

HENRY WOOD

VERNER'S

PRIDE

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Mrs. Henry Wood

Verner's Pride

CHAPTER I.

RACHEL FROST

The slanting rays of the afternoon sun, drawing towards the horizon, fell on a fair scene of country life; flickering through the young foliage of the oak and lime trees, touching the budding hedges, resting on the growing grass, all so lovely in their early green, and lighting up with flashes of yellow fire the windows of the fine mansion, that, rising on a gentle eminence, looked down on that fair scene as if it were its master, and could boast the ownership of those broad lands, of those gleaming trees.

Not that the house possessed much attraction for those whose taste savoured of the antique. No time-worn turrets were there, or angular gables, or crooked eaves, or mullioned Gothic casements, so chary of glass that modern eyes can scarcely see in or out; neither was the edifice constructed of gray stone, or of bricks gone black and green with age. It was a handsome, well-built white mansion, giving the promise of desirable rooms inside, whose chimneys did not smoke or their windows rattle, and where there was sufficient space to turn in. The lower windows opened on a gravelled terrace, which ran along the front of the house, a flight of steps descending from it in its midst. Gently sloping lawns extended from the terrace, on either side the steps and the broad walks which branched from them; on which lawns shone gay parterres of flowers already scenting the air, and giving promise of the advancing summer. Beyond, were covered walks, affording a shelter from the sultry noontide sun; shrubberies and labyrinths of many turnings and windings, so suggestive of secret meetings, were secret meetings desirable; groves of scented shrubs exhaling their perfume; cascades and rippling fountains; mossy dells, concealing the sweet primrose, the sweeter violet; and verdant, sunny spots open to the country round, to the charming distant scenery. These open spots had their benches, where you might sit and feast the eyes through the live-long summer day.

It was not summer yet—scarcely spring—and the sun, I say, was drawing to its setting, lighting up the large clear panes of the windows as with burnished gold. The house, the ornamental grounds, the estate around, all belonged to Mr. Verner. It had come to him by bequest, not by entailed inheritance. Busybodies were fond of saying that it never ought to have been his; that, if the strict law of right and justice had been observed, it would have gone to his elder brother; or, rather, to that elder brother's son. Old Mr. Verner, the father of these two brothers, had been a modest country gentleman, until one morning when he awoke to the news that valuable mines had been discovered on his land. The mines brought him in gold, and in his later years he purchased this estate, pulled down the house that was upon it—a high, narrow, old thing, looking like a crazy tower or a capacious belfry—and had erected this one, calling it "Verner's Pride."

An appropriate name. For if ever poor human man was proud of a house he has built, old Mr. Verner was proud of that—proud to folly. He laid out money on it in plenty; he made the grounds belonging to it beautiful and seductive as a fabled scene from fairyland; and he wound up by leaving it to the younger of his two sons.

These two sons constituted all his family. The elder of them had gone into the army early, and left for India; the younger had remained always with his father, the helper of his money-making, the sharer of the planning out and building of Verner's Pride, the joint resident there after it was built. The elder son—Captain Verner then—paid one visit only to England, during which visit he married, and took his wife out with him when he went back. These long-continued separations, however much

we may feel inclined to gloss over the fact, do play strange havoc with home affections, wearing them away inch by inch.

The years went on and on. Captain Verner became Colonel Sir Lionel Verner, and a boy of his had been sent home in due course, and was at Eton. Old Mr. Verner grew near to death. News went out to India that his days were numbered, and Sir Lionel Verner was instructed to get leave of absence, if possible, and start for home without a day's loss, if he would see his father alive. "If possible," you observe, they put to the request; for the Sikhs were at that time giving trouble in our Indian possessions, and Colonel Verner was one of the experienced officers least likely to be spared.

But there is a mandate that must be obeyed whenever it comes—grim, imperative death. At the very hour when Mr. Verner was summoning his son to his death-bed, at the precise time that military authority in India would have said, if asked, that Colonel Sir Lionel Verner could *not* be spared, death had marked out that brave officer for his own especial prey. He fell in one of the skirmishes that took place near Moulton, and the two letters—one going to Europe with tidings of his death, the other going to India with news of his father's illness—crossed each other on the route.

"Steevy," said old Mr. Verner to his younger son, after giving a passing lament to Sir Lionel, "I shall leave Verner's Pride to you."

"Ought it not to go to the lad at Eton, father?" was the reply of Stephen Verner.

"What's the lad at Eton to me?" cried the old man. "I'd not have left it away from Lionel, as he stood first, but it has always seemed to me that you had the most right to it; that to leave it away from you savoured of injustice. You were at its building, Steevy; it has been your home as much as it has been mine; and I'll never turn you from it for a stranger, let him be whose child he may. No, no! Verner's Pride shall be yours. But, look you, Stephen! you have no children; bring up young Lionel as your heir, and let it descend to him after you."

And that is how Stephen Verner had inherited Verner's Pride. Neighbouring gossipers, ever fonder of laying down the law for other people's business than of minding their own, protested against it among themselves as a piece of injustice. Had they cause? Many very just-minded persons would consider that Stephen Verner possessed more fair claim to it than the boy at Eton.

I will tell you of one who did not consider so. And that was the widow of Sir Lionel Verner. When she arrived from India with her other two children, a son and daughter, she found old Mr. Verner dead, and Stephen the inheritor. Deeply annoyed and disappointed, Lady Verner deemed that a crying wrong had been perpetrated upon her and hers. But she had no power to undo it.

Stephen Verner had strictly fulfilled his father's injunctions touching young Lionel. He brought up the boy as his heir. During his educational days at Eton and at college, Verner's Pride was his holiday home, and he subsequently took up his permanent residence at it. Stephen Verner, though long married, had no children. One daughter had been born to him years ago, but had died at three or four years old. His wife had died a very short while subsequent to the death of his father. He afterwards married again, a widow lady of the name of Massingbird, who had two nearly grown-up sons. She had brought her sons home with her to Verner's Pride, and they had made it their home since.

Mr. Verner kept it no secret that his nephew Lionel was to be his heir; and, as such, Lionel was universally regarded on the estate. "Always provided that you merit it," Mr. Verner would say to Lionel in private; and so he had said to him from the very first. "Be what you ought to be—what I fondly believe my brother Lionel was: a man of goodness, of honour, of Christian integrity; a *gentleman* in the highest acceptation of the term—and Verner's Pride shall undoubtedly be yours. But if I find you forget your fair conduct, and forfeit the esteem of good men, so surely will I leave it away from you."

And that is the introduction. And now we must go back to the golden light of that spring evening.

Ascending the broad flight of steps and crossing the terrace, the house door is entered. A spacious hall, paved with delicately-grained marble, its windows mellowed by the soft tints of stained glass, whose pervading hues are of rose and violet, gives entrance to reception rooms on either side.

Those on the right hand are mostly reserved for state occasions; those on the left are dedicated to common use. All these rooms are just now empty of living occupants, save one. That one is a small room on the right, behind the two grand drawing-rooms, and it looks out on the side of the house towards the south. It is called "Mr. Verner's study." And there sits Mr. Verner himself in it, leaning back in his chair and reading. A large fire burns in the grate, and he is close to it: he is always chilly.

Ay, always chilly. For Mr. Verner's last illness—at least, what will in all probability prove his last, his ending—has already laid hold of him. One generation passes away after another. It seems but the other day that a last illness seized upon his father, and now it is his turn: but several years have elapsed since then. Mr. Verner is not sixty, and he thinks that age is young for the disorder that has fastened on him. It is no hurried disorder; he may live for years yet; but the end, when it does come, will be tolerably sudden: and that he knows. It is water on the chest. He is a little man with light eyes; very much like what his father was before him: but not in the least like his late brother Sir Lionel, who was a very fine and handsome man. He has a mild, pleasing countenance: but there arises a slight scowl to his brow as he turns hastily round at a noisy interruption.

Some one had burst into the room—forgetting, probably, that it was the quiet room of an invalid. A tall, dark young man, with broad shoulders and a somewhat peculiar stoop in them. His hair was black, his complexion sallow; but his features were good. He might have been called a handsome man, but for a strange, ugly mark upon his cheek. A very strange-looking mark indeed, quite as large as a pigeon's egg, with what looked like radii shooting from it on all sides. Some of the villagers, talking familiarly among themselves, would call it a hedgehog, some would call it a "porkypine"; but it resembled a star as much as anything. That is, if you can imagine a black star. The mark was black as jet; and his pale cheek, and the fact of his possessing no whiskers, made it all the more conspicuous. He was born with the mark; and his mother used to say—But that is of no consequence to us. It was Frederick Massingbird, the present Mrs. Verner's younger son.

"Roy has come up, sir," said he, addressing Mr. Verner. "He says the Dawsons have turned obstinate and won't go out. They have barricaded the door, and protest that they'll stay, in spite of him. He wishes to know if he shall use force."

"No," said Mr. Verner. "I don't like harsh measures, and I will not have such attempted. Roy knows that."

"Well, sir, he waits your orders. He says there's half the village collected round Dawson's door. The place is in a regular commotion."

Mr. Verner looked vexed. Of late years he had declined active management on his estate; and, since he grew ill, he particularly disliked being disturbed with details.

"Where's Lionel?" he asked in a peevish tone.

"I saw Lionel ride out an hour ago. I don't know where he is gone."

"Tell Roy to let the affair rest until to-morrow, when Lionel will see about it. And, Frederick, I wish you would remember that a little noise shakes me: try to come in more quietly. You burst in as if my nerves were as strong as your own."

Mr. Verner turned to his fire again with an air of relief, glad to have got rid of the trouble in some way, and Frederick Massingbird proceeded to what was called the steward's room, where Roy waited. This Roy, a hard-looking man with a face very much seamed with the smallpox, was working bailiff to Mr. Verner. Until within a few years he had been but a labourer on the estate. He was not liked among the poor tenants, and was generally honoured with the appellation "Old Grips," or "Grip Roy."

"Roy," said Frederick Massingbird, "Mr. Verner says it is to be left until to-morrow morning. Mr. Lionel will see about it then. He is out at present."

"And let the mob have it all their own way for to-night?" returned Roy angrily. "They be in a state of mutiny, they be; a-saying everything as they can lay their tongues to."

"Let them say it," responded Frederick Massingbird. "Leave them alone, and they'll disperse quietly enough. I shall not go in to Mr. Verner again, Roy. I caught it now for disturbing him. You must let it rest until you can see Mr. Lionel."

The bailiff went off, growling. He would have liked to receive *carte-blanche* for dealing with the mob—as he was pleased to term them—between whom and himself there was no love lost. As he was crossing a paved yard at the back of the house, some one came hastily out of the laundry in the detached premises to the side, and crossed his path.

A very beautiful girl. Her features were delicate, her complexion was fair as alabaster, and a bright colour mantled in her cheeks. But for the modest cap upon her head, a stranger might have been puzzled to guess at her condition in life. She looked gentle and refined as any lady, and her manners and speech would not have destroyed the illusion. She may be called a *protégée* of the house, as will be explained presently; but she acted as maid to Mrs. Verner. The bright colour deepened to a glowing one when she saw the bailiff.

He put out his hand and stopped her. "Well, Rachel, how are you?"

"Quite well, thank you," she answered, endeavouring to pass on. But he would not suffer it.

"I say, I want to come to the bottom of this business between you and Luke," he said, lowering his voice. "What's the rights of it?"

"Between me and Luke?" she repeated, turning upon the bailiff an eye that had some scorn in it, and stopping now of her own accord. "There is no business whatever between me and Luke. There never has been. What do you mean?"

"Chut!" cried the bailiff. "Don't I know that he has followed your steps everywhere like a shadder; that he has been ready to kiss the very ground you trod on? And right mad I have been with him for it. You can't deny that he has been after you, wanting you to be his wife."

"I do not wish to deny it," she replied. "You and the whole world are quite welcome to know all that has passed between me and Luke. He asked to be allowed to come here to see me—to 'court' me, he phrased it—which I distinctly declined. Then he took to following me about. He did not molest me, he was not rude—I do not wish to make it out worse than it was—but it is not pleasant, Mr. Roy, to be followed whenever you may take a walk. Especially by one you dislike."

"What is there to dislike in Luke?" demanded the bailiff.

"Perhaps I ought to have said by one you do not like," she resumed. "To like Luke, in the way he wished, was impossible for me, and I told him so from the first. When I found that he dodged my steps, I spoke to him again, and threatened that I should acquaint Mr. Verner. I told him, once for all, that I could not like him, that I never would have him; and since then he has kept his distance. That is all that has ever passed between me and Luke."

"Well, your hard-heartedness has done for him, Rachel Frost. It has drove him away from his native home, and sent him, an exile, to rough it in foreign lands. You may fix upon one as won't do for you and be your slave as Luke would. He could have kept you well."

"I heard he had gone to London," she remarked.

"London!" returned the bailiff slightly. "That's only the first halt on the journey. And you have drove him to it!"

"I can't help it," she replied, turning to the house. "I had no natural liking for him, and I could not force it. I don't believe he has gone away for that trifling reason, Mr. Roy. If he has, he must be very foolish."

"Yes, he is foolish," muttered the bailiff to himself, as he strode away. "He's a idiot, that's what he is! and so be all men that loses their wits a-sighing after a girl. Vain, deceitful, fickle creatures, the girls be when they're young; but once let them get a hold on you, your ring on their finger, and they turn into vixenish, snarling women! Luke's a sight best off without her."

Rachel Frost proceeded indoors. The door of the steward's room stood open, and she turned into it, fancying it was empty. Down on a chair sat she, a marked change coming over her air and

manner. Her bright colour had faded, her hands hung down listless; and there was an expression on her face of care, of perplexity. Suddenly she lifted her hands and struck her temples, with a gesture that looked very like despair.

"What ails you, Rachel?"

The question came from Frederick Massingbird, who had been standing at the window behind the high desk, unobserved by Rachel. Violently startled, she sprang up from her seat, her face a glowing crimson, muttering some disjointed words, to the effect that she did not know anybody was there.

"What were you and Roy discussing so eagerly in the yard?" continued Frederick Massingbird. But the words had scarcely escaped his lips, when the housekeeper, Mrs. Tynn, entered the room. She had a mottled face and mottled arms, her sleeves just now being turned up to the elbow.

"It was nothing particular, Mr. Frederick," replied Rachel.

"Roy is gone, is he not?" he continued to Rachel.

"Yes, sir."

"Rachel," interposed the housekeeper, "are those things not ready yet, in the laundry?"

"Not quite. In a quarter of an hour, they say."

The housekeeper, with a word of impatience at the laundry's delay, went out and crossed the yard towards it. Frederick Massingbird turned again to Rachel.

"Roy seemed to be grumbling at you."

"He accused me of being the cause of his son's going away. He thinks I ought to have noticed him."

Frederick Massingbird made no reply. He raised his finger and gently rubbed it round and round the mark upon his cheek: a habit he had acquired when a child, and they could not entirely break him of it. He was seven-and-twenty years of age now, but he was sure to begin rubbing that mark unconsciously, if in deep thought. Rachel resumed, her tone a covert one, as if the subject on which she was about to speak might not be breathed, even to the walls.

"Roy hinted that his son was going to foreign lands. I did not choose to let him see that I knew anything, so remarked that I had heard he was gone to London. 'London!' he answered; 'that was only the first halting-place on the journey!'"

"Did he give any hint about John?"

"Not a word," replied Rachel. "He would not be likely to do that."

"No. Roy can keep counsel, whatever other virtues he may run short of. Suppose you had joined your fortunes to sighing Luke's, Rachel, and gone out with him to grow rich together?" added Frederick Massingbird, in a tone which could be taken for either jest or earnest.

She evidently took it as the latter, and it appeared to call up an angry spirit. She was vexed almost to tears. Frederick Massingbird detected it.

"Silly Rachel!" he said, with a smile. "Do you suppose I should really counsel your throwing yourself away upon Luke Roy?—Rachel," he continued, as the housekeeper again made her appearance, "you must bring up the things as soon as they are ready. My brother is waiting for them."

"I'll bring them up, sir," replied Rachel.

Frederick Massingbird passed through the passages to the hall, and then proceeded upstairs to the bedroom occupied by his brother. A sufficiently spacious room for any ordinary purpose, but it did not look half large enough now for the litter that was in it. Wardrobes and drawers were standing open, their contents half out, half in; chairs, tables, bed, were strewed; and boxes and portmanteaus were gaping open on the floor. John Massingbird, the elder brother, was stowing away some of this litter into the boxes; not all sixes and sevens, as it looked lying there, but compactly and artistically. John Massingbird possessed a ready hand at packing and arranging; and therefore he preferred doing it himself to deputing it to others. He was one year older than his brother, and there was a great likeness between them in figure and in feature. Not in expression: in that, they were widely different.

They were about the same height, and there was the same stoop observable in the shoulders; the features also were similar in cast, and sallow in hue; the same the black eyes and hair. John had large whiskers, otherwise the likeness would have been more striking; and his face was not disfigured by the strange black mark. He was the better looking of the two; his face wore an easy, good-natured, free expression; while Frederick's was cold and reserved. Many people called John Massingbird a handsome man. In character they were quite opposite. John was a harum-scarum chap, up to every scrape; Fred was cautious and steady as Old Time.

Seated in the only free chair in the room—free from litter—was a tall, stout lady. But that she had so much crimson about her, she would have borne a remarkable resemblance to those two young men, her sons. She wore a silk dress, gold in one light, green in another, with broad crimson stripes running across it; her cap was of white lace garnished with crimson ribbons, and her cheeks and nose were crimson to match. As if this were not enough, she wore crimson streamers at her wrists, and a crimson bow on the front of her gown. Had you been outside, you might have seen that the burnished gold on the window-panes had turned to crimson, for the setting sun had changed its hue: but the panes could not look more brightly, deeply crimson, than did Mrs. Verner. It seemed as if you might light a match at her face. In that particular, there was a contrast between her and the perfectly pale, sallow faces of her sons; otherwise the resemblance was great.

"Fred," said Mrs. Verner, "I wish you would see what they are at with the shirts and things. I sent Rachel after them, but she does not come back, and then I sent Mary Tynn, and she does not come. Here's John as impatient as he can be."

She spoke in a slow, somewhat indifferent tone, as if she did not care to put herself out of the way about it. Indeed it was not Mrs. Verner's custom to put herself out of the way for anything. She liked to eat, drink, and sleep in undisturbed peace; and she generally did so.

"John's impatient because he wants to get it over," spoke up that gentleman himself in a merry voice. "Fifty thousand things I have to do, between now and to-morrow night. If they don't bring the clothes soon, I shall close the boxes without them, and leave them a legacy for Fred."

"You have only yourself to thank, John," said his mother. "You never gave the things out until after breakfast this morning, and then required them to be done by the afternoon. Such nonsense, to say they had grown yellow in the drawers! They'll be yellower by the time you get there. It is just like you! driving off everything till the last moment. You have known you were going for some days past."

John was stamping upon a box to get down the lid, and did not attend to the reproach. "See if it will lock, Fred, will you?" said he.

Frederick Massingbird stooped and essayed to turn the key. And just then Mrs. Tynn entered with a tray of clean linen, which she set down. Rachel followed, having a contrivance in her hand, made of silk, for the holding of needles, threads, and pins, all in one.

She looked positively beautiful as she held it out before Mrs. Verner. The evening rays fell upon her exquisite face, with its soft, dark eyes and its changing colour; they fell upon her silk dress, a relic of Mrs. Verner's—but it had no crimson stripes across it; upon her lace collar, upon the little edge of lace at her wrists. Nature had certainly intended Rachel for a lady, with her graceful form, her charming manners, and her delicate hands.

"Will this do, ma'am?" she inquired. "Is it the sort of thing you meant?"

"Ay, that will do, Rachel," replied Mrs. Verner. "John, here's a huswife for you!"

"A what?" asked John Massingbird, arresting his stamping.

"A needle-book to hold your needles and thread. Rachel has made it nicely. Sha'n't you want a thimble?"

"Goodness knows," replied John. "That's it, Fred! that's it! Give it a turn."

Frederick Massingbird locked the box, and then left the room. His mother followed him, telling John she had a large steel thimble somewhere, and would try to find it for him. Rachel began filling the huswife with needles, and John went on with his packing.

"Hollo!" he presently exclaimed. And Rachel looked up.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"I have pulled one of the strings off this green case. You must sew it on again, Rachel."

He brought a piece of green baize to her and a broken string. It looked something like the cover of a pocket-book or of a small case of instruments.

Rachel's nimble fingers soon repaired the damage. John stood before her, looking on.

Looking not only at the progress of the work, but at her. Mr. John Massingbird was one who had an eye for beauty; he had not seen much in his life that could match with that before him. As Rachel held the case up to him, the damage repaired, he suddenly bent his head to steal a kiss.

But Rachel was too quick for him. She flung his face away with her hand; she flushed vividly; she was grievously indignant. That she considered it in the light of an insult was only too apparent; her voice was pained—her words were severe.

"Be quiet, stupid! I was not going to eat you," laughed John Massingbird. "I won't tell Luke."

"Insult upon insult!" she exclaimed, strangely excited. "You know that Luke Roy is nothing to me, Mr. Massingbird; you know that I have never in my life vouchsafed to give him an encouraging word. But, much as I despise him—much as he is beneath me—I would rather submit to have my face touched by him than by you."

What more she would have said was interrupted by the reappearance of Mrs. Verner. That lady's ears had caught the sound of the contest; of the harsh words; and she felt inexpressibly surprised.

"What has happened?" she asked. "What is it, Rachel?"

"She pricked herself with one of the needles," said John, taking the explanation upon himself; "and then said I did it."

Mrs. Verner looked from one to the other. Rachel had turned quite pale. John laughed; he knew his mother did not believe him.

"The truth is, mother, I began teasing Rachel about her admirer, Luke. It made her angry."

"What absurdity!" exclaimed Mrs. Verner testily, to Rachel. "My opinion is, you would have done well to encourage Luke. He was steady and respectable; and old Roy must have saved plenty of money."

Rachel burst into tears.

"What now!" cried Mrs. Verner. "Not a word can anybody say to you lately, Rachel, but you must begin to cry as if you were heart-broken. What has come to you, child? Is anything the matter with you?"

The tears deepened into long sobs of agony, as though her heart were indeed broken. She held her handkerchief up to her face, and went sobbing from the room.

Mrs. Verner gazed after her in very astonishment. "What has taken her? What can it possibly be?" she uttered. "John, you must know."

"I, mother! I declare to you that I know no more about it than Adam. Rachel must be going a little crazed."

CHAPTER II. THE WILLOW POND

Before the sun had well set, the family at Verner's Pride were assembling for dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Verner, and John Massingbird: neither Lionel Verner nor Frederick Massingbird was present. The usual custom appeared somewhat reversed on this evening: while roving John would be just as likely to absent himself from dinner as not, his brother and Lionel Verner nearly always appeared at it. Mr. Verner looked surprised.

"Where are they?" he cried, as he waited to say grace.

"Mr. Lionel has not come in, sir," replied the butler, Tynn, who was husband to the housekeeper.

"And Fred has gone out to keep some engagement with Sibylla West," spoke up Mrs. Verner. "She is going to spend the evening at the Bitterworths, and Fred promised, I believe, to see her safely thither. He will take his dinner when he comes in."

Mr. Verner bent his head, said the grace, and the dinner began.

Later—but not much later, for it was scarcely dark yet—Rachel Frost was leaving the house to pay a visit in the adjoining village, Deerham. Her position may be at once explained. It was mentioned in the last chapter that Mr. Verner had had one daughter, who died young. The mother of Rachel Frost had been this child's nurse, Rachel being an infant at the same time, so that the child, Rachel Verner, and Rachel Frost—named after her—had been what is called foster-sisters. It had caused Mr. Verner, and his wife also while she lived, to take an interest in Rachel Frost; it is very probable that their own child's death only made this interest greater. They were sufficiently wise not to lift the girl palpably out of her proper sphere; but they paid for a decent education for her at a day-school, and were personally kind to her. Rachel—I was going to say fortunately, but it may be as just to say *unfortunately*—was one of those who seem to make the best of every trifling advantage: she had grown, without much effort of her own, into what might be termed a lady, in appearance, in manners, and in speech. The second Mrs. Verner also took an interest in her; and nearly a year before this period, on Rachel's eighteenth birthday, she took her to Verner's Pride as her own attendant.

A fascinating, lovable child had Rachel Frost ever been: she was a fascinating, lovable girl. Modest, affectionate, generous, everybody liked Rachel; she had not an enemy, so far as was known, in all Deerham. Her father was nothing but a labourer on the Verner estate; but in mind and conduct he was superior to his station; an upright, conscientious, and, in some degree, a proud man: her mother had been dead several years. Rachel was proud too, in her way; proud and sensitive.

Rachel, dressed in her bonnet and shawl, passed out of the house by the front entrance. She would not have presumed to do so by daylight; but it was dusk now, the family not about, and it cut off a few yards of the road to the village. The terrace—which you have heard of as running along the front of the house—sloped gradually down at either end to the level ground, so as to admit the approach of carriages.

Riding up swiftly to the door, as Rachel appeared at it, was a gentleman of some five or six and twenty years. Horse and man both looked thoroughbred. Tall, strong, and slender, with a keen, dark blue eye, and regular features of a clear, healthy paleness, he—the man—would draw a second glance to himself wherever he might be met. His face was not inordinately handsome; nothing of the sort; but it wore an air of candour, of noble truth. A somewhat impassive face in repose, somewhat cold; but, in speaking, it grew expressive to animation, and the frank smile that would light it up made its greatest charm. The smile stole over it now, as he checked his horse and bent towards Rachel.

"Have they thought me lost? I suppose dinner is begun?"

"Dinner has been in this half-hour, sir."

"All right. I feared they might wait. What's the matter, Rachel? You've been making your eyes red."

"The matter! There's nothing the matter with me, Mr. Lionel," was Rachel's reply, her tone betraying a touch of annoyance. And she turned and walked swiftly along the terrace, beyond reach of the glare of the gas-lamp.

Up stole a man at this moment, who must have been hidden amid the pillars of the portico, watching the transient meeting, watching for an opportunity to speak. It was Roy, the bailiff; and he accosted the gentleman with the same complaint, touching the ill-doings of the Dawsons and the village in general, that had previously been carried to Mr. Verner by Frederick Massingbird.

"I was told to wait and take my orders from you, sir," he wound up with. "The master don't like to be troubled, and he wouldn't give none."

"Neither shall I give any," was the answer, "until I know more about it."

"They ought to be got out to-night, Mr. Lionel!" exclaimed the man, striking his hand fiercely against the air. "They sow all manner of incendiarisms in the place, with their bad example."

"Roy," said Lionel Verner, in a quiet tone, "I have not, as you know, interfered actively in the management of things. I have not opposed my opinion against my uncle's, or much against yours; I have not come between you and him. When I have given orders, they have been his orders, not mine. But many things go on that I disapprove of; and I tell you very candidly that, were I to become master to-morrow, my first act would be to displace you, unless you could undertake to give up these nasty acts of petty oppression."

"Unless some of 'em was oppressed and kept under, they'd be for riding roughshod over the whole of us," retorted Roy.

"Nonsense!" said Lionel. "Nothing breeds rebellion like oppression. You are too fond of oppression, Roy, and Mr. Verner knows it."

"They be a idle, poaching, good-for-nothing lot, them Dawsons," pursued Roy. "And now that they be behind-hand with their rent, it is a glorious opportunity to get rid of 'em. I'd turn 'em into the road, without a bed to lie on, this very night!"

"How would you like to be turned into the road, without a bed to lie on?" demanded Lionel.

"Me!" returned Roy, in deep dudgeon. "Do you compare me to that Dawson lot? When I give cause to be turned out, then I hope I may be turned out, sir, that's all. Mr. Lionel," he added, in a more conciliating tone, "I know better about out-door things than you, and I say it's necessary to be shut of the Dawsons. Give me power to act in this."

"I will not," said Lionel. "I forbid you to act in it at all, until the circumstances shall have been inquired into."

He sprung from his horse, flung the bridle to the groom, who was at that moment coming forward, and strode into the house with the air of a young chieftain. Certainly Lionel Verner appeared fitted by nature to be the heir of Verner's Pride.

Rachel Frost, meanwhile, gained the road and took the path to the left hand; which would lead her to the village. Her thoughts were bent on many sources, not altogether pleasant, one of which was the annoyance she had experienced at finding her name coupled with that of the bailiff's son, Luke Roy. There was no foundation for it. She had disliked Luke, rather than liked him, her repugnance to him no doubt arising from the very favour he felt disposed to show to her; and her account of past matters to the bailiff was in accordance with the facts. As she walked along, pondering, she became aware that two people were advancing towards her in the dark twilight. She knew them instantly, almost by intuition, but they were too much occupied with each other yet to have noticed her. One was Frederick Massingbird, and the young lady on his arm was his cousin, Sibylla West, a girl young and fascinating as was Rachel. Mr. Frederick Massingbird had been suspected of a liking, more than ordinary, for this young lady; but he had protested in Rachel's hearing, as in that of others, that his was only cousin's love. Some impulse prompted Rachel to glide in at a field-gate which she was then

passing, and stand behind the hedge until they should have gone by. Possibly she did not care to be seen.

It was a still night, and their voices were borne distinctly to Rachel as they slowly advanced. The first words to reach her came from the young lady.

"You will be going out after him, Frederick. That will be the next thing I expect."

"Sibylla," was the answer, and his accents bore that earnest, tender, confidential tone which of itself alone betrays love, "be you very sure of one thing: that I go neither there nor elsewhere without taking you."

"Oh, Frederick, is not John enough to go?"

"If I saw a better prospect there than here, I should follow him. After he has arrived and is settled, he will write and report. My darling, I am ever thinking of the future for your sake."

"But is it not a dreadful country? There are wolves and bears in it that eat people up."

Frederick Massingbird slightly laughed at the remark. "Do you think I would take my wife into the claws of wolves and bears?" he asked, in a tone of the deepest tenderness. "She will be too precious to me for that, Sibylla."

The voices and the footsteps died away in the distance, and Rachel came out of her hiding-place, and went quickly on towards the village. Her father's cottage was soon gained. He did not live alone. His only son, Robert—who had a wife and family—lived with him. Robert was the son of his youth; Rachel the daughter of his age; the children of two wives. Matthew Frost's wife had died in giving birth to Robert, and twenty years elapsed ere he married a second. He was seventy years of age now, but still upright as a dart, with a fine fresh complexion, a clear bright eye, and snow-white hair that fell in curls behind, on the collar of his white smock-frock.

He was sitting at a small table apart when Rachel entered, a candle and a large open Bible on it. A flock of grandchildren crowded round him, two of them on his knees. He was showing them the pictures. To gaze wonderingly on those pictures, and never tire of asking explanations of their mysteries, was the chief business of the little Frosts' lives. Robert's wife—but he was hardly ever called anything but Robin—was preparing something over the fire for the evening meal. Rachel went up and kissed her father. He scattered the children from him to make room for her. He loved her dearly. Robin loved her dearly. When Robin was a grown-up young man the pretty baby had come to be his plaything. Robin seemed to love her still better than he loved his own children.

"Thee'st been crying, child!" cried old Matthew Frost. "What has ailed thee?"

Had Rachel known that the signs of her past tears were so palpable as to call forth remark from everybody she met, as it appeared they were doing, she might have remained at home. Putting on a gay face, she laughed off the matter. Matthew pressed it.

"Something went wrong at home, and I got a scolding," said Rachel at length. "It was not worth crying over, though."

Mrs. Frost turned round from her saucepan.

"A scolding from the missis, Rachel?"

"There's nobody else at Verner's Pride should scold me," responded Rachel, with a charming little air of self-consequence. "Mrs. Verner said a cross word or two, and I was so stupid as to burst out crying. I have had a headache all day, and that's sure to put me out of sorts."

"There's always things to worry one in service, let it be ever so good on the whole," philosophically observed Mrs. Frost, bestowing her attention again upon the saucepan. "Better be one's own missus on a crust, say I, than at the beck and call of others."

"Rachel," interrupted old Matthew, "when I let you go to Verner's Pride, I thought it was for your good. But I'd not keep you there a day, child, if you be unhappy."

"Dear father, don't take up that notion," she quickly rejoined. "I am happier at Verner's Pride than I should be anywhere else. I would not leave it. Where is Robin this evening?"

"Robin—"

The answer was interrupted by the entrance of Robin himself. A short man with a red face, somewhat obstinate-looking. His eye lighted up when he saw Rachel; Mrs. Frost poured out the contents of her saucepan, which appeared to be a compound of Scotch oatmeal and treacle. Rachel was invited to take some, but declined. She lifted one of the children on her knee—a pretty little girl named after herself. The child did not seem well, and Rachel hushed it to her, bringing down her own sweet face caressingly upon the little one's.

"So I hear as Mr. John Massingbird's a-going to London on a visit?" cried Robin to his sister, holding out his basin for a second supply of the porridge.

The question had to be repeated three times, and then Rachel seemed to awake to it with a start. She had been gazing at vacancy, as if buried in a dream.

"Mr. John? A visit to London? Oh, yes, yes; he is going to London."

"Do he make much of a stay?"

"I can't tell," said Rachel slightly. A certain confidence had been reposed in her at Verner's Pride; but it was not her business to make it known, even in her father's home. Rachel was not a good hand at deception, and she changed the subject. "Has there not been some disturbance with the Dawsons to-day? Old Roy was at Verner's Pride this afternoon, and the servants have been saying he came up about the Dawsons."

"He wanted to turn 'em out," replied Robin.

"He's Grip Roy all over," said Mrs. Frost.

Old Matthew Frost shook his head. "There has been ill-feeling smouldering between Roy and old Dawson this long while," said he. "Now that it's come to open war, I misdoubt me but there'll be violence."

"There's ill-feeling between Roy and a many more, father, besides the Dawsons," observed Robin.

"Ay! Rachel, child"—turning his head to the hearth, where his daughter sat apart—"folks have said that young Luke wants to make up to you. But I'd not like it. Luke's a good-meaning, kind-hearted lad himself, but I'd not like you to be daughter-in-law to old Roy."

"Be easy, father dear. I'd not have Luke Roy if he were made of gold. I never yet had anything to say to him, and I never will have. We can't help our likes and dislikes."

"Pshaw!" said Robin, with pardonable pride. "Pretty Rachel is not for a daft chap like Luke Roy, that's a head and ears shorter nor other men. Be you, my dear one?"

Rachel laughed. Her conscience told her that she enjoyed a joke at Luke's undersize. She took a shower of kisses from the little girl, put her down, and rose.

"I must go," she said. "Mrs. Verner may be calling for me."

"Don't she know you be come out?" asked old Matthew.

"No. But do not fear that I came clandestinely—or, as our servants would say, on the sly," added Rachel, with a smile. "Mrs. Verner has told me to run down to see you whenever I like, after she has gone in to dinner. Good-night, dear father."

The old man pressed her to his heart: "Don't thee get fretting again my blessing. I don't care to see thee with red eyes."

For answer, Rachel burst into tears then—a sudden, violent burst. She dashed them away again with a defiant, reckless sort of air, broke, into a laugh, and laid the blame on her headache. Robin said he would walk home with her.

"No, Robin, I would rather you did not to-night," she replied. "I have two or three things to get at Mother Duff's, and I shall stop there a bit, gossiping. After that, I shall be home in a trice. It's not dark; and, if it were, who'd harm me?"

They laughed. To imagine harm of any sort occurring, through walking a mile or so alone at night, would never enter the head of honest country people. Rachel departed; and Robin, who was a domesticated man upon the whole, helped his wife to put the children to bed.

Scarcely an hour later, a strange commotion arose in the village. People ran about wildly, whispering dread words to one another. A woman had just been drowned in the Willow Pond.

The whole place flocked down to the Willow Pond. On its banks, the centre of an awe-struck crowd, which had been quickly gathering, lay a body, recently taken out of the water. It was all that remained of poor Rachel Frost—cold, and white, and DEAD!

CHAPTER III. THE NEWS BROUGHT HOME

Seated in the dining-room at Verner's Pride, comfortably asleep in an arm-chair, her face turned to the fire and her feet on a footstool, was Mrs. Verner. The dessert remained on the table, but nobody was there to partake of it. Mr. Verner had retired to his study upon the withdrawal of the cloth, according to his usual custom. Always a man of spare habits, shunning the pleasures of the table, he had scarcely taken sufficient to support nature since his health failed. Mrs. Verner would remonstrate; but his medical attendant, Dr. West, said it was better for him that it should be so. Lionel Verner (who had come in for the tail of the dinner) and John Massingbird had likewise left the room and the house, but not together. Mrs. Verner sat on alone. She liked to take her share of dessert, if the others did not, and she generally remained in the dining-room for the evening, rarely caring to move. Truth to say, Mrs. Verner was rather addicted to dropping asleep with her last glass of wine and waking up with the tea-tray, and she did so this evening.

Of course work goes on downstairs (or is supposed to go on) whether the mistress of a house be asleep or awake. It really was going on that evening in the laundry at Verner's Pride, whatever it may have been doing in the other various branches and departments. The laundry-maids had had heavy labour on their hands that day, and they were hard at work still, while Mrs. Verner slept.

"Here's Mother Duff's Dan a-coming in!" exclaimed one of the women, glancing over her ironing-board to the yard. "What do he want, I wonder?"

"Who?" cried Nancy, the under-housemaid, a tart sort of girl, whose business it was to assist in the laundry on busy days.

"Dan Duff. Just see what he wants, Nancy. He's got a parcel."

The gentleman familiarly called Dan Duff was an urchin of ten years old. He was the son of Mrs. Duff, linen-draper-in-ordinary to Deerham—a lady popularly spoken of as "Mother Duff," both behind her back and before her face. Nancy darted out at the laundry-door and waylaid the intruder in the yard.

"Now, Dan Duff!" cried she, "what do you want?"

"Please, here's this," was Dan Duff's reply, handing over the parcel. "And, please, I want to see Rachel Frost."

"Who's it for? What's inside it?" sharply asked Nancy, regarding the parcel on all sides.

"It's things as Rachel Frost have been a-buying," he replied. "Please, I want to see her."

"Then want must be your master," retorted Nancy. "Rachel Frost's not at home."

"*Ain't* she?" returned Dan Duff, with surprised emphasis. "Why, she left our shop a long sight afore I did! Mother says, please, would she mind having some o' the dark lavender print instead o' the light, 'cause Susan Peckaby's come in, and she wants the whole o' the light lavender for a gownd, and there's only just enough of it. And, please, I be to take word back."

"How are you to take word back if she's not in?" asked Nancy, whose temper never was improved by extra work. "Get along, Dan Duff! You must come along again to-morrow if you want her."

Dan Duff turned to depart, in meek obedience, and Nancy carried the parcel into the laundry and flung it down on the ironing-board.

"It's fine to be Rachel Frost," she sarcastically cried. "Going shopping like any lady, and having her things sent home for her! And messages about her gownds coming up—which will she have, if you please, and which won't she have! I'll borry one of the horses to-morrow, and go shopping myself on a side-saddle!"

"Has Rachel gone shopping to-night?" cried one of the women, pausing in her ironing. "I did not know she was out."

"She has been out all the evening," was Nancy's answer. "I met her coming down the stairs, dressed. And she could tell a story over it, too, for she said she was going to see her old father."

But Master Dan Duff is not done with yet. If that gentleman stood in awe of one earthly thing more than another, it was of the anger of his revered mother. Mrs. Duff, in her maternal capacity, was rather free both with her hands and tongue. Being sole head of her flock, for she was a widow, she deemed it best to rule with firmness, not to say severity; and her son Dan, awed by his own timid nature, tried hard to steer his course so as to avoid shoals and quicksands. He crossed the yard, after the rebuff administered by Nancy, and passed out at the gate, where he stood still to revolve affairs. His mother had imperatively ordered him to *bring back* the answer touching the intricate question of the light and the dark lavender prints; and Susan Peckaby—one of the greatest idlers in all Deerham—said she would wait in the shop until he came with it. He stood softly whistling, his hands in his pockets, and balancing himself on his heels.

"I'll get a basting, for sure," soliloquised he. "Mother'll lose the sale of the gown, and then she'll say it's my fault, and baste me for it. What's of her? Why couldn't she ha' come home, as she said?"

He set his wits to work to divine what *could* have "gone of her"—alluding, of course, to Rachel. And a bright thought occurred to him—really not an unnatural one—that she had probably taken the other road home. It was a longer round, through the fields, and there were stiles to climb, and gates to mount; which might account for the delay. He arrived at the conclusion, though somewhat slow of drawing conclusions in general, that if he returned home that way, he should meet Rachel; and could then ask the question.

If he turned to his left hand—standing as he did at the gate with his back to the back of the house—he would regain the high road, whence he came. Did he turn to the right, he would plunge into fields and lanes, and covered ways, and emerge at length, by a round, in the midst of the village, almost close to his own house. It was a lonely way at night, and longer than the other, but Master Dan Duff regarded those as pleasant evils, in comparison with a "basting." He took his hands out of his pockets, brought down his feet to a level, and turned to it, whistling still.

It was a tolerably light night. The moon was up, though not very high, and a few stars might be seen here and there in the blue canopy above. Mr. Dan Duff proceeded on his way, not very quickly. Some dim idea was penetrating his brain that the slower he walked, the better chance there might be of his meeting Rachel.

"She's just a cat, is that Susan Peckaby!" decided he, with acrimony, in the intervals of his whistling. "It was her as put mother up to the thought o' sending me to-night: Rachel Frost said the things 'ud do in the morning. 'Let Dan carry 'em up now,' says Dame Peckaby, 'and ask her about the print, and then I'll take it home along o' me.' And if I go in without the answer, she'll be the first to help mother to baste me! Hi! ho! hur! hur-r-r-r!"

This last exclamation was caused by his catching sight of some small animal scudding along. He was at that moment traversing a narrow, winding lane; and, in the field to the right, as he looked in at the open gate, he saw the movement. It might be a cat, it might be a hare, it might be a rabbit, it might be some other animal; it was all one to Mr. Dan Duff; and he had not been a boy had he resisted the propensity to pursue it. Catching up a handful of earth from the lane, he shied it in the proper direction, and tore in at the gate after it.

Nothing came of the pursuit. The trespasser had earthed itself, and Mr. Dan came slowly back again. He had nearly approached the gate, when somebody passed it, walking up the lane with a very quick step, from the direction in which he, Dan, was bound. Dan saw enough to know that it was not Rachel, for it was the figure of a man; but Dan set off to run, and emerged from the gate just in time to catch another glimpse of the person, as he disappeared beyond the windings of the lane.

"'Twarn't Rachel, at all events," was his comment. And he turned and pursued his way again.

It was somewhere about this time that Tynn made his appearance in the dining-room at Verner's Pride, to put away the dessert, and set the tea. The stir woke up Mrs. Verner.

"Send Rachel to me," said she, winking and blinking at the tea-cups.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Tynn.

He left the room when he had placed the cups and things to his satisfaction. He called for Rachel high and low, up and down. All to no purpose. The servants did not appear to know anything of her. One of them went to the door and shouted out to the laundry to know whether Rachel was there, and the answering shout "No" came back. The footman at length remembered that he had seen her go out at the hall door while the dinner was in. Tynn carried this item of information to Mrs. Verner. It did not please her.

"Of course!" she grumbled. "Let me want any one of you particularly, and you are sure to be away! If she did go out, she ought not to stay as long as this. Who's this coming in?"

It was Frederick Massingbird. He entered, singing a scrap of a song; which was cut suddenly short when his eye fell on the servant.

"Tynn," said he, "you must bring me something to eat. I have had no dinner."

"You cannot be very hungry, or you'd have come in before," remarked Mrs. Verner to him. "It is tea-time now."

"I'll take tea and dinner together," was his answer.

"But you ought to have been in before," she persisted; for, though an easy mistress and mother, Mrs. Verner did not like the order of meals to be displaced. "Where have you stayed, Fred? You have not been all this while taking Sibylla West to Bitterworth's."

"You must talk to Sibylla West about that," answered Fred. "When young ladies keep you a good hour waiting, while they make themselves ready to start, you can't get back precisely to your own time."

"What did she keep you waiting for?" questioned Mrs. Verner.

"Some mystery of the toilette, I conclude. When I got there, Amilly said Sibylla was dressing; and a pretty prolonged dressing it appeared to be! Since I left her at Bitterworth's, I have been to Poynton's about my mare. She was as lame as ever to-day."

"And there's Rachel out now, just as I am wanting her!" went on Mrs. Verner, who, when she did lapse into a grumbling mood, was fond of calling up a catalogue of grievances.

"At any rate, that's not my fault, mother," observed Frederick. "I dare say she will soon be in. Rachel is not given to stay out, I fancy, if there's a chance of her being wanted."

Tynn came in with his tray, and Frederick Massingbird sat down to it. Tynn then waited for Mr. Verner's tea, which he carried into the study. He carried a cup in every evening, but Mr. Verner scarcely ever touched it. Then Tynn returned to the room where the upper servants took their meals and otherwise congregated, and sat down to read a newspaper. He was a little man, very stout, his plain clothes always scrupulously neat.

A few minutes, and Nancy came in, the parcel left by Dan Duff in her hand. The housekeeper asked her what it was. She explained in her crusty way, and said something to the same effect that she had said in the laundry—that it was fine to be Rachel Frost. "She's long enough making her way up here!" Nancy wound up with. "Dan Duff says she left their shop to come home before he did. If Luke Roy was in Deerham one would know what to think!"

"Bah!" cried the housekeeper. "Rachel Frost has nothing to say to Luke Roy."

Tynn laid down his paper, and rose. "I'll just tell the mistress that Rachel's on her way home," said he. "She's put up like anything at her being out—wants her for something particular, she says."

Barely had he departed on his errand, when a loud commotion was heard in the passage. Mr. Dan Duff had burst in at the back door, uttering sounds of distress—of fright—his eyes starting, his hair standing on end, his words nearly unintelligible.

"Rachel Frost is in the Willow Pond—drowned!"

The women shrieked when they gathered in the sense. It was enough to make them shriek. Dan Duff howled in concert. The passages took up the sounds and echoed them; and Mrs. Verner, Frederick Massingbird, and Tynn came hastening forth. Mr. Verner followed, feeble, and leaning on his stick. Frederick Massingbird seized upon the boy, questioning sharply.

"Rachel Frost's a-drowned in the Willow Pond," he reiterated. "I see'd her."

A moment of pause, of startled suspense, and then they flew off, men and women, as with one accord, Frederick Massingbird leading the van. Social obligations were forgotten in the overwhelming excitement, and Mr. and Mrs. Verner were left to keep house for themselves. Tynn, indeed, recollected himself, and turned back.

"No," said Mr. Verner. "Go with the rest, Tynn, and see what it is, and whether anything can be done."

He might have crept thither himself in his feeble strength, but he had not stirred out of the house for two years.

CHAPTER IV. THE CROWD IN THE MOONLIGHT

The Willow Pond, so called from its being surrounded with weeping willows, was situated at the corner of a field, in a retired part of the road, about midway between Verner's Pride and Deerham. There was a great deal of timber about that part; it was altogether as lonely as could be desired. When the runners from Verner's Pride reached it, assistance had already arrived, and Rachel, rescued from the pond, was being laid upon the grass. All signs of life were gone.

Who had done it?—what had caused it?—was it an accident?—was it a self-committed act?—or was it a deed of violence? What brought her there at all? No young girl would be likely to take that way home (with all due deference to the opinion of Master Dan Duff) alone at night.

What was to be done? The crowd propounded these various questions in so many marvels of wonder, and hustled each other, and talked incessantly; but to be of use, to direct, nobody appeared capable. Frederick Massingbird stepped forward with authority.

"Carry her at once to Verner's Pride—with all speed. And some of you"—turning to the servants of the house—"hasten on, and get water heated and blankets hot. Get hot bricks—get anything and everything likely to be required. How did she get in?"

He appeared to speak the words more in the light of a wailing regret, than as a question. It was a question that none present appeared able to answer. The crowd was increasing rapidly. One of them suggested that Broom the gamekeeper's cottage was nearer than Verner's Pride.

"But there will be neither hot water nor blankets there," returned Frederick Massingbird.

"The house is the best. Make haste! don't let grass grow under your feet."

"A moment," interposed a gentleman who now came hastily up, as they were raising the body. "Lay her down again."

They obeyed him eagerly, and fell a little back that he might have space to bend over her. It was the doctor of the neighbourhood, resident at Deerham. He was a fine man in figure, dark and florid in face, but a more impassive countenance could not well be seen, and he had the peculiarity of rarely looking a person in the face. If a patient's eyes were mixed on Dr. West's, Dr. West's were invariably fixed upon something else. A clever man in his profession, holding an Edinburgh degree, and practising as a general practitioner. He was brother to the present Mrs. Verner; consequently, uncle to the two young Massingbirds.

"Has anybody got a match?" he asked.

One of the Verner's Pride servants had a whole boxful, and two or three were lighted at a time, and held so that the doctor could see the drowned face better than he could in the uncertain moonlight. It was a strange scene. The lonely, weird character of the place; the dark trees scattered about; the dull pond with its bending willows; the swaying, murmuring crowd collected round the doctor and what he was bending over; the bright flickering flame of the match-light; with the pale moon overhead, getting higher and higher as the night went on, and struggling her way through passing clouds.

"How did it happen?" asked Dr. West.

Before any answer could be given, a man came tearing up at the top of his speed; several men, indeed, it may be said. The first was Roy, the bailiff. Upon Roy's leaving Verner's Pride, after the rebuke bestowed upon him by its heir, he had gone straight down to the George and Dragon, a roadside inn, situated on the outskirts of the village, on the road from Verner's Pride. Here he had remained, consorting with droppers-in from Deerham, and soothing his mortification with a pipe and sundry cans of ale. When the news was brought in that Rachel Frost was drowned in the Willow-pond, Roy, the landlord, and the company collectively, started off to see.

"Why, it *is* her!" uttered Roy, taking a hasty view of poor Rachel. "I said it wasn't possible. I saw her and talked to her up at the house but two or three hours ago. How did she get in?"

The same question always; from all alike: how did she get in? Dr. West rose.

"You can move her," he said.

"Is she dead, sir?"

"Yes."

Frederick Massingbird—who had been the one to hold the matches—caught the doctor's arm.

"Not *dead*!" he uttered. "Not dead beyond hope of restoration?"

"She will never be restored in this world," was the reply of Dr. West. "She is quite dead."

"Measures should be tried, at any rate," said Frederick Massingbird warmly.

"By all means," acquiesced Dr. West. "It will afford satisfaction, though it should do nothing else."

They raised her once more, her clothes dripping, and turned with quiet, measured steps towards Verner's Pride. Of course the whole assemblage attended. They were eagerly curious, boiling over with excitement; but, to give them their due, they were earnestly anxious to afford any aid in their power, and contended who should take turn at bearing that wet burden. Not one but felt sorely grieved for Rachel. Even Nancy was subdued to meekness, as she sped on to be one of the busiest in preparing remedies; and old Roy, though somewhat inclined to regard it in the light of a judgment upon proud Rachel for slighting his son, felt some twinges of pitying regret.

"I have knowed cases where people, dead from drowning, have been restored to life," said Roy, as they walked along.

"That you never have," replied Dr. West. "The *apparently* dead have been restored; the dead, never."

Panting, breathless, there came up one as they reached Verner's Pride. He parted the crowd, and threw himself almost upon Rachel with a wild cry. He caught up her cold, wet face, and passing his hands over it, bent down his warm cheek upon it.

"Who has done it?" he sobbed. "What has done it? She couldn't have fell in alone."

It was Robin Frost. Frederick Massingbird drew him away by the arm. "Don't hinder, Robin. Every minute may be worth a life."

And Robin, struck with the argument, obeyed docilely like a little child.

Mr. Verner, leaning on his stick, trembling with weakness and emotion, stood just without the door of the laundry, which had been hastily prepared, as the bearers tramped in.

"It is an awful tragedy!" he murmured. "Is it true"—addressing Dr. West—"that you think there is no hope?"

"I am sure there is none," was the answer. "But every means shall be tried."

The laundry was cleared of the crowd, and their work began. One of the next to come up was old Matthew Frost. Mr. Verner took his hand.

"Come in to my own room, Matthew," he said. "I feel for you deeply."

"Nay, sir; I must look upon her."

Mr. Verner pointed with his stick in the direction of the laundry.

"They are shut in there—the doctor and those whom he requires round him," he said. "Let them be undisturbed; it is the only chance."

All things likely to be wanted had been conveyed to the laundry; and they were shut in there, as Mr. Verner expressed it, with their fires and their heat. On dragged the time. Anxious watchers were in the house, in the yard, gathered round the back gate. The news had spread, and gentlepeople, friends of the Verners, came hasting from their homes, and pressed into Verner's Pride, and asked question upon question of Mr. and Mrs. Verner, of everybody likely to afford an answer. Old Matthew Frost stood outwardly calm and collected, full of inward trust, as a good man should be. He had

learned where to look for support in the darkest trial. Mr. Verner in that night of sorrow seemed to treat him as a brother.

One hour! Two hours! and still they plied their remedies, under the able direction of Dr. West. All was of no avail, as the experienced physician had told them. Life was extinct. Poor Rachel Frost was really dead!

CHAPTER V. THE TALL GENTLEMAN IN THE LANE

Apart from the horror of the affair, it was altogether attended with so much mystery that that of itself would have kept the excitement alive. What could have taken Rachel Frost near the pond at all? Allowing that she had chosen that lonely road for her way home—which appeared unlikely in the extreme—she must still have gone out of it to approach the pond, must have walked partly across a field to gain it. Had her path led close by it, it would have been a different matter: it might have been supposed (unlikely still, though) that she had missed her footing and fallen in. But unpleasant rumours were beginning to circulate in the crowd. It was whispered that sounds of a contest, the voices being those of a man and a woman, had been heard in that direction at the time of the accident, or about the time; and these rumours reached the ear of Mr. Verner.

For the family to think of bed, in the present state of affairs, or the crowd to think of dispersing, would have been in the highest degree improbable. Mr. Verner set himself to get some sort of solution first. One told one tale; one, another: one asserted something else; another, the exact opposite. Mr. Verner—and in saying Mr. Verner, we must include all—was fairly puzzled. A notion had sprung up that Dinah Roy, the bailiffs wife, could tell something about it if she would. Certain it was, that she had stood amid the crowd, cowering and trembling, shrinking from observation as much as possible, and recoiling visibly if addressed.

A word of this suspicion at last reached her husband. It angered him. He was accustomed to keep his wife in due submission. She was a little body, with a pinched face and a sharp red nose, given to weeping upon every possible occasion, and as indulgently fond of her son Luke as she was afraid of her husband. Since Luke's departure she had passed the better part of her time in tears.

"Now," said Roy, going up to her with authority, and drawing her apart, "what's this as is up with you?"

She looked round her, and shuddered.

"Oh, law!" cried she, with a moan. "Don't you begin to ask, Giles, or I shall be fit to die."

"Do you know anything about this matter, or don't you?" cried he savagely. "Did you see anything?"

"What should I be likely to see of it?" quaked Mrs. Roy.

"Did you see Rachel fall into the pond? Or see her a-nigh the pond?"

"No, I didn't," moaned Mrs. Roy. "I never set eyes on Rachel this blessed night at all. I'd take a text o' scripture to it."

"Then what is the matter with you?" he demanded, giving her a slight shake.

"Hush, Giles!" responded she, in a tone of unmistakable terror. "I saw a ghost!"

"Saw a—what?" thundered Giles Roy.

"A ghost!" she repeated. "And it have made me shiver ever since."

Giles Roy knew that his wife was rather prone to flights of fancy. He was in the habit of administering one sovereign remedy, which he believed to be an infallible panacea for wives' ailments whenever it was applied—a hearty good shaking. He gave her a slight instalment as he turned away.

"Wait till I get ye home," said he significantly. "I'll drive the ghosts out of ye!"

Mr. Verner had seated himself in his study, with a view of investigating systematically the circumstances attending the affair, so far as they were known. At present all seemed involved in a Babel of confusion, even the open details.

"Those able to tell anything of it shall come before me, one by one," he observed; "we may get at something then."

The only stranger present was Mr. Bitterworth, an old and intimate friend of Mr. Verner. He was a man of good property, and resided a little beyond Verner's Pride. Others—plenty of them—had been eager to assist in what they called the investigation, but Mr. Verner had declined. The public investigation would come soon enough, he observed, and that must satisfy them. Mrs. Verner saw no reason why she should be absent, and she took her seat. Her sons were there. The news had reached John out-of-doors, and he had hastened home full of consternation. Dr. West also remained by request, and the Frosts, father and son, had pressed in. Mr. Verner could not deny *them*.

"To begin at the beginning," observed Mr. Verner, "it appears that Rachel left this house between six and seven. Did she mention to anybody where she was going?"

"I believe she did to Nancy, sir," replied Mrs. Tynn, who had been allowed to remain.

"Then call Nancy in," said Mr. Verner.

Nancy came, but she could not say much: only that, in going up the front stairs to carry some linen into Mrs. Verner's room, she had met Rachel, dressed to go out. Rachel had said, in passing her, that she was about to visit her father.

"And she came?" observed Mr. Verner, turning to Matthew Frost, as Nancy was dismissed.

"She came, sir," replied the old man, who was having an incessant battle with himself for calmness; for it was not there, in the presence of others, that he would willingly indulge his grief. "I saw that she had been fretting. Her eyes were as red as ferrets'; and I taxed her with it. She was for turning it off at first, but I pressed for the cause, and she then said she had been scolded by her mistress."

"By me!" exclaimed Mrs. Verner, lifting her head in surprise. "I had not scolded her."

But as she spoke she caught the eye of her son John, and she remembered the little scene of the afternoon.

"I recollect now," she resumed. "I spoke a word of reproof to Rachel, and she burst into a violent flood of tears, and ran away from me. It surprised me much. What I said was not sufficient to call forth one tear, let alone a passionate burst of them."

"What was it about?" asked Mr. Verner.

"I expect John can give a better explanation of it than I," replied Mrs. Verner, after a pause. "I went out of the room for a minute or two, and when I returned, Rachel was talking angrily at John. I could not make out distinctly about what. John had begun to tease her about Luke Roy, I believe, and she did not like it."

Mr. John Massingbird's conscience called up the little episode of the coveted kiss. But it might not be altogether prudent to confess it in full conclave.

"It is true that I did joke Rachel about Luke," he said. "It seemed to anger her very much, and she paid me out with some hard words. My mother returned at the same moment. She asked what was the matter; I said I had joked Rachel about Luke, and that Rachel did not like it."

"Yes, that was it," acquiesced Mrs. Verner. "I then told Rachel that in my opinion she would have done well to encourage Luke, who was a steady young man, and would no doubt have a little money. Upon which she began weeping. I felt rather vexed; not a word have I been able to say to her lately, but tears have been the answer; and I asked what had come to her that she should cry for every trifle as if she were heart-broken. With that, she fell into a burst of sobs, terrifying to see, and ran from the room. I was thunderstruck. I asked John what could be the matter with her, and he said he could only think she was going crazed."

John Massingbird nodded his head, as if in confirmation. Old Matthew Frost spoke up, his voice trembling with the emotion that he was striving to keep under—

"Did she say what it was that had come to her, ma'am?"

"She did not make any reply at all," rejoined Mrs. Verner. "But it is quite nonsense to suppose she could have fallen into that wild burst of grief simply at being joked about Luke. I could not make her out."

"And she has fallen into fretting, you say, ma'am, lately?" pursued Matthew Frost, leaning his venerable white head forward.

"Often and often," replied Mrs. Verner. "She has seemed quite an altered girl in the last few weeks!"

"My son's wife has said the same," cried old Matthew. "She has said that Rachel was changed. But I took it to mean in her looks—that she had got thinner. You mind the wife saying it, Robin?"

"Yes, I mind it," shortly replied Robin, who had propped himself against the wall, his arms folded and his head bent. "I'm a-minding all."

"She wouldn't eat a bit o' supper," went on old Matthew. "But that was nothing," he added; "she used to say she had plenty of food here, without eating ours. She sat apart by the fire with one o' the little uns in her lap. She didn't stay over long; she said the missus might be wanting her, and she left; and when she was kissing my poor old face, she began sobbing. Robin offered to see her home—"

"And she wouldn't have it," interrupted Robin, looking up for the first time with a wild expression of despair. "She said she had things to get at Mother Duff's, and should stop a bit there, a-gossiping. It'll be on my mind by day and by night, that if I'd went with her, harm couldn't have come."

"And that was how she left you," pursued Mr. Verner. "You did not see her after that? You know nothing further of her movements?"

"Nothing further," assented Robin. "I watched her down the lane as far as the turning, and that was the last."

"Did she go to Mrs. Duff's, I wonder?" asked Mr. Verner.

Oh, yes; several of those present could answer that. There was the parcel brought up by Dan Duff, as testimony; and, if more had been needed, Mrs. Duff herself had afforded it, for she made one of the crowd outside.

"We must have Mrs. Duff in," said Mr. Verner.

Accordingly, Mrs. Duff was brought in—a voluble lady with red hair. Mr. Verner politely asked her to be seated, but she replied that she'd prefer to stand, if 'twas all the same. She was used to standing in her shop, and she couldn't never sit for a minute together when she was upset.

"Did Rachel Frost purchase things of you this evening, Mrs. Duff?"

"Well, she did, and she didn't," responded Mrs. Duff. "I never calls it purchasing of things, sir, when a customer comes in and says, 'Just cut me off so and so, and send it up.' They be sold, of course, if you look at it in that light; but I'm best pleased when buyers examines the goods, and chats a bit over their merits. Susan Peckaby, now, she—"

"What did Rachel Frost buy?" interrupted Mr. Verner, who knew what Mrs. Duff's tongue was, when it was once set going.

"She looked in at the shop, sir, while I was a-serving little Green with some bone buttons, that her mother had sent her for. 'I want some Irish for aprons, Mrs. Duff,' says she. 'Cut off the proper quantity for a couple, and send it me up some time to-morrow. I'd not give the trouble,' says she, 'but I can't wait to take it now, for I'm in a hurry to get home, and I shall be wanting the aprons.' 'What quality—pretty good?' said I. 'Oh, you know,' says she; 'about the same that I bought last time. And put in the tape for strings, and a reel of white cotton, No. 30. And I don't mind if you put in a piece of that German ribbon, middling width,' she went on. 'It's nicer than tape for nightcaps, and them sort o' things.' And with that, sir, she was turning out again, when her eyes was caught by some lavender prints, as was a-hanging just in the doorway. Two shades of it, there was, dark and light. 'That's pretty,' says she. 'It's beautiful,' said I; 'they be the sweetest things I have had in, this many a day; and they be the wide width. Won't you take some of it for a gownd?' 'No,' says she, 'I'm set up for cotton gownds.' 'Why not buy a bit of it for a apron or two?' I said. 'Nothing's cleaner than them lavender prints for morning aprons, and they saves the white.' So she looked at it for a minute, and then she said I might cut her off a couple o' yards of the light, and send it up with the other things. Well, sir, Sally Green went away with her buttons, and I took down the light print, thinking I'd cut off

the two yards at once. Just then, Susan Peckaby comes in for some gray worsted, and she falls right in love with the print. 'I'll have a gownd of that,' says she, 'and I'll take it now.' In course, sir, I was only too glad to sell it to her, for, like Rachel, she's good pay; but when I come to measure it, there was barely nine yards left, which is what Susan Peckaby takes for a gownd, being as tall as a maypole. So I was in a mess; for I couldn't take and sell it all, over Rachel's head, having offered it to her. 'Perhaps she wouldn't mind having her aprons off the dark,' says Susan Peckaby; 'it don't matter what colour aprons is of—they're not like gownds.' And then we agreed that I should send Dan up here at once to ask her, and Susan Peckaby—who seemed mighty eager to have the print—said she'd wait till he come back. And I cut off the white Irish, and wrapped it up with the tape and things, and sent him."

"Rachel Frost had left your shop, then?"

"She left it, sir, when she told me she'd have some of the lavender print. She didn't stay another minute."

Robin Frost lifted his head again. "She said she was going to stop at your place for a bit of a gossip, Mother Duff."

"Then she didn't stop," responded that lady. "She never spoke a single word o' gossip, or looked inclined to speak it. She just spoke out short, as if she was in a hurry, and she turned clean out o' the shop afore the words about the lavender print had well left her. Ask Sally Green, if you don't believe me."

"You did not see which way she took?" observed Mr. Verner.

"No, sir, I didn't; I was behind my counter. But, for the matter o' that, there was two or three as saw her go out of my shop and take the turning by the pound—which is a good proof she meant to come home here by the field way, for that turning, as you know, sir, leads to nowhere else."

Mr. Verner did know it. He also knew—for witnesses had been speaking of it outside—that Rachel had been seen to take that turning after she left Mrs. Duff's shop, and that she was walking with a quick step.

The next person called in was Master Dan Duff—in a state of extreme consternation at being called in at all. He was planted down in front of Mr. Verner, his legs restless. An idea crossed his brain that they might be going to accuse him of putting Rachel into the pond, and he began to cry. With a good deal of trouble on Mr. Verner's part, owing to the young gentleman's timidity, and some circumlocution on his own, the facts, so far as Dan was cognisant of them, were drawn forth. It appeared that after he had emerged from the field when he made that slight diversion in pursuit of the running animal, he continued his road, and had gained the lonely part near where the pond was situated, when young Broom, the son of Mr. Verner's gamekeeper, ran up and asked him what was the matter, and whether anybody was in the pond. Broom did not wait for an answer, but went on to the pond, and Dan Duff followed him. Sure enough, Rachel Frost was in it. They knew her by her clothes, as she rose to the surface. Dan Duff, in his terror, went back shrieking to Verner's Pride, and young Broom, more sensibly, ran for help to get her out.

"How did young Broom know, or suspect, there was anybody in the pond?" questioned Mr. Verner.

"I dun know, please, sir," sobbed Dan Duff; "that was what he said as he runned off to it. He asked me if I had seen any folks about, and I said I'd only seen that un in the lane."

"Whom did you see in the lane?"

"I dun know who it was, please, sir," returned Dan, sniffing greatly. "I wasn't a-nigh him."

"But you must have been nigh him if you met him in the lane."

"Please, sir, I wasn't in the lane then. I had runned into the field after a cat."

"After a cat?"

"Please, sir, 'twere a cat, I think. But it got away, and I didn't find it. I saw somebody a-passing of the gate up the lane, but I warn't quick enough to see who."

"Going which way?"

"Please, sir, up towards here. If I hadn't turned into the field, I should ha' met him face to face. I dun know who it was."

"Did you hear any noise near the pond, or see any movement in its direction, before you were accosted by Broom?"

"Please, sir, no."

It appeared to be of little use to detain Mr. Duff. In his stead young Broom was called in. A fine-grown young fellow of nineteen, whose temperament may be indicated by two words—cool and lazy. He was desired to give his own explanation.

"I was going home for the night, sir," he began, in answer, "when I heard the sound of voices in dispute. They seemed to come from the direction of the grove of trees near the Willow Pond, and I stayed to listen. I thought perhaps some of the Dawsons and Roy had come to an encounter out there; but I soon found that one of the voices was that of a woman. Quite a young voice it sounded, and it was broke by sobs and tears. The other voice was a man's."

"Only two! Did you recognise them?"

"No, sir, I did not recognise them; I was too far off, maybe. I only made out that it was two—a man's and a woman's. I stopped a few minutes, listening, and they seemed to quiet down, and then, as I was going on again, I came up to Mrs. Roy. She was kneeling down, and—"

"Kneeling down?" interrupted Mr. Verner.

"She was kneeling down, sir, with her hands clasped round the trunk of a tree, like one in mortal fright. She laid hold of me then, and I asked what was the matter with her, and she answered that she had been a'most frightened to death. I asked whether it was at the quarrel, but she only said, 'Hush! listen!' and at last she set on to cry. Just then we heard an awful shriek, and a plunge into the water. 'There goes something into the Willow Pond,' said I, and I was turning to run to it, when Mrs. Roy shrieked out louder than the other shriek had been, and fell flat down on the earth. I never hardly see such a face afore for ghastliness. The moon was shining out full then, and it daunted me to look at her. I thought she was dead—that the fright had killed her. There wasn't a bit o' breath in her body, and I raised her head up, not knowing what to do with her. Presently she heaved a sort of sigh, and opened her eyes; and with that she seemed to recollect herself, and asked what was in the pond. I left her and went off to it, meeting Dan Duff—and we found it was Rachel Frost. Dan, he set on to howl, and wouldn't stay, and I went for the nearest help, and got her out. That's all, sir."

"Was she already dead?"

"Well, sir, when you first get a person out of the water it's hard to say whether they be dead or not. She seemed dead, but perhaps if there had been means right at hand, she might have been brought-to again."

A moan of pain from old Matthew. Mr. Verner continued as it died out—

"Rachel Frost's voice must have been one of those you heard in dispute?"

"Not a doubt of that, sir," replied young Broom. "Any more than that there must have been foul play at work to get her into the pond, or that the other disputing voice must have belonged to the man who did it."

"Softly, softly," said Mr. Verner. "Did you see any man about?"

"I saw nobody at all, sir, saving Dan Duff and Mrs. Roy; and Rachel's quarrel could not have been with either of them. Whoever the other was, he had made himself scarce."

Robin Frost took a step forward respectfully.

"Did you mind, sir, that Mother Duffs Dan spoke to seeing some person in the lane?"

"I do," replied Mr. Verner. "I should like to ask the boy another question or two upon that point. Call him in, one of you."

John Massingbird went out and brought back the boy.

"Mind you have your wits sharp about you this time, Mr. Duff," he remarked. Which piece of advice had the effect of scaring Mr. Duff's wits more completely away than they had been scared before.

"You tell us that you saw a man pass up the lane when you were in the field after the cat," began Mr. Verner. "Was the man walking fast?"

"Please, sir, yes. Afore I could get out o' the gate he was near out o' sight. He went a'most as fast as the cat did."

"How long was it, after you saw him, before you met young Broom, and heard that somebody was in the pond?"

"Please, sir, 'twas a'most directly. I was running then, I was."

As the boy's answer fell upon the room, a conviction stole over most of those collected in it that this man must have been the one who had been heard in dispute with Rachel Frost.

"Were there no signs about him by which you could recognise him?" pursued Mr. Verner. "What did he look like? Was he tall or short?"

"Please, sir, he were very tall."

"Could you see his dress? Was it like a gentleman's or a labourer's?"

"Please, sir, I think it looked like a gentleman's—like one o' the gentlemen's at Verner's Pride."

"Whose? Like which of the gentlemen's?" rang out Mr. Verner's voice, sharply and sternly, after a moment's pause of surprise, for he evidently had not expected the answer.

"Please, sir, I dun know which. The clothes looked dark, and the man were as tall as the gentlemen, or as Calves."

"Calves?" echoed Mr. Verner, puzzled.

John Massingbird broke into an involuntary smile. He knew that their tall footman, Bennet, was universally styled "Calves" in the village. Dan Duff probably believed it to be his registered name.

But Frederick Massingbird was looking dark and threatening. The suspicion hinted at—if you can call it a suspicion—angered him. The villagers were wont to say that Mr. Frederick had ten times more pride than Mr. John. They were not far wrong—Mr. John had none at all.

"Boy!" Frederick sternly said, "what grounds have you for saying it was like one of the gentlemen?"

Dan Duff began to sob. "I dun know who it were," he said; "indeed I don't. But he were tall, and his clothes looked dark. Please, sir, if you basted me, I couldn't tell no more."

It was believed that he could not. Mr. Verner dismissed him, and John Massingbird, according to order, went to bring in Mrs. Roy.

He was some little time before he found her. She was discovered at last in a corner of the steward's room, seated on a low stool, her head bent down on her knees.

"Now, ma'am," said John, with unwonted politeness, "you are being waited for."

She looked up, startled. She rose from her low seat, and began to tremble, her lips moving, her teeth chattering. But no sound came forth.

"You are not going to your hanging, Dinah Roy," said John Massingbird, by way of consolation. "Mr. Verner is gathering the evidence about this unfortunate business, and it is your turn to go in and state what you know, or saw."

She staggered back a step or two, and fell against the wall, her face changing to one of livid terror.

"I—I—saw nothing!" she gasped.

"Oh, yes, you did! Come along!"

She put up her hands in a supplicating attitude; she was on the point of sinking on her knees in her abject fear, when at that moment the stern face of her husband was pushed in at the door. She sprang up as if electrified, and meekly followed John Massingbird.

CHAPTER VI. DINAH ROY'S "GHOST."

The moon, high in the heavens, shone down brightly, lighting up the fair domain of Verner's Pride, lighting up the broad terrace, and one who was hasting along it; all looking as peaceful as if a deed of dark mystery had not that night been committed.

He, skimming the terrace with a fleet foot, was that domain's recognised heir, Lionel Verner. Tynn and others were standing in the hall, talking in groups, as is the custom with dependents when something unusual and exciting is going on. Lionel appeared full of emotion when he burst in upon them.

"Is it true?" he demanded, speaking impulsively. "Is Rachel really dead?"

"She is dead, sir."

"Drowned?"

"Yes, sir, drowned."

He stood like one confounded. He had heard the news in the village, but this decided confirmation of it was as startling as if he now heard it for the first time. A hasty word of feeling, and then he looked again at Tynn.

"Was it the result of accident?"

Tynn shook his head.

"It's to be feared it was not, sir. There was a dreadful quarrel heard, it seems, near to the pond, just before it happened. My master is inquiring into it now, sir, in his study. Mr. Bitterworth and some more are there."

Giving his hat to the butler, Lionel Verner opened the study door, and entered. It was at that precise moment when John Massingbird had gone out for Mrs. Roy; so that, as may be said, there was a lull in the proceedings.

Mr. Verner looked glad when Lionel appeared. The ageing man, enfeebled with sickness, had grown to lean on the strong young intellect. As much as it was in Mr. Verner's nature to love anything, he loved Lionel. He beckoned him to a chair beside himself.

"Yes, sir, in an instant," nodded Lionel. "Matthew," he whispered, laying his hand kindly on the old man's shoulder as he passed, and bending down to him with his sympathising eyes, his pleasant voice, "I am grieved for this as if it had been my own sister. Believe me."

"I know it; I know you, Mr. Lionel," was the faint answer. "Don't unman me, sir, afore 'em here; leave me to myself."

With a pressure of his hand on the shoulder ere he quitted it, Lionel turned to Frederick Massingbird, asking of him particulars in an undertone.

"I don't know them myself," replied Frederick, his accent a haughty one. "There seems to be nothing but uncertainty and mystery. Mr. Verner ought not to have inquired into it in this semi-public way. Very disagreeable things have been said, I assure you. There was not the least necessity for allowing such absurdities to go forth, as suspicions, to the public. You have not been running from the Willow Pond at a strapping pace, I suppose, to-night?"

"That I certainly have not," replied Lionel.

"Neither has John, I am sure," returned Frederick resentfully. "It is not likely. And yet that boy of Mother Duff's—"

The words were interrupted. The door had opened, and John Massingbird appeared, marshalling in Dinah Roy. Dinah looked fit to die, with her ashy face and her trembling frame.

"Why, what is the matter?" exclaimed Mr. Verner.

The woman burst into tears.

"Oh, sir, I don't know nothing of it; I protest I don't," she uttered. "I declare that I never set eyes on Rachel Frost this blessed night."

"But you were near the spot at the time?"

"Oh, bad luck to me, I was!" she answered, wringing her hands. "But I know no more how she got into the water nor a child unborn."

"Where's the necessity for being put out about it, my good woman?" spoke up Mr. Bitterworth. "If you know nothing, you can't tell it. But you must state what you do know—why you were there, what startled you, and such like. Perhaps—if she were to have a chair?" he suggested to Mr. Verner in a whisper. "She looks too shaky to stand."

"Ay," acquiesced Mr. Verner. "Somebody bring forward a chair. Sit down, Mrs. Roy."

Mrs. Roy obeyed. One of those harmless, well-meaning, timid women, who seem not to possess ten ideas of their own, and are content to submit to others, she had often been seen in a shaky state from very trifling causes. But she had never been seen like this. The perspiration was pouring off her pinched face, and her blue check apron was incessantly raised to wipe it.

"What errand had you near the Willow Pond this evening?" asked Mr. Verner.

"I didn't see anything," she gasped, "I don't know anything. As true as I sit here, sir, I never saw Rachel Frost this blessed evening."

"I am not asking you about Rachel Frost. *Were* you near the spot?"

"Yes. But—"

"Then you can say what errand you had there; what business took you to it," continued Mr. Verner.

"It was no harm took me, sir. I went to get a dish o' tea with Martha Broom. Many's the time she have asked me since Christmas; and my husband, he was out with the Dawsons and all that bother; and Luke, he's gone, and there was nothing to keep me at home. I changed my gownd and I went."

"What time was that?"

"'Twas the middle o' the afternoon, sir. The clock had gone three."

"Did you stay tea there?"

"In course, sir, I did. Broom, he was out, and she was at home by herself a-rinsing out some things. But she soon put 'em away, and we sat down and had our teas together. We was a-talking about—"

"Never mind that," said Mr. Verner. "It was in coming home, I conclude, that you were met by young Broom."

Mrs. Roy raised her apron again, and passed it over her face but not a word spoke she in answer.

"What time did you leave Broom's cottage to return home?"

"I can't be sure, sir, what time it was. Broom's haven't got no clock; they tells the time by the sun."

"Was it dark?"

"Oh, yes, it was dark, sir, except for the moon. That had been up a good bit, for I hadn't hurried myself."

"And what did you see or hear, when you got near the Willow Pond?"

The question sent Mrs. Roy into fresh tears; into fresh tremor.

"I never saw nothing," she reiterated. "The last time I set eyes on Rachel Frost was at church on Sunday."

"What is the matter with you?" cried Mr. Verner, with asperity. "Do you mean to deny that anything had occurred to put you in a state of agitation, when you were met by young Broom?"

Mrs. Roy only moaned.

"Did you hear people quarrelling?" he persisted.

"I heard people quarrelling," she sobbed. "I did. But I never saw, no more than the dead, who it was."

"Whose voices were they?"

"How can I tell, sir? I wasn't near enough. There were two voices, a man's and a woman's; but I couldn't catch a single word, and it did not last long. I declare, if it were the last word I had to speak, that I heard no more of the quarrel than that, and I wasn't no nearer to it."

She really did seem to speak the truth, in spite of her shrinking fear, which was evident to all. Mr. Verner inquired, with incredulity equally evident, whether that was sufficient to put her into the state of tremor spoken of by young Broom.

Mrs. Roy hung her head.

"I'm timid at quarrels, 'specially if it's at night," she faintly answered.

"And was it just the hearing of that quarrel that made you sink down on your knees, and clasp hold of a tree?" continued Mr. Verner. Upon which Mrs. Roy let fall her head on her hands, and sobbed piteously.

Robin Frost interrupted, sarcasm in his tone—"There's a tale going on, outside, that you saw a ghost, and it was that as frightened you," he said to her. "Perhaps, sir"—turning to Mr. Verner—"you'll ask her whose ghost it was."

This appeared to put the finishing touch to Mrs. Roy's discomfiture. Nothing could be made of her for a few minutes. Presently, her agitation somewhat subsided; she lifted her head, and spoke as with a desperate effort.

"It's true," she said. "I'll make a clean breast of it. I did see a ghost, and it was that as upset me so. It wasn't the quarrelling frightened me: I thought nothing of that."

"What do you mean by saying you saw a ghost?" sharply reproved Mr. Verner.

"It was a ghost, sir," she answered, apparently picking up a little courage, now the subject was fairly entered upon.

A pause ensued. Mr. Verner may have been at a loss what to say next. When deliberately assured by any timorous spirit that they have "seen a ghost," it is waste of time to enter an opposing argument.

"Where did you see the ghost?" he asked.

"I had stopped still, listening to the quarrelling, sir. But that soon came to an end, for I heard no more, and I went on a few steps, and then I stopped to listen again. Just as I turned my head towards the grove, where the quarrelling had seemed to be, I saw something a few paces from me that made my flesh creep. A tall, white thing it looked, whiter than the moonlight. I knew it could be nothing but a ghost, and my knees sunk down from under me, and I laid hold o' the trunk o' the tree."

"Perhaps it was a death's head and bones?" cried John Massingbird.

"Maybe, sir," she answered. "That, or something worse. It glided through the trees with its great eyes staring at me; and I felt ready to die."

"Was it a man's or a woman's ghost?" asked Mr. Bitterworth, a broad smile upon his face.

"Couldn't have been a woman's, sir; 'twas too tall," was the sobbing answer. "A great tall thing it looked, like a white shadder. I wonder I be alive!"

"So do I," irascibly cried Mr. Verner. "Which way was it going? Towards the village, or in this direction?"

"Not in either of 'em, sir. It glided right off at an angle amid the trees."

"And it was that—that folly, that put you into the state of tremor in which Broom found you?" said Mr. Verner. "It was nothing else?"

"I declare, before Heaven, that it was what I saw as put me into the fright young Broom found me in," she repeated earnestly.

"But if you were so silly as to be alarmed for the moment, why do you continue to show alarm still?"

"Because my husband says he'll shake me," she whimpered, after a long pause. "He never has no patience with ghosts."

"Serve you right," was the half-audible comment of Mr. Verner. "Is this all you know of the affair?" he continued, after a pause.

"It's all, sir," she sobbed. "And enough too. There's only one thing as I shall be for ever thankful for."

"What's that?" asked Mr. Verner.

"That my poor Luke was away afore this happened. He was fond of hankering after Rachel, and folks might have been for laying it on his shoulders; though, goodness knows, he'd not have hurt a hair of her head."

"At any rate, he is out of it," observed John Massingbird.

"Ay," she replied, in a sort of self-soliloquy, as she turned to leave the room, for Mr. Verner told her she was dismissed, "it'll be a corn o' comfort amid my peck o' troubles. I have fretted myself incessant since Luke left, a-thinking as I could never know comfort again; but perhaps it's all for the best now, as he should ha' went."

She curtsied, and the door was closed upon her. Her evidence left an unsatisfactory feeling behind it.

An impression had gone forth that Mrs. Roy could throw some light upon the obscurity; and, as it turned out, she had thrown none. The greater part of those present gave credence to what she said. All believed the "ghost" to have been pure imagination; knowing the woman's proneness to the marvellous, and her timid temperament. But, upon one or two there remained a strong conviction that Mrs. Roy had not told the whole truth; that she could have said a great deal more about the night's work, had she chosen to do so.

No other testimony was forthcoming. The cries and shouts of young Broom, when he saw the body in the water, had succeeded in arousing some men who slept at the distant brick-kilns; and the tidings soon spread, and crowds flocked up. These people were eager to pour into Mr. Verner's room now, and state all *they* knew, which was precisely the evidence not required; but of further testimony to the facts there was none.

"More may come out prior to the inquest; there's no knowing," observed Mr. Bitterworth, as the gentlemen stood in a group, before separating. "It is a very dreadful thing, demanding the most searching investigation. It is not likely she would throw herself in."

"A well-conducted girl like Rachel Frost throw herself wilfully into a pond to be drowned!" indignantly repeated Mr. Verner. "She would be one of the last to do it."

"And equally one of the last to be thrown in," said Dr. West. "Young women are not thrown into ponds without some cause; and I should think few ever gave less cause for maltreatment of any kind than she. It appears most strange to me with whom she could have been quarrelling—if indeed it was Rachel that was quarrelling."

"It is all strange together," cried Lionel Verner. "What took Rachel that way at all, by night time?"

"What indeed!" echoed Mr. Bitterworth. "Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Mr. Verner; for Mr. Bitterworth had brought his words to a sudden standstill.

"Well, I was going to say, unless she had an appointment there. But that does not appear probable for Rachel Frost."

"It is barely possible, let alone probable," was the retort of Mr. Verner.

"But still, in a case like this, every circumstance must be looked at, every trifle weighed," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "Does Rachel's own conduct appear to you to have been perfectly open? She has been indulging, it would seem, in some secret grief latterly; has been 'strange,' as one or two have expressed it. Then, again, she stated to her brother that she was going to stay at Duffs for a gossip, whereas the woman says she had evidently no intention of gossiping, and barely gave herself

time to order the articles spoken of. Other witnesses observed her leave Duff's, and walk with a hasty step direct to the field road, and turn down it. All this does not sound quite clear to me."

"There was one thing that did not sound clear to me," broke in Lionel abruptly, "and that was Dinah Roy's evidence. The woman's half a fool; otherwise I should think she was purposely deceiving us."

"A pity but she could see a real ghost!" cried John Massingbird, looking inclined to laugh, "It might cure her for fancy ones. She's right in one thing, however; poor Luke might have got this clapped on his shoulders had he been here."

"Scarcely," dissented Dr. West. "Luke Roy is too inoffensive to harm any one, least of all a woman, and Rachel; and that the whole parish knows."

"There's no need to discuss Luke's name in the business," said Mr. Verner; "he is far enough away. Whoever the man may have been, it was not Luke," he emphatically added. "Luke would have been the one to succour Rachel, not to hurt her."

Not a soul present but felt that Mr. Verner spoke in strict accordance with the facts, known and presumptive. They must look in another quarter than Luke for Rachel's assailant.

Mr. Verner glanced at Mr. Bitterworth and Dr. West, then at the three young men before him.

"We are amongst friends," he observed, addressing the latter. "I would ask you, individually, whether it was one of you that the boy, Duff, spoke of as being in the lane?"

They positively disclaimed it, each one for himself. Each one mentioned that he had been elsewhere at the time, and where he had been.

"You see," said Mr. Verner, "the lane leads only to Verner's Pride."

"But by leaping a fence anywhere, or a gate, or breaking through a hedge, it may lead all over the country," observed Frederick Massingbird. "You forget that, sir."

"No, Frederick, I do not forget it. But unless a man had business at Verner's Pride, what should he go into the lane for? On emerging from the field on this side the Willow Pond, any one, not bound for Verner's Pride, would take the common path to the right hand, open to all; only in case of wanting to come here would he take the lane. You cannot suppose for a moment that I suspect any one of you has had a hand in this unhappy event; but it was right that I should be assured, from your own lips, that you were not the person spoken of by young Duff."

"It may have been a stranger to the neighbourhood, sir. In that case he would not know that the lane led only to Verner's Pride."

"True—so far. But what stranger would be likely to quarrel with Rachel?"

"Egad, if you come to that, sir, a stranger's more likely to pick a quarrel with her than one of us," rejoined John Massingbird.

"It was no stranger," said Mr. Verner, shaking his head. "We do not *quarrel* with strangers. Had any stranger accosted Rachel at night, in that lonely spot, with rude words, she would naturally have called out for help; which it is certain she did not do, or young Broom and Mrs. Roy must have heard her. Rely upon it, that man in the lane is the one we must look for."

"But where to look?" debated Frederick Massingbird.

"There it is! The inference would be that he was coming to Verner's Pride; being on its direct way and nearly close upon it. But, the only tall men (as the boy describes) at Verner's Pride, are you three and Bennet. Bennet was at home, therefore he is exempt; and you were scattered in different directions—Lionel at Mr. Bitterworth's, John at the Royal Oak—I wonder you like to make yourself familiar with those tap-rooms, John!—and Frederick coming in from Poynton's to his dinner."

"I don't think I had been in ten minutes when the alarm came," remarked Frederick.

"Well, it is involved in mystery at present," cried Mr. Bitterworth, shaking hands with them. "Let us hope that to-morrow will open more light upon it. Are you on the wing too, doctor? Then we'll go out together."

CHAPTER VII. THE REVELATION AT THE INQUEST

To say that Deerham was rudely disturbed from its equanimity; that petty animosities, whether concerning Mr. Roy and the Dawsons or other contending spirits, were lost sight of, hushed to rest in the absorbing calamity which had overtaken Rachel; to say that occupations were partially suspended, that there ensued a glorious interim of idleness, for the female portion of it—of conferences in gutters and collectings in houses; to say that Rachel was sincerely mourned, old Frost sympathised with, and the supposed assailant vigorously sought after, would be sufficient to indicate that public curiosity was excited to a high pitch; but all this was as nothing compared to the excitement that was to ensue upon the evidence given at the coroner's inquest.

In the absence of any certain data to go upon, Deerham had been content to take uncertain data, and to come to its own conclusions. Deerham assumed that Rachel, from some reasons which they could not fathom, had taken the lonely road home that night, had met with somebody or other with whom had ensued a quarrel and scuffle, and that, accidentally or by intent, she had been pushed into the pond, the coward decamping.

"Villainy enough! even if 'twas but an accident!" cried wrathful Deerham.

Villainy enough, beyond all doubt, had this been the extent. But, Deerham had to learn that the villainy had had a beginning previous to that.

The inquest had been summoned in due course. It sat two days after the accident. No evidence, tending to further elucidate the matter, was given, than had been elicited that first night before Mr. Verner; except the medical evidence. Dr. West and a surgeon from a neighbouring town, who had jointly made the post-mortem examination, testified that there was a cause for Rachel Frost's unevenness of spirits, spoken to by her father and by Mrs. Verner. She might possibly, they now thought, have thrown herself into the pool; induced to it by self-condemnation.

It electrified Deerham. It electrified Mr. Verner. It worse than electrified Matthew Frost and Robin. In the first impulse of the news, Mr. Verner declared that it *could not be*. But the medical men, with their impassive faces, calmly said that *it was*.

But, so far as the inquiry went, the medical testimony did not carry the matter any further. For, if the evidence tended to induce a suspicion that Rachel might have found life a burden, and so wished to end it, it only rendered stronger the suspicion against another. This supplied the very motive for that other's conduct which had been wanting, supposing he had indeed got rid of her by violence. It gave the clue to much which had before been dark. People could understand now why Rachel should hasten to keep a stealthy appointment; why quarrelling should be heard; in short, why poor Rachel should have been found in the pond. The jury returned an open verdict—"Found drowned; but how she got into the water, there is no precise evidence to show."

Robin Frost struggled out of the room as the crowd was dispersing. His eye was blazing, his cheek burning. Could Robin have laid his hand at that moment upon the right man, there would speedily have ensued another coroner's inquest. The earth was not wide enough for the two to live on it. Fortunately, Robin could not fix on any one, and say, Thou art the man! The knowledge was hidden from him. And yet, the very man may have been at the inquest, side by side with himself. Nay, he probably *was*.

Robin Frost cleared himself from the crowd. He gave vent to a groan of despair; he lifted his strong arms in impotency. Then he turned and sought Mr. Verner.

Mr. Verner was ill; could not be seen. Lionel came forward.

"Robin, I am truly sorry—truly grieved. We all are. But I know you will not care to-day to hear me say it."

"Sir, I wanted to see Mr. Verner," replied Robin. "I want to know if that inquest can be squashed." Don't laugh at him now, poor fellow. He meant quashed.

"The inquest quashed!" repeated Lionel. "Of course it cannot be. I don't know what you mean, Robin. It has been held, and it cannot be unheld."

"I should ha' said the verdict," explained Robin. "I'm beside myself to-day, Mr. Lionel. Can't Mr. Verner get it squashed? He knows the crowner."

"Neither Mr. Verner nor anybody else could do it, Robin. Why should you wish it done?"

"Because it as good as sets forth a lie," vehemently answered Robin Frost. "She never put herself into the water. Bad as things had turned out with her, poor dear, she never did that. Mr. Lionel, I ask you, sir, was she likely to do it?"

"I should have deemed it very unlikely," replied Lionel. "Until to-day," he added to his own thoughts.

"No, she never did! Was it the work of one to go and buy herself aprons, and tape, and cotton for sewing, who was on her way to fling herself into a pond, I'd ask the crowner?" he continued, his voice rising almost to a shriek in his emotion. "Them aprons be a proof that *she* didn't take her own life. Why didn't they bring it in Wilful Murder, and have the place scoured out to find him?"

"The verdict will make no difference to the finding him, Robin," returned Lionel Verner.

"I dun know that, sir. When a charge of wilful murder's out in a place, again' some one of the folks in it, the rest be all on the edge to find him; but 'Found drowned' is another thing. Have you any suspicion again' anybody, sir?"

He put the question sharply and abruptly, and Lionel Verner looked full in his face as he answered, "No, Robin."

"Well, good-afternoon, sir."

He turned away without another word. Lionel gazed after him with true sympathy. "He will never recover this blow," was Lionel Verner's mental comment.

But for this unfortunate occurrence, John Massingbird would have already departed from Verner's Pride. The great bane of the two Massingbirds was, that they had been brought up to be idle men. A sum of money had become theirs when Frederick came of age—which sum you will call large or small, as it may please you. It would be as a drop of water to the millionaire; it would be as a countless fortune to one in the depths of poverty: we estimate things by comparison. The sum was five thousand pounds each—Mrs. Massingbird, by her second marriage with Mr. Verner, having forfeited all right in it. With this sum the young Massingbirds appeared to think that they could live as gentlemen, and need not seek to add to it.

Thrown into the luxurious home of Verner's Pride—again we must speak by comparison: Verner's Pride was luxurious compared to the moderate home they had been reared in—John and Frederick Massingbird suffered that worst complaint of all complaints, indolence, to overtake them and become their master. John, careless, free, unsteady in many ways, set on to spend his portion as fast as he could; Frederick, more cold, more cautious, did not squander as his brother did, but he had managed to get rid of a considerable amount of his own share in unfortunate speculations. While losses do not affect our personal convenience they are scarcely felt. And so it was with the Massingbirds. Mr. Verner was an easy man in regard to money matters; he was also a man who was particularly sensitive to the feelings of other people, and he had never breathed a word to his wife about the inexpediency of her keeping her sons at home in idleness. He feared his motives might be misconstrued—that it might be thought he grudged the expense. He had spoken once or twice of the desirability of his step-sons pursuing some calling in life, and intimated that he should be ready to further their views by pecuniary help; but the advice was not taken. He offered to purchase a commission for one or both of them; he hinted that the bar afforded a stepping-stone to fame. No; John and Frederick Massingbird were conveniently deaf; they had grown addicted to field-sports, to a life of leisure, and they did not feel inclined to quit it for one of obligation or of labour. So they had

stayed on at Verner's Pride in the enjoyment of their comfortable quarters, of the well-spread table, of their horses, their dogs. All these sources of expense were provided without any cost or concern of theirs, their own private expenditure alone coming out of their private purses. How it was with their clothes, they and Mrs. Verner best knew; Mr. Verner did not. Whether these were furnished at their own cost, or whether their mother allowed them to draw for such on her, or, indeed, whether they were scoring up long bills on account, Mr. Verner made it no concern of his to inquire.

John—who was naturally of a roving nature, and who, but for the desirable home he was allowed to call his, would probably have been all over the world before he was his present age, working in his shirt sleeves for bread one day, exalted to some transient luck the next—had latterly taken a fancy in his head to emigrate to Australia. Certain friends of his had gone out there a year or two previously, and were sending home flaming accounts of their success at the gold-fields. It excited in John Massingbird a strong wish to join them. Possibly other circumstances urged him to the step; for it was certain that his finances were not in so desirable a state as they might be. With John Massingbird to wish a thing was to do it; and almost before the plan was spoken of, even in his own family, he was ready to start. Frederick was in his confidence, Lionel partly so, and a hint to his mother was sufficient to induce her to preserve reticence on the subject. John Massingbird had his reasons for this. It was announced in the household that Mr. Massingbird was departing on a visit to town, the only one who was told the truth being Rachel Frost. Rachel was looked upon almost as one of themselves. Frederick Massingbird had also confided it to Sibylla West—but Frederick and Sibylla were on more confidential terms than was suspected by the world. John had made a confidant on his own part, and that was of Luke Roy. Luke, despised by Rachel, whom he truly loved, clearly seeing there was no hope whatever that she would ever favour him, was eager to get away from Deerham—anywhere, so that he might forget her. John Massingbird knew this; he liked Luke, and he thought Luke might prove useful to him in the land to which he was emigrating, so he proposed to him to join in the scheme. Luke warmly embraced it. Old Roy, whom they were obliged to take into confidence, was won over to it. He furnished Luke with the needful funds, believing he should be repaid four-fold; for John Massingbird had contrived to imbue him with the firm conviction that gold was to be picked up for the stooping.

Only three days before the tragic event occurred to Rachel, Luke had been despatched to London by John Massingbird to put things in a train of preparation for the voyage. Luke said nothing abroad of his going, and the village only knew he was away by missing him.

"What's gone of Luke?" many asked of his father.

"Oh, he's off to London on some spree; he can tell ye about it when he gets back," was Roy's answer.

When he got back! John's departure was intended for the day following that one when you saw him packing his clothes, but the untimely end of Rachel had induced him to postpone it. Or, rather, the command of Mr. Verner—a command which John could not conveniently disobey had he wished. He had won over Mr. Verner to promise him a substantial sum, to "set him up," as he phrased it, in Australia; and that sum was not yet handed to him.

CHAPTER VIII. ROBIN'S VOW

The revelation at the inquest had affected Mr. Verner in no measured degree, greatly increasing, for the time, his bodily ailments. He gave orders to be denied to all callers; he could not bear the comments that would be made. An angry, feverish desire to find out who had played the traitor grew strong within him. Innocent, pretty, child-like Rachel! who was it that had set himself, in his wickedness, deliberately to destroy her? Mr. Verner now deemed it more than likely that she had been the author of her own death. It was of course impossible to tell: but he dwelt on that part of the tragedy less than on the other. The one injury was uncertain; the other was a fact.

What rendered it all the more obscure was the absence of any previous grounds of suspicion. Rachel had never been observed to be on terms of intimacy with any one. Luke Roy had been anxious to court her, as Verner's Pride knew; but Rachel had utterly repudiated the wish. Luke it was not. And who else was there?

The suspicions of Mr. Verner veered, almost against his will, towards those of his own household. Not to Lionel; he honestly believed Lionel to be too high-principled: but towards his stepsons. He had no particular cause to suspect either of them, unless the testimony of Mrs. Duff's son about the tall gentleman could furnish it; and it may be said that his suspicion strayed to them only from the total absence of any other quarter to fix it upon. Of the two, he could rather fix upon John, than Frederick. No scandal, touching Frederick, had ever reached his ears: plenty of it touching John. In fact, Mr. Verner was rather glad to help in shipping John off to some faraway place, for he considered him no credit to Verner's Pride, or benefit to the neighbourhood. Venial sins sat lightly on the conscience of John Massingbird.

But this was no venial sin, no case of passing scandal; and Mr. Verner declared to that gentleman that if he found him guilty, he would discard him from Verner's Pride without a shilling of help. John Massingbird protested, in the strongest terms, that he was innocent as Mr. Verner himself.

A trifling addition was destined to be brought to the suspicion already directed by Mr. Verner towards Verner's Pride. On the night of the inquest Mr. Verner had his dinner served in his study—the wing of a fowl, of which he ate about a fourth part. Mrs. Tynn attended on him: he liked her to do so when he was worse than usual. He was used to her, and he would talk to her when he would not to others. He spoke about what had happened, saying that he felt as if it would shorten his life. He would give anything, he added, half in self-soliloquy, to have the point cleared up of who it was young Duff had seen in the lane. Mrs. Tynn answered this, lowering her voice.

"It was one of our young gentlemen, sir; there's, no doubt of it. Dolly saw one of them come in."

"Dolly did!" echoed Mr. Verner.

Mrs. Tynn proceeded to explain. Dolly, the dairymaid at Verner's Pride, was ill-conducted enough (as Mrs. Tynn would tell her, for the fact did not give that ruling matron pleasure) to have a sweetheart. Worse still, Dolly was in the habit of stealing out to meet him when he left work, which was at eight o'clock. On the evening of the accident, Dolly, abandoning her dairy, and braving the wrath of Mrs. Tynn, should she be discovered, stole out to a sheltered spot in the rear of the house, the usual meeting-place. Scarcely was she ensconced here when the swain arrived; who, it may be remarked, *en passant*, filled the important post of waggoner to Mr. Bitterworth. The spot was close to the small green gate which led to the lane already spoken of; it led to that only; and, while he and Dolly were talking and making love, after their own rustic fashion, they saw Dan Duff come from the direction of the house, and pass through the gate, whistling. A short while subsequently the gate was heard to open again. Dolly looked out, and saw what she took to be one of the gentlemen come in, *from* the lane, walking very fast. Dolly looked but casually, the moonlight was obscured there, and

she did not particularly notice *which* of them it was; whether Mr. Lionel, or either of Mrs. Verner's sons. But the impression received into her mind was that it was one of the three; and Dolly could not be persuaded out of that to this very day.

"Hush—sh—sh!" cried she to her sweetheart, "it's one o' the young masters."

The quick steps passed on: but whether they turned into the yard, or took the side path which would conduct round to the front entrance, or bore right across, and so went out into the public road, Dolly did not notice. Very shortly after this—time passes swiftly when people are courting, of which fact the Italians have a proverb—Dan Duff came bursting back again, calling, and crying, and telling the tidings of Rachel Frost. This was the substance of what Mrs. Tynn told Mr. Verner.

"Dolly said nothing of this before!" he exclaimed.

"Not she, sir. She didn't dare confess that she'd been off all that while from her dairy. She let drop a word, and I have got it out of her piecemeal. I have threatened her, sir, that if ever she mentions it again, I'll get her turned off."

"Why did you threaten her?" he hastily asked.

Mrs. Tynn dropped her voice. "I thought it might not be pleasant to have it talked of, sir. She thinks I'm only afraid of the neglect of work getting to the ears of Mrs. Verner."

This was the trifling addition. Not very much in itself, but it served to bear out the doubts Mr. Verner already entertained. Was it John or was it Frederick who had come in? Or was it—Lionel? There appeared to be no more certainty that it was one than another. Mr. Verner had minutely inquired into the proceedings of John and Frederick Massingbird that night, and he had come to the conclusion that both could have been in the lane at that particular hour. Frederick, previously to entering the house for his dinner, after he had left the veterinary surgeon's, Poynton; John, before he paid his visit to the Royal Oak. John appeared to have called in at several places, and his account was not particularly clear. Lionel, Mr. Verner had not thought it necessary to question. He sent for him as soon as his dinner-tray was cleared away: it was as well to be indisputably sure of him before fastening the charge on either of the others.

"Sit down, Lionel," said Mr. Verner. "I want to talk to you. Had you finished your dinner?"

"Quite, thank you. You look very ill to-night," Lionel added, as he drew a chair to the fire; and his tone insensibly became gentle, as he gazed on his uncle's pale face.

"How can I look otherwise? This trouble is worrying me to death. Lionel, I have discovered, beyond doubt, that it was one of you young men who was in the lane that night."

Lionel, who was then leaning over the fire, turned his head with a quick, surprised gesture towards Mr. Verner. The latter proceeded to tell Lionel the substance of the communication made to him by Mrs. Tynn. Lionel sat, bending forward, his elbow on his knee, and his fingers unconsciously running amidst the curls of his dark chestnut hair, as he listened to it. He did not interrupt the narrative, or speak at its conclusion.

"You see, Lionel, it appears certain to have been some one belonging to this house."

"Yes, sir. Unless Dolly was mistaken."

"Mistaken as to what?" sharply asked Mr. Verner, who, when he made up his own mind that a thing was so-and-so, could not bear to be opposed. "Mistaken that some one came in at the gate?"

"I do not see how she could be mistaken in that," replied Lionel. "I meant mistaken as to its being any one belonging to the house."

"Is it likely that any one would come in at that gate at night, unless they belonged to the house, or were coming to the house?" retorted Mr. Verner. "Would a stranger drop from the clouds to come in at it? Or was it Di Roy's 'ghost,' think you?" he sarcastically added.

Lionel did not answer. He vacantly ran his fingers through his hair, apparently in deep thought.

"I have abstained from asking you the explicit details of your movements on that evening," continued Mr. Verner, "but I must demand them of you now."

Lionel started up, his cheek on fire. "Sir," he uttered, with emotion, "you cannot suspect *me* of having had act or part in it! I declare, before Heaven, that Rachel was as sacred for me—"

"Softly, Lionel," interrupted Mr. Verner, "there's no cause for you to break your head against a wheel. It is not you whom I suspect—thank God! But I wish to be sure of your movements—to be able to speak of them as sure, you understand—before I accuse another."

"I will willingly tell you every movement of mine that evening, so far as I remember," said Lionel, resuming his calmness. "I came home when dinner was half over. I had been detained—but you know all that," he broke off. "When you left the dining-room, I went on to the terrace, and sat there smoking a cigar. I should think I stayed there an hour, or more; and then I went upstairs, changed my coat, and proceeded to Mr. Bitterworth's."

"What took you to Mr. Bitterworth's that evening, Lionel?"

Lionel hesitated. He did not choose to say, "Because I knew Sibylla West was to be there;" but that would have been the true answer. "I had nothing particular to do with my evening, so I went up," he said aloud. "Mr. Bitterworth was out. Mrs. Bitterworth thought he had gone into Deerham."

"Yes. He was at Deerham when the alarm was given, and hastened on here. Sibylla West was there, was she not?"

"She was there," said Lionel. "She had promised to be home early; and, as no one came for her, I saw her home. It was after I left her that I heard what had occurred."

"About what time did you get there—I mean to Bitterworth's?" questioned Mr. Verner, who appeared to have his thoughts filled with other things at that moment than with Sibylla West.

"I cannot be sure," replied Lionel. "I think it must have been nine o'clock. I went into Deerham to the post-office, and then came back to Bitterworth's."

Mr. Verner mused.

"Lionel," he observed, "it is a curious thing, but there's not one of you but might have been the party to the quarrel that night; so, far as that your time cannot be positively accounted for by minutes and by hours. I mean, were the accusation brought publicly against you, you would, none of you, be able to prove a distinct *alibi*, as it seems to me. For instance, who is to prove that you did not, when you were sitting on the terrace, steal across to a rendezvous at the Willow Pond, or cut across to it when you were at the post-office at Deerham?"

"I certainly did *not*," said Lionel quietly, taking the remarks only as they were meant—for an illustration. "It might, sir, as you observe, be difficult to prove a decided *alibi*. But"—he rose and bent to Mr. Verner, with a bright smile, a clear, truthful eye—"I do not think you need one to believe me."

"No, Lionel, I do not. Is John Massingbird in the dining-room?"

"He was when I left it."

"Then go and send him to me."

John Massingbird was found and despatched to Mr. Verner, without any reluctance on his own part. He had been bestowing hard words upon Lionel for "taking up the time of the old man" just on the evening when he wanted to take it up himself. The truth was, John Massingbird was intending to depart the following morning, the Fates and Mr. Verner permitting him.

Their interview was a long one. Two hours, full, had they been closeted together when Robin Frost made his appearance again at Verner's Pride, and craved once more an interview with Mr. Verner. "If it was only for a minute—only for a minute!" he implored.

Remembering the overwhelming sorrow which had fallen on the man, Lionel did not like again to deny him without first asking Mr. Verner. He went himself to the study.

"Come in," called out Mr. Verner, in answer to the knock.

He was sitting in his chair as usual; John Massingbird was standing up, his elbow on the mantle-piece. That their conversation must have been of an exciting nature was evident, and Lionel could not help noticing the signs. John Massingbird had a scarlet streak on his sallow cheek, never seen there

above once or twice in his life, and then caused by deep emotion. Mr. Verner, on his part, looked livid. Robin Frost might come in.

Lionel called him, and he came in with Frederick Massingbird.

The man could hardly speak for agitation. He believed the verdict could not be set aside, he said; others had told him so besides Mr. Lionel. He had come to ask if Mr. Verner would offer a reward.

"A reward!" repeated Mr. Verner mechanically, with the air of a man whose mind is far away.

"If you'd please to offer it, sir, I'd work the flesh off my bones to pay it back again," he urged. "I'll live upon a crust myself, and I'll keep my home upon a crust, but what I'll get it up. If there's a reward pasted up, sir, we might come upon the villain."

Mr. Verner appeared, then, to awake to the question before him, and to awake to it in terrible excitement.

"He'll never be found, Robin—the villain will never be found, so long as you and I and the world shall last!"

They looked at him in consternation—Lionel, Frederick Massingbird, and Robin Frost. Mr. Verner recollected himself, and calmed his spirit down.

"I mean, Robin," he more quietly said, "that a reward will be useless. The villain has been too cunning, rely upon it, to—to—leave his traces behind him."

"It might be tried, sir," respectfully urged Robin. "I'd work—"

"You can come up to-morrow, Robin, and I'll talk with you," interrupted Mr. Verner. "I am too ill—too much upset to-night. Come at any hour you please, after twelve, and I will see you."

"I'll come, sir. I've registered a vow afore my old father," went on Robin, lifting his right arm, "and I register it again afore you, sir—afore our future master, Mr. Lionel—that I'll never leave a stone unturned by night nor by day, that I'll make it my first and foremost business in life to find that man. And when I've found him—let him be who he will—either him or me shall die. So help me—"

"Be still, Robin!" passionately interposed Mr. Verner, in a voice that startled the man. "Vows are bad things. I have found them so."

"It was registered afore, sir," significantly answered Robin, as he turned away. "I'll be up here to-morrow."

The morrow brought forth two departures from Verner's Pride. John Massingbird started for London in pursuit of his journey, Mr. Verner having behaved to him liberally. And Lionel Verner was summoned in hot haste to Paris, where his brother had just met with an accident, and was supposed to be lying between life and death.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. VERNER'S ESTRANGEMENT

The former chapters may be looked upon somewhat in the light of an introduction to what is to follow. It was necessary to relate the events recorded in them, but we must take a leap of not far short of two years from the date of their occurrence.

John Massingbird and his attendant, Luke Roy, had arrived safely at Melbourne in due course. Luke had written home one letter to his mother, and there his correspondence ended; but John Massingbird wrote frequently, both to Mrs. Verner and to his brother Frederick. John, according to his own account, appeared to be getting on all one way. The money he took out had served him well. He had made good use of it, and was accumulating a fortune rapidly. Such was his statement; but whether implicit reliance might be placed upon it was a question. Gay John was apt to deceive himself; was given to look on the bright side, and to imbue things with a tinge of *couleur de rose*; when, for less sanguine eyes, the tinge would have shone out decidedly yellow. The time went on, and his last account told of a "glorious nugget" he had picked up at the diggings. "Almost as big as his head," a "fortune in itself," ran some of the phrases in his letters; and his intention was to go down himself to Melbourne and "realise the thousands" for it. His letter to Frederick was especially full of this; and he strongly recommended his brother to come out and pick up nuggets on his own score. Frederick Massingbird appeared very much inclined to take the hint.

"Were I only sure it was all gospel, I'd go to-morrow," observed Frederick Massingbird to Lionel Verner, one day that the discussion of the contents of John's letter had been renewed, a month or two subsequent to its arrival. "A year's luck, such as this, and a man might come home a millionaire. I wish I knew whether to put entire faith in it."

"Why should John deceive you?" asked Lionel.

"He'd not deceive me wilfully. He has no cause to deceive *me*. The question is, is he deceived himself? Remember what grand schemes he would now and then become wild upon here, saying and thinking he had found the philosopher's stone. And how would they turn out? This may be one of the same calibre. I wonder we did not hear again by the last month's mail."

"There's a mail due now."

"I know there is," said Frederick. "Should it bring news to confirm this, I shall go out to him."

"The worst is, those diggings appear to be all a lottery," remarked Lionel. "Where one gets his pockets lined, another starves. Nay, ten—fifty—more, for all we know, starve for the one lucky one. I should not, myself, feel inclined to risk the journey to them."

"*You!* It's not likely you would," was the reply of Frederick Massingbird. "Everybody was not born heir to Verner's Pride."

Lionel laughed pleasantly. They were pacing the terrace in the sunshine of a winter's afternoon, a crisp, cold, bright day in January. At that moment Tynn came out of the house and approached them.

"My master is up, sir, and would like the paper read to him," said he, addressing Frederick Massingbird.

"Oh, bother, I can't stop now," broke from that gentleman involuntarily. "Tynn, you need not say that you found me here. I have an appointment, and I must hasten to keep it."

Lionel Verner looked at his watch.

"I can spare half an hour," he observed to himself; and he proceeded to Mr. Verner's room.

The old study that you have seen before. And there sat Mr. Verner in the same arm-chair, cushioned and padded more than it had used to be. What a change there was in him! Shrunken, wasted, drawn: surely there would be no place very long in this world for Mr. Verner.

He was leaning forward in his chair, his back bowed, his hands resting on his stick, which was stretched out before him. He lifted his head when Lionel entered, and an expression, partly of displeasure, partly of pain, passed over his countenance.

"Where's Frederick?"

"Frederick has an appointment out, sir. I will read to you."

"I thought you were going down to your mother's," rejoined Mr. Verner, his accent not softening in the least.

"I need not go for this half hour yet," replied Lionel, taking up the *Times*, which lay on a table near Mr. Verner. "Have you looked at the headings of the news, sir; or shall I go over them for you, and then you can tell me what you wish read?"

"I don't want anything read by you," said Mr. Verner. "Put the paper down."

Lionel did not immediately obey. A shade of mortification had crossed his face.

"Do you hear me, Lionel? Put the paper down. You know how it fidgets me to hear those papers ruffled, when I am not in a mood for reading."

Lionel rose, and stood before Mr. Verner. "Uncle, I *wish* you would let me do something for you. Better send me out of the house altogether, than treat me with this estrangement. Will it be of any use my asking you, for the hundredth time, what I did to displease you?"

"I tell you I don't want the paper read," said Mr. Verner. "And if you'd leave me alone I should be glad. Perhaps I shall get a wink of sleep. All night, all night, and my eyes were never closed! It's time I was gone."

The concluding sentences were spoken as in soliloquy; not to Lionel. Lionel, who knew his uncle's every mood, quitted the room. As he closed the door, a heavy groan, born of displeasure mingled with pain, as the greeting look had been, was sent after him by Mr. Verner. Very emphatically did it express his state of feeling with regard to Lionel; and Lionel felt it keenly.

Lionel Verner had remained in Paris six months, when summoned thither by the accident to his brother. The accident need not have detained him half that period of time; but the seductions of the gay French capital had charms for Lionel. From the very hour that he set foot in Verner's Pride on his return, he found that Mr. Verner's behaviour had altered to him. He showed bitter, angry estrangement, and Lionel could only conceive one cause for it—his long sojourn abroad. Fifteen or sixteen months had now elapsed since his return, and the estrangement had not lessened. In vain Lionel sought an explanation. Mr. Verner would not enter upon it. In fact, so far as direct words went, Mr. Verner had not expressed much of his displeasure; he left it to his manner. That said enough. He had never dropped the slightest allusion as to its cause. When Lionel asked an explanation, he neither accorded nor denied it, but would put him off evasively; as he might have put off a child who asked a troublesome question. You have now seen him do so once again.

After the rebuff, Lionel was crossing the hall when he suddenly halted, as if a thought struck him, and he turned back to the study. If ever a man's attitude bespoke utter grief and prostration, Mr. Verner's did, as Lionel opened the door. His head and hands had fallen, and his stick had dropped upon the carpet. He started out of his reverie at the appearance of Lionel, and made an effort to recover his stick. Lionel hastened to pick it up for him.

"I have been thinking, sir, that it might be well for Decima to go in the carriage to the station, to receive Miss Tempest. Shall I order it?"

"Order anything you like; order all Verner's Pride—what does it matter? Better for some of us, perhaps, that it had never existed."

Hastily, abruptly, carelessly was the answer given. There was no mistaking that Mr. Verner was nearly beside himself with mental pain.

Lionel went round to the stables, to give the order he had suggested. One great feature in the character of Lionel Verner was its complete absence of assumption. Courteously refined in mind and feelings, he could not have presumed. Others, in his position, might have deemed they were but

exercising a right. Though the presumptive heir to Verner's Pride, living in it, brought up as such, he would not, you see, even send out its master's unused carriage, without that master's sanction. In little things as in great, Lionel Verner could but be a thorough gentleman: to be otherwise he must have changed his nature.

"Wigham, will you take the close carriage to Deerham Court. It is wanted for Miss Verner."

"Very well, sir." But Wigham, who had been coachman in the family nearly as many years as Lionel had been in the world, wondered much, for all his prompt reply. He scarcely ever remembered a Verner's Pride carriage to have been ordered for Miss Verner.

Lionel passed into the high road from Verner's Pride, and, turning to the left, commenced his walk to Deerham. There were no roadside houses for a little way, but they soon began, by ones, by twos, until at last they grew into a consecutive street. These houses were mostly very poor; small shops, beer-houses, labourers' cottages; but a turning to the right in the midst of the village led to a part where the houses were of a superior character, several gentlemen living there. It was a new road, called Belvedere Road; the first house in it being inhabited by Dr. West.

Lionel cast a glance across at that house as he passed down the long street. At least, as much as he could see of it, looking obliquely. His glance was not rewarded. Very frequently pretty Sibylla would be at the windows, or her vain sister Amilly. Though, if vanity is to be brought in, I don't know where it would be found in an equal degree, as it was in Sibylla West. The windows appeared to be untenanted, and Lionel withdrew his eyes and passed straightly on his way. On his left hand was situated the shop of Mrs. Duff; its prints, its silk neckerchiefs, and its ribbons displayed in three parts of its bow-window. The fourth part was devoted to more ignominious articles, huddled indiscriminately into a corner. Children's Dutch dolls and black-lead, penny tale-books and square pink packets of cocoa, bottles of ink and india-rubber balls, side combs and papers of stationery, scented soap and Circassian cream (home made), tape, needles, pins, starch, bandoline, lavender-water, baking-powder, iron skewers, and a host of other articles too numerous to notice. Nothing came amiss to Mrs. Duff. She patronised everything she thought she could turn a penny by.

"Your servant, sir," said she, dropping a curtsy as Lionel came up; for Mrs. Duff was standing at the door.

He merely nodded to her, and went on. Whether it was the sight of the woman or of some lavender prints hanging in her window, certain it was, that the image of poor Rachel Frost came vividly into the mind of Lionel. Nothing had been heard, nothing found, to clear up the mystery of that past night.

CHAPTER X. LADY VERNER

At the extremity of the village, lying a little back from it, was a moderate-sized, red brick house, standing in the midst of lands, and called Deerham Court. It had once been an extensive farm; but the present tenant, Lionel's mother, rented the house, but only very little of the land. The land was let to a neighbouring farmer. Nearly a mile beyond—you could see its towers and its chimneys from the Court—rose the stately old mansion, called Deerham Hall, Deerham Court, and a great deal of the land and property on that side of the village, belonged to Sir Rufus Hautley, a proud, unsociable man. He lived at the Hall; and his only son, between whom and himself it was conjectured there existed some estrangement, had purchased into an Indian regiment, where he was now serving.

Lionel Verner passed the village, branched off to the right, and entered the great iron gates which enclosed the courtyard of Deerham Court. A very unpretending entrance admitted him into a spacious hall, the hall being the largest and best part of the house. Those great iron gates and the hall would have done honour to a large mansion; and they gave an appearance of pretension to Deerham Court which it did not deserve.

Lionel opened a door on the left, and entered a small ante-room. This led him into the only really good room the house contained. It was elegantly furnished and fitted up, and its two large windows looked towards the open country, and to Deerham Hall. Seated by the fire, in a rich violet dress, a costly white lace cap shading her delicate face, that must have been so beautiful, indeed, that was beautiful still, was a lady of middle age. Her seat was low—one of those chairs we are pleased to call, commonly and irreverently, a *prie-dieu*. Its back was carved in arabesque foliage, and its seat was of rich violet velvet. On a small inlaid table, whose carvings were as beautiful, and its top inlaid with mosaic-work, lay a dainty handkerchief of lace, a bottle of smelling-salts, and a book turned with its face downwards, all close at the lady's elbow. She was sitting in idleness just then—she always did sit in idleness—her face bent on the fire, her small hands, cased in white gloves, lying motionless on her lap—ay, a beautiful face once, though it had grown habitually peevish and discontented now. She turned her head when the door opened, and a flush of bloom rose to her cheeks when she saw Lionel.

He went up and kissed her. He loved her much. She loved him, too, better than she loved anything in life; and she drew a chair close to her, and he sat down, bending towards her. There was not much likeness between them, the mother and the son; both were very good-looking, but not alike.

"You see, mother mine, I am not late, as you prophesied I should be," said he, with one of his sweetest smiles.

"You would have been, Lionel, but for my warning. I'm sure I wish—I *wish* she was not coming! She must remember the old days in India, and will perceive the difference."

"She will scarcely remember India, when you were there. She is only a child yet, isn't she?"

"You know nothing about it, Lionel," was the querulous answer. "Whether she remembers or not, will she expect to see *me* in such a house, in such a position as this? It is at these seasons, when people are coming here, who know what I have been and ought to be, that I feel all the humiliation of my poverty. Lucy Tempest is nineteen."

Lionel Verner knew that it was of no use to argue with his mother, when she began upon that most unsatisfactory topic, her position; which included what she called her "poverty" and her "wrongs." Though, in truth, not a day passed but she broke out upon it.

"Lionel," she suddenly said.

He had been glancing over the pages of the book—a new work on India. He laid it down as he had found it, and turned to her.

"What shall you allow me when you come into Verner's Pride?"

"Whatever you shall wish, mother. You shall name the sum, not I. And if you name too modest a one," he added laughingly, "I shall double it. But Verner's Pride must be your home then, as well as mine."

"Never!" was the emphatic answer. "What! to be turned out of it again by the advent of a young wife? No, never, Lionel."

Lionel laughed—constrainedly this time.

"I may not be bringing home a young wife for this many and many a year to come."

"If you never brought one, I would not make my home at Verner's Pride," she resumed, in the same impulsive voice. "Live in the house by favour, that ought to have been mine by right? You would not be my true son to ask me, Lionel. Catherine, is that you?" she called out, as the movements of some one were heard in the ante-room.

A woman-servant put in her head.

"My lady?"

"Tell Miss Verner that Mr. Lionel is here?"

"Miss Verner knows it, my lady," was the woman's reply. "She bade me ask you, sir," addressing Lionel, "if you'd please to step out to her."

"Is she getting ready, Catherine?" asked Lady Verner.

"I think not, my lady."

"Go to her, Lionel, and ask her if she knows the time. A pretty thing if you arrive at the station after the train is in!"

Lionel quitted the room. Outside in the hall stood Catherine, waiting for him.

"Miss Verner has met with a little accident and hurt her foot, sir," she whispered. "She can't walk."

"Not walk!" exclaimed Lionel. "Where is she?"

"She is in the store-room, sir; where it happened."

Lionel went to the store-room, a small boarded room at the back of the hall. A young lady sat there; a very pretty white foot in a wash-hand basin of warm water, and a shoe and stocking lying near, as if hastily thrown off.

"Why, Decima! what is this?"



She lifted her face. A face whose features were of the highest order of beauty, regular as if chiselled from marble, and little less colourless. But for the large, earnest, dark-blue eyes, so full of expression, it might have been accused of coldness. In sleep, or in perfect repose, when the eyelids were bent, it looked strangely cold and pure. Her dark hair was braided; and she wore a dress something the same in colour as Lady Verner's.

"Lionel, what shall I do? And to-day of all days! I shall be obliged to tell mamma; I cannot walk a step."

"What is the injury? How did you meet with it?"

"I got on a chair. I was looking for some old Indian ornaments that I know are in that high cupboard, wishing to put them in Miss Tempest's room, and somehow the chair tilted with me, and I fell upon my foot. It is only a sprain; but I cannot walk."

"How do you know it is only a sprain, Decima? I shall send West to you."

"Thank you all the same, Lionel, but, if you please, I don't like Dr. West well enough to have him," was Miss Verner's answer. "See! I don't think I can walk."

She took her foot out of the basin, and attempted to try. But for Lionel she would have fallen; and her naturally pale face became paler from the pain.

"And you say you will not have Dr. West!" he cried, gently putting her into the chair again. "You must allow me to judge for you, Decima."

"Then, Lionel, I'll have Jan—if I must have any one. I have more faith in him," she added, lifting her large blue eyes, "than in Dr. West."

"Let it be Jan, then, Decima. Send one of the servants for him at once. What is to be done about Miss Tempest?"

"You must go alone. Unless you can persuade mamma out. Lionel, you will tell mamma about this. She must be told."

As Lionel crossed the hall on his return, the door was being opened; the Verner's Pride carriage had just driven up. Lady Verner had seen it from the window of the ante-room, and her eyes spoke her displeasure.

"Lionel, what brings *that* here?"

"I told them to bring it for Decima. I thought you would prefer that Miss Tempest should be met with that rather than with a hired one."

"Miss Tempest will know soon enough that I am too poor to keep a carriage," said Lady Verner. "Decima may use it if she pleases. I would not."

"My dear mother, Decima will not be able to use it. She cannot go to the station. She has hurt her foot."

"How did she do that?"

"She was on a chair in the store-room, looking in the cupboard. She—"

"Of course; that's just like Decima!" crossly responded Lady Verner. "She is everlastingly at something or other, doing half the work of a servant about the house."

Lionel made no reply. He knew that, but for Decima, the house would be less comfortable than it was for Lady Verner; and that what Decima did, she did in love.

"Will you go to the station?" he inquired.

"I! In this cold wind! How can you ask me, Lionel? I should get my face chapped irretrievably. If Decima cannot go, you must go alone."

"But how shall I know Miss Tempest?"

"You must find her out," said Lady Verner. "Her mother was as tall as a giantess; perhaps she is the same. Is Decima much hurt?"

"She thinks it is only a sprain. We have sent for Jan."

"For Jan! Much good he will do!" returned Lady Verner, in so contemptuous a tone as to prove she had no very exalted opinion of Mr. "Jan's" abilities.

Lionel went out to the carriage, and stepped in. The footman did not shut the door. "And Miss Verner, sir?"

"Miss Verner is not coming. The railway station. Tell Wigham to drive fast, or I shall be late."

"My lady wouldn't let Miss Decima come out in it," thought Wigham to himself, as he drove on.

CHAPTER XI. LUCY TEMPEST

The words of my lady, "as tall as a giantess," unconsciously influenced the imagination of Lionel Verner. The train was steaming into the station at one end as his carriage stopped at the other. Lionel leaped from it, and mingled with the bustle of the platform.

Not very much bustle, either; and it would have been less, but that Deerham Station was the nearest approach, as yet, by rail, to Heartburg, a town of some note about four miles distant. Not a single tall lady got out of the train. Not a lady at all that Lionel could see. There were two fat women, tearing about after their luggage, both habited in men's drab greatcoats, or what looked like them; and there was one very young lady, who stood back in apparent perplexity, gazing at the scene of confusion around her.

"*She* cannot be Miss Tempest," deliberated Lionel. "If she is, my mother must have mistaken her age; she looks but a child. No harm in asking her, at any rate."

He went up to the young lady. A very pleasant-looking girl, fair, with a peach bloom upon her cheeks, dark brown hair and eyes, soft and brown and luminous. Those eyes were wandering to all parts of the platform, some anxiety in their expression.

Lionel raised his hat.

"I beg your pardon. Have I the honour of addressing Miss Tempest?"

"Oh, yes, that is my name," she answered, looking up at him, the peach bloom deepening to a glow of satisfaction, and the soft eyes lighting with a glad smile. "Have you come to meet me?"

"I have. I come from my mother, Lady Verner."

"I am so glad," she rejoined, with a frank sincerity of manner perfectly refreshing in these modern days of artificial young ladyism. "I was beginning to think nobody had come; and then what could I have done?"

"My sister would have come with me to receive you, but for an accident which occurred to her just before it was time to start. Have you any luggage?"

"There's the great box I brought from India, and a hair-trunk, and my school-box. It is all in the van."

"Allow me to take you out of this crowd, and it shall be seen to," said Lionel, bending to offer his arm.

She took it, and turned with him; but stopped ere more than a step or two had been taken.

"We are going wrong. The luggage is up that way."

"I am taking you to the carriage. The luggage will be all right."

He was placing her in it, when she suddenly drew back and surveyed it.

"What a pretty carriage!" she exclaimed.

Many said the same of the Verner's Pride equipages. The colour of the panels was of that rich shade of blue called ultra-marine, with white linings and hammer-cloths, while a good deal of silver shone on the harness of the horses. The servants' livery was white and silver, their small-clothes blue.

Lionel handed her in.

"Have we far to go?" she asked.

"Not five minutes' drive."

He closed the door, gave the footman directions about the luggage, took his own seat by the coachman, and the carriage started. Lady Verner came to the door of the Court to receive Miss Tempest.

In the old Indian days of Lady Verner, she and Sir Lionel had been close and intimate friends of Colonel and Mrs. Tempest. Subsequently Mrs. Tempest had died, and their only daughter had been

sent to a clergyman's family in England for her education—a very superior place, where six pupils only were taken. But she was of an age to leave it now, and Colonel Tempest, who contemplated soon being home, had craved of Lady Verner to receive her in the interim.

"Lionel," said his mother to him, "you must stop here for the rest of the day, and help to entertain her."

"Why, what can I do towards it?" responded Lionel.

"You can do something. You can talk. They have got Decima into her room, and I must be up and down with her. I don't like leaving Lucy alone the first day she is in the house; she will take a prejudice against it. One blessed thing, she seems quite simple—not exacting."

"Anything but exacting, I should say," replied Lionel. "I will stay for an hour or two, if you like, mother, but I must be home to dinner."

Lady Verner need not have troubled herself about "entertaining" Lucy Tempest. She was accustomed to entertain herself; and as to any ceremony or homage being paid to her, she would not have understood it, and might have felt embarrassed had it been tendered. She had not been used to anything of the sort. Could Lady Verner have seen her then, at the very moment she was talking to Lionel, her fears might have been relieved. Lucy Tempest had found her way to Decima's room, and had taken up her position in a very undignified fashion at that young lady's feet, her soft, candid brown eyes fixed upwards on Decima's face, and her tongue busy with reminiscences of India. After some time spent in this manner, she was scared away by the entrance of a gentleman whom Decima called "Jan." Upon which she proceeded to the chamber she had been shown to as hers, to dress; a process which did not appear to be very elaborate by the time it took, and then she went downstairs to find Lady Verner.

Lady Verner had not quitted Lionel. She had been grumbling and complaining all that time. It was half the pastime of Lady Verner's life to grumble in the ears of Lionel and Decima. Bitterly mortified had Lady Verner been when she found, upon her arrival from India, that Stephen Verner, her late husband's younger brother, had succeeded to Verner's Pride, to the exclusion of herself and of Lionel; and bitterly mortified she remained. Whether it had been by some strange oversight on the part of old Mr. Verner, or whether it had been intentional, no provision whatever had been left by him to Lady Verner and to her children. Stephen Verner would have remedied this. On the arrival of Lady Verner, he had proposed to pay over to her yearly a certain sum out of the estate; but Lady Verner, smarting under disappointment, under the sense of injustice, had flung his proposal back to him. Never, so long as he lived, she told Stephen Verner, passionately, would she be obliged to him for the worth of a sixpence in money or in kind. And she had kept her word.

Her income was sadly limited. It was very little besides her pay as a colonel's widow; and to Lady Verner it seemed less than it really was, for her habits were somewhat expensive. She took this house, Deerham Court, then to be let without the land, had it embellished inside and out—which cost her more than she could afford, and had since resided in it. She would not have rented under Mr. Verner had he paid her to do it. She declined all intercourse with Verner's Pride; had never put her foot over its threshold. Decima went once in a way; but she, never. If she and Stephen Verner met abroad, she was coldly civil to him; she was indifferently haughty to Mrs. Verner, whom she despised in her heart for not being a lady. With all her deficiencies, Lady Verner was essentially a gentlewoman—not to be one amounted in her eyes to little less than a sin. No wonder that she, with her delicate beauty of person, her quiet refinements of dress, shrank within herself as she swept past poor Mrs. Verner, with her great person, her crimson face, and her flaunting colours! No wonder that Lady Verner, smarting under her wrongs, passed half her time giving utterance to them; or that her smooth face was acquiring premature wrinkles of discontent. Lionel had a somewhat difficult course to steer between Verner's Pride and Deerham Court, so as to keep friends with both.

Lucy Tempest appeared at the door. She stood there hesitating, after the manner of a timid school-girl. They turned round and saw her.

"If you please, may I come in?"

Lady Verner could have sighed over the deficiency of "style," or confidence, whichever you may like to term it. Lionel laughed, as he crossed the room to throw the door wider by way of welcome.

She wore a light shot pink dress of peculiar material, a sort of cashmere, very fine and soft. Looking at it one way it was pink, the other, mauve; the general shade of it was beautiful. Lady Verner could have sighed again: if the wearer was deficient in style, so also was the dress. A low body and short sleeves, perfectly simple, a narrow bit of white lace alone edging them: nothing on her neck, nothing on her arms, no gloves. A child of seven might have been so dressed. Lady Verner looked at her, her brow knit, and various thoughts running through her brain. She began to fear that Miss Tempest would require so much training as would give her trouble.

Lucy saw the look, and deemed that her attire was wrong.

"Ought I to have put on my best things—my new silk?" she asked.

My new silk! My best things! Lady Verner was almost at a loss for an answer. "You have not an extensive wardrobe, possibly, my dear?"

"Not very," replied Lucy. "This was my best dress, until I had my new silk. Mrs. Cust told me to put this one on for dinner to-day, and she said if Lady—if you and Miss Verner dressed very much, I could change it for the silk to-morrow. It is a *beautiful* dress," Lucy added, looking ingenuously at Lady Verner, "a pearl gray. Then I have my morning dresses, and then my white for dancing. Mrs. Cust said that anything you found deficient in my wardrobe it would be better for you to supply, than for her, as you would be the best judge of what I should require."

"Mrs. Cust does not pay much attention to dress, probably," observed Lady Verner coldly. "She is a clergyman's wife. It is sad taste when people neglect themselves, whatever may be the duties of their station."

"But Mrs. Cust does not neglect herself," spoke up Lucy, a surprised look upon her face. "She is always dressed nicely—not fine, you know. Mrs. Cust says that the lower classes have become so fine nowadays, that nearly the only way you may know a lady, until she speaks, is by her quiet simplicity."

"My dear, Mrs. Cust should say elegant simplicity," corrected Lady Verner. "She ought to know. She is of good family."

Lucy humbly acquiesced. She feared she herself must be too "quiet" to satisfy Lady Verner. "Will you be so kind, then, as to get me what you please?" she asked.

"My daughter will see to all these things, Lucy," replied Lady Verner. "She is not young like you, and she is remarkably steady, and experienced."

"She does not look old," said Lucy, in her open candour. "She is very pretty."

"She is turned five-and-twenty. Have you seen her?"

"I have been with her ever so long. We were talking about India. She remembers my dear mamma; and, do you know"—her bright expression fading to sadness—"I can scarcely remember her! I should have stayed with Decima—may I call her Decima?" broke off Lucy, with a faltering tongue, as if she had done wrong.

"Certainly you may."

"I should have stayed with Decima until now, talking about mamma, but a gentleman came in."

"A gentleman?" echoed Lady Verner.

"Yes. Some one tall and very thin. Decima called him Jan. After that, I went to my room again. I could not find it at first," she added, with a pleasant little laugh. "I looked into two; but neither was mine, for I could not see the boxes. Then I changed my dress, and came down."

"I hope you had my maid to assist you," quickly remarked Lady Verner.

"Some one assisted me. When I had my dress on, ready to be fastened, I looked out to see if I could find any one to do it, and I did. A servant was at the end of the corridor, by the window."

"But, my dear Miss Tempest, you should have rung," exclaimed Lady Verner, half petrified at the young lady's unformed manners, and privately speculating upon the sins Mrs. Cust must have to answer for. "Was it Thérèse?"

"I don't know," replied Lucy. "She was rather old, and had a broom in her hand."

"Old Catherine, I declare! Sweeping and dusting as usual! She might have soiled your dress."

"She wiped her hands on her apron," said Lucy simply. "She had a nice face: I liked it."

"I *beg*, my dear, that in future you will ring for Thérèse," emphatically returned Lady Verner, in her discomposure. "She understands that she is to wait upon you. Thérèse is my maid, and her time is not half occupied. Decima exacts very little of her. But take care that you do not allow her to lapse into English when with you. It is what she is apt to do unless checked. You speak French, of course?" added Lady Verner, the thought crossing her that Mrs. Cust's educational training might have been as deficient on that point, as she deemed it had been on that of "style."

"I speak it quite well," replied Lucy; "as well, or nearly as well, as a French girl. But I do not require anybody to wait on me," she continued. "There is never anything to do for me, but just to fasten these evening dresses that close behind. I am much obliged to you, all the same, for thinking of it, Lady Verner."

Lady Verner turned from the subject: it seemed to grow more and more unprofitable. "I shall go and hear what Jan says, if he is there," she remarked to Lionel.

"I wonder we did not see or hear him come in," was Lionel's answer.

"As if Jan could come into the house like a gentleman!" returned Lady Verner, with intense acrimony. "The back way is a step or two nearer, and therefore he patronises it."

She quitted the room as she spoke, and Lionel turned to Miss Tempest. He had been exceedingly amused and edified at the conversation between her and his mother; but while Lady Verner had been inclined to groan over it, he had rejoiced. That Lucy Tempest was thoroughly and genuinely unsophisticated; that she was of a nature too sincere and honest for her manners to be otherwise than of truthful simplicity, he was certain. A delightful child, he thought; one he could have taken to his heart and loved as a sister. Not with any other love: *that* was already given elsewhere by Lionel Verner.

The winter evening was drawing on, and little light was in the room, save that cast by the blaze of the fire. It flickered upon Lucy's face, as she stood near it. Lionel drew a chair towards her. "Will you not sit down, Miss Tempest?"

A formidable-looking chair, large and stately, as Lucy turned to look at it. Her eyes fell upon the low one which, earlier in the afternoon, had been occupied by Lady Verner. "May I sit in this one instead? I like it best."

"You 'may' sit in any chair that the room contains, or on an ottoman, or anywhere that you like," answered Lionel, considerably amused. "Perhaps you would prefer this?"

"This" was a very low seat indeed—in point of fact, Lady Verner's footstool. He had spoke in jest, but she waited for no second permission, drew it close to the fire, and sat down upon it. Lionel looked at her, his lips and eyes dancing.

"Possibly you would have preferred the rug?"

"Yes, I should," answered she frankly, "It is what we did at the rectory. Between the lights, on a winter's evening, we were allowed to do what we pleased for twenty minutes, and we used to sit down on the rug before the fire, and talk."

"Mrs. Cust, also?" asked Lionel.

"Not Mrs. Cust; you are laughing at me. If she came in, and saw us, she would say we were too old to sit there, and should be better on chairs. But we liked the rug best."

"What had you used to talk of?"

"Of everything, I think. About the poor; Mr. Cust's poor, you know; and the village, and our studies, and—But I don't think I must tell you that," broke off Lucy, laughing merrily at her own thoughts.

"Yes, you may," said Lionel.

"It was about that poor old German teacher of ours. We used to play her such tricks, and it was round the fire that we planned them. But she is very good," added Lucy, becoming serious, and lifting her eyes to Lionel, as if to bespeak his sympathy for the German teacher.

"Is she?"

"She was always patient and kind. The first time Lady Verner lets me go to a shop, I mean to buy her a warm winter cloak. Hers is so thin. Do you think I could get her one for two pounds?"

"I don't know at all," smiled Lionel. "A greatcoat for me would cost more than two pounds."

"I have two sovereigns left of my pocket-money, besides some silver. I hope it will buy a cloak. It is Lady Verner who will have the management of my money, is it not, now that I have left Mrs. Cust's?"

"I believe so."

"I wonder how much she will allow me for myself?" continued Lucy, gazing up at Lionel with a serious expression of inquiry, as if the question were a momentous one.

"I think cloaks for old teachers ought to be apart," cried Lionel. "They should not come out of your pocket-money."

"Oh, but I like them to do so. I wish I had a home of my own!—as I shall have when papa returns to Europe. I should invite her to me for the holidays, and give her nice dinners always, and buy her some nice clothes, and send her back with her poor old heart happy."

"Invite whom?"

"Fraulein Müller. Her father was a gentleman of good position, and he somehow lost his inheritance. When he died she found it out—there was not a shilling for her, instead of a fortune, as she had always thought. She was over forty then, and she had to come to England and begin teaching for a living. She is fifty now, and nearly all she gets she sends to Heidelberg to her poor sick sister. I wonder how much good warm cloaks do cost?"

Lucy Tempest spoke the last sentence dreamily. She was evidently debating the question in her own mind. Her small white hands rested inertly upon her pink dress, her clear face with its delicate bloom was still, her eyes were bent on the fire. But that Lionel's heart was elsewhere, it might have gone out, there and then, to that young girl and her attractive simplicity.

"What a pretty child you are!" involuntarily broke from him.

Up came those eyes to him, soft and luminous, their only expression being surprise, not a shade of vanity.

"I am not a child; why do you call me one? But Mrs. Cust said you would all be taking me for a child, until you knew me."

"How old are you?" asked Lionel.

"I was eighteen last September."

"Eighteen!" involuntarily repeated Lionel.

"Yes; eighteen. We had a party on my birthday. Mr. Cust gave me a most beautifully bound copy of Thomas à Kempis; he had had it bound on purpose. I will show it to you when my books are unpacked. You would like Mr. Cust, if you knew him. He is an old man now, and he has white hair. He is twenty years older than Mrs. Cust; but he is so good!"

"How is it," almost vehemently broke forth Lionel, "that you are so different from others?"

"I don't know. Am I different?"

"So different—so different—that—that—"

"What is the matter with me?" she asked timidly, almost humbly, the delicate colour in her cheeks deepening to crimson.

"There is nothing the matter with you," he answered, smiling; "a good thing if there were as little the matter with everybody else. Do you know that I never saw any one whom I liked so much

at first sight as I like you, although you appear to me only as a child? If I call here often I shall grow to love you almost as much as I love my sister Decima."

"Is not this your home?"

"No. My home is at Verner's Pride."

CHAPTER XII. DR. WEST'S HOME

The house of Dr. West was already lighted up. Gas at its front door, gas at its surgery door, gas inside its windows: no habitation in the place was ever so extensively lighted as Dr. West's. The house was inclosed with iron railings, and on its side—detached—was the surgery. A very low place, this surgery; you had to go down a step or two, and then plunge into a low door. In the time of the last tenant it had been used as a garden tool-house. It was a tolerably large room, and had a tolerably small window, which was in front, the door being on the side, opposite the side entrance of the house. A counter ran along the room at the back, and a table, covered with miscellaneous articles, stood on the right. Shelves were ranged completely round the room aloft, and a pair of steps, used for getting down the jars and bottles, rested in a corner. There was another room behind it, used exclusively by Dr. West.

Seated on the counter, pounding desperately away at something in a mortar, as if his life depended on it, was a peculiar-looking gentleman in shirt-sleeves. Very tall, very thin, with legs and arms that bore the appearance of being too long even for his tall body, great hands and feet, a thin face dark and red, a thin aquiline nose, black hair, and black prominent eyes that seemed to be always on the stare—there sat he, his legs dangling and his fingers working. A straightforward, honest, simple fellow looked he, all utility and practicalness—if there is such a word. One, plain in all ways.

It was Janus Verner—never, in the memory of anybody, called anything but "Jan"—second and youngest son of Lady Verner, brother to Lionel. *He* brother to courtly Lionel, to stately Decima, son to refined Lady Verner? He certainly was; though Lady Verner in her cross moods would declare that Jan must have been changed at nurse—an assertion without foundation, since he had been nursed at home under her own eye. Never in his life had he been called anything but Jan; address him as Janus, or as Mr. Verner, and it may be questioned if Jan would have answered to it. People called him "droll," and, if to be of plain, unvarnished manners and speech is to be droll, Jan decidedly was so. Some said Jan was a fool, some said he was a bear. Lady Verner did not accord him any great amount of favour herself. She had tried to make Jan what she called a gentleman, to beat into him suavity, gracefulness, tact, gloss of speech and bearing, something between a Lord Chesterfield and a Sir Roger de Coverley; and she had been obliged to give it up as a hopeless job. Jan was utterly irreclaimable: Nature had made him plain and straightforward, and so he remained. But there was many a one that the world would bow down to as a model, whose intrinsic worth was poor compared to unoffending Jan's. Lady Verner would tell Jan he was undutiful. Jan tried to be as dutiful to her as ever he could; but he *could not* change his ungainly person, his awkward manner. As well try to wash a negro white.

Lady Verner had proposed that Jan should go into the army, Jan (plain spoken as a boy, as he was still) had responded that he'd rather not go out to be shot at. What *was* she to do with him? Lady Verner peevishly asked. She had no money, she lamented, and she would take care Jan was not helped by Mr. Verner. To make him a barrister, or a clergyman, or a Member of Parliament (it was what Lady Verner said), would cost vast sums of money; a commission could be obtained for him gratis, in consideration of his father's services.

"Make me an apothecary," said Jan.

"An apothecary!" echoed Lady Verner, aghast. "That's not a gentleman's calling."

Jan opened his great eyes. Had he taken a liking for carpentering, he would have deemed it gentlemanly enough for him.

"What has put an apothecary's business into your head?" cried Lady Verner.

"I should like the pounding," replied Jan.

"The pounding!" reiterated Lady Verner, in astonishment.

"I should like it altogether," concluded Jan, "I wish you'd let me go apprentice to Dr. West."

Jan held to his liking. In due course of time he was apprenticed to Dr. West, and pounded away to his heart's content. Thence he went to London to walk the hospitals, afterwards completing his studies in Paris. It was at the latter period that the accident happened to Jan that called Lionel to Paris. Jan was knocked down by a carriage in the street, his leg broken, and he was otherwise injured. Time and skill cured him. Time and perseverance completed his studies, and Jan became a licensed surgeon of no mean skill. He returned to Deerham, and was engaged as assistant to Dr. West. No very ambitious position, but "it's good enough for Jan," slightly said Lady Verner. Jan probably thought the same, or he would have sought a better. He was four-and-twenty now. Dr. West was a general practitioner, holding an Edinburgh degree only. There was plenty to do in Deerham and its neighbourhood, what with the rich and what with the poor. Dr. West chiefly attended the rich himself and left Jan to take care of the poor. It was all one to Jan.

Jan sat on the counter in the surgery, pounding and pounding. He had just come in from his visit to Deerham Court, summoned thither by the slight accident to his sister Decima. Leaning his two elbows on the counter, his pale, puffy cheeks on his hands, and intently watching Jan with his light eyes, was a young gentleman rising fifteen, with an apron tied round his waist. This was Master Cheese; an apprentice, as Jan once had been. In point of fact, the pounding now was Master Cheese's proper work, but he was fat and lazy, and as sure as Jan came into the surgery, so sure would young Cheese begin to grunt and groan, and vow that his arms were "knocked off" with the work. Jan, in his indolent manner—and in motion and manner Jan appeared intensely indolent, as if there was no hurry in him; he would bring his words, too, out indolently—would lift the pounding machine aloft, sit himself down on the counter, and complete the work.

"I say," said young Cheese, watching the progress of the pestle with satisfaction, "Dame Dawson has been here."

"What did she want?" asked Jan.

"Bad in her inside, she says. I gave her three good doses of jalap."

"Jalap!" echoed Jan. "Well, it won't do her much harm. She won't take 'em; she'll throw 'em away."

"Law, Jan!" For, in the private familiarity of the surgery, young Cheese was thus accustomed unceremoniously to address his master—as Jan was. And Jan allowed it with composure.

"She'll throw 'em away," repeated Jan. "There's not a worse lot for physic in all the parish than Dame Dawson. I know her of old. She thought she'd get peppermint and cordials ordered for her—an excuse for running up a score at the public-house. Where's the doctor?"

"He's off somewhere. I saw one of the Bitterworth grooms come to the house this afternoon, so perhaps something's wrong there. I say, Jan, there'll be a stunning pie for supper!"

"Have you seen it?"

"Haven't I! I went into the kitchen when she was making it. It has got a hare inside it, and forcemeat balls."

"Who?" asked Jan—alluding to the maker.

"Miss Deb," replied young Cheese. "It's sure to be something extra good, for her to go and make it. If she doesn't help me to a rare good serving, sha'n't I look black at her!"

"It mayn't be for supper," debated Jan.

"Cook said it was. I asked her. She thought somebody was coming. I say, Jan, if you miss any of the castor oil, don't go and say I drank it."

Jan lifted his eyes to a shelf opposite, where various glass bottles stood. Among them was the one containing the castor oil. "Who has been at it?" he asked.

"Miss Amilly. She came and filled that great fat glass pot of hers, with her own hands; and she made me drop in some essence of cloves to scent it. Won't her hair smell of it to-night!"

"They'll make castor oil scarce, if they go at it like that," said Jan indifferently.

"They use about a quart a month; I know they do; the three of 'em together," exclaimed young Cheese, as vehemently as if the loss of the castor oil was personal. "How their nightcaps must be greased!"

"Sibylla doesn't use it," said Jan.

"Doesn't she, though!" retorted young Cheese, with acrimony. "She uses many things on the sly that she pretends not to use. She's as vain as a peacock. Did you hear about—"

Master Cheese cut his question short. Coming in at the surgery door was Lionel Verner.

"Well, Jan! What about Decima? After waiting ages at the Court for you to come downstairs and report, I found you were gone."

"It's a twist," said Jan. "It will be all right in a few days. How's Uncle Stephen to-day?"

"Just the same. Are the young ladies in?"

"Go and see," said Jan. "I know nothing about 'em."

"Yes, they are in, sir," interrupted Master Cheese. "They have not been out all the afternoon, for a wonder."

Lionel left the surgery, stepped round to the front door, and entered the house.

In a square, moderate-sized drawing-room, with tasty things scattered about it to catch the eye, stood a young lady, figuring off before the chimney-glass. Had you looked critically into the substantial furniture you might have found it old and poor; of a different class from the valuable furniture at Verner's Pride; widely different from the light, elegant furniture at Lady Verner's. But, what with white antimacassars, many coloured mats on which reposed pretty ornaments, glasses and vases of flowers, and other trifles, the room looked well enough for anything. In like manner, had you, with the same critical eye, scanned the young lady, you would have found that of real beauty she possessed little. A small, pretty doll's face with blue eyes and gold-coloured ringlets; a round face, betraying nothing very great, or good, or intellectual; only something fascinating and pretty. Her chief beauty lay in her complexion; by candle-light it was radiantly lovely, a pure red and white, looking like wax-work. A pretty, graceful girl she looked; and, what with her fascinations of person, of dress, and of manner, all of which she perfectly well knew how to display, she had contrived to lead more than one heart captive, and to hold it in fast chains.

The light of the gas chandelier shone on her now; on her blue gauzy dress, set off with ribbons, on her sleepy, blue eyes, on her rose-coloured cheeks. She was figuring off before the glass, I say, twisting her ringlets round her fingers, and putting them in various positions to try the effect; her employment, her look, her manner, all indicating the very essence of vanity. The opening of the door caused her to turn her head, and she shook her ringlets into their proper place, and dropped her hands by her side, at the entrance of Lionel Verner.

"Oh, Lionel! is it you?" said she, with as much composure as if she had not been caught gazing at herself. "I was looking at this," pointing to an inverted tumbler on the mantel-piece. "Is it not strange that we should see a moth at this cold season? Amilly found it this afternoon on the geraniums."

Lionel Verner advanced and bent his head to look at the pretty speckled moth reposing so still on its green leaf. Did he see through the artifice? Did he suspect that the young lady had been admiring her own pretty face, and not the moth? Not he. Lionel's whole heart had long ago been given to that vain butterfly, Sibylla West, who was gay and fluttering, and really of little more use in life than the moth. How was it that he had suffered himself to love *her*? Suffered! Love plays strange tricks, and it has fooled many a man as it was fooling Lionel Verner.

And what of Sibylla? Sibylla did not love him. The two ruling passions of her heart were vanity and ambition. To be sometime the mistress of Verner's Pride was a very vista of desire, and therefore she encouraged Lionel. She did not encourage him very much; she was rather in the habit of playing fast and loose with him; but that only served to rivet tighter the links of his chain. All the love—such as it was!—that Sibylla West was capable of giving, was in possession of Frederick Massingbird.

Strange tricks again! It was scarcely credible that one should fall in love with *him* by the side of attractive Lionel; but so it had been. Sibylla loved Frederick Massingbird for himself, she liked Lionel because he was the heir to Verner's Pride, and she had managed to keep both her slaves.

Lionel had never spoken of his love. He knew that his marriage with Sibylla West would be so utterly distasteful to Mr. Verner, that he was content to wait. He knew that Sibylla could not mistake him—could not mistake what his feelings were; and he believed that she also was content to wait until he should be his own master and at liberty to ask for her. When that time should come, what did she intend to do with Frederick Massingbird, who made no secret *to her* that he loved her and expected to make her his wife? Sibylla did not know; she did not much care; she was of a careless nature, and allowed the future to take its chance.

The only person who had penetrated to the secret of her love for Frederick Massingbird was her father, Dr. West.

"Don't be a simpleton, child, and bind yourself with your eyes bandaged," he abruptly and laconically said to her one day. "When Verner's Pride falls in, then marry whoever is its master."

"Lionel will be its master for certain, will he not?" she answered, startled out of the words.

"We don't know who will be its master," was Dr. West's rejoinder. "Don't play the simpleton, I say, Sibylla, by entangling yourself with your cousin Fred."

Dr. West was one who possessed an eye to the main chance; and, had Lionel Verner been, beyond contingency, "certain" of Verner's Pride, there is little doubt but he would have brought him to book at once, by demanding his intentions with regard to Sibylla. There were very few persons in Deerham but deemed Lionel as indisputably certain of Verner's Pride as though he were already in possession of it. Dr. West was probably an unusually cautious man.

"It is singular," observed Lionel, looking at the moth. "The day has been sunshiny, but far too cold to call these moths into life. At least, according to my belief; but I am not learned in entomology."

"Ento—, what a hard word!" cried Sibylla, in her prettily affected manner. "I should never find out how to spell it."

Lionel smiled. His deep love was shining out of his eyes as he looked down upon her. He loved her powerfully, deeply, passionately; to him she was as a very angel, and he believed her to be as pure-souled, honest-hearted, and single-minded.

"Where did my aunt go to-day?" inquired Sibylla, alluding to Mrs. Verner.

"She did not go anywhere that I am aware of," he answered.

"I saw the carriage out this afternoon."

"It was going to the station for Miss Tempest."

"Oh! she's come, then? Have you seen her? What sort of a demoiselle does she seem?"

"The sweetest child!—she looks little more than a child!" cried Lionel impulsively.

"A child, is she? I had an idea she was grown up. Have any of you at Verner's Pride heard from John?"

"No."

"But the mail's in, is it not? How strange that he does not write!"

"He may be coming home with his gold," said Lionel.

They were interrupted. First of all came in the tea-things—for at Dr. West's the dinner-hour was early—and, next, two young ladies, bearing a great resemblance to each other. It would give them dire offence not to call them young. They were really not very much past thirty, but they were of that class of women who age rapidly; their hair was sadly thin, some of their teeth had gone, and they had thin, flushed faces and large twisted noses; but their blue eyes had a good-natured look in them. Little in person, rather bending forward as they walked, and dressing youthfully, they yet looked older than they really were. Their light brown hair was worn in short, straggling ringlets in front, and twisted up with a comb behind. Once upon a time that hair was long and tolerably thick, but it had gradually and spitefully worn down to what it was now. The Misses West were proud of it still, however; as may

be inferred by the disappearance of the castor oil. A short while back, somebody had recommended to them castor oil as the best specific for bringing on departed hair. They were inoffensive in mind and manners, rather simple, somewhat affected and very vain, quarrelling with no person under the sun, except Sibylla. Sibylla was the plague of their lives. So many years younger than they, they had petted her and indulged her as a child, until at length the child became their mistress. Sibylla was rude and ungrateful, would cast scornful words at them and call them "old maids," with other reproachful terms. There was open warfare between them; but in their hearts they loved Sibylla still. They had been named respectively Deborah and Amilly. The latter name had been intended for Amélie; but by some mistake of the parents or of the clergyman, none of them French scholars, Amilly, the child was christened and registered. It remained a joke against Amilly to this day.

"Sibylla!" exclaimed Deborah, somewhat in surprise, as she shook hands with Lionel, "I thought you had gone to Verner's Pride."

"Nobody came for me. It got dusk, and I did not care to go alone," replied Sibylla.

"Did you think of going to Verner's Pride this evening, Sibylla?" asked Lionel. "Let me take you now. We shall be just in time for dinner. I'll bring you back this evening."

"I don't know," hesitated Sibylla. The truth was, she had expected Frederick Massingbird to come for her. "I—think—I'll—go," she slowly said, apparently balancing some point in her mind.

"If you do go, you should make haste and put your things on," suggested Miss Amilly. And Sibylla acquiesced, and left the room.

"Has Mr. Jan been told that the tea's ready, I wonder?" cried Miss Deborah.

Mr. Jan apparently had been told, for he entered as she was speaking; and Master Cheese—his apron off and his hair brushed—with him. Master Cheese cast an inquisitive look at the tea-table, hoping he should see something tempting upon it; eating good things forming the pleasantest portion of that young gentleman's life.

"Take this seat, Mr. Jan," said Miss Amilly, drawing a chair forward next her own. "Master Cheese, have the kindness to move a little round: Mr. Jan can't see the fire if you sit there."

"I don't want to see it," said literal Jan. "I'm not cold." And Master Cheese took the opportunity which the words gave to remain where he was. He liked to sit in warmth with his back to the fire.

"I cannot think where papa is," said Miss Deborah. "Mr. Lionel, is it of any use asking you to take a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, I am going home to dinner," replied Lionel. "Dr. West is coming in now," he added, perceiving that gentleman's approach from the window.

"Miss Amilly," asked Jan, "have you been at the castor oil?"

Poor Miss Amilly turned all the colours of the rainbow; if she had one weakness, it was upon the subject of her diminishing locks. While Cheese, going red also, administered to Jan sundry kicks under the table, as an intimation that he should have kept counsel. "I—took—just a little drop, Mr. Jan," said she. "What's the dose, if you please? Is it one tea-spoonful or two?"

"It depends upon the age," said Jan, "if you mean taken inwardly. For you it would be—I say, Cheese, what are you kicking at?"

Cheese began to stammer something about the leg of the table; but the subject was interrupted by the entrance of Sibylla. Lionel wished them good-evening, and went out with her. Outside the room door they encountered Dr. West.

"Where are you going, Sybilla?" he asked, almost sharply, as his glance fell upon his daughter and Lionel.

"To Verner's Pride."

"Go and take your things off. You cannot go to Verner's Pride this evening."

"But, papa, why?" inquired Sibylla, feeling that she should like to turn restive.

"I have my reasons for it. You will know them later. Now go and take your things off without another word."

Sibylla dared not openly dispute the will of her father, neither would she essay to do it before Lionel Verner. She turned somewhat unwillingly towards the staircase, and Dr. West opened the drawing-room door, signing to Lionel to wait.

"Deborah, I am going out. Don't keep the tea. Mr. Jan, should I be summoned anywhere, you'll attend for me, I don't know when I shall be home."

"All right," called out Jan. And Dr. West went out with Lionel Verner.

"I am going to Verner's Pride," he said, taking Lionel's arm as soon as they were in the street. "There's news come from Australia. John Massingbird's dead."

The announcement was made so abruptly, with so little circumlocution or preparation, that Lionel Verner failed at the first moment to take in the full meaning of the words. "John Massingbird dead?" he mechanically asked.

"He is dead. It's a sad tale. He had the gold about him, a great quantity of it, bringing it down to Melbourne, and he was killed on the road; murdered for the sake of the gold."

"How have you heard it?" demanded Lionel.

"I met Roy just now," replied Dr. West. "He stopped me, saying he had heard from his son by this afternoon's post; that there was bad news in the letter, and he supposed he must go to Verner's Pride, and break it to them. He gave me the letter, and I undertook to carry the tidings to Mrs. Verner."

"It is awfully sudden," said Lionel, "By the mail, two months ago, he wrote himself to us, in the highest spirits. And now—dead!"

"Life, over there, is not worth a month's purchase just now," remarked Dr. West; and Lionel could but note that had he been discussing the death of a total stranger, instead of a nephew, he could only have spoken in the same indifferent, matter-of-fact tone. "By all accounts, society is in a strange state there," he continued; "ruffians lying in wait ever for prey. The men have been taken, and the gold found upon them, Luke writes."

"That's good, so far," said Lionel.

When they reached Verner's Pride, they found that a letter was waiting for Frederick Massingbird, who had not been home since he left the house early in the afternoon. The superscription was in the same handwriting as the letter Dr. West had brought—Luke Roy's. There could be no doubt that it was only a confirmation of the tidings.

Mrs. Verner was in the drawing-room alone, Tynn said, ready to go in to dinner, and rather cross that Mr. Lionel should keep her waiting for it.

"Who will break it to her—you or I?" asked Dr. West of Lionel.

"I think it should be you. You are her brother."

Broken to her it was, in the best mode they were able. It proved a severe shock. Mrs. Verner had loved John, her eldest born, above every earthly thing. He was wild, random, improvident, had given her incessant trouble as a child and as a man; and so, mother fashion, she loved him best.

CHAPTER XIII. A CONTEMPLATED VOYAGE

Frederick Massingbird sat perched on the gate of a ploughed field, softly whistling. His brain was busy, and he was holding counsel with himself, under the gray February skies. Three weeks had gone by since the tidings arrived of the death of his brother, and Frederick was deliberating whether he should, or should not, go out. His own letter from Luke Roy had been in substance the same as that which Luke had written to his father. It was neither more explanatory, nor less so. Luke Roy was not a first-hand at epistolary correspondence. John had been attacked and killed for the sake of his gold, and the attackers and the gold had been taken hold of by the law; so far it said, and no further. That the notion should occur to Frederick to go out to Melbourne, and lay claim to the gold and any other property left by John, was only natural. He had been making up his mind to do so for the last three weeks; and perhaps the vision of essaying a little business in the gold-fields on his own account, urged him on. But he had not fully made up his mind yet. The journey was a long and hazardous one; and—he did not care to leave Sibylla.

"To be, or not to be?" soliloquised he, from his seat on the gate, as he plucked thin branches off from the bare winter hedge, and scattered them. "Old stepfather's wiry yet, he may last an age, and this is getting a horrid, humdrum life. I wonder what he'll leave me, when he does go off? Mother said one day she thought it wouldn't be more than five hundred pounds. *She* doesn't know; he does not tell her about his private affairs—never has told her. Five hundred pounds! If he left me a paltry sum such as that, I'd fling it in the heir's face—Master Lionel's."

He put a piece of the thorn into his mouth, bit it up, spat it out again, and went on with his soliloquy.

"I had better go. Why, if nothing to speak of does come to me from old Verner, this money of John's would be a perfect windfall. I must not lose the chance of it—and lose it I should, unless I go out and see after it. No, it would never do. I'll go. It's hard to say how much he has left, poor fellow. Thousands—if one may judge by his letters—besides this great nugget that they killed him for, the villains! Yes, I'll go—that's settled. And now, to try to get Sibylla. She'll accompany me fast enough. At least, I fancy she would. But there's that old West! I may have a battle over it with him."

He flung away what remained in his hand of the sticks, leaped off the gate, and bent his steps hastily in the direction of Deerham. Could he be going, there and then, to Dr. West's, to try his fate with Sibylla? Very probably. Frederick Massingbird liked to deliberate well when making up his mind to a step; but, that once done, he was wont to lose no time in carrying it out.

On this same afternoon, and just about the same hour, Lionel Verner was strolling through Deerham on his way to pay a visit to his mother. Close at the door he encountered Decima—well, now—and Miss Tempest, who were going out. None would have believed Lionel and Decima to be brother and sister, judging by their attire—he wore deep mourning, she had not a shred of mourning about her. Lady Verner, in her prejudice against Verner's Pride, had neither put on mourning herself for John Massingbird, nor allowed Decima to put it on. Lionel was turning with them; but Lady Verner, who had seen him from the window, sent a servant to desire him to come to her.

"Is it anything particular, mother?" he hastily inquired. "I am going with Decima and Lucy."

"It is so far particular, Lionel, that I wish you to stay with me, instead of going with them," answered Lady Verner. "I fancy you are getting rather fond of being with Lucy, and—and—in short, it won't do."

Lionel, in his excessive astonishment, could only stare at his mother.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Lucy Tempest! What won't do?"

"You are beginning to pay Lucy Tempest particular attention," said Lady Verner, unscrewing the silver stopper of her essence-bottle, and applying some to her forehead. "I will not permit it, Lionel."

Lionel could not avoid laughing.

"What can have put such a thing in your head, mother, I am at a loss to conceive. Certainly nothing in my conduct has induced it. I have talked to Lucy as a child, more than as anything else; I have scarcely thought of her but as one—"

"Lucy is not a child," interrupted Lady Verner.

"In years I find she is not. When I first saw her at the railway-station, I thought she was a child, and the impression somehow remains upon my mind. Too often I talk to her as one. As to anything else—were I to marry to-morrow, it is not Lucy Tempest I should make my wife."

The first glad look that Lionel had seen on Lady Verner's face for many a day came over it then. In her own mind she had been weaving a pretty little romance for Lionel; and it was her dread, lest that romance should be interfered with, which had called up her fears, touching Lucy Tempest.

"My darling Lionel, you know where you might go and choose a wife," she said. "I have long wished that you would do it. Beauty, rank, wealth—you may win them for the asking."

A slightly self-conscious smile crossed the lips of Lionel.

"You are surely not going to introduce again that nonsense about Mary Elmsley!" he exclaimed. "I should never like her, never marry her, therefore—"

"Did you not allude to *her* when you spoke but now—that it was not Lucy Tempest you should make your wife?"

"No."

"To whom, then? Lionel, I must know it."

Lionel's cheek flushed scarlet. "I am not going to marry yet—I have no intention of it. Why should this conversation have arisen?"

The words seemed to arouse a sudden dread on the part of Lady Verner. "Lionel," she gasped in a low tone, "there is a dreadful fear coming over me. Not Lady Mary! Some one else! I remember Decima said one day that you appeared to care more for Sibylla West than for her, your sister. I have never thought of it from that hour to this. I paid no more attention to it than though she had said you cared for my maid Thérèse. You *cannot* care for Sibylla West!"

Lionel had high notions of duty as well as of honour, and he would not equivocate to his mother. "I do care very much for Sibylla West," he said in a low tone; "and, please God, I hope she will sometime be my wife. But, mother, this confidence is entirely between ourselves. I beg you not to speak of it; it must not be suffered to get abroad."

The one short sentence of avowal over, Lionel might as well have talked to the moon. Lady Verner heard him not. She was horrified. The Wests in her eyes were utterly despicable. Dr. West was tolerated *as* her doctor; but as nothing else. Her brave Lionel—standing there before her in all the pride of his strength and his beauty—*he* sacrifice himself to Sibylla West! Of the two, Thérèse might have been the less dreadful to the mind of Lady Verner.

A quarrel ensued. Stay—that is a wrong word. It was not a quarrel, for Lady Verner had all the talking, and Lionel would not respond angrily; he kept his lips pressed together lest he should. Never had Lady Verner been moved to make a like scene. She reproached, she sobbed, she entreated. And, in the midst of it, in walked Decima and Lucy Tempest.

Lady Verner for once forgot herself. She forgot that Lucy was a stranger; she forgot the request of Lionel for silence; and, upon Decima's asking what was amiss, she told all—that Lionel loved Sibylla West, and meant to marry her.

Decima was too shocked to speak. Lucy turned and looked at Lionel, a pleasant smile shining in her eyes. "She is very pretty; very, very pretty; I never saw any one prettier."

"Thank you, Lucy," he cordially said; and it was the first time he had called her Lucy.

Decima went up to her brother. "Lionel, *must* it be? I do not like her."

"Decima, I fear that you and my mother are both prejudiced," he somewhat haughtily answered. And there he stopped. In turning his eyes towards his mother as he spoke of her, he saw that she had fainted away.

Jan was sent for, in all haste. Dr. West was Lady Verner's medical adviser; but a feeling in Decima's heart at the moment prevented her summoning him. Jan arrived, on the run; the servant had told him she was not sure but her lady was dying.

Lady Verner had revived then; was better; and was re-entering upon the grievance which had so affected her. "What could it have been?" wondered Jan, who knew his mother was not subject to fainting fits.

"Ask your brother, there, what it was," resentfully spoke Lady Verner. "He told me he was going to marry Sibylla West."

"Law!" uttered Jan.

Lionel stood; haughty, impassive; his lips curling, his figure drawn to its full height. He would not reproach his mother by so much as a word, but the course she was taking, in thus proclaiming his affairs to the world, hurt him in no measured degree.

"I don't like her," said Jan. "Deborah and Amilly are not much, but I'd rather have the two, than Sibylla."

"Jan," said Lionel, suppressing his temper, "*your* opinion was not asked."

Jan sat down on the arm of the sofa, his great legs dangling. "Sibylla can't marry two," said he.

"Will you be quiet, Jan?" said Lionel. "You have no right to interfere. You shall not interfere."

"Gracious, Lionel, I don't want to interfere," returned Jan simply. "Sibylla's going to marry Fred Massingbird."

"Will you be quiet?" reiterated Lionel, his brow flushing scarlet.

"I'll be quiet," said Jan, with composure. "You can go and ask her for yourself. It has all been settled this afternoon; not ten minutes ago. Fred's going out to Australia, and Sibylla's going with him, and Deborah and Amilly are crying their eyes out, at the thought of parting with her."

Lady Verner looked up at Jan, an expression of eager hope on her face. She could have kissed him a thousand times. Lionel—Lionel took his hat and walked out.

Believing it? No. The temptation to chastise Jan was growing great, and he deemed it well to remove himself out of it. Jan was right, however.

Much to the surprise of Frederick Massingbird, very much to the surprise of Sibylla, Dr. West not only gave his consent to the marriage as soon as asked, but urged it on. If Fred must depart in a week, why, they could be married in a week, he said. Sibylla was thunderstruck: Miss Deborah and Miss Amilly gave vent to a few hysterical shrieks, and hinted about the wedding clothes and the outfit. *That* could be got together in a day, was the reply of Dr. West, and they were too much astonished to venture to say it could not.

"You told me to wait for Lionel Verner," whispered Sibylla, when she and her father were alone, as she stood before him, trembling. In her mind's eye she saw Verner's Pride slipping from her; and it gave her chagrin, in spite of her love for Fred Massingbird.

Dr. West leaned forward and whispered a few words in her ear. She started violently, she coloured crimson. "Papa!"

"It is true," nodded the doctor.

As Lionel passed the house on his way from Deerham Court to Verner's Pride, he turned into it, led by a powerful impulse. He did not believe Jan, but the words had made him feel twitchings of uneasiness. Fred Massingbird had gone then, and the doctor was out. Lionel looked into the drawing-room, and there found the two elder Misses West, each dissolved in a copious shower of tears. So far, Jan's words were borne out. A sharp spasm shot across his heart.

"You are in grief," he said, advancing to them. "What is the cause?"

"The most dreadful voyage for her!" ejaculated Miss Deborah. "The ship may go to the bottom before it gets there."

"And not so much as time to *think* of proper things for her, let alone getting them!" sobbed Miss Amilly. "It's all a confused mass in my mind together—bonnets, and gowns, and veils, and wreaths, and trunks, and petticoats, and calico things for the voyage!"

Lionel felt his lips grow pale. They were too much engrossed to notice him; nevertheless, he covered his face with his hand as he stood by the mantel-piece. "Where is she going?" he quietly asked.

"To Melbourne, with Fred," said Miss Deborah. "Fred's going out to see about the money and gold that John left, and to realise it. They are not to stay: it will only be the voyage out and home. But if she should be taken ill out there, and die! Her sisters died, Mr. Lionel. Fred is her cousin, too. Better have married one not of kin."

They talked on. Lionel heard them not. After the revelation, that she was about to marry, all else seemed a chaos. But he was one who could control his feelings.

"I must be going," said he quietly, moving from his standing-place with calmness. "Good-day to you."

He shook hands with them both, amidst a great accession of sobs, and quitted the room. Running down the stairs at that moment, singing gaily a scrap of a merry song, came Sibylla, unconscious of his vicinity; indeed, of his presence in the house. She started when she saw him, and stopped in hesitation.

Lionel threw open the door of the empty dining-room, caught her arm and drew her into it—his bearing haughty, his gestures imperative. There they stood before each other, neither speaking for some moments. Lionel's very lips were livid; and *her* rich wax-work colour went and came, and her clear blue eyes fell under the stern gaze of his.

"Is this true, which I have been obliged to hear?" was his first question.

She knew that she had acted ill. She knew that Lionel Verner deserved to have a better part played by him. She had always looked up to him—all the Wests had—as one superior in birth, rank, and station to herself. Altogether, the moment brought to her a great amount of shame and confusion.

"Answer me one question; I demand it of you," exclaimed Lionel. "Have you ever mistaken my sentiments towards you in the least degree?"

"Have—I—I don't know," she faltered.

"No equivocation," burst Lionel. "Have you not *known* that I loved you? that I was only waiting my uncle's death to make you my wife?—Heaven forgive me that I should thus speak as though I had built upon it!"

Sibylla let fall some tears.

"Which have you loved?—all this while! Me?—or him?"

"Oh! don't speak to me like that," sobbed Sibylla. "He asked me to marry him, and—and—papa said yes."

"I ask you," said Lionel in a low voice, "which is it that you love?"

She did not answer. She stood before him the prettiest picture of distress imaginable; her hands clasped, her large blue eyes filled with tears, her shower of golden hair shading her burning cheeks.

"If you have been surprised or terrified into this engagement, loving him not, will you give him up for me?" tenderly whispered Lionel. "Not—you understand—if your love be his. In that case, I would not ask it. But, without reference to myself at all, I doubt—and I have my reasons for it—if Frederick Massingbird be worthy of you."

Was she wavering in her own mind? She stole a glance upward—at his tall, fine form, his attractive face, its lineaments showing out in that moment, all the pride of the Verners. A pride that mingled with love.

Lionel bent to her—

"Sibylla, if you love him I have no more to say; if you love me, avow it, as I will then avow my love, my intentions, in the face of day. Reflect before you speak. It is a solemn moment—a moment which holds alike my destiny and yours in its hands."

A rush of blood to her heart, a rush of moisture to her forehead; for Sibylla West was not wholly without feeling, and she knew, as Lionel said, that it was a decision fraught with grave destiny. But Frederick Massingbird was more to her than he was.

"I have given my promise. I cannot go from it," was her scarcely breathed answer.

"May your falsity never come home to you!" broke from Lionel, in the bitterness of his anguish. And he strode from the room without another word or look, and quitted the house.

CHAPTER XIV. THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING

Deerham could not believe the news. Verner's Pride could not believe it. Nobody believed it, save Lady Verner, and she was only too thankful to believe it and hug it. There was nothing surprising in Sibylla's marrying her cousin Fred, for many had shrewdly suspected that the favour between them was not altogether cousinly favour; but the surprise was given to the hasty marriage. Dr. West vouchsafed an explanation. Two of his daughters, aged respectively one year and two years younger than Amilly, had each died of consumption, as all Deerham knew. On attaining her twenty-fifth year, each one had shown rapid symptoms of the disease, and had lingered but a few weeks. Sibylla was only one-and-twenty yet; but Dr. West fancied he saw, or said he saw, grounds for fear. It was known of what value a sea-voyage was in these constitutions; hence his consent to the departure of Sibylla. Such was the explanation of Dr. West.

"I wonder whether the stated 'fear of consumption' has been called up by himself for the occasion?" was the thought that crossed the mind of Decima Verner. Decima did not believe in Dr. West.

Verner's Pride, like the rest, had been taken by surprise. Mrs. Verner received the news with equanimity. She had never given Fred a tithe of the love that John had had, and she did not seem much to care whether he married Sibylla, or whether he did not—whether he went out to Australia, or whether he stayed at home. Frederick told her of it in a very off-hand manner; but he took pains to bespeak the approbation of Mr. Verner.

"I hope my choice is pleasant to you, sir. That you will cordially sanction it."

"Whether it is pleasant to me or not, I have no right to say it shall not be," was the reply of Mr. Verner. "I have never interfered with you, or with your brother, since you became inmates of my house."

"Do you not like Sibylla, sir?"

"She is a pretty girl. I know nothing against her. I think you might have chosen worse."

Coldly, very coldly were the words delivered, and there was a strangely keen expression of anguish on Mr. Verner's face; but that was nothing unusual now. Frederick Massingbird was content to accept the words as a sanction of approval.

A few words—I don't mean angry ones—passed between him and Lionel on the night before the wedding. Lionel had not condescended to speak to Frederick Massingbird upon the subject at all; Sibylla had refused him for the other of her own free will; and there he let it rest. But the evening previous to the marriage day, Lionel appeared strangely troubled; indecisive, anxious, as if he were debating some question with himself. Suddenly he went straight up to Frederick Massingbird's chamber, who was deep in the business of packing, as his unfortunate brother John had been, not two short years before.

"I wish to speak to you," he began. "I have thought of doing so these several days past, but have hesitated, for you may dream that it is no business of mine. However, I cannot get it off my mind that it may be my duty; and I have come to do it."

Frederick Massingbird was half buried amid piles of things, but he turned round at this strange address and looked at Lionel.

"Is there *nothing* on your conscience that should prevent your marrying that girl?" gravely asked Lionel.

"Do you want her left for yourself?" was Fred's answer, after a prolonged stare.

Lionel flushed to his very temples. He controlled the hasty retort that rose to his tongue. "I came here not to speak in any one's interest but hers. Were she free as air this moment—were she

to come to my feet and say, 'Let me be your wife,' I should tell her that the whole world was before her to choose from, save myself. She can never again be anything to me. No. I speak for her alone. She is marrying you in all confidence. Are you worthy of her?"

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Frederick Massingbird.

"If there be any sin upon your conscience that ought to prevent your taking her, or any confiding girl, to your heart, as wife, reflect whether you should ignore it. The consequences may come home later; and then what would be her position?"

"I have no sin upon my conscience, Poor John, perhaps, had plenty of it. I do not understand you, Lionel Verner."

"On your sacred word?"

"On my word, and honour, too."

"Then forgive me," was the ready reply of Lionel. And he held out his hand with frankness to Frederick Massingbird.

CHAPTER XV. A TROUBLED MIND

Just one fortnight from the very day that witnessed the sailing of Frederick Massingbird and his wife, Mr. Verner was taken alarmingly ill. Fred, in his soliloquy that afternoon, when you saw him upon the gate of the ploughed field,—“Old stepfather's wiry yet, and may last an age,”—had certainly not been assisted with the gift of prevision, for there was no doubt that Mr. Verner's time to die had now come.

Lionel had thrown his sorrow bravely from him, in outward appearance at any rate. What it might be doing for him inwardly, he alone could tell. These apparently calm, undemonstrative natures, that show a quiet exterior to the world, may have a fire consuming their heartstrings. He did not go near the wedding; but neither did he shut himself up indoors, as one indulging lamentation and grief. He pursued his occupations just as usual. He read to Mr. Verner, who allowed him to do so that day; he rode out; he saw people, friends and others whom it was necessary to see. He had the magnanimity to shake hands with the bride, and wish her joy.

It occurred in this way. Mrs. Verner declined to attend the ceremony. Since the news of John's death she had been ailing both in body and mind. But she desired Frederick to take Verner's Pride in his road when driving away with his bride, that she might say her last farewell to him and Sibylla, neither of whom she might ever see again. Oh, she'd see them again fast enough, was Fred's response; they should not be away more than a year. But he complied with her request, and brought Sibylla. About three o'clock in the afternoon, the ceremony and the breakfast over, the carriage, with its four horses, clattered on to the terrace, and Fred handed Sibylla out of it. Lionel was crossing the hall at the moment of their entrance; his horse had just been brought round for him. To say he was surprised at seeing them there would not be saying enough; he had known nothing of the intended call. They met face to face. Sibylla wore a sweeping dress of silk; a fine Indian shawl, the gift of Mrs. Verner, was folded round her, and her golden hair fell beneath her bonnet. Her eyes fell, also, before the gaze of Lionel.

Never had she looked more beautiful, more attractive; and Lionel felt it. But, had she been one for whom he had never cared, he could not have shown more courtly indifference. A moment given to the choking down of his emotion, to the stilling of his beating pulses, and he stood before her calmly self-possessed; holding out his hand, speaking in a low, clear tone.

“Allow me to offer you my good wishes for your welfare, Mrs. Massingbird.”

“Thank you; thank you very much,” replied Sibylla, dropping his hand, avoiding his eye, and going on to find Mrs. Verner.

“Good-bye, Lionel,” said Frederick Massingbird. “You are going out, I see.”

Lionel shook his hand cordially. Rival though he had proved to him, he did not blame Frederick Massingbird; he was too just to cast blame where it was not due.

“Fare you well, Frederick. I sincerely hope you will have a prosperous voyage; that you will come safely home again.”

All this was over, and they had sailed; Dr. West having exacted a solemn promise from his son-in-law that they should leave for home again the very instant that John's property had been realised. And now, a fortnight after it, Mr. Verner was taken—as was believed—for death. He himself believed so. He knew what his own disorder was; he knew that the moment the water began to mount, and had attained a certain height, his life would be gone.

“How many hours have I to live?” he inquired of Dr. West.

“Probably for some days,” was the answer.

What could it have been that was troubling the mind of Mr. Verner? That it was worldly trouble was certain. That other trouble, which has been known to distract the minds of the dying, to fill them with agony, was absent from his. On that score he was in perfect peace. But that some very great anxiety was racking him might be seen by the most casual observer. It had been racking him for a long time past, and it was growing worse now. And it appeared to be what he could not, or would not, speak of.

The news of the dangerous change in the master of Verner's Pride circulated through the vicinity, and it brought forth, amidst other of his friends, Mr. Bitterworth. This was on the second day of the change. Tynn received Mr. Bitterworth in the hall.

"There's no hope, sir, I'm afraid," was Tynn's answer to his inquiries. "He's not in much pain of body, but he is dreadfully anxious and uneasy."

"What about?" asked Mr. Bitterworth, who was a little man with a pimpled face.

"Nobody knows, sir; he doesn't say. For myself, I can only think it must be about something connected with the estate. What else can it be?"

"I suppose I can see him, Tynn?"

"I'll ask, sir. He refuses visitors in his room, but I dare say he'll admit you."

Lionel came to Mr. Bitterworth in the drawing-room. "My uncle will see you," he said, after greetings had passed.

"Tynn informs me that he appears to be uneasy in his mind," observed Mr. Bitterworth.

"A man so changed, as he has been in the last two years, I have never seen," replied Lionel. "None can have failed to remark it. From entire calmness of mind, he has exhibited anxious restlessness; I may say irritability. Mrs. Verner is ill," Lionel added, as they were ascending the stairs. "She has not been out of bed for two days."

Not in his study now; he had done with the lower part of the house for ever; but in his bed-chamber, never to come out of it alive, was Mr. Verner. They had got him up, and he sat in an easy-chair by the bedside, partially dressed, and wrapped in his dressing-gown. On his pale, worn face there were the unmistakable signs of death. He and Mr. Bitterworth were left alone.

"So you have come to see the last of me, Bitterworth!" was the remark of Mr. Verner.

"Not the last yet, I hope," heartily responded Mr. Bitterworth, who was an older man than Mr. Verner, but hale and active. "You may rally from this attack and get about again. Remember how many serious attacks you have had."

"None like this. The end must come; and it has come now. Hush, Bitterworth! To speak of recovery to me is worse than child's play. I *know* my time has come. And I am glad to meet it, for it releases me from a world of care."

"Were there any in this world who might be supposed to be exempt from care, it is you," said Mr. Bitterworth, leaning towards the invalid, his hale old face expressing the concern he felt. "I should have judged you to be perfectly free from earthly care. You have no children; what can be troubling you?"

"Would to Heaven I had children!" exclaimed Mr. Verner; and the remark appeared to break from him involuntarily, in the bitterness of his heart.

"You have your brother's son, your heir, Lionel."

"He is no heir of mine," returned Mr. Verner, with, if possible, double bitterness.

"No heir of yours!" repeated Mr. Bitterworth, gazing at his friend, and wondering whether he had lost his senses.

Mr. Verner, on his part, gazed on vacancy, his thoughts evidently cast inwards. He sat in his old favourite attitude; his hands clasped on the head of his stick, and his face bent down upon it. "Bitterworth," said he presently "when I made my will years ago, after my father's death, I appointed you one of the executors."

"I know it," replied Mr. Bitterworth. "I was associated—as you gave me to understand—with Sir Rufus Hautley."

"Ay. After the boy came of age,"—and Mr. Bitterworth knew that he alluded to Lionel—"I added his name to those of Sir Rufus and yourself. Legacies apart, the estate was all left to him."

"Of course it was," assented Mr. Bitterworth.

"Since then, I have seen fit to make an alteration," continued Mr. Verner. "I mention it to you, Bitterworth, that you may not be surprised when you hear the will read. Also I would tell you that I made the change of my own free act and judgment, unbiassed by any one, and that I did not make it without ample cause. The estate is not left to Lionel Verner, but to Frederick Massingbird."

Mr. Bitterworth had small round eyes, but they opened now to their utmost width. "What did you say?" he repeated, after a pause, like a man out of breath.

"Strictly speaking, the estate is not bequeathed to Frederick Massingbird; he will inherit it in consequence of John's death," quietly went on Mr. Verner. "It is left to John Massingbird, and to Frederick after him, should he be the survivor. Failing them both—"

"And I am still executor?" interrupted Mr. Bitterworth, in a tone raised rather above the orthodox key for a sick-room.

"You and Sir Rufus. That, so far, is not altered."

"Then I will not act. No, Stephen Verner, long and close as our friendship has been, I will not countenance an act of injustice. I will not be your executor, unless Verner's Pride goes, as it ought, to Lionel Verner."

"Lionel has forfeited it."

"Forfeited it!—how can he have forfeited it? Is this"—Mr. Bitterworth was given to speak in plain terms when excited—"is this the underhand work of Mrs. Verner?"

"Peace, Bitterworth! Mrs. Verner knows nothing of the change. Her surviving son knows nothing of it; John knew nothing of it. They have no idea but that Lionel is still the heir. You should not jump to unjust conclusions. Not one of them has ever asked me how my property was left; or has attempted, by the smallest word, to influence me in its disposal."

"Then, what has influenced you? Why have you done it?" demanded Mr. Bitterworth, his voice becoming more subdued.

To this question Mr. Verner did not immediately reply. He appeared not to have done with the defence of his wife and her sons.

"Mrs. Verner is not of a covetous nature; she is not unjust, and I believe that she would wish the estate willed to Lionel, rather than to her sons. She knows no good reason why it should not be willed to him. And for those sons—do you suppose either of them would have gone out to Australia, had he been cognisant that he was heir to Verner's Pride?"

"Why have you willed it away from Lionel?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Mr. Verner, in a tone of sharp pain. It betrayed to Mr. Bitterworth what sharper pain the step itself must have cost.

"It is *this* which has been on your mind, Verner—disturbing your closing years?"

"Ay, it is that; nothing else!" wailed Mr. Verner, "nothing else, nothing else! Has it not been enough to disturb me?" he added, putting the question in a loud, quick accent. "Setting aside my love for Lionel, which was great, setting aside my finding him unworthy, it has been a bitter trial to me to leave Verner's Pride to a Massingbird. I have never loved the Massingbirds," he continued, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"If Lionel *were* unworthy,"—with a stress upon the "were,"—"you might have left it to Jan," spoke Mr. Bitterworth.

"Lady Verner has thrown too much estrangement between Jan and me. No. I would rather even a Massingbird had it than Jan."

"If Lionel were unworthy, I said," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "I cannot believe he is. How has he proved himself so? What has he done?"

Mr. Verner put up his hands as if to ward off some imaginary phantom, and his pale face turned of a leaden hue.

"Never ask me," he whispered. "I cannot tell you. I have had to bear it about with me," he continued, with an irrepressible burst of anguish; "to bear it here, within me, in silence; never breathing a word of my knowledge to him, or to any one."

"Some folly must have come to your cognisance," observed Mr. Bitterworth; "though I had deemed Lionel Verner to be more free from the sins of hot-blooded youth than are most men. I have believed him to be a true gentleman in the best sense of the word—a good and honourable man."

"A silent stream runs deep," remarked Mr. Verner.

Mr. Bitterworth drew his chair nearer to his friend, and, bending towards him, resumed solemnly—

"Verner's Pride of right (speaking in accordance with our national notions) belonged to your brother, Sir Lionel. It would have been his, as you know, had he lived but a month or two longer; your father would not have willed it away from him. After him it would have been Lionel's. Sir Lionel died too soon, and it was left to you; but what injunction from your father accompanied it? Forgive my asking you the question, Stephen."

"Do you think I have forgotten it?" wailed Mr. Verner. "It has cost me my peace—my happiness, to will it away from Lionel. To see Verner's Pride in possession of any but a Verner will trouble me so—if, indeed, we are permitted in the next world still to mark what goes on in this—that I shall scarcely rest quiet in my grave."

"You have no more—I must speak plainly, Stephen—I believe that you have no more right in equity to will away the estate from Lionel, than you would have were he the heir-at-law. Many have said—I am sure you must be aware that they have—that you have kept him out of it; that you have enjoyed what ought to have been his, ever since his grandfather's death."

"Have *you* said it?" angrily asked Mr. Verner.

"I have neither said it nor thought it. When your father informed me that he had willed the estate to you, Sir Lionel being dead, I answered him that I thought he had done well and wisely; that you had far more right to it, for your life, than the boy Lionel. But, Stephen, I should never sanction your leaving it away from him after you. Had you possessed children of your own, they should never have been allowed to shut out Lionel. He is your elder brother's son, remember."

Mr. Verner sat like one in dire perplexity. It would appear that there was a struggle going on in his own mind.

"I know, I know," he presently said, in answer. "The worry, the uncertainty, as to what I ought to do, has destroyed the peace of my later days. I altered my will when smarting under the discovery of his unworthiness; but, even then a doubt as to whether I was doing right caused me to name him as inheritor, should the Massingbirds die."

"Why, that must have been a paradox!" exclaimed Mr. Bitterworth. "Lionel Verner should inherit before all, or not inherit at all. What your ground of complaint against him is, I know not; but whatever it may be, it can be no excuse for your willing away from him Verner's Pride. Some youthful folly of his came to your knowledge, I conclude."

"Not folly. Call it sin—call it crime," vehemently replied Mr. Verner.

"As you please; you know its proper term better than I. For one solitary instance of—what you please to name it—you should not blight his whole prospects for life. Lionel's general conduct is so irreproachable (unless he be the craftiest hypocrite under the sun) that you may well pardon one defalcation. Are you sure you were not mistaken?"

"I am sure. I hold proof positive."

"Well, I leave that. I say that you might forgive him, whatever it may be, remembering how few his offences are. He would make a faithful master of Verner's Pride. Compare him to Fred Massingbird! Pshaw!"

Mr. Verner did not answer. His face had an aching look upon it, as it leaned out over the top of his stick. Mr. Bitterworth laid his hand upon his friend's knee persuasively.

"Do not go out of the world committing an act of injustice; an act, too, that is irreparable, and of which the injustice must last for ever. Stephen, I will not leave you until you consent to repair what you have done."

"It has been upon my mind to do it since I was taken worse yesterday," murmured Stephen Verner. "Our Saviour taught us to forgive. Had it been against me only that he sinned, I would have forgiven him long ago."

"You will forgive him now?"

"Forgiveness does not lie with me. It was not against me, I say, that he sinned. Let him ask forgiveness of God and of his own conscience. But he shall have Verner's Pride."

"Better that you should see it in its proper light at the eleventh hour, than not at all, Stephen," said Mr. Bitterworth. "By every law of right and justice, Verner's Pride, after you, belongs to Lionel."

"You speak well, Bitterworth, when you call it the eleventh hour," observed Mr. Verner. "If I am to make this change you must get Matiss here without an instant's delay. See him yourself, and bring him back. Tell him what the necessity is. He will make more haste for you than he might for one of my servants."

"Does he know of the bequest to the Massingbirds?"

"Of course he knows of it. He made the will. I have never employed anybody but Matiss since I came into the estate."

Mr. Bitterworth, feeling there was little time to be lost, quitted the room without more delay. He was anxious that Lionel should have his own. Not so much because he liked and esteemed Lionel, as that he possessed a strong sense of justice within himself. Lionel heard him leaving the sick-room, and came to him, but Mr. Bitterworth would not stop.

"I cannot wait," he said. "I am bound on an errand for your uncle."

CHAPTER XVI. AN ALTERED WILL

Mr. Bitterworth was bound to the house of the lawyer, Mr. Matiss, who lived and had his office in the new part of Deerham, down by Dr. West's. People wondered that he managed to make a living in so small a place; but he evidently did make one. Most of the gentry in the vicinity employed him for trifling things, and he held one or two good agencies. He kept no clerk. He was at home when Mr. Bitterworth entered, writing at a desk in his small office, which had maps hung round it. A quick-speaking man, with dark hair and a good-natured face.

"Are you busy, Matiss?" began Mr. Bitterworth, when he entered; and the lawyer looked at him through the railings of his desk.

"Not particularly, Mr. Bitterworth. Do you want me?"

"Mr. Verner wants you. He has sent me to bring you to him without delay. You have heard that there's a change in him?"

"Oh, yes, I have heard it," replied the lawyer. "I am at his service, Mr. Bitterworth."

"He wants his last will altered. Remedied, I should say," continued Mr. Bitterworth, looking the lawyer full in the face, and nodding confidentially.

"Altered to what it was before?" eagerly cried the lawyer.

Mr. Bitterworth nodded again. "I called in upon him this morning, and in the course of conversation it came out what he had done about Verner's Pride. And now he wants it undone."

"I am glad of it—I am glad of it, Mr. Bitterworth. Between ourselves—though I mean no disrespect to them—the young Massingbirds were not fit heirs for Verner's Pride. Mr. Lionel Verner is."

"He is the rightful heir as well as the fit one, Matiss," added Mr. Bitterworth, leaning over the railings of the desk, while the lawyer was hastily putting his papers in order, preparatory to leaving them, placing some aside on the desk, and locking up others. "What was the cause of his willing it away from Lionel Verner?"

"It's more than I can tell. He gave no clue whatever to his motive. Many and many a time have I thought it over since, but I never came near fathoming it. I told Mr. Verner that it was not a just thing, when I took his instructions for the fresh will. That is, I intimated as much; it was not my place, of course, to speak out my mind offensively to Mr. Verner. Dr. West said a great deal more to him than I did; but he could make no impression."

"Was Dr. West consulted, then, by Mr. Verner?"

"Not at all. When I called at Verner's Pride with the fresh will for Mr. Verner to execute, it happened that Tynn was out. He and one of the other servants were to have witnessed the signature. Dr. West came in at the time, and Mr. Verner said he would do for a witness in Tynn's place. Dr. West remonstrated most strongly when he found what it was; for Mr. Verner told him in confidence what had been done. He, the doctor, at first refused to put his hand to anything so unjust. He protested that the public would cry shame, would say John Massingbird had no human right to Verner's Pride, would suspect he had obtained it by fraud, or by some sort of underhand work. Mr. Verner replied that I—Matiss—could contradict that. At last the doctor signed."

"When was this?"

"It was the very week after John started for Australia. I wondered why Mr. Verner should have allowed him to go, if he meant to make him his heir. Dr. West wondered also, and said so to Mr. Verner, but Mr. Verner made no reply."

"Mr. Verner has just told me that neither the Massingbirds nor Mrs. Verner knew anything of the fresh will. I understood him to imply that no person whatever was cognisant of it but himself and you."

"And Dr. West. Nobody else."

"And he gave *no* reason for the alteration—either to you or to Dr. West?"

"None at all. Beyond the assertion that Lionel had displeased him. Dr. West would have pressed him upon the point, but Mr. Verner repulsed him with coldness. He insisted upon our secrecy as to the new will; which we promised, and I dare say have never violated. I know I can answer for myself."

They hastened back to Verner's Pride. And the lawyer, in the presence of Mr. Bitterworth, received instructions for a codicil, revoking the bequest of the estate to the Massingbirds, and bestowing it absolutely upon Lionel Verner. The bequests to others, legacies, instructions in the former will, were all to stand. It was a somewhat elaborate will; hence Mr. Verner suggested that that will, so far, could still stand, and the necessary alteration be made by a codicil.

"You can have it ready by this evening?" Mr. Verner remarked to the lawyer.

"Before then, if you like, sir. It won't take me long to draw that up. One's pen goes glibly when one's heart is in the work. I am glad you are willing it back to Mr. Lionel."

"Draw it up then, and bring it here as soon as it's ready. You won't find me gone out," Mr. Verner added, with a faint attempt at jocularly.

The lawyer did as he was bid, and returned to Verner's Pride about five o'clock in the afternoon. He found Dr. West there. It was somewhat singular that the doctor should again be present, as he had been at the previous signing. And yet not singular, for he was now in frequent attendance on the patient.

"How do you feel yourself this afternoon, sir?" asked Mr. Matiss, when he entered, his greatcoat buttoned up, his hat in his hand, his gloves on; showing no signs that he had any professional document about him, or that he had called in for any earthly reason, save to inquire in politeness after the state of the chief of Verner's Pride.

"Pretty well, Matiss. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll do it at once, then. Dr. West," Mr. Verner added, turning to the doctor, "I have been making an alteration in my will. You were one of the former witnesses; will you be so again?"

"With pleasure. An alteration consequent upon the death of John Massingbird, I presume?"

"No. I should have made it, had he been still alive. Verner's Pride must go to Lionel. I cannot die easy unless it does."

"But—I thought you said Lionel had done—had done something to forfeit it?" interrupted Dr. West, whom the words appeared to have taken by surprise.

"To forfeit my esteem and good opinion. Those he can never enjoy again. But I doubt whether I have a right to deprive him of Verner's Pride. I begin to think I have not. I believe that the world generally will think I have not. It may be that a Higher Power, to whom alone I am responsible, will judge I have not. There's no denying that he will make a more fitting master of it than would Frederick Massingbird; and for myself I shall die the easier knowing that a Verner will succeed me. Mr. Matiss, be so kind as read over the deed."

The lawyer produced a parchment from one of his ample pockets, unfolded, and proceeded to read it aloud. It was the codicil, drawn up with all due form, bequeathing Verner's Pride to Lionel Verner. It was short, and he read it in a clear, distinct voice.

"Will you like to sign it, sir?" he asked, as he laid it down.

"When I have read it for myself," replied Mr. Verner.

The lawyer smiled as he handed it to him. All his clients were not so cautious. Some might have said, "so mistrustful."

Mr. Verner found the codicil all right, and the bell was rung for Tynn. Mrs. Tynn happened to come in at the same moment. She was retreating when she saw business a-gate, but her master spoke to her.

"You need not go, Mrs. Tynn. Bring a pen and ink here."

So the housekeeper remained present while the deed was executed. Mr. Verner signed it, proclaiming it his last will and testament, and Dr. West and Tynn affixed their signatures. The lawyer and Mrs. Tynn stood looking on.

Mr. Verner folded it up with his own hands, and sealed it.

"Bring me my desk," he said, looking at Mrs. Tynn.

The desk was kept in a closet in the room, and she brought it forth. Mr. Verner locked the parchment within it.

"You will remember where it is," he said, touching the desk, and looking at the lawyer. "The will is also here."

Mrs. Tynn carried the desk back again; and Dr. West and the lawyer left the house together.

Later, when Mr. Verner was in bed, he spoke to Lionel, who was sitting with him.

"You will give heed to carry out my directions, Lionel, so far as I have left directions, after you come into power."

"I will, sir," replied Lionel, never having had the faintest suspicion that he had been near losing his inheritance.

"And be more active abroad than I have been. I have left too much to Roy and others. You are young and strong; don't you leave it to them. Look into things with your own eyes."

"Indeed I will. My dear uncle," he added, bending over the bed, and speaking in an earnest tone, "I will endeavour to act in all things as though in your sight, accountable to God and my own conscience. Verner's Pride shall have no unworthy master."

"Try to live so as to redeem the past."

"Yes," said Lionel. He did not see what precise part of it he had to redeem, but he was earnestly anxious to defer to the words of a dying man. "Uncle, may I dare to say that I hope you will live yet?" he gently said.

"It is of no use, Lionel. The world is closing for me."

It was closing for him even then, as he spoke—closing rapidly. Before another afternoon had come round, the master of Verner's Pride had quitted that, and all other pride, for ever.

CHAPTER XVII. DISAPPEARED

Sweeping down from Verner's Pride towards the church at Deerham came the long funeral train—mutes with their plumes and batons, relays of bearers, the bier. It had been Mr. Verner's express desire that he should be carried to the grave, that no hearse or coaches should be used.

"Bury me quietly; bury me without show," had been his charge. And yet a show it was, that procession, if only from its length. Close to the coffin walked the heir, Lionel; Jan and Dr. West came next; Mr. Bitterworth and Sir Rufus Hautley. Other gentlemen were there, followers or pall-bearers; the tenants followed; the servants came last. A long, long line, slow and black; and spectators gathered on the side of the road, underneath the hedges, and in the upper windows at Deerham, to see it pass. The under windows were closed.

A brave heir, a brave master of Verner's Pride! was the universal thought, as eyes were turned on Lionel, on his tall, noble form, his pale face stilled to calmness, his dark hair. He chose to walk bare-headed, his hat, with its sweeping streamers, borne in his hand. When handed to him in the hall he had not put it on, but went out as he was, carrying it. The rest, those behind him, did not follow his example; they assumed their hats; but Lionel was probably unconscious of it, probably he never gave it a thought.

At the churchyard entrance they were met by the Vicar of Deerham, the Reverend James Bourne. All hats came off then, as his voice rose, commencing the service. Nearly one of the last walked old Matthew Frost. He had not gone to Verner's Pride, the walk so far was beyond him now, but fell in at the churchyard gate. The fine, upright, hale man whom you saw at the commencement of this history had changed into a bowed, broken mourner. Rachel's fate had done that. On the right as they moved up the churchyard, was the mound which covered the remains of Rachel. Old Matthew did not look towards it; as he passed it he only bent his head the lower. But many others turned their heads; they remembered her that day.

In the middle of the church, open now, dark and staring, was the vault of the Verners. There lay already within it Stephen Verner's father, his first wife, and the little child Rachel, Rachel Frost's foster-sister. A grand grave this, compared to that lowly mound outside; there was a grand descriptive tablet on the walls to the Verners; while the mound was nameless. By the side of the large tablet was a smaller one, placed there to the memory of the brave Sir Lionel Verner, who had fallen near Moulton. Lionel involuntarily glanced up at it, as he stood now over the vault, and a wish came across him that his father's remains were here, amidst them, instead of in that far-off grave.

The service was soon over, and Stephen Verner was left in his resting-place. Then the procession, shorn of its chief and prominent features, went back to Verner's Pride. Lionel wore his hat this time.

In the large drawing-room of state, in her mourning robes and widow's cap, sat Mrs. Verner. She had not been out of her chamber, until within the last ten minutes, since before Mr. Verner's death; scarcely out of her bed. As they passed into the room—the lawyer, Dr. West, Jan, Mr. Bitterworth, and Sir Rufus Hautley—they thought how Mrs. Verner had changed, and how ill she looked; not that her florid complexion was any paler. She had, indeed, changed since the news of John Massingbird's death; and some of them believed that she would not be very long after Mr. Verner.

They had assembled there for the purpose of hearing the will read. The desk of Mr. Verner was brought forward and laid upon the table. Lionel, taking his late uncle's keys from his pocket, unlocked it, and delivered a parchment which it contained to Mr. Matiss. The lawyer saw at a glance that it was the old will, not the codicil, and he waited for Lionel to hand him also the latter.

"Be so kind as read it, Mr. Matiss," said Lionel, pointing to the will.

It had to be read; and it was of no consequence whether the codicil was taken from the desk before reading the original will, or afterwards, so Mr. Matiss unfolded it, and began.

It was a somewhat elaborate will—which has been previously hinted. Verner's Pride, with its rich lands, its fine income, was left to John Massingbird; in the event of John's death, childless, it went to Frederick; in the event of Frederick's death, childless, it passed to Lionel Verner. There the conditions ended; so that, if it did lapse to Lionel, it lapsed to him absolutely. But it would appear that the contingency of both the Massingbirds dying had been only barely glanced at by Mr. Verner. Five hundred pounds were left to Lionel: five hundred to Jan; five hundred to Decima; nothing to Lady Verner. Mrs. Verner was suitably provided for, and there were bequests to servants. Twenty-five pounds for "a mourning ring" were bequeathed to each of the two executors, Sir Rufus Hautley, and Mr. Bitterworth; and old Matthew Frost had forty pounds a year for his life. Such were the chief features of the will; and the utter astonishment it produced on the minds and countenances of some of the listeners was a sight to witness. Lionel, Mrs. Verner, Jan, and Sir Rufus Hautley were petrified.

Sir Rufus rose. He was a thin, stately man, always dressed in hessian boots and the old-fashioned shirt-frill. A proud, impassive countenance was his, but it darkened now. "I will not act," he began. "I beg to state my opinion that the will is an unfair one—"

"I beg your pardon, Sir Rufus," interrupted the lawyer. "Allow me a word. This is not the final will of Mr. Verner; much of it has been revoked by a recent codicil. Verner's Pride comes to Mr. Lionel. You will find the codicil in the desk, sir," he added to Lionel.

Lionel, his pale face haughty, and quite as impassive as that of Sir Rufus, for anything like injustice angered him, opened the desk again. "I was not aware," he observed. "My uncle told me on the day of his death that the will would be found in his desk; I supposed that to be it."

"It is the will," said Mr. Matiss. "But he caused me to draw up a later codicil, which revoked the bequest of Verner's Pride. It is left to you absolutely."

Lionel was searching in the desk. The few papers in it appeared to be arranged with the most methodical neatness: but they were small, chiefly old letters. "I don't see anything like a codicil," he observed. "You had better look yourself, Mr. Matiss; you will probably recognise it."

Mr. Matiss advanced to the desk and looked in it. "It is not here!" he exclaimed.

Not there! They gazed at him, at the desk, at Lionel, half puzzled. The lawyer, with rapid fingers, began taking out the papers one by one.

"No, it is not here, in either compartment. I saw it was not, the moment I looked in; but it was well to be sure. Where has it been put?"

"I really do not know anything about it," answered Lionel, to whom he looked as he spoke. "My uncle told me the will would be found in his desk. And the desk has not been opened since his death."

"Could Mr. Verner himself have changed its place to somewhere else?" asked the lawyer, speaking with more than usual quickness, and turning over the papers with great rapidity.

"Not after he told me where the will was. He did not touch the desk after that. It was but just before his death. So far as I know, he had not had his desk brought out of the closet for days."

"Yes, he had," said the lawyer. "After he had executed the codicil on the evening previous to his death, he called for his desk, and put the parchment into it. It lay on the top of the will—this one. I saw that much."

"I can testify that the codicil was locked in the desk, and the desk was then returned to the closet, for I happened to be present," spoke up Dr. West. "I was one of the witnesses to the codicil, as I had been to the will. Mr. Verner must have moved it himself to some safer place."

"What place could be safer than the desk in his own bedroom?" cried the lawyer. "And why move the codicil and not the will?"

"True," assented Dr. West. "But—I don't see—it could not go out of the desk without being moved out. And who would presume to meddle with it but himself? Who took possession of his keys when he died?" added the doctor, looking round at Mrs. Verner.

"I did," said Lionel. "And they have not been out of my possession since. Nothing whatever has been touched; desk, drawers, every place belonging to him are as they were left when he died."

Of course the only thing to do was to look for the codicil. Great interest was excited; and it appeared to be altogether so mysterious an affair that one and all flocked upstairs to the room; the room where he had died! whence the coffin had but just been borne. Mrs. Tynn was summoned; and when she found what was amiss, she grew excited; fearing, possibly, that the blame might in some way fall upon her. Saving Lionel himself, she was the only one who had been alone with Mr. Verner; of course, the only one who could have had an opportunity of tampering with the desk. And that, only when the patient slept.

"I protest that the desk was never touched, after I returned it to the closet by my master's desire, when the parchment was put into it!" she cried. "My master never asked for his desk again, and I never so much as opened the closet. It was only the afternoon before he died, gentlemen, that the deed was signed."

"Where did he keep his keys?" asked Mr. Bitterworth.

"In the little table-drawer at his elbow, sir. The first day he took to his bed, he wanted his keys, and I got them out of his dressing-gown pocket for him. 'You needn't put them back,' he says to me; 'let them stop inside this little drawer.' And there they stayed till he died, when I gave them up to Mr. Lionel."

"You must have allowed somebody to get into the room, Mrs. Tynn," said Dr. West.

"I never was away from the room above two minutes at a time, sir," was the woman's reply, "and then either Mr. Lionel or Tynn would be with him. But, if any of 'em did come in, it's not possible they'd get picking at the master's desk to take out a paper. What good would the paper do any of the servants?"

Mrs. Tynn's question was a pertinent one. The servants were neither the better nor the worse for the codicil; whether it were forthcoming, or not, it made no difference to them. Sir Rufus Hautley inquired upon this point, and the lawyer satisfied him.

"The codicil was to this effect alone," he explained. "It changed the positions of Mr. Lionel and Mr. John Massingbird, the one for the other, as they had stood in the will. Mr. Lionel came into the inheritance, and Mr. Frederick Massingbird to five hundred pounds only. Mr. John was gone—as everybody knows."

"These two, Mr. Lionel and Frederick Massingbird, were the only parties interested in the codicil, then?"

"The only two. John Massingbird's name was mentioned, but only to revoke all former bequests to him."

"Then—were John Massingbird alive, he could not now succeed to the estate!" cried Sir Rufus.

"He could not, Sir Rufus," replied the lawyer. "He would be debarred from all benefit under Mr. Verner's will. That is, provided we can come across the codicil. Failing that, he would succeed were he in life, to Verner's Pride."

"The codicil *must* be found," cried Mr. Bitterworth, getting heated. "Don't say, 'if we can come across it,' Matiss."

"Very good, Mr. Bitterworth. I'm sure I should be glad to see it found. Where else are we to look?"

Where else, indeed! That Mr. Verner could not get out of the room to hide the codicil was an indisputable fact; and nobody else seemed to know anything whatever about it. The only one personally interested in the suppression of the codicil was Frederick Massingbird; and he, hundreds of miles away, could neither have secured it nor sent his ghost to secure it. In a less degree, Mrs. Verner and Dr. West were interested; the one in her son, the other in that son's wife. But the doctor was not an inmate of Verner's Pride; and Mrs. Tynn could have testified that she had been present in the room and never left it during each of the doctor's professional visits, subsequent to the drawing out of

the codicil. As for Mrs. Verner, she had not been out of her bed. Mr. Verner, at the last, had gone off suddenly, without pain, and there had been no time to call his wife. Mrs. Tynn excused the negligence by saying she did not think her master had been quite so near his end; and it was a true excuse. But no one dreamed of attaching suspicion to Mrs. Verner, or to Dr. West. "I'd rather it had been Lionel to succeed than Frederick," spoke the former, honestly, some faint idea that people might think she was pleased suggesting the avowal to her. "Lionel has more right than Fred to Verner's Pride."

"More right!" ejaculated Dr. West warmly. "Frederick Massingbird has *no* right, by the side of Lionel Verner. Why Mr. Verner ever willed it away from Lionel we could not understand."

"Fred needn't take it—even if the codicil can't be found—he can give it back to Lionel by deed of gift," said practical Jan. "*I* should."

"That my master meant Mr. Lionel to succeed, is certain," interposed Tynn, the butler. "Nearly the last word he said to me, before the breath went out of his body, was an injunction to serve Mr. Lionel faithfully at Verner's Pride, as I had served him. There can be no difficulty in Mr. Lionel's succeeding, when my master's intentions were made so plain."

"Be quiet, Tynn," said Lionel. "I succeed by means of legal right to Verner's Pride, or I will not succeed at all."

"That's true," acquiesced the lawyer. "A will is a will, and must be acted upon. How on earth has that codicil got spirited away?"

How indeed! But for the plain fact, so positive and palpable before them, of the codicil's absence, they would have declared the loss to be an impossibility. Upstairs and down, the house was vainly searched for it; and the conclusion was at length unwillingly come to that Mr. Verner had repented of his bequest, had taken the codicil out of the desk, and burned it. The suggestion came from Mr. Bitterworth; and Mrs. Tynn acknowledged that it was just possible Mr. Verner's strength would allow him to accomplish so much, while her back was turned. And yet, how reconcile this with his dying charges to Lionel, touching the management of the estate?

The broad fact that there was the will, and that alone to act upon, untempered by a codicil, shone out all too clearly. Lionel Verner was displaced, and Frederick Massingbird was the heir.

Oh, if some impossible electric telegraph could but have carried the news over the waves of the sea, to the ship ploughing along the mid-path of the ocean; if the two fugitives in her could but have been spirited back again, as the codicil seemed to have been spirited away, how triumphantly would they have entered upon their sway at Verner's Pride.

CHAPTER XVIII. PERPLEXITY

It was a terrible blow; there was no doubt of that; very terrible to Lionel Verner, so proud and sensitive. Do not take the word proud in its wrong meaning. He did not set himself up for being better than others, or think everybody else dirt beneath his feet; but he was proud of his independence, of his unstained name—he was proud to own that fine place, Verner's Pride. And now Verner's Pride was dashed from him, and his independence seemed to have gone out with the blow, and a slight seemed to have fallen upon him, if not upon his name.

He had surely counted upon Verner's Pride. He had believed himself as indisputably its heir, as though he had been Stephen Verner's eldest son, and the estate entailed. Never for a moment had a doubt that he would succeed entered his own mind, or been imparted to it from any quarter. In the week that intervened between Mr. Verner's death and burial, he had acted as entire master. It was he who issued orders—from himself now, not from any other—it was he who was appealed to. People, of their own accord, began to call him Mr. Verner. Very peremptory indeed had been a certain interview of his with Roy the bailiff. Not, as formerly, had he said, "Roy, my uncle desires me to say so and so;" or, "Roy, you must not act in that way, it would displease Mr. Verner;" but he issued his own clear and unmistakable orders, as the sole master of Verner's Pride. He and Roy all but came to loggerheads that day; and they would have come quite to it, but that Roy remembered in time that he, before whom he stood, was his head and master—his master to keep him on, or to discharge him at pleasure, and who would brook no more insubordination to his will. So Roy bowed, and ate humble pie, and hated Lionel all the while. Lionel had seen this; he had seen how the man longed to rebel, had he dared: and now a flush of pain rose to his brow as he remembered that in that interview he had *not* been the master; that he was less master now than he had ever been. Roy would likewise remember it.

Mr. Bitterworth took Lionel aside. Sir Rufus Hautley had gone out after the blow had fallen, when the codicil had been searched for in vain, had gone out in anger, shaking the dust from his feet, declining to act as executor, to accept the mourning-ring, to have to do with anything so palpably unjust. The rest lingered yet. It seemed that they could not talk enough of it, could not tire of bringing forth new conjectures, could not give vent to all the phases of their astonishment.

"What could have been your offence, that your uncle should alter his will, two years ago, and leave the estate from you?" Mr. Bitterworth inquired of Lionel, drawing him aside.

"I am unable to conjecture," replied Lionel. "I find by the date of this will that it was made the week subsequent to my departure for Paris, when Jan met with the accident. He was not displeased with me then, so far as I knew—"

"Did you go to Paris in opposition to his wish?" interrupted Mr. Bitterworth.

"On the contrary, he hurried me off. When the news of Jan's accident arrived, and I went to my uncle with the message, he said to me—I remember his very words—'Go off at once; don't lose an instant,' and he handed me money for the journey and for my stay; for Jan, also, should any great expense be needed for him; and in an hour I was away on my route. I stayed six months in Paris, as you may remember—the latter portion of the time for my own pleasure. When I did return home, I was perfectly thunderstruck at the change in my uncle's appearance, and at the change in his manners to me. He was a bowed, broken man, with—as it seemed to me—some care upon his mind; and that I had offended him in some very unfortunate way, and to a great extent, was palpable. I never could get any solution to it, though I asked him repeatedly. I do not know, to this hour, what I had done. Sometimes I thought he was angry at my remaining so long away; but, if so, he might have given me a hint to return, or have suffered some one else to give it, for he never wrote to me."

"Never wrote to you?" repeated Mr. Bitterworth.

"Not once, the whole of the time I was away. I wrote to him often; but if he had occasion to send me a message, Mrs. Verner or Fred Massingbird would write it. Of course, this will, disinheriting me, proves that my staying away could not have been the cause of displeasure—it is dated only the week after I went."

"Whatever may have been the cause, it is a grievous wrong inflicted on you. He was my dear friend, and we have but now returned from laying him in his grave, but still I must speak out my sentiments—that he had *no right* to deprive you of Verner's Pride."

Lionel knit his brow. That he thought the same; that he was feeling the injustice as a crying and unmerited wrong, was but too evident. Mr. Bitterworth had bent his head in a reverie, stealing a glance at Lionel now and then.

"Is there nothing that you can charge your conscience with; no sin, which may have come to the knowledge of your uncle, and been deemed by him a just cause for disinheritance?" questioned Mr. Bitterworth, in a meaning tone.

"There is nothing, so help me Heaven!" replied Lionel, with emotion. "No sin, no shame; nothing that could be a cause, or the shade of a cause—I will not say for depriving me of Verner's Pride, but even for my uncle's displeasure."

"It struck me—you will not be offended with me, Lionel, if I mention something that struck me a week back," resumed Mr. Bitterworth. "I am a foolish old man, given to ponder much over cause and effect—to put two and two together, as we call it; and the day I first heard from your uncle that he had had good cause—it was what he said—for depriving you of Verner's Pride, I went home, and set myself to think. The will had been made just after John Massingbird's departure for Australia. I brought before me all the events which had occurred about that same time, and there rose up naturally, towering above every other reminiscence, the unhappy business touching Rachel Frost. Lionel"—laying his hand on the young man's shoulder and dropping his voice to a whisper—"did *you* lead the girl astray?"

Lionel drew himself up to his full height, his lip curling with displeasure.

"Mr. Bitterworth!"

"To suspect you never would have occurred to me. I do not suspect you now. Were you to tell me that you were guilty of it, I should have difficulty in believing you. But it did occur to me that possibly your uncle may have cast that blame on you. I saw no other solution of the riddle. It could have been no light cause to induce Mr. Verner to deprive you of Verner's Pride. He was not a capricious man."

"It is impossible that my uncle could have cast a shade of suspicion on me, in regard to that affair," said Lionel. "He knew me better. At the moment of its occurrence, when nobody could tell whom to suspect, I remember a word or two were dropped which caused me to assure him *I* was not the guilty party, and he stopped me. He would not allow me even to speak of defence; he said he cast no suspicion on me."

"Well, it is a great mystery," said Mr. Bitterworth. "You must excuse me, Lionel. I thought Mr. Verner might in some way have taken up the notion. Evil tales, which have no human foundation, are sometimes palmed upon credulous ears for fact, and do their work."

"Were it as you suggest, my uncle would have spoken to me, had it been only to reproach," said Lionel. "It is a mystery, certainly, as you observe; but that is nothing to this mystery of the disappearance of the codicil—"

"I am going, Lionel," interrupted Jan, putting his head round the room door.

"I must go, too," said Lionel, starting from the sideboard against which he had been leaning. "My mother must hear of this business from no one but me."

Verner's Pride emptied itself of its mourners, who betook themselves their respective ways. Lionel, taking the long crape from his hat, and leaving on its deep mourning band alone, walked with a quick step through the village. He would not have *chosen* to be abroad that day, walking the very

route where he had just figured chief in the procession, but to go without delay to Lady Verner was a duty. And a duty was never willingly omitted by Lionel Verner.

CHAPTER XIX. THE REVELATION TO LADY VERNER

In the drawing-room at Deerham Court, in their new black dresses, sat Lady Verner and Decima; Lucy Tempest with them. Lady Verner held out her hand to Lionel when he entered, and lifted her face, a strange eagerness visible in its refinement.

"I thought you would come to me, Lionel!" she uttered. "I want to know a hundred things.—Decima, have the goodness to direct your reproachful looks elsewhere; not to me. Why should I be a hypocrite, and feign a sorrow for Stephen Verner which I do not feel? I know it is his burial-day as well as you know it; but I will not make that a reason for abstaining from questions on family topics, although they do relate to money and means that were once his. I say it would be hypocritical affectation to do so. Lionel," she deliberately continued, "has Jan an interest in Verner's Pride after you, or is it left to you unconditionally? And what residence is appointed for Mrs. Verner?"

Lionel leaned over the table, apparently to reach something that was lying on it, contriving to bring his lips close to Decima. "Go out of the room, and take Lucy," he whispered.

Decima received the hint promptly. She rose as of her own accord. "Lucy, let us leave mamma and Lionel alone. We will come back when your secrets are over," she added, turning round with a smile as she left the room, drawing Lucy with her.

"You don't speak, Lionel," impatiently cried Lady Verner. In truth he did not; he did not know how to begin. He rose, and approached her.

"Mother, can you bear disappointment?" he asked, taking her hand, and speaking gently, in spite of his agitation.

"Hush!" interrupted Lady Verner. "If you speak of 'disappointment' to me, you are no true son of mine. You are going to tell me that Stephen Verner has left nothing to me. Let me tell you, Lionel, that I would not have accepted it—and this I made known to him. Accept money from *him*! No. But I will accept it from my dear son,"—looking at him with a smile—"now that he enjoys the revenues of Verner's Pride."

"It was not with money left, or not left, to you, that I was connecting disappointment," answered Lionel. "There is a worse disappointment in store for us than that, mother."

"A worse disappointment!" repeated Lady Verner, looking puzzled. "You are never to be saddled with the presence of Mrs. Verner at Verner's Pride, until her death!" she hastily added. A great disappointment, that would have been; a grievous wrong, in the estimation of Lady Verner.

"Mother, dear, Verner's Pride is not mine."

"Not yours!" she slowly said. "He *surely* has not done as his father did before him?—left it to the younger brother, over the head of the elder? He has never left it to Jan!"

"Neither to Jan nor to me. It is left to Frederick Massingbird. John would have had it, had he been alive."

Lady Verner's delicate features became crimson; before she could speak, they had assumed a leaden colour. "Don't play with me, Lionel," she gasped, an awful fear thumping at her heart that he was *not* playing with her. "It cannot be left to the Massingbirds!"

He sat down by her side, and gave her the history of the matter in detail. Lady Verner caught at the codicil, as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"How could you terrify me?" she asked. "Verner's Pride is yours, Lionel. The codicil must be found."

"The conviction upon my mind is that it never will be found," he resolutely answered. "Whoever took that codicil from the desk where it was placed, could have had but one motive in doing it—the depriving me of Verner's Pride. Rely upon it, it is effectually removed ere this, by burning, or

otherwise. No. I already look upon the codicil as a thing that never existed. Verner's Pride is gone from us."

"But, Lionel, whom do you suspect? Who can have taken it? It is pretty nearly a hanging matter to steal a will!"

"I do not suspect any one," he emphatically answered. "Mrs. Tynn protests that no one could have approached the desk unseen by her. It is very unlikely that any one could have burnt it. They must, first of all, have chosen a moment when my uncle was asleep; they must have got Mrs. Tynn from the room; they must have searched for and found the keys; they must have unlocked the desk, taken the codicil, relocked the desk, and replaced the keys. All this could not be done without time, and familiarity with facts. Not a servant in the house—save the Tynns—knew the codicil was there, and they did not know its purport. But the Tynns are thoroughly trustworthy."

"It must have been Mrs. Verner—"

"Hush, mother! I cannot listen to that, even from you. Mrs. Verner was in her bed—never out of it; she knew nothing whatever of the codicil. And, if she had, you will, I hope, do her the justice to believe that she would be incapable of meddling with it."

"She benefits by its loss, at any rate," bitterly rejoined Lady Verner.

"Her son does. But that he does was entirely unknown to her. She never knew that Mr. Verner had willed the estate away from me; she never dreamed but that I, and no other, would be his successor. The accession of Frederick Massingbird is unwelcome to her, rather than the contrary; he has no right to it, and she feels that he has not. In the impulse of the surprise, she said aloud that she wished it had been left to me; and I am sure these were her true sentiments."

Lady Verner sat in silence, her white hands crossed on her black dress, her head bent down. Presently she lifted it—

"I do not fully understand you, Lionel. You appear to imply that—according to your belief—no one has touched the codicil. How, then, can it have got out of the desk?"

"There is only one solution. It was suggested by Mr. Bitterworth; and, though I refused credence to it when he spoke, it has since been gaining upon my mind. He thinks my uncle must have repented of the codicil after it was made, and himself destroyed it. I should give full belief to this were it not that at the very last he spoke to me as the successor to Verner's Pride."

"Why did he will it from you at all?" asked Lady Verner.

"I know not. I have told you how estranged his manner has been to me for the last year or two; but wherefore, or what I had done to displease him, I cannot think or imagine."

"He had no right to will away the estate from you," vehemently rejoined Lady Verner. "Was it not enough that he usurped your father's birth-right, as Jacob usurped Esau's, keeping you out of it for years and years, but he must now deprive you of it for ever? Had you been dead—had there been any urgent reason why you should not succeed—Jan should have come in. Jan is the lawful heir, failing you. Mark me, Lionel, it will bring no good to Frederick Massingbird. Rights, violently diverted out of their course, can bring only wrong and confusion."

"It would be scarcely fair were it to bring him ill," spoke Lionel, in his strict justice. "Frederick has had nothing to do with my uncle's bequeathing the estate to him."

"Nonsense, Lionel! you cannot make me believe that no cajolery has been at work from some quarter or other," peevishly answered Lady Verner. "Tell the facts to an impartial person—a stranger. They were always about him—his wife and those Massingbirds—and at the last moment it is discovered that he has left all to them, and disinherited you."

"Mother, you are mistaken. What my uncle has done, he has done of his own will alone, unbiassed by others; nay, unknown to others. He distinctly stated this to Matiss, when the change was made. No, although I am a sufferer, and they benefit, I cannot throw a shade of the wrong upon Mrs. Verner and the Massingbirds."

"I will tell you what I cannot do—and that is to accept your view of the disappearance of the codicil," said Lady Verner. "It does not stand to reason that your uncle would cause a codicil to be made, with all the haste and parade you speak of, only to destroy it afterwards. Depend upon it, you are wrong. He never took it."

"It does appear unlikely," acquiesced Lionel, after some moments of deliberation. "It was not likely, either, that he would destroy it in secret; he would have done it openly. And still less likely, that he would have addressed me as his successor in dying, and given me charges as to the management of the estate, had he left it away from me."

"No, no; no, no!" emphatically returned Lady Verner. "That codicil has been *stolen*, Lionel."

"But, by whom?" he debated. "There's not a servant in the house would do it; and there was no other inmate of it, save myself. This is my chief difficulty. Were it not for the total absence of all other suspicion, I should not for a moment entertain the thought that it could have been my uncle. Let us leave the subject, mother. It seems to be an unprofitable one, and my head is weary."

"Are you going to give the codicil tamely up for a bad job, without further search?" asked Lady Verner. "That I should live—that I should *live* to see Sibylla West's children inherit Verner's Pride!" she passionately added.

Sibylla West's children! Lionel had enough pain at his heart, just then, without that shaft. A piercing shaft truly, and it dyed his brow fiery red.

"We have searched already in every likely or possible place that we can think of; to-morrow morning, places unlikely and impossible will be searched," he said, in answer to his mother's question. "I shall be aided by the police; our searching is nothing compared with what they can do. They go about it artistically, perfected by practice."

"And—if the result should be a failure?"

"It will be a failure," spoke Lionel, in his firm conviction. "In which case I bid adieu to Verner's Pride."

"And come home here; will you not, Lionel?"

"For the present. And now, mother, that I have told you the ill news, and spoiled your rest, I must go back again."

Spoiled her rest! Ay, for many a day and night to come. Lionel disinherited! Verner's Pride gone from them for ever! A cry went forth from Lady Verner's heart. It had been the moment of hope which she had looked forward to for years; and, now that it was come, what had it brought?

"My own troubles make me selfish," said Lionel, turning back when he was half out at the door. "I forgot to tell you that Jan and Decima inherit five hundred pounds each."

"Five hundred pounds!" slightly returned Lady Verner. "It is but of at piece with the rest."

He did not add that he had five hundred also, failing the estate. It would have seemed worse mockery still.

Looking out at the door, opposite to the ante-room, on the other side of the hall, was Decima. She had heard his step, and came to beckon him in. It was the dining-parlour, but a pretty room still; for Lady Verner would have nothing about her inelegant or ugly, if she could help it. Lucy Tempest, in her favourite school attitude, was half-kneeling, half-sitting on the rug before the fire; but she rose when Lionel came in.

Decima entwined her arm within his, and led him up to the fire-place. "Did you bring mamma bad news?" she asked. "I thought I read it in your countenance."

"Very bad, Decima. Or I should not have sent you away while I told it."

"I suppose there's nothing left for mamma, or for Jan?"

"Mamma did not expect anything left for her, Decima. Don't go away, Lucy," he added, arresting Lucy Tempest, who, with good taste, was leaving them alone. "Stay and hear how poor I am; all Deerham knows it by this time."

Lucy remained. Decima, her beautiful features a shade paler than usual, turned her serene eyes on Lionel. She little thought what was coming.

"Verner's Pride is left away from me, Decima."

"Left away from you! From *you*?"

"Frederick Massingbird inherits. I am passed over."

"Oh, Lionel!" The words were not uttered angrily, passionately, as Lady Verner's had been; but in a low, quiet voice, wrung from her, seemingly, by intense inward pain.

"And so there will be some additional trouble for you in the housekeeping line," went on Lionel, speaking gaily, and ignoring all the pain at *his* heart. "Turned out of Verner's Pride, I must come to you here—at least, for a time. What shall you say to that, Miss Lucy?"

Lucy was looking up at him gravely, not smiling in the least. "Is it true that you have lost Verner's Pride?" she asked.

"Quite true."

"But I thought it was yours—after Mr. Verner."

"I thought so too, until to-day," replied Lionel. "It ought to have been mine."

"What shall you do without it?"

"What, indeed!" he answered. "From being a landed country gentleman—as people have imagined me—I go down to a poor fellow who must work for his bread and cheese before he eats it. Your eyes are laughing, Miss Lucy, but it is true."

"Bread and cheese costs nothing," said she.

"No? And the plate you put it on, and the knife you eat it with, and the glass of beer to help it go down, and the coat you wear during the repast, and the room it's served in?—they cost something, Miss Lucy."

Lucy laughed. "I think you will always have enough bread and cheese," said she. "You look as though you would."

Decima turned to them. She had stood buried in a reverie, until the light tone of Lionel aroused her from it. "*Which* is real, Lionel? This joking, or that you have lost Verner's Pride?"

"Both," he answered. "I am disinherited from Verner's Pride; better perhaps that I should joke over it, than cry."

"What will mamma do? What will mamma do?" breathed Decima. "She has so counted upon it. And what will you do, Lionel?"

"Decima!" came forth at this moment from the opposite room, in the imperative voice of Lady Verner.

Decima turned in obedience to it, her step less light than usual. Lucy addressed Lionel.

"One day at the rectory there came a gipsy woman, wanting to tell our fortunes; she accosted us in the garden. Mr. Cust sent her away, and she was angry, and told him his star was not in the ascendant. I think it must be the case at present with your star, Mr. Verner."

Lionel smiled. "Yes, indeed."

"It is not only one thing that you are losing; it is more. First, that pretty girl whom you loved; then, Mr. Verner; and now, Verner's Pride. I wish I knew how to comfort you."

Lucy Tempest spoke with the most open simplicity, exactly as a sister might have done. But the one allusion grated on Lionel's heart.

"You are very kind, Lucy. Good-bye. Tell Decima I shall see her some time to-morrow."

Lucy Tempest looked after him from the window as he paced the inclosed courtyard. "I cannot think how people can be unjust!" was her thought. "If Verner's Pride was rightly his, why have they taken it from him?"

CHAPTER XX. DRY WORK

Certainly Lionel Verner's star was not in the ascendant—though Lucy Tempest had used the words in jest. His love gone from him; his fortune and position wrested from him; all become the adjuncts of one man, Frederick Massingbird. Serenely, to outward appearance, as Lionel had met the one blow, so did he now meet the other; and none, looking on his calm bearing, could suspect what the loss was to him. But it is the silent sorrow that eats into the heart; the loud grief does not tell upon it.

An official search had been made; but no trace could be found of the missing codicil. Lionel had not expected that it would be found. He regarded it as a deed which had never had existence, and took up his abode with his mother. The village could not believe it; the neighbourhood resented it. People stood in groups to talk it over. It did certainly appear to be a most singular and almost incredible thing, that, in the enlightened days of the latter half of the nineteenth century, an official deed should disappear out of a gentleman's desk, in his own well-guarded residence, in his habited chamber. Conjectures and thoughts were freely bandied about; while Dr. West and Jan grew nearly tired of the particulars demanded of them in their professional visits, for their patients would talk of nothing else.

The first visible effect that the disappointment had, was to stretch Lady Verner on a sick-bed. She fell into a low, nervous state of prostration, and her irritability—it must be confessed—was great. But for this illness, Lionel would have been away. Thrown now upon his own resources, he looked steadily into the future, and strove to chalk out a career for himself; one by which—as he had said to Lucy Tempest—he might earn bread and cheese. Of course, at Lionel Verner's age, and reared to no profession, unfamiliar with habits of business, that was easier thought of than done. He had no particular talent for literature; he believed that, if he tried his hand at that, the bread might come, but the cheese would be doubtful—although he saw men, with even less aptitude for it than he, turning to it and embracing it with all the confidence in the world, as if it were an ever-open resource for all, when other trades failed. There were the three professions; but were they available? Lionel felt no inclination to become a working drudge like poor Jan; and the Church, for which he had not any liking, he was by far too conscientious to embrace only as a means of living. There remained the Bar; and to that he turned his attention, and resolved to qualify himself for it. That there would be grinding, and drudgery, and hard work, and no pay for years, he knew; but, so there might be, go to what he would. The Bar did hold out a chance of success, and there was nothing in it derogatory to the notions in which he had been reared—those of a gentleman.

Jan came to him one day about the time of the decision, and Lionel told him that he should soon be away; that he intended to enter himself at the Middle Temple, and take chambers.

"Law!" said Jan. "Why, you'll be forty, maybe, before you ever get a brief. You should have entered earlier."

"Yes. But how was I to know that things would turn out like this?"

"Look here," said Jan, tilting himself in a very uncomfortable fashion on the high back of an arm-chair, "there's that five hundred pounds. You can have that."

"What five hundred pounds?" asked Lionel.

"The five hundred that Uncle Stephen left me. I don't want it. Old West gives me as much as keeps me in clothes and that, which is all I care about. You take the money and use it."

"No, Jan. Thank you warmly, old boy, all the same; but I'd not take your poor little bit of money if I were starving."

"What's the good of it to me?" persisted Jan, swaying his legs about. "I can't use it: I have got nothing to use it in. I have put it in the bank at Heartburg, but the bank may go smash, you know, and then who'd be the better for the money? You take it and make sure of it, Lionel."

Lionel smiled at him. Jan was as simple and single-hearted in his way as Lucy Tempest was in hers. But Lionel must want money very grievously indeed, before he would have consented to take honest Jan's.

"I have five hundred of my own, you know, Jan," he said. "More than I can use yet awhile."

So he fixed upon the Bar, and would have hastened to London but for Lady Verner's illness. In the weak, low state to which disappointment and irritability had reduced her, she could not bear to lose sight of Lionel, or permit him to depart. "It will be time enough when I am dead; and that won't be long first," was the constant burden of her song to him.

He believed his mother to be little more likely to die than he was, but he was too dutiful a son to cross her in her present state. He gathered certain ponderous tomes about him, and began studying law on his own account, shutting himself up in his room all day to do it. Awfully dry work he found it; not in the least congenial; and many a time did he long to pitch the whole lot into the pleasant rippling stream, running through the grounds of Sir Rufus Hautley, which danced and glittered in the sun in view of Lionel's window.

He could not remain at his daily study without interruptions. They were pretty frequent. People—tenants, workmen, and others—would persist in coming for orders to Mr. Lionel. In vain Lionel told them that he could not give orders, could not interfere; that he had no longer anything to do with Verner's Pride. They could not be brought to understand why he was not their master as usual—at any rate, why he could not act as one, and interpose between them and the tyrant, Roy. In point of fact, Mr. Roy was head and master of the estate just now, and a nice head and master he made! Mrs. Verner, shut up in Verner's Pride with her ill health, had no conception what games were being played. "Let be, let be," the people would say. "When Mr. Fred Massingbird comes home, Roy'll get called to account, and receive his deserts;" a fond belief in which all did not join. Many entertained a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Fred Massingbird was too much inclined to be a tyrant on his own account, to disapprove of the acts of Roy. Lionel's blood often boiled at what he saw and heard, and he wished he could put miles between himself and Deerham.

CHAPTER XXI. A WHISPERED SUSPICION

Dr. West was crossing the courtyard one day, after paying his morning visit to Lady Verner, when he was waylaid by Lionel.

"How long will my mother remain in this weak state?" he inquired.

Dr. West lifted his arched eyebrows. "It is impossible to say, Mr. Lionel. These cases of low nervous fever are sometimes very much protracted."

"Lady Verner's is not nervous fever," dissented Lionel.

"It approaches near to it."

"The fact is, I want to be away," said Lionel.

"There is no reason why you should not be away, if you wish it," rejoined the physician. "Lady Verner is not in any danger; she is sure to recover eventually."

"I know that. At least, I hope it is sure," returned Lionel. "But, in the state she is, I cannot reason with her, or talk to her of the necessity of my being away. Any approach to the topic irritates her."

"I should go, and say nothing to her beforehand," observed Dr. West. "When she found you were really off, and that there was no remedy for it, she must perforce reconcile herself to it."

Every fond feeling within Lionel revolted at the suggestion. "We are speaking of my mother, doctor," was his courteously-uttered rebuke.

"Well, if you would not like to do that, there's nothing for it but patience," the doctor rejoined, as he drew open one of the iron gates. "Lady Verner may be no better than she is now for weeks to come. Good-day, Mr. Lionel."

Lionel paced into the house with a slow step, and went up to his mother's chamber. She was lying on a couch by the fire, her eyes closed, her pale features contracted as if with pain. Her maid Thérèse appeared to be busy with her, and Lionel called out Decima.

"There's no improvement, I hear, Decima."

"No. But, on the other hand, there is no danger. There's nothing even very serious, if Dr. West may be believed. Do you know, Lionel, what I fancy he thinks?"

"What?" asked Lionel.

"That if mamma were obliged to exert and rouse herself—were like any poor person, for instance, who cannot lie by and be nursed—she would be well directly. And—unkind, unlike a daughter as it may seem in me to acknowledge it—I do very much incline to the same opinion."

Lionel made no reply.

"Only Dr. West has not the candour to say so," went on Decima. "So long as he can keep her lying here, he will do it; she is a good patient for him. Poor mamma gives way, and he helps her to do it. I wish she would discard him, and trust to Jan."

"You don't like Dr. West, Decima?"

"I never did," said Decima. "And I believe that, in skill, Jan is quite equal to him. There's this much to be said of Jan, that he is sincere and open as if he were made of glass. Jan will never keep a patient in bed unnecessarily, or give the smallest dose more than is absolutely requisite. Did you hear of Sir Rufus Hautley sending for Jan?"

"No."

"He is ill, it seems. And when he sent to Dr. West's, he expressly desired that it might be Mr. Jan Verner to answer the summons. Dr. West will not forgive that in a hurry."

"That comes of prejudice," said Lionel; "prejudice not really deserved by Dr. West. Since the reading of the will, Sir Rufus has been bitter against the Massingbirds; and Dr. West, as connected with them, comes in for his share of the feeling."

"I hope he may not deserve it in any worse way than as connected with them," returned Decima, with more acrimony than she, in her calm gentleness, was accustomed to speak.

The significant tone struck Lionel. "What do you mean, Decima?"

Decima glanced round. They were standing at the far end of the corridor at the window which overlooked the domains of Sir Rufus Hautley. The doors of the several rooms were closed, and no one was about. Decima spoke in a whisper—

"Lionel, I cannot divest myself of the opinion that—that—"

"That what?" he asked, looking at her in wonder, for she was hesitating strangely, her manner shrinking, her voice awe-struck.

"That it was Dr. West who took the codicil."

Lionel's face flushed—partially with pain; he did not like to hear it said, even by Decima.

"You have never suspected so much yourself?" she asked.

"Never, never. I hope I never shall suspect it. Decima, you perhaps cannot help the thought, but you can help speaking of it."

"I did not mean to vex you. Somehow, Lionel, it is for your sake that I seem to have taken a dislike to the Wests—"

"To take a dislike to people is no just cause for accusing them of crime," he interrupted. "Decima, you are not like yourself to-day."

"Do you suppose that it is my dislike which caused me to suspect him. No, Lionel. I seem to see people and their motives very clearly; and I do honestly believe"—she dropped her voice still lower—"that Dr. West is a man capable of almost anything. At the time when the codicil was being searched for, I used to think and think it over, how it could be—how it could have disappeared. All its points, all its bearings, I deliberated upon again and again. One certain thing was, the codicil could not have disappeared from the desk without its having been taken out. Another point, almost equally certain to my mind, was that my Uncle Stephen did not take it out, but died in the belief that it was *in*, and that it would give you your inheritance. A third point was, that whoever took it must have had some strong motive for the act. Who (with possible access to the desk) could have had this motive, even in a remote degree? There were but two—Dr. West and Mrs. Verner. Mrs. Verner I judge to be incapable of anything so wrong; Dr. West I believe to be capable of even worse than that. Hence I drew my deductions."

"Deductions which I shall never accept, and which I would advise you to get rid of, Decima," was his answer. "My dear, never let such an accusation cross your lips again."

"I never shall. I have told you; and that is enough. I have longed to tell you for some time past. I did not think you would believe me."

"Believe *it*, you should say, Decima. Dr. West take the codicil! Were I to bring myself to that belief, I think all my faith in man would go out. You are sadly prejudiced against the Wests."

"And you in their favour," she could not help saying. "But I shall ever be thankful for one thing—that you have escaped Sibylla."

Was he thankful for it? Scarcely, while that pained heart of his, those coursing pulses, could beat on in this tumultuous manner at the bare sound of her name.

In the silence that ensued—for neither felt inclined to break it—they heard a voice in the hall below, inquiring whether Mr. Verner was within. Lionel recognised it as Tynn's.

"For all I know he is," answered old Catherine. "I saw him a few minutes ago in the court out there, a-talking to the doctor."

"Will you please ask if I can speak to him."

Lionel did not wait further, but descended to the hall. The butler, in his deep mourning, had taken his seat on the bench. He rose as Lionel approached.

"Well, Tynn, how are you? What is it?"

"My mistress has sent me to ask if you'd be so kind as come to Verner's Pride, sir?" said Tynn, standing with his hat in his hand. "She bade me say that she did not feel well enough, or she'd have written you a note with the request, but she wishes particularly to see you."

"Does she wish to see me to-day?"

"As soon as ever you could get there, sir, I fancy. I am sure she meant to-day."

"Very well, Tynn. I'll come over. How is your mistress?"

"She's very well, sir, now; but she gets worried on all sides about things out-of-doors."

"Who worries her with those tales?" asked Lionel.

"Everybody almost does, sir, as comes a-nigh her. First it's one complaint that's brought to the house, of things going wrong, and then it's another complaint—and the women servants, they have not the sense to keep it from her. My wife can't keep her tongue still upon it, and can't see that the rest do. Might I ask how her ladyship is to-day, sir?"

"Not any better, Tynn. Tell Mrs. Verner I will be with her almost immediately."

Lionel lost little time in going to Vender's Pride. Turned from it as he had been, smarting under the injustice and the pain, many a one would have haughtily refused to re-enter it, whatever might have been the emergency. Not so Lionel. He had chosen to quit Verner's Pride as his residence, but he had remained entirely good friends with Mrs. Verner, calling on her at times. Not upon her would Lionel visit his displeasure.

It was somewhat curious that she had taken to sit in the old study of Stephen Verner; a room which she had rarely entered during his lifetime. Perhaps some vague impression that she was now a woman of business, or ought to be one, that she herself was in sole charge for the absent heir, had induced her to take up her daily sitting amidst the drawers, bureaux, and other places which had contained Mr. Verner's papers—which contained them still. She had, however, never yet looked at one. If anything came up to the house, leases, deeds, other papers, she would say: "Tynn, see to it," or "Tynn, take it over to Mr. Lionel Verner, and ask what's to be done." Lionel never refused to say.

She was sitting back in Mr. Verner's old chair, now, filling it a great deal better than he used to do. Lionel took her hand cordially. Every time he saw her he thought her looking bigger and bigger. However much she may have grieved at the time for her son John's death, it had not taken away either her flesh or her high colour. Nothing would have troubled Mrs. Verner permanently, unless it had been the depriving her of her meals. Now John was gone, she cared for nothing else in life.

"It's kind of you to come, Lionel," said she. "I want to talk to you. What will you have?—some wine?"

"Not anything," replied Lionel. "Tynn said you wished to see me for something particular."

"And so I do. You must take the management of the estate until Fred's at home."

The words grated on his ear, and his brow knit itself into lines. But he answered calmly—

"I cannot do that, Mrs. Verner."

"Then what can I do?" she asked. "Here's all this great estate, nobody to see after it, nobody to take it in charge! I'm sure I have no more right to be teased over it than you have, Lionel."

"It is your son's."

"I asked you not to leave Verner's Pride. I asked you to take the management of out-door things! You did so, between your uncle's death and his burial."

"Believing that I was taking the management of what was mine," replied Lionel.

"Why do you visit upon me the blame of all that has happened?" pursued Mrs. Verner. "I declare that I knew nothing of what was done; I could not believe my own ears when I heard Matiss read out the will. You should not blame me."

"I never have blamed you for it, Mrs. Verner. I believe you to be as innocent of blame in the matter as I am."

"Then you ought not to turn haughty and cold, and refuse to help me. They are going to have me up before the Justice Courts at Heartburg!"

"Have you up before the Justice Courts at Heartburg!" repeated Lionel, in great astonishment.

"It's all through Roy; I know it is. There's some stupid dispute about a lease, and I am to be had up in evidence. Did you hear of the threat?"

"What threat?" asked he.

"Some of the men are saying they'll burn down Verner's Pride. Roy turned them off the brick-yard, and they threaten they'll do it out of revenge. If you would just look to things and keep Roy quiet, nothing of this would happen."

Lionel knew that.

"Mrs. Verner," he said, "were you the owner of Verner's Pride, I would spare no pains to help you. But I cannot act for Frederick Massingbird."

"What has Fred done to you?" she asked quickly.

"That is not the question—he has done nothing," answered Lionel, speaking more rapidly still. "My management would—if I know anything of him—be essentially different from your son's; different from what he would approve. Neither would I take authority upon myself only to have it displaced upon his return. Have Roy before you, Mrs. Verner, and caution him."

"It does no good. I have already had him. He smoothes things over to me, so that black looks white. Lionel, I must say that you are unkind and obstinate."

"I do not think I am naturally either one or the other," he answered, smiling. "Perhaps it might answer your purpose to put things into the hands of Matiss, until your son's return."

"He won't take it," she answered. "I sent for him—what with this court business and the threat of incendiarism, I am like one upon thorns—and he said he would not undertake it. He seemed to fear contact with Roy."

"Were I to take the management, Mrs. Verner, my first act would be to discharge Roy."

Mrs. Verner tried again to shake his resolution. But he was quite firm. And, wishing her good-day, he left Verner's Pride, and bent his steps towards the village.

CHAPTER XXII. PECKABY'S SHOP

On passing through Deerham from Verner's Pride, a little below the shop of Mrs. Duff, you come upon an opening on the left hand, which led to quite a swarm of cottages. Many of the labourers congregated here. If you took this turning, which was called Clay Lane, and continued your way past the cottages in a straight line over the fields, you would arrive at the residence of the gamekeeper, Broom, leaving some brick-fields to the right, and the Willow Pool, which had been the end of poor Rachel Frost, on the left. But, unless you climbed hedges, you could not get to the pool from this quarter without going round, near the gamekeeper's. The path which led to Verner's Pride past the pool, and which Rachel had taken that unfortunate night, had its commencement higher up in the village, above Mrs. Duff's. A few cottages were scattered again beyond the gamekeeper's, and one or two on this side it; but we have nothing to do with them at present.

A great part of the ill-feeling rife on the estate was connected with these brick-fields. It had been a great mistake on Mr. Verner's part ever to put Roy into power; had Mr. Verner been in the habit of going out of doors himself, he would have seen this, and not kept the man on a week. The former bailiff had died suddenly. He, the bailiff, had given some little power to Roy during his lifetime; had taken him on as a sort of inferior helper; and Mr. Verner, put to shifts by the bailiff's death, had allowed Roy so to continue. Bit by bit, step by step, gradually, covertly, the man made good his footing: no other was put over his head, and in time he came to be called Roy the bailiff, without having ever been formally appointed as bailiff. He drew his two pounds per week—his stipulated wages—and he made, it is hard to say what, besides. Avarice and tyranny were the predominant passions of Roy's mind; bad qualities, and likely to bring forth bad fruits when joined to petty power.

About three years previous to Mr. Verner's death, a stranger had appeared in Clay Lane, and set up a shop there. Nearly every conceivable thing in the shape of eatables was sold in it; that is, such eatables as are in request among the poor. Bread, flour, meat, potatoes, butter, tea, sugar, red herrings, and the like. Soap and candles were also sold; and afterwards the man added green vegetables and coals, the latter doled out by the measure, so much a "kipe." The man's name was Peckaby; he and his wife were without family, and they managed the shop between them. A tall, strong, brawny man was he; his wife was a remarkably tall woman, fond of gossip and of smart caps. She would go gadding out for hours at a stretch, leaving him to get through all the work at home, the preparing meals, the serving customers.

Folks fly to new things; to do so is a propensity inherent in human nature; and Mr. Peckaby's shop flourished. Not that he was much honoured with the complimentary "Mr."; his customers brought it out short—"Peckaby's shop." Much intimacy had appeared to exist from the first between him and Roy, so that it was surmised they had been previously acquainted. The prices were low, the shop was close at hand, and Clay Lane flocked to it.

New things, however, like new faces, are apt to turn out no better than the old; sometimes not as good. And thus it proved with Peckaby's shop. From rather underselling the shops of the village, Peckaby's shop grew to increase its charges until they were higher than those of anybody else; the wares also deteriorated in value. Clay Lane awoke to this by degrees, and would have taken its custom away; but that was more easily contemplated than done. A good many of its families had been allowed to get on Peckaby's books, and they also found that Roy set his face against their leaving the shop. For Roy to set his face against a measure was a formidable affair, not readily contended with: the labourers did not dare to fly in his face, lest he should make an excuse to take their work from them. He had already discharged several. So Clay Lane, for the most part, found itself tied to Peckaby's shop, and to paying some thirty per cent. beyond what they would have paid at the old shops; added

to which was the grievance of being compelled to put up with very inferior articles. Dissatisfaction at this state of things had long been smouldering. It grew and grew, threatening to break out into open rebellion, perhaps to bloodshed. The neighbourhood cried shame upon Roy, and felt inclined to echo the cry upon Mrs. Verner; while Clay Lane openly avowed their belief that Peckaby's shop was Roy's shop, and that the Peckaby's were only put in to manage it.

One fearfully hot Monday morning, in the beginning of July, Lionel Verner was passing down Clay Lane. In another week he would be away from Deerham. Lady Verner's illness had commenced near the latter end of April, and it was growing towards the end of June before she began to get better, or would give Lionel leave to depart. Jan, plain-speaking, truth-telling Jan, had at length quietly told his mother that there was nothing the matter with her but "vexing and temper." Lady Verner went into hysterics at Jan's unfilial conduct; but, certain it was, from that very time she began to amend. July came in, and Lionel was permitted to fix the day for his departure.

Lionel was walking down Clay Lane. It was a short cut to Lord Elmsley's house over the hills, a mile or two distant. Not a very suitable day for a walk. Had Lionel been training for a light jockey, without any superfluous weight, he might have dispensed with extra covering in his exercise, and done as effectually without it. A hotter day never was known in our climate; a more intensely burning sun never rode in the heavens. It blazed down with a force that was almost unbearable, scorching and withering all within its radius. Lionel looked up at it; it seemed to blister his face and dazzle his eyes; and his resolution wavered as he thought of the walk before him. "I have a great mind not to go," said he mentally. "They can set up their targets without me. I shall be half dead by the time I get there." Nevertheless, in the indecision, he still walked on. He thought he'd see how affairs looked when he came to the green fields. Green! brown, rather.

But Lionel found other affairs to look at before he reached the fields. On turning a sharp angle of Clay Lane, he was surprised to see a crowd collected, stretching from one side of it to the other. Not a peaceable crowd evidently, although it was composed for the most part of the gentler sex; but a crowd of threatening arms and inflamed faces, and swaying white caps and noisy tongues. The female population of Clay Lane had collected there.

Smash! went the breaking of glass in Lionel's ears as he came in view; smash! went another crash. Were Peckaby's shop windows suffering? A misgiving that it must be so, crossed the mind of Lionel, and he made few steps to the scene of warfare.

Sure enough it was nothing less. Three great holes were staring in so many panes, the splinters of glass lying inside the shop-window, amidst butter and flour, and other suchlike articles. The flour looked brown, and the butter was running away in an oily stream; but that was no reason why a shower of broken glass should be added to improve their excellences. Mr. Peckaby, with white gills and hair raised up on end, stood, the picture of fear, gazing at the damage, but too much afraid to start out and prevent it. Those big men are sometimes physical cowards. Another pane smashed! the weapon used being a hard piece of flint coal, which just escaped short of Mr. Peckaby's head, and Lionel thought it time to interfere. He pushed into the midst of them.

They drew aside when they saw who it was. In their hot passions—hot and angry then—perhaps no one, friend or enemy, would have stood a chance of being deferred to but Lionel Verner. They had so long looked upon him as the future lord of Verner's Pride that they forgot to look upon him as anything less now. And they all liked Lionel. His appearance was as oil poured upon troubled waters.

"What is the meaning of this? What is the matter?" demanded Lionel.

"Oh, sir, why don't you interfere to protect us, now things is come to this pass? You be a Verner!" was the prayer of remonstrance from all sides that met his words.

"Give me an explanation," reiterated Lionel. "What is the grievance?"

The particular grievance of this morning, however easy to explain, was somewhat difficult to comprehend, when twenty tongues were speaking at once—and those, shrill and excited ones. In vain Lionel assured them that if one, instead of all, would tell it, he should understand it sooner; that if

their tone were subdued, instead of loud enough to be heard yonder at the brick-fields, it might be more desirable. Excited women, suffering under what they deem a wrong, cannot be made quiet; you may as well try to put down a rising flood. Lionel resigned himself to his fate, and listened; and at this stage of the affair a new feature of it struck his eye and surprised him. Scarcely one of the women but bore in her hand some uncooked meat. Such meat! Lionel drew himself and his coat from too close proximity to it. It was of varied hues, and walking away alive. Upon plates, whole or broken, upon half-saucers, upon dust-pans, upon fire-shovels, held at the end of tongs, hooked on to a fork, spread out in a coal-box; anyhow so as to avoid contact with fingers, these dainty pieces were exhibited for inspection.

By what Lionel could gather, it appeared that this meat had been purchased on Saturday night at Peckaby's shop. The women had said then, one and all, that it was not good; and Mr. Peckaby had been regaled with various open conjectures, more plain than polite, as to the state of the animal from which it had been supplied. Independent of the quality of the meat, it was none the better, even then, for having been kept. The women scented this; but Peckaby, and Peckaby's wife, who was always in the shop with her husband on a Saturday night, protested and vowed that their customers' noses were mistaken; that the meat would be perfectly good and fresh on the Sunday, and on the Monday too, if they liked to keep it so long. The women, somewhat doubtfully giving ear to the assurance, knowing that the alternative was that or none, bought the meat and took it home. On Sunday morning they found the meat was—anything you may imagine. It was neither cookable nor eatable; and their anger against Peckaby was not diminished by a certain fact which oozed out to them; namely, that Peckaby himself did not cut *his* Sunday's dinner off the meat in his shop, but sent to buy it of one of the Deerham butchers. The general indignation was great; the men, deprived of their Sunday's meat, joined in it; but nothing could be done until Monday morning. Peckaby's shop was always hermetically sealed on a Sunday. Mr. Verner had been stringent in allowing no Sunday traffic on the estate.

Monday came. The men went to their work as usual, leaving their wives to deal with the matter. Behold them assembled with their meat, kept for the occasion in spite of its state, before the shop of Peckaby. But of redress they could get none; Peckaby was deaf; and Lionel arrived to find hostilities commenced. Such was the summary of the story.

"You are acting very wrongly," were Lionel's first words to them in answer. "You should blame the meat, not Peckaby. Is this weather for keeping meat?"

"The weather didn't get to this heat till yesterday in the afternoon," said they—and Lionel could not deny the fact. Mrs. Dawson took up the word.

"*Our* meat warn't bought at Peckaby's; our meat were got at Clark's, and it were sweet as a nut. 'Twere veal, too, and that's the worst meat for keeping. Roy 'ud kill us if he could; but he can't force *us* on to Peckaby's rubbish. We defy him to't."

In point of defying Roy, the Dawsons had done that long ago. There was open warfare between them, and skirmishes took place occasionally. The first act of Roy, after it was known that Lionel was disinherited, had been to discharge old Dawson and his sons from work. How they had managed to live since was a mystery; funds did not seem to run low with them; tales of their night-poaching went about, and the sons got an odd job at legitimate work now and then.

"It's an awful shame," cried a civil, quiet woman, Sarah Grind, one of a very numerous family, commonly called "Grind's lot," "that we should be beat down to have our victuals and other things at such a place as Peckaby's! Sometimes, sir, I'm almost inclined to ask, is it Christians as rules over us?"

Lionel felt the shaft levelled at his family, though not personally at himself.

"You are not beaten down to it," he said. "Why do you deal at Peckaby's? Stay a bit! I know what you would urge: that by going elsewhere you would displease Roy. It seems to me that if you would all go elsewhere, Roy *could* not prevent it. Should one of you attempt to go, he might; but he could not prevent it if you all go with one accord. If Peckaby's things are bad—as I believe they are—why do you buy them?"

"There ain't a single thing as is good in his place," spoke up a woman, half-crying. "Sir, it's truth. His flour is half bone-dust, and his 'tatures is watery. His sugar is sand, and his tea is leaves dried over again, while his eggs is rotten, and his coals is flint."

"Allowing that, it is no good reason for your smashing his windows," said Lionel. "It is utterly impossible that that can be tolerated."

"Why do he palm his bad things off upon us, then?" retorted the crowd. "He makes us pay half as much again as we do in the other shops; and when we gets them home, we can't eat 'em. Sir, you be Mr. Verner now; you ought to see as we be protected."

"I am Mr. Verner; but I have no power. My power has been taken from me, as you know. Mrs. Verner is—"

"A murrain light upon her!" scowled a man from the outskirts of the crowd. "Why do she call *herself* Mrs. Verner, and stick herself up for missis at Verner's Pride, if she is to take no notice on us? Why do she leave us in the hands of Roy, to be—"

Lionel had turned upon the man like lightning.

"Davies, how dare you presume so to speak of Mrs. Verner in my presence? Mrs. Verner is not the source of your ills; you must look nearer to you, for that. Mrs. Verner is aged and ailing; she cannot get out of doors to see into your grievances."

At the moment of Lionel's turning to the man, he, Davies, had commenced to push his way towards Lionel. This caused the crowd to sway, and Lionel's hat, which he held carelessly in his hand, having taken it off to wipe his heated brow, got knocked down. Before he could stoop for its rescue, it was trampled out of shape; not intentionally—they would have protected Lionel and his things with their lives—but inadvertently. A woman picked it up with a comical look of despair. To put on *that* again was impossible.

"Never mind," said Lionel good-naturedly. "It was my own fault; I should have held it better."

"Put your handkercher over your head, sir," was the woman's advice. "It'll keep the sun off."

Lionel smiled, but did not take it. Davies was claiming his attention; while some of the women seemed inclined to go in for a fight, which should secure the hat.

"Could Mr. Verner get out o' doors and look into our grievances, the last years of his life, any more, sir, nor she can?" he was asking, in continuation of the subject.

"No, sir; he couldn't, and he didn't; but things wasn't then brought to the pitch as they be now."

"No," acquiesced Lionel, "I was at hand then, to interpose between Roy and Mr. Verner."

"And don't you think, sir, as you might be able to do the same thing still?"

"No, Davies. I have been displaced from Verner's Pride, and from all power connected with it. I have no more right to interfere with the working of the estate than you have. You must make the best of things until Mr. Massingbird's return."

"There'll be some dark deed done, then, afore many weeks is gone over; that's what there'll be!" was Davies's sullen reply. "It ain't to be stood, sir, as a man and his family is to clam, 'cause Peckaby—"

"Davies, I will hear no more on that score," interrupted Lionel. "You men should be men, and make common cause in that one point for yourselves against Roy. You have your wages in your hand on a Saturday night, and can deal at any shop you please."

The man—he wore a battered old straw hat on his head, which looked as dirty as his face—raised his eyes with an air of surprise at Lionel.

"What wages, sir? We don't get ours."

"Not get your wages?" repeated Lionel.

"No, sir; not on a Saturday night. That's just it—it's where the new shoe's a-pinching. Roy don't pay now on a Saturday night. He gives us all a sort o' note, good for six shilling, and we has, us or our wives, to take that to Peckaby's, and get what we can for it. On the Monday, at twelve o'clock, which

is his new time for paying the wages, he docks us of six shilling. *That's* his plan now; and no wonder as some of us has kicked at it, and then he have turned us off. I be one."

Lionel's brow burned; not with the blazing sun, but with indignation. That this should happen on the lands of the Verner's! Hot words rose to his lips—to the effect that Roy, as he believed, was acting against the law—but he swallowed them down ere spoken. It might not be expedient to proclaim so much to the men.

"Since when has Roy done this?" he asked. "I am surprised not to have heard of it."

"This six weeks he have done it, sir, and longer nor that. It's get our things from Peckaby's or it's not get any at all. Folks won't trust the likes of us, without us goes with the money in our hands. We might have knowed there was some evil in the wind when Peckaby's took to give us trust. Mr. Verner wasn't the best of masters to us, after he let Roy get on our backs—saving your presence for saying it, sir; but you must know as it's truth—but there's things a-going on now as 'ud make him, if he knowed 'em, rise up out of his grave. Let Roy take care of hisself, that he don't get burned up some night in his bed!" significantly added the man.

"Be silent, Davies! You—"

Lionel was interrupted by a commotion. Upon turning to ascertain its cause, he found an excited crowd hastening towards the spot from the brick-fields. The news of the affray had been carried thither, and Roy, with much intemperate language and loud wrath, had set off at full speed to quell it. The labourers set off after him, probably to protect their wives. Shouting, hooting, swearing—at which pastime Roy was the loudest—on they came, in a state of fury.

But for the presence of Lionel Verner, things might have come to a crisis—if a fight could have brought a crisis on. He interposed his authority, which even Roy did not yet dispute to his face, and he succeeded in restoring peace for the time. He became responsible—I don't know whether it was quite wise of him to do so—for the cost of the broken windows, and the women were allowed to go home unmolested. The men returned to their work, and Mr. Peckaby's face regained its colour. Roy was turning away, muttering to himself, when Lionel beckoned him aside with an authoritative hand.

"Roy, this must not go on. Do you understand me? It must not go on."

"What's not to go on, sir?" retorted Roy sullenly.

"You know what I mean. This disgraceful system of affairs altogether. I believe that you would be amenable to the law in thus paying the men, or in part paying them, with an order for goods; instead of in open, honest coin. Unless I am mistaken, it borders very closely upon the truck system."

"I can take care of myself and of the law, too, sir," was the answer of Roy.

"Very good. I shall take care that this sort of oppression is lifted off the shoulders of the men. Had I known it was being pursued, I should have stopped it before."

"You have no right to interfere between me and anything now, sir."

"Roy," said Lionel calmly, "you are perfectly well aware that the right, not only to interfere between you and the estate, but to invest me with full power over it and you, was sought to be given me by Mrs. Verner at my uncle's death. For reasons of my own I chose to decline it, and have continued to decline it. Do you remember what I once told you—that one of my first acts of power would be to displace you? After what I have seen and heard to-day, I shall deliberate whether it be not my duty to reconsider my determination, and assume this, and all other power."

Roy's face turned green. He answered defiantly, not in tone, but in spirit—

"It wouldn't be for long, at any rate, sir; and Mr. Massingbird, I know, 'll put me into my place again on his return."

Lionel did not reply immediately. The sun was coming down upon his uncovered head like a burning furnace, and he was casting a glance round to see if any friendly shade might be at hand. In his absorption over the moment's business he had not observed that he had halted with Roy right underneath its beams. No, there was no shade just in that spot. A public pump stood behind him, but the sun was nearly vertical, and the pump got as much of it as he did. A thought glanced through

Lionel's mind of resorting to the advice of the women, to double his handkerchief cornerwise over his head. But he did not purpose staying above another minute with Roy, to whom he again turned.

"Don't deceive yourself, Roy. Mr. Massingbird is not likely to countenance such doings as these. That Mrs. Verner will not, I know; and, I tell you plainly, I will not. You shall pay the men's wages at the proper and usual time; you shall pay them in full, to the last halfpenny that they earn. Do you hear? I order you now to do so. We will have no underhanded truck system introduced on the Verner estate."

"You'd like to ruin poor Peckaby, I suppose, sir!"

"I have nothing to do with Peckaby. If public rumour is to be credited, the business is not Peckaby's, but yours—"

"Them that says it is a pack of liars!" burst forth Roy.

"Possibly. I say I have nothing to do with that. Peckaby—"

Lionel's voice faltered. An awful pain—a pain, the like of which, for acute violence, he had never felt—had struck him in the head. He put his hand up to it, and fell against the pump.

"Are you ill, sir?" asked Roy.

"What can it be?" murmured Lionel. "A sudden pain has attacked me here, Roy," touching his head; "an awful pain. I'll get into Frost's, and sit down."

Frost's cottage was but a minute's walk, but Lionel staggered as he went to it. Roy attended him. The man humbly asked if Mr. Lionel would be pleased to lean upon him, but Lionel waved him off. Matthew Frost was sitting indoors alone; his grandchildren were at school, his son's wife was busy elsewhere. Matthew no longer went out to labour. He had been almost incapable of it before Mr. Verner's annuity fell to him. Robin was away at work: but Robin was a sadly altered man since the death of Rachel. His very nature appeared to have changed.

"My head! my head!" broke from Lionel, as he entered, in the intensity of his pain. "Matthew, I think I must have got a sun-stroke."

Old Matthew pulled off his straw hat, and lifted himself slowly out of his chair. All his movements were slow now. Lionel had sat himself down on the settle, his head clasped by both hands, and his pale face turned to fiery red—as deep a crimson as Mrs. Verner's was habitually.

"A sun-stroke?" echoed old Matthew, leaning on his stick, as he stood before him, attentively regarding Lionel. "Ay, sir, for sure it looks like it. Have you been standing still in the sun, this blazing day?"

"I have been standing in it without my hat," replied Lionel. "Not for long, however."

"It don't take a minute, sir, to do the mischief. I had one myself, years before you were born, Mr. Lionel. On a day as hot as this, I was out in my garden, here, at the back of this cottage. I had gone out without my hat, and was standing over my pig, watching him eat his wash, when I felt something take my head—such a pain, sir, that I had never felt before, and never wish to feel again. I went indoors, and Robin, who might be a boy of five, or so, looked frightened at me, my face was so red. I couldn't hold my head up, sir; and when the doctor came, he said it was a sun-stroke. I think there must be particular moments and days when the sun has this power to harm us, though we don't know which they are nor how to avoid them," added old Matthew, as much in self-soliloquy as to Lionel. "I had often been out before, without my hat, in as great heat; for longer, too; and it had never harmed me. Since then, sir, I have put a white handkerchief inside the crown of my hat in hot weather. The doctor told me to do so."

"How long did the pain last?" asked Lionel, feeling *his* pain growing worse with every moment. "Many hours?"

"*Hours?*" repeated old Matthew, with a strong emphasis on the word. "Mr. Lionel, it lasted for days and weeks. Before the next morning came, sir, I was in a raging fever; for three weeks, good, I was in my bed, above here, and never out of it; hardly the clothes smoothed a-top of me. Sun-strokes are not frequent in this climate, sir, but when they do come, they can't be trifled with."

Perhaps Lionel felt the same conviction. Perhaps he felt that with this pain, increasing as it was in intensity, he must make the best of his way home, if he would get home at all. "Good-day, Matthew," he said, rising from the bench. "I'll go home at once!"

"And send for Dr. West, sir, or for Mr. Jan, if you are no better when you get there," was the parting salutation of the old man.

He stood at the door, leaning on his stick, and watched Lionel down Clay Lane. "A sun-stroke, for sure," repeated he, slowly turning in, as the angle of the lane hid Lionel from his view.

CHAPTER XXIII. DAYS AND NIGHTS OF PAIN

In his darkened chamber at Deerham Court lay Lionel Verner. Whether it was a sun-stroke, or whether it was but the commencement of a fever, which had suddenly struck him down that day, certain it was, that a violent sickness attacked him, and he lay for many, many days—days and weeks as old Frost had called it—between life and death. Fever and delirium struggled with life, which should get the mastery.

Very little doubt was there, that his state of mind increased the danger of his state of body. How bravely Lionel had struggled to do battle with his great anguish, he might scarcely have known himself, in all its full intensity, save for this illness. He had loved Sibylla with the pure fervour of feelings young and fresh. He could have loved her to the end of life; he could have died for her. No leaven was mixed with his love, no base dross; it was refined as the purest silver. It is only these exalted, ideal passions, which partake more of heaven's nature than of earth's, that *tell* upon the heart when their end comes. Terribly had it told upon Lionel Verner's. In one hour he had learned that Sibylla was false to him, was about to become the wife of another. In his sensitive reticence, in his shrinking pride, he had put a smiling face upon it before the world. He had watched her marry Frederick Massingbird, and had "made no sign." Deep, deep in his heart, fifty fathom deep, had he pressed down his misery, passing his days in what may be called a false atmosphere—showing a false side to his friends. It seemed false to Lionel, the appearing what he was not. He was his true self at night only, when he could turn, and toss, and groan out his trouble at will. But, when illness attacked him, and he had no strength of body to throw off his pain of mind, then he found how completely the blow had shattered him. It seemed to Lionel, in his sane moments, in the intervals of his delirium, that it would be far happier to die, than to wake up again to renewed life, to bear about within him that ever-present sorrow. Whether the fever—it was not brain fever, though bordering closely upon it—was the result of this state of mind, more than of the sun-stroke, might be a question. Nobody knew anything of that inward state, and the sun-stroke got all the blame—save, perhaps, from Lionel himself. He may have doubted.

One day Jan called in to see him. It was in August. Several weeks had elapsed since the commencement of his illness, and he was so far recovered as to be removed by day to a sitting-room on a level with his chamber—a wondrously pretty sitting-room over Lady Verner's drawing-room, but not so large as that, and called "Miss Decima's room." The walls were panelled in medallions, white and delicate blue, the curtains were of blue satin and lace, the furniture blue. In each medallion hung an exquisite painting in water colours, framed—Decima's doing. Lady Verner was one who liked at times to be alone, and then Decima would sit in this room, and feel more at home than in any room in the house. When Lionel began to recover, the room was given over to him. Here he lay on the sofa; or lounged on an easy-chair; or stood at the window, his hands clasping hold of some support, and his legs as tottering as were poor old Matthew Frost's. Sometimes Lady Verner would be his companion, sometimes he would be consigned to Decima and Lucy Tempest. Lucy was pleased to take her share of helping the time to pass; would read to him, or talk to him; or sit down on her low stool on the hearth-rug and only look at him, waiting until he should want something done. Dangerous moments, Miss Lucy! Unless your heart is cased in adamant, you can scarcely be with that attractive man—ten times more attractive now, in his sickness—and not get your wings singed.

Jan came in one day when Lionel was sitting on the sofa, having propped the cushion up at the back of his head. Decima was winding some silk, and Lucy was holding the skein for her. Lucy wore a summer dress of white muslin, a blue sprig raised upon it in tambour-stitch, with blue and white

ribbons at its waist and neck. Very pretty, very simple it looked, but wonderfully according with Lucy Tempest. Jan looked round, saw a tolerably strong table, and took up his seat upon it.

"How d'ye get on, Lionel?" asked he.

It was Dr. West who attended Lionel, and Jan was chary of interfering with the doctor's proper patients—or, rather, the doctor was chary of his doing so—therefore Jan's visits were entirely unprofessional.

"I don't get on at all—as it seems to me," replied Lionel. "I'm sure I am weaker than I was a week ago."

"I dare say," said Jan.

"You dare say!" echoed Lionel. "When a man has turned the point of an illness, he expects to get stronger, instead of weaker."

"That depends," said Jan. "I beg your pardon, Miss Lucy; that's my foot caught in your dress, isn't it?"

Lucy turned to disentangle her dress from Jan's great feet. "You should not sway your feet about so, Jan," said she pleasantly.

"It hasn't hurt it, has it?" asked Jan.

"Oh, no. Is there another skein to hold, Decima?"

Decima replied in the negative. She rose, put the paper of silk upon the table, and then turned to Jan.

"Mamma and I had quite a contention yesterday," she said to him. "I say that Lionel is not being treated properly."

"That's just my opinion," laconically replied Jan. "Only West flares up so, if his treatment is called in question. I'd get him well in half the time."

Lionel wearily changed his position on the sofa. The getting well, or the keeping ill, did not appear to interest him greatly.

"Let's look at his medicine, Decima," continued Jan. "I have not seen what has come round lately."

Decima left the room and brought back a bottle with some medicine in it.

"There's only one dose left," she remarked to Jan.

Jan took the cork out and smelt it; then he tasted it, apparently with great gusto, as anybody else might taste port wine; while Lucy watched him, drawing her lips away from her pretty teeth in distaste at the proceeding.

"Psha!" cried Jan.

"Is it not proper medicine for him?" asked Decima.

"It's as innocent as water," said Jan. "It'll do him neither good nor harm."

And finally Jan poured the lot down his own throat.

Lucy shuddered.

"Oh, Jan, how could you take it?"

"It won't hurt me," said literal Jan.

"But it must be so nasty! I never could have believed any one would willingly drink medicine. It is bad enough to do it when compelled by sickness."

"Law!" returned Jan. "If you call this nasty, Miss Lucy, you should taste some of our physic. The smell would about knock you down."

"I think nothing is worse than the smell of drugs," resumed Lucy. "The other day, when Lady Verner called in at your surgery to speak to you, and took me with her, I was glad to get into the open air again."

"Don't you ever marry a doctor, then, Miss Lucy."

"I am not going to marry one," returned Lucy.

"Well, you need not look so fierce," cried Jan. "I didn't ask you."

Lucy laughed. "Did I look fierce, Jan? I suppose I was thinking of the drugs. I'd never, never be a surgeon, of all things in the world."

"If everybody was of your mind, Miss Lucy, how would people get doctored?"

"Very true," answered Lucy. "But I don't envy them."

"The doctors or the people?" asked Jan.

"I meant the doctors. But I envy the patients less," glancing involuntarily towards Lionel as she spoke.

Jan glanced at him too. "Lionel, I'll bring you round some better stuff than this," said he. "What are you eating?"

"Nothing," put in Decima. "Dr. West keeps him upon arrowroot and beef-tea, and such things."

"Slops," said Jan contemptuously. "Have a fowl cooked every day, Lionel, and eat it all, if you like, bones and all; or a mutton—chop or two; or some good eels. And have the window open and sit at it; don't lounge on that sofa, fancying you can't leave it; and to-morrow or the next day, borrow Mrs. Verner's carriage—"

"No, thank you," interposed Lionel.

"Have a fly, then," composedly went on Jan. "Rouse yourself, and eat and drink, and go into the air, and you'll soon be as well as I am. It's the stewing and fretting indoors, fancying themselves ill, that keeps folks back."

Something like a sickly smile crossed Lionel's wan lips. "Do you remember how you offended your mother, Jan, by telling her she only wanted to rouse herself?"

"Well," said Jan, "it was the truth. West keeps his patients dilly-dallying on, when he might have them well in no time. If he says anything about them to me, I always tell him so; otherwise I don't interfere; it's no business of mine. But you are my brother, you know."

"Don't quarrel with West on my account, Jan. Only settle it amicably between you, what I am to do, and what I am to take. I don't care."

"Quarrel!" said Jan. "You never knew me to quarrel in your life. West can come and see you as usual, and charge you, if you please; and you can just pour his physic down the sink. I'll send you some bark: but it's not of much consequence whether you take it or not; it's good kitchen physic you want now. Is there anything on your mind that's keeping you back?" added plain Jan.

A streak of scarlet rose to Lionel's white cheek.

"Anything on my mind, Jan! I do not understand you."

"Look here," said Jan, "if there is nothing, you ought to be better than this by now, in spite of old West. What you have got to do is to rouse yourself, and believe you are well, instead of lying by, here. My mother was angry with me for telling her that, but didn't she get well all one way after it? And look at the poor! They have their illnesses that bring 'em down to skeletons; but when did you ever find them lie by, after they got better? They can't; they are obliged to go out and turn to at work again; and the consequence is they are well in no time. You have your fowl to-day," continued Jan, taking himself off the table to depart; "or a duck, if you fancy it's more savoury; and if West comes in while you are eating it, tell him I ordered it. He can't grumble at me for doctoring *you*."

Decima left the room with Jan. Lucy Tempest went to the window, threw it open, drew an easy-chair, with its cushions, near to it, and then returned to the sofa.

"Will you come to the window?" said she to Lionel. "Jan said you were to sit there, and I have put your chair ready."

Lionel unclosed his eyelids. "I am better here, child, thank you."

"But you heard what Jan said—that you were not going the right way to get well."

"It does not much matter, Lucy, whether I get well, or whether I don't," he answered wearily.

Lucy sat down; not on her favourite stool, but on a low chair, and fixed her eyes upon him gravely.

"Do you know what Mr. Cust would say to that?" she asked. "He would tell you that you were ungrateful to God. You are already half-way towards getting well."

"I know I am, Lucy. But I am nearly tired of life."

"It is only the very old who say that, or ought to say it. I am not sure that they *ought*—even if they were a hundred. But you are young. Stay! I will find it for you."

He was searching about for his handkerchief. Lucy found it, fallen on the floor at the back of the sofa. She brought it round to him, and he gently laid hold of her hand as he took it.



"My little friend, you have yet to learn that *things*, not years, tire us of life."

Lucy shook her head.

"No; I have not to learn it. I know it must be so. Will you *please* to come to the window?"

Lionel, partly because his tormentor (may the word be used? he was sick, bodily and mentally, and would have lain still for ever) was a young lady, partly to avoid the trouble of persisting in "No," rose, and took his seat in the arm-chair.

"What an obstinate nurse you would make, Lucy! Is there anything else, pray, that you wish me to do?"

She did not smile in response to his smile; she looked very grave and serious.

"I would do all that Jan says, were I you," was her answer. "I believe in Jan. He will get you well sooner than Dr. West."

"Believe in Jan?" repeated Lionel, willing to be gay if he could. "Do you mean that Jan is Jan?"

"I mean that I have faith in Jan. I have none in Dr. West."

"In his medical skill? Let me tell you, Lucy, he is a very clever man, in spite of what Jan may say."

"I can't tell anything about his skill. Until Jan spoke now I did not know but he was treating you rightly. But I have no faith in himself. I think a good, true, faithful-natured man should be depended on for cure, more certainly than one who is false-natured."

"False-natured!" echoed Lionel. "Lucy, you should not so speak of Dr. West. You know nothing wrong of Dr. West. He is much esteemed among us at Deerham."

"Of course I know nothing wrong of him," returned Lucy, with some slight surprise. "But when I look at people I always seem to know what they are. I am sorry to have said so much. I—I think I forgot it was to you I spoke."

"Forgot!" exclaimed Lionel. "Forgot what?"

She hesitated at the last sentence, and she now blushed vividly.

"I forgot for the moment that he was Sibylla's father," she simply said.

Again the scarlet rose in the face of Lionel. Lucy leaned against the window-frame but a few paces from him, her large soft eyes, in their earnest sympathy, lifted to his. He positively shrank from them.

"What's Sibylla to me?" he asked. "She is Mrs. Frederick Massingbird."

Lucy stood in penitence. "Do not be angry with me," she timidly cried. "I ought not to have said it to you, perhaps. I see it always."

"See what, Lucy?" he continued, speaking gently, not in anger.

"I see now much you think of her, and how ill it makes you. When Jan asked just now if you had anything on your mind to keep you back, I knew what it was."

Lionel grew hot and cold with a sudden fear. "Did I say anything in my delirium?"

"Nothing at all—that I heard of. I was not with you. I do not think anybody suspects that you are ill because—because of *her*."

"Ill because of her!" he sharply repeated, the words breaking from him in his agony, in his shrinking dread at finding so much suspected. "I am ill from fever. What else should I be ill from?"

Lucy went close to his chair and stood before him meekly.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "I cannot help seeing things, but I did not mean to make you angry."

He rose, steadying himself by the table, and laid his hand upon her head, with the same fond motion that a father might have used.

"Lucy, I am not angry—only vexed at being watched so closely," he concluded, his lips parting with a faint smile.

In her earnest, truthful, serious face of concern, as it was turned up to him, he read how futile it would be to persist in his denial.

"I did not watch you for the purpose of watching. I saw how it was, without being able to help myself."

Lionel bent his head.

"Let the secret remain between us, Lucy. Never suffer a hint of it to escape your lips."

Nothing answered him save the glad expression that beamed out from her countenance, telling him how implicitly he might trust to her.

CHAPTER XXIV. DANGEROUS COMPANIONSHIP

Lionel Verner grew better. His naturally good constitution triumphed over the disease, and his sick soreness of mind lost somewhat of its sharpness. So long as he brooded in silence over his pain and his wrongs, there was little chance of the sting becoming much lighter; it was like the vulture preying upon its own vitals; but that season of silence was past. When once a deep grief can be *spoken of*, its great agony is gone. I think there is an old saying, or a proverb—"Griefs lose themselves in telling," and a greater truism was never uttered. The ice once broken, touching his feelings with regard to Sibylla, Lionel found comfort in making it his theme of conversation, of complaint, although his hearer and confidant was only Lucy Tempest. A strange comfort, but yet a natural one, as those who have suffered as Lionel did may be able to testify. At the time of the blow, when Sibylla deserted him with coolness so great, Lionel could have died rather than give utterance to a syllable betraying his own pain; but several months had elapsed since, and the turning-point was come. He did not, unfortunately, love Sibylla one shade less; love such as his cannot be overcome so lightly; but the keenness of the disappointment, the blow to his self-esteem—to his vanity, it may be said—was growing less intense. In a case like this, of faithlessness, let it happen to man or to woman, the wounding of the self-esteem is not the least evil that must be borne. Lucy Tempest was, in Lionel's estimation, little more than a child, yet it was singular how he grew to love to talk with her. Not for love of *her*—do not fancy that—but for the opportunity it gave him of talking of Sibylla. You may deem this an anomaly; I know that it was natural; and, like oil poured upon a wound, so did it bring balm to Lionel's troubled spirit.

He never spoke of her save at the dusk hour. During the broad, garish light of day, his lips were sealed. In the soft twilight of the evening, if it happened that Lucy was alone with him, then he would pour out his heart—would tell of his past tribulation. As past he spoke of it; had he not regarded it as past, he never would have spoken. Lucy listened, mostly in silence, returning him her earnest sympathy. Had Lucy Tempest been a little older in ideas, or had she been by nature and rearing less entirely single-minded, she might not have sat unrestrainedly with him, going into the room at any moment, and stopping there, as she would had he been her brother. Lucy was getting to covet the companionship of Lionel very much—too much, taking all things into consideration. It never occurred to her that, for that very reason, she might do well to keep away. She was not sufficiently experienced to define her own sensations; and she did not surmise that there was anything inexpedient or not perfectly orthodox in her being so much with Lionel. She liked to be with him, and she freely indulged the liking upon any occasion that offered.

"Oh, Lucy, I loved her! I did love her!" he would say, having repeated the same words perhaps fifty times before in other interviews; and he would lean back in his easy-chair, and cover his eyes with his hand, as if willing to shut out all sight save that of the past. "Heaven knows what she was to me! Heaven only knows what her faithlessness has cost!"

"Did you dream of her last night, Lionel?" answered Lucy, from her low seat where she generally sat, near to Lionel, but with her face mostly turned from him.

And it may as well be mentioned that Miss Lucy never thought of such a thing as *discouraging* Lionel's love and remembrance of Sibylla. Her whole business in the matter seemed to be to listen to him, and help him to remember her.

"Ay," said Lionel, in answer to the question. "Do you suppose I should dream of anything else?"

Whatever Lucy may or may not have supposed, it was a positive fact, known well to Lionel—known to him, and remembered by him to this hour—that he constantly dreamed of Sibylla. Night after night, since the unhappy time when he learned that she had left him for Frederick Massingbird, had she formed the prominent subject of his dreams. It is the strict truth; and it will prove to you

how powerful a hold she must have possessed over his imagination. This he had not failed to make an item in his revelations to Lucy.

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