HENRY WOOD

JOHNNY LUDLOW, FIFTH SERIES

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Johnny Ludlow, Fifth Series

Wood H.

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Содержание

Mrs. Henry Wood
Johnny Ludlow, Fifth 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.

FEATHERSTON'S STORY

I

I have called this Featherston's story, because it was through him that I heard about it—and, indeed, saw a little of it towards the end.

Buttermead, the wide straggling district to which Featherston enjoyed the honour of being doctor-in-ordinary, was as rural as any that can be found in Worcestershire. Featherston's house stood at the end of the village. Whitney Hall lay close by; as did our school, Dr. Frost's. In the neighbourhood were scattered a few other substantial residences, some farmers' homesteads and labourers' cottages. Featherston was a slim man, with long thin legs and a face grey and careworn. His patients (like the soldier's steam arm) gave him no rest day or night.

There is no need to go into details here about Featherston's people. His sister, Mary Ann, lived in his house at one time, and for everyday ailments was almost as good a doctor as he. She was not at all like him: a merry, talkative, sociable little woman, with black hair and quick, kindly dark eyes.

Our resident French master in those days at Dr. Frost's was one Monsieur Jules Carimon: a small man with honest blue eyes in his clean-shaven face, and light brown hair cropped close to his head. He was an awful martinet at study, but a genial little gentleman out of it. To the surprise of Buttermead, he and Mary Featherston set up a courtship. It was carried on in sober fashion, as befitted a sober couple who had both left thirty years, and the rest, behind them; and after a summer or two of it they laid plans for their marriage and for living in France.

"I'm sure I don't know what on earth I shall do amongst the French, Johnny Ludlow," Mary said to me in her laughing way, when I and Bill Whitney were having tea at Featherston's one half-holiday, the week before the wedding. "Jules protests they are easier to get on with than the English; not so stiff and formal; but I don't pay attention to all he says, you know."

Monsieur Jules Carimon was going to settle down at his native place, Sainteville—a town on the opposite coast, which had a service of English steamers running to it two or three times a-week. He had obtained the post of first classical master at the college there, and meant to eke out his salary (never large in French colleges) by teaching French and mathematics to as many English pupils as he could obtain out of hours. Like other northern French seaport towns, Sainteville had its small colony of British residents.

"We shall get on; I am not afraid," answered Mary Featherston to a doubting remark made to her by old Mrs. Selby of the Court. "Neither I nor Jules have been accustomed to luxury, and we don't care for it. We would as soon make our dinner of bread-and-butter and radishes, as of chicken and apple-tart."

So the wedding took place, and they departed the same day for Sainteville. And of the first two or three years after that there's nothing good or bad to record.

Selby Court lay just outside Buttermead. Its mistress, an ancient lady now, was related to the Preen family, of whom I spoke in that story which told of the tragical death of Oliver. Lavinia Preen, sister to Oliver's father, Gervase Preen, but younger, lived with Mrs. Selby as a sort of adopted daughter; and when the death of the father, old Mr. Preen, left nearly all his large family with scarcely any cheese to their bread, Mrs. Selby told Ann Preen, the youngest of them all, that she might come to her also. So Lavinia and Ann Preen lived at the Court, and had no other home.

These two ladies were intimate with Mary Featherston, all three being much attached to one another. When Mary married and left her country for France, the Miss Preens openly resented it, saying she ought to have had more consideration. Did some premonitory instinct prompt that unreasonable resentment? I cannot say. No one can say. But it is certain that had Mary Featherston

not gone to live abroad, the ominous chain of events fated to engulf the sisters could not have touched them, and this account, which is a perfectly true one, would never have been written.

For a short time after the marriage they and Mary Carimon exchanged a letter now and then; not often, for foreign postage was expensive; and then it dropped altogether.

Mrs. Selby became an invalid, and died. She left each of the two sisters seventy pounds a-year for life; if the one died, the other was to enjoy the whole; when both were dead, it would lapse back to the Selby estate.

"Seventy pounds a-year!" remarked Ann Preen to her sister. "It does not seem very much, does it, Lavinia? Shall we be able to live upon it?"

They were seated in the wainscoted parlour at Selby Court, talking of the future. The funeral was over, and they must soon leave; for the house was waiting to be done up for the reception of its new master, Mr. Paul Selby, an old bachelor full of nervous fancies.

"We must live upon it, Nancy," said Lavinia in answer to her.

She was the stronger-minded of the two, and she looked it. A keen, practical woman, of rather more than middle height, with smooth brown hair, pleasant, dark hazel eyes, and a bright glow in her cheeks. Ann (or Nancy, as she was more often called) was smaller and lighter, with a pretty face, a shower of fair ringlets, and mild, light-blue eyes; altogether not unlike a pink-and-white wax doll.

"We should have been worse off, Nancy, had she not left us anything; and sometimes I have feared she might not," remarked Lavinia cheerfully. "It will be a hundred and forty pounds between us, dear; we can live upon that."

"Of course we can, if you think so, Lavinia," said the other, who deemed her elder sister wiser than any one in the world, and revered her accordingly.

"But we should live cheaper abroad than here, I expect," continued Lavinia. "It's said money goes twice as far in France as in England. Suppose we were to go over, Nancy, and try? We could come back if we did not like it."

Nancy's eyes sparkled. "I think it would be delightful," she said. "Money go further in France —why, to be sure it does! Aunt Emily is able to live like a princess at Tours, by all accounts. Yes, yes, Lavinia, let us try France!"

One fine spring morning the Miss Preens packed up their bag and baggage and started for the Continent. They went direct to Tours, intending to make that place their pied-à-terre, as the French phrase it; at any rate, for a time. It was not, perhaps, the wisest thing they could have done.

For Mrs. Magnus, formerly Emily Preen, and their late father's sister, did not welcome them warmly. She lived in style herself, one of the leading stars in the society of Tours; and she did not at all like that two middle-aged nieces, of straitened means, should take up their abode in the next street. So Mrs. Magnus met her nieces with the assurance that Tours would not do for them; it was too expensive a place; they would be swamped in it. Mrs. Magnus was drawing near to the close of her life then; had she known it, she might have been kinder, and let them remain; but she was not able to foresee the hour of that great event which must happen to us all any more than other people are. Oliver Preen was with her then, revelling in the sunny days which were flitting away on gossamer wings.

"Lavinia, do you think we can stay at Tours?"

The Miss Preens had descended at a fourth-rate hotel, picked out of the guide-book. When Ann asked this question, they were sitting after dinner in the table d'hôte room, their feet on the sanded floor. Sanded floors were quite usual at that time in many parts of France.

"Stay here to put up with Aunt Emily's pride and insolence!" quickly answered Miss Preen. "No. I will tell you what I have done, Ann. I wrote yesterday to Mary Carimon, asking her about Sainteville; whether she thinks it will suit us, and so on. As soon as her answer comes—she's certain to say yes—we will *go*, dear, and leave Mrs. Magnus to her grandeur. And, once we are safe away, *I shall write her a letter*," added Lavinia, in decisive tones; "a letter which she won't like."

Madame Carimon's answer came by return of post. It was as cordial as herself. Sainteville would be the very place for them, she said, and she should count the hours until they were there.

The Miss Preens turned their backs upon Tours, shaking its dust off their shoes. Lavinia had a little nest of accumulated money, so was at ease in that respect. And when the evening of the following day the railway terminus at Sainteville was reached, the pleasant, smiling face of Mary Carimon was the first they saw outside the barrière. She must have been nearly forty now, but she did not look a day older than when she had left Buttermead. Miss Lavinia was a year or two older than Mary; Miss Ann a year or two younger.

"You must put up at the Hôtel des Princes," remarked Madame Carimon. "It is the only really good one in the town. They won't charge you too much; my husband has spoken to the landlady. And you must spend to-morrow with me."

The hotel omnibus was waiting for them and other passengers, the luggage was piled on the roof, and Madame Carimon accompanied them to the hotel. A handsome hotel, the sisters thought; quite another thing from the one at Tours. Mary Carimon introduced them to the landlady, Madame Podevin, saw them seated down to tea and a cold fowl, and then left for the night.

With Sainteville the Miss Preens were simply charmed. It was a fresh, clean town, with wide streets, and good houses and old families, and some bright shops. The harbour was large, and the pier extended out to the open sea.

"I *should* like to live here!" exclaimed Miss Lavinia, sitting down at Madame Carimon's, in a state of rapture. "I never saw such a nice town, or such a lovely market."

They had been about all the morning with Madame Carimon. It was market-day, Wednesday. The market was held on the Grande Place; and the delicious butter, the eggs, the fresh vegetables, the flowers and the poultry, took Miss Lavinia's heart by storm. Nancy was more taken with the picturesque market-women, in their white caps and long gold ear-rings. Other ladies were doing their marketing as well as Madame Carimon. She spoke to most of them, in French or in English, as the case might be. Under the able tuition of her husband, she talked French fluently now.

Madame Carimon's habitation—very nice, small and compact—was in the Rue Pomme Cuite. The streets have queer names in some of these old French towns. It was near the college, which was convenient for Monsieur Carimon. Here they lived, with their elderly servant, Pauline. The same routine went on daily in the steady little domicile from year's end to year's end.

"Jules goes to the college at eight o'clock every week-day, after a cup of coffee and a petit pain," said madame to her guests, "and he returns at five to dinner. He takes his déjeûner in the college at twelve, and I take mine alone at home. On Sundays he has no duty: we attend the French Protestant Church in a morning, dine at one o'clock, and go for a walk in the afternoon."

"You have no children, Mary?"

Mary Carimon's lively face turned sad as she answered: "There was one little one; she stayed with us six months, and then God took her. I wrote to you of it, you know, Lavinia. No, we have not any children. Best not, Jules says; and I agree with him. They might only leave us when we have learnt to love them; and that's a trial hard to bear. Best as it is."

"I'm sure I should never learn to speak French, though we lived here for a century," exclaimed Miss Lavinia. "Only to hear you jabbering to your servant, Mary, quite distracts one's ears."

"Yes, you would. You would soon pick up enough to be understood in the shops and at market."

At five o'clock, home came Monsieur Carimon. He welcomed the Miss Preens with honest, genuine pleasure, interspersed with a little French ceremony; making them about a dozen bows apiece before he met the hands held out to him.

They had quite a gala dinner. Soup to begin with—broth, the English ladies inwardly pronounced it—and then fish. A small cod, bought by Madame Carimon at the fish-market in the morning, with oyster sauce. Ten sous she had given for the cod, for she knew how to bargain now, and six sous for a dozen oysters, as large as a five-franc piece. This was followed by a delicious

little fricandeau of veal, and that by a tarte à la crême from the pastrycook's. She told her guests unreservedly what all the dishes cost, to show them how reasonably people might live at Sainteville.

Over the coffee, after dinner, the question of their settling in the place was fully gone into, for the benefit of Monsieur Carimon's opinions, who gave them in good English.

"Depend upon it, Lavinia, you could not do better," remarked Mary Carimon. "If you cannot make your income do here, you cannot anywhere."

"We want to make it do well; not to betray our poverty, but to be able to maintain a fairly good appearance," said Lavinia. "You understand me, I am sure, monsieur."

"But certainly, mademoiselle," he answered; "it is what we all like to do at Sainteville, I reckon."

"And *can* do, if we are provident," added madame. "French ways are not English ways. Our own income is small, Lavinia, yet we put by out of it."

"A fact that goes without saying," confirmed the pleasant little man. "If we did not put by, where would my wife be when I am no longer able to work?"

"Provisions being so cheap– What did you say, Nancy?" asked Madame Carimon, interrupting herself.

"I was going to say that I could live upon oysters, and should like to," replied Nancy, shaking back her flaxen curls with a laugh. "Half-a-dozen of those great big oysters would make me a lovely dinner any day—and the cost would be only three halfpence."

"And only fivepence the cost of that beautiful fish," put in her sister. "In Sainteville our income would amply suffice."

"It seems to me that it would, mesdemoiselles," observed Monsieur Carimon. "Three thousand five hundred francs yearly! We French should think it a sufficient sum. Doubtless much would depend upon the way in which you laid it out."

"What should we have to pay for lodgings, Mary?" inquired Lavinia. "Just a nice sitting-room and two small bedrooms; or a large room with two beds in it; and to be waited on?"

"Oh, you won't find that at Sainteville," was the unexpected answer. "Nobody lets lodgings English fashion: it's not the custom over here. You can find a furnished apartment, but the people will not wait upon you. There is always a little kitchen let with the rooms, and you must have your own servant."

It was the first check the ladies had received. They sat thinking. "Dear me!" exclaimed Nancy. "No lodgings!"

"Would the apartments you speak of be very dear?" asked Lavinia.

"That depends upon the number of rooms and the situation," replied Madame Carimon. "I cannot call to mind just now any small apartment that is vacant. If you like, we will go to-morrow and look about."

It was so arranged. And little Monsieur Carimon attended the ladies back to the Hôtel des Princes at the sober hour of nine, and bowed them into the porte cochère with two sweeps of his hat, wishing them the good-evening and the very good-night.

II

Thursday morning. Nancy Preen awoke with a sick headache, and could not get up. But in the afternoon, when she was better, they went to Mary Carimon's, and all three set out to look for an apartment—not meeting with great success.

All they saw were too large, and priced accordingly. There was one, indeed, in the Rue Lamartine, which suited as to size, but the rooms were inconvenient and stuffy; and there was another small one on the Grande Place, dainty and desirable, but the rent was very high. Madame Carimon at once offered the landlord half-price, French custom: she dealt at his shop for her groceries. No, no, he answered; his apartment was the nicest in the town for its size, as mesdames saw, and it was in the best situation—and not a single sou would the worthy grocer abate.

They were growing tired, then; and five o'clock, the universal hour at Sainteville for dinner, was approaching.

"Come round to me after dinner, and we will talk it over," said Mary Carimon, when they parted. "I will give you a cup of tea."

They dined at the table d'hôte, which both of them thought charming, and then proceeded to the Rue Pomme Cuite. Monsieur Carimon was on the point of going out, to spend an hour at the Café Pillaud, but he put down his hat to wait awhile, out of respect to the ladies. They told him about not having found an apartment to suit them.

"Of course we have not searched all parts of the town, only the most likely ones," said Madame Carimon. "There are large apartments to be had, but no small ones. We can search again to-morrow."

"I suppose there's not a little house to be had cheap, if we cannot find an apartment?" cried Miss Nancy, who was in love with Sainteville, and had set her heart upon remaining there.

"Tiens," quickly spoke Monsieur Carimon in French to his wife, "there's the Petite Maison Rouge belonging to Madame Veuve Sauvage, in the Place Ronde. It is still to let: I saw the affiche in the shop window to-day. What do you think of it, Marie?"

Madame Carimon did not seem to know quite what to think. She looked at her husband, then at the eager faces of her two friends; but she did not speak.

About half-way down the Rue Tessin, a busy street leading to the port, was a wide opening, giving on to the Place Ronde. The Place Ronde agreed with its name, for it was somewhat in form of a horseshoe. Some fifteen or sixteen substantial houses were built round it, each having a shop for its basement; and trees, green and feathery, were scattered about, affording a slight though pleasant shelter from the hot sun in summer weather.

The middle house at the bottom of the Place Ronde, exactly facing the opening from the Rue Tessin, was a very conspicuous house indeed, inasmuch as it was painted red, whilst the other houses were white. All of them had green persienne shutters to the upper windows. The shop, a large one, belonging to this red house was that of the late Monsieur Jean Sauvage, "Marchand de Vin en gros et en détail," as the announcement over his door used to run in the later years of his life. But when Jean Sauvage commenced business, in that same shop, it was only as a retail vendor. Casting about in his mind one day for some means by which his shop might be distinguished from other wine-shops and attract customers, he hit upon the plan of painting the house red. No sooner thought of than done. A painter was called, who converted the white walls into a fiery vermilion, and stretched a board across the upper part, between the windows of the first and second floors, on which appeared in large letters "A la Maison Rouge."

Whether this sort of advertisement drew the public, or whether it might have been the sterling respectability and devotion to business of Monsieur Sauvage, he got on most successfully. The Marchand en détail became also Marchand en gros, and in course of time he added liqueurs to his wines. No citizen of Sainteville was more highly esteemed than he, both as a man and a tradesman.

Since his death the business had been carried on by his widow, aided by the two sons, Gustave and Emile. Latterly Madame Veuve Sauvage had given up all work to them; she was now in years, and had well earned her rest. They lived in the rooms over the shop, which were large and handsome. In former days, when the energies of herself and her husband were chiefly devoted to acquiring and saving money, they had let these upper rooms for a good sum yearly. Old Madame Sauvage might be seen any day now sitting at a front-window, looking out upon the world between her embroidered white curtains.

The door of this prosperous shop was between the two windows. The one window displayed a few bottles of wine, most of them in straw cases; in the other window were clear flacons of liqueurs: chartreuse, green and yellow; curaçoa, warm and ruby; eau de vie de Danzick, with its fluttering gold leaf; and many other sorts.

However, it is not with the goods of Madame Veuve Sauvage that we have to do, but with her premises. Standing in front of the shop, as if coveting a bottle of that choice wine for to-day's dinner, or an immediate glass of delicious liqueur, you may see on your right hand, but to the left of the shop, the private door of the house. On the other side the shop is also a door which opens to a narrow entry. The entry looks dark, even in the mid-day sun, for it is pretty long, extending down a portion of the side of the Maison Rouge, which is a deep house, and terminating in a paved yard surrounded by high buildings. At the end of the yard is a small dwelling, with two modern windows, one above the other. Near the under window is the entrance-door, painted oak colour, with a brass knob, a bell-wire with a curious handle, and a knocker. This little house the late Monsieur Sauvage had also caused to be converted into a red one, the same as the larger.

In earlier days, when Jean Sauvage and his wife were putting their shoulders to the wheel, they had lived in the little house with their children; the two sons and the daughter, Jeanne. Jeanne Sauvage married early and very well, an avocat. But since they had left it, the house in the yard seemed to have been, as the Widow Sauvage herself expressed it, unlucky. The first of the tenants had died there; the second had disappeared—decamped in fact, to avoid paying rent and other debts; the third had moved into a better house; and the fourth, an old widow lady, had also died, owing a year's rent to Madame Sauvage, and leaving no money to pay it.

It was of this small dwelling, lying under the shadow of the Maison Rouge, that Monsieur Carimon had thought. Turning to the Miss Preens, he gave them briefly a few particulars, and said he believed the house was to be had on very reasonable terms.

"What do you call it?" exclaimed Lavinia. "The little red house?"

"Yes, we call it so," said Monsieur Carimon. "Emile Sauvage was talking of it to me the other evening at the café, saying they would be glad to have it tenanted."

"I fear our good friends here would find it dull," remarked Madame Carimon to him. "It is in so gloomy a situation, you know, Jules."

"Mon amie, I do not myself see how that signifies," said he in reply. "If your house is comfortable inside, does it matter what it looks out upon?"

"Very true," assented Miss Lavinia, whose hopes had gone up again. "But this house may not be furnished, Mary."

"It is partly furnished," said Madame Carimon. "When the old lady who was last in it died, they had to take her furniture for the rent. It was not much, I have heard."

"We should not want much, only two of us," cried Miss Ann eagerly. "Do let us go to look at it to-morrow!"

On the following day, Friday, the Miss Preens went to the Place Ronde, piloted by Mary Carimon. They were struck with admiration at the Maison Rouge, all a fiery glow in the morning sun, and a novelty to English eyes. Whilst Madame Carimon went into the shop to explain and ask for the key, the sisters gazed in at the windows. Lying on the wine-bottles was a small black board on which was written in white letters, "Petite Maison à louer."

Monsieur Gustave Sauvage, key in hand, saluted the ladies in English, which he spoke fairly well, and accompanied them to view the house. The sun was very bright that day, and the confined yard did not look so dull as at a less favourable time; and perhaps the brilliant red of the little house, at which Nancy laughed, imparted a cheerfulness to it. Monsieur Gustave opened the door with a latch-key, drew back, and waited for them to enter.

The first to do so, or to attempt to do so, was Miss Preen. But no sooner had she put one foot over the threshold than she drew back with a start, somewhat discomposing the others by the movement.

"What is it, Lavinia?" inquired Ann.

"Something seemed to startle me, and throw me backward!" exclaimed Lavinia Preen, regaining her breath. "Perhaps it was the gloom of the passage: it is very dark."

"Pardon, mesdames," spoke Monsieur Gustave politely. "If the ladies will forgive my entering before them, I will open the salon door."

The passage was narrow. The broad shoulders of Monsieur Gustave almost touched the wall on either side as he walked along. Almost at the other end of it, on his left hand, was the salon door; he threw it open, and a little light shone forth. The passage terminated in a small square recess. At the back of this was fixed a shallow marble slab for holding things, above which was a cupboard let into the wall. On the right of the recess was the staircase; and opposite the staircase the kitchen-door, the kitchen being behind the salon.

The salon was nice when they were in it; the paint was fresh, the paper light and handsome. It was of good size, and its large window looked to the front. The kitchen opened upon a small back-yard, furnished with a pump and a shed for wood or coal. On the floor above were two very good chambers, one behind the other. Opposite these, on the other side of the passage, was another room, not so large, but of fair size. It was apparently built out over some part of the next-door premises, and was lighted by a skylight. All the rooms were fresh and good, and the passage had a window at the end.

Altogether it was not an inconvenient abode for people who did not go in for show. The furniture was plain, clean and useful, but it would have to be added to. There were no grates, not even a cooking-stove in the kitchen. It was very much the Sainteville custom at that period for tenants to provide grates for themselves, plenty of which could be bought or hired for a small sum. An easy-chair or two would be needed; tea-cups and saucers and wine-glasses; and though, there were washing-stands, these contained no jugs or basins; and there were no sheets or tablecloths or towels, no knives or forks, no brooms or brushes, and so on.

"There is only this one sitting-room, you perceive," remarked Madame Carimon, as they turned about, looking at the salon again, after coming downstairs.

"Yes, that's a pity, on account of dining," replied Miss Nancy.

"One of our tenants made a pretty salon of the room above this, and this the salle à manger," replied Monsieur Gustave. "Mesdames might like to do the same, possibly?"

He had pointedly addressed Miss Lavinia, near whom he stood. She did not answer. In fact—it was a very curious thing, but a fact—Miss Lavinia had not spoken a word since she entered. She had gone through the house taking in its features in complete silence, just as if that shock at the door had scared away her speech.

The rent asked by Monsieur Gustave, acting for his mother, was very moderate indeed—twenty pounds a-year, including the use of the furniture. There would be no taxes to pay, he said; absolutely none; the taxes of this little house, being upon their premises, were included in their own. But to ensure this low rental, the house must be taken for five years.

"Of course we will take it—won't we, Lavinia?" cried Miss Ann in a loud whisper. "*Only* twenty pounds a-year! Just think of it!"

"Sir," Miss Lavinia said to Monsieur Gustave, speaking at last, "the house would suit us in some respects, especially as regards rent. But we might find it too lonely: and I should hardly like to be bound for five years."

All that was of course for mesdames' consideration, he frankly responded. But he thought that if the ladies were established in it with their ménage about them, they would not find it lonely.

"We will give you an answer to-morrow or Monday," decided Miss Lavinia.

They went about the town all that day with Madame Carimon; but nothing in the shape of an apartment could be found to suit them. Madame invited them again to tea in the evening. And by that time they had decided to take the house. Nancy was wild about it. What with the change from the monotony of their country house to the bright and busy streets, the gay outdoor life, the delights of the table d'hôte, Ann Preen looked upon Sainteville as an earthly paradise.

"The house is certainly more suited to you than anything else we have seen," observed Madame Carimon. "I have nothing to say against the Petite Maison Rouge, except its dull situation."

"Did it strike you, Mary, apart from its situation, as being gloomy?" asked Lavinia.

"No. Once you are in the rooms they are cheerful enough."

"It did me. Gloomy, with a peculiar gloom, you understand. I'm sure the passage was dark as night. It must have been its darkness that startled me as we were going in."

"By the way, Lavinia, what was the matter with you then?" interrupted her sister.

"I don't know, Nancy; I said at the time I did not know. With my first step into the passage, some horror seemed to meet me and drive me backward."

"Some horror!" repeated Nancy.

"I seemed to feel it so. I had still the glare of the streets and the fiery red walls in my eyes, which must have caused the house passage to look darker than it ought. That was all, I suppose—but it turned me sick with a sort of fear; sick and shivery."

"That salon may be made as pretty a room as any in Sainteville," remarked Madame Carimon. "Many of the English residents here have only one salon in their apartments. You see, we don't go in for ceremony; France is not like England."

On the morrow the little house under the wing of the Maison Rouge was secured by the Miss Preens. They took it in their joint names for five years. To complete the transaction they were ushered upstairs to the salon and presence of Madame Veuve Sauvage—a rather stately looking old lady, attired in a voluminous black silk robe and a mourning cap of fine muslin. Madame, who could not speak a syllable of English, conversed graciously with her future tenants through the interpretation of Mary Carimon, offering to be useful to them in any way she could. Lavinia and Ann Preen both signed the bail, or agreement, and Madame Veuve Sauvage likewise signed it; by virtue of which she became their landlady, and they her tenants of the little house for five years. Madame Carimon, and a shopman who came upstairs for the purpose, signed as witnesses.

Wine and the little cakes called pistolets were then introduced; and so the bargain was complete.

Oh if some kindly spirit from the all-seeing world above could only have whispered a hint to those ill-fated sisters of what they were doing!—had only whispered a warning in time to prevent it! Might not that horror, which fell upon Lavinia as she was about to pass over the door-sill, have served her as such? But who regards these warnings when they come to us? Who personally applies them? None.

Having purchased or hired the additional things required, the Miss Preens took possession of their house. Nancy had the front bed-chamber, which Lavinia thought rather the best, and so gave it up to her; Lavinia took the back one. The one opposite, with the skylight, remained unoccupied, as their servant did not sleep in the house. Not at all an uncommon custom at Sainteville.

An excellent servant had been found for them in the person of Flore Pamart, a widow, who was honest, cooked well, and could talk away in English; all recommendations that the ladies liked. Flore let herself in with a latch-key before breakfast, and left as soon after five o'clock in the evening

as she could get the dinner things removed. Madame Flore Pamart had one little boy named Dion, who went to school by day, but was at home night and morning; for which reason his mother could only take a daily service.

Thus the Miss Preens became part of the small colony of English at Sainteville. They took sittings in the English Protestant Church, which was not much more than a room; and they subscribed to the casino on the port when it opened for the summer season, spending many an evening there, listening to the music, watching the dancing when there was any, and chattering with the acquaintances they met. They were well regarded, these new-comers, and they began to speak French after a fashion. Now and then they went out to a soirée; once in a way gave one in return. Very sober soirées indeed were those of Sainteville; consisting (as Sam Weller might inform us) of tea at seven o'clock with, hot galette, conversation, cake at ten (gâteau Suisse or gâteau au rhum), and a glass of Picardin wine.

They were pleased with the house, once they had settled down in it, and never a shadow of regret crossed either of them for having taken the Petite Maison Rouge.

In this way about a twelvemonth wore on.

III

It was a fine morning at the beginning of April; the sun being particularly welcome, as Sainteville had latterly been favoured with a spell of ill-natured, bitter east winds. About eleven o'clock, Miss Preen and her sister turned out of their house to take a walk on the pier—which they liked to do most days, wind and weather permitting. In going down the Rue des Arbres, they were met by a fresh-looking little elderly gentleman, with rather long white hair, and wearing a white necktie. He stopped to salute the ladies, bowing ceremoniously low to each of them. It was Monsieur le Docteur Dupuis, a kindly man of skilful reputation, who had now mostly, though not altogether, given up practice to his son, Monsieur Henri Dupuis. Miss Lavinia had a little acquaintance with the doctor, and took occasion to ask him news of the public welfare; for there was raging in the town the malady called "la grippe," which, being interpreted, means influenza.

It was not much better at present, Monsieur Dupuis answered; but this genial sunshine he hoped would begin to drive it away; and, with another bow, he passed onward.

The pier was soon reached, and they enjoyed their walk upon it. The sunlight glinted on the rather turbulent waves of the sea in the distance, but there was not much breeze to be felt on land. When nearing the end of the pier their attention was attracted to a fishing-boat, which was tumbling about rather unaccountably in its efforts to make the harbour.

"It almost looks from here as though it had lost its rudder, Nancy," remarked Miss Lavinia.

They halted, and stood looking over the side at the object of interest; not particularly noticing that a gentleman stood near them, also looking at the same through an opera-glass. He was spare, of middle height and middle age; his hair was grey, his face pale and impassive; the light over-coat he wore was of fashionable English cut.

"Oh, Lavinia, look, look! It is coming right on to the end of the pier," cried Ann Preen.

"Hush, Nancy, don't excite yourself," said Miss Lavinia, in lowered tones. "It will take care not to do that."

The gentleman gave a wary glance at them. He saw two ladies dressed alike, in handsome black velvet mantles, and bonnets with violet feathers; by which he judged them to be sisters, though there was no resemblance in face. The elder had clear-cut features, a healthy colour, dark brown hair, worn plain, and a keen, sensible expression. The other was fair, with blue eyes and light ringlets.

"Pardon me," he said, turning to them, and his accent was that of a gentleman. "May I offer you the use of my glasses?"

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Nancy, in a light tone bordering on a giggle; and she accepted the glasses. She was evidently pleased with the offer and with the stranger.

Lavinia, on the contrary, was not. The moment she saw his full face she shrank from it—shrank from him. The feeling might have been as unaccountable as that which came over her when she had been first entering the Petite Maison Rouge; but it was there. However, she put it from her, and thanked him.

"I don't think I see so well with the glasses as without them; it seems all a mist," remarked Nancy, who was standing next the stranger.

"They are not properly focused for you. Allow me," said he, as he took the glasses from her to alter them. "Young eyes need a less powerful focus than elderly ones like mine."

He spoke in a laughing tone; Nancy, fond of compliments, giggled outright this time. She was approaching forty; he might have been ten years older. They continued standing there, watching the fishing-boat, and exchanging remarks at intervals. When it had made the harbour without accident, the Miss Preens wished him good-morning, and went back down the pier; he took off his hat to them, and walked the other way.

"What a *charming* man!" exclaimed Nancy, when they were at a safe distance.

"I don't like him," dissented Lavinia.

"Not like him!" echoed the other in surprise. "Why, Lavinia, his manners are delightful. I wonder who he is?"

When nearly home, in turning into the Place Ronde, they met an English lady of their acquaintance, the wife of Major Smith. She had been ordering a dozen of vin Picardin from the Maison Rouge. As they stood talking together, the gentleman of the pier passed up the Rue de Tessin. He lifted his hat, and they all, including Mrs. Smith, bowed.

"Do you know him?" quickly asked Nancy, in a whisper.

"Hardly that," answered Mrs. Smith. "When we were passing the Hôtel des Princes this morning, a gentleman turned out of the courtyard, and he and my husband spoke to one another. The major said to me afterwards that he had formerly been in the—I forget which—regiment. He called him Mr. Fennel."

Now, as ill-fortune had it, Miss Preen found herself very poorly after she got home. She began to sneeze and cough, and thought she must have taken cold through standing on the pier to watch the vagaries of the fishing-smack.

"I hope you are not going to have the influenza!" cried Nancy, her blue eyes wide with concern.

But the influenza it proved to be. Miss Preen seemed about to have it badly, and lay in bed the next day. Nancy proposed to send Flore for Monsieur Dupuis, but Lavinia said she knew how to treat herself as well as he could treat her.

The next day she was no better. Poor Nancy had to go out alone, or to stay indoors. She did not like doing the latter at all; it was too dull; her own inclination would have led her abroad all day long and every day.

"I saw Captain Fennel on the pier again," said she to her sister that afternoon, when she was making the tea at Lavinia's bedside, Flore having carried up the tray.

"I hope you did not talk to him, Ann," spoke the invalid, as well as she could articulate.

"I talked a little," said Nancy, turning hot, conscious that she had gossiped with him for three-quarters-of-an-hour. "He stopped to speak to me; I could not walk on rudely."

"Any way, don't talk to him again, my dear. I do not like that man."

"What is there to dislike in him, Lavinia?"

"That I can't say. His countenance is not a good one; it is shifty and deceitful. He is a man you could never trust."

"I'm sure I've heard you say the same of other people."

"Because I can read faces," returned Lavinia.

"Oh—well—I consider Captain Fennel's is a *handsome* face," debated Nancy.

"Why do you call him 'Captain'?"

"He calls himself so," answered Nancy. "I suppose it was his rank in the army when he retired. They retain it afterwards by courtesy, don't they, Lavinia?"

"I am not sure. It depends upon whether they retire in rotation or sell out, I fancy. Mrs. Smith said the major called him Mr. Fennel, and he ought to know. There, I can't talk any more, Nancy, and the man is nothing to us, that we need discuss him."

La grippe had taken rather sharp hold of Lavinia Preen, and she was upstairs for ten days. On the first afternoon she went down to the salon, Captain Fennel called, very much to her surprise; and, also to her surprise, he and Nancy appeared to be pretty intimate.

In point of fact, they had met every day, generally upon the pier. Nancy had said nothing about it at home. She was neither sly nor deceitful in disposition; rather notably simple and unsophisticated; but, after Lavinia's reproof the first time she told about meeting him, she would not tell again.

Miss Preen behaved coolly to him; which he would not appear to see. She sat over the fire, wrapped in a shawl, for it was a cold afternoon. He stayed only a little time, and put his card down on the slab near the stairs when he left. Lavinia had it brought to her.

"Mr. Edwin Fennel."

"Then he is not Captain Fennel," she observed. "But, Nancy, what in the world could have induced the man to call here? And how is it you seem to be familiar with him?"

"I have met him out-of-doors, sometimes, while you were ill," said Nancy. "As to his calling here—he came, I suppose, out of politeness. There's no harm in it, Lavinia."

Miss Lavinia did not say there was. But she disliked the man too much to favour his acquaintanceship. Instinct warned her against him.

How little was she prepared for what was to follow! Before she was well out-of-doors again, before she had been anywhere except to church, Nancy gave her a shock. With no end of simperings and blushings, she confessed that she had been asked to marry Captain Fennel.

Had Miss Lavinia Preen been herself politely asked to marry a certain gentleman popularly supposed to reside underground, she would not have been much more indignantly startled. Perhaps "frightened" would be the better word for it.

"But—you *would* not, Nancy!" she gasped, when she found her voice.

"I don't know," simpered foolish Nancy. "I—I—think him very nice and gentlemanly, Lavinia."

Lavinia came out of her fright sufficiently to reason. She strove to show Nancy how utterly unwise such a step would be. They knew nothing of Captain Fennel or his antecedents; to become his wife might just be courting misery and destruction. Nancy ceased to argue; and Lavinia hoped she had yielded.

Both sisters kept a diary. But for that fact, and also that the diaries were preserved, Featherston could not have arrived at the details of the story so perfectly. About this time, a trifle earlier or later, Ann Preen wrote as follows in hers:

"*April 16th.*—I met Captain Fennel on the pier again this morning. I do *think* he goes there because he knows he may meet me. Lavinia is not out yet; she has not quite got rid of that Grip, as they stupidly call it here. I'm sure it has gripped *her*. We walked quite to the end of the pier, and then I sat down on the edge for a little while, and he stood talking to me. I do wish I could tell Lavinia of these meetings; but she was so cross the first day I met him, and told her of it, that I don't like to. Captain Fennel lent me his glasses as usual, and I looked at the London steamer, which was coming in. Somehow we fell to talking of the Smiths; he said they were poor, had not much more than the major's half-pay. 'Not like you rich people, Miss Nancy,' he said—he thinks that's my right name. 'Your income is different from theirs.' 'Oh,' I screamed out, 'why, it's only a hundred and forty pounds a-year!' 'Well,' he answered, smiling, 'that's a comfortable sum for a place like this; five francs will buy as much at Sainteville as half-a-sovereign will in England.' Which is pretty nearly true."

Skipping a few entries of little importance, we come to another:

"*May 1st*, and such a lovely day!—It reminds me of one May-day at home, when the Jacks-in-the-green were dancing on the grass-plot before the Court windows at Buttermead, and Mrs. Selby sat watching them, as pleased as they were, saying she should like to dance, too, if she could only go first to the mill to be ground young again. Jane and Edith Peckham were spending the day with us. It was just such a day as this, warm and bright; light, fleecy clouds flitting across the blue sky. I wish Lavinia were out to enjoy it! but she is hardly strong enough for long walks yet, and only potters about, when she does get out, in the Rue des Arbres or the Grande Place, or perhaps over to see Mary Carimon.

"I don't know what to do. I lay awake all last night, and sat moping yesterday, thinking what I *could* do. Edwin wants me to marry him; I told Lavinia, and she absolutely forbids it, saying I should rush upon misery. *He* says I should be happy as the day's long. I feel like a distracted lunatic, not knowing which of them is right, or which opinion I ought to yield to. I have obeyed Lavinia all my life; we have never had a difference before; her wishes have been mine, and mine have been hers. But I *can't* see why she need have taken up this prejudice against him, for I'm sure he's more like an angel than a man; and, as he whispers to me, Nancy Fennel would be a prettier name than Nancy Preen. I

said to him to-day, 'My name is Ann, not really Nancy.' 'My dear,' he answered, 'I shall always call you Nancy; I love the simple name.'

"I no longer talk about him to Lavinia, or let her suspect that we still meet on the pier. It would make her angry, and I can't bear that. I dare not hint to her what Edwin said to-day—that he should take matters into his own hands. He means to go over to Dover, *viâ* Calais; stay at Dover a fortnight, as the marriage law requires, and then come back to fetch me; and after the marriage has taken place we shall return here to live.

"Oh dear, what am I to do? It will be a *dreadful* thing to deceive Lavinia; and it will be equally dreadful to lose *him*. He declares that if I do not agree to this he shall set sail for India (where he used to be with his regiment), and never, never see me again. Good gracious! *never* to see me again!

"The worst is, he wants to go off to Dover at once, giving one no time for consideration! Must I say Yes, or No? The uncertainty shakes me to pieces. He laughed to-day when I said something of this, assuring me Lavinia's anger would pass away like a summer cloud when I was his wife; that sisters had no authority over one another, and that Lavinia's opposition arose from selfishness only, because she did not want to lose me. '*Risk it*, Nancy,' said he; 'she will receive you with open arms when I bring you back from Dover.' If I could only think so! Now and then I feel inclined to confide my dilemma to Mary Carimon, and ask her opinion, only that I fear she might tell Lavinia."

Mr. Edwin Fennel quitted Sainteville. When he was missed people thought he might have gone for good. But one Saturday morning some time onwards, when the month of May was drawing towards its close, Miss Lavinia, out with Nancy at market, came full upon Captain Fennel in the crowd on the Grande Place. He held out his hand.

"I thought you had left Sainteville, Mr. Fennel," she remarked, meeting his hand and the sinister look in his face unwillingly.

"Got back this morning," he said; "travelled by night. Shall be leaving again to-day or to-morrow. How are *you*, Miss Nancy?"

Lavinia pushed her way to the nearest poultry stall. "Will you come here, Ann?" she said. "I want to choose a fowl."

She began to bargain, half in French, half in English, with the poultry man, all to get rid of that other man, and she looked round, expecting Nancy had followed her. Nancy had not stirred from the spot near the butter-baskets: she and Captain Fennel had their heads together, he talking hard and fast.

They saw Lavinia looking at them; looking angry, too. "Remember," impressively whispered Captain Fennel to Nancy: and, lifting his hat to Lavinia, over the white caps of the market-women, he disappeared across the Place.

"I wonder what that man has come back for?" cried Miss Preen, as Nancy reached her—not that she had any suspicion. "And I wonder you should stay talking with him, Nancy!"

Nancy did not answer.

Sending Flore—who had attended them with her market-basket—home with the fowl and eggs and vegetables, they called at the butcher's and the grocer's, and then went home themselves. Miss Preen then remembered that she had forgotten one or two things, and must go out again. Nancy remained at home. When Lavinia returned, which was not for an hour, for she had met various friends and stayed to gossip, her sister was in her room. Flore thought Mademoiselle Nancy was setting her drawers to rights: she had heard her opening and shutting them.

Time went on until the afternoon. Just before five o'clock, when Flore came into lay the cloth for dinner, Lavinia, sitting at the window, saw her sister leave the house and cross the yard, a good-sized paper parcel in her hand.

"Why, that is Miss Nancy," she exclaimed, in much surprise. "Where can she be going to now?"

"Miss Nancy came down the stairs as I was coming in here," replied Flore. "She said to me that she had just time to run to Madame Carimon's before dinner."

"Hardly," dissented Miss Lavinia. "What can she be going for?"

As five o'clock struck, Flore (always punctual, from self-interest) came in to ask if she should serve the fish; but was told to wait until Miss Nancy returned. When half-past five was at hand, and Nancy had not appeared, Miss Preen ordered the fish in, remarking that Madame Carimon must be keeping her sister to dinner.

Afterwards Miss Preen set out for the casino, expecting she should meet them both there; for Lavinia and Nancy had intended to go. Madame Carimon was not a subscriber, but she sometimes paid her ten sous and went in. It would be quite a pretty sight to-night—a children's dance. Lavinia soon joined some friends there, but the others did not come.

At eight o'clock she was in the Rue Pomme Cuite, approaching Madame Carimon's. Pauline, in her short woollen petticoats, and shoeless feet thrust into wooden sabots, was splashing buckets of water before the door to scrub the pavement, and keeping up a screaming chatter with the other servants in the street, who were doing the same, Saturday-night fashion.

Madame Carimon was in the salon, sitting idle in the fading light; her sewing lay on the table. Lavinia's eyes went round the room, but she saw no one else in it.

"Mary, where is Nancy?" she asked, as Madame Carimon rose to greet her with outstretched hands.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Madame Carimon lightly. "She has not been here. Did you think she had?"

"She dined here—did she not?"

"What, Nancy? Oh no! I and Jules dined alone. He is out now, giving a French lesson. I have not seen Nancy since—let me see—since Thursday, I think; the day before yesterday."

Lavinia Preen sat down, half-bewildered. She related the history of the evening.

"It is elsewhere that Nancy is gone," remarked Madame Carimon. "Flore must have misunderstood her."

Concluding that to be the case, and that Nancy might already be at home, Lavinia returned at once to the Petite Maison Rouge, Mary Carimon bearing her company in the sweet summer twilight. Lavinia opened the door with her latch-key. Flore had departed long before. There were three latch-keys to the house, Nancy possessing one of them.

They looked into every room, and called out "Nancy! Nancy!" But she was not there.

Nancy Preen had gone off with Captain Fennel by the six-o'clock train, en route for Dover, there to be converted into Mrs. Fennel.

And had Nancy foreseen the terrible events and final crime which this most disastrous step would bring about, she might have chosen, rather than take it, to run away to the Protestant cemetery outside the gates of Sainteville, there to lay herself down to die.

IV

"Where *can* Nancy be?"

Miss Preen spoke these words to Mary Carimon in a sort of flurry. After letting themselves into the house, the Petite Maison Rouge, and calling up and down it in vain for Nancy, the question as to where she could be naturally arose.

"She must be spending the evening with the friends she stayed to dine with," said Madame Carimon.

"I don't know where she would be likely to stay. Unless—yes—perhaps at Mrs. Hardy's."

"That must be it, Lavinia," pronounced Madame Carimon.

It was then getting towards nine o'clock. They set out again for Mrs. Hardy's to escort Nancy home. She lived in the Rue Lothaire; a long street, leading to the railway-station.

Mrs. Hardy was an elderly lady. When near her door they saw her grand-nephew, Charles Palliser, turn out of it. Charley was a good-hearted young fellow, the son of a rich merchant in London. He was staying at Sainteville for the purpose of acquiring the art of speaking French as a native.

"Looking for Miss Ann Preen!" cried he, as they explained in a word or two. "No, she is not at our house; has not been there. I saw her going off this evening by the six-o'clock train."

"Going off by the six-o'clock train!" echoed Miss Lavinia, staring at him. "Why, what do you mean, Mr. Charles? My sister has not gone off by any train."

"It was in this way," answered the young man, too polite to flatly contradict a lady. "Mrs. Hardy's cousin, Louise Soubitez, came to town this morning; she spent the day with us, and after dinner I went to see her off by the train. And there, at the station, was Miss Ann Preen."

"But not going away by train," returned Miss Lavinia.

"Why, yes, she was. I watched the train out of the station. She and Louise Soubitez sat in the same compartment."

A smile stole to Charles Palliser's face. In truth, he was amused at Miss Lavinia's consternation. It suddenly struck her that the young man was joking.

"Did you speak to Ann, Mr. Charles?"

"Oh yes; just a few words. There was not time for much conversation; Louise was late."

Miss Preen felt a little shaken.

"Was Ann alone?"

"No; she was with Captain Fennel."

And, with that, a suspicion of the truth, and the full horror of it, dawned upon Lavinia Preen. She grasped Madame Carimon's arm and turned white as death.

"It never can be," she whispered, her lips trembling: "it never can be! She cannot have—have—run away—with that man!"

Unconsciously perhaps to herself, her eyes were fixed on Charles. He thought the question was put to him, and answered it.

"Well—I—I'm afraid it looks like it, as she seems to have said nothing to you," he slowly said. "But I give you my word, Miss Preen, that until this moment that aspect of the matter never suggested itself to me. I supposed they were just going up the line together for some purpose or other; though, in fact, I hardly thought about it at all."

"And perhaps that is all the mystery!" interposed Madame Carimon briskly. "He may have taken Ann to Drecques for a little jaunt, and they will be back again by the last train. It must be almost due, Lavinia."

With one impulse they turned to the station, which was near at hand. Drecques, a village, was the first place the trains stopped at on the up-line. The passengers were already issuing from the gate.

Standing aside until all had passed, and not seeing Nancy anywhere, Charley Palliser looked into the omnibuses. But she was not there.

"They may have intended to come back and missed the train, Miss Preen; it's very easy to miss a train," said he in his good nature.

"I think it must be so, Lavinia," spoke up Madame Carimon. "Any way, we will assume it until we hear to the contrary. And, Charley, we had better not talk of this to-night."

"*I* won't," answered Charley earnestly. "You may be sure of me."

Unless Captain Fennel and Miss Ann Preen chartered a balloon, there was little probability of their reaching Sainteville that evening, for this had been the last train. Lavinia Preen passed a night of discomfort, striving to hope against hope, as the saying runs. Not a very wise saying; it might run better, striving to hope against despair.

When Sunday did not bring back the truants, or any news of them, the three in the secret—Mary Carimon, Lavinia, and Charley Palliser—had little doubt that the disappearance meant an elopement. Monsieur Jules Carimon, not easily understanding such an escapade, so little in accordance with the customs and manners of his own country, said in his wife's ear he hoped it would turn out that there was a marriage in the case.

Miss Preen received a letter from Dover pretty early in the week, written by Ann. She had been married that day to Captain Fennel.

Altogether, the matter was the most bitter blow ever yet dealt to Lavinia Preen. No living being knew, or ever would know, how cruelly her heart was wrung by it. But, being a kindly woman of good sound sense, she saw that the best must be made of it, not the worst; and this she set herself out to do. She began by hoping that her own instinct, warning her against Captain Fennel, might be a mistaken one, and that he had a good home to offer his wife and would make her happy in it.

She knew no more about him—his family, his fortune, his former life, his antecedents—than she knew of the man in the moon. Major Smith perhaps did; he had been acquainted with him in the past. Nancy's letter, though written the previous day, had been delivered by the afternoon post. As soon as she could get dinner over, Lavinia went to Major Smith's. He lived at the top of the Rue Lambeau, a street turning out of the Grande Place. He and his wife, their own dinner just removed, were sitting together, the major indulging in a steaming glass of schiedam and water, flavoured with a slice of lemon. He was a very jolly little man, with rosy cheeks and a bald head. They welcomed Miss Lavinia warmly. She, not quite as composed as usual, opened her business without preamble; her sister Ann had married Captain Fennel, and she had come to ask Major Smith what he knew of him.

"Not very much," answered the major.

There was something behind his tone, and Lavinia burst into tears. Compassionating her distress, the major offered her a comforting glass, similar to his own. Lavinia declined it.

"You will tell me what you know," she said; and he proceeded to do so.

Edwin Fennel, the son of Colonel Fennel, was stationed in India with his regiment for several years. He got on well enough, but was not much liked by his brother officers: they thought him unscrupulous and deceitful. All at once, something very disagreeable occurred, which obliged Captain Fennel to quit her Majesty's service. The affair was hushed up, out of consideration to his family and his father's long term of service. "In fact, I believe he was allowed to retire, instead of being cashiered," added the major, "but I am not quite sure which it was."

"What was it that occurred—that Captain Fennel did, to necessitate his dismissal?" questioned Lavinia.

"I don't much like to mention it," said the major, shaking his head. "It might get about, you see, Miss Preen, which would make it awkward for him. I have no wish, or right either, to do the man a gratuitous injury."

"I promise you it shall not get about through me," returned Lavinia; "my sister's being his wife will be the best guarantee for that. You must please tell me, Major Smith."

"Well, Fennel was suspected—detected, in short—of cheating at cards."

Lavinia drew a deep breath. "Do you know," she said presently, in an undertone, "that when I first met the man I shrank from his face."

"Oh my! And it has such nice features!" put in Mrs. Smith, who was but a silly little woman.

"There was something in its shifty look which spoke to me as a warning," continued Lavinia. "It did, indeed. All my life I have been able to read faces, and my first instinct has rarely, if ever, deceived me. Each time I have seen this man since, that instinct against him has become stronger."

Major Smith took a sip at his schiedam. "I believe—between ourselves—he is just a mauvais sujet," said he. "He has a brother who is one, out and out; as I chance to know."

"What is Edwin Fennel's income, major?"

"I can't tell at all. I should not be surprised to hear that he has none."

"How does he live then?" asked Lavinia, her heart going at a gallop.

"Don't know that either," said the major. "His father is dead now and can't help him. A very respectable man, the old colonel, but always poor."

"He cannot live upon air; he must have some means," debated Lavinia.

"Lives upon his wits, perhaps; some men do. He wanted to borrow ten pounds from me a short time ago," added the major, taking another sip at his tumbler; "but I told him I had no money to lend—which was a fact. I have an idea that he got it out of Charley Palliser."

The more Lavinia Preen heard of this unhappy case, the worse it seemed to be. Declining to stay for tea, as Mrs. Smith wished, she betook her miserable steps home again, rather wishing that the sea would swallow up Captain Fennel.

The next day she saw Charles Palliser. Pouncing upon him as he was airing his long legs in the Grande Place, she put the question to him in so determined a way that Charley had no chance against her. He turned red.

"I don't know who can have set that about," said he. "But it's true, Miss Preen. Fennel pressed me to lend him ten pounds for a month; and I—well, I did it. I happened to have it in my pocket, you see, having just cashed a remittance from my father."

"Has he repaid you, Mr. Charles?"

"Oh, the month's not quite up yet," cried Charley. "Please don't talk of it, Miss Preen; he wouldn't like it, you know. How on earth it has slipped out I can't imagine."

"No, I shall not talk of it," said Lavinia, as she wished him good-day and walked onwards, wondering what sort of a home Captain Fennel meant to provide for Ann.

Lavinia Preen's cup of sorrow was not yet full. A morning or two after this she was seated at breakfast with the window open, when she saw the postman come striding across the yard with a letter. It was from the bride; a very short letter, and one that Miss Lavinia did not at once understand. She read it again.

> "My dear Lavinia,
>
> "All being well, we shall be home to-morrow; that is, on the day you receive this letter; reaching Sainteville by the last train in the evening. Please get something nice and substantial for tea, Edwin says, and please see that Flore has the bedroom in good order.
>
> *"Your affectionate sister,*
> *"Ann Fennel."*

The thing that Miss Lavinia did, when comprehension came to her, was to fly into a passion.

"Come home here—*he!*—is that what she means?" cried she. "Never. Have that man in my house? Never, never."

"But what has mademoiselle received?" exclaimed Flore, appearing just then with a boiled egg. "Is it bad news?"

"It is news that I will not put up with—will not tolerate," cried Miss Lavinia. And, in the moment's dismay, she told the woman what it was.

"Tiens!" commented Flore, taking a common-sense view of matters: "they must be coming just to show themselves to mademoiselle on their marriage. Likely enough they will not stay more than a night or two, while looking out for an apartment."

Lavinia did not believe it; but the very suggestion somewhat soothed her. To receive that man even for a night or two, as Flore put it, would be to her most repugnant, cruel pain, and she resolved not to do it. Breakfast over, she carried the letter and her trouble to the Rue Pomme Cuite.

"But I am afraid, Lavinia, you cannot refuse to receive them," spoke Madame Carimon, after considering the problem.

"Not refuse to receive them!" echoed Lavinia. "Why do you say that?"

"Well," replied Mary Carimon uneasily, for she disliked to add to trouble, "you see the house is as much Ann's as yours. It was taken in your joint names. Ann has the right to return to it; and also, I suppose"—more dubiously—"to introduce her husband into it."

"Is that French law?"

"I think so. I'll ask Jules when he comes home to dinner. Would it not be English law also, Lavinia?"

Lavinia was feeling wretchedly uncomfortable. With all her plain common-sense, this phase of the matter had not struck her.

"Mary," said she—and there stopped, for she was seized with a violent shivering, which seemed difficult to be accounted for. "Mary, if that man has to take up his abode in the house, I can never remain in it. I would rather die."

"Look here, dear friend," whispered Mary: "life is full of trouble—as Job tells us in the Holy Scriptures—none of us are exempt from it. It attacks us all in turn. The only one thing we can do is to strive to make the best of it, under God; to ask Him to help us. I am afraid there is a severe cross before you, Lavinia; better *bear* it than fight against it."

"I will never bear *that*," retorted Lavinia, turning a deaf ear in her anger. "You ought not to wish me to do so."

"And I would not if I saw anything better for you."

Madame Veuve Sauvage, sitting as usual at her front-window that same morning, was surprised at receiving an early call from her tenant, Miss Preen. Madame handed her into her best crimson velvet fauteuil, and they began talking.

Not to much purpose, however; for neither very well understood what the other said. Lavinia tried to explain the object of her visit, but found her French was not equal to it. Madame called her maid, Mariette, and sent her into the shop below to ask Monsieur Gustave to be good enough to step up.

Lavinia had gone to beg of them to cancel the agreement for the little house, so far as her sister was concerned, and to place it in her name only.

Monsieur Gustave, when he had mastered the request, politely answered that such a thing was not practicable; Miss Ann's name could not be struck out of the lease without her consent, or, as he expressed it, breaking the bail. His mother and himself had every disposition to oblige Miss Preen in any way, as indeed she must know, but they had no power to act against the law.

So poor Miss Lavinia went into her home wringing her hands in despair. She was perfectly helpless.

V

The summer days went on. Mr. Edwin Fennel, with all the impudence in the world, had taken up his abode in the Petite Maison Rouge, without saying with your leave or by your leave.

"How could you *think* of bringing him here, Ann?" Lavinia demanded of her sister in the first days.

"I did not think of it; it was he thought of it," returned Mrs. Fennel in her simple way. "I feared you would not like it, Lavinia; but what could I do? He seemed to look upon it as a matter of course that he should come."

Yes, there he was; "a matter of course;" making one in the home. Lavinia could not show fight; he was Ann's husband, and the place was as much Ann's as hers. The more Lavinia saw of him the more she disliked him; which was perhaps unreasonable, since he made himself agreeable to her in social intercourse, though he took care to have things his own way. If Lavinia's will went one way in the house and his the other, she found herself smilingly set at naught. Ann was his willing slave; and when opinions differed she sided with her husband.

It was no light charge, having a third person in the house to live upon their small income, especially one who studied his appetite. For a very short time Lavinia, in her indignation at affairs generally, turned the housekeeping over to Mrs. Fennel. But she had to take to it again. Ann was naturally an incautious manager; she ordered in delicacies to please her husband's palate without regard to cost, and nothing could have come of that but debt and disaster.

That the gallant ex-Captain Fennel had married Ann Preen just to have a roof over his head, Lavinia felt as sure of as that the moon occasionally shone in the heavens. She did not suppose he had any other refuge in the wide world. And through something told her by Ann she judged that he had believed he was doing better for himself in marrying than he had done.

The day after the marriage Mr. and Mrs. Fennel were sitting on a bench at Dover, romantically gazing at the sea, honeymoon fashion, and talking of course of hearts and darts. Suddenly the bridegroom turned his thoughts to more practical things.

"Nancy, how do you receive your money—half-yearly or quarterly?" asked he.

"Oh, quarterly," said Nancy. "It is paid punctually to us by the acting-trustee, Colonel Selby."

"Ah, yes. Then you have thirty-five pounds every quarter?"

"Between us, we do," assented Nancy. "Lavinia has seventeen pounds ten, and I have the same; and the colonel makes us each give a receipt for our own share."

Captain Fennel turned his head and gazed at her with a hard stare.

"You told me your income was a hundred and forty pounds a-year."

"Yes, it is that exactly," said she quietly; "mine and Lavinia's together. We do not each have that, Edwin; I never meant to imply–"

Mrs. Fennel broke off, frightened. On the captain's face, cruel enough just then, there sat an expression which she might have thought diabolical had it been any one else's face. Any way, it scared her.

"What is it?" she gasped.

Rising rapidly, Captain Fennel walked forward, caught up some pebbles, flung them from him and waited, apparently watching to see where they fell. Then he strolled back again.

"Were you angry with me?" faltered Nancy. "Had I done anything?"

"My dear, what should you have done? Angry?" repeated he, in a light tone, as if intensely amused. "You must not take up fancies, Mrs. Fennel."

"I suppose Mrs. Selby thought it would be sufficient income for us, both living together," remarked Nancy. "If either of us should die it all lapses to the other. We found it quite enough last year, I assure you, Edwin; Sainteville is so cheap a place."

"Oh, delightfully cheap!" agreed the captain.

It was this conversation that Nancy repeated to Lavinia; but she did not speak of the queer look which had frightened her. Lavinia saw that Mr. Edwin Fennel had taken up a wrong idea of their income. Of course the disappointment angered him.

An aspect of semi-courtesy was outwardly maintained in the intercourse of home life. Lavinia was a gentlewoman; she had not spoken unpleasant things to the captain's face, or hinted that he was a weight upon the housekeeping pocket; whilst he, as yet, was quite officiously civil to her. But there was no love lost between them; and Lavinia could not divest her mind of an undercurrent of conviction that he was, in some way or other, a man to be dreaded.

Thus Captain Fennel (as he was mostly called), being domiciled with the estimable ladies in the Petite Maison Rouge, grew to be considered one of the English colony of Sainteville, and was received as such. As nobody knew aught against him, nobody thought anything. Major Smith had not spoken of antecedents, neither had Miss Preen; the Carimons, who were in the secret, never spoke ill of any one: and as the captain could assume pleasing manners at will, he became fairly well liked by his country-people in a passing sort of way.

Lavinia Preen sat one day upon the low edge of the pier, her back to the sun and the sea. She had called in at the little shoe-shop on the port, just as you turn out of the Rue Tessin, and had left her parasol there. The sun was not then out in the grey sky, and she did not miss it. Now that the sun was shining, and the grey canopy above had become blue, she said to herself that she had been stupid. It was September weather, so the sun was not unbearable.

Lavinia Preen was thinner; the thraldom of the past three months had made her so. Now and then it would cross her mind to leave the Petite Maison Rouge to its married inmates; but for Nancy's sake she hesitated. Nancy had made the one love of her life, and Nancy had loved her in return. Now, the love was chiefly given to the new tie she had formed; Lavinia was second in every respect.

"They go their way now, and I have to go mine," sighed Lavinia, as she sat this morning on the pier. "Even my walks have to be solitary."

A cloud came sailing up and the sun went in again. Lavinia rose; she walked onwards till she came to the end of the pier, where she again sat down. The next moment, chancing to look the way she had come, she saw a lady and gentleman advancing arm-in-arm.

"Oh, *they* are on the pier, are they!" mentally spoke Lavinia. For it was Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Fennel.

Nancy sat down beside her. "It is a long walk!" cried she, drawing a quick breath or two. "Lavinia, what do you think we have just heard?"

"How can I tell?" returned the elder sister.

"You know those queer people, an old English aunt and three nieces, who took Madame Gibon's rooms in the Rue Ménar? They have all disappeared and have paid nobody," continued Nancy. "Charley Palliser told us just how; he was laughing like anything over it."

"I never thought they looked like people to be trusted," remarked Lavinia. "Dear me! here's the sun coming out again."

"Where is your parasol?"

Lavinia recounted her negligence in having left it at the shoe-mart. Captain Fennel had brought out a small silk umbrella; he turned from the end of the pier, where he stood looking out to sea, opened the umbrella, and offered it.

"It is not much larger than a good-sized parasol," remarked he. "Pray take it, Miss Lavinia."

Lavinia did so after a moment's imperceptible hesitation, and thanked him. She hated to be under the slightest obligation to him, but the sun was now full in her eyes, and might make her head ache.

The pleasant smell of a cigar caused them to look up. A youngish man, rather remarkably tall, with a shepherd's plaid across his broad shoulders, was striding up the pier. He sat down near Miss

Preen, and she glanced round at him. Appearing to think that she looked at his cigar, he immediately threw it into the sea behind him.

"Oh, I am sorry you did that," said Lavinia, speaking impulsively. "I like the smell of a cigar."

"Oh, thank you; thank you very much," he answered. "I had nearly smoked it out."

Voice and manner were alike pleasant and easy, and Lavinia spoke again—some trivial remark about the fine expanse of sea; upon which they drifted into conversation. We are reserved enough with strangers at home, we Islanders, as the world knows, but most of us are less ungracious abroad.

"Sainteville seems a clean, healthy place," remarked the new-comer.

"Very," said Miss Lavinia. "Do you know it well?"

"I never saw it before to-day," he replied. "I have come here from Douai to meet a friend, having two or three days to spare."

"Douai is a fine town," remarked Captain Fennel, turning to speak, for he was still looking out over the sea, and had his opera-glasses in his hand. "I spent a week there not long ago."

"Douai!" exclaimed Nancy. "That's the place where the great Law Courts are, is it not? Don't you remember the man last year, Lavinia, who committed some dreadful crime, and was taken up to Douai to be tried at the Assizes there?"

"We have a great case coming on there as soon as the Courts meet," said the stranger, who seemed a talkative man; "and that's what I am at Douai for. A case of extensive swindling."

"You are a lawyer, I presume?" said Miss Preen.

The stranger nodded. "Being the only one of our London firm who can speak French readily, and we are four of us in it, I had to come over and watch this affair and wait for the trial. For the young fellow is an Englishman, I am sorry to say, and his people, worthy and well-to-do merchants, are nearly mad over it."

"But did he commit it in England?" cried Miss Preen.

"Oh no; in France, within the arrondissement of the Douai Courts. He is in prison there. I dare say you get some swindling in a petty way even at Sainteville," added the speaker.

"That we do," put in Nancy. "An English family of ladies ran away only yesterday, owing twenty pounds at least, it is said."

"Ah," said the stranger, with a smile. "I think the ladies are sometimes more clever at that game than the men. By the way," he went on briskly, "do you know a Mr. Dangerfield at Sainteville?"

"No," replied Lavinia.

"He is staying here, I believe, or has been."

"Not that I know of," said Lavinia. "I never heard his name."

"Changed it again, probably," carelessly observed the young man.

"Is Dangerfield not his true name, then?"

"Just as much as it is mine, madam. His real name is Fennel; but he has found it convenient to drop that on occasion."

Now it was a curious fact that Nancy did not hear the name which the stranger had given as the true one. Her attention was diverted by some men who were working at the mud in the harbour, for it was low water, and who were loudly disputing together. Nancy had moved to the side of the pier to look down at them.

"Is he a swindler, that Mr. Dangerfield?" asked she, half-turning her head to speak. But the stranger did not answer.

As to Lavinia, the avowal had struck her speechless. She glanced at Captain Fennel. He had his back to them, and stood immovable, apparently unconcerned, possibly not having heard. A thought struck her—and frightened her.

"Do you know that Mr. Dangerfield yourself?" she asked the stranger, in a tone of indifference.

"No, I do not," he said; "but there's a man coming over in yonder boat who does."

He pointed over his shoulder at the sea as he spoke. Lavinia glanced quickly in the same direction.

"In yonder boat?" she repeated vaguely.

"I mean the London boat, which is on its way here, and will get in this evening," he explained.

"Oh, of course," said Lavinia, as if her wits had been wool-gathering.

The young man took out his watch and looked at it. Then he rose, lifted his hat, and, with a general good-morning, walked quickly down the pier.

Nancy was still at the side of the pier, looking down at the men. Captain Fennel put up his glasses and sat down beside Lavinia, his impassive face still as usual.

"I wonder who that man is?" he cried, watching the footsteps of the retreating stranger.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Lavinia, dropping her voice.

"Yes. Had Nancy not been here, I should have given him a taste of my mind; but she hates even the semblance of a quarrel. He had no right to say what he did."

"What could it have meant?" murmured Lavinia.

"It meant my brother, I expect," said Captain Fennel savagely, and, as Lavinia thought, with every appearance of truth. "But he has never been at Sainteville, so far as I know; the fellow is mistaken in that."

"Does he pass under the name of Dangerfield?"

"Possibly. This is the first I've heard of it. He is an extravagant man, often in embarrassment from debt. There's nothing worse against him."

He did not say more; neither did Lavinia. They sat on in silence. The tall figure in the Scotch plaid disappeared from sight; the men in the harbour kept on disputing.

"How long are you going to stay here?" asked Nancy, turning towards her husband.

"I'm ready to go now," he answered. And giving his arm to Nancy, they walked down the pier together.

Never a word to Lavinia; never a question put by him or by Nancy, if only to say, "Are you not coming with us?" It was ever so now. Nancy, absorbed in her husband, neglected her sister.

Lavinia sighed. She sat on a little while longer, and then took her departure.

The shoe-shop on the port was opposite the place in the harbour where the London steamers were generally moored. The one now there was taking in cargo. As Lavinia was turning into the shop for her parasol, she heard a stentorian English voice call out to a man who was superintending the work in his shirt-sleeves: "At what hour does this boat leave to-night?"

"At eight o'clock, sir," was the answer. "Eight sharp; we want to get away with the first o' the tide."

From Miss Lavinia Preen's Diary

September 22nd.—The town clocks have just struck eight, and I could almost fancy that I hear the faint sound of the boat steaming down the harbour in the dark night, carrying Nancy away with it, and carrying *him*. However, that is fancy and nothing else, for the sound could not penetrate to me here.

Perhaps it surprised me, perhaps it did not, when Nancy came to me this afternoon as I was sitting in my bedroom reading Scott's "Legend of Montrose," which Mary Carimon had lent me from her little stock of English books, and said she and Captain Fennel were going to London that night by the boat. He had received a letter, he told her, calling him thither. He might tell Nancy that if he liked, but it would not do for me. He is going, I can only believe, in consequence of what that gentleman in the shepherd's plaid said on the pier to-day. Can it be that the "Mr. Dangerfield" spoken of applies to Edwin Fennel himself and not to his brother? Is he finding himself in some dangerous strait, and is running away from the individual coming over in the approaching boat, who personally

knows Mr. Dangerfield? “Can you lend me a five-pound note, Lavinia?” Nancy went on, when she had told me the news; “lend it to myself, I mean. I will repay you when I receive my next quarter’s income, which is due, you know, in a few days.” I chanced to have a five-pound note by me in my own private store, and I gave it her, reminding her that unless she did let me have it again, it would be so much less in hand to meet expenses with, and that I had found difficulty enough in the past quarter. “On the other hand,” said Nancy, “if I and Edwin stay away a week or two, you will be spared our housekeeping; and when our money comes, Lavinia, you can open my letter and repay yourself if I am not here. I don’t at all know where we are going to stay,” she said, in answer to my question. “I was beginning to ask Edwin just now in the other room, but he was busy packing his portmanteau, and told me not to bother him.”

And so, there it is: they are gone, and I am left here all alone.

I wonder whether any Mr. Dangerfield has been at Sainteville? I think we should have heard the name. Why, that is the door-bell! I must go and answer it.

It was Charley Palliser. He had come with a message from Major and Mrs. Smith. They are going to Drecques to-morrow morning by the eleven-o’clock train with a few friends and a basket of provisions, and had sent Charley to say they would be glad of my company. “Do come, Miss Preen,” urged Charley as I hesitated; “you are all alone now, and I’m sure it must be dreadfully dull.”

“How do you know I am alone?” I asked.

“Because,” said Charley, “I have been watching the London boat out, and I saw Captain Fennel and your sister go by it. Major and Mrs. Smith were with me. It is a lovely night.”

“Wait a moment,” I said, as Charley was about to depart when I had accepted the invitation. “Do you know whether an Englishman named Dangerfield is living here?”

“Don’t think there is; I have not met with him,” said Charley. “Why, Miss Preen?”

“Oh, only that I was asked to-day whether I knew any one of that name,” I returned carelessly. “Good-night, Mr. Charles. Thank you for coming.”

They have invited me, finding I was left alone, and I think it very kind of them. But the Smiths are both kind-hearted people.

September 23rd.—Half-past nine o’clock, p.m. Have just returned from Drecques by the last train after spending a pleasant day. Quiet, of course, for there is not much to do at Drecques except stroll over the ruins of the old castle, or saunter about the quaint little ancient town, and go into the grand old church. It was so fine and warm that we had dinner on the grass, the people at the cottage bringing our plates and knives and forks. Later in the day we took tea indoors. In the afternoon, when all the rest were scattered about and the major sat smoking his cigar on the bench under the trees, I sat down by him to tell him what happened yesterday, and I begged him to give me his opinion. It was no betrayal of confidence, for Major Smith is better acquainted with the shady side of the Fennels than I am.

“I heard there was an English lawyer staying at the Hôtel des Princes, and that he had come here from Douai,” observed the major. “His name’s Lockett. It must have been he who spoke to you on the pier.”

“Yes, of course. Do you know, major, whether any one has stayed at Sainteville passing as Mr. Dangerfield?”

“I don’t think so,” replied the major. “Unless he has kept himself remarkably quiet.”

“Could it apply to Captain Fennel?”

“I never knew that he had gone under an assumed name. The accusation is one more likely to apply to his brother than to himself. James Fennel is unscrupulous, very incautious: notwithstanding that, I like him better than I like the other. There’s something about Edwin Fennel that repels you; at least, it does me; but one can hardly help liking James, mauvais sujet though he is,” added the speaker, pausing to flirt off the ashes of his cigar.

"The doubt pointing to Edwin Fennel in the affair is his suddenly decamping," continued Major Smith. "It was quite impromptu, you say, Miss Preen?"

"Quite so. I feel sure he had no thought of going away in the morning; and he did not receive any letter from England later, which was the excuse he gave Nancy for departing. Rely upon it that what he heard about the Mr. Dangerfield on the pier drove him away."

"Well, that looks suspicious, you see."

"Oh yes, I do see it," I answered, unable to conceal the pain I felt. "It was a bitter calamity, Major Smith, when Nancy married him."

"I'll make a few cautious inquiries in the town, and try to find out if there's anything against him in secret, or if any man named Dangerfield has been in the place and got into a mess. But, indeed, I don't altogether see that it could apply to him," concluded the major after a pause. "One can't well go under two names in the same town; and every one knows him as Edwin Fennel.—Here they are, some of them, coming back!" And when the wanderers were close up, they found Major Smith arguing with me about the architecture of the castle.

Ten o'clock. Time for bed. I am in no haste to go, for I don't sleep as well as I used to.

A thought has lately sometimes crossed me that this miserable trouble worries me more than it ought to do. "Accept it as your cross, and *yield* to it, Lavinia," says Mary Carimon to me. But I *cannot* yield to it; that is, I cannot in the least diminish the anxiety which always clings to me, or forget the distress and dread that lie upon me like a shadow. I know that my life has been on the whole an easy life—that during all the years I spent at Selby Court I never had any trouble; I know that crosses do come to us all, earlier or later, and that I ought not to be surprised that "no new thing has happened to me," the world being full of such experiences. I suppose it is because I have been so exempt from care, that I feel this the more.

Half-past ten! just half-an-hour writing these last few lines and *thinking*! Time I put up. I wonder when I shall hear from Nancy?

VI

A curious phase, taken in conjunction with what was to follow, now occurred in the history. Miss Preen began to experience a nervous dread at going into the Petite Maison Rouge at night.

She could go into the house ten times a-day when it was empty; she could stay in the house alone in the evening after Flore took her departure; she could be its only inmate all night long; and never at these times have the slightest sense of fear. But if she went out to spend the evening, she felt an unaccountable dread, amounting to horror, at entering it when she arrived home.

It came on suddenly. One evening when Lavinia had been at Mrs. Hardy's, Charley Palliser having run over to London, she returned home a little before ten o'clock. Opening the door with her latch-key, she was stepping into the passage when a sharp horror of entering it seized her. A dread, as it seemed to her, of going into the empty house, up the long, dark, narrow passage. It was the same sort of sensation that had struck her the first time she attempted to enter it under the escort of Monsieur Gustave Sauvage, and it came on now with as little reason as it had come on then. For Lavinia this night had not a thought in her mind of fear or loneliness, or anything else unpleasant. Mrs. Hardy had been relating a laughable adventure that Charley Palliser met with on board the boat when going over, the account of which he had written to her, and Lavinia was thinking brightly of it all the way home. She was smiling to herself as she unlatched the door and opened it. And then, without warning, arose the horrible fear.

How she conquered it sufficiently to enter the passage and reach the slab, where her candle and matches were always placed, she did not know. It had to be done, for Lavinia Preen could not remain in the dark yard all night, or patrol the streets; but her face had turned moist, and her hands trembled.

That was the beginning of it. Never since had she come home in the same way at night but the same terror assailed her; and I must beg the reader to understand that this is no invention. Devoid of reason and unaccountable though the terror was, Lavinia Preen experienced it.

She went out often—two or three times a-week, perhaps—either to dine or to spend the evening. Captain Fennel and Nancy were still away, and friends, remembering Miss Preen's solitary position, invited her.

October had passed, November was passing, and as yet no news came to Lavinia of the return of the travellers. At first they did not write to her at all, leaving her to infer that as the boat reached London safely they had done the same. After the lapse of a fortnight she received a short letter from Nancy telling her really nothing, and not giving any address. The next letter came towards the end of November, and was as follows:

> "My dear Lavinia,
>
> "I have not written to you, for, truly, there is nothing to write about, and almost every day I expect Edwin to tell me we are going home. Will you *kindly* lend me a ten-pound note? Please send it in a letter. We are staying at Camberwell, and I enclose you the address in strict confidence. Do not repeat it to any one—not even to Mary Carimon. It is a relation of Edwin's we are staying with, but he is not well off. I like his wife. Edwin desires his best regards.
>
> *"Your loving sister,*
>
> *"Nancy."*

Miss Preen did not send the ten-pound note. She wrote to tell Nancy that she could not do it, and was uncomfortably pressed for money herself in consequence of Nancy's own action.

The five-pound note borrowed from Lavinia by Nancy on her departure had not been repaid; neither had Nancy's share of the previous quarter's money been remitted. On the usual day of payment at the end of September, Lavinia's quarterly income came to her at Sainteville, as was customary;

not Nancy's. For Nancy there came neither money nor letter. The fact was, Nancy, escorted by her husband, had presented herself at Colonel Selby's bank—he was junior partner and manager of a small private bank in the City—the day before the dividends were due, and personally claimed the quarterly payment, which was paid to her.

But now, the summary docking of just half their income was a matter of embarrassment to Miss Preen, as may readily be imagined. The house expenses had to go on, with only half the money to meet them. Lavinia had a little nest-egg of her own, it has been said before, saved in earlier years; and this she drew upon, and so kept debt down. But it was very inconvenient, as well as vexatious. Lavinia told the whole truth now to Mary Carimon and her husband, with Nancy's recent application for a ten-pound note, and her refusal. Little Monsieur Carimon muttered a word between his closed lips which sounded like "Rat," and was no doubt applied to Edwin Fennel.

Pretty close upon this, Lavinia received a blowing-up letter from Colonel Selby. Having known Lavinia when she was in pinafores, the colonel, a peppery man, considered he had a right to take her to task at will. He was brother to Paul Selby, of Selby Court, and heir presumptive to it. The colonel had a wife and children, and much ado at times to keep them, for his income was not large at present, and growing-up sons are expensive.

> "Dear Lavinia,
>
> "What in the name of common sense could have induced you to imagine that I should pay the two quarterly incomes some weeks before they were due, and to send Ann and that man Fennel here with your orders that I should do so? Pretty ideas of trusteeship you must have! If you are over head and ears in debt, as they tell me, and for that reason wish to forestall the time for payment, *I* can't help it. It is no reason with me. Your money will be forwarded to Sainteville, at the proper period, to *yourself*. Do not ask me again to pay it into Ann's hands, and to accept her receipt for it. I can do nothing of the kind. Ann's share will be sent at the same time. She tells me she is returning to you. She must give me her own receipt for it, and you must give me yours.
>
> *"Your affectionate kinsman,*
> *"William Selby."*

Just for a few minutes Lavinia Preen did not understand this letter. What could it mean? Why had Colonel Selby written it to her? Then the truth flashed into her mind.

Nancy (induced, of course, by Edwin Fennel) had gone with him to Colonel Selby, purporting to have been sent by Lavinia, to ask him to pay them the quarter's money not due until the end of December, and not only Nancy's share but Lavinia's as well.

"Why, it would have been nothing short of swindling!" cried Lavinia, as she gazed in dismay at the colonel's letter.

In the indignation of the moment, she took pen and ink and wrote an answer to William Selby. Partly enlightening him—not quite—but telling him that her money must never be paid to any one but herself, and that the present matter had better be hushed up for Ann's sake, who was as a reed in the hands of the man she had married.

Colonel Selby exploded a little when he received this answer. Down he sat in his turn, and wrote a short, sharp note to Edwin Fennel, giving that estimable man a little of his mind, and warning him that he must not be surprised if the police were advised to look after him.

When Edward Fennel received this decisive note through an address he had given to Colonel Selby, but not the one at Camberwell, he called Miss Lavinia Preen all the laudatory names in the thieves' dictionary.

And on the feast of St. Andrew, which as every one knows is the last day of November, the letters came to an end with the following one from Nancy:

> "All being well, my dear Lavinia, we propose to return home by next Sunday's boat, which ought to get in before three o'clock in the afternoon. On Wednesday, Edwin met Charley Palliser in the Strand, and had a chat with him, and heard all the Sainteville news; not that there seemed much to hear. Charley says he runs over to London pretty often now, his mother being ill. Of course you will not mind waiting dinner for us on Sunday.
> *"Ever your loving sister,*
> *"Ann."*

So at length they were coming! Either that threat of being looked after by the police had been too much for Captain Fennel, or the failure to obtain funds was cutting short his stay in London. Any way, they were coming. Lavinia laid the letter beside her breakfast-plate and fell into thought. She resolved to welcome them graciously, and to say nothing about bygones.

Flore was told the news, and warned that instead of dining at half-past one on the morrow, the usual Sunday hour, it would be delayed until three. Flore did not much like the prospect of her afternoon's holiday being shortened, but there was no help for it. Lavinia provided a couple of ducks for dinner, going into the market after breakfast to buy them; the dish was an especial favourite of the captain's. She invited Mary Carimon to partake of it, for Monsieur Carimon was going to spend Sunday at Lille with an old friend of his, who was now master of the college there.

On this evening, Saturday, Lavinia dined out herself. Some ladies named Bosanquet, three sisters, with whom she had become pretty intimate, called at the Petite Maison Rouge, and carried her off to their home in the Rue Lamartine, where they had lived for years. After a very pleasant evening with them, Lavinia left at ten o'clock.

And when she reached her own door, and was putting the latch-key into the lock, the old fear came over her. Dropping her hands, she stood there trembling. She looked round at the silent, deserted yard, she looked up at the high encircling walls; she glanced at the frosty sky and the bright stars; and she stood there shivering.

But she must go in. Throwing the door back with an effort of will, she turned sick and faint: to enter that dark, lonely, empty house seemed beyond her strength and courage. What could this strange feeling portend?—why should it thus attack her? It was just as if some fatality were in the house waiting to destroy her, and a subtle power would keep her from entering it.

Her heart beating wildly, her breath laboured, Lavinia went in; she shut the door behind her and sped up the passage. Feeling for the match-box on the slab, put ready to her hand, she struck a match and lighted the candle. At that moment, when turning round, she saw, or thought she saw, Captain Fennel. He was standing just within the front-door, which she had now come in at, staring at her with a fixed gaze, and with the most malignant expression on his usually impassive face. Lavinia's terror partly gave place to astonishment. Was it he himself? How had he come in?

Turning to take the candle from the slab in her bewilderment, when she looked again he was gone. What had become of him? Lavinia called to him by name, but he did not answer. She took the candle into the salon, though feeling sure he could not have come up the passage; but he was not there. Had he slipped out again? Had she left the door open when thinking she closed it, and had he followed her in, and was now gone again? Lavinia carried her lighted candle to the door, and found it was fastened. She had *not* left it open.

Then, as she undressed in her room, trying all the while to solve the problem, an idea crept into her mind that the appearance might have been supernatural. Yet—supernatural visitants of the living do not appear to us, but of the dead. Was Edwin Fennel dead?

So disturbed was the brain of Lavinia Preen that she could not get to sleep; but tossed and turned about the bed almost until daybreak. At six o'clock she fell into an uneasy slumber, and into a most distressing dream.

It was a confused dream; nothing in it was clear. All she knew when she awoke, was that she had appeared to be in a state of inexplicable terror, of most intense apprehension throughout it, arising from some evil threatened her by Captain Fennel.

VII

It was a fine, frosty day, and the first of December. The sun shone on the fair streets of Sainteville and on the small congregation turning out of the English Protestant Church after morning service.

Lavinia Preen went straight home. There she found that Madame Carimon, who was to spend the rest of the day with her—monsieur having gone to Lille—had not yet arrived, though the French Church Evangélique was always over before the English. After glancing at Flore in the kitchen, busy over the fine ducks, Lavinia set off for the Rue Pomme Cuite.

She met Mary Carimon turning out of it. "Let us go and sit under the wall in the sun," said Mary. "It is too early yet for the boat."

This was a high wall belonging to the strong north gates of the town, near Madame Carimon's. The sun shone full upon the benches beneath it, which it sheltered from the bleak winds; in front was a patch of green grass, on which the children ran about amidst the straight poplar trees. It was very pleasant sitting there, even on this December day—bright and cheerful; the wall behind them was quite warm, the sunshine rested upon all.

Sitting there, Lavinia Preen told Madame Carimon of the curious dread of entering her house at night, which had pursued her for the past two months that she had been alone in it, and which she had never spoken of to any one before. She went on to speak of the belief that she had seen Captain Fennel the previous night in the passage, and of the dream which had visited her when at length she fell asleep.

Madame Carimon turned her kindly, sensible face and her quiet, dark, surprised eyes upon Lavinia. "I cannot understand you," she said.

"You mean, I suppose, that you cannot understand the facts, Mary. Neither can I. Why this fear of going into the house should lie upon me is most strange. I never was nervous before."

"I don't know that that is so very strange," dissented Mary Carimon, after a pause. "It must seem lonely to let one's self into a dark, empty house in the middle of the night; and your house is in what may be called an isolated situation; I should not much like it myself. That's nothing. What I cannot understand, Lavinia, is the fancy that you saw Captain Fennel."

"He appeared to be standing there, and was quite visible to me. The expression on his face, which seemed to be looking straight into mine, was most malicious. I never saw such an expression upon it in reality."

Mary Carimon laughed a little, saying she had never been troubled with nervous fears herself; she was too practical for anything of the sort.

"And I have been practical hitherto," returned Lavinia. "When the first surprise of seeing him there, or fancying I saw him there, was over, I began to think, Mary, that he might be dead; that it was his apparition which had stood there looking at me."

Mary Carimon shook her head. "Had anything of that sort happened, Nancy would have telegraphed to you. Rely upon it, Lavinia, it was pure fancy. You have been disagreeably exercised in mind lately, you know, about that man; hearing he was coming home, your brain was somewhat thrown off its balance."

"It may be so. The dream followed on it; and I did not like the dream."

"We all have bad dreams now and then. You say you do not remember much of this one."

"I think I did not know much of it when dreaming it," quaintly spoke Lavinia. "I was in a sea of trouble, throughout which I seemed to be striving to escape some evil menaced me by Captain Fennel, and could not do so. Whichever way I turned, there he was at a distance, scowling at me with a threatening, evil countenance. Mary," she added in impassioned tones, "I am sure some ill awaits me from that man."

"I am sure, were I you, I would put these foolish notions from me," calmly spoke Madame Carimon. "If Nancy set up a vocation for seeing ghosts and dreaming dreams, one would not so much wonder at it. *You* have always been reasonable, Lavinia; be so now."

Miss Preen took out her watch and looked at it. "We may as well be walking towards the port, Mary," she remarked. "It is past two. The boat ought to be in sight."

Not only in sight was the steamer, but rapidly nearing the port. She had made a calm and quick passage. When at length she was in and about to swing round, and the two ladies were looking down at it, with a small crowd of other assembled spectators, the first passengers they saw on board were Nancy and Captain Fennel, who began to wave their hands in greeting and to nod their heads.

"Any way, Lavinia, it could not have been his ghost last night," whispered Mary Carimon.

Far from presenting an evil countenance to Lavinia, as the days passed on, Captain Fennel appeared to wish to please her, and was all suavity. So at present nothing disturbed the peace of the Petite Maison Rouge.

"What people were they that you stayed with in London, Nancy?" Lavinia inquired of her sister on the first favourable opportunity.

Nancy glanced round the salon before answering, as if to make sure they were alone; but Captain Fennel had gone out for a stroll.

"We were at James Fennel's, Lavinia."

"What—the brother's! And has he a wife?"

"Yes; a wife, but no children. Mrs. James Fennel has money of her own, which she receives weekly."

"Receives weekly!" echoed Lavinia.

"She owns some little houses which are let out in weekly tenements; an agent collects the rents, and brings her the money every Tuesday morning. She dresses in the shabbiest things sometimes, and does her own housework, and altogether is not what I should call quite a lady, but she is very good-hearted. She did her best to make us comfortable, and never grumbled at our staying so long. I expect Edwin paid her something. James only came home by fits and starts. I think he was in some embarrassment—debt, you know. He used to dash into the house like a whirlwind when he did come, and steal out of it when he left, peering about on all sides."

"Have they a nice house?" asked Lavinia.

"Oh, good gracious, no! It's not a house at all, only small lodgings. And Mrs. James changed them twice over whilst we were there. When we first went they were at a place called Ball's Pond."

"Why did you remain all that time?"

Mrs. Edwin Fennel shook her head helplessly; she could not answer the question. "I should have liked to come back before," she said; "it was very wearisome, knowing nobody and having nothing to do. Did you find it dull here, Lavinia, all by yourself?"

"'Dull' is not the right word for it," answered Lavinia, catching her breath with a sigh. "I felt more lonely, Ann, than I shall ever care to feel again. Especially when I had to come home at night from some soirée, or from spending the evening quietly with Mary Carimon or any other friend." And she went on to tell of the feeling of terror which had so tried her.

"I never heard of such a thing!" exclaimed Ann. "How silly you must be, Lavinia! What could there have been in the house to frighten you?"

"I don't know; I wish I did know," sighed Lavinia, just as she had said more than once before.

Nancy, who was attired in a bright ruby cashmere robe, with a gold chain and locket, some blue ribbons adorning her light ringlets, for she had made a point of dressing more youthfully than ever since her marriage, leaned back in her chair, as she sat staring at her sister and thinking.

"Lavinia," she said huskily, "you remember the feeling you had the day we were about to look at the house with Mary Carimon, and which you thought was through the darkness of the passage striking you unpleasantly? Well, my opinion is that it must have given you a scare."

"Why, of course it did."

"Ah, but I mean a scare which lasts," said Ann; "one of those scares which affect the mind and take very long to get rid of. You recollect poor Mrs. Hunt, at Buttermead? She was frightened at a violent thunderstorm, though she never had been before; and for years afterwards, whenever it thundered, she became so alarmingly ill and agitated that Mr. Featherston had to be run for. He called it a scare. I think the fear you felt that past day must have left that sort of scare upon you. How else can you account for what you tell me?"

Truth to say, the same idea had more than once struck Lavinia. She knew how devoid of reason some of these "scares" are, and yet how terribly they disturb the mind on which they fasten.

"But I had quite forgotten that fear, Ann," she urged in reply. "We had lived in the house eighteen months when you went away, and I had never recalled it."

"All the same, I think you received the scare; it had only lain dormant," persisted Ann.

"Well, well; you are back again now, and it is over," said Lavinia. "Let us forget it. Do not speak of it again at all to any one, Nancy love."

VIII

Winter that year had quite set in when Sainteville found itself honoured with rather a remarkable visitor; one Signor Talcke, who descended, one morning at the beginning of December, at the Hôtel des Princes. Though he called himself "Signor," it seemed uncertain to what country he owed his birth. He spoke five or six languages as a native, including Hindustani. Signor Talcke was a professor of occult sciences; he was a great astronomer; astrology he had at his fingers' ends. He was a powerful mesmerist; he would foretell the events of your life by your hands, or your fortune by the cards.

For a fee of twenty-five francs, he would attend an evening party, and exhibit some of his powers. Amidst others who engaged him were the Miss Bosanquets, in the Rue Lamartine. A relative of theirs, Sir George Bosanquet, K.C.B., had come over with his wife to spend Christmas with them. Sir George laughed at what he heard of Signor Talcke's powers of reading the future, and said he should much like to witness a specimen of it. So Miss Bosanquet and her sisters hastily arranged an evening entertainment, engaged the mystical man, and invited their friends and acquaintances, those of the Petite Maison Rouge included.

It took place on the Friday after Christmas-Day. Something that occurred during the evening was rather remarkable. Miss Preen's diary gives a full account of it, and that shall be transcribed here. And I, Johnny Ludlow, take this opportunity of assuring the reader that what she wrote was in faithful accordance with the facts of the case.

From Miss Preen's Diary

Saturday morning.—I feel very tired; fit for nothing. Nancy has undertaken to do the marketing, and is gone out for that purpose with her husband. It is to be hoped she will be moderate, and not attempt to buy up half the market.

I lay awake all night, after the evening at Miss Bosanquet's, thinking how foolish Ann was to have had her "future cast," as that Italian (if he is Italian) called it, and how worse than foolish I was to let what he said worry me. "As if there could be anything in it!" laughed Ann, as we were coming home; fortunately she is not as I am in temperament—nervously anxious. "It is only nonsense," said Miss Anna Bosanquet to me when the signor's predictions were at an end; "he will tell some one else just the same next time." But *I* did not think so. Of course, one is at a loss how to trust this kind of man. Take him for all in all, I rather like him; and he appears to believe implicitly in what he says: or, rather, in what he tell us the cards say.

They are charming women, these three sisters—Grace, Rose, and Anna Bosanquet; good, considerate, high-bred ladies. I wonder how it is they have lived to middle life without any one of them marrying? And I often wonder how they came to take up their residence at Sainteville, for they are very well off, and have great connections. I remember, though, Anna once said to me that the dry, pure air of the place suited her sister Rose, who has bad health, better than any other they had tried.

When seven o'clock struck, the hour named, Nancy and I appeared together in the sitting-room, ready to start, for we observe punctuality at Sainteville. I wore my black satin, handsome yet, trimmed with the rich white lace that Mrs. Selby gave me. Nancy looked very nice and young in her lilac silk. She wore a white rose in her hair, and her gold chain and locket round her neck. Captain Fennel surprised us by saying he was not going—his neuralgia had come on. I fancied it was an excuse—that he did not wish to meet Sir George Bosanquet. He had complained of the same thing on Christmas-Day, so it might be true. Ann and I set off together, leaving him nursing his cheek at the table.

It was a large gathering for Sainteville—forty guests, I should think; but the rooms are large. Professor Talcke exhibited some wonderful feats in—what shall I call it?—necromancy?—as good a word, perhaps, as any other. He mesmerized some people, and put one of them into a state of

clairvoyance, and her revelations took my breath away. Signor Talcke assured us that what she said would be found minutely true. I think he has the strangest eyes I ever saw: grey eyes, with a sort of light in their depths. His features are fair and delicate, his voice is gentle as a woman's, his manner retiring; Sir George seemed much taken with him.

Later, when the evening was passing, he asked if any one present would like to have their future cast, for he had cards which would do it. Three of his listeners pressed forward at once; two of them with gay laughter, the other pale and awestruck. The signor went into the recess in the small room, and sat down behind the little table there, and as many as could crowd round to look on, did so. I don't know what passed; there was no room for me; or whether the "Futures" he disclosed were good or bad. I had sat on the sofa at a distance, talking with Anna Bosanquet and Madame Carimon.

Suddenly, as we were for a moment silent, Ann's voice was heard, eager and laughing:

"Will you tell my fortune, Signor Talcke? I should like to have mine revealed."

"With pleasure, madame," he answered.

We got up and drew near. I felt vexed that Ann should put herself forward in any such matter, and whispered to her; but she only shook her curls, laughed at me, and persisted. Signor Talcke put the cards in her hands, telling her to shuffle them.

"It is all fun, Lavinia," she whispered to me. "Did you hear him tell Miss Peet she was going to have money left her?"

After Ann had shuffled the cards, he made her cut them into three divisions, and he then turned them up on the table himself, faces upwards, and laid them out in three rows. They were not like the cards we play with; quite different from those; nearly all were picture-cards, and the plain ones bore cabalistic characters. We stood looking on with two or three other people; the rest had dispersed, and had gone into the next room to listen to the singing.

At first Signor Talcke never spoke a word. He looked at the cards, and looked at Nancy; looked, and looked again. "They are not propitious," he said in low tones, and picked them up, and asked Nancy to shuffle and cut them again. Then he laid them as before, and we stood waiting in silence.

Chancing at that moment to look at Signor Talcke, his face startled me. He was frowning at the cards in so painful a manner as to quite alter its expression. But he did not speak. He still only gazed at the cards with bent eyes, and glanced up at Ann occasionally. Then, with an impatient sweep of the hand, he pushed the cards together.

"I must trouble you to shuffle and cut them once more, madame," he said. "Shuffle them well."

"Are they still unpropitious?" asked a jesting voice at my elbow. Turning, I saw Charley Palliser's smiling face. He must have been standing there, and heard Signor Talcke's previous remark.

"Yes, sir, they are," replied the signor, with marked emphasis. "I never saw the cards so unpropitious in my life."

Nancy took up the cards, shuffled them well, and cut them three times. Signor Talcke laid them out as before, bent his head, and looked attentively at them. He did not speak, but there was no mistaking the vexed, pained, and puzzled look on his face.

I do not think he knew Nancy, even by name. I do not think he knew me, or had the least notion that we were related. Neither of us had ever met him before. He put his hand to his brow, still gazing at the cards.

"But when are you going to begin my fortune, sir?" broke in Nancy.

"I would rather not tell it at all, madame," he answered.

"*Cannot* you tell it?—have your powers of forecasting inconveniently run away?" said she incautiously, her tone mocking in her disappointment.

"I could tell it, all too surely; but you might not like to hear it," returned he.

"Our magician has lost his divining-rod just when he needed it," observed a gentleman with a grey beard, a stranger to me, who was standing opposite, speaking in a tone of ill-natured satire; and a laugh went round.

"It is not that," said the signor, keeping his temper perfectly. "I could tell what the cards say, all too certainly; but it would not give satisfaction."

"Oh yes, it would," returned Nancy. "I should like to hear it, every bit of it. Please do begin."

"The cards are dark, very dark indeed," he said; "I don't remember ever to have seen them like it. Each time they have been turned the darkness has increased. *Nothing* can show worse than they do now."

"Never mind that," gaily returned Ann. "You undertook to tell my fortune, sir; and you ought not to make excuses in the middle of it. Let the cards be as dark as night, we must hear what they say."

He drew in his thin lips for a moment, and then spoke, his tone quiet, calm, unemotional.

"Some great evil threatens you," he began; "you seem to be living in the midst of it. It is not only you that it threatens; there is another also–"

"Oh, my goodness!" interrupted Nancy, in her childish way. "I hope it does not threaten Edwin. What *is* the evil?—sickness?"

"Worse than that. It—is–" Signor Talcke's attention was so absorbed by the aspect of the cards that, as it struck me, he appeared hardly to heed what he was saying. He had a long, thin black pencil in his long, thin fingers, and kept pointing to different cards as if in accordance with his thoughts, but not touching them. "There is some peculiar form of terror here," he went on. "I cannot make it out; it is very unusual. It does not come close to you; not yet, at any rate; and it seems to surround you. It seems to be in the house. May I ask"—quickly lifting his eyes to Ann—"whether you are given to superstitious fears?"

"Do you mean ghosts?" cried Ann, and Charley Palliser burst out laughing. "Not at all, sir; I don't believe in ghosts. I'm sure there are none in our house."

Remembering my own terror in regard to the house, and the nervous fancy of having seen Captain Fennel in it when he was miles away, a curious impression came over me that he must surely be reading my fortune as well as Nancy's. But I was not prepared for her next words. Truly she has no more reticence than a child.

"My sister has a feeling that the house is lonely. She shivers when she has to go into it after night-fall."

Signor Talcke let his hands fall on the table, and lifted his face. Apparently, he was digesting this revelation. I do not think he knew the "sister" was present. For my part, disliking publicity, I slipped behind Anna Bosanquet, and stood by Charley Palliser.

"Shivers?" repeated the Italian.

"Shivers and trembles, and turns sick at having to go in," affirmed Nancy. "So she told me when I arrived home from England."

"If a feeling of that sort assailed me, I should never go into the house again," said the signor.

"But how could you help it, if it were your home?" she argued.

"All the same. I should regard that feeling as a warning against the house, and never enter it. Then you are not yourself troubled with superstitious fears?" he broke off, returning to the business in hand, and looking at the cards. "Well—at present—it does not seem to touch you, this curious terror which is assuredly in the house–"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Ann. "Why do you say 'at present'? Is it to touch me later?"

"I cannot say. Each time that the cards have been spread it has shown itself nearer to you. It is not yet very near. Apart from that terror—or perhaps remotely connected with it—I see evil threatening you—great evil."

"Is it in the house?"

"Yes; hovering about it. It is not only yourself it seems to threaten. There is some one else. And it is nearer to that person than it is to you."

"But who is that person?—man or woman?"

"It is a woman. See this ugly card," continued he, pointing with his pencil; "it will not be got rid of, shuffle as you will; it has come nearer to that woman each time."

The card he pointed to was more curious-looking than any other in the pack. It was not unlike the nine of spades, but crowded with devices. The gentleman opposite, whom I did not know, leaned forward and touched the card with the tip of his forefinger.

"Le cercueil, n'est-ce-pas?" said he.

"My!" whispered an English lad's voice behind me. "Cercueil? that means coffin."

"How did you know?" asked Signor Talcke of the grey-bearded man.

"I was at the Sous-Préfect's soirée on Sunday evening when you were exhibiting. I heard you tell him in French that that was the ugliest card in the pack: indicating death."

"Well, it is not this lady the card is pursuing," said the signor, smiling at Ann to reassure her. "Not yet awhile, at least. And we must all be pursued by it in our turn, whenever that shall come," he added, bending over the cards again. "Pardon me, madame—may I ask whether there has not been some unpleasantness in the house concerning money?"

Nancy's face turned red. "Not—exactly," she answered with hesitation. "We are like a great many more people—not as rich as we should wish to be."

"It does not appear to lie precisely in the want of money: but certainly money is in some way connected with the evil," he was beginning to say, his eyes fixed dreamily on the cards, when Ann interrupted him.

"That is too strong a word—evil. Why do you use it?"

"I use it because the evil is there. No lighter word would be appropriate. There is some evil element pervading your house, very grave and formidable; it is most threatening; likely to go on to—to—darkness. I mean that it looks as if there would be some great break-up," he corrected swiftly, as if to soften the other word.

"That the house would be broken up?" questioned Ann.

He stole a glance at her. "Something of that sort," he said carelessly.

"Do you mean that the evil comes from an enemy?" she went on.

"Assuredly."

"But we have no enemy. I'm sure we have not one in all the world."

He slightly shook his head. "You may not suspect it yet, though I should have said"—waving the pencil thoughtfully over some of the cards—"that he was already suspected—doubted."

Nancy took up the personal pronoun briskly. "He!—then the evil enemy must be a man? I assure you we do not know any man likely to be our enemy or to wish us harm. No, nor woman either. Perhaps your cards don't tell true to-night, Signor Talcke?"

"Perhaps not, madame; we will let it be so if you will," he quietly said, and shuffled all the cards together.

That ended the séance. As if determined not to tell any more fortunes, the signor hurriedly put up the cards and disappeared from the recess. Nancy did not appear to be in the least impressed.

"What a curious 'future' it was!" she exclaimed lightly to Mary Carimon. "I might as well not have had it cast. He told me nothing."

They walked away together. I went back to the sofa and Anna Bosanquet followed me.

"Mrs. Fennel calls it 'curious,'" I said to her. "I call it more than that—strange; ominous. I wish I had not heard it."

"Dear Miss Preen, it is only nonsense," she answered. "He will tell some one else the same next time." But she only so spoke to console me.

A wild wish flashed into my mind—that I should ask the man to tell *my* future. But had I not heard enough? Mine was blended with this of Ann's. *I* was the other woman whom the dark fate was more relentlessly pursuing. There could be no doubt of that. There could be as little doubt that it was I who already suspected the author of the "evil." What can the "dark fate" be that we are threatened

with? Debt? Will his debts spring upon us and break up our home, and turn us out of it? Or will it be something worse? That card which followed me meant a coffin, they said. Ah me! Perhaps I am foolish to dwell upon such ideas. Certainly they are more fitting for the world's dark ages than for this enlightened nineteenth century of it.

Charley Palliser gallantly offered to see us home. I said no; as if we were not old enough to go by ourselves; but he would come with us. As we went along Ann began talking of the party, criticizing the dresses, and so on. Charley seemed to be unusually silent.

"Was not mine a grand fortune?" she presently said with a laugh, as we crossed the Place Ronde.

"Stunning," said he.

"As if there could be anything in it, you know! Does the man think we believe him, I wonder?"

"Oh, these conjurers like to fancy they impose on us," remarked Charley, shaking hands as we halted before the house of Madame Sauvage.

And I have had a wretched night, for somehow the thing has frightened me. I never was superstitious; never; and I'm sure I never believed in conjurers, as Charles had it. If I should come across Signor Talcke again while he stays here, I would ask him– Here comes Nancy! and Flore behind her with the marketings. I'll put up my diary.

"I've bought such a lovely capon," began Nancy, as Lavinia went into the kitchen. "Show it to madame, Flore."

It was one that even Lavinia could praise; they both understood poultry. "It really is a beauty," said Lavinia. "And did you remember the salsifis? And, Ann, where have you left your husband?"

"Oh, we met old Mr. Griffin, and Edwin has gone up to Drecques with him. My opinion is, Lavinia, that that poor old Griffin dare not go about far by himself since his attack. He had to see his landlord at Drecques to-day, and he asked Edwin to accompany him. They went by the eleven-o'clock train."

Lavinia felt it a relief. Even that little absence, part of a day, she felt thankful for, so much had she grown to dislike the presence in the house of Edwin Fennel.

"Did you tell your husband about your 'fortune' Nancy?"

"No; I was too sleepy last night to talk, and I was late in getting up this morning. I'm not sure that I shall tell him," added Mrs. Fennel thoughtfully; "he might be angry with me for having had it done."

"That is more than likely," replied Lavinia.

Late in the afternoon, as they were sitting together in the salon, they saw the postman come marching up the yard. He brought two letters—one for Miss Preen, the other for her sister.

"It is the remittance from William Selby," said Lavinia as she opened hers. "He has sent it a day or two earlier than usual; it is not really due until Monday or Tuesday."

Seventeen pounds ten shillings each. Nancy, in a hasty sort of manner, put her cheque into the hands of Lavinia, almost as if she feared it would burn her own fingers. "You had better take it from me whilst you can," she said in low tones.

"Yes; for I must have it, Ann," was the answer. "We are in debt—as you may readily conceive —with only half the usual amount to spend last quarter."

"It was not my fault; I was very sorry," said Ann humbly; and she rose hastily to go to the kitchen, saying she was thirsty, and wanted a glass of water. But Lavinia thought she went to avoid being questioned.

Lavinia carried the two cheques to her room and locked them up. After their five-o'clock dinner, each sister wrote a note to Colonel Selby, enclosing her receipt. Flore took them out to post when she left. The evening passed on. Lavinia worked; Nancy nodded over the fire: she was very sleepy, and went to bed early.

It was past eleven o'clock when Captain Fennel came in, a little the worse for something or other. After returning from Drecques by the last train, he had gone home with Mr. Griffin to supper. He told Lavinia, in words running into one another, that the jolting train had made him giddy. Of

course she believed as much of that as she liked, but did not contradict it. He went to the cupboard in the recess, unlocked it to get out the cognac, and then sat down with his pipe by the embers of the dying fire. Lavinia, unasked, brought in a decanter of water, put it on the table with a glass, and wished him good-night.

All next day Captain Fennel lay in bed with a racking headache. His wife carried up a choice bit of the capon when they were dining after morning service, but he could not so much as look at it. Being a fairly cautious man as a rule, he had to pay for—for the jolting of the train.

He was better on Monday morning, but not well, still shaky, and did not come down to breakfast. It was bitterly cold—a sort of black frost; but Lavinia, wrapping herself up warmly, went out as soon as breakfast was over.

Her first errand was to the bank, where she paid in the cheques and received French money for them. Then she visited sundry shops; the butcher's, the grocer's, and others, settling the accounts due. Last of all, she made a call upon Madame Veuve Sauvage, and paid the rent for the past quarter. All this left her with exactly nineteen pounds, which was all the money she had to go on with for every purpose until the end of March—three whole months.

Lunch was ready when she returned. Taking off her things upstairs and locking up her cash, she went down to it. Flore had made some delicious soupe maigre. Only those who have tried it know how good it is on a sharp winter's day. Captain Fennel seemed to relish it much, though his appetite had not quite come back to him, and he turned from the dish of scrambled eggs which supplemented the soup. In the evening they went, by appointment, to dine at Madame Carimon's, the other guests being Monsieur Henri Dupuis with his recently married wife, and Charles Palliser.

After dinner, over the coffee, Monsieur Henri Dupuis suddenly spoke of the soirée at Miss Bosanquet's the previous Friday, regretting that he and his wife had been unable to attend it. He was engaged the whole evening with a patient dangerously ill, and his wife did not like to appear at it without him. Nancy—Nancy!—then began to tell about the "fortune" which had been forecast for her by Signor Talcke, thinking possibly that her husband could not reproach her for it before company. She was very gay over it; a proof that it had left no bad impression on her mind.

"What's that, Nancy?" cried Captain Fennel, who had listened as if he disbelieved his ears. "The fellow told you we had something evil in our house?"

"Yes, he did," assented Nancy. "An evil influence, he said, which was destined to bring forth something dark and dreadful."

"I am sorry you did not tell this before," returned the captain stiffly. "I should have requested you not again to allude to such folly. It was downright insolence."

"I—you—you were out on Saturday, you know, Edwin, and in bed with your headache all Sunday; and to-day I forgot it," said Nancy in less brave tones.

"Suppose we have a game at wholesome card-playing," interposed Mary Carimon, bringing forth a new pack. "Open them, will you, Jules? Do you remember, mon ami, having your fortune told once by a gipsy woman when we were in Sir John Whitney's coppice with the two Peckham girls? She told you you would fall into a rich inheritance and marry a Frenchwoman."

"Neither of which agreeable promises is yet fulfilled," said little Monsieur Carimon with his happy smile. Monsieur Carimon had heard the account of Nancy's "forecast" from his wife; he was not himself present, but taking a hand at whist in the card-room.

They sat down to a round game—spin. Monsieur Henri Dupuis and his pretty young wife had never played it before, but they soon learned it and liked it much. Both of them spoke English well; she with the prettiest accent imaginable. Thus the evening passed, and no more allusion was made to the fortune-telling at Miss Bosanquet's.

That was Monday. On Tuesday, Miss Preen was dispensing the coffee at breakfast in the Petite Maison Rouge to her sister and Mr. Fennel, when Flore came bustling in with a letter in her hand.

"Tenez, madame," she said, putting it beside Mrs. Fennel. "I laid it down in the kitchen when the facteur brought it, whilst I was preparing the déjeûner, and forgot it afterwards."

Before Nancy could touch the letter, her husband caught it up. He gazed at the address, at the postmark, and turned it about to look at the seal. The letters of gentlefolk were generally fastened with a seal in those days: this had one in transparent bronze wax.

Mr. Fennel put the letter down with a remark peevishly uttered. "It is not from London; it is from Buttermead."

"And from your old friend, Jane Peckham, Nancy," struck in Lavinia. "I recognize her handwriting."

"I *am* glad," exclaimed Nancy. "I have not heard from them for ages. Why now—is it not odd?—that Madame Carimon should mention the Peckhams last night, and I receive a letter from them this morning?"

"I supposed it might be from London, with your remittance," said Mr. Fennel to his wife. "It is due, is it not?"

"Oh, that came on Saturday, Edwin," she said, as she opened her letter.

"Came on Saturday!" echoed Captain Fennel ungraciously, as if disputing the assertion.

"By the afternoon post; you were at Drecques, you know."

"The *money* came? *Your* money?"

"Yes," said Nancy, who had stepped to the window to read her letter, for it was a dark day, and stood there with her back to the room.

"And where is it?" demanded he.

"I gave it to Lavinia. I always give it to her."

Captain Fennel glared at his wife for a moment, then smoothed his face to its ordinary placidity, and turned to Lavinia.

"Will you be good enough to hand over to me my wife's money, Miss Preen?"

"No," she answered quietly.

"I must trouble you to do so, when breakfast shall be finished."

"I cannot," pursued Lavinia. "I have paid it away."

"That I do not believe. I claim it from you in right of my wife; and I shall enforce the claim."

"The money is Nancy's, not yours," said Lavinia. "In consequence of your having stopped her share last quarter in London, I was plunged here into debt and great inconvenience. Yesterday morning I went out to settle the debts—and it has taken the whole of her money to do it. That is the state of things, Captain Fennel."

"I am in debt here myself," retorted he, but not angrily. "I owe money to my tailor and bootmaker; I owe an account at the chemist's; I want money in my pockets—and I must indeed have it."

"Not from me," returned Lavinia.

Edwin Fennel broke into a little access of temper. He dashed his serviette on the table, strode to the window, and roughly caught his wife by the arm. She cried out.

"How dared you hand your money to any one but me?" he asked in a low voice of passion.

"But how are we to live if I don't give it to Lavinia for the housekeeping?" returned Nancy, bursting into tears. "It takes all we have; her share and mine; every farthing of it."

"Let my sister alone, Mr. Fennel," spoke up Lavinia with authority. "She is responsible for the debts we contract in this house, just as much as I am, and she must contribute her part to pay them. You ought to be aware that the expenses are now increased by nearly a third; I assure you I hardly like to face the difficulties I see before me."

"Do you suppose I can stop in the place without some loose cash to keep me going?" he asked calmly. "Is that reasonable, Miss Lavinia?"

"And do you suppose I can keep you and Ann here without her money to help me to do it?" she rejoined. "Perhaps the better plan will be for me to take up my abode elsewhere, and leave the house to you and Ann to do as you please in it."

Captain Fennel dropped his argument, returned to the table, and went on with his breakfast. The last words had startled him. Without Lavinia, which meant without her money, they could not live in the house at all.

Matters were partly patched up in the course of the day. Nancy came upstairs to Lavinia, begging and praying, as if she were praying for her life, for a little ready money for her husband—just a hundred francs. Trembling and sobbing, she confessed that she dared not return to him without it; she should be too frightened at his anger.

And Lavinia gave it to her.

IX

Matters went on to the spring. There were no outward differences in the Petite Maison Rouge, but it was full of an undercurrent of discomfort. At least for Lavinia. Captain Fennel was simply to her an incubus; and now and again petty accounts of his would be brought to the door by tradespeople who wanted them settled. As to keeping up the legitimate payments, she could not do it.

March was drawing to an end, when a surprise came to them. Lavinia received a letter from Paris, written by Colonel Selby. He had been there for two days on business, he said, and purposed returning viâ Sainteville, to take a passing glimpse at herself and her sister. He hoped to be down that afternoon by the three-o'clock train, and he asked them to meet him at the Hôtel des Princes afterwards, and to stay and dine with him. He proposed crossing to London by the night boat.

Lavinia read the letter aloud. Nancy went into ecstasies, for a wonder; she had been curiously subdued in manner lately. Edwin Fennel made no remark, but his pale face wore a look of thought.

During the morning he betook himself to the Rue Lothaire to call upon Mr. Griffin; and he persuaded that easy-natured old gentleman to take advantage of the sunny day and make an excursion en voiture to the nearest town, a place called Pontipette. Of course the captain went also, as his companion.

Colonel Selby arrived at three. Lavinia and Nancy met him at the station, and went with him in the omnibus to the hotel. They then showed him about Sainteville, to which he was a stranger, took him to see their domicile, the little red house (which he did not seem to admire), and thence to Madame Carimon's. In the Buttermead days, the colonel and Mary Featherston had been great friends. He invited her and her husband to join them at the table d'hôte dinner at five o'clock.

Lavinia and Nancy went home again to change their dresses for it. Nancy put on a pretty light green silk, which had been recently modernized. Mrs. Selby had kept up an extensive wardrobe, and had left it between the two sisters.

"You should wear your gold chain and locket," remarked Lavinia, who always took pride in her sister's appearance. "It will look very nice upon that dress."

She alluded to a short, thick chain of gold, the gold locket attached to it being set round with pearls, Nancy's best ornament; nay, the only one she had of any value; it was the one she had worn at Miss Bosanquet's celebrated party. Nancy made no answer. She was turning red and white.

"What's the matter?" cried Lavinia.

The matter was, that Mr. Edwin Fennel had obtained possession of the chain and locket more than a month ago. Silly Nancy confessed with trembling lips that she feared he had pledged it.

Or sold it, thought Lavinia. She felt terribly vexed and indignant. "I suppose, Ann, it will end in his grasping everything," she said, "and starving us out of house and home: *myself*, at any rate."

"He expects money from his brother James, and then he will get it back for me," twittered Nancy.

Monsieur Jules Carimon was not able to come to the table d'hôte; his duties that night would detain him at the college until seven o'clock. It happened so on occasion. Colonel Selby sat at one end of their party, Lavinia at the other; Mary Carimon and Nancy between them. A gentleman was on the other side of Lavinia whom she did not particularly notice; and, upon his asking the waiter for something, his voice seemed to strike upon her memory. Turning, she saw that it was the tall Englishman they had seen on the pier some months before in the shepherd's plaid, the lawyer named Lockett. He recognized her face at the same moment, and they entered into conversation.

"Are you making any stay at Sainteville?" she inquired.

"For a few days. I must be back in London on Monday morning."

Colonel Selby's attention was attracted to the speakers. "What, is it you, Lockett?" he exclaimed.

Mr. Lockett bent forward to look beyond Lavinia and Madame Carimon. “Why, colonel, are you here?” he cried. So it was evident that they knew one another.

But you can’t talk very much across people at a table d’hôte; and Lavinia and Mr. Lockett were, so to say, left together again. She put a question to him, dropping her voice to a whisper.

“Did you ever find that person you were looking for?”

“The person I was looking for?” repeated the lawyer, not remembering. “What person was that?”

“The one you spoke of on the pier that day—a Mr. Dangerfield.”

“Oh, ay; but I was not looking for him myself. No; I believe he is not dropped upon yet. He is keeping quiet, I expect.”

“Is he still being looked for?”

“Little doubt of that. My friend here, on my left, could tell you more about him than I can, if you want to know.”

“No, thank you,” said Lavinia hastily, in a sort of fear. And she then observed that next to Mr. Lockett another Englishman was sitting, who looked very much like a lawyer also.

After dinner Colonel Selby took his guests, the three ladies, into the little salon, which opened to Madame Podevin’s bureau; for it was she who, French fashion, kept the bureau and all its accounts, not her husband. Whilst the coffee which the colonel ordered was preparing, he took from his pocket-book two cheques, and gave one each to Lavinia and Mrs. Fennel. It was their quarterly income, due about a week hence.

“I thought I might as well give it you now, as I am here, and save the trouble of sending,” he remarked. “You can write me a receipt for it; here’s pen, ink and paper.”

Each wrote her receipt, and gave it him. Nancy held the cheque in her hand, looking at her sister in a vacillating manner. “I suppose I ought to give it you, Lavinia,” she said. “Must I do so?”

“What do you think about it yourself?” coldly rejoined Lavinia.

“He was so very angry with me the last time,” sighed Nancy, still withholding the cheque. “He said I ought to keep possession of my own, and he ordered me to do so in future.”

“That he may have the pleasure of spending it,” said Mary Carimon in a sharp tone, though she laughed at the same time. “Lavinia has to pay for the bread-and-cheese that you and he eat, Nancy; how can she do that unless she receives your money?”

“Yes, I know; it is very difficult,” said poor Nancy. “Take the cheque, Lavinia; I shall tell him that you and Mary Carimon both said I must give it up.”

“Oh, tell him I said so, and welcome,” spoke Madame Carimon. “I will tell him so myself, if you like.”

As Colonel Selby returned to the room—he had been seeing to his luggage—the coffee was brought in, and close upon it came Monsieur Carimon.

The boat for London was leaving early that night—eight o’clock; they all went down to it to see William Selby off. It was a calm night, warm for the time of year, the moon beautifully bright. After the boat’s departure, Lavinia and Ann went home, and found Captain Fennel there. He had just got in, he said, and wanted some supper.

Whilst he was taking it, his wife told him of Mr. Lockett’s having sat by them at the table d’hôte, and that he and Colonel Selby were acquainted with one another. Captain Fennel drew a grim face at the information, and asked whether the lawyer had also “cleared out” for London.

“I don’t think so; I did not see him go on board,” said Nancy. “Lavinia knows; she was talking with Mr. Lockett all dinner-time.”

Captain Fennel turned his impassive face to Lavinia, as if demanding an answer to his question.

“Mr. Lockett intends to remain here until Sunday, I fancy; he said he had to be in London on Monday morning. He has some friend with him here. I inquired whether they had found the Mr.

Dangerfield he spoke of last autumn," added Lavinia slowly and distinctly. "'Not yet,' he answered, 'but he is still being looked for.'"

Whether Lavinia said this with a little spice of malice, or whether she really meant to warn him, she best knew. Captain Fennel finished his supper in silence.

"I presume the colonel did not hand you over your quarter's money?" he next said to his wife in a mocking sort of way. "It is not due for a week yet; he is not one to pay beforehand."

Upon which Nancy began to tremble and looked imploringly at her sister, who was putting the plates together upon the tray. After Flore went home they had to wait upon themselves.

"Colonel Selby did hand us the money," said Lavinia. "I hold both cheques for it."

Well, there ensued a mild disturbance; what schoolboys might call a genteel row. Mr. Edwin Fennel insisted upon his wife's cheque being given to him. Lavinia decisively refused. She went into a bit of a temper, and told him some home truths. He said he had a right to hold his wife's money, and should appeal to the law on the morrow to enforce it. He might do that, Lavinia retorted; no French law would make her give it up. Nancy began to cry.

Probably he knew his threats were futile. Instead of appealing to the law on the morrow, he went off by an early train, carrying Nancy with him. Lavinia's private opinion was that he thought it safer to take her, though it did increase the expense, than to leave her; she might get talking with Mr. Lockett. Ann's eyes were red, as if she had spent the night in crying.

"Has he *beaten* you?" Lavinia inquired, snatching the opportunity of a private moment.

"Oh, Lavinia, don't, don't! I shall *never* dare to let you have the cheque again," she wailed.

"Where is it that you are going?"

"He has not told me," Nancy whispered back again. "To Calais, I think, or else up to Lille. We are to be away all the week."

"Until Mr. Lockett and his friend are gone," thought Lavinia. "Nancy, how can he find money for it?"

"He has some napoleons in his pocket—borrowed yesterday, I think, from old Griffin."

Lavinia understood. Old Griffin, as Nancy styled him, had been careless of his money since his very slight attack of paralysis; he would freely lend to any one who asked him. She had not the slightest doubt that Captain Fennel had borrowed of him—and not for the first time.

It was on Wednesday morning that they went away, and for the rest of the week Lavinia was at peace. She changed the cheques at the bank as before, and paid the outstanding debts. But it left her so little to go on with, that she really knew not how she should get through the months until midsummer.

On Friday two of the Miss Bosanquets called. Hearing she was alone, they came to ask her to dine with them in the evening. Lavinia did so. But upon returning home at night, the old horror of going into the house came on again. Lavinia was in despair; she had hoped it had passed away for good.

On Saturday morning at market she met Madame Carimon, who invited her for the following day, Sunday. Lavinia hesitated. Glad enough indeed she was at the prospect of being taken out of her solitary home for a happy day at Mary Carimon's; but she shrank from again risking the dreadful feeling which would be sure to attack her when going into the house at night.

"You must come, Lavinia," cheerily urged Madame Carimon. "I have invited the English teacher at Madame Deauville's school; she has no friends here, poor thing."

"Well, I will come, Mary; thank you," said Lavinia slowly.

"To be sure you will. Why do you hesitate at all?"

Lavinia could not say why in the midst of the jostling market-place; perhaps would not had they been alone. "For one thing, they may be coming home before to-morrow," observed Lavinia, alluding to Mr. and Mrs. Fennel.

"Let them come. You are not obliged to stay at home with them," laughed Mary.

From the Diary of Miss Preen

Monday morning.—Well, it is over. The horror of last night is over, and I have not died of it. That will be considered a strong expression, should any eye save my own see this diary: but I truly believe the horror would kill me if I were subjected many more times to it.

I went to Mary Carimon's after our service was over in the morning, and we had a pleasant day there. The more I see of Monsieur Jules the more I esteem and respect him. He is so genuine, so good at heart, so simple in manner. Miss Perry is very agreeable; not so young as I had thought—thirty last birthday, she says. Her English is good and refined, and that is not always the case with the English teachers who come over to France—the French ladies who engage them cannot judge of our accent.

Miss Perry and I left together a little before ten. She wished me good-night in the Rue Tessin, Madame Deauville's house lying one way, mine another. The horror began to come over me as I crossed the Place Ronde, which had never happened before. Stay; not the horror itself, but the dread of it. An impulse actually crossed me to ring at Madame Sauvage's, and ask Mariette to accompany me up the entry, and stand at my open door whilst I went in to light the candle. But I could see no light in the house, not even in madame's salon, and supposed she and Mariette might be gone to bed. They are early people on Sundays, and the two young men have their latch-keys.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.