

"Dear no, ma'am! The drawing-room is below and on t'other side of the house entirely. It's never gone into from one month's end to another. Master and Mr. Stephen uses nothing but the parlour. We call this the Pine Room."

"The Pine Room!" echoed Selina. "Why?"

"Because it looks out on them pines, I suppose," replied Holt.

Selina looked from the window, and saw a row of dark pines waving before the higher trees behind them. The view beyond was completely shut in by these trees; they were very close to the house: it almost seemed as though a long arm might have touched them from where she stood. Anything more dull than this aspect could not well be found. Selina leaned from the window to look below: and saw a gravel-path with some grass on either side it, but no flowers.

It was a week later. Mr. Radcliffe sat in the parlour, busily examining some samples of new wheat, when there came a loud ring at the outer bell, and presently Stephen Radcliffe walked in. The father and son resembled each other. Both were tall and strongly built, and had the same rugged cast of features: men of few words and ungenial manners. But while Mr. Radcliffe's face was not an unpleasing one, Stephen's had a most sullen—some might have said evil—expression. In his eyes there was a slight cast, and his dull brown hair was never tidy. Some time before this, when the father and son had a quarrel, Stephen had gone off into Cornwall to stay with his mother's relations. This was his first appearance back again.

"Is it you, Stephen!" cried Mr. Radcliffe, without offering to shake hands: for the house was never given to ceremony.

"Yes, it's me," replied Stephen, who generally talked more like a boor than a gentleman, particularly in his angry moods. "It's about time I came home, I think, when such a notice as this

appears in the public papers."

He took a newspaper from his pocket, and laid it before his father, pointing with his fore-finger to an announcement. It was that of Mr. Radcliffe's marriage.

"Well?" said Mr. Radcliffe.

"Is that true or a hoax?"

"True."

Stephen caught the paper up again, tore it in two, and flung it across the room.

"What the devil made you go and do such a thing as that?"

"Softly, Ste. Keep a civil tongue in your head. I am my own master."

"At your age!" growled Stephen. "There's no fool like an old fool."

"If you don't like it, you can go back to where you came from," said Mr. Radcliffe quietly, turning the wheat from one of the sample-bags out on the table.

Stephen went to the window, and stood there looking at that agreeable prospect beyond—the trees—his hands in his pockets, his back to his father, and swearing to himself awfully. It would not do to quarrel implacably with the old man, for his money was at his own disposal: and, if incensed too greatly, he might possibly take the extreme step of leaving it away from him. But Stephen Radcliffe's heart was good to turn his father out of doors there and then, and appropriate the money to himself at once, if he only had the power. "No fool like an old fool!" he again

muttered. “Where *is* the cat?”

“Where’s who?” cried Mr. Radcliffe, looking up from his wheat.

“The woman you’ve gone and made yourself a world’s spectacle with.”

“Ste, my lad, this won’t do. Keep a fair tongue in your head, as I bid you; or go where you may make it a foul one. For by Heaven!”—and Mr. Radcliffe’s passion broke out and he rose from his seat menacingly—“I’ll not tolerate this.”

Stephen hardly ever remembered his father to have shown passion before. He did not like it. They had gone on so very quietly together, until that quarrel just spoken of, and Stephen had had his own way, and ruled, so to say, in all things, for his father was easy, that this outbreak was something new. It might not do to give further provocation then.

He was standing as before in sullen silence, his hands in his trousers’ pockets and the skirts of his short brown velveteen coat thrown back, and Mr. Radcliffe had sat down to the bags again, when the door opened, and some one came in. Stephen turned. He saw a pretty young girl in black, with some books in her delicate hands. Just for an instant he wondered who the young girl could be: and then the thought flashed over him that “the woman” his father had married might have a grown-up daughter. Selina had been unpacking her trunks upstairs, and arranging her things in the drawers and closets. She hesitated on her way to the book-case when she saw the stranger.

"My son Stephen, Selina. Ste, Mrs. Radcliffe."

Stephen Radcliffe for a moment forgot his sullenness and his temper. He did nothing but stare. Was his father playing a joke on him? He had pictured the new wife (though he knew not why) as a woman of mature age: this was a child. As she timidly held out the only hand she could extricate from the load of books, he saw the wedding-ring on her finger. Meeting her hand ungraciously and speaking never a word, he turned to the window again. Selina put the books down, to be disposed in their shelves later, and quitted the room.

"This is even worse folly than I dreamed of," began Stephen, facing his father. "She's nothing but a child."

"She is close upon twenty."

"Why, there may be children!" broadly roared out Stephen. "You must have been mad when you did such a deed as this."

"Mad or sane, it's done, Stephen. And I should do it again to-morrow without asking your leave. Understand that."

Yes, it was done. Rattling the silver in his pockets, Stephen Radcliffe felt that, and that there was no undoing it. Here was this young step-mother planted down at the Torr; and if he and she could not hit it off together, it was he who would have to walk out of the house. For full five minutes Stephen mentally rehearsed all the oaths he remembered. Presently he spoke.

"It was a fair trick, wasn't it, that you should forbid my marrying, and go and do the same thing yourself!"

"I did not object to your marrying, Ste: I objected to the

girl. Gibbon's daughter is not one to match with you. You are a Radcliffe."

Stephen scoffed. Nobody had ever been able to beat into him any sense of self-importance. Pride of birth, pride in his family were elements unknown to Stephen's nature. He had a great love of money to make up for it.

"What's good for the goose is good for the gander," he retorted, plunging into a communication he had resolved to make. "You have been taking a wife on your score, and I have taken one on mine."

Mr. Radcliffe looked keenly at Stephen. "You have married Gibbon's girl?"

"I have."

"When? Where?"

"In Cornwall. She followed me there."

The elder man felt himself in a dilemma. He did care for his son, and he resented this alliance bitterly for Stephen's sake. Gibbon was gamekeeper to Sir Peter Chanasse, and had formerly been outdoor servant at the Torr; and this daughter of his, Rebecca—or Becca, as she was commonly called—was a girl quite beneath Stephen. Neither was she a lovable young woman in herself; but hard, and sly, and bony. How it was that Stephen had fancied her, Mr. Radcliffe could not understand. But having stolen a march on Stephen himself, in regard to his own marriage, he did not feel much at liberty to resent Stephen's. It was done, too—as he had just observed of his own—and it could not be

undone.

"Well, Stephen, I am more vexed for your sake than I care to say. It strikes me you will live to repent it."

"That's my look out," replied Stephen. "I am going to bring her home."

"Home! Where?"

"Here."

Mr. Radcliffe was silent; perhaps the assertion startled him.

"I don't want Gibbon's daughter here, Stephen. There's no room for her."

"Plenty of room, and to spare."

So there was; for the old house was large. But Mr. Radcliffe had not been thinking of space.

"I can't have her. There! You may make your home where you like."

"This is my home," said Stephen.

"And it may be still, if you like. But it's not hers. Two women in a house, each wanting to be mistress, wouldn't do. Now no noise, Ste, *I won't have Gibbon's girl here*. I've not been used to consort with people who have been my servants."

It is one thing to make a resolution, and another to keep it. Before twelve months had gone by, Mr. Radcliffe's firmly spoken words had come to naught; and Stephen had brought his wife into the Torr and two babies—for Mrs. Stephen had presented him with two at once. Selina was upstairs then with an infant of her own, and very ill. The world thought she was going to die.

The opportunity was a grand one for Madam Becca, and she seized upon it. When Selina came about again, after months spent in confinement, she found, so to say, no place for her. Becca was in her place; mistress, and ruler, and all. Stephen behaved to her like the lout he was; Becca, a formidable woman of towering height, alternately snapped at, and ignored her. Old Radcliffe did not interfere: he seemed not to see that anything was amiss. Poor Selina could only sit up in that apartment that Holt had called the Pine Room, and let her tears fall on her baby-boy, and whisper all her griefs into his unconscious ear. She was refined and timid and shrinking: but once she spoke to her husband.

"Treat you with contempt?—don't let you have any will of your own?—thwart you in all ways?" he repeated. "Who says it, Selina?"

"Oh, it is so; you may see that it is, if you only will notice," she said, looking up at him imploringly through her tears.

"I'll speak to Stephen. I knew there'd be a fuss if that Becca came here. But you are not as strong to bustle about as she is, Selina: let her take the brunt of the management off you. What does it matter?"

What did it matter?—that was Mr. Radcliffe's chief opinion on the point: and had it been only a question of management it would not have mattered. He spoke to Stephen, telling him that he and his wife must make things pleasanter for Mrs. Radcliffe, than, as it seemed, they were doing. The consequence was, that Stephen and Becca took a convenient occasion of attacking

Selina; calling her a sneak, a tell-tale, and a wolf in sheep's clothing, and pretty nearly frightening her into another spell of illness.

From that time Selina had no spirit to retaliate. She took all that was put upon her—and it was a great deal—and bore it in silence and patience. She saw that her marriage, taking one thing with another, had turned out to be the mistake her friends had foretold that it would be. Mr. Radcliffe, growing by degrees into a state of apathy as he got older, was completely under the dominion of Stephen. He did not mean to be unkind to his wife: he just perceived nothing; he was indifferent to all that passed around him: had they set fire to Selina's petticoats before his eyes, he'd hardly have seen the blaze. Now and again Selina would try to make friends with Holt: but Holt, though never uncivil, had a way of throwing her off. And so, she lived on, a cowed, broken-spirited woman, eating away her heart in silence. Selina Radcliffe had found out that there were worse evils in the world than poverty.

She might have died then but for her boy. You never saw a nicer little fellow than he—that Francis Radcliffe. A bright, tractable, loving boy; with laughing blue eyes, and fair curls falling back from his pretty face. Mr. and Mrs. Stephen hated him. Their children, Tom and Lizzy, pinched and throttled him: but the lad took it all in good part, and had the sweetest temper imaginable. He loved his mother beyond telling, and she made him as gentle and nearly as patient as she was. Virtually driven

from the parlour, except at meal-times, their refuge was the Pine Room. There they were unmolested. There Selina educated and trained him, doing her best to show him the way to the next world, as well as to fit him for this.

One day when he was about nine years old, Selina was up aloft, in the little room where he slept; which had a better view than some of the rooms had, and looked out into the open country. It was snowy weather, and she caught sight of the two boys in the yard below, snowballing each other. Opening the window to call Francis in—for he always got into the wars when with Tom, and she had learnt to dread his being with him—she saw Stephen Radcliffe crossing from the barn. Suddenly a snowball took Stephen in the face. It came from Tom; she saw that; Francis was stooping down at the time, collecting material for a fresh missive.

"Who flung that at me?" roared out Stephen, in a rage.

Tom disclaimed all knowledge of it; and Stephen Radcliffe seized upon Francis, beating him shamefully.

"It was not Francis," called out Selina from the window, shivering at the sight; for Stephen in his violence might some time, as she knew, lame the lad. "Its touching you was an accident; I could see that; but it was not Francis who threw it."

The cold, rarefied air carried her words distinctly to the ear of Stephen. Holding Francis by one hand to prevent his escape, he told Mrs. Radcliffe that she was a liar, adding other polite epithets and a few oaths. And then he began pummelling the lad

again.

"Come in, Francis! Let him come in!" implored the mother, clasping her hands in her bitter agony. "Oh, is there no refuge for him and for me?"

She ran down to their sanctum, the Pine Room. Francis came up, sore all over, and his face bleeding. He was a brave little lad, and he strove to make light of it, and keep his tears down. She held him to her, and burst into sobs while trying to comfort him. That upset him at once.

"Oh, my darling, try and bear! My poor boy, there's nothing left for us both but to bear. The world is full of wrongs and tribulation: but, Francis, it will all be made right when we get to heaven."

"Don't cry, mamma. It didn't hurt me much. But, indeed, the snowball was not mine."

At ten years old the boys were sent to school. Young Tom, allowed to have his own way, grew beyond every one's control, even his father's; and Stephen packed him off to school. Selina besought her husband to send Francis also. Why not, replied Mr. Radcliffe; the boy must be educated. And, in spite of Stephen's opposition, Francis was despatched. It was frightfully lonely and unpleasant for Selina after that, and she grew to have a pitiful look on her face.

The school was a sharp one, and Francis got on well; he seemed to possess his grandfather Elliot's aptitude for learning. Tom hated it. After each of the half-yearly holidays, it took

Stephen himself to get him to school again: and before he was fourteen he capped it all by appearing at home uncalled for, a red-hot fugitive, and announcing an intention of going to sea.

Tom carried his point. After some feats of skirmishing between him and his father, he was shipped off as "midshipman" on board a fine merchantman bound for Hong Kong. Stephen Radcliffe might never have given a consent, but for the certainty that if he did not give it, Tom would decamp from the Torr, as he did from school, and go off as a common seaman before the mast. It was strange, with his crabbed nature, how much he cared for those two children!

"You'll have that other one home now," said sullen Stephen to his father. "No good to be paying for him there."

And most likely it would have been so; but fate, or fortune, intervened. Francis had a wind-fall. A clergyman, who had known Mr. Elliot, died, and left Francis a thousand pounds. Selina decided that it should be spent, or at least a portion of it, in completing his education in a more advanced manner—though, no doubt, Stephen would have liked to get hold of the money. Francis was sent up to King's College in London, and to board at the house of one of the masters. In this way a few more years passed on. Francis chose the Bar as a profession, and began to study law.

"The Bar!" sneered Stephen. "A penniless beggar like Francis Radcliffe! Put a pig to learn to spell!"

A bleak day in winter. The wind was howling and crying

round Sandstone Torr, tearing through the branches of the almost leafless trees, whirling the weather-cock atop of the lofty tower, playing madly on the window-panes. If there was one spot in the county that the wind seemed to favour above all other spots, it was the Torr. It would go shrieking in the air round about there like so many unquiet spirits.

In the dusk of evening, on a sofa beside the fire in the Pine Room lay Mrs. Radcliffe, with a white, worn face and hollow eyes. She was slowly dying. Until to-day she had not thought there was any immediate danger: but she knew it all now, and that the end was at hand.

So it was not that knowledge which had caused her, a day or two ago, to write to London for Francis. Some news brought in by Stephen Radcliffe had unhinged and shocked her beyond expression. Francis was leading a loose, bad life, drinking and gambling, and going to the deuce headlong, ran the tales, and Stephen repeated them indoors.

That same night she wrote for Francis. She could not rest day or night until she could see him face to face, and say—Is this true, or untrue? He might have reached the Torr the previous day; but he did not. She was lying listening for him now in the twilight gloom amidst the blasts of that shrieking wind.

"If God had but taken my child in infancy!" came the chief thought of her troubled heart. "If I could only know that I should meet him on the everlasting shores!"

"Mother!"

She started up with a yearning cry. It was Francis. He had arrived, and come upstairs, and his opening of the door had been drowned by the wind. A tall, slender, bright-faced young fellow of twenty, with the same sunny hair as in his childhood, and a genial heart.

Francis halted, and stood in startled consternation. The firelight played on her wasted face, and he saw—what was there. In manners he was still almost a boy; his disposition open, his nature transparent.

She made room for him on the sofa; sitting beside him, and laying her weary head for a moment on his shoulder. Francis took a few deep breaths while getting over the shock.

"How long have you been like this, mother? What has brought it about?"

"Nothing in particular; nothing fresh," she answered. "I have been getting nearer and nearer to it for years and years."

"Is there no hope?"

"None. And oh, my darling, but for you I should be so glad to die. Sitting here in my loneliness for ever, with only heaven to look forward to, it seems that I have learnt to see a little already of what its rest will be."

Francis pushed his hair from his brow, and left his hand there. He had loved his mother intensely, and the blow was cruel.

Quietly, holding his other hand in hers, she spoke of what Stephen Radcliffe had heard. Francis's face turned to scarlet as he listened. But in that solemn hour he could not and would not

tell a lie.

Yes, it was true; partly true, he said. He was not always so steady as he ought to be. Some of his acquaintances, young men studying law like himself, or medicine, or what not, were rather wild, and he had been the same. Drink?—well, yes; at times they did take more than might be quite needful. But they were not given to gambling: that was false.

"Francis," she said, her heart beating wildly with its pain, "the worst of all is the drink. If once you suffer yourself to acquire a love for it, you may never leave it off. It is so insidious–"

"But I don't love it, mother; I don't care for it—and I am sure you must know that I would tell you nothing but truth now," he interrupted. "I have only done as the others do. I'll leave it off."

"Will you promise me that?"

"Yes, I will. I do promise it."

She carried his hand to her lips and kissed it. Francis had always kept his promises.

"It is so difficult for young fellows without a home to keep straight in London," he acknowledged. "There's no good influence over us; there's no pleasant family circle where we can spend our evenings: and we go out, and get drawn into this and that. It all comes of thoughtlessness, mother."

"You have promised me, Francis."

"Oh yes. And I will perform."

"How long will it be before you are called to the Bar?" she asked, after a pause.

"Two years."

"So much as that?"

"I think so. How the wind howls!"

Mrs. Radcliffe sighed; Francis's future seemed not to be very clear. Unless he could get on pretty quickly, and make a living for himself—

"When I am gone, Francis," she said aloud, interrupting her own thoughts, "this will not be any home for you."

"It has not been one for me for some years now, mother."

"But if you do not get into work soon, and your own funds come to an end, you will have no home but this to turn to."

"If I attempted to turn to it, Stephen would soon make it too hot for me, I expect."

"That might not be all; not the worst," she quickly answered, dropping her voice to a tone of fear, and glancing around as one in a fever.

Francis looked round too. He supposed she was seeking something.

"It is always scaring me, Francis," she whispered. "There are times when I fancy I am going to see it enacted before my eyes. It puts me into a state of nervous dread not to be described."

"See what enacted?" he asked.

"I was sitting here about ten days ago, Francis, thinking of you, thinking of the future, when all at once a most startling prevision —yes, I call it so—a prevision came upon me of some dreadful ill in store for you; ill wrought by Stephen. I—I am not sure but

it was—that—that he took your life," she added, scarcely above her breath, and in tones that made Francis shiver.

"Why, what do you mean, mother?"

"Every day, every day since, every night and nearly all night, that strange conviction has lain upon me. I know it will be fulfilled: when the hand of death is closing on us, these previsions are an instinct. As surely as that I am now disclosing this to you, Francis, so surely will you fall in some way under the iron hand of Stephen."

"Perhaps you were dreaming, mother dear," suggested Francis: for he had his share of common sense.

"It will be in this house; the Torr," she went on, paying no attention to him; "for it is always these rooms and the dreary trees outside that seem to lie before me. For that reason, I would not have you live here–"

"But don't you think you may have been dreaming?" repeated Francis, interrupting the rest.

"I was as wide awake as I am now, Francis, but I was deep in thought. It stole upon me, this impression, without any sort of warning, or any train of ideas that could have led to it; and it lies within me, a sure and settled conviction. *Beware of Stephen.* But oh, Francis! even while I give you this caution I know that you will not escape the evil—whatever it may turn out to be."

"I hope I shall," he said, rather lightly. "I'll try, at any rate."

"Well, I have warned you, Francis. Be always upon your guard. And keep away from the Torr, if you can."

Holt, quite an aged woman now, came in with some tea for her mistress. Francis took the opportunity to go down and see his father. Mr. Radcliffe, in a shabby old coat, was sitting in his arm-chair at the parlour fire. He looked pleased to see Francis, and kept his hand for a minute after he had shaken it.

"My mother is very ill, sir," said Francis.

"Ay," replied the old man, dreamily. "Been so for some time now."

"Can nothing be done to—to—keep her with us a little longer, father?"

"I suppose not. Ask Duffham."

"What the devil!—is it you! What brings *you* here?"

The coarse salutation came from Stephen. Francis turned to see him enter and bang the door after him. His shoes were dirty, his beaver gaiters splashed, and his hair was like a tangled mop.

"I came down to see my father and mother," answered Francis, as he held out his hand. But Stephen did not choose to see it.

Mrs. Stephen, in a straight-down blue cloth gown and black cap garnished with red flowers, looking more angular and hard than of yore, came in with the tea-tray. She did as much work in the house as a servant. Lizzy had been married the year before, and lived in Birmingham with her husband, who was curate at one of the churches there.

"You'll have to sleep on the sofa to-night, young man," was Mrs. Stephen's snappish salutation to Francis. "There's not a bed in the house that's aired."

"The sofa will do," he answered.

"Let his bed be aired to-morrow, Becca," interposed the old man. And they stared in astonishment to hear him say it.

Francis sat down to the tea-table with Stephen and his wife; but neither of them spoke a word to him. Mr. Radcliffe had his tea in his arm-chair at the fire, as usual. Afterwards, Francis took his hat and went out. He was going to question the doctor; and the wind came rushing and howling about him as he bore onwards down the lane towards Church Dykely.

In about an hour's time he came back again with red eyes. He said it was the wind, but his subdued voice sounded as though he had been crying. His father, with bent head, was smoking a long pipe; Stephen sat at the table, reading the sensational police reports in a low weekly newspaper.

"Been out for a stroll, lad?" asked old Radcliffe—and it was the first voluntary question he had put for months. Stephen, listening, could not think what was coming to him.

"I have been to Duffham's," answered Francis. "He—he—" with a stopping of the breath, "says that nothing can be done for my mother; that a few days now will see the end of it."

"Ay," quietly responded the old man. "Our turns must all come."

"*Her* turn ought not to have come yet," said Francis, nearly breaking down.

"No?"

"I have been looking forward at odd moments to a time when

I should be in work, and able to give her a happy home with me, father. It is very hard to come here and find *this*."

Old Radcliffe took a long whiff; and, opening his mouth, let the smoke curl upwards. "Have a pipe, Francis?"

"No, thank you, sir. I am going up to my mother."

As he left the room, Stephen, having finished the police reports, was turning the paper to see what it said about the markets, when his father put down his pipe and began to speak.

"Only a few days, he says, Ste!"

"What?" demanded Stephen in his surly and ungracious tones.

"She's been ailing always; and has sat up there away from us, Ste. But we shall miss her."

"Miss her!" retorted Ste, leaving the paper, and walking to the fire. "Why, what good has she been? *Miss* her? The house'll have a good riddance of her," he added, under his breath.

"It'll be my turn next, Ste. And not long first, either."

Stephen took a keen look at his father from beneath his overhanging, bushy eyebrows, that were beginning to turn grey. All this sounded very odd.

"When you and me and Becca's left alone here by ourselves, we shall be as easy as can be," he said.

"What month is it, Ste?"

"November."

"Ay. You'll have seen the last o' me before Christmas."

"Think so?" was Stephen's equable remark. The old man nodded; and there came a pause.

"And you and Becca'll be glad to get us out, Ste."

Stephen did not take the trouble to gainsay it. He was turning about in his thoughts something that he had a mind to speak of.

"They've been nothing but interlopers from the first—she and him. I expect you to do what's right by me, father."

"Ay, I shall do what's right," answered the old man.

"About the money, I mean. It must *all* come to me, father. I was heir to it before you ever set eyes on her; and her brat must not be let stand in my way. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear. It'll be all right, Ste."

"Take only a fraction from the income, and how would the Torr be kept up?" pursued Stephen, plucking up his spirits at the last answer. "He has got his fine profession, and he can make a living for himself out of it: some o' them counsellors make their thousands a-year. But he must not be let rob *me*."

"He shan't rob you, Ste. It will be all right."

And covetous Stephen, thus reassured and put at ease, strolled into the kitchen, and ordered Becca to provide his favourite dish, toasted cheese, for supper.

The "few days" spoken of by Mr. Duffham, were slowly passing. There was not much difference to be observed in Selina; except that her voice grew weaker. She could only use it at intervals. But her face had a beautiful look of peace upon it, just as though she were three parts in heaven. I have heard Duffham say so many a time since; I, Johnny Ludlow.

On the fifth day she was so much better that it seemed little

short of a miracle. They found her in the Pine Room early, up and dressed: when Holt went in to light the fire, she was looking over the two books that lay on the round table. One of them was the Bible; the other was a translation of the German tale "Sintram," which Francis had brought her when he came down the last summer. The story had taken hold of her imagination, and she knew it nearly by heart.

Down went Holt, and told them that the mistress (for, contradictory though it may seem, Selina had been always accorded that title) had taken a "new lease of life," and was getting well. Becca, astonished, went stalking up: perhaps she was afraid it might be true. Selina had "Sintram" in her hand as she sat: her eyes looked bright, her cheeks pink, her voice was improved.

"Oh," said Becca. "What have you left your bed for at this early hour?"

"I feel so well," Selina answered with a smile, letting the book lie open on the table. "Won't you shake hands with me?—and—and kiss me?"

Now Becca had never kissed her in all the years they had lived together, and she did not seem to care about beginning now. "I'll go down and beat you up an egg and a spoonful of wine," said she, just touching the tips of Selina's fingers, in response to the held-out hand: and, with that, went away.

Stephen was the only one who did not pay the Pine Room a visit that day. He heard of the surprising change while he

was feeding the pigs: for Becca went out and told him. Stephen splashed some wash over the side of the trough, and gave a little pig a smack with the bucket, and that was all his answer. Old Radcliffe sat an hour in the room; but he never spoke all the time: so his company could not be considered as much.

Selina crept as far as the window, and looked out on the bare pines and the other dreary trees. Most trees are dreary in November. Francis saw a shiver take her as she stood, leaning on the window-frame; and he went to give her his arm and bring her back again. They were by themselves then.

"A week, or so, of this improvement, mother, and you will be as you used to be," said he cheerfully, seating her on the sofa and stirring up the fire. "We shall have our home together yet."

She turned her face full on his, as he sat down by her; a half-questioning, half-wondering look in her eyes.

"Not in this world, Francis. Surely *you* are not deceived!" and his over-sanguine heart went down like lead.

"It is but the flickering of the spirit before it finally quits the weary frame; just as you may have seen the flame shoot up from an expiring candle," she continued. "The end is very near now."

A spasm of pain rose in his throat. She took his hands between her own feeble ones.

"Don't grieve, Francis; don't grieve for me! Remember what my life has been."

He did remember it. He remembered also the answer Duffham gave when he had inquired what malady it was his

mother was dying of. “A broken heart.”

“Don’t forget, Francis—never forget—that it is a journey we must enter on, sooner or later.”

“An uncertain and unknown journey at the best!” he said. “You have no fear of it?”

“Fear! No, but I had once.”

She spoke the words in a low, sweet tone, and pointed with a smile to the book that still lay open on the table. Francis’s eyes fell on the page.

> “When death is drawing near,
> And thy heart shrinks with fear,
> And thy limbs fail,
> Then raise thy hands and pray
> To Him who cheers the way
> Through the dark vale.
>
> “Seest thou the eastern dawn?
> Hears’t thou, in the red morn,
> The angel’s song?
> Oh! lift thy drooping head,
> Thou who in gloom and dread
> Hast lain so long.
>
> “Death comes to set thee free;
> Oh! meet him cheerily,
> As thy true friend;
> And all thy fears shall cease,

And in eternal peace
Thy penance end."

Francis sat very still, struggling a little with that lump in his throat. She leaned forward, and let her head rest upon him, just as she had done the other day when he first came in. His emotion broke loose then.

"Oh, mother, what shall I do without you?"

"You will have God," she whispered.

Still all the morning she kept up well; talking of this and that, saying how much of late the verses, just quoted, had floated in her mind and become a reality to her; showing Holt a slit that had appeared in the table-cover and needed darning: telling Francis his pocket-handkerchiefs looked yellow and should be bleached. It might have been thought she was only going out to tea at Church Dykely, instead of entering on the other journey she had told of.

"Have you been giving her anything?" demanded Stephen, casting his surly eyes on Francis as they sat opposite to each other at dinner in the parlour. "Dying people can't spurt up in this manner without drugs to make 'em."

Francis did not deign to answer. Stephen projected his fork, and took a potato out of the dish. Frank went upstairs when the meal was over. He had left his mother sitting on the sofa, comparatively well. He found her lying on the bed in the next room, grappling with death. She lifted her feeble arms to

welcome him, and a ray of joyous light shone on her face. Francis made hardly one step of it to the bed.

"Oh, my darling, it will be all right!" she breathed. "I have prayed for you, and I know—I know I have been heard. You will be helped to put away that evil habit; temptation may assail, but it will not finally overcome you. And, Francis, when–" Her voice failed.

"I no longer hear what you say, mother," cried Francis in an agony.

"Yes, yes," she repeated, as if in answer to something he had said. "Beware of Stephen."

The hands and face alike fell. Francis rang the bell violently, and Holt came up. All was over.

Stephen attended the funeral with the others. Grumbling wofully at having to do it, because it involved a new suit of black clothes. "They'll be ready for the old man, though," was his consoling reflection: "he won't be long."

He was even quicker than Stephen thought. On the very day week that they had come in from leaving Selina in the grave, Mr. Radcliffe was lying as lifeless as she was. A seizure carried him off. Francis was summoned again from London before he had well got back to it. Stephen could not, at such a season, completely ignore him.

He did not foresee the blow that was to come thundering down. When Mr. Radcliffe's will came to be opened, it was found that his property was equally divided between the two sons,

half and half: Stephen of course inheriting the Torr; and Squire Todhetley being appointed trustee for Francis. "And I earnestly beg of him to accept the trust," ran the words, "for the sake of Selina's son."

Francis caught the glare of Stephen as they were read out. It was of course Stephen himself, but it looked more like a savage wild-cat. That warning of his mother's came into Francis's mind with a rush.

II

It stood on the left of the road as you went towards Alcester: a good-looking, red-brick house, not large, but very substantial. Everything about it was in trim order; from the emerald-green outer venetian window-blinds to the handsome iron entrance-gates between the enclosing palisades; and the garden and grounds had not as much as a stray worm upon them. Mr. Brandon was nice and particular in all matters, as old bachelors generally are; and he was especially so in regard to his home.

Careering up to this said house on the morning of a fine spring day, when the green hedges were budding and the birds sang in the trees, went a pony-gig, driven by a gentleman. A tall, slender young fellow of seven-and-twenty, with golden hair that shone in the sun and eyes as blue and bright as the sky. Leaving the pony to be taken care of by a labouring boy who chanced to be loitering about, he rang the bell at the iron gates, and inquired of the answering servant whether Mr. Brandon was at home.

"Yes, sir," was the answer of the man, as he led the way in. "But I am not sure that he can see you. What name?" And the applicant carelessly took a card from his waistcoat-pocket, and was left in the drawing-room. Which card the servant glanced at as he carried it away.

"Mr. Francis Radcliffe."

People say there's sure to be a change every seven years.

Seven years had gone by since the death of old Mr. Radcliffe and the inheritance by Francis of the portion that fell to him; three hundred a-year. There were odd moments when Frank, in spite of himself, would look back at those seven years; and he did not at all like the retrospect. For he remembered the solemn promise he had made to his mother when she was dying, to put away those evil habits which had begun to creep upon him, more especially that worst of all bad habits that man, whether young or old, can take to—*drinking*—and he had not kept the promise. He had been called to the Bar in due course, but he made nothing by his profession. Briefs did not come to him. He just wasted his time and lived a fast life on the small means that were his. He pulled up sometimes, turned his back on folly, and read like a house on fire: but his wild companions soon got hold of him again, and put his good resolutions to flight. Frank put it all down to idleness. "If I had work to do, I should do it," he said, "and that would keep me straight." But at the close of this last winter he had fallen into a most dangerous illness, resulting from the draughts of ale, and what not, that he had made too free with, and he got up from it with a resolution never to drink again. Knowing that the resolution would be more easy to keep if he turned his back on London and the companions who beset him, down he came to his native place, determined to take a farm and give up the law. For the second time in his life some money had come to him unexpectedly; which would help him on. And so, after a seven years' fling, Frank Radcliffe was going in for a change.

He had never stayed at Sandstone Torr since his father's death. His brother Stephen's surly temper, and perhaps that curious warning of his mother's, kept him out of it. He and Stephen maintained a show of civility to one another; and when Frank was in the neighbourhood (but that had only happened twice in the seven years), he would call at the Torr and see them. The last time he came down, Frank was staying at a place popularly called Pitchley's Farm. Old Pitchley—who had lived on it, boy and man, for seventy years—liked him well. Frank made acquaintance that time with Annet Skate; fell in love with her, in fact, and meant to marry her. She was a pretty girl, and a good girl, and had been brought up to be thoroughly useful as a farmer's daughter: but neither by birth nor position was she the equal of Frank Radcliffe. All her experience of life lay in her own secluded, plain home: in regard to the world outside she was as ignorant as a young calf, and just as mild and soft as butter.

So Frank, after his spell of sickness and reflection, had thrown up London, and come down to settle in a farm with Annet, if he could get one. But there was not a farm to be let for miles round. And it was perhaps a curious thing that while Frank was thinking he should have to travel elsewhere in search of one, Pitchley's should turn up. For old Pitchley suddenly died. Pitchley's Farm belonged to Mr. Brandon. It was a small compact farm; just the size Frank wanted. A large one would have been beyond his means.

Mr. Brandon sat writing letters at the table in his library, in

his geranium-coloured Turkish cap, with its purple tassel, when his servant went in with the card.

"Mr. Francis Radcliffe!" read he aloud, in his squeaky voice. "What, is he down here again? You can bring him in, Abel—though I'm sure I don't know what he wants with me." And Abel went and brought him.

"We heard you were ill, young man," said Mr. Brandon, peering up into Frank's handsome face as he shook hands, and detecting all sorts of sickly signs in it.

"So I have been, Mr. Brandon; very ill. But I have left London and its dissipations for good, and have come here to settle. It's about time I did," he added, with the candour natural to him.

"I should say it was," coughed old Brandon. "You've been on the wrong tack long enough."

"And I have come to you—I hope I am first in the field—to ask you to let me have the lease of Pitchley's Farm."

Mr. Brandon could not have felt more surprised had Frank asked for a lease of the moon, but he did not show it. His head went up a little, and the purple tassel took a sway backwards.

"Oh," said he. "*You* take Pitchley's Farm! How do you think to stock it?"

"I shall take to the stock at present on it, as far as my means will allow, and give a bond for the rest. Pitchley's executors will make it easy for me."

"What are your means?" curtly questioned old Brandon.

"In all, they will be two thousand pounds. Taking mine and

Miss Skate's together."

"That's a settled thing, is it, Master Francis?"—alluding to the marriage.

"Yes, it is," said Frank. "Her portion is just a thousand pounds, and her friends are willing to put it on the farm. Mine is another thousand."

"Where does yours come from?"

"Do you recollect, Mr. Brandon, that when I was a little fellow at school I had a thousand pounds left me by a clergyman—a former friend of my grandfather Elliot?"

Mr. Brandon nodded. "It was Parson Godfrey. He came down once or twice to the Torr to see your mother and you."

"Just so. Well, his widow has now recently died; she was considerably younger than he; and she has left me another thousand. If I can have Pitchley's Farm, I shall be sure to get on at it," he added in his sanguine way. For, if ever there was a sanguine, sunny-natured fellow in this world, it was Frank Radcliffe.

Old Brandon pushed his geranium cap all aside and gave a flick to the tassel. "My opinion lies the contrary way, young man: that you will be sure not to get on at it."

"I understand all about farming," said Frank eagerly. "And I mean to be as steady as steady can be."

"To begin with a debt on the farm will cripple the best man going, sir."

"Oh, Mr. Brandon, don't turn against me!" implored Frank,

who was feeling terribly in earnest. “Give me a chance! Unless I can get some constant work, some *interest* to occupy my hands and my mind, I might be relapsing back to the old ways again from sheer ennui. There’s no resource but a farm.”

Mr. Brandon did not seem to be in a hurry to answer. He was looking straight at Frank, and nodding little nods to himself, following out some mental argument. Frank leaned forward in his chair, his voice low, his face solemn.

“When my poor mother was dying, I promised her to give up bad habits, Mr. Brandon. I hope—I think—I fully intend to do so now. Won’t you help me?”

“What do you wish me to understand by ‘bad’ habits, young man?” queried Mr. Brandon in his hardest tones. “What have been yours?”

“Drink,” said Frank shortly. “And I am ashamed enough to have to say it. It is not that I have been a constant drinker, or that I have taken *much*, in comparison with what very many men drink; but I have, sometimes for weeks together, taken it very recklessly. *That* is what I meant by speaking of my bad habits, Mr. Brandon.”

“Couldn’t speak of a worse habit, Frank Radcliffe.”

“True. I should have pulled up long ago but for those fast companions I lived amongst. They kept me down. Once amidst such, a fellow has no chance. Often and often that neglected promise to my mother has lain upon me, a nightmare of remorse. I have fancied she might be looking down upon earth, upon *me*,

and seeing how I was fulfilling it."

"If your mother was not looking down upon you, sir, your Creator was."

"Ay. I know. Mr. Brandon"—his voice sinking deeper in its solemnity, and his eyes glistening—"in the very last minute of my mother's life—when her soul was actually on the wing—she told me that she *knew* I should be helped to throw off what was wrong. She had prayed for it, and seen it. A conviction is within me that I shall be—has been within me ever since. I think this—now—may be the turning-point in my life. Don't deny me the farm, sir."

"Frank Radcliffe, I'd let you have the farm, and another to it, if I thought you were sincere."

"Why—you *can't* think me not sincere, after what I have said!" cried Frank.

"Oh, you are sincere enough at the present moment. I don't doubt that. The question is, will you be sincere in keeping your good resolutions in the future?"

"I hope I shall. I believe I shall. I will try with all my best energies."

"Very well. You may have the farm."

Frank Radcliffe started up in his joy and gratitude, and shook Mr. Brandon's hands till the purple tassel quivered. He had a squeaky voice and a cold manner, and went in for coughs and chest-aches, and all kinds of fanciful disorders; but there was no more generous heart going than old Brandon's.

Business settled, the luncheon was ordered in. But Frank was a good deal too impatient to stay for it; and drove away in the pony-gig to impart the news to all whom it might concern. Taking a round to the Torr first, he drove into the back-yard. Stephen came out.

Stephen looked quite old now. He must have been fifty years of age. Hard and surly as ever was he, and his stock of hair was as grizzled as his father's used to be before Frank was born.

"Oh, it's you!" said Stephen, as civilly as he could bring his tongue to speak. "Whose chay and pony is that?"

"It belongs to Pitchley's bailiff. He lent it me this morning."

"Will you come in?"

"I have not time now," answered Frank. "But I thought I'd just drive round and tell you the news, Stephen. I'm going to have Pitchley's Farm."

"Who says so?"

"I have now been settling it with Mr. Brandon. At first, he seemed unwilling to let me have it—was afraid, I suppose, that I and the farm might come to grief together—but he consented at last. So I shall get in as soon as I can, and take Annet with me. You'll come to our wedding, Stephen?"

"A fine match *she* is!" cried cranky Stephen.

"What's the matter with her?"

"I don't say as anything's the matter with her. But you have always stuck up for the pride and pomp of the Radcliffes: made out that nobody was good enough for 'em. A nice comedown for

Frank Radcliffe that'll be—old Farmer Skate's girl."

"We won't quarrel about it, Stephen," said Frank, with his good-humoured smile. "Here's your wife. How do you do, Mrs. Radcliffe?"

Becca had come out with a wet mop in her hands, which she proceeded to wring. Some of the splashes went on Frank's pony-gig. She wore morning costume: a dark-blue cotton gown hanging straight down on her thin, lanky figure; and an old black cap adorning her hard face. It was a great contrast: handsome, gentlemanly, well-dressed, sunny Frank Radcliffe, barrister-at-law; and that surly boor Stephen, in his rough clothes, and his shabby, hard-working wife.

"When be you going back to London?" was Becca's reply to his salutation, as she began to rinse out the mop at the pump.

"Not at all. I have been telling Stephen. I am going into Pitchley's Farm."

"Along of Annet Skate," put in Stephen; whose queer phraseology had been indulged in so long that it had become habitual. "Much good they'll do in a farm! He'd like us to go to the wedding! No, thank ye."

"Well, good-morning," said Frank, starting the pony. They did not give him much encouragement to stay.

"Be it true, Radcliffe?" asked Becca, letting the mop alone for a minute. "Be he a-going to marry Skate's girl, and get Pitchley's Farm?"

"I wish the devil had him!" was Stephen's surly comment, as

he stalked off in the wake of the receding pony-gig, giving his wife no other answer.

No doubt Stephen was sincere in his wish, though it was hardly polite to avow it. For the whole of Frank's life, he had been a thorn in the flesh of Stephen: in the first years, for fear their father should bequeath to Frank a share of the inheritance; in the later years, because Frank had had the share! That sum of three hundred a-year, enjoyed by Frank, was coveted by Stephen as money was never yet coveted by man. Looking at matters with a distorted mind, he considered it a foul wrong done him; as no better than a robbery upon him; that the whole of the money was his own by all the laws of right and wrong, and that not a stiver of it ought to have gone to Frank. Unable, however, to alter the state of existing things, he had sincerely hoped that some lucky chance —say the little accident of Frank's drinking himself to death— would put him in possession of it; and all the rumours that came down from London about Frank's wild life rejoiced him greatly. For if Frank died without children, the money went to Stephen. And it may as well be mentioned here, that old Mr. Radcliffe had so vested the three hundred a-year that Frank had no power over the capital and was unable to squander it. It would go to his children when he died; or, if he left no children, to Stephen.

Never a night when he went to bed, never a morning when he got up, but Stephen Radcliffe's hungry heart gave a dismal groan to that three hundred a-year he had been deprived of. In truth, his own poor three hundred was not enough for him. And

then, he had expected that the six would all be his! He had, he said, to work like a slave to keep up the Torr, and make both ends meet. His two children were for ever tugging at his purse-strings. Tom, quitting the sea, had settled in a farm in Canada; but he was always writing home for help. Lizzy would make her appearance at home at all kinds of unseasonable times; and tell pitiful stories of the wants of her scanty ménage at Birmingham, and of her little children, and of the poor health and short pay of her husband the curate. Doubtless Stephen had rather a hard life of it and could very well have done with a doubled income. To hear that Frank was going to settle down to a sober existence and to marry a wife, was the worst news of all to Stephen, for it lessened his good chances finely.

But he had only the will to hinder it, not the power. And matters and the year went swimmingly on. Francis entered into possession of the farm; and just a week before Midsummer Day, he married Annet Skate and took her home.

The red June sunset fell full on Pitchley's Farm, staining the windows a glowing crimson. Pitchley's Farm lay in a dell, about a mile from Dyke Manor, on the opposite side to Sandstone Torr. It was a pretty little homestead, with jessamine on the porch, and roses creeping up the frames of the parlour-windows. Just a year had gone by since the wedding, and to-morrow would be the anniversary of the wedding-day. Mr. and Mrs. Francis Radcliffe were intending to keep it, and had bidden their friends to an entertainment. He had carried out his resolution to be steady,

and they had prospered fairly well. David Skate, one of Annet's brothers, a thorough, practical farmer, was ever ready to come over, if wanted, and help Francis with work and counsel.

Completely tired with her day's exertions, was Annet, for she had been making good things for the morrow, and now sat down for the first time that day in the parlour—a low room, with its windows open to the clustering roses, and the furniture bright and tasty. Annet was of middle height, light and active, with a delicate colour on her cheeks, soft brown eyes, and small features. She had just changed her cotton gown for one of pink summer muslin, and looked as fresh as a daisy.

"How tired I am!" she exclaimed to herself, with a smile. "Frank would scold me if he knew it."

"Be you ready for supper, ma'am?" asked a servant, putting in her head at the door. The only maid kept: for both Frank and his wife knew that their best help to getting on was economy.

"Not yet, Sally. I shall wait for your master."

"Well, I've put it on the table, ma'am; and I'm just going to step across now to Hester Bitton's, and tell her she'll be wanted here to-morrow."

Annet went into the porch, and stood there looking out for her husband, shading her eyes with her hand from the red glare. Some business connected with stock took him to Worcester that day, and he had started in the early morning; but Annet had expected him home earlier than this.

There he was, riding down the road at a sharpish trot; Annet

heard the horse's hoofs before she saw him. He waved his hand to her in the distance, and she fluttered her white handkerchief back again. Thorpe, the indoor man, appeared to take the horse.

Francis Radcliffe had been changing for the better during the past twelvemonth. Regular habits and regular hours, and a mind healthily occupied, had done great things for him. His face was bright, his blue eyes were clear, and his smile and his voice were alike cheering as he got off the horse and greeted his wife.

"You are late, Frank! It is ever so much past eight."

"Our clocks are fast: I've found that out to-day, Annet, But I could not get back before."

He had gone into the parlour, had kissed her, and was disincumbering his pockets of various parcels: she helping him. Both were laughing, for there seemed to be no end to them. They contained articles wanted for the morrow: macaroons, and potted lampreys, and lots of good things.

"Don't say again that I forget your commissions, Annet."

"Never again, Frank. How good you are! But what is in this one? it feels soft."

"That's for yourself," said Frank. "Open it."

Cutting the string, the paper flew apart, disclosing a baby's cloak of white braided cashmere. Annet laughed and blushed.

"Oh, Frank! How could you?"

"Why, I heard you say you must get one."

"Yes—but—not just yet. It may not be wanted, you know."

"Stuff! The thing was in Mrs. What's-her-name's window in

High Street, staring passers-by in the face; so I went in, and bought it."

"It's too beautiful," murmured Annet, putting it reverently into the paper, as if she mistook it for a baby. "And how has the day gone, Frank? Could you buy the sheep?"

"Yes; all right. The sheep—Annet, who *do* you think is coming here to-morrow? Going to honour us as one of the guests?"

At the break in the sentence, Frank had flung himself into a chair, and thrown his head back, laughing. Annet wondered.

"Stephen! It's true. He had gone to Worcester after some sheep himself. I asked whether we should have the pleasure of seeing them here, and he curtly said that he was coming, but couldn't answer for Mrs. Radcliffe. Had the Pope of Rome told me he was coming, I should not have been more surprised."

"Stephen's wife took no notice of the invitation."

"Writing is not in her line: or in his either. Something must be in the wind, Annet: neither he nor his wife has been inside our doors yet."

They sat down to supper, full of chat: as genial married folks always are, after a day's separation. And it was only when the house was at rest, and Annet was lighting the bed-candle, that she remembered a letter lying on the mantel-piece.

"Oh, Frank, I ought to have given it to you at once; I quite forgot it. This letter came for you by this morning's post."

Frank sat down again, drew the candle to him, and read it. It

was from one of his former friends, a Mr. Briarly; offering on his own part and on that of another former friend, one Pratt, a visit to Pitchley's Farm.

Instincts arise to all of us: instincts that it might be well to trust to oftener than we do. A powerful instinct, *against* the offered visit, rushed into the mind of Francis Radcliffe. But the chances are, that, in the obligations of hospitality, it would not have prevailed, even had the chance been afforded him.

"Cool, I must say!" said Frank, with a laugh. "Look here, Annet; these two fellows are going to take us by storm to-morrow. If I don't want them, says Briarly, I must just shut the door in their faces."

"But you'll be glad to see them, won't you, Frank?" she remarked in her innocence.

"Yes. I shall like well enough to see them again. It's our busy time, though: they might have put it off till after harvest."

As many friends went to this entertainment at Pitchley's Farm as liked to go. Mr. Brandon was one of them: he walked over with us—with me, and Tod, and the Squire, and the mater. Stephen Radcliffe and his wife were there, Becca in a black silk with straps of rusty velvet across it. Stephen mostly sat still and said nothing, but Becca's sly eyes were everywhere. Frank and his wife, well dressed and hospitable, welcomed us all; and the board was well spread with cold meats and dainties.

Old Brandon had a quiet talk with Annet in a corner of the porch. He told her he was glad to find Frank seemed likely to

do well at the farm.

"He tries his very best, sir," she said.

"Ay. Somehow I thought he would. People said 'Frank Radcliffe has his three hundred a-year to fall back upon when he gets out of Pitchley's': but I fancied he might stay at Pitchley's instead of getting out of it."

"We are getting on as well as we can be, sir, in a moderate way."

"A moderate way is the only safe way to get on," said Mr. Brandon, putting his white silk handkerchief corner-wise on his head against the sun. "That's a true saying, He who would be rich in twelve months is generally a beggar in six. You are helping Frank well, my dear. *I* have heard of it: how industrious you are, and keep things together. It's not often a good old head like yours is set upon young shoulders."

Annet laughed. "My shoulders are not so very young, sir. I was twenty-four last birthday."

"That's young to manage a farm, child. But *you've* had good training; you had an industrious mother"—indicating an old lady on the lawn in a big lace cap and green gown. "I can tell you what—when I let Frank Radcliffe have the lease, I took into consideration that you were coming here as well as he. Why!—who are these?"

Two stylish-looking fellows were dashing up in a dog-cart; pipes in their mouths, and portmanteaus behind them. Shouting and calling indiscriminately about for Frank Radcliffe; for a man

to take the horse and vehicle, that they had contrived to charter at the railway terminus; for a glass of bitter beer apiece, for they were confoundedly dry—there was no end of a commotion.

They were the two visitors from London, Briarly and Pratt. Their tones moderated somewhat when they saw the company. Frank came out; and received a noisy greeting that might have been heard at York. One of them trod on Mr. Brandon's corns as he went in through the porch. Annet looked half frightened.

"Come to stay here!—gentlemen from London!—Frank's former friends!" repeated old Brandon, listening to her explanation. "Fine friends, I should say! Frank Radcliffe,"—laying hold of him as he was coming back from giving directions to his servant—"how came you to bring those men down into your home?"

"They came of their own accord, Mr. Brandon."

"Friends of yours, I hear?"

"Yes, I knew them in the old days."

"Oh. Well—*I* should not like to go shouting and thundering up to a decent house with more aboard me than I could carry. Those men have both been drinking."

Frank was looking frightfully mortified. "I am afraid they have," he said. "The heat of the day and the dust on the journey must have caused them to take more than they were aware of. I'm very sorry. I assure you, Mr. Brandon, they are really quiet, good fellows."

"May be. But the sooner you see their backs turned, the better,

young man."

From that day, the trouble set in. Will it be believed that Frank Radcliffe, after keeping himself straight for ever so much more than a year, fell away again? Those two visitors must have found their quarters at Pitchley's Farm agreeable, for they stayed on and on, and made no sign of going away. They were drinkers, hard and fast. They drank, themselves, and they seduced Frank to drink—though perhaps he did not require much seduction. Frank's ale was poured out like water. Dozens of port, ordered and paid for by Briarly, arrived from the wine-merchant's; Pratt procured cases of brandy. From morning till night liquor was under poor Frank's nose, tempting him to sin. *Their* heads might be strong enough to stand the potions; Frank's was not. It was June when the new life set in; and on the first of September, when all three staggered in from a day's shooting, Frank was in a fever and curiously trembling from head to foot.

By the end of the week he was strapped down in his bed, a raving madman; Duffham attending him, and two men keeping guard.

Duffham made short work with Briarly and Pratt. He packed them and their cases of wine and their portmanteaus off together; telling them they had done enough mischief for one year, and he must have the house quiet for both its master and mistress. Frank's malady was turning to typhus fever, and a second doctor was called in from Evesham.

The next news was, that Pitchley's Farm had a son and heir.

They called it Francis. It did not live many days, however: how was a son and heir likely to live, coming to that house of fright and turmoil? Frank's ravings might be heard all over it; and his poor wife was nearly terrified out of her bed.

The state of things went on. October came in, and there was no change. It was not known whether Annet would live or die. Frank was better in health, but his mind was gone.

"There's one chance for him," said Duffham, coming across to Dyke Manor to the Squire: "and that is, a lunatic asylum. At home he cannot be kept; he is raving mad. No time must be lost in removing him."

"You think he may get better in an asylum?" cried the Squire, gloomily.

"Yes. I say it is his best chance. His wife, poor thing, is horrified at the thought: but there's nothing else to be done. The calmness of an asylum, the sanatory rules and regulations observed there, will restore him, if anything will."

"How is *she*?" asked the Squire.

"About as ill as she can be. She won't leave her bed on this side Christmas. And the next question is, Squire—where shall he be placed? Of course we cannot act at all without your authority."

The Squire, you see, was Frank Radcliffe's trustee. At the present moment Frank was dead in the eye of the law, and everything lay with the Squire. Not a sixpence of the income could any one touch now, but as he pleased to decree.

After much discussion, in which Stephen Radcliffe had to take

his share, according to law and order, Frank was conveyed to a small private asylum near London. It belonged to a Dr. Dale: and the Evesham doctor strongly recommended it. The terms seemed high to us: two hundred pounds a-year: and Stephen grumbled at them. But Annet begged and prayed that money might not be spared; and the Squire decided to pay it. So poor Frank was taken to town; and Stephen, as his nearest male relative—in fact, his only one—officially consigned him to the care of Dr. Dale.

And that's the jolly condition things were in, that Christmas, at Pitchley's Farm. Its master in a London madhouse, its mistress in her sick-bed, and the little heir in Church Dykely churchyard. David Skate, like the good brother he was, took up his quarters at the farm, and looked after things.

It was in January that Annet found herself well enough to get upon her legs. The first use she made of them was to go up to London to see her husband. But the sight of her so much excited Frank that Dr. Dale begged her not to come again. It was, he said, taking from Frank one chance of his recovery. So Annet gave her promise not to do so, and came back to Pitchley's sobbing and sighing.

Things went on without much change till May. News came of Frank periodically, chiefly to Stephen Radcliffe, who was the recognized authority in Dr. Dale's eyes. On the whole it was good. The improvement in him, though slow, was gradual: and Dr. Dale felt quite certain now of his restoration. In May, the cheering tidings arrived that Frank was all but well; and Stephen

Radcliffe, who went to London for a fortnight about that time and saw Frank twice, confirmed it.

Stephen's visit up arose in this way. One Esau D. Stettin (that's how he wrote his name), who owned land in Canada, came to this country on business, and brought news to the Torr of Tom Radcliffe. Tom had every chance of doing well, he said, and was quite steady—and this was true. Mr. and Mrs. Stephen were almost as glad to hear it as if a fortune had been left them. But, to ensure his doing well and to make his farm prosperous, Tom wanted no end of articles sent out to him: the latest improvements in agricultural implements; patent wheelbarrows, and all the rest of it. For Stephen to take the money out of his pocket to purchase the wheelbarrows was like taking the teeth from his head; but as Esau D. Stettin—who was above suspicion—confirmed Tom's need of the things, Stephen decided to do it. He went up to London, to buy the articles and superintend their embarkation, and it was during that time that he saw Frank. Upon returning to the Torr, he fully bore out Dr. Dale's opinion that Frank was recovering his mind, was, in fact, almost well; but he privately told the Squire some other news that qualified it.

Frank's health was failing. While his mind was resuming its tone, his body was wasting. He was, Ste said, a mere shadow; and Dr. Dale feared that he would not last very long after complete sanity set in.

How sorry we all were, I need not say. With all his failings and his instability, every one liked Frank Radcliffe. They kept it

from Annet. She was but a shadow herself: had fretted her flesh to fiddlestrings; and Duffham's opinion was that she stood a good chance of dwindling away till nothing was left of her but a shroud and a coffin.

"Would it be of any use my going up to see him, poor fellow?" asked the Squire, sadly down in the mouth.

"Not a bit," returned Stephen. "Dale would be sure not to admit you: so much depends on Frank's being kept free from excitement. Why, he wanted to deny me, that Dale; but I insisted on my right to go in. I mean to see him again, too, before many days are over."

"Are you going to London again?" asked the Squire, rather surprised. It was something new for Stephen Radcliffe to be a gad-about.

"I shall have to go, I reckon," said Stephen, ungraciously. "I've to see Stettin before he sails."

Stephen Radcliffe did go up again, apparently much against his will, to judge by the ill words he gave to it. And the report he brought back of Frank that time was rather more cheering.

The Squire was standing one hot morning in the yard in his light buff coat, blowing up Dwarf Giles for something that had gone wrong in the stables, when a man was seen making his way from the oak-walk towards the yard. The June hay-making was about, and the smell of the hay was wafted across to us on the wings of the summer breeze.

"Who's that, Johnny?" asked the pater: for the sun was shining

right in his eyes.

"It—it looks like Stephen Radcliffe, sir."

"You may tell him by his rusty suit of velveteen," put in Tod; who stood watching a young brood of ducklings in the duck-pond, and the agonies of the hen that had hatched them.

Stephen Radcliffe it was. He had a stout stick in his hand, and his face was of a curious leaden colour. Which, with him, took the place of paleness.

"I've had bad news, Mr. Todhetley," he began, in low tones, without any preliminary greeting. "Frank's dead."

The Squire's straw hat, which he chanced to have taken off, dropped on the stones. "Dead! Frank!" he exclaimed in an awestruck tone. "It can't be true."

"Just the first thought that struck me when I opened the letter," said Stephen, drawing one from his pocket. "Here it is, though, in black and white."

His hands shook like anything as he held out the letter. It was from one of the assistants at Dale's—a Mr. Pitt: the head doctor, under Dale, Stephen explained. Frank had died suddenly, it stated, without warning of any kind, so that there was no possibility of apprising his friends; and it requested Mr. Radcliffe to go up without delay.

"It is a dreadful thing!" cried the Squire.

"So it is, poor fellow," agreed Stephen. "I never thought it was going to end this way; not yet awhile, at any rate. For him, it's a happy release, I suppose. He'd never ha' been good for anything."

"What has he died of?" questioned Tod.

The voice, or the question, seemed to startle Stephen. He looked sharply round, as if he hadn't known Tod was there, an ugly scowl on his face.

"I expect we shall hear it was heart disease," he said, facing the Squire and turning his back upon Tod.

"Why do you say that, Mr. Radcliffe? Was anything the matter with his heart?"

"Dale had some doubts of it, Squire. He thought that was the cause of his wasting away."

"You never told us that."

"Because I never believed it. A Radcliffe never had a weak heart yet. And it's only a thought o' mine: he might have died from something else. Laid hands on himself, maybe."

"For goodness' sake don't bring up such an ill thought as that," cried the pater explosively. "Wait till you know."

"Yes, I must wait till I know," said Stephen, sullenly. "And a precious inconvenience it is to me to go up at this moment when my hay's just cut! Frank's been a bother to me all his life, and he must even be a bother now he's dead."

"Shall I go up for you?" asked the Squire: who in his distress at the sudden news would have thought nothing of offering to start for Kamschatka.

"No good if you did," growled Stephen, folding up the letter that the pater handed back to him. "They'd not as much as release him to be buried without me, I expect. I shall bring him down

here," added Stephen, jerking his head in the direction of the churchyard.

"Yes, yes, poor fellow—let him lie by his mother," said the Squire.

Stephen said a good-morrow, meant for the whole of us; and had rounded the duck-pond on his exit, when he stopped, and turned back again to the pater.

"There'll be extra expenses, I suppose, up at Dale's. Have I your authority to discharge them?"

"Of course you have, Mr. Radcliffe. Or let Dale send in the account to me, if you prefer it."

He went off without another word, his head down; his thick stick held over his shoulder. Tho Squire rubbed his face, and wondered what on earth was the next thing to do in this unhappy crisis.

Annet was in Wales with her mother at some seaside place. It would be a dreadful shock to her. Getting the address from David Skate, the Squire wrote to break it to them in the best manner he could. But now, a mischance happened to that letter. Welsh names are difficult to spell; the pater's pen put L for Y, or X for Z, something of that sort; and the letter went to a wrong town altogether, and finally came back to him unopened. Stephen Radcliffe had returned then.

Stephen did not keep his word, instead of bringing Frank down, he left him in London in Finchley Cemetery. "The heat of the weather," he pleaded by way of excuse when the Squire

blew him up. “There was some delay; an inquest, and all that; and unless we’d gone to the expense of lead, it couldn’t be done; Dale said so. What does it signify? He’ll lie as quiet there as he would here.”

“And was it the heart that was wrong?” asked the pater.

“No. It was what they called ‘effusion on the brain,’” replied Stephen. “Dale says it’s rather a common case with lunatics, but he never feared it for Frank.”

“It is distressing to think his poor wife did not see him. Quite a misfortune.”

“Well, we can’t help it: it was no fault of ours,” retorted Stephen: who had actually had the decency to put himself into a semblance of mourning. “The world ’ud go on differently for many of us, Squire, if we could foresee things.”

And that was the end of Francis Radcliffe!

“Finchley Cemetery!” exclaimed Mr. Brandon, when he heard it. “That Stephen Radcliffe has been at his stingy tricks again. You can bury people for next to nothing there.”

Poor Annet came home in her widow’s weeds, In health she was better; and might grow strong in time. There was no longer any suspense: she knew the worst; that was in itself a rest. The great doubt to be encountered now was, whether she could keep on Pitchley’s Farm. Mr. Brandon was willing to risk it: and David Skate took up his abode at the farm for good, and would do his best in all ways. But the three hundred a-year income, that had been the chief help and stay of herself and Frank, was gone.

It had lapsed to Stephen. Nothing could be said against that in law, for old Mr. Radcliffe's will had so decreed it; but it seemed a very cruel thing for every shilling to leave her, an injustice, a wrong. The tears ran down her pale face as she spoke of it one day at Pitchley's to the Squire: and he, going in wholesale for sympathy, determined to have a tussel with Stephen.

"You can't *for shame* take it all from her, Stephen Radcliffe," said the Squire, after walking over to Sandstone Torr the next morning. "You must not leave her quite penniless."

"I don't take it from her," replied Stephen, rumpling up his grizzled hair. "It comes to me of right. It is my own."

"Now don't quibble, Stephen Radcliffe," said the Squire, rubbing his face, for he went into a fever as usual over his argument, and the day was hot. "The poor thing was your brother's wife, and you ought to consider that."

"Francis was a fool to marry her. An unsteady man like him always is a fool to marry."

"Well, he did marry her: and I don't see that he was a fool at all for it. I wish I'd got the whip-hand of those two wicked blades who came down here and turned him from his good ways. I wonder how they'll answer for it in heaven."

"Would you like to take a drop of cider?" asked Stephen.

"I don't care if I do."

The cider was brought in by Eunice Gibbon: a second edition, so far as looks went, of Mrs. Stephen Radcliffe, whose younger sister she was. She lived there as servant, the only one kept. Holt

had left when old Mr. Radcliffe died.

"Come, Stephen Radcliffe, you must make Annet some allowance," said the Squire, after taking a long draught and finding the cider uncommonly sour. "The neighbours will cry out upon you if you don't."

"The neighbours can do as they choose."

"Just take this much into consideration. If that little child of theirs had lived, the money would have been his."

"But he didn't live," argued Stephen.

"I know he didn't—more's the pity. He'd have been a consolation to her, poor thing. Come! you can't, I say, take all from her and leave her with nothing."

"Nothing! Hasn't she got the farm-stock and the furniture? She's all that to the good. 'Twas bought with Frank's money."

"No, it was not. Half the money was hers. Look here. Unless she gets help somewhere, I don't see how she is to stay on at Pitchley's."

"And 'twould be a sight better for her not to stay on at Pitchley's," retorted Stephen. "Let her go back to her mother's again, over in the other parish. Or let her emigrate. Lots of folks is emigrating now."

"This won't do, Stephen Radcliffe," said the Squire, beginning to lose his temper. "You can't for shame bring every one down upon your head. Allow her a trifle, man, out of the income that has lapsed to you: let the world have to say that you are generous for once."

Well, not to pursue the contest—which lasted, hot and sharp, for a couple of hours, for the Squire, though he kept getting out of one passion into another, would not give in—I may as well say at once that Stephen at last yielded, and agreed to allow her fifty pounds a-year. "Just for a year or so," as he ungraciously put it, "while she turned herself round."

And it was so tremendous a concession for Stephen Radcliffe that no one believed it at first, the Squire included. It must be intended as a thanksgiving for his brother's death, said the world.

"Only, Ste Radcliffe is not the one to offer thanksgivings," observed old Brandon. "Take care that he pays it, Squire."

And thus things fell into the old grooves again, and the settling down of Frank Radcliffe amongst us seemed but as a very short episode in Church Dykely life. Stephen Radcliffe, in funds now, bought an adjoining field that was to be sold, and added it to his land: but he and his wife and the Torr kept themselves more secluded than ever. Frank's widow took up her old strength by degrees, and worked and managed incessantly: she in the house, and David Skate out of it; to keep Pitchley's Farm together. And the autumn drew on.

The light of the moon streamed in slantwise upon us as we sat round the bay-window. Tod and I had just got home for the Michaelmas holidays: and we sat talking after dinner in the growing dusk. There was always plenty to relate, on getting home from school. A dreadful thing had happened this last quarter: one of the younger ones had died at a game of Hare and Hounds. I'll

tell you of it some time. The tears glistened in Mrs. Todhetley's eyes, and we all seemed to be talking at once.

"Mrs. Francis Radcliffe, ma'am."

Old Thomas had opened the door and interrupted us. Annet came in quietly, and sat down after shaking hands all round. Her face looked pale and troubled. We asked her to stay tea; but she would not.

"It is late to come in," she said, some apology in her tone. "I meant to have been here earlier; but it has been a busy day, and I have had interruptions besides."

This seemed to imply that she had come over for some special purpose. Not another word, however, did she say. She just sat in silence, or next door to it: answering Yes and No in an abstracted sort of way when spoken to, and staring out into the moonlight like any one dreaming. And presently she got up to leave.

We went out with her and walked across the field; the pater, I, and Tod. Nearly every blade of the short grass could be seen as distinctly as in the day. At the first stile she halted, saying she expected to meet David there, who had gone on to Dobbs the blacksmith on some errand connected with the horses.

Tod saw a young hare scutter across the grass, and rushed after it, full chase. The moon, low in the heavens, as autumn moons mostly are, lighted up the perplexity on Annet's face. It *was* perplexed. Suddenly she turned it on the Squire.

"Mr. Todhetley, I am sure you must wonder what I came for."

"Well, I thought you wanted something," said the Squire

candidly. “We are always pleased to have you; you ought to have stayed tea.”

“I did want something. But I really could not muster courage to begin upon it. The longer I sat there—like a statue, as I felt—the more my tongue failed me. Perhaps I can say it here.”

It was a curious thing she had to tell, and must have sounded to the Squire’s ears like an incident out of a ghost story. The gist of it was this: an impression had taken hold of her mind that her husband had not been fairly dealt with. In plain words, had not come fairly by his end. The pater listened, and could make no sense of it.

“I can’t tell how or when the idea arose,” she said; “it seems to have floated in my mind so long that I do not trace the beginning. At first it was but the merest shadow of a doubt; hardly that; but it has grown deeper and darker, and I cannot rest for it.”

“Bless my heart!” cried the Squire. “Johnny, hold my hat a minute.”

“Just as surely as that I see that moon in the sky, sir,” she went on, “do I seem to see in my mind that some ill was wrought to Frank by his brother. Mrs. Radcliffe said it would be.”

“Dear me! What Mrs. Radcliffe?”

“Frank’s mother. She had the impression of it when she was dying, and she warned Frank that it would be so.”

“Poor Selina! But—my dear lady, how do you know that?”

“My husband told me. He told me one night when we were sitting alone in the parlour. Not that he put faith in it. He had

escaped Stephen's toils until then, he said in a joking tone, and thought he could take care of himself and escape them still. But I fear he did not."

"Now what is it you do fear?" asked the Squire. "Come."

She glanced round in dread, and then spoke with considerable hesitation and in a low whisper.

"I fear—that Stephen—may have—murdered him."

"Mercy upon us!" uttered the Squire, recoiling a step or two.

She put her elbow on the stile and raised her hand to her face, showing out so pale and distressed under its white net border.

"It lies upon me, sir—a great agony. I don't know what to do."

"But it *could not* be," cried the Squire, collecting his scared senses. "Your imagination must run away with you, child. Frank died up at Dr. Dale's; Stephen Radcliffe was down here at the time."

"Yes—I am aware of all that, sir. But—I believe it was as I fear. I don't pretend to account for it; to say what Stephen did or how he did it—but my fears are dreadful. I have no peace night or day."

The Squire stared at her and shook his head. I am sure he thought her brain was touched.

"My dear Mrs. Frank, this must be pure fancy. Stephen Radcliffe is a hard and griping man, not sticking at a trick or two where his pocket is concerned, but he wouldn't do such a thing as this. No, no; surly as he may be, he could not be guilty of murder."

She took her arm off the stile, with a short shiver. David Skate came into sight; Tod's footsteps were heard brushing the grass.

"Good-night, sir," she hurriedly said; and was over the stile before we could help her.

III

When the rumours first began, I can't tell you. They must have had a beginning: but no one recollected when the beginning was. It was said that curious noises were heard in the neighbourhood of Sandstone Torr. One spoke of it, and another spoke of it, at intervals of perhaps a month apart, until people grew *accustomed* to hearing of the strange sounds that went shrieking round the Torr on a windy night. Dovey, the blacksmith, going up to the Torr on some errand, declared he had heard them at mid-day: but he was not generally believed.

The Torr was so remote from the ordinary routes of traffic, that the noises were not likely to be heard often, even allowing that there were noises to hear. Shut in by trees, and in a lonely spot, people had no occasion to pass it. The narrow lane, by which it was approached from Church Dykely, led to nowhere else; on other sides it was surrounded by fields. Stephen Radcliffe was asked about these noises; but he positively denied having heard any, except those caused by the wind. *That* shrieked around the house as if so many witches were at work, he said, and it always had as long as he could remember. Which was true.

Stephen's inheritance of all the money on the death of his young half-brother Francis—young, compared with him—seemed to have been only the signal for him and his wife to become more unsociable, and they were bad enough before. They

shut themselves up in the Torr, with that sister of hers, Eunice Gibbon, who acted as their servant, and saw no one. Neither visitors nor tradespeople were encouraged there; they preferred to live without help from any one: butcher or baker or candlestick maker. The produce of the farm supplied ordinary daily needs, and anything else that might be wanted was fetched from the village by Eunice Gibbon—as tall and strapping a woman as Mrs. Stephen, and just as grim and silent. Even the postman had orders to leave any letters that might arrive, addressed to the Torr, at Church Dykely post-office to be called for. Possibly it was a sense of their own unfitness for society that caused them to keep aloof from it. Stephen Radcliffe had always been a sullen, boorish man, in spite of his descent from the ancient Druids—or whatever the high-caste tribes might be, that he traced back from; and as to his wife, she was just as much like a lady as a pig's like a windmill.

The story of the queer noises gained ground, and in the course of time it coursed about pretty freely. One evening in the late spring—but the report had been abroad then for months and months—a circumstance caused it to be discussed at Dyke Manor. Giles, our groom, strolling out one night to give himself an airing, chanced to get near the Torr, and came home full of it. "Twere exactly," he declared, "like a lot o' witches howling in the air." Just as Stephen Radcliffe had said of the wind. The Squire told Giles it must be the owls; the servants thought Mr. Radcliffe might be giving his wife a beating; Mrs. Todhetley imagined it

might be only the bleating of the young lambs. Giles protested it could come from neither owls nor lambs: and as to Radcliffe's beating 'Becca, he'd be hardly likely to try it on, for she'd beat back again. Tod and I were at school, and heard nothing of it till we got home in summer.

"Johnny! There's the noise!"

We two had been over to the Court to see the Sterlings; it was only the second day of our holidays; and were taking the cross-cut home through the fields, which led us past Sandstone Torr. It was the twilight of a summer's evening. The stars were beginning to show themselves; in the north-west the colours were the most beautiful opal conceivable; the round silver moon sailed in the clear blue sky. Crossing the stile by the grove of trees that on three sides surrounded the Torr, we had reached the middle of the next field, when a sort of faint wailing cry, indescribably painful, brought us both to a standstill.

"It must be the noise they talk of," repeated Tod.

Where did it come from? What was it? Standing on the path in the centre of the open field, we turned about and gazed around; but could see nothing to produce or cause it. It seemed to be overhead, ever so far up in the air: an unearthly, imploring cry, or rather a succession of cries; faint enough, as if the sound spent itself before it reached us, but still distinct; and just as much like what witches might be supposed to make, witches in pain, as any cries could be. I'd have given a month's pocket-money not to have heard it.

"Is it in the Torr?" exclaimed Tod, breaking the silence. "I don't see how that could be, though."

"It is up in the air, Tod."

We stood utterly puzzled; and gazing at the Torr. At as much of it, at least, as could be seen—the tops of the chimneys, and the sugar-loaf of a tower shooting up to its great height amidst them. The windows of the house and its old stone walls, on which the lichen vegetated, were hidden by the clustering old trees, in full foliage then.

"Hark! There it is again!"

The same horrible, low, distressing sound, something between a howl and a wail; enough to make a stout man shiver in his shoes.

"Is it a woman's cry, Tod?"

"*I* don't know, lad. It's like a person being murdered and crying out for help."

"Radcliffe can't be tanning his wife."

"Not he, Johnny. She'd take care of that. Besides, they've never been cat-and-dog. Birds of a feather: that's what they are. Oh, by Jove! there it comes again! Just listen to it! I don't like this at all, Johnny. It must be witches, and nothing else."

Decidedly it must be. It came from the air. The open fields lay around, white and still under the moonlight, and nothing was on their surface of any kind, human or animal. Now again! that awful cry, rising on the bit of breeze there was, and dying away in pain to a faint echo.

"Let us go to the Torr, Johnny, and ask Radcliffe if he hears

it!"

We bounded forward under the cry, which rose again and again incessantly; but in nearing the house it seemed to get further off and to be higher than ever in the air. Leaping the gate into the lane, we reached the front-door, and seized the bell-handle. It brought Mrs. Radcliffe; a blue cap and red roses adoring her straggling hair. Holding the candle above her head, she peered at us with her small, sly eyes.

"Oh, is it you, young gentlemen? Do you want anything? Will you walk in?"

I was about to say No, when Tod pushed me aside and strode up the damp stone passage. They did not make fires enough in the house to keep out the damp. As he told me afterwards, he wanted to get in to listen. But there was no sound at all to be heard; the house seemed as still as death. Wherever the cries might come from, it was certainly not from inside the Torr.

"Radcliffe went over to Wire-Piddle this afternoon, and he's not back yet," she said; opening the parlour-door when we got to the hall. "Did you want him? You must ha' been in a hurry by the way you pulled the bell."

She put the candle down on the table. Her work lay there—a brown woollen stocking about half-way knitted.

"There is the most extraordinary noise outside that you ever heard, Mrs. Radcliffe," began Todd, seating himself without ceremony on the old-fashioned mahogany sofa. "It startled us. Did you hear it in here?"

"I have heard no noise at all," she answered quietly, taking up the stocking and beginning to knit standing. "What was it like?"

"An awful shrieking and crying. Not loud; nearly faint enough for dying cries. As it is not in your house—and we did not think it was, or could be—it must be, I should say, in the air."

"Ay," she said, "just so. I can tell you what it is, Mr. Joseph: the night-birds."

Tod looked at her, plying the knitting-needles so quickly, and looked at me, and there was a silence. I wondered what was keeping him from speaking. He suddenly bent his head forward.

"Have you heard any talk of these noises, Mrs. Radcliffe? People say they are to be heard almost any night."

"I've not heard no talk, but I have heard the noise," she answered, whisking out a needle and beginning another of the three-cornered rows. "One evening about a month ago I was a-coming home up the lane, and I hears a curious kind o' prolonged cry. It startled me at the moment, for, thinks I, it must be in this house; and I hastens in. No. Eunice said she had heard no cries: as how should she, when there was nobody but herself indoors? So I goes out again, and listens," added Mrs. Radcliffe, lifting her eyes from the stocking and fixing them on Tod, "and then I finds out what it really was—the night-birds."

"The night-birds?" he echoed.

"'Twas the night-birds, Mr. Joseph," she repeated, with an emphatic nod. "They had congregated in these thick trees, and was crying like so many human beings. I have heard the same

thing many a time in Wiltshire when I was a girl. I used to go there to stay with aunt and uncle."

"Well, I never heard anything like it before," returned Tod. "It's just as though some unquiet spirit was in the air."

"Mayhap it sounds so afore you know what it is. Let me give you young gentlemen a drop o' my home-made cowslip wine."

She had taken the decanter of wine and some glasses off the sideboard with her long arms, before we could say Yes or No. We are famous for cowslip wine down there, but this was extra good. Tod took another glass of it, and got up to go.

"Don't be frighted if you hear the noise again, now that you know what it is," she said, quite in a motherly way. "For my part I wish some o' the birds was shot. They don't do no good to nobody."

"As there is not any house about here, except this, the thought naturally arises that the noise may be inside it—until you know to the contrary," remarked Tod.

"I wish it was inside it—we'd soon stop it by wringing all their necks," cried she. "You can listen," she added, suddenly going into the hall and flinging wide every door that opened from it and led to the different passages and rooms. "Go to any part of the house you like, and hearken for yourselves, young gentlemen."

Tod laughed at the suggestion. The passages were all still and cold, and there was nothing to hear. Taking up the candle, she lighted us to the front-door. Outside stood the woman-servant Eunice, a basket on her arm, and just about to ring, Mrs.

Radcliffe inquired if she had heard any noise.

"Only the shrieking birds up there," she answered readily. "They be in full cry to-night."

"They've been startling these gentlemen finely."

"There bain't nothing to be startled at," said the woman, roughly, turning a look of contempt upon us. "If I was the master I'd shoot as many as I could get at; and if that didn't get rid of 'em, I'd cut the trees down."

"They make a queerer noise than any birds I ever heard before," said Tod, standing his ground to say it.

"They does," assented the woman. "That queer, that some folks believes it's the shrieks o' the skeleton on the gibbet."

Pleasant! When I and Tod had to pass within a few yards of its corner. The posts of the old gibbet were there still, but the skeleton had mouldered away long ago. A bit of chain, some few inches long, adhered to its fastening in the post still, and rattled away on windy nights.

"What donkeys we were, Johnny, not to know birds' cries when we heard them!" exclaimed Tod, as we tumbled over the gate and went flying across the field. "Hark! Listen! There it is again!"

There it was. The same despairing sort of wail, faintly rising and dying on the air. Tod stood in hushed silence.

"Johnny, I believe that's a human cry!—I could almost fancy," he went on, "that it is speaking words. No bird, that ever I met with, native or foreign, could make the like."

It died away. But still occurred the obvious question, What was it, and where did it come from? With nothing but the empty air above and around us, that was difficult to answer.

"It's not in the trees—I vow it," said Tod; "it's not inside the Torr; it can't rise up from under the ground. I say, Johnny, is it a case of ghost?"

The wailing arose again as he spoke, as if to reprove him for his levity. I'd rather have met a ghost; ay, and a real ghost; than have carried away that sound to haunt me.

We tore home as fast as our heels could take us, and told of the night's adventure. After the pater had blown us up for being late, he treated us to a dose of ridicule. Human cries, indeed? Ghosts and witches? I might be excused, he said, being a muff; but Joe must be just going back to his childhood. That settled Tod. Of all disagreeable things he most hated to be ridiculed.

"It must have been the old birds in those trees, after all, Johnny," said he, as we went up to bed. "I think the moon makes people fanciful."

And after a sound night's rest we woke up to the bright sunshine, and thought no more of the cries.

That morning, being close to Pitchley's Farm, we called in to see Mrs. Frank Radcliffe. But she was not to be seen. Her brother, David Skate, just come in to his mid-day dinner, came forward to meet us in his fustian suit. Annet had been hardly able to keep about for some time, he said, but this was the first day she had regularly broken down so as to be in bed.

"It has brought on a touch of fever," said he, pressing the bread-and-cheese and cider upon us, which he had ordered in.

"What has?" asked Tod.

"This perpetual torment that she keeps her mind in. But she can't help it, poor thing, so it's not fair to blame her," added David Skate. "It grows worse instead of better, and I don't see what the end of it is to be. I've thought for some time she might go and break up to-day."

"Why to-day?"

"Because it is the anniversary of her husband's death, Master Johnny. He died twelve months ago to-day."

Back went my memory to the morning we heard of it. When the pater was scolding Dwarf Giles in the yard, and Tod stood laughing at the young ducks taking to the water, and Stephen Radcliffe loomed into sight, grim and surly, to disclose to us the tidings that the post had brought in—his brother Frank's death.

"Has she still that curious fancy in her, David?—that he did not come by his death fairly."

"She has it in her, and she can't get it out of her," returned David. "Why, Master Johnny, it's nothing but that that's killing her. Ay, and that's not too strong a word, sir, for I do believe she'll die of it, unless something can be done to satisfy her mind, and give her rest," he added earnestly. "She thinks there was foul play used in some way, and that Stephen Radcliffe was at the bottom of it."

We had never heard a word about the fancy since that night

when Annet first spoke of it at the stile, and supposed she had forgotten it long ago. The Squire and Mrs. Todhetley had often noticed how ill she looked, but they put it down to grief for Francis and to her anxiety about the farm.

"No, she has said no more since then," observed David. "She took up an idea that the Squire ascribed it to a wandering brain; and so has held her peace since."

"Is her brain wandering, do you think?" asked Tod.

"Well, I don't know," returned David, absently making little cuts at the edge of the cheese with the knife. "In all other respects she is as sane as sane can be; there's not a woman of sounder sense, as to daily matters, anywhere. But this odd fancy has got hold of her mind; and it's just driving her crazy. She says that her husband appears to her in her dreams, and calls upon her to help and release him."

"Release him from what? From his grave in Finchley Cemetery?"

"From what indeed!" echoed David Skate. "That's what I ask her. But she persists that, sleeping or waking, his spirit is always hovering near her, crying out to her to avenge him. She declares that it is no fancy. Of course it is, though."

"I never met with such a case," said Tod, forgetting the good cider in his astonishment. "Frank Radcliffe died up at Dr. Dale's in London. Stephen could not have had anything to do with his death: he was down here at the time."

"Well, Annet has the notion firmly fixed in her mind that he

had, and there's no turning her," said David. "There will be no turning her this side the grave, unless we can free her from it. Any way, the fancy has come to such a pitch now, and is telling upon her so seriously, that something must be done. If it were not that just the busiest time has set in; the hay cut, and the wheat a'most ready to cut, I'd take her to London to Dr. Dale's. Perhaps if she heard the account of Frank's death from his own lips, and that it was a natural death, it might help her a bit."

We went home full of this. The Squire was in a fine way when he heard it, and brimming over with pity for Annet. He had grown to like her; and he had always looked on Francis as in some degree belonging to him.

"Look here," said he, in his impulsive good nature, "it will never do to let this go on: we shall have her in a mad-house too. That's not a bad notion of David Skate's; and if he can't leave to take her up to London just now, I'll take her."

"She could not go," said Tod. "She is in bed with low fever."

"Then I'll go up by myself," stamped the Squire in his zeal. "And get Dr. Dale to write out all the particulars, and hurry down again with them to her as fast as the train will bring me. Poor thing! her disease must be a sort of mania."

"Now, Johnny, mind you don't make a mistake in the omnibus. Use your eyes; they are younger than mine."

We were standing at Charing Cross in the hot afternoon sun, looking out for an omnibus that would take us westward. The Squire had lost no time in starting for London, and we had

reached it an hour before. He let me come up with him, as Tod had gone to Whitney Hall.

"Here it is, sir. 'Kensington,—Hammersmith,—Richmond.' This is the right one."

The omnibus stopped, and in we got; for the Squire said the sun was too fierce for the outside; and by-and-by, when the houses became fewer, and the trees and fields more frequent, we were set down near Dr. Dale's. A large house, standing amidst a huge grass-plat, shut in by iron gates.

"I want to see Dr. Dale," said the pater, bustling in as soon as the door was opened, without waiting to be asked.

The servant looked at him and then at me; as if he thought the one or the other of us was a lunatic about to be left there. "This way, sir," said he to the Squire and put us into a small square room that had a blue and drab carpet, and a stand of plants before the window. A little man, with deep-set dark eyes, and the hair all gone from the top of his head, soon made his appearance—Dr. Dale.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.