

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**LUCRETIA —
COMPLETE**

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Lucretia — Complete

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Lucretia — Complete

PREFACE TO THE EDITION OF 1853

“Lucretia; or, The Children of Night,” was begun simultaneously with “The Caxtons: a Family Picture.” The two fictions were intended as pendants; both serving, amongst other collateral aims and objects, to show the influence of home education, of early circumstance and example, upon after character and conduct. “Lucretia” was completed and published before “The Caxtons.” The moral design of the first was misunderstood and assailed; that of the last was generally acknowledged and approved: the moral design in both was nevertheless precisely the same. But in one it was sought through the darker side of human nature; in the other through the more sunny and cheerful: one shows the evil, the other the salutary influences, of early circumstance and training. Necessarily, therefore, the first resorts to the tragic elements of awe and distress,—the second to the comic elements of humour and agreeable emotion. These differences serve to explain the different reception that awaited the two, and may teach us how little the real conception of an author is known, and how little it is cared for; we judge, not by the purpose he conceives, but according as the impressions he effects are pleasurable or painful. But while I cannot acquiesce in much of the hostile criticism this fiction produced at its first appearance, I readily allow that as a mere question of art the story might have been improved in itself, and rendered more acceptable to the reader, by diminishing the gloom of the catastrophe. In this edition I have endeavoured to do so; and the victim whose fate in the former cast of the work most revolted the reader, as a violation of the trite but amiable law of Poetical Justice, is saved from the hands of the Children of Night. Perhaps, whatever the faults of this work, it equals most of its companions in the sustainment of interest, and in that coincidence between the gradual development of motive or passion, and the sequences of external events constituting plot, which mainly distinguish the physical awe of tragedy from the coarse horrors of melodrama. I trust at least that I shall now find few readers who will not readily acknowledge that the delineation of crime has only been employed for the grave and impressive purpose which brings it within the due province of the poet,—as an element of terror and a warning to the heart.

LONDON, December 7.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

It is somewhere about four years since I appeared before the public as the writer of a fiction, which I then intimated would probably be my last; but bad habits are stronger than good intentions. When Fabricio, in his hospital, resolved upon abjuring the vocation of the Poet, he was, in truth, recommencing his desperate career by a Farewell to the Muses,—I need not apply the allusion.

I must own, however, that there had long been a desire in my mind to trace, in some work or other, the strange and secret ways through which that Arch-ruler of Civilization, familiarly called “Money,” insinuates itself into our thoughts and motives, our hearts and actions; affecting those who undervalue as those who overestimate its importance; ruining virtues in the spendthrift no less than engendering vices in the miser. But when I half implied my farewell to the character of a novelist, I had imagined that this conception might be best worked out upon the stage. After some unpublished and imperfect attempts towards so realizing my design, I found either that the subject was too wide for the limits of the Drama, or that I wanted that faculty of concentration which alone enables the dramatist to compress multiform varieties into a very limited compass. With this design, I desired to unite some exhibition of what seems to me a principal vice in the hot and emulous chase for happiness or fame, fortune or knowledge, which is almost synonymous with the cant phrase of “the March of Intellect,” in that crisis of society to which we have arrived. The vice I allude to is Impatience. That eager desire to press forward, not so much to conquer obstacles as to elude them; that gambling with the solemn destinies of life, seeking ever to set success upon the chance of a die; that hastening from the wish conceived to the end accomplished; that thirst after quick returns to ingenious toil, and breathless spurtings along short cuts to the goal, which we see everywhere around us, from the Mechanics’ Institute to the Stock Market,—beginning in education with the primers of infancy, deluging us with “Philosophies for the Million” and “Sciences made Easy;” characterizing the books of our writers, the speeches of our statesmen, no less than the dealings of our speculators,—seem, I confess, to me to constitute a very diseased and very general symptom of the times. I hold that the greatest friend to man is labour; that knowledge without toil, if possible, were worthless; that toil in pursuit of knowledge is the best knowledge we can attain; that the continuous effort for fame is nobler than fame itself; that it is not wealth suddenly acquired which is deserving of homage, but the virtues which a man exercises in the slow pursuit of wealth,—the abilities so called forth, the self-denials so imposed; in a word, that Labour and Patience are the true schoolmasters on earth. While occupied with these ideas and this belief, whether right or wrong, and slowly convinced that it was only in that species of composition with which I was most familiar that I could work out some portion of the plan that I began to contemplate, I became acquainted with the histories of two criminals existing in our own age,—so remarkable, whether from the extent and darkness of the guilt committed, whether from the glittering accomplishments and lively temper of the one, the profound knowledge and intellectual capacities of the other, that the examination and analysis of characters so perverted became a study full of intense, if gloomy, interest.

In these persons there appear to have been as few redeemable points as can be found in Human Nature, so far as such points may be traced in the kindly instincts and generous passions which do sometimes accompany the perpetration of great crimes, and, without excusing the individual, vindicate the species. Yet, on the other hand, their sanguinary wickedness was not the dull ferocity of brutes; it was accompanied with instruction and culture,—nay, it seemed to me, on studying their lives and pondering over their own letters, that through their cultivation itself we could arrive at the secret of the ruthless and atrocious pre-eminence in evil these Children of Night had attained; that here the monster vanished into the mortal, and the phenomena that seemed aberrations from Nature were explained.

I could not resist the temptation of reducing to a tale the materials which had so engrossed my interest and tasked my inquiries. And in this attempt, various incidental opportunities have occurred, if not of completely carrying out, still of incidentally illustrating, my earlier design,—of showing the influence of Mammon upon our most secret selves, of reproving the impatience which is engendered by a civilization that, with much of the good, brings all the evils of competition, and of tracing throughout, all the influences of early household life upon our subsequent conduct and career. In such incidental bearings the moral may doubtless be more obvious than in the delineation of the darker and rarer crime which forms the staple of my narrative. For in extraordinary guilt we are slow to recognize ordinary warnings,—we say to the peaceful conscience, “This concerns thee not!” whereas at each instance of familiar fault and commonplace error we own a direct and sensible admonition. Yet in the portraiture of gigantic crime, poets have rightly found their sphere and fulfilled their destiny of teachers. Those terrible truths which appall us in the guilt of Macbeth or the villany of Iago, have their moral uses not less than the popular infirmities of Tom Jones, or the every-day hypocrisy of Blifil. Incredible as it may seem, the crimes herein related took place within the last seventeen years. There has been no exaggeration as to their extent, no great departure from their details; the means employed, even that which seems most far-fetched,—the instrument of the poisoned ring,—have their foundation in literal facts. Nor have I much altered the social position of the criminals, nor in the least overrated their attainments and intelligence. In those more salient essentials which will most, perhaps, provoke the Reader’s incredulous wonder, I narrate a history, not invent a fiction [These criminals were not, however, in actual life, as in the novel, intimates and accomplices. Their crimes were of similar character, effected by similar agencies, and committed at dates which embrace their several careers of guilt within the same period; but I have no authority to suppose that the one was known to the other.]. All that Romance which our own time affords is not more the romance than the philosophy of the time. Tragedy never quits the world,—it surrounds us everywhere. We have but to look, wakeful and vigilant, abroad, and from the age of Pelops to that of Borgia, the same crimes, though under different garbs, will stalk on our paths. Each age comprehends in itself specimens of every virtue and every vice which has ever inspired our love or moved our horror.

LONDON, November 1, 1846.

PART THE FIRST

PROLOGUE TO PART THE FIRST

In an apartment at Paris, one morning during the Reign of Terror, a man, whose age might be somewhat under thirty, sat before a table covered with papers, arranged and labelled with the methodical precision of a mind fond of order and habituated to business. Behind him rose a tall bookcase surmounted with a bust of Robespierre, and the shelves were filled chiefly with works of a scientific character, amongst which the greater number were on chemistry and medicine. There were to be seen also many rare books on alchemy, the great Italian historians, some English philosophical treatises, and a few manuscripts in Arabic. The absence from this collection of the stormy literature of the day seemed to denote that the owner was a quiet student, living apart from the strife and passions of the Revolution. This supposition was, however, disproved by certain papers on the table, which were formally and laconically labelled "Reports on Lyons," and by packets of letters in the handwritings of Robespierre and Couthon. At one of the windows a young boy was earnestly engaged in some occupation which appeared to excite the curiosity of the person just described; for this last, after examining the child's movements for a few moments with a silent scrutiny that betrayed but little of the half-complacent, half-melancholy affection with which busy man is apt to regard childhood, rose noiselessly from his seat, approached the boy, and looked over his shoulder unobserved. In a crevice of the wood by the window, a huge black spider had formed his web; the child had just discovered another spider, and placed it in the meshes: he was watching the result of his operations. The intrusive spider stood motionless in the midst of the web, as if fascinated. The rightful possessor was also quiescent; but a very fine ear might have caught a low, humming sound, which probably augured no hospitable intentions to the invader. Anon, the stranger insect seemed suddenly to awake from its amaze; it evinced alarm, and turned to fly; the huge spider darted forward; the boy uttered a chuckle of delight. The man's pale lip curled into a sinister sneer, and he glided back to his seat. There, leaning his face on his hand, he continued to contemplate the child. That child might have furnished to an artist a fitting subject for fair and blooming infancy. His light hair, tinged deeply, it is true, with red, hung in sleek and glittering abundance down his neck and shoulders. His features, seen in profile, were delicately and almost femininely proportioned; health glowed on his cheek, and his form, slight though it was, gave promise of singular activity and vigour. His dress was fantastic, and betrayed the taste of some fondly foolish mother; but the fine linen, trimmed with lace, was rumpled and stained, the velvet jacket unbrushed, the shoes soiled with dust,—slight tokens these of neglect, but serving to show that the foolish fondness which had invented the dress had not of late presided over the toilet.

"Child," said the man, first in French; and observing that the boy heeded him not,—“child,” he repeated in English, which he spoke well, though with a foreign accent, “child!”

The boy turned quickly.

“Has the great spider devoured the small one?”

“No, sir,” said the boy, colouring; “the small one has had the best of it.”

The tone and heightened complexion of the child seemed to give meaning to his words,—at least, so the man thought, for a slight frown passed over his high, thoughtful brow.

“Spiders, then,” he said, after a short pause, “are different from men; with us, the small do not get the better of the great. Hum! do you still miss your mother?”

“Oh, yes!” and the boy advanced eagerly to the table.

“Well, you will see her once again.”

“When?”

The man looked towards a clock on the mantelpiece,—“Before that clock strikes. Now, go back to your spiders.” The child looked irresolute and disinclined to obey; but a stern and terrible expression gathered slowly over the man’s face, and the boy, growing pale as he remarked it, crept back to the window.

The father—for such was the relation the owner of the room bore to the child—drew paper and ink towards him, and wrote for some minutes rapidly. Then starting up, he glanced at the clock, took his hat and cloak, which lay on a chair beside, drew up the collar of the mantle till it almost concealed his countenance, and said, “Now, boy, come with me; I have promised to show you an execution: I am going to keep my promise. Come!”

The boy clapped his hands with joy; and you might see then, child as he was, that those fair features were capable of a cruel and ferocious expression. The character of the whole face changed. He caught up his gay cap and plume, and followed his father into the streets.

Silently the two took their way towards the Barriere du Trone. At a distance they saw the crowd growing thick and dense as throng after throng hurried past them, and the dreadful guillotine rose high in the light blue air. As they came into the skirts of the mob, the father, for the first time, took his child’s hand. “I must get you a good place for the show,” he said, with a quiet smile.

There was something in the staid, courteous, yet haughty bearing of the man that made the crowd give way as he passed. They got near the dismal scene, and obtained entrance into a wagon already crowded with eager spectators.

And now they heard at a distance the harsh and lumbering roll of the tumbril that bore the victims, and the tramp of the horses which guarded the procession of death. The boy’s whole attention was absorbed in expectation of the spectacle, and his ear was perhaps less accustomed to French, though born and reared in France, than to the language of his mother’s lips,—and she was English; thus he did not hear or heed certain observations of the bystanders, which made his father’s pale cheek grow paler.

“What is the batch to-day?” quoth a butcher in the wagon. “Scarce worth the baking,—only two; but one, they say, is an aristocrat,—a ci-devant marquis,” answered a carpenter. “Ah, a marquis! Bon! And the other?”

“Only a dancer, but a pretty one, it is true; I could pity her, but she is English.” And as he pronounced the last word, with a tone of inexpressible contempt, the butcher spat, as if in nausea.

“Mort diable! a spy of Pitt’s, no doubt. What did they discover?”

A man, better dressed than the rest, turned round with a smile, and answered: “Nothing worse than a lover, I believe; but that lover was a proscriber. The ci-devant marquis was caught disguised in her apartment. She betrayed for him a good, easy friend of the people who had long loved her, and revenge is sweet.”

The man whom we have accompanied, nervously twitched up the collar of his cloak, and his compressed lips told that he felt the anguish of the laugh that circled round him.

“They are coming! There they are!” cried the boy, in ecstatic excitement.

“That’s the way to bring up citizens,” said the butcher, patting the child’s shoulder, and opening a still better view for him at the edge of the wagon.

The crowd now abruptly gave way. The tumbril was in sight. A man, young and handsome, standing erect and with folded arms in the fatal vehicle, looked along the mob with an eye of careless scorn. Though he wore the dress of a workman, the most unpractised glance could detect, in his mien and bearing, one of the hated noblesse, whose characteristics came out even more forcibly at the hour of death. On the lip was that smile of gay and insolent levity, on the brow that gallant if reckless contempt of physical danger, which had signalized the hero-coxcombs of the old regime. Even the rude dress was worn with a certain air of foppery, and the bright hair was carefully adjusted, as if for the holiday of the headsman. As the eyes of the young noble wandered over the fierce faces of that horrible assembly, while a roar of hideous triumph answered the look, in which for the last time the

gentilhomme spoke his scorn of the canaille, the child's father lowered the collar of his cloak, and slowly raised his hat from his brow. The eye of the marquis rested upon the countenance thus abruptly shown to him, and which suddenly became individualized amongst the crowd,—that eye instantly lost its calm contempt. A shudder passed visibly over his frame, and his cheek grew blanched with terror. The mob saw the change, but not the cause, and loud and louder rose their triumphant yell. The sound recalled the pride of the young noble; he started, lifted his crest erect, and sought again to meet the look which had appalled him. But he could no longer single it out among the crowd. Hat and cloak once more hid the face of the foe, and crowds of eager heads intercepted the view. The young marquis's lips muttered; he bent down, and then the crowd caught sight of his companion, who was being lifted up from the bottom of the tumbril, where she had flung herself in horror and despair. The crowd grew still in a moment as the pale face of one, familiar to most of them, turned wildly from place to place in the dreadful scene, vainly and madly through its silence imploring life and pity. How often had the sight of that face, not then pale and haggard, but wreathed with rosy smiles, sufficed to draw down the applause of the crowded theatre; how, then, had those breasts, now fevered by the thirst of blood, held hearts spellbound by the airy movements of that exquisite form writhing now in no stage-mime agony! Plaything of the city, minion to the light amusement of the hour, frail child of Cytherea and the Graces, what relentless fate has conducted thee to the shambles? Butterfly of the summer, why should a nation rise to break thee upon the wheel? A sense of the mockery of such an execution, of the horrible burlesque that would sacrifice to the necessities of a mighty people so slight an offering, made itself felt among the crowd. There was a low murmur of shame and indignation. The dangerous sympathy of the mob was perceived by the officer in attendance. Hastily he made the sign to the headsman, and as he did so, a child's cry was heard in the English tongue,—“Mother! Mother!” The father's hand grasped the child's arm with an iron pressure; the crowd swam before the boy's eyes; the air seemed to stifle him, and become blood-red; only through the hum and the tramp and the roll of the drums he heard a low voice hiss in his ear “Learn how they perish who betray me!”

As the father said these words, again his face was bare, and the woman, whose ear amidst the dull insanity of fear had caught the cry of her child's voice, saw that face, and fell back insensible in the arms of the headsman.

CHAPTER I. A FAMILY GROUP

One July evening, at the commencement of the present century, several persons were somewhat picturesquely grouped along an old-fashioned terrace which skirted the garden-side of a manor-house that had considerable pretensions to baronial dignity. The architecture was of the most enriched and elaborate style belonging to the reign of James the First: the porch, opening on the terrace, with its mullion window above, was encased with pilasters and reliefs at once ornamental and massive; and the large square tower in which it was placed was surmounted by a stone falcon, whose talons gripped fiercely a scutcheon blazoned with the five-pointed stars which heralds recognize as the arms of St. John. On either side this tower extended long wings, the dark brickwork of which was relieved with noble stone casements and carved pediments; the high roof was partially concealed by a balustrade perforated not inelegantly into arabesque designs; and what architects call “the sky line” was broken with imposing effect by tall chimney-shafts of various form and fashion. These wings terminated in angular towers similar to the centre, though kept duly subordinate to it both in size and decoration, and crowned with stone cupolas. A low balustrade, of later date than that which adorned the roof, relieved by vases and statues, bordered the terrace, from which a double flight of steps descended to a smooth lawn, intersected by broad gravel-walks, shadowed by vast and stately cedars, and gently and gradually mingling with the wilder scenery of the park, from which it was only divided by a ha-ha.

Upon the terrace, and under cover of a temporary awning, sat the owner, Sir Miles St. John of Laughton, a comely old man, dressed with faithful precision to the costume which he had been taught to consider appropriate to his rank of gentleman, and which was not yet wholly obsolete and eccentric. His hair, still thick and luxuriant, was carefully powdered, and collected into a club behind; his nether man attired in gray breeches and pearl-coloured silk stockings; his vest of silk, opening wide at the breast, and showing a profusion of frill, slightly sprinkled with the pulvilio of his favourite Martinique; his three-cornered hat, placed on a stool at his side, with a gold-headed crutch-cane (hat made rather to be carried in the hand than worn on the head), the diamond in his shirt-breast, the diamond on his finger, the ruffles at his wrist,—all bespoke the gallant who had chatted with Lord Chesterfield and supped with Mrs. Clive. On a table before him were placed two or three decanters of wine, the fruits of the season, an enamelled snuff-box in which was set the portrait of a female (perhaps the Chloe or Phyllis of his early love-ditties), a lighted taper, a small china jar containing tobacco, and three or four pipes of homely clay,—for cherry-sticks and meerschaums were not then in fashion, and Sir Miles St. John, once a gay and sparkling beau, now a popular country gentleman, great at county meetings and sheep-shearing festivals, had taken to smoking, as in harmony with his bucolic transformation. An old setter lay dozing at his feet; a small spaniel—old, too—was sauntering lazily in the immediate neighbourhood, looking gravely out for such stray bits of biscuit as had been thrown forth to provoke him to exercise, and which hitherto had escaped his attention. Half seated, half reclined on the balustrade, apart from the baronet, but within reach of his conversation, lolled a man in the prime of life, with an air of unmistakable and sovereign elegance and distinction. Mr. Vernon was a guest from London; and the London man,—the man of clubs and dinners and routs, of noon loungings through Bond Street, and nights spent with the Prince of Wales,—seemed stamped not more upon the careful carelessness of his dress, and upon the worn expression of his delicate features, than upon the listless ennui, which, characterizing both his face and attitude, appeared to take pity on himself for having been entrapped into the country.

Yet we should convey an erroneous impression of Mr. Vernon if we designed, by the words “listless ennui,” to depict the slumberous insipidity of more modern affectation; it was not the ennui of a man to whom ennui is habitual, it was rather the indolent prostration that fills up the intervals of excitement. At that day the word blast was unknown; men had not enough sentiment for satiety. There was a kind of Bacchanalian fury in the life led by those leaders of fashion, among whom Mr.

Vernon was not the least distinguished; it was a day of deep drinking, of high play, of jovial, reckless dissipation, of strong appetite for fun and riot, of four-in-hand coachmanship, of prize-fighting, of a strange sort of barbarous manliness that strained every nerve of the constitution,—a race of life in which three fourths of the competitors died half-way in the hippodrome. What is now the Dandy was then the Buck; and something of the Buck, though subdued by a chaster taste than fell to the ordinary members of his class, was apparent in Mr. Vernon's costume as well as air. Intricate folds of muslin, arranged in prodigious bows and ends, formed the cravat, which Brummell had not yet arisen to reform; his hat, of a very peculiar shape, low at the crown and broad at the brim, was worn with an air of devil-me-care defiance; his watch-chain, garnished with a profusion of rings and seals, hung low from his white waistcoat; and the adaptation of his nankeen inexpressibles to his well-shaped limbs was a masterpiece of art. His whole dress and air was not what could properly be called foppish, it was rather what at that time was called "rakish." Few could so closely approach vulgarity without being vulgar: of that privileged few, Mr. Vernon was one of the elect.

Farther on, and near the steps descending into the garden, stood a man in an attitude of profound abstraction, his arms folded, his eyes bent on the ground, his brows slightly contracted; his dress was a plain black surtout, and pantaloons of the same colour. Something both in the fashion of the dress, and still more in the face of the man, bespoke the foreigner.

Sir Miles St. John was an accomplished person for that time of day. He had made the grand tour; he had bought pictures and statues; he spoke and wrote well in the modern languages; and being rich, hospitable, social, and not averse from the reputation of a patron, he had opened his house freely to the host of emigrants whom the French Revolution had driven to our coasts. Olivier Dalibard, a man of considerable learning and rare scientific attainments, had been tutor in the house of the Marquis de G——, a French nobleman known many years before to the old baronet. The marquis and his family had been among the first emigres at the outbreak of the Revolution. The tutor had remained behind; for at that time no danger appeared to threaten those who pretended to no other aristocracy than that of letters. Contrary, as he said, with repentant modesty, to his own inclinations, he had been compelled, not only for his own safety, but for that of his friends, to take some part in the subsequent events of the Revolution,—a part far from sincere, though so well had he simulated the patriot that he had won the personal favour and protection of Robespierre; nor till the fall of that virtuous exterminator had he withdrawn from the game of politics and effected in disguise his escape to England. As, whether from kindly or other motives, he had employed the power of his position in the esteem of Robespierre to save certain noble heads from the guillotine,—amongst others, the two brothers of the Marquis de G——, he was received with grateful welcome by his former patrons, who readily pardoned his career of Jacobinism from their belief in his excuses and their obligations to the services which that very career had enabled him to render to their kindred. Olivier Dalibard had accompanied the marquis and his family in one of the frequent visits they paid to Laughton; and when the marquis finally quitted England, and fixed his refuge at Vienna, with some connections of his wife's, he felt a lively satisfaction at the thought of leaving his friend honourably, if unambitiously, provided for as secretary and librarian to Sir Miles St. John. In fact, the scholar, who possessed considerable powers of fascination, had won no less favour with the English baronet than he had with the French dictator. He played well both at chess and backgammon; he was an extraordinary accountant; he had a variety of information upon all points that rendered him more convenient than any cyclopaedia in Sir Miles's library; and as he spoke both English and Italian with a correctness and fluency extremely rare in a Frenchman, he was of considerable service in teaching languages to, as well as directing the general literary education of, Sir Miles's favourite niece, whom we shall take an early opportunity to describe at length.

Nevertheless, there had been one serious obstacle to Dalibard's acceptance of the appointment offered to him by Sir Miles. Dalibard had under his charge a young orphan boy of some ten or twelve years old,—a boy whom Sir Miles was not long in suspecting to be the scholar's son. This child

had come from France with Dalibard, and while the marquis's family were in London, remained under the eye and care of his guardian or father, whichever was the true connection between the two. But this superintendence became impossible if Dalibard settled in Hampshire with Sir Miles St. John, and the boy remained in London; nor, though the generous old gentleman offered to pay for the child's schooling, would Dalibard consent to part with him. At last the matter was arranged: the boy was invited to Laughton on a visit, and was so lively, yet so well mannered, that he became a favourite, and was now fairly quartered in the house with his reputed father; and not to make an unnecessary mystery of this connection, such was in truth the relationship between Olivier Dalibard and Honore Gabriel Varney,—a name significant of the double and illegitimate origin: a French father, an English mother. Dropping, however, the purely French appellation of Honore, he went familiarly by that of Gabriel. Half-way down the steps stood the lad, pencil and tablet in hand, sketching. Let us look over his shoulder: it is his father's likeness,—a countenance in itself not very remarkable at the first glance, for the features were small; but when examined, it was one that most persons, women especially, would have pronounced handsome, and to which none could deny the higher praise of thought and intellect. A native of Provence, with some Italian blood in his veins,—for his grandfather, a merchant of Marseilles, had married into a Florentine family settled at Leghorn, —the dark complexion common with those in the South had been subdued, probably by the habits of the student, into a bronze and steadfast paleness which seemed almost fair by the contrast of the dark hair which he wore unpowdered, and the still darker brows which hung thick and prominent over clear gray eyes. Compared with the features, the skull was disproportionally large, both behind and before; and a physiognomist would have drawn conclusions more favourable to the power than the tenderness of the Provençal's character from the compact closeness of the lips and the breadth and massiveness of the iron jaw. But the son's sketch exaggerated every feature, and gave to the expression a malignant and terrible irony not now, at least, apparent in the quiet and meditative aspect. Gabriel himself, as he stood, would have been a more tempting study to many an artist. It is true that he was small for his years; but his frame had a vigour in its light proportions which came from a premature and almost adolescent symmetry of shape and muscular development. The countenance, however, had much of effeminate beauty: the long hair reached the shoulders, but did not curl,—straight, fine, and glossy as a girl's, and in colour of the pale auburn, tinged with red, which rarely alters in hue as childhood matures to man; the complexion was dazzlingly clear and fair. Nevertheless, there was something so hard in the lip, so bold, though not open, in the brow, that the girlishness of complexion, and even of outline, could not leave, on the whole, an impression of effeminacy. All the hereditary keenness and intelligence were stamped upon his face at that moment; but the expression had also a large share of the very irony and malice which he had conveyed to his caricature. The drawing itself was wonderfully vigorous and distinct; showing great artistic promise, and done with the rapidity and ease which betrayed practice. Suddenly his father turned, and with as sudden a quickness the boy concealed his tablet in his vest; and the sinister expression of his face smoothed into a timorous smile as his eye encountered Dalibard's. The father beckoned to the boy, who approached with alacrity. "Gabriel," whispered the Frenchman, in his own tongue, "where are they at this moment?"

The boy pointed silently towards one of the cedars. Dalibard mused an instant, and then, slowly descending the steps, took his noiseless way over the smooth turf towards the tree. Its boughs drooped low and spread wide; and not till he was within a few paces of the spot could his eye perceive two forms seated on a bench under the dark green canopy. He then paused and contemplated them.

The one was a young man whose simple dress and subdued air strongly contrasted the artificial graces and the modish languor of Mr. Vernon; but though wholly without that nameless distinction which sometimes characterizes those conscious of pure race and habituated to the atmosphere of courts, he had at least Nature's stamp of aristocracy in a form eminently noble, and features of manly, but surpassing beauty, which were not rendered less engaging by an expression of modest timidity. He seemed to be listening with thoughtful respect to his companion, a young female by his side, who

was speaking to him with an earnestness visible in her gestures and her animated countenance. And though there was much to notice in the various persons scattered over the scene, not one, perhaps,—not the graceful Vernon, not the thoughtful scholar, nor his fair-haired, hard-lipped son, not even the handsome listener she addressed,—no, not one there would so have arrested the eye, whether of a physiognomist or a casual observer, as that young girl, Sir Miles St. John's favourite niece and presumptive heiress.

But as at that moment the expression of her face differed from that habitual to it, we defer its description.

“Do not,” such were her words to her companion,—“do not alarm yourself by exaggerating the difficulties; do not even contemplate them: those be my care. Mainwaring, when I loved you; when, seeing that your diffidence or your pride forbade you to be the first to speak, I overstepped the modesty or the dissimulation of my sex; when I said, ‘Forget that I am the reputed heiress of Laughton, see in me but the faults and merits of the human being, of the wild unregulated girl, see in me but Lucretia Clavering’” (here her cheeks blushed, and her voice sank into a lower and more tremulous whisper) “and love her if you can!”—when I went thus far, do not think I had not measured all the difficulties in the way of our union, and felt that I could surmount them.”

“But,” answered Mainwaring, hesitatingly, “can you conceive it possible that your uncle ever will consent? Is not pride—the pride of family—almost the leading attribute of his character? Did he not discard your mother—his own sister—from his house and heart for no other offence but a second marriage which he deemed beneath her? Has he ever even consented to see, much less to receive, your half-sister, the child of that marriage? Is not his very affection for you interwoven with his pride in you, with his belief in your ambition? Has he not summoned your cousin, Mr. Vernon, for the obvious purpose of favouring a suit which he considers worthy of you, and which, if successful, will unite the two branches of his ancient house? How is it possible that he can ever hear without a scorn and indignation which would be fatal to your fortunes that your heart has presumed to choose, in William Mainwaring, a man without ancestry or career?”

“Not without career,” interrupted Lucretia, proudly. “Do you think if you were master of Laughton that your career would not be more brilliant than that of yon indolent, luxurious coxcomb? Do you think that I could have been poor-hearted enough to love you if I had not recognized in you energies and talents that correspond with my own ambition? For I am ambitious, as you know, and therefore my mind, as well as my heart, went with my love for you.”

“Ah, Lucretia, but can Sir Miles St. John see my future rise in my present obscurity?”

“I do not say that he can, or will; but if you love me, we can wait. Do not fear the rivalry of Mr. Vernon. I shall know how to free myself from so tame a peril. We can wait,—my uncle is old; his habits preclude the chance of a much longer life; he has already had severe attacks. We are young, dear Mainwaring: what is a year or two to those who hope?” Mainwaring's face fell, and a displeasing chill passed through his veins. Could this young creature, her uncle's petted and trusted darling, she who should be the soother of his infirmities, the prop of his age, the sincerest mourner at his grave, weigh coldly thus the chances of his death, and point at once to the altar and the tomb?

He was saved from the embarrassment of reply by Dalibard's approach.

“More than half an hour absent,” said the scholar, in his own language, with a smile; and drawing out his watch, he placed it before their eyes. “Do you not think that all will miss you? Do you suppose, Miss Clavering, that your uncle has not ere this asked for his fair niece? Come, and forestall him.” He offered his arm to Lucretia as he spoke. She hesitated a moment, and then, turning to Mainwaring, held out her hand. He pressed it, though scarcely with a lover's warmth; and as she walked back to the terrace with Dalibard, the young man struck slowly into the opposite direction, and passing by a gate over a foot-bridge that led from the ha-ha into the park, bent his way towards a lake which gleamed below at some distance, half-concealed by groves of venerable trees rich with

the prodigal boughs of summer. Meanwhile, as they passed towards the house, Dalibard, still using his native tongue, thus accosted his pupil:—

“You must pardon me if I think more of your interests than you do; and pardon me no less if I encroach on your secrets and alarm your pride. This young man,—can you be guilty of the folly of more than a passing caprice for his society, of more than the amusement of playing with his vanity? Even if that be all, beware of entangling yourself in your own meshes.”

“You do in truth offend me,” said Lucretia, with calm haughtiness, “and you have not the right thus to speak to me.”

“Not the right,” repeated the Provençal, mournfully, “not the right! Then, indeed, I am mistaken in my pupil. Do you consider that I would have lowered my pride to remain here as a dependent; that, conscious of attainments, and perhaps of abilities, that should win their way, even in exile, to distinction, I would have frittered away my life in these rustic shades,—if I had not formed in you a deep and absorbing interest? In that interest I ground my right to warn and counsel you. I saw, or fancied I saw, in you a mind congenial to my own; a mind above the frivolities of your sex,—a mind, in short, with the grasp and energy of a man’s. You were then but a child, you are scarcely yet a woman; yet have I not given to your intellect the strong food on which the statesmen of Florence fed their pupil-princes, or the noble Jesuits the noble men who were destined to extend the secret empire of the imperishable Loyola?”

“You gave me the taste for a knowledge rare in my sex, I own,” answered Lucretia, with a slight tone of regret in her voice: “and in the knowledge you have communicated I felt a charm that at times seems to me to be only fatal. You have confounded in my mind evil and good, or rather, you have left both good and evil as dead ashes, as the dust and cinder of a crucible. You have made intellect the only conscience. Of late, I wish that my tutor had been a village priest!”

“Of late, since you have listened to the pastorals of that meek Corydon!”

“Dare you despise him? And for what? That he is good and honest?”

“I despise him, not because he is good and honest, but because he is of the common herd of men, without aim or character. And it is for this youth that you will sacrifice your fortunes, your ambition, the station you were born to fill and have been reared to improve,—this youth in whom there is nothing but the lap-dog’s merit, sleekness and beauty! Ay, frown,—the frown betrays you; you love him!”

“And if I do?” said Lucretia, raising her tall form to its utmost height, and haughtily facing her inquisitor,—“and, if I do, what then? Is he unworthy of me? Converse with him, and you will find that the noble form conceals as high a spirit. He wants but wealth: I can give it to him. If his temper is gentle, I can prompt and guide it to fame and power. He at least has education and eloquence and mind. What has Mr. Vernon?”

“Mr. Vernon? I did not speak of him!”

Lucretia gazed hard upon the Provençal’s countenance,—gazed with that un pitying air of triumph with which a woman who detects a power over the heart she does not desire to conquer exults in defeating the reasons that heart appears to her to prompt. “No,” she said in a calm voice, to which the venom of secret irony gave stinging significance,—“no, you spoke not of Mr. Vernon; you thought that if I looked round, if I looked nearer, I might have a fairer choice.”

“You are cruel, you are unjust,” said Dalibard, falteringly. “If I once presumed for a moment, have I repeated my offence? But,” he added hurriedly, “in me,—much as you appear to despise me,—in me, at least, you would have risked none of the dangers that beset you if you seriously set your heart on Mainwaring.”

“You think my uncle would be proud to give my hand to M. Olivier Dalibard?”

“I think and I know,” answered the Provençal, gravely, and disregarding the taunt, “that if you had deigned to render me—poor exile that I am!—the most enviable of men, you had still been the heiress of Laughton.”

“So you have said and urged,” said Lucretia, with evident curiosity in her voice; “yet how, and by what art,—wise and subtle as you are,—could you have won my uncle’s consent?”

“That is my secret,” returned Dalibard, gloomily; “and since the madness I indulged is forever over; since I have so schooled my heart that nothing, despite your sarcasm, save an affectionate interest which I may call paternal rests there,—let us pass from this painful subject. Oh, my dear pupil, be warned in time; know love for what it really is, in the dark and complicated history of actual life,—a brief enchantment, not to be disdained, but not to be considered the all-in all. Look round the world; contemplate all those who have married from passion: ten years afterwards, whither has the passion flown? With a few, indeed, where there is community of object and character, new excitements, new aims and hopes, spring up; and having first taken root in passion, the passion continues to shoot out in their fresh stems and fibres. But deceive yourself not; there is no such community between you and Mainwaring. What you call his goodness, you will learn hereafter to despise as feeble; and what in reality is your mental power he soon, too soon, will shudder at as unwomanly and hateful.”

“Hold!” cried Lucretia, tremulously. “Hold! and if he does, I shall owe his hate to you,—to your lessons; to your deadly influence!”

“Lucretia, no; the seeds were in you. Can cultivation force from the soil that which it is against the nature of the soil to bear?”

“I will pluck out the weeds! I will transform myself!”

“Child, I defy you!” said the scholar, with a smile that gave to his face the expression his son had conveyed to it. “I have warned you, and my task is done.” With that he bowed, and leaving her, was soon by the side of Sir Miles St. John; and the baronet and his librarian, a few moments after, entered the house and sat down to chess.

But during the dialogues we have sketched, we must not suppose that Sir Miles himself had been so wholly absorbed in the sensual gratification bestowed upon Europe by the immortal Raleigh as to neglect his guest and kinsman.

“And so, Charley Vernon, it is not the fashion to smoke in Lunnon.” Thus Sir Miles pronounced the word, according to the Euphuism of his youth, and which, even at that day, still lingered in courtly jargon.

“No, sir. However, to console us, we have most other vices in full force.”

“I don’t doubt it; they say the prince’s set exhaust life pretty quickly.”

“It certainly requires the fortune of an earl and the constitution of a prize-fighter to live with him.”

“Yet methinks, Master Charley, you have neither the one nor the other.”

“And therefore I see before me, and at no very great distance, the Bench and—a consumption!” answered Vernon, suppressing a slight yawn.

“T is a pity, for you had a fine estate, properly managed; and in spite of your faults, you have the heart of a true gentleman. Come, come!” and the old man spoke with tenderness, “you are young enough yet to reform. A prudent marriage and a good wife will save both your health and your acres.”

“If you think so highly of marriage, my dear Sir Miles, it is a wonder you did not add to your precepts the value of your example.”

“Jackanapes! I had not your infirmities: I never was a spendthrift, and I have a constitution of iron!” There was a pause. “Charles,” continued Sir Miles, musingly, “there is many an earl with a less fortune than the conjoined estates of Vernon Grange and Laughton Hall. You must already have understood me: it is my intention to leave my estates to Lucretia; it is my wish, nevertheless, to think you will not be the worse for my will. Frankly, if you can like my niece, win her; settle here while I live, put the Grange to nurse, and recruit yourself by fresh air and field-sports. Zounds, Charles, I love you, and that’s the truth! Give me your hand!”

“And a grateful heart with it, sir,” said Vernon, warmly, evidently affected, as he started from his indolent position and took the hand extended to him. “Believe me, I do not covet your wealth, nor do I envy my cousin anything so much as the first place in your regard.”

“Prettily said, my boy, and I don’t suspect you of insincerity. What think you, then, of my plan?”

Mr. Vernon seemed embarrassed; but recovering himself with his usual ease, he replied archly: “Perhaps, sir, it will be of little use to know what I think of your plan; my fair cousin may have upset it already.”

“Ha, sir! let me look at you. So, so! you are not jesting. What the deuce do you mean? ‘Gad, man, speak out!’”

“Do you not think that Mr. Monderling—Mandolin—what’s his name, eh?—do you not think that he is a very handsome young fellow?” said Mr. Vernon, drawing out his snuffbox and offering it to his kinsman.

“Damn your snuff,” quoth Sir Miles, in great choler, as he rejected the proffered courtesy with a vehemence that sent half the contents of the box upon the joint eyes and noses of the two canine favourites dozing at his feet. The setter started up in an agony; the spaniel wheezed and sniffled and ran off, stopping every moment to take his head between his paws. The old gentleman continued without heeding the sufferings of his dumb friends,—a symptom of rare discomposure on his part.

“Do you mean to insinuate, Mr. Vernon, that my niece—my elder niece, Lucretia Clavering—condescends to notice the looks, good or bad, of Mr. Mainwaring? ‘Sdeath, sir, he is the son of a land-agent! Sir, he is intended for trade! Sir, his highest ambition is to be partner in some fifth-rate mercantile house!’”

“My dear Sir Miles,” replied Mr. Vernon, as he continued to brush away, with his scented handkerchief, such portions of the prince’s mixture as his nankeen inexpressibles had diverted from the sensual organs of Dash and Ponto—“my dear Sir Miles, *ca n’empeche pas le sentiment!*”

“*Empeche the fiddlestick!* You don’t know Lucretia. There are many girls, indeed, who might not be trusted near any handsome flute-playing spark, with black eyes and white teeth; but Lucretia is not one of those; she has spirit and ambition that would never stoop to a mesalliance; she has the mind and will of a queen,—old Queen Bess, I believe.”

“That is saying much for her talent, sir; but if so, Heaven help her intended! I am duly grateful for the blessings you propose me!”

Despite his anger, the old gentleman could not help smiling.

“Why, to confess the truth, she is hard to manage; but we men of the world know how to govern women, I hope,—much more how to break in a girl scarce out of her teens. As for this fancy of yours, it is sheer folly: Lucretia knows my mind. She has seen her mother’s fate; she has seen her sister an exile from my house. Why? For no fault of hers, poor thing, but because she is the child of disgrace, and the mother’s sin is visited on her daughter’s head. I am a good-natured man, I fancy, as men go; but I am old-fashioned enough to care for my race. If Lucretia demeaned herself to love, to encourage, that lad, why, I would strike her from my will, and put your name where I have placed hers.”

“Sir,” said Vernon, gravely, and throwing aside all affectation of manner, “this becomes serious; and I have no right even to whisper a doubt by which it now seems I might benefit. I think it imprudent, if you wish Miss Clavering to regard me impartially as a suitor to her hand, to throw her, at her age, in the way of a man far superior to myself, and to most men, in personal advantages,—a man more of her own years, well educated, well mannered, with no evidence of his inferior birth in his appearance or his breeding. I have not the least ground for supposing that he has made the slightest impression on Miss Clavering, and if he has, it would be, perhaps, but a girl’s innocent and thoughtless fancy, easily shaken off by time and worldly reflection; but pardon me if I say bluntly that should that be so, you would be wholly unjustified in punishing, even in blaming, her,—it is yourself you must blame for your own carelessness and that forgetful blindness to human nature and youthful emotions which, I must say, is the less pardonable in one who has known the world so intimately.”

“Charles Vernon,” said the old baronet, “give me your hand again! I was right, at least, when I said you had the heart of a true gentleman. Drop this subject for the present. Who has just left Lucretia yonder?”

“Your protege, the Frenchman.”

“Ah, he, at least, is not blind; go and join Lucretia!”

Vernon bowed, emptied the remains of the Madeira into a tumbler, drank the contents at a draught, and sauntered towards Lucretia; but she, perceiving his approach, crossed abruptly into one of the alleys that led to the other side of the house, and he was either too indifferent or too well-bred to force upon her the companionship which she so evidently shunned. He threw himself at length upon one of the benches on the lawn, and leaning his head upon his hand, fell into reflections which, had he spoken, would have shaped themselves somewhat thus into words:—

“If I must take that girl as the price of this fair heritage, shall I gain or lose? I grant that she has the finest neck and shoulders I ever saw out of marble; but far from being in love with her, she gives me a feeling like fear and aversion. Add to this that she has evidently no kinder sentiment for me than I for her; and if she once had a heart, that young gentleman has long since coaxed it away. Pleasant auspices, these, for matrimony to a poor invalid who wishes at least to decline and to die in peace! Moreover, if I were rich enough to marry as I pleased; if I were what, perhaps, I ought to be, heir to Laughton,—why, there is a certain sweet Mary in the world, whose eyes are softer than Lucretia Clavinger’s. But that is a dream! On the other hand, if I do not win this girl, and my poor kinsman give her all, or nearly all, his possessions, Vernon Grange goes to the usurers, and the king will find a lodging for myself. What does it matter? I cannot live above two or three years at the most, and can only hope, therefore, that dear stout old Sir Miles may outlive me. At thirty-three I have worn out fortune and life; little pleasure could Laughton give me,—brief pain the Bench. ‘Fore Gad, the philosophy of the thing is on the whole against sour looks and the noose!” Thus deciding in the progress of his reverie, he smiled, and changed his position. The sun had set, the twilight was over, the moon rose in splendour from amidst a thick copse of mingled beech and oak; the beams fell full on the face of the muser, and the face seemed yet paler and the exhaustion of premature decay yet more evident, by that still and melancholy light: all ruins gain dignity by the moon. This was a ruin nobler than that which painters place on their canvas,—the ruin, not of stone and brick, but of humanity and spirit; the wreck of man prematurely old, not stricken by great sorrow, not bowed by great toil, but fretted and mined away by small pleasures and poor excitements,—small and poor, but daily, hourly, momentarily at their gnome-like work. Something of the gravity and the true lesson of the hour and scene, perhaps, forced itself upon a mind little given to sentiment, for Vernon rose languidly and muttered,—

“My poor mother hoped better things from me. It is well, after all, that it is broken off with Mary. Why should there be any one to weep for me? I can the better die smiling, as I have lived.”

Meanwhile, as it is necessary we should follow each of the principal characters we have introduced through the course of an evening more or less eventful in the destiny of all, we return to Mainwaring and accompany him to the lake at the bottom of the park, which he reached as its smooth surface glistened in the last beams of the sun. He saw, as he neared the water, the fish sporting in the pellucid tide; the dragonfly darted and hovered in the air; the tedded grass beneath his feet gave forth the fragrance of crushed thyme and clover; the swan paused, as if slumbering on the wave; the linnet and finch sang still from the neighbouring copses; and the heavy bees were winging their way home with a drowsy murmur. All around were images of that unspeakable peace which Nature whispers to those attuned to her music; all fitted to lull, but not to deject, the spirit,—images dear to the holiday of the world-worn man, to the contemplation of serene and retired age, to the boyhood of poets, to the youth of lovers. But Mainwaring’s step was heavy, and his brow clouded, and Nature that evening was dumb to him. At the margin of the lake stood a solitary angler who now, his evening’s task done,

was employed in leisurely disjointing his rod and whistling with much sweetness an air from one of Izaak Walton's songs. Mainwaring reached the angler and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"What sport, Ardworth?"

"A few large roach with the fly, and one pike with a gudgeon,—a noble fellow! Look at him! He was lying under the reeds yonder; I saw his green back, and teased him into biting. A heavenly evening! I wonder you did not follow my example, and escape from a set where neither you nor I can feel very much at home, to this green banquet of Nature, in which at least no man sits below the salt-cellar. The birds are an older family than the St. Johns, but they don't throw their pedigree in our teeth, Mainwaring."

"Nay, nay, my good friend, you wrong old Sir Miles; proud he is, no doubt, but neither you nor I have had to complain of his insolence."

"Of his insolence, certainly not; of his condescension, yes! Hang it, William, it is his very politeness that galls me. Don't you observe that with Vernon, or Lord A——, or Lord B——, or Mr. C——, he is easy and off-hand; calls them by their names, pats them on the shoulder, rates them, and swears at them if they vex him. But with you and me and his French parasite, it is all stately decorum and punctilious courtesy: 'Mr. Mainwaring, I am delighted to see you;' 'Mr. Ardworth, as you are so near, dare I ask you to ring the bell?' 'Monsieur Dalibard, with the utmost deference, I venture to disagree with you.' However, don't let my foolish susceptibility ruffle your pride. And you, too, have a worthy object in view, which might well detain you from roach and jack-fish. Have you stolen your interview with the superb Lucretia?"

"Yes, stolen, as you say; and, like all thieves not thoroughly hardened, I am ashamed of my gains."

"Sit down, my boy,—this is a bank in ten thousand; there, that old root to lean your elbow on, this soft moss for your cushion: sit down and confess. You have something on your mind that preys on you; we are old college friends,—out with it!"

"There is no resisting you, Ardworth," said Mainwaring, smiling, and drawn from his reserve and his gloom by the frank good-humour of his companion. "I should like, I own, to make a clean breast of it; and perhaps I may profit by your advice. You know, in the first place, that after I left college, my father, seeing me indisposed for the Church, to which he had always destined me in his own heart, and for which, indeed, he had gone out of his way to maintain me at the University, gave me the choice of his own business as a surveyor and land-agent, or of entering into the mercantile profession. I chose the latter, and went to Southampton, where we have a relation in business, to be initiated into the elementary mysteries. There I became acquainted with a good clergyman and his wife, and in that house I passed a great part of my time."

"With the hope, I trust, on better consideration, of gratifying your father's ambition and learning how to starve with gentility on a cure."

"Not much of that, I fear."

"Then the clergyman had a daughter?"

"You are nearer the mark now," said Mainwaring, colouring,—“though it was not his daughter. A young lady lived in his family, not even related to him; she was placed there with a certain allowance by a rich relation. In a word, I admired, perhaps I loved, this young person; but she was without an independence, and I not yet provided even with the substitute of money,—a profession. I fancied (do not laugh at my vanity) that my feelings might be returned. I was in alarm for her as well as myself; I sounded the clergyman as to the chance of obtaining the consent of her rich relation, and was informed that he thought it hopeless. I felt I had no right to invite her to poverty and ruin, and still less to entangle further (if I had chanced to touch at all) her affection. I made an excuse to my father to leave the town, and returned home."

"Prudent and honourable enough, so far; unlike me,—I should have run off with the girl, if she loved me, and old Plutus, the rascal, might have done his worst against Cupid. But I interrupt you."

“I came back when the county was greatly agitated,—public meetings, speeches, mobs; a sharp election going on. My father had always taken keen interest in politics; he was of the same party as Sir Miles, who, you know, is red-hot upon politics. I was easily led—partly by ambition, partly by the effect of example, partly by the hope to give a new turn to my thoughts—to make an appearance in public.”

“And a devilish creditable one too! Why, man, your speeches have been quoted with rapture by the London papers. Horribly aristocratic and Pittish, it is true,—I think differently; but every man to his taste. Well—”

“My attempts, such as they were, procured me the favour of Sir Miles. He had long been acquainted with my father, who had helped him in his own elections years ago. He seemed cordially delighted to patronize the son; he invited me to visit him at Laughton, and hinted to my father that I was formed for something better than a counting-house: my poor father was intoxicated. In a word, here I am; here, often for days, almost weeks, together, have I been a guest, always welcomed.”

“You pause. This is the primordium,—now comes the confession, eh?”

“Why, one half the confession is over. It was my most unmerited fortune to attract the notice of Miss Clavering. Do not fancy me so self-conceited as to imagine that I should ever have presumed so high, but for—”

“But for encouragement,—I understand! Well, she is a magnificent creature, in her way, and I do not wonder that she drove the poor little girl at Southampton out of your thoughts.”

“Ah! but there is the sore,—I am not sure that she has done so. Ardworth, I may trust you?”

“With everything but half-a-guinea. I would not promise to be rock against so great a temptation!” and Ardworth turned his empty pockets inside out.

“Tush! be serious, or I go.”

“Serious! With pockets like these, the devil’s in it if I am not serious. Perge, precor.”

“Ardworth, then,” said Mainwaring, with great emotion, “I confide to you the secret trouble of my heart. This girl at Southampton is Lucretia’s sister,—her half-sister; the rich relation on whose allowance she lives is Sir Miles St. John.”

“Whew! my own poor dear little cousin, by the father’s side! Mainwaring, I trust you have not deceived me; you have not amused yourself with breaking Susan’s heart? For a heart, and an honest, simple, English girl’s heart she has.”

“Heaven forbid! I tell you I have never even declared my love; and if love it were, I trust it is over. But when Sir Miles was first kind to me, first invited me, I own I had the hope to win his esteem; and since he had always made so strong and cruel a distinction between Lucretia and Susan, I thought it not impossible that he might consent at last to my union with the niece he had refused to receive and acknowledge. But even while the hope was in me, I was drawn on, I was entangled, I was spell-bound, I know not how or why; but, to close my confidence, while still doubtful whether my own heart is free from the remembrance of the one sister, I am pledged to the other.”

Ardworth looked down gravely and remained silent. He was a joyous, careless, reckless youth, with unsteady character and pursuits, and with something of vague poetry, much of unaccommodating pride about his nature,—one of those youths little likely to do what is called well in the world; not persevering enough for an independent career, too blunt and honest for a servile one. But it was in the very disposition of such a person to judge somewhat harshly of Mainwaring’s disclosure, and not easily to comprehend what, after all, was very natural,—how a young man, new to life, timid by character, and of an extreme susceptibility to the fear of giving pain, had, in the surprise, the gratitude, the emotion, of an avowed attachment from a girl far above him in worldly position, been forced, by receiving, to seem, at least, to return her affection. And, indeed, though not wholly insensible to the brilliant prospects opened to him in such a connection, yet, to do him justice, Mainwaring would have been equally entangled by a similar avowal from a girl more his equal in the world. It was rather from an amiability bordering upon weakness, than from any more degrading

moral imperfections, that he had been betrayed into a position which neither contented his heart nor satisfied his conscience.

With far less ability than his friend, Ardworth had more force and steadiness in his nature, and was wholly free from that morbid delicacy of temperament to which susceptible and shy persons owe much of their errors and misfortunes. He said, therefore, after a long pause: “My good fellow, to be plain with you, I cannot say that your confession has improved you in my estimation; but that is perhaps because of the bluntness of my understanding. I could quite comprehend your forgetting Susan (and, after all, I am left in doubt as to the extent of her conquest over you) for the very different charms of her sister. On the other hand, I could still better understand that, having once fancied Susan, you could not be commanded into love for Lucretia. But I do not comprehend your feeling love for one, and making love to the other,—which is the long and short of the business.”

“That is not exactly the true statement,” answered Mainwaring, with a powerful effort at composure. “There are moments when, listening to Lucretia, when, charmed by that softness which, contrasting the rest of her character, she exhibits to none but me, struck by her great mental powers, proud of an unsought triumph over such a being, I feel as if I could love none but her; then suddenly her mood changes,—she utters sentiments that chill and revolt me; the very beauty seems vanished from her face. I recall with a sigh the simple sweetness of Susan, and I feel as if I deceived both my mistress and myself. Perhaps, however, all the circumstances of this connection tend to increase my doubts. It is humiliating to me to know that I woo clandestinely and upon sufferance; that I am stealing, as it were, into a fortune; that I am eating Sir Miles’s bread, and yet counting upon his death; and this shame in myself may make me unconsciously unjust to Lucretia. But it is useless to reprove me for what is past; and though I at first imagined you could advise me for the future, I now see, too clearly, that no advice could avail.”

“I grant that too; for all you require is to make up your mind to be fairly off with the old love, or fairly on with the new. However, now you have stated your case thus frankly, if you permit me, I will take advantage of the strange chance of finding myself here, and watch, ponder, and counsel, if I can. This Lucretia, I own it, puzzles and perplexes me; but though no Oedipus, I will not take fright at the sphinx. I suppose now it is time to return. They expect some of the neighbours to drink tea, and I must doff my fishing-jacket. Come!”

As they strolled towards the house, Ardworth broke a silence which had lasted for some moments.

“And how is that dear good Fielden? I ought to have guessed him at once, when you spoke of your clergyman and his young charge; but I did not know he was at Southampton.”

“He has exchanged his living for a year, on account of his wife’s health, and rather, I think also, with the wish to bring poor Susan nearer to Laughton, in the chance of her uncle seeing her. But you are, then, acquainted with Fielden?”

“Acquainted!—my best friend. He was my tutor, and prepared me for Caius College. I owe him, not only the little learning I have, but the little good that is left in me. I owe to him apparently, also, whatever chance of bettering my prospects may arise from my visit to Laughton.”

“Notwithstanding our intimacy, we have, like most young men not related, spoken so little of our family matters that I do not now understand how you are cousin to Susan, nor what, to my surprise and delight, brought you hither three days ago.”

“Faith, my story is easier to explain than your own, William. Here goes!”

But as Ardworth’s recital partially involves references to family matters not yet sufficiently known to the reader, we must be pardoned if we assume to ourselves his task of narrator, and necessarily enlarge on his details.

The branch of the illustrious family of St. John represented by Sir Miles, diverged from the parent stem of the Lords of Bletshoe. With them it placed at the summit of its pedigree the name of William de St. John, the Conqueror’s favourite and trusted warrior, and Oliva de Filgiers. With them

it blazoned the latter alliance, which gave to Sir Oliver St. John the lands of Bletshoe by the hand of Margaret Beauchamp (by her second marriage with the Duke of Somerset), grandmother to Henry VII. In the following generation, the younger son of a younger son had founded, partly by offices of state, partly by marriage with a wealthy heiress, a house of his own; and in the reign of James the First, the St. Johns of Laughton ranked amongst the chief gentlemen of Hampshire. From that time till the accession of George III the family, though it remained untitled, had added to its consequence by intermarriages of considerable dignity,—chosen, indeed, with a disregard for money uncommon amongst the English aristocracy; so that the estate was but little enlarged since the reign of James, though profiting, of course, by improved cultivation and the different value of money. On the other hand, perhaps there were scarcely ten families in the country who could boast of a similar directness of descent on all sides from the proudest and noblest aristocracy of the soil; and Sir Miles St. John, by blood, was, almost at the distance of eight centuries, as pure a Norman as his ancestral William. His grandfather, nevertheless, had deviated from the usual disinterested practice of the family, and had married an heiress who brought the quarterings of Vernon to the crowded escutcheon, and with these quarterings an estate of some 4,000 pounds a year popularly known by the name of Vernon Grange. This rare occurrence did not add to the domestic happiness of the contracting parties, nor did it lead to the ultimate increase of the Laughton possessions. Two sons were born. To the elder was destined the father's inheritance,—to the younger the maternal property. One house is not large enough for two heirs. Nothing could exceed the pride of the father as a St. John, except the pride of the mother as a Vernon. Jealousies between the two sons began early and rankled deep; nor was there peace at Laughton till the younger had carried away from its rental the lands of Vernon Grange; and the elder remained just where his predecessors stood in point of possessions,—sole lord of Laughton sole. The elder son, Sir Miles's father, had been, indeed, so chafed by the rivalry with his brother that in disgust he had run away and thrown himself, at the age of fourteen, into the navy. By accident or by merit he rose high in that profession, acquired name and fame, and lost an eye and an arm,—for which he was gazetted, at the same time, an admiral and a baronet.

Thus mutilated and dignified, Sir George St. John retired from the profession; and finding himself unmarried, and haunted by the apprehension that if he died childless, Laughton would pass to his brother's heirs, he resolved upon consigning his remains to the nuptial couch, previous to the surer peace of the family vault. At the age of fifty-nine, the grim veteran succeeded in finding a young lady of unblemished descent and much marked with the small-pox, who consented to accept the only hand which Sir George had to offer. From this marriage sprang a numerous family; but all died in early childhood, frightened to death, said the neighbours, by their tender parents (considered the ugliest couple in the county), except one boy (the present Sir Miles) and one daughter, many years younger, destined to become Lucretia's mother. Sir Miles came early into his property; and although the softening advance of civilization, with the liberal effects of travel and a long residence in cities, took from him that provincial austerity of pride which is only seen in stanch perfection amongst the lords of a village, he was yet little less susceptible to the duties of maintaining his lineage pure as its representation had descended to him than the most superb of his predecessors. But owing, it was said, to an early disappointment, he led, during youth and manhood, a roving and desultory life, and so put off from year to year the grand experiment matrimonial, until he arrived at old age, with the philosophical determination to select from the other branches of his house the successor to the heritage of St. John. In thus arrogating to himself a right to neglect his proper duties as head of a family, he found his excuse in adopting his niece Lucretia. His sister had chosen for her first husband a friend and neighbour of his own, a younger son, of unexceptionable birth and of very agreeable manners in society. But this gentleman contrived to render her life so miserable that, though he died fifteen months after their marriage, his widow could scarcely be expected to mourn long for him. A year after Mr. Clavering's death, Mrs. Clavering married again, under the mistaken notion that she had the right to choose for herself. She married Dr. Mivers, the provincial physician who had

attended her husband in his last illness,—a gentleman by education, manners, and profession, but unhappily the son of a silk-mercator. Sir Miles never forgave this connection. By her first marriage, Sir Miles's sister had one daughter, Lucretia; by her second marriage, another daughter, named Susan. She survived somewhat more than a year the birth of the latter. On her death, Sir Miles formally (through his agent) applied to Dr. Mivers for his eldest niece, Lucretia Clavering, and the physician did not think himself justified in withholding from her the probable advantages of a transfer from his own roof to that of her wealthy uncle. He himself had been no worldly gainer by his connection; his practice had suffered materially from the sympathy which was felt by the county families for the supposed wrongs of Sir Miles St. John, who was personally not only popular, but esteemed, nor less so on account of his pride,—too dignified to refer even to his domestic annoyances, except to his most familiar associates; to them, indeed, Sir Miles had said, briefly, that he considered a physician who abused his entrance into a noble family by stealing into its alliance was a character in whose punishment all society had an interest. The words were repeated; they were thought just. Those who ventured to suggest that Mrs. Clavering, as a widow, was a free agent, were regarded with suspicion. It was the time when French principles were just beginning to be held in horror, especially in the provinces, and when everything that encroached upon the rights and prejudices of the high born was called “a French principle.” Dr. Mivers was as much scouted as if he had been a *sans-culotte*. Obligated to quit the county, he settled at a distance; but he had a career to commence again; his wife's death enfeebled his spirits and damped his exertions. He did little more than earn a bare subsistence, and died at last, when his only daughter was fourteen, poor and embarrassed. On his death-bed he wrote a letter to Sir Miles reminding him that, after all, Susan was his sister's child, gently vindicating himself from the unmerited charge of treachery, which had blasted his fortunes and left his orphan penniless, and closing with a touching yet a manly appeal to the sole relative left to befriend her. The clergyman who had attended him in his dying moments took charge of this letter; he brought it in person to Laughton, and delivered it to Sir Miles. Whatever his errors, the old baronet was no common man. He was not vindictive, though he could not be called forgiving. He had considered his conduct to his sister a duty owed to his name and ancestors; she had placed herself and her youngest child out of the pale of his family. He would not receive as his niece the grand-daughter of a silk-mercator. The relationship was extinct, as, in certain countries, nobility is forfeited by a union with an inferior class. But, niece or not, here was a claim to humanity and benevolence, and never yet had appeal been made by suffering to his heart and purse in vain.

He bowed his head over the letter as his eye came to the last line, and remained silent so long that the clergyman at last, moved and hopeful, approached and took his hand. It was the impulse of a good man and a good priest. Sir Miles looked up in surprise; but the calm, pitying face bent on him repelled all return of pride.

“Sir,” he said tremulously, and he pressed the hand that grasped his own, “I thank you. I am not fit at this moment to decide what to do; to-morrow you shall know. And the man died poor,—not in want, not in want?”

“Comfort yourself, worthy sir; he had at the last all that sickness and death require, except one assurance, which I ventured to whisper to him,—I trust not too rashly,—that his daughter would not be left unprotected. And I pray you to reflect, my dear sir, that—”

Sir Miles did not wait for the conclusion of the sentence; he rose abruptly, and left the room. Mr. Fielden (so the good priest was named) felt confident of the success of his mission; but to win it the more support, he sought Lucretia. She was then seventeen: it is an age when the heart is peculiarly open to the household ties,—to the memory of a mother, to the sweet name of sister. He sought this girl, he told his tale, and pleaded the sister's cause. Lucretia heard in silence: neither eye nor lip betrayed emotion; but her colour went and came. This was the only sign that she was moved: moved, but how? Fielden's experience in the human heart could not guess. When he had done, she went quietly to her desk (it was in her own room that the conference took place), she unlocked it with a

deliberate hand, she took from it a pocketbook and a case of jewels which Sir Miles had given her on her last birthday. "Let my sister have these; while I live she shall not want!"

"My dear young lady, it is not these things that she asks from you,—it is your affection, your sisterly heart, your intercession with her natural protector; these, in her name, I ask for,—'non gemmis, neque purpura venale, nec auro!'"

Lucretia then, still without apparent emotion, raised to the good man's face deep, penetrating, but unrevealing eyes, and said slowly,—

"Is my sister like my mother, who, they say, was handsome?"

Much startled by this question, Fielden answered: "I never saw your mother, my dear; but your sister gives promise of more than common comeliness."

Lucretia's brows grew slightly compressed. "And her education has been, of course, neglected?"

"Certainly, in some points,—mathematics, for instance, and theology; but she knows what ladies generally know,—French and Italian, and such like. Dr. Mivers was not unlearned in the polite letters. Oh, trust me, my dear young lady, she will not disgrace your family; she will justify your uncle's favour. Plead for her!" And the good man clasped his hands.

Lucretia's eyes fell musingly on the ground; but she resumed, after a short pause,—

"What does my uncle himself say?"

"Only that he will decide to-morrow."

"I will see him;" and Lucretia left the room as for that object. But when she had gained the stairs, she paused at the large embayed casement, which formed a niche in the landing-place, and gazed over the broad domains beyond; a stern smile settled, then, upon her lips,—the smile seemed to say, "In this inheritance I will have no rival."

Lucretia's influence with Sir Miles was great, but here it was not needed. Before she saw him he had decided on his course. Her precocious and apparently intuitive knowledge of character detected at a glance the safety with which she might intercede. She did so, and was chid into silence.

The next morning, Sir Miles took the priest's arm and walked with him into the gardens.

"Mr. Fielden," he said, with the air of a man who has chosen his course, and deprecates all attempt to make him swerve from it, "if I followed my own selfish wishes, I should take home this poor child. Stay, sir, and hear me,—I am no hypocrite, and I speak honestly. I like young faces; I have no family of my own. I love Lucretia, and I am proud of her; but a girl brought up in adversity might be a better nurse and a more docile companion,—let that pass. I have reflected, and I feel that I cannot set to Lucretia—set to children unborn—the example of indifference to a name degraded and a race adulterated; you may call this pride or prejudice,—I view it differently. There are duties due from an individual, duties due from a nation, duties due from a family; as my ancestors thought, so think I. They left me the charge of their name, as the fief-rent by which I hold their lands. 'Sdeath, sir!—Pardon me the expletive; I was about to say that if I am now a childless old man, it is because I have myself known temptation and resisted. I loved, and denied myself what I believed my best chance of happiness, because the object of my attachment was not my equal. That was a bitter struggle,—I triumphed, and I rejoice at it, though the result was to leave all thoughts of wedlock elsewhere odious and repugnant. These principles of action have made a part of my creed as gentleman, if not as Christian. Now to the point. I beseech you to find a fitting and reputable home for Miss—Miss Mivers," the lip slightly curled as the name was said; "I shall provide suitably for her maintenance. When she marries, I will dower her, provided only and always that her choice fall upon one who will not still further degrade her lineage on her mother's side,—in a word, if she select a gentleman. Mr. Fielden, on this subject I have no more to say."

In vain the good clergyman, whose very conscience, as well as reason, was shocked by the deliberate and argumentative manner with which the baronet had treated the abandonment of his sister's child as an absolutely moral, almost religious, duty,—in vain he exerted himself to repel such sophisms and put the matter in its true light. It was easy for him to move Sir Miles's heart,—that

was ever gentle; that was moved already: but the crotchet in his head was impregnable. The more touchingly he painted poor Susan's unfriended youth, her sweet character, and promising virtues, the more Sir Miles St. John considered himself a martyr to his principles, and the more obstinate in the martyrdom he became. "Poor thing! poor child!" he said often, and brushed a tear from his eyes; "a thousand pities! Well, well, I hope she will be happy! Mind, money shall never stand in the way if she have a suitable offer!"

This was all the worthy clergyman, after an hour's eloquence, could extract from him. Out of breath and out of patience, he gave in at last; and the baronet, still holding his reluctant arm, led him back towards the house. After a prolonged pause, Sir Miles said abruptly: "I have been thinking that I may have unwittingly injured this man,—this Mivers,—while I deemed only that he injured me. As to reparation to his daughter, that is settled; and after all, though I do not publicly acknowledge her, she is half my own niece."

"Half?"

"Half,—the father's side doesn't count, of course; and, rigidly speaking, the relationship is perhaps forfeited on the other. However, that half of it I grant. Zooks, sir, I say I grant it! I beg you ten thousand pardons for my vehemence. To return,—perhaps I can show at least that I bear no malice to this poor doctor. He has relations of his own,—silk mercers; trade has reverses. How are they off?"

Perfectly perplexed by this very contradictory and paradoxical, yet, to one better acquainted with Sir Miles, very characteristic, benevolence, Fielden was some time before he answered. "Those members of Dr. Mivers's family who are in trade are sufficiently prosperous; they have paid his debts,—they, Sir Miles, will receive his daughter."

"By no means!" cried Sir Miles, quickly; then, recovering himself, he added, "or, if you think that advisable, of course all interference on my part is withdrawn."

"Festina lente!—not so quick, Sir Miles. I do not yet say that it is advisable,—not because they are silk-mercers, the which, I humbly conceive, is no sin to exclude them from gratitude for their proffered kindness, but because Susan, poor child, having been brought up in different habits, may feel a little strange, at least at first, with—"

"Strange, yes; I should hope so!" interrupted Sir Miles, taking snuff with much energy. "And, by the way, I am thinking that it would be well if you and Mrs. Fielden—you are married, sir? That is right; clergymen all marry!—if you and Mrs. Fielden would take charge of her yourselves, it would be a great comfort to me to think her so well placed. We differ, sir, but I respect you. Think of this. Well, then, the doctor has left no relations that I can aid in any way?"

"Strange man!" muttered Fielden. "Yes; I must not let one poor youth lose the opportunity offered by your—your—"

"Never mind what; proceed. One poor youth,—in the shop, of course?"

"No; and by his father's side (since you so esteem such vanities) of an ancient family,—a sister of Dr. Mivers married Captain Ardworth."

"Ardworth,—a goodish name; Ardworth of Yorkshire?"

"Yes, of that family. It was, of course, an imprudent marriage, contracted while he was only an ensign. His family did not reject him, Sir Miles."

"Sir, Ardworth is a good squire's family, but the name is Saxon; there is no difference in race between the head of the Ardworths, if he were a duke, and my gardener, John Hodge,—Saxon and Saxon, both. His family did not reject him; go on."

"But he was a younger son in a large family; both himself and his wife have known all the distresses common, they tell me, to the poverty of a soldier who has no resource but his pay. They have a son. Dr. Mivers, though so poor himself, took this boy, for he loved his sister dearly, and meant to bring him up to his own profession. Death frustrated this intention. The boy is high-spirited and deserving."

“Let his education be completed; send him to the University; and I will see that he is put into some career of which his father’s family would approve. You need not mention to any one my intentions in this respect, not even to the lad. And now, Mr. Fielden, I have done my duty,—at least, I think so. The longer you honour my house, the more I shall be pleased and grateful; but this topic, allow me most respectfully to say, needs and bears no further comment. Have you seen the last news from the army?”

“The army! Oh, fie, Sir Miles, I must speak one word more. May not my poor Susan have at least the comfort to embrace her sister?”

Sir Miles paused a moment, and struck his crutch-stick thrice firmly on the ground.

“I see no great objection to that; but by the address of this letter, the poor girl is too far from Laughton to send Lucretia to her.”

“I can obviate that objection, Sir Miles. It is my wish to continue to Susan her present home amongst my own children. My wife loves her dearly; and had you consented to give her the shelter of your own roof, I am sure I should not have seen a smile in the house for a month after. If you permit this plan, as indeed you honoured me by suggesting it, I can pass through Southampton on my way to my own living in Devonshire, and Miss Clavering can visit her sister there.”

“Let it be so,” said Sir Miles, briefly; and so the conversation closed.

Some weeks afterwards, Lucretia went in her uncle’s carriage, with four post-horses, with her maid and her footman,—went in the state and pomp of heiress to Laughton,—to the small lodging-house in which the kind pastor crowded his children and his young guest. She stayed there some days. She did not weep when she embraced Susan, she did not weep when she took leave of her; but she showed no want of actual kindness, though the kindness was formal and stately. On her return, Sir Miles forbore to question; but he looked as if he expected, and would willingly permit, her to speak on what might naturally be uppermost at her heart. Lucretia, however, remained silent, till at last the baronet, colouring, as if ashamed of his curiosity, said,—

“Is your sister like your mother?”

“You forget, sir, I can have no recollection of my mother.”

“Your mother had a strong family likeness to myself.”

“She is not like you; they say she is like Dr. Mivers.”

“Oh!” said the baronet, and he asked no more.

The sisters did not meet again; a few letters passed between them, but the correspondence gradually ceased.

Young Ardworth went to college, prepared by Mr. Fielden, who was no ordinary scholar, and an accurate and profound mathematician,—a more important requisite than classical learning in a tutor for Cambridge. But Ardworth was idle, and perhaps even dissipated. He took a common degree, and made some debts, which were paid by Sir Miles without a murmur. A few letters then passed between the baronet and the clergyman as to Ardworth’s future destiny; the latter owned that his pupil was not persevering enough for the Bar, nor steady enough for the Church. These were no great faults in Sir Miles’s eyes. He resolved, after an effort, to judge himself of the capacities of the young man, and so came the invitation to Laughton. Ardworth was greatly surprised when Fielden communicated to him this invitation, for hitherto he had not conceived the slightest suspicion of his benefactor; he had rather, and naturally, supposed that some relation of his father’s had paid for his maintenance at the University, and he knew enough of the family history to look upon Sir Miles as the proudest of men. How was it, then, that he, who would not receive the daughter of Dr. Mivers, his own niece, would invite the nephew of Dr. Mivers, who was no relation to him? However, his curiosity was excited, and Fielden was urgent that he should go; to Laughton, therefore, had he gone.

We have now brought down to the opening of our narrative the general records of the family its concerns; we have reserved our account of the rearing and the character of the personage most

important, perhaps, in the development of its events,—Lucretia Claving, —in order to place singly before the reader the portrait of her dark, misguided, and ill-boding youth.

CHAPTER II. LUCRETIA

When Lucretia first came to the house of Sir Miles St. John she was an infant about four years old. The baronet then lived principally in London, with occasional visits rather to the Continent or a watering-place than to his own family mansion. He did not pay any minute attention to his little ward, satisfied that her nurse was sedulous, and her nursery airy and commodious. When, at the age of seven, she began to interest him, and he himself, approaching old age, began seriously to consider whether he should select her as his heiress, for hitherto he had not formed any decided or definite notions on the matter, he was startled by a temper so vehement, so self-willed and sternly imperious, so obstinately bent upon attaining its object, so indifferently contemptuous of warning, reproof, coaxing, or punishment, that her governess honestly came to him in despair.

The management of this unmanageable child interested Sir Miles. It caused him to think of Lucretia seriously; it caused him to have her much in his society, and always in his thoughts. The result was, that by amusing and occupying him, she forced a stronger hold on his affections than she might have done had she been more like the ordinary run of commonplace children. Of all dogs, there is no dog that so attaches a master as a dog that snarls at everybody else,—that no other hand can venture to pat with impunity; of all horses, there is none which so flatters the rider, from Alexander downwards, as a horse that nobody else can ride. Extend this principle to the human species, and you may understand why Lucretia became so dear to Sir Miles St. John,—she got at his heart through his vanity. For though, at times, her brow darkened and her eye flashed even at his remonstrance, she was yet no sooner in his society than she made a marked distinction between him and the subordinates who had hitherto sought to control her. Was this affection? He thought so. Alas! what parent can trace the workings of a child's mind,—springs moved by an idle word from a nurse; a whispered conference between hirelings. Was it possible that Lucretia had not often been menaced, as the direst evil that could befall her, with her uncle's displeasure; that long before she could be sensible of mere worldly loss or profit, she was not impressed with a vague sense of Sir Miles's power over her fate,—nay, when trampling, in childish wrath and scorn, upon some menial's irritable feelings, was it possible that she had not been told that, but for Sir Miles, she would be little better than a servant herself? Be this as it may, all weakness is prone to dissimulate; and rare and happy is the child whose feelings are as pure and transparent as the fond parent deems them. There is something in children, too, which seems like an instinctive deference to the aristocratic appearances which sway the world. Sir Miles's stately person, his imposing dress, the respect with which he was surrounded, all tended to beget notions of superiority and power, to which it was no shame to succumb, as it was to Miss Black, the governess, whom the maids answered pertly, or Martha, the nurse, whom Miss Black snubbed if Lucretia tore her frock.

Sir Miles's affection once won, his penetration not, perhaps, blinded to her more evident faults, but his self-love soothed towards regarding them leniently, there was much in Lucretia's external gifts which justified the predilection of the haughty man. As a child she was beautiful, and, perhaps from her very imperfections of temper, her beauty had that air of distinction which the love of command is apt to confer. If Sir Miles was with his friends when Lucretia swept into the room, he was pleased to hear them call her their little "princess," and was pleased yet more at a certain dignified tranquillity with which she received their caresses or their toys, and which he regarded as the sign of a superior mind; nor was it long, indeed, before what we call "a superior mind" developed itself in the young Lucretia. All children are quick till they are set methodically to study; but Lucretia's quickness defied even that numbing ordeal, by which half of us are rendered dunces. Rapidity and precision in all the tasks set to her, in the comprehension of all the explanations given to her questions, evinced singular powers of readiness and reasoning.

As she grew older, she became more reserved and thoughtful. Seeing but few children of her own age, and mixing intimately with none, her mind was debarred from the usual objects which distract the vivacity, the restless and wondrous observation, of childhood. She came in and out of Sir Miles's library of a morning, or his drawing-room of an evening, till her hour for rest, with unquestioned and sometimes unnoticed freedom; she listened to the conversation around her, and formed her own conclusions unchecked. It has a great influence upon a child, whether for good or for evil, to mix early and habitually with those grown up,—for good to the mere intellect always; the evil depends upon the character and discretion of those the child sees and hears. “Reverence the greatest is due to the children,” exclaims the wisest of the Romans [Cicero. The sentiment is borrowed by Juvenal.],—that is to say, that we must revere the candour and inexperience and innocence of their minds.

Now, Sir Miles's habitual associates were persons of the world,—well-bred and decorous, indeed, before children, as the best of the old school were, avoiding all anecdotes; all allusions, for which the prudent matron would send her girls out of the room; but with that reserve speaking of the world as the world goes: if talking of young A——, calculating carelessly what he would have when old A——, his father, died; naturally giving to wealth and station and ability their fixed importance in life; not over-apt to single out for eulogium some quiet goodness; rather inclined to speak with irony of pretensions to virtue; rarely speaking but with respect of the worldly seemings which rule mankind. All these had their inevitable effect upon that keen, quick, yet moody and reflective intellect.

Sir Miles removed at last to Laughton. He gave up London,—why, he acknowledged not to himself; but it was because he had outlived his age. Most of his old set were gone; new hours, new habits, had stolen in. He had ceased to be of importance as a marrying man, as a personage of fashion; his health was impaired; he shrank from the fatigues of a contested election; he resigned his seat in parliament for his native county; and once settled at Laughton, the life there soothed and flattered him,—there all his former claims to distinction were still fresh. He amused himself by collecting, in his old halls and chambers, his statues and pictures, and felt that, without fatigue or trouble, he was a greater man at Laughton in his old age than he had been in London during his youth.

Lucretia was then thirteen. Three years afterwards, Olivier Dalibard was established in the house; and from that time a great change became noticeable in her. The irregular vehemence of her temper gradually subsided, and was replaced by an habitual self-command which rendered the rare deviations from it more effective and imposing. Her pride changed its character wholly and permanently; no word, no look of scorn to the low-born and the poor escaped her. The masculine studies which her erudite tutor opened to a grasping and inquisitive mind, elevated her very errors above the petty distinctions of class. She imbibed earnestly what Dalibard assumed or felt,—the more dangerous pride of the fallen angel,—and set up the intellect as a deity. All belonging to the mere study of mind charmed and enchained her; but active and practical in her very reveries, if she brooded, it was to scheme, to plot, to weave, web, and mesh, and to smile in haughty triumph at her own ingenuity and daring. The first lesson of mere worldly wisdom teaches us to command temper; it was worldly wisdom that made the once impetuous girl calm, tranquil, and serene. Sir Miles was pleased by a change that removed from Lucretia's outward character its chief blot,—perhaps, as his frame declined, he sighed sometimes to think that with so much majesty there appeared but little tenderness; he took, however, the merits with the faults, and was content upon the whole.

If the Provencal had taken more than common pains with his young pupil, the pains were not solely disinterested. In plunging her mind amidst that profound corruption which belongs only to intellect cultivated in scorn of good and in suppression of heart, he had his own views to serve. He watched the age when the passions ripen, and he grasped at the fruit which his training sought to mature. In the human heart ill regulated there is a dark desire for the forbidden. This Lucretia felt; this her studies cherished, and her thoughts brooded over. She detected, with the quickness of her sex, the preceptor's stealthy aim. She started not at the danger. Proud of her mastery over herself,

she rather triumphed in luring on into weakness this master-intelligence which had lighted up her own,—to see her slave in her teacher; to despise or to pity him whom she had first contemplated with awe. And with this mere pride of the understanding might be connected that of the sex; she had attained the years when woman is curious to know and to sound her power. To inflame Dalibard's cupidity or ambition was easy; but to touch his heart,—that marble heart!—this had its dignity and its charm. Strange to say, she succeeded; the passion, as well as interests, of this dangerous and able man became enlisted in his hopes. And now the game played between them had a terror in its suspense; for if Dalibard penetrated not into the recesses of his pupil's complicated nature, she was far from having yet sounded the hell that lay, black and devouring, beneath his own. Not through her affections,—those he scarce hoped for,—but through her inexperience, her vanity, her passions, he contemplated the path to his victory over her soul and her fate. And so resolute, so wily, so unscrupulous was this person, who had played upon all the subtlest keys and chords in the scale of turbulent life, that, despite the lofty smile with which Lucretia at length heard and repelled his suit, he had no fear of the ultimate issue, when all his projects were traversed, all his mines and stratagems abruptly brought to a close, by an event which he had wholly unforeseen,—the appearance of a rival; the ardent and almost purifying love, which, escaping a while from all the demons he had evoked, she had, with a girl's frank heart and impulse, conceived for Mainwaring. And here, indeed, was the great crisis in Lucretia's life and destiny. So interwoven with her nature had become the hard calculations of the understanding; so habitual to her now was the zest for scheming, which revels in the play and vivacity of intrigue and plot, and which Shakspeare has perhaps intended chiefly to depict in the villany of Iago,—that it is probable Lucretia could never become a character thoroughly amiable and honest. But with a happy and well-placed love, her ambition might have had legitimate vents; her restless energies, the woman's natural field in sympathies for another. The heart, once opened, softens by use; gradually and unconsciously the interchange of affection, the companionship with an upright and ingenuous mind (for virtue is not only beautiful, it is contagious), might have had their redeeming and hallowing influence. Happier, indeed, had it been, if her choice had fallen upon a more commanding and lofty nature! But perhaps it was the very meekness and susceptibility of Mainwaring's temper, relieved from feebleness by his talents, which, once in play, were undeniably great, that pleased her by contrast with her own hardness of spirit and despotism of will.

That Sir Miles should have been blind to the position of the lovers is less disparaging to his penetration than it may appear; for the very imprudence with which Lucretia abandoned herself to the society of Mainwaring during his visits at Laughton took a resemblance to candour. Sir Miles knew his niece to be more than commonly clever and well informed; that she, like him, should feel that the conversation of a superior young man was a relief to the ordinary babble of their country neighbours, was natural enough; and if now and then a doubt, a fear, had crossed his mind and rendered him more touched than he liked to own by Vernon's remarks, it had vanished upon perceiving that Lucretia never seemed a shade more pensive in Mainwaring's absence. The listlessness and the melancholy which are apt to accompany love, especially where unpropitiously placed, were not visible on the surface of this strong nature. In truth, once assured that Mainwaring returned her affection, Lucretia reposed on the future with a calm and resolute confidence; and her customary dissimulation closed like an unruffled sea over all the undercurrents that met and played below. Still, Sir Miles's attention once, however slightly, aroused to the recollection that Lucretia was at the age when woman naturally meditates upon love and marriage, had suggested, afresh and more vividly, a project which had before been indistinctly conceived,—namely, the union of the divided branches of his house, by the marriage of the last male of the Vernons with the heiress of the St. Johns. Sir Miles had seen much of Vernon himself at various intervals; he had been present at his christening, though he had refused to be his godfather, for fear of raising undue expectations; he had visited and munificently "tipped" him at Eton; he had accompanied him to his quarters when he joined the prince's regiment; he had come often in contact with him when, at the death of his father, Vernon retired from the army and blazed

in the front ranks of metropolitan fashion; he had given him counsel and had even lent him money. Vernon's spendthrift habits and dissipated if not dissolute life had certainly confirmed the old baronet in his intentions to trust the lands of Laughton to the lesser risk which property incurs in the hands of a female, if tightly settled on her, than in the more colossal and multiform luxuries of an expensive man; and to do him justice, during the flush of Vernon's riotous career he had shrunk from the thought of confiding the happiness of his niece to so unstable a partner. But of late, whether from his impaired health or his broken fortunes, Vernon's follies had been less glaring. He had now arrived at the mature age of thirty-three, when wild oats may reasonably be sown. The composed and steadfast character of Lucretia might serve to guide and direct him; and Sir Miles was one of those who hold the doctrine that a reformed rake makes the best husband. Add to this, there was nothing in Vernon's reputation—once allowing that his thirst for pleasure was slaked—which could excite serious apprehensions. Through all his difficulties, he had maintained his honour unblemished; a thousand traits of amiability and kindness of heart made him popular and beloved. He was nobody's enemy but his own. His very distresses—the prospect of his ruin, if left unassisted by Sir Miles's testamentary dispositions—were arguments in his favour. And, after all, though Lucretia was a nearer relation, Vernon was in truth the direct male heir, and according to the usual prejudices of family, therefore, the fitter representative of the ancient line. With these feelings and views, he had invited Vernon to his house, and we have seen already that his favourable impressions had been confirmed by the visit.

And here we must say that Vernon himself had been brought up in boyhood and youth to regard himself the presumptive inheritor of Laughton. It had been, from time immemorial, the custom of the St. Johns to pass by the claims of females in the settlement of the entails; from male to male the estate had gone, furnishing warriors to the army, and senators to the State. And if when Lucretia first came to Sir Miles's house the bright prospect seemed somewhat obscure, still the mesalliance of the mother, and Sir Miles's obstinate resentment thereat, seemed to warrant the supposition that he would probably only leave to the orphan the usual portion of a daughter of the house, and that the lands would go in their ordinary destination. This belief, adopted passively, and as a thing of course, had had a very prejudicial effect upon Vernon's career. What mattered that he overenjoyed his youth, that the subordinate property of the Vernons, a paltry four or five thousand pounds a year, went a little too fast,—the splendid estates of Laughton would recover all. From this dream he had only been awakened, two or three years before, by an attachment he had formed to the portionless daughter of an earl; and the Grange being too far encumbered to allow him the proper settlements which the lady's family required, it became a matter of importance to ascertain Sir Miles's intentions. Too delicate himself to sound them, he had prevailed upon the earl, who was well acquainted with Sir Miles, to take Laughton in his way to his own seat in Dorsetshire, and, without betraying the grounds of his interest in the question, learn carelessly, as it were, the views of the wealthy man. The result had been a severe and terrible disappointment. Sir Miles had then fully determined upon constituting Lucretia his heiress; and with the usual openness of his character, he had plainly said so upon the very first covert and polished allusion to the subject which the earl slyly made. This discovery, in breaking off all hopes of a union with Lady Mary Stanville, had crushed more than mercenary expectations. It affected, through his heart, Vernon's health and spirits; it rankled deep, and was resented at first as a fatal injury. But Vernon's native nobility of disposition gradually softened an indignation which his reason convinced him was groundless and unjust. Sir Miles had never encouraged the expectations which Vernon's family and himself had unthinkingly formed. The baronet was master of his own fortune, and after all, was it not more natural that he should prefer the child he had brought up and reared, to a distant relation, little more than an acquaintance, simply because man succeeded to man in the mouldy pedigree of the St. Johns? And, Mary fairly lost to him, his constitutional indifference to money, a certain French levity of temper, a persuasion that his life was nearing its wasted close, had left him without regret, as without resentment, at his kinsman's decision. His boyish affection for the hearty, generous old gentleman returned, and though he abhorred the country, he had, without

a single interested thought or calculation, cordially accepted the baronet's hospitable overtures, and deserted, for the wilds of Hampshire, "the sweet shady side of Pall-Mall."

We may now enter the drawing-room at Laughton, in which were already assembled several of the families residing in the more immediate neighbourhood, and who sociably dropped in to chat around the national tea-table, play a rubber at whist, or make up, by the help of two or three children and two or three grandpas, a merry country-dance; for in that happy day people were much more sociable than they are now in the houses of our rural Thanets. Our country seats became bustling and animated after the Birthday; many even of the more important families resided, indeed, all the year round on their estates. The Continent was closed to us; the fastidious exclusiveness which comes from habitual residence in cities had not made that demarcation, in castes and in talk, between neighbour and neighbour, which exists now. Our squires were less educated, less refined, but more hospitable and unassuming. In a word, there was what does not exist now, except in some districts remote from London,—a rural society for those who sought it.

The party, as we enter, is grouped somewhat thus. But first we must cast a glance at the room itself, which rarely failed to be the first object to attract a stranger's notice. It was a long, and not particularly well-proportioned apartment,—according, at least, to modern notions,—for it had rather the appearance of two rooms thrown into one. At the distance of about thirty-five feet, the walls, before somewhat narrow, were met by an arch, supported by carved pilasters, which opened into a space nearly double the width of the previous part of the room, with a domed ceiling and an embayed window of such depth that the recess almost formed a chamber in itself. But both these divisions of the apartment corresponded exactly in point of decoration,—they had the same small panelling, painted a very light green, which seemed almost white by candlelight, each compartment wrought with an arabesque; the same enriched frieze and cornice; they had the same high mantelpieces, ascending to the ceiling, with the arms of St. John in bold relief. They had, too, the same old-fashioned and venerable furniture, draperies of thick figured velvet, with immense chairs and sofas to correspond,—interspersed, it is true, with more modern and commodious inventions of the upholsterer's art, in grave stuffed leather or lively chintz. Two windows, nearly as deep as that in the farther division, broke the outline of the former one, and helped to give that irregular and nooky appearance to the apartment which took all discomfort from its extent, and furnished all convenience for solitary study or detached flirtation. With little respect for the carved work of the panels, the walls were covered with pictures brought by Sir Miles from Italy; here and there marble busts and statues gave lightness to the character of the room, and harmonized well with that half-Italian mode of decoration which belongs to the period of James the First. The shape of the chamber, in its divisions, lent itself admirably to that friendly and sociable intermixture of amusements which reconciles the tastes of young and old. In the first division, near the fireplace, Sir Miles, seated in his easy-chair, and sheltered from the opening door by a seven-fold tapestry screen, was still at chess with his librarian. At a little distance a middle-aged gentleman and three turbaned matrons were cutting in at whist, shilling points, with a half-crown bet optional, and not much ventured on. On tables, drawn into the recesses of the windows, were the day's newspapers, Gilray's caricatures, the last new publications, and such other ingenious suggestions to chit-chat. And round these tables grouped those who had not yet found elsewhere their evening's amusement,—two or three shy young clergymen, the parish doctor, four or five squires who felt great interest in politics, but never dreamed of the extravagance of taking in a daily paper, and who now, monopolizing all the journals they could find, began fairly with the heroic resolution to skip nothing, from the first advertisement to the printer's name. Amidst one of these groups Mainwaring had bashfully ensconced himself. In the farther division, the chandelier, suspended from the domed ceiling, threw its cheerful light over a large circular table below, on which gleamed the ponderous tea-urn of massive silver, with its usual accompaniments. Nor were wanting there, in addition to those airy nothings, sliced infinitesimally, from a French roll, the more substantial and now exiled cheer of cakes,—plum and seed, Yorkshire and saffron,—attesting the light hand of the housekeeper and

the strong digestion of the guests. Round this table were seated, in full gossip, the maids and the matrons, with a slight sprinkling of the bolder young gentlemen who had been taught to please the fair. The warmth of the evening allowed the upper casement to be opened and the curtains drawn aside, and the July moonlight feebly struggled against the blaze of the lights within. At this table it was Miss Clavering's obvious duty to preside; but that was a complaisance to which she rarely condescended. Nevertheless, she had her own way of doing the honour of her uncle's house, which was not without courtesy and grace; to glide from one to the other, exchange a few friendly words, see that each set had its well-known amusements, and, finally, sit quietly down to converse with some who, from gravity or age, appeared most to neglect or be neglected by the rest, was her ordinary, and not unpopular mode of welcoming the guests at Laughton,—not unpopular; for she thus avoided all interference with the flirtations and conquests of humbler damsels, whom her station and her endowments might otherwise have crossed or humbled, while she insured the good word of the old, to whom the young are seldom so attentive. But if a stranger of more than provincial repute chanced to be present; if some stray member of parliament, or barrister on the circuit, or wandering artist, accompanied any of the neighbours,—to him Lucretia gave more earnest and undivided attention. Him she sought to draw into a conversation deeper than the usual babble, and with her calm, searching eyes, bent on him while he spoke, seemed to fathom the intellect she set in play. But as yet, this evening, she had not made her appearance,—a sin against etiquette very unusual in her. Perhaps her recent conversation with Dalibard had absorbed her thoughts to forgetfulness of the less important demands on her attention. Her absence had not interfered with the gayety at the tea-table, which was frank even to noisiness as it centred round the laughing face of Ardworth, who, though unknown to most or all of the ladies present, beyond a brief introduction to one or two of the first comers from Sir Miles (as the host had risen from his chess to bid them welcome), had already contrived to make himself perfectly at home and outrageously popular. Niched between two bouncing lasses, he had commenced acquaintance with them in a strain of familiar drollery and fun, which had soon broadened its circle, and now embraced the whole group in the happy contagion of good-humour and young animal spirits. Gabriel, allowed to sit up later than his usual hour, had not, as might have been expected, attached himself to this circle, nor indeed to any; he might be seen moving quietly about,—now contemplating the pictures on the wall with a curious eye; now pausing at the whist-table, and noting the game with the interest of an embryo gamester; now throwing himself on an ottoman, and trying to coax towards him Dash or Ponto,—trying in vain, for both the dogs abhorred him; yet still, through all this general movement, had any one taken the pains to observe him closely, it might have been sufficiently apparent that his keen, bright, restless eye, from the corner of its long, sly lids, roved chiefly towards the three persons whom he approached the least,—his father, Mainwaring, and Mr. Vernon. This last had ensconced himself apart from all, in the angle formed by one of the pilasters of the arch that divided the room, so that he was in command, as it were, of both sections. Reclined, with the careless grace that seemed inseparable from every attitude and motion of his person, in one of the great velvet chairs, with a book in his hand, which, to say truth, was turned upside down, but in the lecture of which he seemed absorbed, he heard at one hand the mirthful laughter that circled round young Ardworth, or, in its pauses, caught, on the other side, muttered exclamations from the grave whist-players: “If you had but trumped that diamond, ma'am!” “Bless me, sir, it was the best heart!” And somehow or other, both the laughter and the exclamations affected him alike with what then was called “the spleen,”—for the one reminded him of his own young days of joyless, careless mirth, of which his mechanical gayety now was but a mocking ghost; and the other seemed a satire, a parody, on the fierce but noiseless rapture of gaming, through which his passions had passed, when thousands had slipped away with a bland smile, provoking not one of those natural ebullitions of emotion which there accompanied the loss of a shilling point. And besides this, Vernon had been so accustomed to the success of the drawing-room, to be a somebody and a something in the company of wits and princes, that he felt, for the first time, a sense of insignificance in this provincial circle. Those fat

squires had heard nothing of Mr. Vernon, except that he would not have Laughton,—he had no acres, no vote in their county; he was a nobody to them. Those ruddy maidens, though now and then, indeed, one or two might steal an admiring glance at a figure of elegance so unusual, regarded him not with the female interest he had been accustomed to inspire. They felt instinctively that he could be nothing to them, nor they to him,—a mere London fop, and not half so handsome as Squires Bluff and Chuff.

Rousing himself from this little vexation to his vanity with a conscious smile at his own weakness, Vernon turned his looks towards the door, waiting for Lucretia's entrance, and since her uncle's address to him, feeling that new and indescribable interest in her appearance which is apt to steal into every breast when what was before but an indifferent acquaintance, is suddenly enhaloed with the light of a possible wife. At length the door opened, and Lucretia entered. Mr. Vernon lowered his book, and gazed with an earnestness that partook both of doubt and admiration.

Lucretia Clavering was tall,—tall beyond what is admitted to be tall in woman; but in her height there was nothing either awkward or masculine,—a figure more perfect never served for model to a sculptor. The dress at that day, unbecoming as we now deem it, was not to her—at least, on the whole disadvantageous. The short waist gave greater sweep to her majestic length of limb, while the classic thinness of the drapery betrayed the exact proportion and the exquisite contour. The arms then were worn bare almost to the shoulder, and Lucretia's arms were not more faultless in shape than dazzling in their snowy colour; the stately neck, the falling shoulders, the firm, slight, yet rounded bust,—all would have charmed equally the artist and the sensualist. Fortunately, the sole defect of her form was not apparent at a distance: that defect was in the hand; it had not the usual faults of female youthfulness,—the superfluity of flesh, the too rosy healthfulness of colour,—on the contrary, it was small and thin; but it was, nevertheless, more the hand of a man than a woman: the shape had a man's nervous distinctness, the veins swelled like sinews, the joints of the fingers were marked and prominent. In that hand it almost seemed as if the iron force of the character betrayed itself. But, as we have said, this slight defect, which few, if seen, would hypercritically notice, could not, of course, be perceptible as she moved slowly up the room; and Vernon's eye, glancing over the noble figure, rested upon the face. Was it handsome? Was it repelling? Strange that in feature it had pretensions to the highest order of beauty, and yet even that experienced connoisseur in female charms was almost as puzzled what sentence to pronounce. The hair, as was the fashion of the day, clustered in profuse curls over the forehead, but could not conceal a slight line or wrinkle between the brows; and this line, rare in women at any age, rare even in men at hers, gave an expression at once of thought and sternness to the whole face. The eyebrows themselves were straight, and not strongly marked, a shade or two perhaps too light,—a fault still more apparent in the lashes; the eyes were large, full, and though bright, astonishingly calm and deep,—at least in ordinary moments; yet withal they wanted the charm of that steadfast and open look which goes at once to the heart and invites its trust,—their expression was rather vague and abstracted. She usually looked aslant while she spoke, and this, which with some appears but shyness, in one so self-collected had an air of falsehood. But when, at times, if earnest, and bent rather on examining those she addressed than guarding herself from penetration, she fixed those eyes upon you with sudden and direct scrutiny, the gaze impressed you powerfully, and haunted you with a strange spell. The eye itself was of a peculiar and displeasing colour,—not blue, nor gray, nor black, nor hazel, but rather of that cat-like green which is drowsy in the light, and vivid in the shade. The profile was purely Greek, and so seen, Lucretia's beauty seemed incontestable; but in front face, and still more when inclined between the two, all the features took a sharpness that, however regular, had something chilling and severe: the mouth was small, but the lips were thin and pale, and had an expression of effort and contraction which added to the distrust that her sidelong glance was calculated to inspire. The teeth were dazzlingly white, but sharp and thin, and the eye-teeth were much longer than the rest. The complexion was pale, but without much delicacy,—the paleness seemed not natural to it, but rather that hue which study and late vigils give to men; so that she wanted the freshness and bloom of youth, and looked older than she was,—an effect

confirmed by an absence of roundness in the cheek not noticeable in the profile, but rendering the front face somewhat harsh as well as sharp. In a word, the face and the figure were not in harmony: the figure prevented you from pronouncing her to be masculine; the face took from the figure the charm of feminacy. It was the head of the young Augustus upon the form of Agrippina. One touch more, and we close a description which already perhaps the reader may consider frivolously minute. If you had placed before the mouth and lower part of the face a mask or bandage, the whole character of the upper face would have changed at once,—the eye lost its glittering falseness, the brow its sinister contraction; you would have pronounced the face not only beautiful, but sweet and womanly. Take that bandage suddenly away and the change would have startled you, and startled you the more because you could detect no sufficient defect or disproportion in the lower part of the countenance to explain it. It was as if the mouth was the key to the whole: the key nothing without the text, the text uncomprehended without the key.

Such, then, was Lucretia Clavering in outward appearance at the age of twenty,—striking to the most careless eye; interesting and perplexing the student in that dark language never yet deciphered,—the human countenance. The reader must have observed that the effect every face that he remarks for the first time produces is different from the impression it leaves upon him when habitually seen. Perhaps no two persons differ more from each other than does the same countenance in our earliest recollection of it from the countenance regarded in the familiarity of repeated intercourse. And this was especially the case with Lucretia Clavering's: the first impulse of nearly all who beheld it was distrust that partook of fear; it almost inspired you with a sense of danger. The judgment rose up against it; the heart set itself on its guard. But this uneasy sentiment soon died away, with most observers, in admiration at the chiselled outline, which, like the Grecian sculpture, gained the more the more it was examined, in respect for the intellectual power of the expression, and in fascinated pleasure at the charm of a smile, rarely employed, it is true, but the more attractive both for that reason and for its sudden effect in giving brightness and persuasion to an aspect that needed them so much. It was literally like the abrupt breaking out of a sunbeam; and the repellent impression of the face thus familiarized away, the matchless form took its natural influence; so that while one who but saw Lucretia for a moment might have pronounced her almost plain, and certainly not prepossessing in appearance, those with whom she lived, those whom she sought to please, those who saw her daily, united in acknowledgment of her beauty; and if they still felt awe, attributed it only to the force of her understanding.

As she now came midway up the room, Gabriel started from his seat and ran to her caressingly. Lucretia bent down, and placed her hand upon his fair locks. As she did so, he whispered,—

“Mr. Vernon has been watching for you.”

“Hush! Where is your father?”

“Behind the screen, at chess with Sir Miles.”

“With Sir Miles!” and Lucretia's eye fell, with the direct gaze we have before referred to, upon the boy's face.

“I have been looking over them pretty often,” said he, meaningly: “they have talked of nothing but the game.” Lucretia lifted her head, and glanced round with her furtive eye; the boy divined the search, and with a scarce perceptible gesture pointed her attention to Mainwaring's retreat. Her vivid smile passed over her lips as she bowed slightly to her lover, and then, withdrawing the hand which Gabriel had taken in his own, she moved on, passed Vernon with a commonplace word or two, and was soon exchanging greetings with the gay merry-makers in the farther part of the room. A few minutes afterwards, the servants entered, the tea-table was removed, chairs were thrust back, a single lady of a certain age volunteered her services at the piano, and dancing began within the ample space which the arch fenced off from the whist-players. Vernon had watched his opportunity, and at the first sound of the piano had gained Lucretia's side, and with grave politeness pre-engaged her hand for the opening dance.

At that day, though it is not so very long ago, gentlemen were not ashamed to dance, and to dance well; it was no languid saunter through a quadrille; it was fair, deliberate, skilful dancing amongst the courtly,—free, bounding movement amongst the gay.

Vernon, as might be expected, was the most admired performer of the evening; but he was thinking very little of the notice he at last excited, he was employing such ingenuity as his experience of life supplied to the deficiencies of a very imperfect education, limited to the little flogged into him at Eton, in deciphering the character and getting at the heart of his fair partner.

“I wonder you do not make Sir Miles take you to London, my cousin, if you will allow me to call you so. You ought to have been presented.”

“I have no wish to go to London yet.”

“Yet!” said Mr. Vernon, with the somewhat fade gallantry of his day; “beauty even like yours has little time to spare.”

“Hands across, hands across!” cried Mr. Ardworth.

“And,” continued Mr. Vernon, as soon as a pause was permitted to him, “there is a song which the prince sings, written by some sensible old-fashioned fellow, which says,—

“Gather your rosebuds while you may, For time is still a flying.”

“You have obeyed the moral of the song yourself, I believe, Mr. Vernon.”

“Call me cousin, or Charles,—Charley, if you like, as most of my friends do; nobody ever calls me Mr. Vernon,—I don’t know myself by that name.”

“Down the middle; we are all waiting for you,” shouted Ardworth.

And down the middle, with wondrous grace, glided the exquisite nankeens of Charley Vernon.

The dance now, thanks to Ardworth, became too animated and riotous to allow more than a few broken monosyllables till Vernon and his partner gained the end of the set, and then, flirting his partner’s fan, he recommenced,—

“Seriously, my cousin, you must sometimes feel very much moped here.”

“Never!” answered Lucretia. Not once yet had her eye rested on Mr. Vernon. She felt that she was sounded.

“Yet I am sure you have a taste for the pomps and vanities. Aha! there is ambition under those careless curls,” said Mr. Vernon, with his easy, adorable impertinence.

Lucretia winced.

“But if I were ambitious, what field for ambition could I find in London?”

“The same as Alexander,—empire, my cousin.”

“You forget that I am not a man. Man, indeed, may hope for an empire. It is something to be a Pitt, or even a Warren Hastings.”

Mr. Vernon stared. Was this stupidity, or what?

“A woman has an empire more undisputed than Mr. Pitt’s, and more pitiless than that of Governor Hastings.”

“Oh, pardon me, Mr. Vernon—”

“Charles, if you please.”

Lucretia’s brow darkened.

“Pardon me,” she repeated; “but these compliments, if such they are meant to be, meet a very ungrateful return. A woman’s empire over gauzes and ribbons, over tea-tables and drums, over fops and coquettes, is not worth a journey from Laughton to London.”

“You think you can despise admiration?”

“What you mean by admiration,—yes.”

“And love too?” said Vernon, in a whisper.

Now Lucretia at once and abruptly raised her eyes to her partner. Was he aiming at her secret? Was he hinting at intentions of his own? The look chilled Vernon, and he turned away his head.

Suddenly, then, in pursuance of a new train of ideas, Lucretia altered her manner to him. She had detected what before she had surmised. This sudden familiarity on his part arose from notions her uncle had instilled,—the visitor had been incited to become the suitor. Her penetration into character, which from childhood had been her passionate study, told her that on that light, polished, fearless nature scorn would have slight effect; to meet the familiarity would be the best means to secure a friend, to disarm a wooer. She changed then her manner; she summoned up her extraordinary craft; she accepted the intimacy held out to her, not to unguard herself, but to lay open her opponent. It became necessary to her to know this man, to have such power as the knowledge might give her. Insensibly and gradually she led her companion away from his design of approaching her own secrets or character, into frank talk about himself. All unconsciously he began to lay bare to his listener the infirmities of his erring, open heart. Silently she looked down, and plumbed them all,—the frivolity, the recklessness, the half gay, half mournful sense of waste and ruin. There, blooming amongst the wrecks, she saw the fairest flowers of noble manhood profuse and fragrant still,—generosity and courage and disregard for self. Spendthrift and gambler on one side the medal; gentleman and soldier on the other. Beside this maimed and imperfect nature she measured her own prepared and profound intellect, and as she listened, her smile became more bland and frequent. She could afford to be gracious; she felt superiority, scorn, and safety.

As this seeming intimacy had matured, Vernon and his partner had quitted the dance, and were conversing apart in the recess of one of the windows, which the newspaper readers had deserted, in the part of the room where Sir Miles and Dalibard, still seated, were about to commence their third game at chess. The baronet's hand ceased from the task of arranging his pawns; his eye was upon the pair; and then, after a long and complacent gaze, it looked round without discovering the object it sought.

"I am about to task your kindness most improperly, Monsieur Dalibard," said Sir Miles, with that politeness so displeasing to Ardworth, "but will you do me the favour to move aside that fold of the screen? I wish for a better view of our young people. Thank you very much."

Sir Miles now discovered Mainwaring, and observed that, far from regarding with self-betraying jealousy the apparent flirtation going on between Lucretia and her kinsman, he was engaged in animated conversation with the chairman of the quarter sessions. Sir Miles was satisfied, and ranged his pawns. All this time, and indeed ever since they had sat down to play, the Provencal had been waiting, with the patience that belonged to his character, for some observation from Sir Miles on the subject which, his sagacity perceived, was engrossing his thoughts. There had been about the old gentleman a fidgety restlessness which showed that something was on his mind. His eyes had been frequently turned towards his niece since her entrance; once or twice he had cleared his throat and hemmed,—his usual prelude to some more important communication; and Dalibard had heard him muttering to himself, and fancied he caught the name of "Mainwaring." And indeed the baronet had been repeatedly on the verge of sounding his secretary, and as often had been checked both by pride in himself and pride for Lucretia. It seemed to him beneath his own dignity and hers even to hint to an inferior a fear, a doubt, of the heiress of Laughton. Olivier Dalibard could easily have led on his patron, he could easily, if he pleased it, have dropped words to instil suspicion and prompt question; but that was not his object,—he rather shunned than courted any reference to himself upon the matter; for he knew that Lucretia, if she could suppose that he, however indirectly, had betrayed her to her uncle, would at once declare his own suit to her, and so procure his immediate dismissal; while, aware of her powers of dissimulation and her influence over her uncle, he feared that a single word from her would suffice to remove all suspicion in Sir Miles, however ingeniously implanted, and however truthfully grounded. But all the while, under his apparent calm, his mind was busy and his passions burning.

"Pshaw! your old play,—the bishop again," said Sir Miles, laughing, as he moved a knight to frustrate his adversary's supposed plan; and then, turning back, he once more contemplated the

growing familiarity between Vernon and his niece. This time he could not contain his pleasure. “Dalibard, my dear sir,” he said, rubbing his hands, “look yonder: they would make a handsome couple!”

“Who, sir?” said the Provençal, looking another way, with dogged stupidity.

“Who? Damn it, man! Nay, pray forgive my ill manners, but I felt glad, sir, and proud, sir. Who? Charley Vernon and Lucretia Clavering.”

“Assuredly, yes. Do you think that there is a chance of so happy an event?”

“Why, it depends only on Lucretia; I shall never force her.” Here Sir Miles stopped, for Gabriel, unperceived before, picked up his patron’s pocket-handkerchief.

Olivier Dalibard’s gray eyes rested coldly on his son. “You are not dancing to-night, my boy. Go; I like to see you amused.”

The boy obeyed at once, as he always did, the paternal commands. He found a partner, and joined a dance just begun; and in the midst of the dance, Honore Gabriel Varney seemed a new being,—not Ardworth himself so thoroughly entered into the enjoyment of the exercise, the lights, the music. With brilliant eyes and dilated nostrils, he seemed prematurely to feel all that is exciting and voluptuous in that exhilaration which to childhood is usually so innocent. His glances followed the fairest form; his clasp lingered in the softest hand; his voice trembled as the warm breath of his partner came on his cheeks.

Meanwhile the conversation between the chess-players continued.

“Yes,” said the baronet, “it depends only on Lucretia. And she seems pleased with Vernon: who would not be?”

“Your penetration rarely deceives you, sir. I own I think with you. Does Mr. Vernon know that you would permit the alliance?”

“Yes; but—” the baronet stopped short.

“You were saying, but—But what, Sir Miles?”

“Why, the dog affected diffidence; he had some fear lest he should not win her affections. But luckily, at least, they are disengaged.”

Dalibard looked grave, and his eye, as if involuntarily, glanced towards Mainwaring. As ill-luck would have it, the young man had then ceased his conversation with the chairman of the quarter sessions, and with arms folded, brow contracted, and looks, earnest, anxious, and intent, was contemplating the whispered conference between Lucretia and Vernon.

Sir Miles’s eye had followed his secretary’s, and his face changed. His hand fell on the chess board and upset half the men; he uttered a very audible “Zounds!”

“I think, Sir Miles,” said the Provençal, rising, as if conscious that Sir Miles wished to play no more,—“I think that if you spoke soon to Miss Clavering as to your views with regard to Mr. Vernon, it might ripen matters; for I have heard it said by French mothers—and our Frenchwomen understand the female heart, sir—that a girl having no other affection is often prepossessed at once in favour of a man whom she knows beforehand is prepared to woo and to win her, whereas without that knowledge he would have seemed but an ordinary acquaintance.”

“It is shrewdly said, my dear Monsieur Dalibard; and for more reasons than one, the sooner I speak to her the better. Lend me your arm. It is time for supper; I see the dance is over.”

Passing by the place where Mainwaring still leaned, the baronet looked at him fixedly. The young man did not notice the gaze. Sir Miles touched him gently. He started as from a reverie.

“You have not danced, Mr. Mainwaring.”

“I dance so seldom, Sir Miles,” said Mainwaring, colouring.

“Ah! you employ your head more than your heels, young gentleman,—very right; I must speak to you to-morrow. Well, ladies, I hope you have enjoyed yourselves? My dear Mrs. Vesey, you and I are old friends, you know; many a minuet we have danced together, eh? We can’t dance now, but we

can walk arm-in-arm together still. Honour me. And your little grandson—vaccinated, eh? Wonderful invention! To supper, ladies, to supper!”

The company were gone. The lights were out,—all save the lights of heaven; and they came bright and still through the casements. Moonbeam and Starbeam, they seemed now to have the old house to themselves. In came the rays, brighter and longer and bolder, like fairies that march, rank upon rank, into their kingdom of solitude. Down the oak stairs, from the casements, blazoned with heraldry, moved the rays, creepingly, fearfully. On the armour in the hall clustered the rays boldly and brightly, till the steel shone out like a mirror. In the library, long and low, they just entered, stopped short: it was no place for their play. In the drawing-room, now deserted, they were more curious and adventurous. Through the large window, still open, they came in freely and archly, as if to spy what had caused such disorder; the stiff chairs out of place, the smooth floor despoiled of its carpet, that flower dropped on the ground, that scarf forgotten on the table,—the rays lingered upon them all. Up and down through the house, from the base to the roof, roved the children of the air, and found but two spirits awake amidst the slumber of the rest.

In that tower to the east, in the tapestry chamber with the large gilded bed in the recess, came the rays, tamed and wan, as if scared by the grosser light on the table. By that table sat a girl, her brow leaning on one hand; in the other she held a rose,—it is a love-token: exchanged with its sister rose, by stealth, in mute sign of reproach for doubt excited,—an assurance and a reconciliation. A love-token!—shrink not, ye rays; there is something akin to you in love. But see,—the hand closes convulsively on the flower; it hides it not in the breast; it lifts it not to the lip: it throws it passionately aside. “How long!” muttered the girl, impetuously,—“how long! And to think that will here cannot shorten an hour!” Then she rose, and walked to and fro, and each time she gained a certain niche in the chamber she paused, and then irresolutely passed on again. What is in that niche? Only books. What can books teach thee, pale girl? The step treads firmer; this time it halts more resolved. The hand that clasped the flower takes down a volume. The girl sits again before the light. See, O rays! what is the volume? Moon and Starbeam, ye love what lovers read by the lamp in the loneliness. No love-ditty this; no yet holier lesson to patience, and moral to hope. What hast thou, young girl, strong in health and rich in years, with the lore of the leech,—with prognostics and symptoms and diseases? She is tracing with hard eyes the signs that precede the grim enemy in his most sudden approach,—the habits that invite him, the warnings that he gives. He whose wealth shall make her free has twice had the visiting shock; he starves not, he lives frae! She closes the volume, and, musing, metes him out the hours and days he has to live. Shrink back, ye rays! The love is disenhalloved; while the hand was on the rose, the thought was on the charnel.

Yonder, in the opposite tower, in the small casement near the roof, came the rays. Childhood is asleep. Moon and Starbeam, ye love the slumbers of the child! The door opens, a dark figure steals noiselessly in. The father comes to look on the sleep of his son. Holy tenderness, if this be all! “Gabriel, wake!” said a low, stern voice, and a rough hand shook the sleeper.

The sharpest test of those nerves upon which depends the mere animal courage is to be roused suddenly, in the depth of night, by a violent hand. The impulse of Gabriel, thus startled, was neither of timidity nor surprise. It was that of some Spartan boy not new to danger; with a slight cry and a fierce spring, the son’s hand clutched at the father’s throat. Dalibard shook him off with an effort, and a smile, half in approval, half in irony, played by the moonlight over his lips.

“Blood will out, young tiger,” said he. “Hush, and hear me!”

“Is it you, Father?” said Gabriel. “I thought, I dreamed—”

“No matter; think, dream always that man should be prepared for defence from peril!”

“Gabriel,” and the pale scholar seated himself on the bed, “turn your face to mine,—nearer; let the moon fall on it; lift your eyes; look at me—so! Are you not playing false to me? Are you not Lucretia’s spy, while you are pretending to be mine? It is so; your eye betrays you. Now, heed me; you have a mind beyond your years. Do you love best the miserable garret in London, the hard fare

and squalid dress, or your lodgment here, the sense of luxury, the sight of splendour, the atmosphere of wealth? You have the choice before you.”

“I choose, as you would have me, then,” said the boy, “the last.”

“I believe you. Attend! You do not love me,—that is natural; you are the son of Clara Varney! You have supposed that in loving Lucretia Clavering you might vex or thwart me, you scarce knew how; and Lucretia Clavering has gold and gifts and soft words and promises to bribe withal. I now tell you openly my plan with regard to this girl: it is my aim to marry her; to be master of this house and these lands. If I succeed, you share them with me. By betraying me, word or look, to Lucretia, you frustrate this aim; you plot against our rise and to our ruin. Deem not that you could escape my fall; if I am driven hence,—as you might drive me,—you share my fate; and mark me, you are delivered up to my revenge! You cease to be my son,—you are my foe. Child! you know me.”

The boy, bold as he was, shuddered; but after a pause so brief that a breath scarce passed between his silence and his words, he replied with emphasis,—

“Father, you have read my heart. I have been persuaded by Lucretia (for she bewitches me) to watch you,—at least, when you are with Sir Miles. I knew that this was mixed up with Mr. Mainwaring. Now that you have made me understand your own views, I will be true to you,—true without threats.”

The father looked hard on him, and seemed satisfied with the gaze. “Remember, at least, that your future rests upon your truth; that is no threat,—that is a thought of hope. Now sleep or muse on it.” He dropped the curtain which his hand had drawn aside, and stole from the room as noiselessly as he had entered. The boy slept no more. Deceit and cupidity and corrupt ambition were at work in his brain. Shrink back, Moon and Starbeam! On that child’s brow play the demons who had followed the father’s step to his bed of sleep.

Back to his own room, close at hand, crept Olivier Dalibard. The walls were lined with books,—many in language and deep in lore. Moon and Starbeam, ye love the midnight solitude of the scholar! The Provençal stole to the casement, and looked forth. All was serene,—breathless trees and gleaming sculpture and whitened sward, girdled by the mass of shadow. Of what thought the man? Not of the present loveliness which the scene gave to his eye, nor of the future mysteries which the stars should whisper to the soul. Gloomily over a stormy and a hideous past roved the memory, stored with fraud and foul with crime,—plan upon plan, schemed with ruthless wisdom, followed up by remorseless daring, and yet all now a ruin and a blank; an intellect at war with good, and the good had conquered! But the conviction neither touched the conscience nor enlightened the reason; he felt, it is true, a moody sense of impotence, but it brought rage, not despondency. It was not that he submitted to Good as too powerful to oppose, but that he deemed he had not yet gained all the mastery over the arsenal of Evil. And evil he called it not. Good and evil to him were but subordinate genii at the command of Mind; they were the slaves of the lamp. But had he got at the true secret of the lamp itself? “How is it,” he thought, as he turned impatiently from the casement, “that I am baffled here where my fortunes seemed most assured? Here the mind has been of my own training, and prepared by nature to my hand; here all opportunity has smiled. And suddenly the merest commonplace in the vulgar lives of mortals,—an unlooked-for rival; rival, too, of the mould I had taught her to despise; one of the stock gallants of a comedy, no character but youth and fair looks,—yea, the lover of the stage starts up, and the fabric of years is overthrown.” As he thus mused, he placed his hand upon a small box on one of the tables. “Yet within this,” resumed his soliloquy, and he struck the lid, that gave back a dull sound,—“within this I hold the keys of life and death! Fool! the power does not reach to the heart, except to still it. Verily and indeed were the old heathens mistaken? Are there no philters to change the current of desire? But touch one chord in a girl’s affection, and all the rest is mine, all, all, lands, station, power, all the rest are in the opening of this lid!”

Hide in the cloud, O Moon! shrink back, ye Stars! send not your holy, pure, and trouble-lulling light to the countenance blanched and livid with the thoughts of murder.

CHAPTER III. CONFERENCES

The next day Sir Miles did not appear at breakfast,—not that he was unwell, but that he meditated holding certain audiences, and on such occasions the good old gentleman liked to prepare himself. He belonged to a school in which, amidst much that was hearty and convivial, there was much also that nowadays would seem stiff and formal, contrasting the other school immediately succeeding him, which Mr. Vernon represented, and of which the Charles Surface of Sheridan is a faithful and admirable type. The room that Sir Miles appropriated to himself was, properly speaking, the state apartment, called, in the old inventories, “King James’s chamber;” it was on the first floor, communicating with the picture-gallery, which at the farther end opened upon a corridor admitting to the principal bedrooms. As Sir Miles cared nothing for holiday state, he had unscrupulously taken his cubiculum in this chamber, which was really the handsomest in the house, except the banquet-hall, placed his bed in one angle with a huge screen before it, filled up the space with his Italian antiquities and curiosities; and fixed his favourite pictures on the faded gilt leather panelled on the walls. His main motive in this was the communication with the adjoining gallery, which, when the weather was unfavourable, furnished ample room for his habitual walk. He knew how many strides by the help of his crutch made a mile, and this was convenient. Moreover, he liked to look, when alone, on those old portraits of his ancestors, which he had religiously conserved in their places, preferring to thrust his Florentine and Venetian masterpieces into bedrooms and parlours, rather than to dislodge from the gallery the stiff ruffs, doublets, and farthingales of his predecessors. It was whispered in the house that the baronet, whenever he had to reprove a tenant or lecture a dependant, took care to have him brought to his sanctum, through the full length of this gallery, so that the victim might be duly prepared and awed by the imposing effect of so stately a journey, and the grave faces of all the generations of St. John, which could not fail to impress him with the dignity of the family, and alarm him at the prospect of the injured frown of its representative. Across this gallery now, following the steps of the powdered valet, strode young Ardworth, staring now and then at some portrait more than usually grim, more often wondering why his boots, that never creaked before, should creak on those particular boards, and feeling a quiet curiosity, without the least mixture of fear or awe as to what old Squaretoes intended to say to him. But all feeling of irreverence ceased when, shown into the baronet’s room, and the door closed, Sir Miles rose with a smile, and cordially shaking his hand, said, dropping the punctilious courtesy of Mister: “Ardworth, sir, if I had a little prejudice against you before you came, you have conquered it. You are a fine, manly, spirited fellow, sir; and you have an old man’s good wishes,—which are no bad beginning to a young man’s good fortune.”

The colour rushed over Ardworth’s forehead, and a tear sprang to his eyes. He felt a rising at his throat as he stammered out some not very audible reply.

“I wished to see you, young gentleman, that I might judge myself what you would like best, and what would best fit you. Your father is in the army: what say you to a pair of colours?”

“Oh, Sir Miles, that is my utmost ambition! Anything but law, except the Church; anything but the Church, except the desk and a counter!”

The baronet, much pleased, gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Ha, ha! we gentlemen, you see (for the Ardworths are very well born, very), we gentlemen understand each other! Between you and me, I never liked the law, never thought a man of birth should belong to it. Take money for lying,—shabby, shocking! Don’t let that go any farther! The Church—Mother Church—I honour her! Church and State go together! But one ought to be very good to preach to others,—better than you and I are, eh? ha, ha! Well, then, you like the army,—there’s a letter for you to the Horse Guards. Go up to town; your business is done. And, as for your outfit,—read this little book at your leisure.” And Sir Miles thrust a pocketbook into Ardworth’s hand.

“But pardon me,” said the young man, much bewildered. “What claim have I, Sir Miles, to such generosity? I know that my uncle offended you.”

“Sir, that’s the claim!” said Sir Miles, gravely. “I cannot live long,” he added, with a touch of melancholy in his voice; “let me die in peace with all! Perhaps I injured your uncle,—who knows but, if so, he hears and pardons me now?”

“Oh, Sir Miles!” exclaimed the thoughtless, generous-hearted young man; “and my little playfellow, Susan, your own niece!”

Sir Miles drew back haughtily; but the burst that offended him rose so evidently from the heart, was so excusable from its motive and the youth’s ignorance of the world, that his frown soon vanished as he said, calmly and gravely,—

“No man, my good sir, can allow to others the right to touch on his family affairs; I trust I shall be just to the poor young lady. And so, if we never meet again, let us think well of each other. Go, my boy; serve your king and your country!”

“I will do my best, Sir Miles, if only to merit your kindness.”

“Stay a moment: you are intimate, I find, with young Mainwaring?”

“An old college friendship, Sir Miles.”

“The army will not do for him, eh?”

“He is too clever for it, sir.”

“Ah, he’d make a lawyer, I suppose,—glib tongue enough, and can talk well; and lie, if he’s paid for it?”

“I don’t know how lawyers regard those matters, Sir Miles; but if you don’t make him a lawyer, I am sure you must leave him an honest man.”

“Really and truly—”

“Upon my honour I think so.”

“Good-day to you, and good luck. You must catch the coach at the lodge; for I see by the papers that, in spite of all the talk about peace, they are raising regiments like wildfire.”

With very different feelings from those with which he had entered the room, Ardworth quitted it. He hurried into his own chamber to thrust his clothes into his portmanteau, and while thus employed, Mainwaring entered.

“Joy, my dear fellow, wish me joy! I am going to town,—into the army; abroad; to be shot at, thank Heaven! That dear old gentleman! Just throw me that coat, will you?”

A very few more words sufficed to explain what had passed to Mainwaring. He sighed when his friend had finished: “I wish I were going with you!”

“Do you? Sir Miles has only got to write another letter to the Horse Guards. But no, you are meant to be something better than food for powder; and, besides, your Lucretia! Hang it, I am sorry I cannot stay to examine her as I had promised; but I have seen enough to know that she certainly loves you. Ah, when she changed flowers with you, you did not think I saw you,—sly, was not I? Pshaw! She was only playing with Vernon. But still, do you know, Will, now that Sir Miles has spoken to me so, that I could have sobbed, ‘God bless you, my old boy!’ ‘pon my life, I could! Now, do you know that I feel enraged with you for abetting that girl to deceive him?”

“I am enraged with myself; and—”

Here a servant entered, and informed Mainwaring that he had been searching for him; Sir Miles requested to see him in his room. Mainwaring started like a culprit.

“Never fear,” whispered Ardworth; “he has no suspicion of you, I’m sure. Shake hands. When shall we meet again? Is it not odd, I, who am a republican by theory, taking King George’s pay to fight against the French? No use stopping now to moralize on such contradictions. John, Tom,—what’s your name?—here, my man, here, throw that portmanteau on your shoulder and come to the lodge.” And so, full of health, hope, vivacity, and spirit, John Walter Ardworth departed on his career.

Meanwhile Mainwaring slowly took his way to Sir Miles. As he approached the gallery, he met Lucretia, who was coming from her own room. “Sir Miles has sent for me,” he said meaningly. He had time for no more, for the valet was at the door of the gallery, waiting to usher him to his host. “Ha! you will say not a word that can betray us; guard your looks too!” whispered Lucretia, hurriedly; “afterwards, join me by the cedars.” She passed on towards the staircase, and glanced at the large clock that was placed there. “Past eleven! Vernon is never up before twelve. I must see him before my uncle sends for me, as he will send if he suspects—” She paused, went back to her room, rang for her maid, dressed as for walking, and said carelessly, “If Sir Miles wants me, I am gone to the rectory, and shall probably return by the village, so that I shall be back about one.” Towards the rectory, indeed, Lucretia bent her way; but half-way there, turned back, and passing through the plantation at the rear of the house, awaited Mainwaring on the bench beneath the cedars. He was not long before he joined her. His face was sad and thoughtful; and when he seated himself by her side, it was with a weariness of spirit that alarmed her.

“Well,” said she, fearfully, and she placed her hand on his.

“Oh, Lucretia,” he exclaimed, as he pressed that hand with an emotion that came from other passions than love, “we, or rather I, have done great wrong. I have been leading you to betray your uncle’s trust, to convert your gratitude to him into hypocrisy. I have been unworthy of myself. I am poor, I am humbly born, but till I came here, I was rich and proud in honour. I am not so now. Lucretia, pardon me, pardon me! Let the dream be over; we must not sin thus; for it is sin, and the worst of sin,—treachery. We must part: forget me!”

“Forget you! Never, never, never!” cried Lucretia, with suppressed but most earnest vehemence, her breast heaving, her hands, as he dropped the one he held, clasped together, her eyes full of tears, —transformed at once into softness, meekness, even while racked by passion and despair.

“Oh, William, say anything,—reproach, chide, despise me, for mine is all the fault; say anything but that word ‘part.’ I have chosen you, I have sought you out, I have wooed you, if you will; be it so. I cling to you, you are my all,—all that saves me from—from myself,” she added falteringly, and in a hollow voice. “Your love—you know not what it is to me! I scarcely knew it myself before. I feel what it is now, when you say ‘part.’”

Agitated and tortured, Mainwaring writhed at these burning words, bent his face low, and covered it with his hands.

He felt her clasp struggling to withdraw them, yielded, and saw her kneeling at his feet. His manhood and his gratitude and his heart all moved by that sight in one so haughty, he opened his arms, and she fell on his breast. “You will never say ‘part’ again, William!” she gasped convulsively.

“But what are we to do?”

“Say, first, what has passed between you and my uncle.”

“Little to relate; for I can repeat words, not tones and looks. Sir Miles spoke to me, at first kindly and encouragingly, about my prospects, said it was time that I should fix myself, added a few words, with menacing emphasis, against what he called ‘idle dreams and desultory ambition,’ and observing that I changed countenance,—for I felt that I did,—his manner became more cold and severe. Lucretia, if he has not detected our secret, he more than suspects my—my presumption. Finally, he said dryly, that I had better return home, consult with my father, and that if I preferred entering into the service of the Government to any mercantile profession, he thought he had sufficient interest to promote my views. But, clearly and distinctly, he left on my mind one impression,—that my visits here are over.”

“Did he allude to me—to Mr. Vernon?”

“Ah, Lucretia! do you know him so little,—his delicacy, his pride?”

Lucretia was silent, and Mainwaring continued:—

“I felt that I was dismissed. I took my leave of your uncle; I came hither with the intention to say farewell forever.”

“Hush! hush! that thought is over. And you return to your father’s,—perhaps better so: it is but hope deferred; and in your absence I can the more easily allay all suspicion, if suspicion exist. But I must write to you; we must correspond. William, dear William, write often,—write kindly; tell me, in every letter, that you love me,—that you love only me; that you will be patient, and confide.”

“Dear Lucretia,” said Mainwaring, tenderly, and moved by the pathos of her earnest and imploring voice, “but you forget: the bag is always brought first to Sir Miles; he will recognize my hand. And to whom can you trust your own letters?”

“True,” replied Lucretia, despondingly; and there was a pause. Suddenly she lifted her head, and cried: “But your father’s house is not far from this,—not ten miles; we can find a spot at the remote end of the park, near the path through the great wood: there I can leave my letters; there I can find yours.”

“But it must be seldom. If any of Sir Miles’s servants see me, if—”

“Oh, William, William, this is not the language of love!”

“Forgive me,—I think of you!”

“Love thinks of nothing but itself; it is tyrannical, absorbing,—it forgets even the object loved; it feeds on danger; it strengthens by obstacles,” said Lucretia, tossing her hair from her forehead, and with an expression of dark and wild power on her brow and in her eyes. “Fear not for me; I am sufficient guard upon myself. Even while I speak, I think,—yes, I have thought of the very spot. You remember that hollow oak at the bottom of the dell, in which Guy St. John, the Cavalier, is said to have hid himself from Fairfax’s soldiers? Every Monday I will leave a letter in that hollow; every Tuesday you can search for it, and leave your own. This is but once a week; there is no risk here.”

Mainwaring’s conscience still smote him, but he had not the strength to resist the energy of Lucretia. The force of her character seized upon the weak part of his own,—its gentleness, its fear of inflicting pain, its reluctance to say “No,”—that simple cause of misery to the over-timid. A few sentences more, full of courage, confidence, and passion, on the part of the woman, of constraint and yet of soothed and grateful affection on that of the man, and the affianced parted.

Mainwaring had already given orders to have his trunks sent to him at his father’s; and, a hardy pedestrian by habit, he now struck across the park, passed the dell and the hollow tree, commonly called “Guy’s Oak,” and across woodland and fields golden with ripening corn, took his way to the town, in the centre of which, square, solid, and imposing, stood the respectable residence of his bustling, active, electioneering father.

Lucretia’s eye followed a form as fair as ever captivated maiden’s glance, till it was out of sight; and then, as she emerged from the shade of the cedars into the more open space of the garden, her usual thoughtful composure was restored to her steadfast countenance. On the terrace, she caught sight of Vernon, who had just quitted his own room, where he always breakfasted alone, and who was now languidly stretched on a bench, and basking in the sun. Like all who have abused life, Vernon was not the same man in the early part of the day. The spirits that rose to temperate heat the third hour after noon, and expanded into glow when the lights shone over gay carousers, at morning were flat and exhausted. With hollow eyes and that weary fall of the muscles of the cheeks which betrays the votary of Bacchus,—the convivial three-bottle man,—Charley Vernon forced a smile, meant to be airy and impertinent, to his pale lips, as he rose with effort, and extended three fingers to his cousin.

“Where have you been hiding? Catching bloom from the roses? You have the prettiest shade of colour,—just enough; not a hue too much. And there is Sir Miles’s valet gone to the rectory, and the fat footman puffing away towards the village, and I, like a faithful warden, from my post at the castle, all looking out for the truant.”

“But who wants me, cousin?” said Lucretia, with the full blaze of her rare and captivating smile.

“The knight of Laughton confessedly wants thee, O damsel! The knight of the Bleeding Heart may want thee more,—dare he own it?”

And with a hand that trembled a little, not with love, at least, it trembled always a little before the Madeira at luncheon,—he lifted hers to his lips.

“Compliments again,—words, idle words!” said Lucretia, looking down bashfully.

“How can I convince thee of my sincerity, unless thou takest my life as its pledge, maid of Laughton?”

And very much tired of standing, Charley Vernon drew her gently to the bench and seated himself by her side. Lucretia’s eyes were still downcast, and she remained silent; Vernon, suppressing a yawn, felt that he was bound to continue. There was nothing very formidable in Lucretia’s manner.

“Fore Gad!” thought he, “I suppose I must take the heiress after all; the sooner ‘t is over, the sooner I can get back to Brook Street.”

“It is premature, my fair cousin,” said he, aloud,—“premature, after less than a week’s visit, and only some fourteen or fifteen hours’ permitted friendship and intimacy, to say what is uppermost in my thoughts; but we spendthrifts are provokingly handsome! Sir Miles, your good uncle, is pleased to forgive all my follies and faults upon one condition,—that you will take on yourself the task to reform me. Will you, my fair cousin? Such as I am, you behold me. I am no sinner in the disguise of a saint. My fortune is spent, my health is not strong; but a young widow’s is no mournful position. I am gay when I am well, good-tempered when ailing. I never betrayed a trust,—can you trust me with yourself?”

This was a long speech, and Charley Vernon felt pleased that it was over. There was much in it that would have touched a heart even closed to him, and a little genuine emotion had given light to his eyes, and color to his cheek. Amidst all the ravages of dissipation, there was something interesting in his countenance, and manly in his tone and his gesture. But Lucretia was only sensible to one part of his confession,—her uncle consented to his suit. This was all of which she desired to be assured, and against this she now sought to screen herself.

“Your candour, Mr. Vernon,” she said, avoiding his eye, “deserves candour in me; I cannot affect to misunderstand you. But you take me by surprise; I was so unprepared for this. Give me time,—I must reflect.”

“Reflection is dull work in the country; you can reflect more amusingly in town, my fair cousin.”

“I will wait, then, till I find myself in town.”

“Ah, you make me the happiest, the most grateful of men,” cried Mr. Vernon, rising, with a semi-genuflection which seemed to imply, “Consider yourself knelt to,”—just as a courteous assailer, with a motion of the hand, implies, “Consider yourself horsewhipped.”

Lucretia, who, with all her intellect, had no capacity for humour, recoiled, and looked up in positive surprise.

“I do not understand you, Mr. Vernon,” she said, with austere gravity.

“Allow me the bliss of flattering myself that you, at least, are understood,” replied Charley Vernon, with imperturbable assurance. “You will wait to reflect till you are in town,—that is to say, the day after our honeymoon, when you awake in Mayfair.”

Before Lucretia could reply, she saw the indefatigable valet formally approaching, with the anticipated message that Sir Miles requested to see her. She replied hurriedly to this last, that she would be with her uncle immediately; and when he had again disappeared within the porch, she said, with a constrained effort at frankness,—

“Mr. Vernon, if I have misunderstood your words, I think I do not mistake your character. You cannot wish to take advantage of my affection for my uncle, and the passive obedience I owe to him, to force me into a step of which—of which—I have not yet sufficiently considered the results. If you really desire that my feelings should be consulted, that I should not—pardon me—consider myself sacrificed to the family pride of my guardian and the interests of my suitor—”

“Madam!” exclaimed Vernon, reddening.

Pleased with the irritating effect her words had produced, Lucretia continued calmly, “If, in a word, I am to be a free agent in a choice on which my happiness depends, forbear to urge Sir Miles further at present; forbear to press your suit upon me. Give me the delay of a few months; I shall know how to appreciate your delicacy.”

“Miss Clavering,” answered Vernon, with a touch of the St. John haughtiness, “I am in despair that you should even think so grave an appeal to my honour necessary. I am well aware of your expectations and my poverty. And, believe me, I would rather rot in a prison than enrich myself by forcing your inclinations. You have but to say the word, and I will (as becomes me as a man and gentleman) screen you from all chance of Sir Miles’s displeasure, by taking it on myself to decline an honour of which I feel, indeed, very undeserving.”

“But I have offended you,” said Lucretia, softly, while she turned aside to conceal the glad light of her eyes,—“pardon me; and to prove that you do so, give me your arm to my uncle’s room.”

Vernon, with rather more of Sir Miles’s antiquated stiffness than his own rakish ease, offered his arm, with a profound reverence, to his cousin, and they took their way to the house. Not till they had passed up the stairs, and were even in the gallery, did further words pass between them. Then Vernon said,—

“But what is your wish, Miss Clavering? On what footing shall I remain here?”

“Will you suffer me to dictate?” replied Lucretia, stopping short with well-feigned confusion, as if suddenly aware that the right to dictate gives the right to hope.

“Ah, consider me at least your slave!” whispered Vernon, as, his eye resting on the contour of that matchless neck, partially and advantageously turned from him, he began, with his constitutional admiration of the sex, to feel interested in a pursuit that now seemed, after piquing, to flatter his self-love.

“Then I will use the privilege when we meet again,” answered Lucretia; and drawing her arm gently from his, she passed on to her uncle, leaving Vernon midway in the gallery.

Those faded portraits looked down on her with that melancholy gloom which the effigies of our dead ancestors seem mysteriously to acquire. To noble and aspiring spirits, no homily to truth and honour and fair ambition is more eloquent than the mute and melancholy canvas from which our fathers, made, by death, our household gods, contemplate us still. They appear to confide to us the charge of their unblemished names. They speak to us from the grave, and heard aright, the pride of family is the guardian angel of its heirs. But Lucretia, with her hard and scholastic mind, despised as the veriest weakness all the poetry that belongs to the sense of a pure descent. It was because she was proud as the proudest in herself that she had nothing but contempt for the virtue, the valour, or the wisdom of those that had gone before. So, with a brain busy with guile and stratagem, she trod on, beneath the eyes of the simple and spotless Dead.

Vernon, thus left alone, mused a few moments on what had passed between himself and the heiress; and then, slowly retracing his steps, his eye roved along the stately series of his line. “Faith!” he muttered, “if my boyhood had been passed in this old gallery, his Royal Highness would have lost a good fellow and hard drinker, and his Majesty would have had perhaps a more distinguished soldier,—certainly a worthier subject. If I marry this lady, and we are blessed with a son, he shall walk through this gallery once a day before he is flogged into Latin!”

Lucretia’s interview with her uncle was a masterpiece of art. What pity that such craft and subtlety were wasted in our little day, and on such petty objects; under the Medici, that spirit had gone far to the shaping of history. Sure, from her uncle’s openness, that he would plunge at once into the subject for which she deemed she was summoned, she evinced no repugnance when, tenderly kissing her, he asked if Charles Vernon had a chance of winning favour in her eyes. She knew that she was safe in saying “No;” that her uncle would never force her inclinations,—safe so far as Vernon was concerned; but she desired more: she desired thoroughly to quench all suspicion that her heart was pre-occupied; entirely to remove from Sir Miles’s thoughts the image of Mainwaring; and a denial of one

suitor might quicken the baronet's eyes to the concealment of the other. Nor was this all; if Sir Miles was seriously bent upon seeing her settled in marriage before his death, the dismissal of Vernon might only expose her to the importunity of new candidates more difficult to deal with. Vernon himself she could use as the shield against the arrows of a host. Therefore, when Sir Miles repeated his question, she answered, with much gentleness and seeming modest sense, that Mr. Vernon had much that must prepossess in his favour; that in addition to his own advantages he had one, the highest in her eyes, —her uncle's sanction and approval. But—and she hesitated with becoming and natural diffidence —were not his habits unfixed and roving? So it was said; she knew not herself, —she would trust her happiness to her uncle. But if so, and if Mr. Vernon were really disposed to change, would it not be prudent to try him, —try him where there was temptation, not in the repose of Laughton, but amidst his own haunts of London? Sir Miles had friends who would honestly inform him of the result. She did but suggest this; she was too ready to leave all to her dear guardian's acuteness and experience.

Melted by her docility, and in high approval of the prudence which betokened a more rational judgment than he himself had evinced, the good old man clasped her to his breast and shed tears as he praised and thanked her. She had decided, as she always did, for the best; Heaven forbid that she should be wasted on an incorrigible man of pleasure! “And,” said the frank-hearted gentleman, unable long to keep any thought concealed, —“and to think that I could have wronged you for a moment, my own noble child; that I could have been dolt enough to suppose that the good looks of that boy Mainwaring might have caused you to forget what—But you change colour!” —for, with all her dissimulation, Lucretia loved too ardently not to shrink at that name thus suddenly pronounced. “Oh,” continued the baronet, drawing her still nearer towards him, while with one hand he put back her face, that he might read its expression the more closely, —“oh, if it had been so, —if it be so, I will pity, not blame you, for my neglect was the fault: pity you, for I have known a similar struggle; admire you in pity, for you have the spirit of your ancestors, and you will conquer the weakness. Speak! have I touched on the truth? Speak without fear, child, —you have no mother; but in age a man sometimes gets a mother's heart.”

Startled and alarmed as the lark when the step nears its nest, Lucretia summoned all the dark wile of her nature to mislead the intruder. “No, uncle, no; I am not so unworthy. You misconceived my emotion.”

“Ah, you know that he has had the presumption to love you, —the puppy! —and you feel the compassion you women always feel for such offenders? Is that it?”

Rapidly Lucretia considered if it would be wise to leave that impression on his mind. On one hand, it might account for a moment's agitation; and if Mainwaring were detected hovering near the domain, in the exchange of their correspondence, it might appear but the idle, if hopeless, romance of youth, which haunts the mere home of its object, —but no; on the other hand, it left his banishment absolute and confirmed. Her resolution was taken with a promptitude that made her pause not perceptible.

“No, my dear uncle,” she said, so cheerfully that it removed all doubt from the mind of her listener; “but M. Dalibard has rallied me on the subject, and I was so angry with him that when you touched on it, I thought more of my quarrel with him than of poor timid Mr. Mainwaring himself. Come, now, own it, dear sir! M. Dalibard has instilled this strange fancy into your head?”

“No, 'S life; if he had taken such a liberty, I should have lost my librarian. No, I assure you, it was rather Vernon; you know true love is jealous.”

“Vernon!” thought Lucretia; “he must go, and at once.” Sliding from her uncle's arms to the stool at his feet, she then led the conversation more familiarly back into the channel it had lost; and when at last she escaped, it was with the understanding that, without promise or compromise, Mr. Vernon should return to London at once, and be put upon the ordeal through which she felt assured it was little likely he should pass with success.

CHAPTER IV. GUY'S OAK

Three weeks afterwards, the life at Laughton seemed restored to the cheerful and somewhat monotonous tranquillity of its course, before chafed and disturbed by the recent interruptions to the stream. Vernon had departed, satisfied with the justice of the trial imposed on him, and far too high-spirited to seek to extort from niece or uncle any engagement beyond that which, to a nice sense of honour, the trial itself imposed. His memory and his heart were still faithful to Mary; but his senses, his fancy, his vanity, were a little involved in his success with the heiress. Though so free from all mercenary meanness, Mr. Vernon was still enough man of the world to be sensible of the advantages of the alliance which had first been pressed on him by Sir Miles, and from which Lucretia herself appeared not to be averse. The season of London was over, but there was always a set, and that set the one in which Charley Vernon principally moved, who found town fuller than the country. Besides, he went occasionally to Brighton, which was then to England what Baiae was to Rome. The prince was holding gay court at the Pavilion, and that was the atmosphere which Vernon was habituated to breathe. He was no parasite of royalty; he had that strong personal affection to the prince which it is often the good fortune of royalty to attract. Nothing is less founded than the complaint which poets put into the lips of princes, that they have no friends,—it is, at least, their own perverse fault if that be the case; a little amiability, a little of frank kindness, goes so far when it emanates from the rays of a crown. But Vernon was stronger than Lucretia deemed him; once contemplating the prospect of a union which was to consign to his charge the happiness of another, and feeling all that he should owe in such a marriage to the confidence both of niece and uncle, he evinced steadier principles than he had ever made manifest when he had only his own fortune to mar, and his own happiness to trifle with. He joined his old companions, but he kept aloof from their more dissipated pursuits. Beyond what was then thought the venial error of too devout libations to Bacchus, Charley Vernon seemed reformed.

Ardworth had joined a regiment which had departed for the field of action. Mainwaring was still with his father, and had not yet announced to Sir Miles any wish or project for the future.

Olivier Dalibard, as before, passed his mornings alone in his chamber,—his noons and his evenings with Sir Miles. He avoided all private conferences with Lucretia. She did not provoke them. Young Gabriel amused himself in copying Sir Miles's pictures, sketching from Nature, scribbling in his room prose or verse, no matter which (he never showed his lucubrations), pinching the dogs when he could catch them alone, shooting the cats, if they appeared in the plantation, on pretence of love for the young pheasants, sauntering into the cottages, where he was a favourite because of his good looks, but where he always contrived to leave the trace of his visits in disorder and mischief, upsetting the tea-kettle and scalding the children, or, what he loved dearly, setting two gossips by the ears. But these occupations were over by the hour Lucretia left her apartment. From that time he never left her out of view; and when encouraged to join her at his usual privileged times, whether in the gardens at sunset or in her evening niche in the drawing-room, he was sleek, silken, and caressing as Cupid, after plaguing the Nymphs, at the feet of Psyche. These two strange persons had indeed apparently that sort of sentimental familiarity which is sometimes seen between a fair boy and a girl much older than himself; but the attraction that drew them together was an indefinable instinct of their similarity in many traits of their several characters,—the whelp leopard sported fearlessly around the she-panther. Before Olivier's midnight conference with his son, Gabriel had drawn close and closer to Lucretia, as an ally against his father; for that father he cherished feelings which, beneath the most docile obedience, concealed horror and hate, and something of the ferocity of revenge. And if young Varney loved any one on earth except himself, it was Lucretia Clavering. She had administered to his ruling passions, which were for effect and display; she had devised the dress which set off to the utmost his exterior, and gave it that picturesque and artistic appearance which he had sighed for in his

study of the portraits of Titian and Vandyke. She supplied him (for in money she was generous) with enough to gratify and forestall every boyish caprice; and this liberality now turned against her, for it had increased into a settled vice his natural taste for extravagance, and made all other considerations subordinate to that of feeding his cupidity. She praised his drawings, which, though self-taught, were indeed extraordinary, predicted his fame as an artist, lifted him into consequence amongst the guests by her notice and eulogies, and what, perhaps, won him more than all, he felt that it was to her—to Dalibard's desire to conceal before her his more cruel propensities—that he owed his father's change from the most refined severity to the most paternal gentleness.

And thus he had repaid her, as she expected, by a devotion which she trusted to employ against her tutor himself, should the baffled aspirant become the scheming rival and the secret foe. But now, —thoroughly aware of the gravity of his father's objects, seeing before him the chance of a settled establishment at Laughton, a positive and influential connection with Lucretia; and on the other hand a return to the poverty he recalled with disgust, and the terrors of his father's solitary malice and revenge,—he entered fully into Dalibard's sombre plans, and without scruple or remorse, would have abetted any harm to his benefactress. Thus craft, doomed to have accomplices in craft, resembles the spider, whose web, spread indeed for the fly, attracts the fellow-spider that shall thrust it forth, and profit by the meshes it has woven for a victim, to surrender to a master.

Already young Varney, set quietly and ceaselessly to spy every movement of Lucretia's, had reported to his father two visits to the most retired part of the park; but he had not yet ventured near enough to discover the exact spot, and his very watch on Lucretia had prevented the detection of Mainwaring himself in his stealthy exchange of correspondence. Dalibard bade him continue his watch, without hinting at his ulterior intentions, for, indeed, in these he was not decided. Even should he discover any communication between Lucretia and Mainwaring, how reveal it to Sir Miles without forever precluding himself from the chance of profiting by the betrayal? Could Lucretia ever forgive the injury, and could she fail to detect the hand that inflicted it? His only hope was in the removal of Mainwaring from his path by other agencies than his own, and (by an appearance of generosity and self-abandonment, in keeping her secret and submitting to his fate) he trusted to regain the confidence she now withheld from him, and use it to his advantage when the time came to defend himself from Vernon. For he had learned from Sir Miles the passive understanding with respect to that candidate for her hand; and he felt assured that had Mainwaring never existed, could he cease to exist for her hopes, Lucretia, despite her dissimulation, would succumb to one she feared but respected, rather than one she evidently trifled with and despised.

“But the course to be taken must be adopted after the evidence is collected,” thought the subtle schemer, and he tranquilly continued his chess with the baronet.

Before, however, Gabriel could make any further discoveries, an event occurred which excited very different emotions amongst those it more immediately interested.

Sir Miles had, during the last twelve months, been visited by two seizures, seemingly of an apoplectic character. Whether they were apoplexy, or the less alarming attacks that arise from some more gentle congestion, occasioned by free living and indolent habits, was matter of doubt with his physician,—not a very skilful, though a very formal, man. Country doctors were not then the same able, educated, and scientific class that they are now rapidly becoming. Sir Miles himself so stoutly and so eagerly repudiated the least hint of the more unfavourable interpretation that the doctor, if not convinced by his patient, was awed from expressing plainly a contrary opinion. There are certain persons who will dismiss their physician if he tells them the truth: Sir Miles was one of them.

In his character there was a weakness not uncommon to the proud. He did not fear death, but he shrank from the thought that others should calculate on his dying. He was fond of his power, though he exercised it gently: he knew that the power of wealth and station is enfeebled in proportion as its dependants can foresee the date of its transfer. He dreaded, too, the comments which are always made on those visited by his peculiar disease: “Poor Sir Miles! an apoplectic fit. His intellect must be

very much shaken; he revoked at whist last night,—memory sadly impaired!” This may be a pitiable foible; but heroes and statesmen have had it most: pardon it in the proud old man! He enjoined the physician to state throughout the house and the neighbourhood that the attacks were wholly innocent and unimportant. The physician did so, and was generally believed; for Sir Miles seemed as lively and as vigorous after them as before. Two persons alone were not deceived,—Dalibard and Lucretia. The first, at an earlier part of his life, had studied pathology with the profound research and ingenious application which he brought to bear upon all he undertook. He whispered from the first to Lucretia, —“Unless your uncle changes his habits, takes exercise, and forbears wine and the table, his days are numbered.”

And when this intelligence was first conveyed to her, before she had become acquainted with Mainwaring, Lucretia felt the shock of a grief sudden and sincere. We have seen how these better sentiments changed as human life became an obstacle in her way. In her character, what phrenologists call “destructiveness,” in the comprehensive sense of the word, was superlatively developed. She had not actual cruelty; she was not bloodthirsty: those vices belong to a different cast of character. She was rather deliberately and intellectually unsparing. A goal was before her; she must march to it: all in the way were but hostile impediments. At first, however, Sir Miles was not in the way, except to fortune, and for that, as avarice was not her leading vice, she could well wait; therefore, at this hint of the Provençal’s she ventured to urge her uncle to abstinence and exercise. But Sir Miles was touchy on the subject; he feared the interpretations which great change of habits might suggest. The memory of the fearful warning died away, and he felt as well as before; for, save an old rheumatic gout (which had long since left him with no other apparent evil but a lameness in the joints that rendered exercise unwelcome and painful), he possessed one of those comfortable, and often treacherous, constitutions which evince no displeasure at irregularities, and bear all liberties with philosophical composure. Accordingly, he would have his own way; and he contrived to coax or to force his doctor into an authority on his side: wine was necessary to his constitution; much exercise was a dangerous fatigue. The second attack, following four months after the first, was less alarming, and Sir Miles fancied it concealed even from his niece; but three nights after his recovery, the old baronet sat musing alone for some time in his own room before he retired to rest. Then he rose, opened his desk, and read his will attentively, locked it up with a slight sigh, and took down his Bible. The next morning he despatched the letters which summoned Ardworth and Vernon to his house; and as he quitted his room, his look lingered with melancholy fondness upon the portraits in the gallery. No one was by the old man to interpret these slight signs, in which lay a world of meaning.

A few weeks after Vernon had left the house, and in the midst of the restored tranquillity we have described, it so happened that Sir Miles’s physician, after dining at the Hall, had been summoned to attend one of the children at the neighbouring rectory; and there he spent the night. A little before daybreak his slumbers were disturbed; he was recalled in all haste to Laughton Hall. For the third time, he found Sir Miles speechless. Dalibard was by his bedside. Lucretia had not been made aware of the seizure; for Sir Miles had previously told his valet (who of late slept in the same room) never to alarm Miss Clavering if he was taken ill. The doctor was about to apply his usual remedies; but when he drew forth his lancet, Dalibard placed his hand on the physician’s arm.

“Not this time,” he said slowly, and with emphasis; “it will be his death.”

“Pooh, sir!” said the doctor, disdainfully.

“Do so, then; bleed him, and take the responsibility. I have studied medicine,—I know these symptoms. In this case the apoplexy may spare,—the lancet kills.”

The physician drew back dismayed and doubtful.

“What would you do, then?”

“Wait three minutes longer the effect of the cataplasms I have applied. If they fail—”

“Ay, then?”

“A chill bath and vigorous friction.”

“Sir, I will never permit it.”

“Then murder your patient your own way.”

All this while Sir Miles lay senseless, his eyes wide open, his teeth locked. The doctor drew near, looked at the lancet, and said irresolutely, —

“Your practice is new to me; but if you have studied medicine, that’s another matter. Will you guarantee the success of your plan?”

“Yes.”

“Mind, I wash my hands of it; I take Mr. Jones to witness;” and he appealed to the valet.

“Call up the footman and lift your master;” said Dalibard; and the doctor, glancing round, saw that a bath, filled some seven or eight inches deep with water, stood already prepared in the room. Perplexed and irresolute, he offered no obstacle to Dalibard’s movements. The body, seemingly lifeless, was placed in the bath; and the servants, under Dalibard’s directions, applied vigorous and incessant friction. Several minutes elapsed before any favourable symptom took place. At length Sir Miles heaved a deep sigh, and the eyes moved; a minute or two more, and the teeth chattered; the blood, set in motion, appeared on the surface of the skin; life ebbed back. The danger was passed, the dark foe driven from the citadel. Sir Miles spoke audibly, though incoherently, as he was taken back to his bed, warmly covered up, the lights removed, noise forbidden, and Dalibard and the doctor remained in silence by the bedside.

“Rich man,” thought Dalibard, “thine hour is not yet come; thy wealth must not pass to the boy Mainwaring.” Sir Miles’s recovery, under the care of Dalibard, who now had his own way, was as rapid and complete as before. Lucretia when she heard, the next morning, of the attack, felt, we dare not say a guilty joy, but a terrible and feverish agitation. Sir Miles himself, informed by his valet of Dalibard’s wrestle with the doctor, felt a profound gratitude and reverent wonder for the simple means to which he probably owed his restoration; and he listened, with a docility which Dalibard was not prepared to expect, to his learned secretary’s urgent admonitions as to the life he must lead if he desired to live at all. Convinced, at last, that wine and good cheer had not blockaded out the enemy, and having to do, in Olivier Dalibard, with a very different temper from the doctor’s, he assented with a tolerable grace to the trial of a strict regimen and to daily exercise in the open air. Dalibard now became constantly with him; the increase of his influence was as natural as it was apparent. Lucretia trembled; she divined a danger in his power, now separate from her own, and which threatened to be independent of it. She became abstracted and uneasy; jealousy of the Provencal possessed her. She began to meditate schemes for his downfall. At this time, Sir Miles received the following letter from Mr. Fielden:—

SOUTHAMPTON, Aug. 20, 1801.

DEAR SIR MILES,—You will remember that I informed you when I arrived at Southampton with my dear young charge; and Susan has twice written to her sister, implying the request which she lacked the courage, seeing that she is timid, expressly to urge, that Miss Clavering might again be permitted to visit her. Miss Clavering has answered as might be expected from the propinquity of the relationship; but she has perhaps the same fears of offending you that actuate her sister. But now, since the worthy clergyman who had undertaken my parochial duties has found the air insalubrious, and prays me not to enforce the engagement by which we had exchanged our several charges for the space of a calendar year, I am reluctantly compelled to return home,—my dear wife, thank Heaven, being already restored to health, which is an unspeakable mercy; and I am sure I cannot be sufficiently grateful to Providence, which has not only provided me with a liberal independence of more than 200 pounds a year, but the best of wives and the most dutiful of children,—possessions that I venture to call “the riches of the heart.” Now, I pray you, my dear Sir Miles, to gratify these two deserving young persons, and to suffer Miss Lucretia incontinently to visit her sister. Counting on your consent, thus boldly demanded, I have already prepared an apartment for Miss Clavering; and Susan is busy in what, though I do not know much of such feminine matters, the whole house declares to be a most

beautiful and fanciful toilet-cover, with roses and forget-me-nots cut out of muslin, and two large silk tassels, which cost her three shillings and fourpence. I cannot conclude without thanking you from my heart for your noble kindness to young Ardworth. He is so full of ardour and spirit that I remember, poor lad, when I left him, as I thought, hard at work on that well-known problem of Euclid vulgarly called the Asses' Bridge,—I found him describing a figure of 8 on the village pond, which was only just frozen over! Poor lad! Heaven will take care of him, I know, as it does of all who take no care of themselves. Ah, Sir Miles, if you could but see Susan,—such a nurse, too, in illness! I have the honour to be, Sir Miles,

Your most humble, poor servant, to command,
MATTHEW FIELDEN.

Sir Miles put this letter in his niece's hand, and said kindly, "Why not have gone to see your sister before? I should not have been angry. Go, my child, as soon as you like. To-morrow is Sunday,—no travelling that day; but the next, the carriage shall be at your order."

Lucretia hesitated a moment. To leave Dalibard in sole possession of the field, even for a few days, was a thought of alarm; but what evil could he do in that time? And her pulse beat quickly: Mainwaring could come to Southampton; she should see him again, after more than six weeks' absence! She had so much to relate and to hear; she fancied his last letter had been colder and shorter; she yearned to hear him say, with his own lips, that he loved her still. This idea banished or prevailed over all others. She thanked her uncle cheerfully and gayly, and the journey was settled.

"Be at watch early on Monday," said Olivier to his son.

Monday came; the baronet had ordered the carriage to be at the door at ten. A little before eight, Lucretia stole out, and took her way to Guy's Oak. Gabriel had placed himself in readiness; he had climbed a tree at the bottom of the park (near the place where hitherto he had lost sight of her); she passed under it,—on through a dark grove of pollard oaks. When she was at a sufficient distance, the boy dropped from his perch; with the stealth of an Indian he crept on her trace, following from tree to tree, always sheltered, always watchful. He saw her pause at the dell and look round; she descended into the hollow; he slunk through the fern; he gained the marge of the dell, and looked down,—she was lost to his sight. At length, to his surprise, he saw the gleam of her robe emerge from the hollow of a tree,—her head stooped as she came through the aperture; he had time to shrink back amongst the fern; she passed on hurriedly, the same way she had taken, back to the house; then into the dell crept the boy. Guy's Oak, vast and venerable, with gnarled green boughs below, and sere branches above, that told that its day of fall was decreed at last, rose high from the abyss of the hollow, high and far-seen amidst the trees that stood on the vantage-ground above,—even as a great name soars the loftier when it springs from the grave. A dark and irregular fissure gave entrance to the heart of the oak. The boy glided in and looked round; he saw nothing, yet something there must be. The rays of the early sun did not penetrate into the hollow, it was as dim as a cave. He felt slowly in every crevice, and a startled moth or two flew out. It was not for moths that the girl had come to Guy's Oak! He drew back, at last, in despair; as he did so, he heard a low sound close at hand,—a low, murmuring, angry sound, like a hiss; he looked round, and through the dark, two burning eyes fixed his own: he had startled a snake from its bed. He drew out in time, as the reptile sprang; but now his task, search, and object were forgotten. With the versatility of a child, his thoughts were all on the enemy he had provoked. That zest of prey which is inherent in man's breast, which makes him love the sport and the chase, and maddens boyhood and age with the passion for slaughter, leaped up within him; anything of danger and contest and excitement gave Gabriel Varney a strange fever of pleasure. He sprang up the sides of the dell, climbed the park pales on which it bordered, was in the wood where the young shoots rose green and strong from the underwood. To cut a staff for the strife, to descend again into the dell, creep again through the fissure, look round for those vengeful eyes, was quick done as the joyous play of the impulse. The poor snake had slid down in content and

fancied security; its young, perhaps, were not far off; its wrath had been the instinct Nature gives to the mother. It hath done thee no harm yet, boy; leave it in peace! The young hunter had no ear to such whisper of prudence or mercy. Dim and blind in the fissure, he struck the ground and the tree with his stick, shouted out, bade the eyes gleam, and defied them. Whether or not the reptile had spent its ire in the first fruitless spring, and this unlooked-for return of the intruder rather daunted than exasperated, we leave those better versed in natural history to conjecture; but instead of obeying the challenge and courting the contest, it glided by the sides of the oak, close to the very feet of its foe, and emerging into the light, dragged its gray coils through the grass; but its hiss still betrayed it. Gabriel sprang through the fissure and struck at the craven, insulting it with a laugh of scorn as he struck. Suddenly it halted, suddenly reared its crest; the throat swelled with venom, the tongue darted out, and again, green as emeralds, glared the spite of its eyes. No fear felt Gabriel Varney; his arm was averted; he gazed, spelled and admiringly, with the eye of an artist. Had he had pencil and tablet at that moment, he would have dropped his weapon for the sketch, though the snake had been as deadly as the viper of Sumatra. The sight sank into his memory, to be reproduced often by the wild, morbid fancies of his hand. Scarce a moment, however, had he for the gaze; the reptile sprang, and fell, baffled and bruised by the involuntary blow of its enemy. As it writhed on the grass, how its colours came out; how graceful were the movements of its pain! And still the boy gazed, till the eye was sated and the cruelty returned. A blow, a second, a third,—all the beauty is gone; shapeless, and clotted with gore, that elegant head; mangled and dissevered the airy spires of that delicate shape, which had glanced in its circling involutions, free and winding as a poet's thought through his verse. The boy trampled the quivering relics into the sod, with a fierce animal joy of conquest, and turned once more towards the hollow, for a last almost hopeless survey. Lo, his object was found! In his search for the snake, either his staff or his foot had disturbed a layer of moss in the corner; the faint ray, ere he entered the hollow, gleamed upon something white. He emerged from the cavity with a letter in his hand; he read the address, thrust it into his bosom, and as stealthily, but more rapidly, than he had come, took his way to his father.

CHAPTER V. HOUSEHOLD TREASON

The Provençal took the letter from his son's hand, and looked at him with an approbation half-complacent, half-ironical. "Mon fils!" said he, patting the boy's head gently, "why should we not be friends? We want each other; we have the strong world to fight against."

"Not if you are master of this place."

"Well answered,—no; then we shall have the strong world on our side, and shall have only rogues and the poor to make war upon." Then, with a quiet gesture, he dismissed his son, and gazed slowly on the letter. His pulse, which was usually low, quickened, and his lips were tightly compressed; he shrank from the contents with a jealous pang; as a light quivers strugglingly in a noxious vault, love descended into that hideous breast, gleamed upon dreary horrors, and warred with the noxious atmosphere: but it shone still. To this dangerous man, every art that gives power to the household traitor was familiar: he had no fear that the violated seals should betray the fraud which gave the contents to the eye that, at length, steadily fell upon the following lines:—

DEAREST, ANDEVER DEAREST,—Where art thou at this moment? What are thy thoughts,—are they upon me? I write this at the dead of night. I picture you to myself as my hand glides over the paper. I think I see you, as you look on these words, and envy them the gaze of those dark eyes. Press your lips to the paper. Do you feel the kiss that I leave there? Well, well! it will not be for long now that we shall be divided. Oh, what joy, when I think that I am about to see you! Two days more, at most three, and we shall meet, shall we not? I am going to see my sister. I subjoin my address. Come, come, come; I thirst to see you once more. And I did well to say, "Wait, and be patient;" we shall not wait long: before the year is out I shall be free. My uncle has had another and more deadly attack. I see its trace in his face, in his step, in his whole form and bearing. The only obstacle between us is fading away. Can I grieve when I think it,—grieve when life with you spreads smiling beyond the old man's grave? And why should age, that has survived all passion, stand with its chilling frown, and the miserable prejudices the world has not conquered, but strengthened into a creed,—why should age stand between youth and youth? I feel your mild eyes rebuke me as I write. But chide me not that on earth I see only you. And it will be mine to give you wealth and rank! Mine to see the homage of my own heart reflected from the crowd who bow, not to the statue, but the pedestal. Oh, how I shall enjoy your revenge upon the proud! For I have drawn no pastoral scenes in my picture of the future. No; I see you leading senates, and duping fools. I shall be by your side, your partner, step after step, as you mount the height, for I am ambitious, you know, William; and not less because I love,—rather ten thousand times more so. I would not have you born great and noble, for what then could we look to,—what use all my schemes, and my plans, and aspirings? Fortune, accident, would have taken from us the great zest of life, which is desire.

When I see you, I shall tell you that I have some fears of Olivier Dalibard; he has evidently some wily project in view. He, who never interfered before with the blundering physician, now thrusts him aside, affects to have saved the old man, attends him always. Dares he think to win an influence, to turn against me,—against us? Happily, when I shall come back, my uncle will probably be restored to the false strength which deceives him; he will have less need of Dalibard; and then—then let the Frenchman beware! I have already a plot to turn his schemes to his own banishment. Come to Southampton, then, as soon as you can,—perhaps the day you receive this; on Wednesday, at farthest. Your last letter implies blame of my policy with respect to Vernon. Again I say, it is necessary to amuse my uncle to the last. Before Vernon can advance a claim, there will be weeping at Laughton. I shall weep, too, perhaps; but there will be joy in those tears, as well as sorrow,—for then, when I clasp thy hand, I can murmur, "It is mine at last, and forever!"

Adieu! No, not adieu,—to our meeting, my lover, my beloved! Thy LUCRETIA.

An hour after Miss Clavering had departed on her visit, Dalibard returned the letter to his son, the seal seemingly unbroken, and bade him replace it in the hollow of the tree, but sufficiently in sight to betray itself to the first that entered. He then communicated the plan he had formed for its detection,—a plan which would prevent Lucretia ever suspecting the agency of his son or himself; and this done, he joined Sir Miles in the gallery. Hitherto, in addition to his other apprehensions in revealing to the baronet Lucretia's clandestine intimacy with Mainwaring, Dalibard had shrunk from the thought that the disclosure would lose her the heritage which had first tempted his avarice or ambition; but now his jealous and his vindictive passions were aroused, and his whole plan of strategy was changed. He must crush Lucretia, or she would crush him, as her threats declared. To ruin her in Sir Miles's eyes, to expel her from his house, might not, after all, weaken his own position, even with regard to power over herself. If he remained firmly established at Laughton, he could affect intercession,—he could delay, at least, any precipitate union with Mainwaring, by practising on the ambition which he still saw at work beneath her love; he might become a necessary ally; and then—why, then, his ironical smile glanced across his lips. But beyond this, his quick eye saw fair prospects to self-interest: Lucretia banished; the heritage not hers; the will to be altered; Dalibard esteemed indispensable to the life of the baronet. Come, there was hope here,—not for the heritage, indeed, but at least for a munificent bequest.

At noon, some visitors, bringing strangers from London whom Sir Miles had invited to see the house (which was one of the lions of the neighbourhood, though not professedly a show-place), were expected. Aware of this, Dalibard prayed the baronet to rest quiet till his company arrived, and then he said carelessly,—

“It will be a healthful diversion to your spirits to accompany them a little in the park; you can go in your garden-chair; you will have new companions to talk with by the way; and it is always warm and sunny at the slope of the hill, towards the bottom of the park.”

Sir Miles assented cheerfully; the guests came, strolled over the house, admired the pictures and the armour and the hall and the staircase, paid due respect to the substantial old-fashioned luncheon, and then, refreshed, and in great good-humour, acquiesced in Sir Miles's proposition to saunter through the park.

The poor baronet was more lively than usual. The younger people clustered gayly round his chair (which was wheeled by his valet), smiling at his jests and charmed with his courteous high-breeding. A little in the rear walked Gabriel, paying special attention to the prettiest and merriest girl of the company, who was a great favourite with Sir Miles,—perhaps for those reasons.

“What a delightful old gentleman!” said the young lady. “How I envy Miss Clavering such an uncle!”

“Ah, but you are a little out of favour to-day, I can tell you,” said Gabriel, laughingly; “you were close by Sir Miles when we went through the picture-gallery, and you never asked him the history of the old knight in the buff doublet and blue sash.”

“Dear me, what of that?”

“Why, that was brave Colonel Guy St. John, the Cavalier, the pride and boast of Sir Miles; you know his weakness. He looked so displeased when you said, ‘What a droll-looking figure!’ I was on thorns for you!”

“What a pity! I would not offend dear Sir Miles for the world.”

“Well, it's easy to make it up with him. Go and tell him that he must take you to see Guy's Oak, in the dell; that you have heard so much about it; and when you get him on his hobby, it is hard if you can't make your peace.”

“Oh, I'll certainly do it, Master Varney;” and the young lady lost no time in obeying the hint. Gabriel had set other tongues on the same cry, so that there was a general exclamation when the girl named the subject,—“Oh, Guy's Oak, by all means!”

Much pleased with the enthusiasm this memorial of his pet ancestor produced, Sir Miles led the way to the dell, and pausing as he reached the verge, said,—

“I fear I cannot do you the honours; it is too steep for my chair to descend safely.”

Gabriel whispered the fair companion whose side he still kept to.

“Now, my dear Sir Miles,” cried the girl, “I positively won’t stir without you; I am sure we could get down the chair without a jolt. Look there, how nicely the ground slopes! Jane, Lucy, my dears, let us take charge of Sir Miles. Now, then.”

The gallant old gentleman would have marched to the breach in such guidance; he kissed the fair hands that lay so temptingly on his chair, and then, rising with some difficulty, said,—

“No, my dears, you have made me so young again that I think I can walk down the steep with the best of you.”

So, leaning partly on his valet, and by the help of the hands extended to him, step after step, Sir Miles, with well-disguised effort, reached the huge roots of the oak.

“The hollow then was much smaller,” said he, “so he was not so easily detected as a man would be now, the damned crop-ears—I beg pardon, my dears; the rascally rebels—poked their swords through the fissure, and two went, one through his jerkin, one through his arm; but he took care not to swear at the liberty, and they went away, not suspecting him.”

While thus speaking, the young people were already playfully struggling which should first enter the oak. Two got precedence, and went in and out, one after the other. Gabriel breathed hard. “The blind owlets!” thought he; “and I put the letter where a mole would have seen it!”

“You know the spell when you enter an oak-tree where the fairies have been,” he whispered to the fair object of his notice. “You must turn round three times, look carefully on the ground, and you will see the face you love best. If I was but a little older, how I should pray—”

“Nonsense!” said the girl, blushing, as she now slid through the crowd, and went timidly in; presently she uttered a little exclamation.

The gallant Sir Miles stooped down to see what was the matter, and offering his hand as she came out, was startled to see her holding a letter.

“Only think what I have found!” said the girl. “What a strange place for a post-office! Bless me! It is directed to Mr. Mainwaring!”

“Mr. Mainwaring!” cried three or four voices; but the baronet’s was mute. His eye recognized Lucretia’s hand; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth; the blood surged, like a sea, in his temples; his face became purple. Suddenly Gabriel, peeping over the girl’s shoulder, snatched away the letter.

“It is my letter,—it is mine! What a shame in Mainwaring not to have come for it as he promised!”

Sir Miles looked round and breathed more freely.

“Yours, Master Varney!” said the young lady, astonished. “What can make your letters to Mr. Mainwaring such a secret?”

“Oh! you’ll laugh at me; but—but—I wrote a poem on Guy’s Oak, and Mr. Mainwaring promised to get it into the county paper for me; and as he was to pass close by the park pales, through the wood yonder, on his way to D—— last Saturday, we agreed that I should leave it here; but he has forgotten his promise, I see.”

Sir Miles grasped the boy’s arm with a convulsive pressure of gratitude. There was a general cry for Gabriel to read his poem on the spot; but the boy looked sheepish, and hung down his head, and seemed rather more disposed to cry than to recite. Sir Miles, with an effort at simulation that all his long practice of the world never could have nerved him to, unexcited by a motive less strong than the honour of his blood and house, came to the relief of the young wit that had just come to his own.

“Nay,” he said, almost calmly, “I know our young poet is too shy to oblige you. I will take charge of your verses, Master Gabriel;” and with a grave air of command, he took the letter from the boy and placed it in his pocket.

The return to the house was less gay than the visit to the oak. The baronet himself made a feverish effort to appear blithe and debonair as before; but it was not successful. Fortunately, the carriages were all at the door as they reached the house, and luncheon being over, nothing delayed the parting compliments of the guests. As the last carriage drove away, Sir Miles beckoned to Gabriel, and bade him follow him into his room.

When there, he dismissed his valet and said,—

“You know, then, who wrote this letter. Have you been in the secret of the correspondence? Speak the truth, my dear boy; it shall cost you nothing.”

“Oh, Sir Miles!” cried Gabriel, earnestly, “I know nothing whatever beyond this,—that I saw the hand of my dear, kind Miss Lucretia; that I felt, I hardly knew why, that both you and she would not have those people discover it, which they would if the letter had been circulated from one to the other, for some one would have known the hand as well as myself, and therefore I spoke, without thinking, the first thing that came into my head.”

“You—you have obliged me and my niece, sir,” said the baronet, tremulously; and then, with a forced and sickly smile, he added: “Some foolish vagary of Lucretia, I suppose; I must scold her for it. Say nothing about it, however, to any one.”

“Oh, no, sir!”

“Good-by, my dear Gabriel!”

“And that boy saved the honour of my niece’s name,—my mother’s grandchild! O God! this is bitter,—in my old age too!”

He bowed his head over his hands, and tears forced themselves through his fingers. He was long before he had courage to read the letter, though he little foreboded all the shock that it would give him. It was the first letter, not destined to himself, of which he had ever broken the seal. Even that recollection made the honourable old man pause; but his duty was plain and evident, as head of the house and guardian to his niece. Thrice he wiped his spectacles; still they were dim, still the tears would come. He rose tremblingly, walked to the window, and saw the stately deer grouped in the distance, saw the church spire that rose above the burial vault of his ancestors, and his heart sank deeper and deeper as he muttered: “Vain pride! pride!” Then he crept to the door and locked it, and at last, seating himself firmly, as a wounded man to some terrible operation, he read the letter.

Heaven support thee, old man! thou hast to pass through the bitterest trial which honour and affection can undergo,—household treason. When the wife lifts high the blushless front and brazens out her guilt; when the child, with loud voice, throws off all control and makes boast of disobedience,—man revolts at the audacity; his spirit arms against his wrong: its face, at least, is bare; the blow, if sacrilegious, is direct. But when mild words and soft kisses conceal the worst foe Fate can arm; when amidst the confidence of the heart starts up the form of Perfidy; when out from the reptile swells the fiend in its terror; when the breast on which man leaned for comfort has taken counsel to deceive him; when he learns that, day after day, the life entwined with his own has been a lie and a stage-mime,—he feels not the softness of grief, nor the absorption of rage; it is mightier than grief, and more withering than rage,—it is a horror that appalls. The heart does not bleed, the tears do not flow, as in woes to which humanity is commonly subjected; it is as if something that violates the course of nature had taken place,—something monstrous and out of all thought and forewarning; for the domestic traitor is a being apart from the orbit of criminals: the felon has no fear of his innocent children; with a price on his head, he lays it in safety on the bosom of his wife. In his home, the ablest man, the most subtle and suspecting, can be as much a dupe as the simplest. Were it not so as the rule, and the exceptions most rare, this world were the riot of a hell!

And therefore it is that to the household perfidy, in all lands, in all ages, God’s curse seems to cleave, and to God’s curse man abandons it; he does not honour it by hate, still less will he lighten and share the guilt by descending to revenge. He turns aside with a sickness and loathing, and leaves Nature to purify from the earth the ghastly phenomenon she abhors.

Old man, that she wilfully deceived thee, that she abused thy belief and denied to thy question and profaned maidenhood to stealth,—all this might have galled thee; but to these wrongs old men are subjected,—they give mirth to our farces; maid and lover are privileged impostors. But to have counted the sands in thine hour-glass, to have sat by thy side, marvelling when the worms should have thee, and looked smiling on thy face for the signs of the death-writ—Die quick, old man; the executioner hungers for the fee!

There were no tears in those eyes when they came to the close; the letter fell noiselessly to the floor, and the head sank on the breast, and the hands drooped upon the poor crippled limbs, whose crawl in the sunshine hard youth had grudged. He felt humbled, stunned, crushed; the pride was clean gone from him; the cruel words struck home. Worse than a cipher, did he then but cumber the earth? At that moment old Ponto, the setter, shook himself, looked up, and laid his head in his master's lap; and Dash, jealous, rose also, and sprang, not actively, for Dash was old, too, upon his knees, and licked the numbed, drooping hands. Now, people praise the fidelity of dogs till the theme is worn out; but nobody knows what a dog is, unless he has been deceived by men,—then, that honest face; then, that sincere caress; then, that coaxing whine that never lied! Well, then,—what then? A dog is long-lived if he live to ten years,—small career this to truth and friendship! Now, when Sir Miles felt that he was not deserted, and his look met those four fond eyes, fixed with that strange wistfulness which in our hours of trouble the eyes of a dog sympathizingly assume, an odd thought for a sensible man passed into him, showing, more than pages of sombre elegy, how deep was the sudden misanthropy that blackened the world around. “When I am dead,” ran that thought, “is there one human being whom I can trust to take charge of the old man's dogs?”

So, let the scene close!

CHAPTER VI. THE WILL

The next day, or rather the next evening, Sir Miles St. John was seated before his unshared chicken,—seated alone, and vaguely surprised at himself, in a large, comfortable room in his old hotel, Hanover Square. Yes, he had escaped. Hast thou, O Reader, tasted the luxury of escape from a home where the charm is broken,—where Distrust looks askant from the Lares? In vain had Dalibard remonstrated, conjured up dangers, and asked at least to accompany him. Excepting his dogs and his old valet, who was too like a dog in his fond fidelity to rank amongst bipeds, Sir Miles did not wish to have about him a single face familiar at Laughton, Dalibard especially. Lucretia's letter had hinted at plans and designs in Dalibard. It might be unjust, it might be ungrateful; but he grew sick at the thought that he was the centre-stone of stratagems and plots. The smooth face of the Provencal took a wily expression in his eyes; nay, he thought his very footmen watched his steps as if to count how long before they followed his bier. So, breaking from all roughly, with a shake of his head and a laconic assertion of business in London, he got into his carriage,—his own old bachelor's lumbering travelling-carriage,—and bade the post-boys drive fast, fast! Then, when he felt alone,—quite alone,—and the gates of the lodge swung behind him, he rubbed his hands with a schoolboy's glee, and chuckled aloud, as if he enjoyed, not only the sense, but the fun of his safety; as if he had done something prodigiously cunning and clever.

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