Ainsworth William Harrison

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION. – THE YOUNG STEPMOTHER

I. OUSELCROFT

One summer evening, Mildred Calverley, accounted the prettiest girl in Cheshire, who had been seated in the drawing-room of her father's house, Ouselcroft, near Daresbury, vainly trying to read, passed out from the open French window, and made her way towards two magnificent cedars of Lebanon, at the farther end of the lawn.

She was still pacing the lawn with distracted steps, when a well-known voice called out to her, and a tall figure emerged from the shade of the cedars, and Mildred uttered a cry of mingled surprise and delight.

"Is that you, Chetwynd?"

"Ay I don't you know your own brother, Mildred?"

And as they met, they embraced each other affectionately.

"Have you been here long, Chetwynd?" she asked. "Why didn't you come into the house?"

"I didn't know whether I should be welcome, Mildred. Tell me how all is going on?"

"Then you have not received my letters, addressed to Bellagio and Milan? I wrote to tell you that papa is very seriously ill, and begged you to return immediately. Did you get the letters?"

"No; in fact, I have heard nothing at all from any one of you, directly nor indirectly, for more than two months."

"How extraordinary! But how can the letters have miscarried?"

"I might give a guess, but you would think me unjustly suspicious. Is my father really ill, Mildred?"

"Really very seriously ill. About a month ago he caught a bad cold, and has never since been able to shake it off. Doctor Spencer, who has been attending him the whole time, didn't apprehend any danger at first; but now he almost despairs of papa's recovery."

"Gracious heaven!" exclaimed the young man; "I didn't expect to be greeted by this sad intelligence!"

"You have only just come in time to see papa alive! Within the last few days a great change for the worse has taken place in him. Mamma has been most attentive, and has scarcely ever left him."

"She is acting her part well, it seems," cried Chetwynd, bitterly. "But don't call her mamma when you speak of her to

me, Mildred. Let it be Mrs. Calverley, if you please."

"I don't wish to pain you, Chetwynd, but I must tell you the truth. Mrs. Calverley, as you desire me to call her, has shown the greatest devotion to her husband, and Doctor Spencer cannot speak too highly of her. She has had a great deal to go through, I assure you. Since his illness, poor papa has been very irritable and fretful, and would have tried anybody's patience – but she has an angelic temper."

"You give her an excellent character, Mildred," he remarked, in a sceptical tone.

"I give her the character she deserves, Chetwynd. Everybody will tell you the same thing. All the servants idolise her. You know what my opinion of her is, and how dearly I love her. She is quite a model of a wife."

"Don't speak of her in those rapturous terms to me, Mildred, unless you desire to drive me away. I can't bear it. I wish to think kindly of my father now. He has caused me much unhappiness, but I forgive him. I never can forgive *her*."

"I own you have a good deal to complain of, Chetwynd, and I have always pitied you."

"You are the only person who does pity me, I fancy, Mildred. It is not often that a man is robbed of his intended bride by his own father. It is quite true that Teresa and I had quarrelled, and that my father declared if I didn't marry her, he would marry her himself. But I didn't expect he would put his threats into execution – still less that she would accept him. I didn't know the

fickleness of your sex."

"It is entirely your own fault, Chetwynd, that this has happened," said his sister. "But I know how much you have suffered in consequence of your folly and hasty temper, and I won't, therefore, reproach you. Whatever your feelings may be, it is your duty to control them now. Papa passed a very bad night, and sent this morning for Mr. Carteret, the attorney, and gave him instructions to prepare his will."

"I always understood he had made his will, Mildred. He made a handsome settlement upon – his wife?"

"It is as I tell you, Chetwynd. Mr. Carteret was alone with him in his room for nearly two hours this morning; and I believe he was directed to prepare the will without delay, and to return with it this evening."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Chetwynd, gloomily. "That bodes ill to me – to both of us, in fact. He will leave all his property to Teresa – to his wife, I am certain of it."

"Nothing of the sort, Chetwynd!" cried his sister. "Come into the house, and see him."

"If he has made up his mind to commit this act of folly and injustice, all I can say won't prevent it. Ah, here is Carteret!" he exclaimed, as a mail phaeton entered the lodge gate, and drove up to the hall door.

The attorney and his clerk descended; and, leaving his carriage to the care of a groom, Mr. Carteret rang the bell.

"Come in at once, Chetwynd, and you will be able to see papa

before Mr. Carteret is admitted. Come with me – quick!"

Chetwynd suffered himself to be persuaded, and passed through the drawing-room window with his sister.

But he was too late. The attorney and his clerk had already gone upstairs.

II. TERESA

Chetwynd, only son of Mr. Hugh Calverley, a retired Liverpool merchant, residing at Ouselcroft, in Cheshire, was somewhat singularly circumstanced, as will have been surmised from the conversation just recounted – but he had only himself to blame.

Rather more than a year ago – when he was just of age – he had fallen in love with his father's ward, Teresa Mildmay, a young lady of great personal attractions, but very small fortune – had proposed to her, and been accepted.

Teresa had lost both her parents. Her mother, Lady Eleanor Mildmay, daughter of Lord Rockingham, died when she was quite a child. Her father, General Mildmay, an Indian officer of distinction, was one of Mr. Calverley's most intimate friends, and hence it chanced that the latter was appointed Teresa's guardian.

General Mildmay's demise occurred at Cheltenham about two years prior to the commencement of our story. By her guardian's desire, Teresa then came to reside with his daughter at Ouselcroft. Though Mildred was two or three years younger than her friend, and they were very dissimilar in character, a sisterly affection subsisted between them. Originating when they were at school together at Brighton, their friendship had never since been disturbed. To Mildred, therefore, it was a source of the greatest satisfaction when Teresa took up her abode with them.

The two girls differed as much in personal appearance as in character. Both were remarkably goodlooking. Teresa Mildmay had a very striking countenance. Her features were classical in mould, her complexion dark, her eyes magnificent, and arched over by thick black brows. Her tresses were black as jet, luxuriant, and of a silky texture, and were always dressed in a manner that best suited her. Her figure was lofty and beautifully proportioned. The expression of her face was decidedly proud – too proud to be altogether agreeable. Nevertheless, she was extremely admired.

Teresa possessed great good sense and good judgment, and was looked upon by her guardian as a model of prudence and propriety. As he frequently consulted her upon household matters, and, indeed, asked her advice upon many other points, she naturally acquired considerable influence over him.

A very charming girl was Mildred, though her style was quite different from that of Teresa. She was a blonde. A ravishingly fair complexion, a dimpled cheek, a lip fashioned like a Cupid's bow, teeth like pearls – these constituted her attractions. Her figure was slight, but perfectly symmetrical, and nothing could be sweeter than her smile.

Such were the two fair inmates of Ouselcroft, before a change took place in the establishment.

Having proposed to his father's beautiful ward, as we have stated, and been accepted, Chetwynd, who could not brook delay, was anxious that the marriage should take place at once.

To this, however, the prudent Teresa objected. She was of a cold temperament, and reflection convinced her that she had not done wisely in accepting Chetwynd; but for several reasons she hesitated to break off the engagement. She did not like to lose a comfortable home, and hoped that the young man, who had hitherto been very careless and extravagant, might turn over a new leaf.

In this expectation, she was disappointed. Chetwynd was very handsome and agreeable, and had many good qualities, but his temper was excessively irritable, and he was reckless in regard to expense. His Oxford debts, which were heavy, had been paid by his father, and he then promised amendment, but did not keep his word. On the contrary, he continued his extravagant courses. Though intended for the law, he would not study, but led a mere life of pleasure – riding daily in the parks, and visiting all public places of amusement; and his father, who was a great deal too indulgent, did not check him.

On his return to Ouselcroft, after an absence of a couple of months, during which he had not deemed it necessary to write to Teresa, she received him very coldly; and provoked by her manner, he told her next day, when they were alone, that he did not think he should be happy with her.

"If you really believe so, Chetwynd," she said, "the marriage ought not to take place. I release you from your engagement."

The remarkable calmness – almost indifference – with which she spoke, piqued him, and he exclaimed:

"Very well; I accept it! There is an end of all between us!"

Scarcely were the words uttered, than he repented, and would have recalled them. He looked appealingly at her, but she seemed so cold, that he became fortified in his resolution.

Mr. Calverley soon learnt what had happened from Mildred; but, feeling sure he could set matters right, he sent for his son, and insisted on his marrying Miss Mildmay, on pain of his severest displeasure.

Chetwynd refused point blank.

"You won't?" cried the old gentleman, ready to explode.

"I have already given you an answer, sir," rejoined his son. "I adhere to my determination! Pray don't put yourself in a passion. It won't have any effect upon me!"

"Very well," said Mr. Calverley, with difficulty controlling his rage. "Since you decline to fulfil your engagement, I'll marry her myself!"

"Ridiculous!" cried his son.

"Ridiculous or not, you'll find I shall be as good as my word."

"Pshaw! The young lady won't accept you."

He was mistaken, however.

The young lady *did* accept the old gentleman, and so readily that it almost seemed she preferred him to his son. Within a month, they were married.

Before the marriage Chetwynd went abroad, and did not keep up any communication with his family. They ascertained, however, that he was at Bellagio, on the Lake of Como.

Apparently, Mr. Calverley had no reason to regret the extraordinary step he had taken. Teresa made him an excellent wife, and seemed quite devoted to him. She studied him in everything – read the newspaper to him of a morning, chatted agreeably to him when they drove out together in the barouche, played and sang to him in the evening, and, in short, kept him constantly amused. She managed his large establishment perfectly – better than it had ever been managed before. She quarrelled with none of his old friends – even though she might deem some of them bores – but always appeared delighted to see them. Above all, she continued on the most affectionate terms with Mildred, who had never disapproved of the match. Nothing could be more judicious than her conduct.

At first, everybody cried out Mr. Calverley was an "old fool;" but they soon said he was a very sensible man, and exceedingly fortunate.

He was not, however, destined to enjoy a long term of happiness. Hitherto, he had scarcely known a day's illness; but a few months after his marriage his health began rapidly to decline.

Teresa tended him with the greatest solicitude.

III. MR. CALVERLEY

Repairing to the invalid's chamber, we shall find Mr. Calverley seated in an easy-chair, his head supported by a pillow. For nearly a fortnight he had not left his bed, but he insisted on getting up that day.

He had been a fine-looking old gentleman; but he was now wonderfully reduced, and his attire hung loosely on him. Still his countenance was very handsome.

His young wife was seated on a tabouret by his side, watching him anxiously with her large black eyes. She was wrapped in an Indian shawl dressing-gown, which could not conceal her perfectly-proportioned figure.

"Give me a glass of wine, Teresa," he said, in a scarcely audible voice. "I feel that dreadful faintness coming on again."

She eagerly obeyed him.

With difficulty he conveyed the wine to his lips; but having swallowed it, he seemed better.

Taking his wife's hand, he looked at her earnestly, as he thus addressed her:

"I must soon leave you, Teresa. Nay, do not interrupt me. I know what you would say. It must be, my love. I cannot be deceived as to my state. You have been an excellent wife, Teresa – a great comfort to me – a very great comfort. You are aware I have given my solicitor, Mr. Carteret, instructions respecting

my will. I will now tell you what I have done. I have the most perfect confidence in you, Teresa, and I know you will carry out my instructions."

"Be sure of it, my dear," she murmured.

"Teresa," he continued, speaking very deliberately, "I have left my entire property to you."

"To me!" she ejaculated, a slight flush tinging her pale cheek. "Oh, love, it is not right you should do this! I am amply provided for already by the handsome settlement you made upon me, and I tell you at once, if you leave me your property, I shall not keep it. I shall divide it between Chetwynd and Mildred."

A faint smile lighted up the features of the dying man.

"I had formed a correct opinion of you, Teresa," he said, looking at her affectionately. "I know the goodness of your heart and the rectitude of your principles."

Then, slightly changing his manner, he added, "I must now make an effort to explain myself, and I pray you to give strict attention to what I am about to say. I have left you the whole of my property, because I feel certain it will be placed in safe hands, and I mean you to represent myself."

"I listen!" she murmured.

"First, with regard to Chetwynd. I do not exactly know how he is circumstanced, but I fear he is in debt. He has always been extravagant. I think it will be best to continue the allowance I have hitherto made him, of six hundred a year, for the present; and if he marries, or reforms, let him have thirty thousand

pounds."

"It shall be done exactly as you enjoin," said his wife, earnestly.

"Beyond the sum I have settled on you, Teresa," continued the old man, "I estimate my property at sixty thousand pounds. Of this one half is to go to Chetwynd, provided he reforms; the other half to Mildred, on her marriage, provided she marries with your consent. This house, with the plate, pictures, books, furniture, carriages, and horses, and all the lands attached to it, are yours – for life."

"Oh! you are too good to me!" she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears.

"I have now told you all!" he said. "I leave you mistress of everything; and; since you know my wishes, I am sure you will act up to them."

"I will! I will!" she ejaculated, in broken accents.

"Enough! I shall now die content!"

He then closed his eyes, and his lips slightly moved, as if in prayer.

Teresa constrained her emotion by a strong effort; and, for a few minutes, perfect silence prevailed.

The door was then softly opened by an elderly manservant, out of livery, who came to inform his master that Mr. Carteret had returned.

"Show him up at once, Norris," said Mr. Calverley, opening his eyes.

"His clerk is with him," said the butler.

"Show the clerk up as well," rejoined the old gentleman.

"Shall I withdraw?" asked Mrs. Calverley, as the butler retired.

"Perhaps you had better, my dear, till the will is signed," replied her husband.

Mrs. Calverley remained till the attorney appeared, and having exchanged a word in a low tone with him, left the room.

IV. FATHER AND SON

Tall and thin, and very business-like in manner, was Mr. Carteret. Sitting down quietly beside the old gentleman, and taking the will from his clerk, he proceed to read it.

Though conducted with due deliberation, the ceremony did not occupy many minutes, and when the attorney had finished reading the document, Mr. Calverley declared himself perfectly satisfied.

"All you have to do is to sign it, sir," said the attorney.

Accordingly, a small table was placed beside the invalid's chair, and the will was duly executed and attested.

"Pray call in my wife," said Mr. Calverley, as soon as this was done.

When Mrs. Calverley re-appeared, she was informed by her husband that the will was executed.

"Yes; the business is done, madam," observed Mr. Carteret, with a very singular expression of countenance.

"Shall I leave the document with you, sir?"

"No; take charge of it," replied Mr. Calverley.

"Well, perhaps, it will be best with me," observed the attorney, glancing at the lady as he spoke.

He was in the act of tying up the instrument preparatory to consigning it to his clerk, when the door opened, and Chetwynd and his sister came in.

The old gentleman looked greatly startled by the unexpected appearance of his son, and did not, for a few moments, recover his composure.

Scarcely knowing what might ensue, Mrs. Calverley stepped between them.

"I was not aware of your return, Chetwynd," said Mr. Calverley, as soon as he was able to speak.

"I have only just come back sir," replied his son, regarding him steadfastly. "I hope I have arrived in time to prevent you from doing an act of injustice to me and my sister?"

"You will have much to answer for, Chetwynd, if you agitate your father at this moment," interposed Mrs. Calverley. "You see what a critical state he is in!"

"I cannot help it, madam," rejoined the young man. "I must and will speak to him while he is able to listen to me. Pray, don't go, I beg of you, Mr. Carteret," he continued, to the attorney, who was preparing to follow his clerk out of the room. "It is proper you should hear what I have to say. I have reason to believe, sir," he added, to his father, "that you have left your entire property to your wife, and have made my sister and myself entirely dependent on her. If this is really the case, I entreat you to alter your determination – "

"I don't understand why you permit yourself to talk to me thus, Chetwynd," interrupted the old gentleman, his anger supplying him with strength. "At all events, I shall not tolerate it. Even supposing it were as you state, I have a perfect right to bequeath

my property as I see fit, and you have not proved yourself such a dutiful son as to merit consideration on my part. Wait till the fitting season, and you will learn what I have done."

"No, sir; I won't wait till your ears are deaf to my prayers! I *will* speak while you are able to listen to me. I may have given you some offence, but do not carry your resentment to the grave. Bethink you that whatever you do now will be irreparable."

"I cannot bear this!" cried the old man. "Take him away! He distracts me!"

"Mr. Chetwynd," said Carteret, "I am extremely reluctant to interfere; but your presence certainly disturbs your father very much. Let me beg you to retire!"

The young man showed no disposition to comply.

"Perhaps, Chetwynd, when I have spoken," said Mr. Calverley, trying to calm himself, "you will either go or keep silence. I have done what, on mature consideration, and with the prospect of death before me, I deem best for you and your sister; and I am certain my wishes will be most faithfully carried out."

"What you say, sir, seems to intimate that you have placed us entirely in the hands of your wife," cried his son. "Why should you compel us to bow to her will and pleasure?"

"Because she will take care of you," rejoined the old man; "and, though you are two-and-twenty, you have not come to years of discretion."

"That is your opinion, sir. But, granting it to be correct, does it apply to my sister?"

"Your sister makes no complaint," said his father, looking affectionately at her. "She knows I have done all that is right. She is in good hands."

"Yes, I am quite sure of that, papa!" cried Mildred. "Pray don't think about me!"

"Chetwynd," she added to him, in a low tone, "I wouldn't have brought you here had I imagined you would make this terrible scene!"

"I really must interfere to prevent the continuance of a discussion which I am aware can lead to no beneficial result," interposed Mr. Carteret. "I would again beseech you, Mr. Chetwynd, not to trouble your father! I know he has good reasons for what he has done. Have you anything further to say to me, sir?" he added to Mr. Calverley.

"Stop a minute, Mr. Carteret, I beg of you!" cried Chetwynd. "I am yet in hopes that I may move him. Let me make one more appeal to your sense of justice, sir!" he added to his father. "I promise you it shall be the last!"

"I cannot listen to you!" replied Mr. Calverley.

"You refuse, then, to alter your will?"

"Positively refuse!" rejoined the old gentleman. "For heaven's sake let me die in peace! Can you not prevail on him to go," he added to his wife and daughter. "He will kill me outright!"

"You hear what your father says!" cried Mrs. Calverley, in an authoritative tone. "Go, I command you!"

"Yes, I *will* go," rejoined Chetwynd; "but not at your bidding!

You are the sole cause of this misunderstanding between my father and myself. By your arts you have cheated me out of my inheritance!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Calverley.

"This is madness!" exclaimed Mr. Carteret, trying to drag him from the room.

"Hear my last, words, sir!" cried Chetwynd to his father. "I never will touch a shilling of your money if it is to be doled out to me by this woman!"

And he rushed out of the room.

V. THE OLD BUTLER

Pushing aside the attorney's clerk, whom he found on the landing, he hurried downstairs, and had just snatched up his hat in the hall, when he perceived the old butler eyeing him wistfully.

He had a great regard for this faithful old servant, whom he had known since he was a boy, so he went up to him, and patting him kindly on the shoulder, said —

"Good-bye, dear old Norris. I don't mean to remain a minute longer in my father's house, and I may never return to it. Farewell, old friend!"

"You shan't go out thus, sir, unless you knock me down," rejoined Norris, detaining him. "You'll do yourself a mischief. No one is in the dining-room. Please to go in there. I want to have a few words with you – to reason with you."

And he tried to draw him towards the room in question; but Chetwynd resisted.

"Reason with me!" he exclaimed. "I know what you'll say, Norris. You'll advise me to make it up with my father, and bow the knee to my stepmother; but I'll die rather!"

"Mr. Chetwynd, it's a chance if your father is alive to-morrow morning. Think of that, and what your feelings will be when he's gone. You'll reproach yourself then, sir, for I know you've a good heart. I've got you out of many a scrape when you were a boy, and I'm persuaded something may be done now, if you'll only

condescend to listen to me."

"Well, I'll stay a few minutes on purpose to talk to you. But I hear Carteret coming downstairs. I don't want to meet him. I don't want to meet anybody – not even my sister."

"Then I'll tell you what to do, sir. Go up the back staircase to your own room. It's just as you left it. No one will know you're here. I'll come to you as soon as I can."

And he almost forced him through a folding-door into a passage communicating with the back staircase.

Chetwynd had disappeared before the attorney and his clerk reached the hall; but Mr. Carteret stopped for a moment to speak to the old butler.

"Ah, we've had a frightful scene, Norris!" he said. "It will surprise me if the old gentleman survives it. I suppose Mr. Chetwynd is gone?"

"I really can't say, sir. He was here a few minutes ago."

"Looking rather wild, eh?"

"I'm sure he looked wild enough when he passed me just now," observed the clerk. "I thought he'd have thrown me over the banisters."

"Serve you right, too!" muttered Norris.

"Nothing could be more injudicious, and, I may add, more unfeeling, than his conduct to his father," remarked Carteret.

"I'm sorry to hear it," said the butler; "but you must make some allowance for him."

"I can make every allowance," rejoined the attorney. "But no

good purpose can be answered by such violence as he gave way to. On the contrary, irreparable harm is done."

"Not irreparable harm, I hope, sir?"

"I very much fear so. He used language towards Mrs. Calverley that I don't think she will ever forgive It's of the last importance that he should be set right with her. Should you see him before he goes, tell him so."

"I will, sir – if I *do* see him. There's master's bell. Excuse me; I must go upstairs."

"Don't mind me, Norris. I can let myself out. As I drive back, at Mrs. Calverley's request, I shall call on Doctor Spencer, and send him to see Mr. Calverley at once. That will save time."

"Very good, sir," replied the butler.

And he flew upstairs; while Mr. Carteret and his clerk went out at the front door.

"Has anybody just left the house, Edward?" inquired Mr. Carteret of his groom, who was waiting with the phaeton near the door.

"No, sir," replied the man.

"I fancied he was not gone," thought the attorney. "I am glad I spoke to Norris."

VI. SELF-EXAMINATION

Chetwynd had become more tranquillised since he entered the room that had once belonged to him – and that might be said to belong to him still – since it had always been kept for him.

A comfortable bed-chamber, with windows looking upon the garden. Night was now coming on, but it was still light enough to see every object in the room, and Chetwynd examined them with interest – almost with emotion.

The furniture was precisely the same he had left; the narrow iron bed, without curtains, and covered with an eider-down quilt – the easy-chair on which he used to sit and smoke – the books on the shelf and the prints on the walls, were still there, as of yore. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed.

When he last occupied that room Teresa was his father's ward, and believing himself in love with her, he indulged in dreams of future happiness – for there seemed no obstacle to their union.

Now, all was gone. Teresa had become hateful to him. Yet, somehow or other, her image was associated with the room.

Throwing open the windows, he looked out into the garden, and, after listening to the singing of the birds, sat down in the easy-chair, and tried to lay out a plan for the future.

Impossible! His mind was much too confused for the task. He could decide on nothing. Never having done anything during his life but amuse himself, he had no idea what he should have to do

when thrown upon his own resources.

Compelled to examine himself, he found his knowledge of business exceedingly limited. However, he had plenty of friends, and did not doubt they would help him to a situation of some kind.

The thought that most annoyed him was that he had well-nigh spent all his money. He had not enough to pay a passage to Australia.

At length, Norris made his appearance, and explained that he could not come sooner, having had a good deal to do in Mr. Calverley's room. Doctor Spencer had paid a visit to his patient, and had only just left.

"However, all is quiet for the present," said the butler, "and I will therefore beg you to come with me to my room, where I have got a little supper for you."

"I shall really be glad of it, Norris. I suppose we sha'n't meet any of the other servants?"

"No; I have taken care of that, sir," replied Norris.

In the butler's pantry, to which they repaired, they found a cold pigeon-pie and a bottle of claret on the table, and being very hungry, Chetwynd made a hearty meal.

"I'm sorry I cannot give you a very good report of what has been going on upstairs, sir," said the butler; "though your father is not so bad as I feared. He has been put to bed, and Doctor Spencer has seen him, as I told you. The doctor gave him some stimulant that helped to revive him, and has left a small phial

with Mrs. Calverley, from which she is to administer a few drops to him, as she may deem fit. I hope he may last out the night, and I think he will, for he seemed better when I left him just now. Heaven grant you may see him again, sir!"

"I despair of doing anything with him, Norris."

"Never despair, sir, – never despair!"

"Well, that's a good maxim. Extraordinary things have sometimes been done when all has been deemed hopeless. Fresh wills have been made almost *in extremis*. It may be so in my father's case, but I don't think it likely."

"You must remain in the house to-night, sir. It's your last chance."

"*Is* there a chance, Norris?"

"You shall judge for yourself, sir. When I was in your father's room just now, standing by his bedside, he spoke to me about you in a way that showed his good feelings towards you had returned. Evidently, he didn't want Mrs. Calverley to hear what he said; but she was in the dressing-room, though the door was partly open. He asked me, in a low voice, if you were really gone; and seemed much relieved when I told him you were still in the house, but begged me not to mention it to his wife. 'It may alarm, her, Norris,' he said. I couldn't say anything more to him at the time, for she came out of the dressing-room; but I shall have another opportunity to-night. Of one thing I'm certain, sir; but I shall have another opportunity to-night. Of one thing I'm certain, sir – you haven't lost your hold of your father's affections."

At this moment a slight sound outside caught Chet-wynd's ear.

Wishing to ascertain if there was a listener, he immediately got up, and, opening the door, looked along the passage right and left; but it was quite dark, and he could distinguish no one.

"It was a false alarm," he said, as he came back. "For the moment I fancied it might be Mrs. Calverley."

"No fear of that, sir; she never comes down here."

"Let us go back to my room. I shall feel easier there. After what you've told me, Norris, I shan't think of leaving to-night."

"That's the right thing to do, sir," cried the butler, joyfully.

"Bring the bottle of claret and the glasses with you, and come along," said Chetwynd.

VII. TERRIBLE SUSPICIONS

|In half a minute more they were in the old room upstairs

The blinds were drawn down, the candles on the chimney-piece lighted, the claret and glasses set on the table, Chetwynd was seated in an easy-chair, and old Norris had taken a place opposite him.

"Now, Norris," said Chetwynd, "I should like to ask you a few questions. In the first place, what is the matter with my father? Till I came here this evening I have never heard he was unwell. What is his complaint? What does Doctor Spencer say about him?"

"Doctor Spencer says it's a complete 'break up,'" replied the butler; "but I don't think he understands the case at all. Your father used to be a remarkably stout man for his years, as I needn't tell you, sir. I never recollect him having a day's illness till his marriage; and, indeed, he was as well as ever for three months, when he caught a cold, and then a very sudden change occurred, and I thought all would soon he over with him – but he rallied."

"Did he quite recover from his cold?"

"No, sir, he was much weakened, and didn't regain his

strength. He looked to me as if gradually wasting away."

"Why, so he was, I suppose, Norris. There is nothing but what is perfectly natural in all this; yet you seem suspicious."

"I hope he has been fairly treated, sir."

"Why should you think otherwise?"

"Because he has symptoms that I don't exactly like, sir."

Then lowering his voice, as if afraid to speak the words aloud, he added, "It looks to me almost like a case of slow poisoning!"

Chetwynd seemed horror-stricken at the idea.

"You must be mistaken, Norris," he said. "It cannot he. Whatever opinion I may entertain of the person it is evident you suspect, I am certain she is incapable of such a monstrous crime. Have you mentioned your suspicions to Doctor Spencer, or any one else?"

"I told Doctor Spencer I thought it a very strange illness, but he said there was nothing unusual in it – it was simply the result of a bad cold. 'It was quite impossible,' he said, 'that Mr. Calverley could be more carefully attended to than by his wife. She had really kept him alive.' I don't know what he would have said if I had ventured to breathe a word against her."

"Did you warn my father? It was your duty to do so, if you really believed he was being poisoned."

"My immediate discharge would have been the consequence," said Norris. "And how could I prove what I asserted? Doctor Spencer thought me a stupid old fool; my master would have thought me crazy; Mrs. Calverley would have thought a lunatic

asylum fitter for me than Ouselcroft; and Miss Mildred would have been of the same opinion. So I held my tongue, and let things go on. Had you been at home, sir, I should have consulted you, and you could have taken such steps as you deemed proper. But it is now too late to save him."

"If this were true it would be dreadful," exclaimed Chetwynd. "But I cannot believe it. It must have been found out. Doctor Spencer, who is a very clever, shrewd man, has been in constant attendance on my father, and must have been struck by any unusual symptoms in his illness, but he appears to have been quite satisfied that everything was going on properly. To make an accusation of this sort, with nothing to support it, would have been culpable in the highest degree, and I am glad you kept quiet."

"Still, I can hardly reconcile my conduct to myself, sir," said Norris; "but I fear I should have done no good."

"No; you would have done great mischief. I am quite certain you are utterly mistaken."

Norris did not seem to think so, but he made no further remark.

After a brief silence he got up, and said:

"I must now go up to my master's room, and see whether he wants anything. Perhaps I may find an opportunity of speaking to him."

VIII. DEATH OF MR. CALVERLEY

Left alone, Chetwynd revolved what the butler had told him; and on considering the matter, he came to the conclusion he had previously arrived at – that there was nothing whatever to justify the old man's suspicions.

"I cannot imagine how he has got such a notion into his head," he thought; "but, according to his own account, he has not a shadow of proof to support the charge. Besides, setting all else aside, there is no motive for such a crime. She could not wish to get rid of my father. Perhaps she might desire to come into the property, but, even if she were bad enough to do it, she would never run such a frightful risk. No, no, the supposition is absurd and monstrous!"

At this moment the very person of whom he was thinking came in, and closed the door.

In her hand she had a small lamp, but she set it down.

She looked very pale, but her manner was perfectly composed, though there was a slight quivering of the lip.

Chetwynd arose, and regarded her in astonishment.

"You need not be alarmed at my appearance," she said. "I have no unfriendly intentions towards you. I heard you were still here, and came to speak to you. I am anxious to prevent further unpleasantness. You are acting very foolishly. Why should you quarrel with me? Whatever you may think, I mean you well."

By this time Chetwynd had recovered from his surprise, and, regarding her sternly, said:

"I have no desire to hold any conversation with you, madam; but my conduct requires explanation. I was about to depart, but have been induced to remain for various reasons. I have learnt matters that have determined me to see my father again."

The latter words were pronounced with great significance, but did not seem to produce any impression upon Mrs. Calverley.

"I do not wish to prevent you from seeing him, Chetwynd, if you will promise to behave quietly," she replied.

"I cannot let him go out of the world in the belief that you have acted properly to him," said Chetwynd, fiercely.

"Then you shall not see him! Nothing you could allege against me would produce the slightest effect upon him, but you shall not disturb his latest moments."

"You dare not leave me alone with him – "

"No," she replied, in a severe tone, "because you cannot control yourself. In my opinion, you ought to ask your father's pardon for your manifold acts of disobedience, and if you do so in a proper spirit I am certain you will obtain it."

"You venture to give the advice," he said. "But have you yourself obtained pardon from my father?"

"Pardon for what?" she cried.

"For any crime you may have committed," he replied. "It is not for me to search your heart!"

"I disdain to answer such an infamous charge!" she rejoined,

contemptuously.

"Have you not shortened his days?"

"What mean you by that dark insinuation?" she cried.

"My meaning is intelligible enough," he rejoined. "But I will make it plainer, if you will."

A singular change come over her countenance.

But she instantly recovered, and threw a scornful glance at Chetwynd.

"What have you done to him?" he demanded.

"Striven to make his latter days happy," she replied, "and I believe I have succeeded. At any rate, he seemed happy."

"That was before his illness," observed Chetwynd.

"Since his illness I have nursed him with so much care that those best able to judge think I preserved his life. I saved him from all pain and annoyance, and his confidence in me was such that he has left all to my management."

"I know it, madam; and you have been in haste to assume the power, but it may be wrested from your hands!"

"Make the attempt," she rejoined, defiantly. "You will only injure yourself!"

Just then voices were heard outside that startled them both, and checked their converse.

"Great heaven, it is your father!" exclaimed Mrs. Calverley. "He has risen from the bed of death to come here!"

Next moment the door was thrown open, and the old gentleman came in, sustained by Norris.

A dressing-gown scarcely concealed his emaciated frame. His features had the most ghastly expression, and bore the impress of death. But for the aid of the old butler he must have fallen to the ground.

Behind him came Mildred, carrying a light.

"Why did you allow him to quit his couch?" cried his wife, in a voice of anguish.

"I remonstrated with him," replied Norris. "But I could not prevent him. He would come down to see his son."

"I likewise tried to dissuade him, but in vain," said Mildred,

"Chetwynd is here, is he not?" cried the old man. "I can't see him."

"Yes, I am here, father," he replied, springing towards him, and throwing himself at his feet. "Have you come to grant me forgiveness?"

"Yes, my son," replied the old man. "But first let me hear that you are reconciled to my dear wife – your stepmother. Answer me truly. Is it so?"

"Father!" hesitated Chetwynd.

"Stand up, my son," said the old man.

Chetwynd obeyed.

"Now, speak to me. Is there peace between you?"

"If you can forgive her, father, I will forgive her."

"I have nothing to forgive. She has been the best of wives to me, and is without a fault. These are my last words."

"Your blessing, father – your blessing!" almost shrieked

Chetwynd.

The old man made an effort to raise his hands; but strength and utterance failed him, and he fell dead into his son's arms.

END OF THE INTRODUCTION

BOOK THE FIRST – MILDRED

I. SUITORS

IMrs. Calverley had been nearly a year a widow

She was still at Ouselcroft, and apparently meant to remain there. No change whatever had been made in the establishment, and old Norris was still in his place.

The will had not been disputed, and the widow was in possession of her late husband's entire property.

She intended to allow Chetwynd six hundred a year, in accordance with his father's request, and instructed Mr Carteret to pay him the amount quarterly; but he peremptorily refused to accept any allowance from her, and ordered the money to be returned.

He had remained at Ouselcroft until after the funeral, and then went abroad. As may be supposed, no reconciliation took place between him and his stepmother.

Hitherto the fair widow had lived in perfect retirement with Mildred, and was only to be seen arrayed in deep mourning in Daresbury Church, in the vaults of which her husband was

interred; but she now began to pay visits, and receive her friends.

When Mildred re-appeared in society, after her temporary seclusion, she created quite a sensation.

We are afraid to say how many persons fell in love with her. She was still in mourning, of course, but her dark attire set off her fair tresses and exquisitely delicate complexion, and suited her slight graceful figure. Then her amiable and captivating manner heightened the effect of her charms, and rendered her almost irresistible.

During her father's lifetime she had been greatly admired, and was accounted, as we have said, the prettiest girl in Cheshire; but her beauty was more talked about now, and many a gallant youth thought himself excessively fortunate if he could obtain her hand for a waltz.

But Mildred was by no means a flirt, and had no desire to make conquests. On the contrary, she was a very quiet girl, and gave the herd of young men who beset her at balls and parties very little encouragement. She did not care to dance much, and would only dance with those who pleased her, or amused her.

There was no sort of rivalry between the lovely girl and her beautiful stepmother. That there were already numerous aspirants to the hand of the wealthy young widow was certain; but it was equally certain she was in no haste to take another husband. She, therefore, felt no jealousy of Mildred, but was delighted to see her admired and sought after, and would willingly have promoted any advantageous match.

Mildred, however, made some objection or other to all who were recommended to her. Thus, when Mrs. Calverley praised young Mr. Capesthorne, and said he would have a fine old Elizabethan mansion, with a park attached to it, and asked if he wouldn't do, the young lady replied that she admired Mr. Capesthorne's old house, but didn't care for him.

Again, when Colonel Blakemere, who was about to return to Madras, and wanted to take a wife with him, paid her marked attention, and got Mrs. Calverley to back his suit, Mildred settled the matter by declaring she would never go to India.

However, these were nothing as compared with what followed.

It never rains but it pours, and offers now came by the dozen.

Mrs. Calverley received a number of little notes, the writers whereof begged permission to wait upon her, intimating that they had an important matter to lay before her, and at the same time making some slight reference to Mildred, that left her no doubt as to their object.

Before replying to any of them, she consulted Mildred; and, having ascertained her sentiments, agreed to see a couple of them on a particular day, and within half an hour of each other.

On the appointed day she was alone in the drawing-room, seated in an easy-chair, and wondering who would appear first, when Mr. Vernon Brook was announced by Norris.

Mr. Vernon Brook belonged to a good old family, but was a younger son.

Dark, sallow-complexioned, and long-visaged, he piqued himself upon having a Vandyke face. To assist the expression, he scrupulously shaved his cheeks, and cultivated a pointed beard.

He had ridden over from his father's place, which was about ten miles off, and arrived in very good spirits, deeming himself sure of success.

Mrs. Calverley received him very graciously, and begged him to be seated. After a few words had passed between them, he came to the point.

"I've a question to ask you, my dear Mrs. Calverley, which I hope you will be able to answer in the affirmative. Your daughter – step-daughter, I ought to say – is a very charming girl, and I want to know if I have your permission to pay my addresses to her?"

He said this in a very easy manner, and as if quite certain the response would be favourable.

Mrs. Calverley's looks rather discouraged him.

"I must be allowed to consider THe matter, Mr. Brook," she replied. "My late husband entrusted his daughter entirely to my care, and I cannot allow an engagement to take place unless I feel sure it would conduce to her happiness."

"But this would not amount to an engagement, my dear madam, though it might lead to one – at least, I hope so."

"It will be best to come to a clear understanding at first, Mr. Brook. I think it right to say that I see no objection to you. You have many agreeable personal qualities, and are

unexceptionable in regard to family, but I am not exactly aware of your expectations."

Vernon Brook's dark cheek coloured, and he rather hesitated. He was not prepared for such a point-blank question.

"I am a younger son, as you are aware, Mrs. Calverley," He said; "and, like most younger sons, my expectations are not very great."

"I may as well speak frankly, Mr. Brook," she rejoined. "He who aspires to Miss Calverley's hand must bring a corresponding fortune. He must have a thousand a year, or a prospect of it."

"I am sorry to say I have neither the one nor the other, but I hope my want of fortune may not be a bar. I think we could be very happy together."

"Possibly; but the days of romantic marriages are over, and only exist in novels. I have dealt with you very fairly, Mr. Brook. Miss Calverley, as I have said, was left to my care by her father, and I shall act for her as he would have acted."

"But I have reason to believe Mr. Calverley would not have made it a *sine qua non* that a suitor to his daughter should be a man of property."

"You have been misinformed, Mr. Brook. No one can be so well acquainted as myself with my late husband's intentions."

"Then I am not to hope?"

"It would be useless, sir."

Mr. Vernon Brook arose, and was reluctantly preparing to depart, when Norris announced Sir Bridgnorth Charlton.

Thereupon he hurriedly bade Mrs. Calverley adieu, bowed stiffly to the new-comer, and made his exit.

II. SIR BRIDGNORTH CHARLTON

Sir Bridgnorth Charlton, Baronet, of Charlton Hall, in. Staffordshire, a very fine place, was a person of considerable importance. He had been a member for the county, and was still a zealous politician. That he had not married earlier in life was owing to a disappointment he experienced, which had deeply affected him and caused him to remain a bachelor.

In age Sir Bridgnorth was not far from sixty, still handsome, though rather portly, and exceedingly gentlemanlike in manner. He had seen Mildred at a county ball, and, being much struck by her resemblance to his former love, the old flame was revived, and he determined to offer his hand.

Accordingly, he wrote to Mrs. Calverley, as we have explained.

Sir Bridgnorth had never been in Ouselcroft before, and after a few observations on the beauty of the grounds, he said:

"You will, no doubt, have conjectured why I have done myself the honour of waiting upon you, ma'am?"

Mrs. Calverley slightly moved.

"You have a very lovely step-daughter. It is not necessary for me to launch into her praises; but I may say I have only seen one person in the course of my life who has charmed me so much. That person would have been my wife had she not jilted me and wedded another. Miss Calverley shall be Lady Charlton if she

will accept me.

"You do us great honour, Sir Bridgnorth!" observed Mrs. Calverley.

"I don't know whether I am right, ma'am," he pursued; "but I prefer making this offer through you, instead of direct to the young lady, as you can put an end to the affair at once, if you think proper. I needn't enter into any particulars. You know my position; you know what sort of place I have got you know I can make a good settlement on my wife, as well as give her a title. The main question is – will Miss Calverley have me? Is she wholly free? for I would not, for the world, interfere with any other engagement. I have suffered too much myself not to be careful. I am not foolish enough to persuade myself she can love me; but I believe I could make her a very good husband, and hope she would be happy. I am quite sure she would be indulged."

He said this with an honest, manly sincerity, that produced a strong effect upon Mrs. Calverley.

In a voice of some emotion, she remarked, "My own husband, as I needn't tell you, Sir Bridgnorth, was considerably older than myself, and no one could be happier than I was with him."

"You encourage me to hope, madam, that the disparity of years may not prove an objection. Supposing the young lady to be entirely disengaged, may I be permitted to see her?"

"Most certainly, Sir Bridgnorth! I would much rather she answered for herself than I should answer for her. Ah! I see her in the garden! If you will step out with me to the lawn I will

present you to her!"

Sir Bridgnorth willingly complied, though he felt some little internal trepidation. A variety of emotions agitated him.

Mildred was at the further end of the lawn, but she came to meet them, and he thought her even more charming in her simple morning costume than in evening dress.

"I had the pleasure of seeing you at the ball at Stafford the other night, Miss Calverley," he said, after the presentation had taken place. "You interested me exceedingly from the striking resemblance you bear to a young lady to whom I was tenderly attached in former days. I will tell you that little story some time or other should you desire to hear it. Meantime, it may suffice to say that I was actually engaged to her, but she threw me over for a better-looking man, and married him. It was a severe blow, and I did not recover it for a long time. I made up my mind never to marry, and for five-and-twenty years adhered to my determination. But see what our resolutions are worth! The sight of you dispelled mine in a moment! As I gazed at you, my youth seemed to return. I felt as much enamoured as I had done before, and it was with difficulty I could prevent myself from going up to you and saying, 'Behold your lover!'"

"I am very glad you didn't, Sir Bridgnorth," said Mildred.

"I knew you would think me a madman!" he continued; "and fearing I might be guilty of some indiscretion, I would not even be introduced to you. But I watched you throughout the evening, and your image has haunted me ever since. Feeling that my

happiness is at stake, I have come here to plead my cause in person, and have just spoken to Mrs. Calverley. Now you know all."

"Not quite all, my love," said Mrs. Calverley. "I am bound to add, that, in making his proposal to you through me, Sir Bridgnorth has behaved in the handsomest manner."

"I am convinced of it," said Mildred; "but – "

"Do not crush my hopes at once," cried Sir Bridgnorth, in alarm. "Give me the chance of winning your affections. I don't desire an immediate answer."

"But I am very fickle myself, Sir Bridgnorth, and extremely liable to change my mind. You shall have no reason to complain of me as you do of your former love."

"I don't complain of her," he said, in a quiet tone.

"Then you are extremely forgiving; for, in my opinion, she used you shamefully."

"You must not say a word against her," exclaimed Sir Bridgnorth.

"Why not?" inquired Mildred, in surprise.

"For an excellent reason," he replied. "She was your own mother."

Mildred could scarcely repress a cry.

"I thought as much," said Mrs. Calverley. "Your fair inconstant was the beautiful Annabella Chetwynd, my husband's first wife."

"Exactly so," said Sir Bridgnorth. "I never beheld her since her

marriage," he added, to Mildred. "No wonder, therefore, your appearance produced such an effect upon me. For a moment I thought she had come to life again. I shall always take an interest in you, and shall always be delighted to serve you. Since I cannot be your husband, you must allow me to be a friend."

"That offer I gladly accept, Sir Bridgnorth," she replied, extending her hand towards him.

He took it, and pressed it to his lips.

"You may rely upon me, as you could have done upon your own father," he said, with an earnestness that bespoke his sincerity. "Call on me when you will, I will answer the appeal. And now farewell!"

"I hope you are not going, Sir Bridgnorth," said Mrs. Calverley. "Pray stay and spend the remainder of the day with us! I am charmed to make your acquaintance."

"I shall be quite grieved if you go, dear Sir Bridgnorth." added Mildred.

"Since you ask me, I cannot refuse," he replied. "But my carriage is waiting at the door."

"I will give orders that it shall be put up immediately," said Mrs. Calverley. "It is so kind of you to stay."

And she went into the house to give the necessary directions.

III. INQUIRIES

Mildred now felt quite at ease with Sir Bridgnorth. His manner towards her was so kind, that she almost began to regard him in the light of a father.

"Excuse me if I ask you a few questions relative to your brother Chetwynd," he said. "I am influenced by no impertinent curiosity, but simply by the desire to ascertain if I can be of any service to him. I am aware that a serious misunderstanding occurred between him and Mrs. Calverley at the time of your father's death; and I have also heard that he absolutely refuses to accept any allowance from her."

"What you have heard is quite correct, Sir Bridgnorth," replied Mildred. "Mrs. Calverley desires to allow my brother six hundred a year, and has instructed Mr. Carteret, her solicitor, to pay him the amount quarterly; but he declines to receive the money, being excessively indignant that my father should have left her the entire control of his property."

"But what has become of your brother? What is he doing?"

"I really cannot tell you, Sir Bridgnorth," she replied. "He came here just before poor papa's death, and remained till after the funeral; but he shut himself up in his own room, and saw no one except old Norris, the butler, who is still with us. I had no idea he was going away so suddenly, for he did not acquaint me with his intention, or even take leave of me, or I would have

tried to dissuade him from the step, though I fear I should have been unsuccessful. His mind seemed a good deal disturbed by painful circumstances that had occurred – chiefly, if not entirely, of his own causing – and I dreaded to excite him still farther. I have since reproached myself for my lukewarmness, but I acted under the advice of Doctor Spencer. After his abrupt departure, he wrote to me from an hotel in London, saying he was going abroad, and in all probability should not return for two or three years; but Mr. Carteret found out that he was still in town, and sent him a cheque for three hundred pounds. The cheque was returned at once, accompanied by a letter, stating that he would accept nothing from Mrs. Calverley."

"His conduct is inexplicable!" said Sir Bridgnorth. "But I suppose some effort has been made to communicate with him?"

"Every effort has been made, but without any satisfactory result. He left the hotel I have mentioned with the expressed intention of going abroad. Whether he really did so, we have been unable to discover. We fear he has no resources. We know from Norris, whom he took into his confidence while he was here, that he had very little money."

"That is dreadful!" exclaimed Sir Bridgnorth. "He was pointed out to me a year or two ago, at Ascot, and I thought him a remarkably fine young man; but I was told he was very wild and extravagant – played and betted heavily."

"He has been very extravagant, Sir Bridgnorth. Poor papa paid his debts more than once, but could never keep him in bounds.

That was the reason why he left him dependent upon mamma."

"So I understood," said Sir Bridgnorth; "and I think he did quite right."

"I am sure he acted for the best," replied Mildred; "and I am quite certain Mrs. Calverley would have carried out papa's intentions had she been able, but Chetwynd thwarted their designs by his fiery and ungovernable temper. Heaven knows what will become of him!" she exclaimed, the tears starting to her eyes. "It makes me very unhappy to think of him."

"I fear I have distressed you," observed Sir Bridgnorth, much touched. "Perhaps I ought not to have spoken?"

"I thank you sincerely for talking to me about my poor brother," she replied. "I may appear indifferent to him, but I am not so. I love him dearly, and would do anything for him. But I know not how to proceed. Such is the peculiarity of his temper – such his pride, that if I could find him, he would accept nothing from me if he thought it came from Mrs. Calverley. Even if he were starving, he would refuse aid from her."

"Well, I must try what I can do," said Sir Bridgnorth. "He can have no antipathy to me. The first thing is to discover where he is. I will see Carteret, and hear what he has to say."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Sir Bridgnorth!" cried Mildred, with effusion. "You are, indeed, a father, both to poor Chetwynd and myself!"

Just then Mrs. Calverley reappeared.

"No more on this subject before mamma, I pray, Sir

Bridgnorth!" said Mildred. "It would be painful to her."

"I will be careful." he replied.

Mrs. Calverley came to say that luncheon was ready. And they went into the house with her.

IV. PORTRAITS

The more Sir Bridgnorth saw of Mildred, the better pleased he was with her

Mrs. Calverley did not produce quite so favourable an impression upon him, though he thought her very beautiful, and very clever. She seemed to him wanting in heart – perhaps designing.

Taking this view of her character, he came to the conclusion that she had married Mr. Calverley for his money, and possibly might have alienated him from his son.

Three or four of Mildred's admirers called during the afternoon, and they all seemed surprised at finding Sir Bridgnorth so much at home at Ouselcroft. They could not believe that Mildred had accepted him – yet it looked rather like it.

The young lady, however, did not trouble herself much about them; but, leaving them to stroll about the garden with Mrs. Calverley, she took Sir Bridgnorth to the library, telling him she wanted to show him a picture.

It was the portrait of a very handsome young man, painted by a well-known artist of the day. The features were regular and finely formed, and very haughty in expression. The likeness was

excellent, and Sir Bridgnorth recognised it at once.

"'Tis your brother Chetwynd," he said, "and wonderfully like him. I should have known it anywhere."

"He was extremely handsome then," observed Mildred; "but I fear he must be much changed now. At that time, he thought he should have all his father's property, and expected to marry the beautiful Teresa Mildmay."

"Yes; I know the story," said Sir Bridgnorth, "and do not wonder at his vexation at the double disappointment. He has suffered much for his hasty temper. Things look very dark just now; but let us hope all may come right in the end."

She then drew his attention to another picture. "Your father. Yes; I see. Time was, when I should have turned away from his portrait; but I have quite forgiven him now."

"Since poor papa's death, Mrs. Calverley cannot bear to look at that portrait," remarked Mildred. "But for my entreaties she would have it put away, and she now rarely enters the room."

"That is not surprising," said Sir Bridgnorth. "The portrait awakens painful memories."

"But I am always pleased to look at it, and I loved papa dearly!" said Mildred. "I often come here by myself, and think I am with him."

At this juncture, their discourse was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the very last person they expected to see.

V. THE POCKET-BOOK

It was Chetwynd.

He looked pale and haggard, and his features had a sombre and stern expression, very different from that depicted in the canvas before them.

He closed the door after him as he came in, and started on perceiving Sir Bridgnorth, whom he evidently had not expected to find there.

Uttering an exclamation of mingled surprise and delight, Mildred sprang towards her brother, and flung her arms round his neck. While returning her embrace, he said in a low voice, "Who have you got with you?"

"Sir Bridgnorth Charlton," she replied. "He takes great interest in you, and has just been making inquiries about you."

"Not many minutes ago, I told your sister it would give me sincere pleasure if I could render you any service," said Sir Bridgnorth. "I did not expect so soon to have an opportunity of saying the same thing to you. I beg you will look upon me as a friend."

"I am greatly beholden to you, Sir Bridgnorth," replied the young man. "I have very few friends left."

"Mine are not mere idle professions, as you will find, if you choose to put them to the proof," said Sir Bridgnorth.

"You speak so earnestly and so kindly that I cannot but credit

what you say," rejoined Chetwynd; "and I am the more inclined to believe you, since I have never done you a favour. Indeed, if my recollection serves me right, you have more reason to dislike than to befriend me."

"Your sister will tell you that the past is forgotten."

"Sir Bridgnorth has a noble heart," said Mildred. "You may speak freely before him. He knows all that has occurred, and is aware that you have refused to accept any allowance from Mrs. Calverley."

"And I may add that I sympathise with you," said Sir Bridgnorth.

"What has brought you back so suddenly?" said Mildred. "Are you in any difficulty?"

"In a most desperate difficulty," he replied. "I want two hundred pounds, and must have the money by to-morrow morning. I could procure it at once from Carteret; but I would rather shoot myself than accept a farthing from Mrs. Calveriey. Can you help me?"

"*I* can," interposed Sir Bridgnorth, quickly. "Luckily, I have the amount about me. In this pocket-book," he added, producing one as he spoke, "you will find the sum you require. Repay me at your convenience."

"A thousand thanks, Sir Bridgnorth?" cried Chetwynd. "You have, indeed, conferred a very great obligation upon me, and I shall not speedily forget it. Ere long, I hope to be able to return you the money."

"Don't trouble yourself on that score; but let me see you soon. Come to me at Charlton."

"I cannot promise to visit you immediately, Sir Bridgnorth," replied the young man.

"Why not?" inquired Mildred.

"Do not ask me to explain," he rejoined. "I am scarcely my own master, and where I to make a promise, I might not be able to fulfil it. I must now begone."

"Stay!" cried Sir Bridgnorth; "can I not bring about a reconciliation between you and Mrs. Calveriey? I think I could accomplish it, if you will consent to some arrangement."

"Never," replied Chetwynd. "And I beg that my visit and its object may not be mentioned to her."

"How did you discover I was in this room?" asked Mildred.

"Old Norris, whom I saw on my arrival, told me I should find you in the library, and I concluded you were alone; but I have found a friend as well. And now I can answer no more questions."

"Ever mysterious and incomprehensible!" cried Mildred. "I do not like to part with you thus."

"You must!" he rejoined. "It is necessary that I should be in London to-night."

He then bade them both farewell, tenderly embracing his sister, and renewing his thanks to Sir Bridgnorth.

Just as he was about to depart, the door was opened by old Norris, who called out, "Mrs. Calverley is coming to the library!"

"I won't see her!" cried Chetwynd, fiercely.

But there was no retreat, and he was compelled to remain.

In another moment, Mrs. Calverley appeared. Her astonishment at beholding Chetwynd may be imagined; nor, though she strove to veil it, could she altogether conceal her annoyance.

"I did not expect to find you here, Chetwynd," she said.

"I came to see my sister, madam," he replied, haughtily; "and, having had a brief interview with her, I am now about to depart."

And, with a stiff bow, he quitted the room.

As soon as she could recover her speech, Mrs. Calverley observed to Sir Bridgnorth, "You see with what impracticable material I have to deal. Any friendly overture on my part is always scornfully rejected. Well, Chetwynd must take his own course; and if he suffers for his wilfulness, he has only himself to blame. Do you feel at liberty to tell me what he came about, Mildred?"

"I do not," she replied.

"You were present at the interview, I suppose, Sir Bridgnorth?"

"Quite unintentionally, madam," he answered. "And my lips are sealed."

This incident rather threw a damp upon the pleasure of the day.

Mrs. Calverley looked displeased, and Mildred appeared anxious and thoughtful, so Sir Bridgnorth ordered his carriage.

But before taking his departure, he had a little private conversation with Mildred, and promised to come over again to

Ouselcroft on an early day.

VI. BRACKLEY HEATH

Mrs. Calveriey had a very pretty pony phaeton, which she was accustomed to drive herself. Easy as a lounging-chair, and with the two long-tailed bay ponies attached to it, the luxurious little vehicle formed a very nice turn-out.

One fine morning, about a week after Sir Bridgnorth's visit, Mrs. Calverley and Mildred set out in the pony phaeton with the intention of calling on Lady Barfleur and her daughter, at Brackley Hall, which was about six or seven miles from Ouselcroft.

Usually, they were attended by a groom, but on this particular occasion he was left at home.

The ponies were full of spirit, and eager to get on, but the ladies would not indulge them, and proceeded quietly along the pleasant lanes, through a rich and fertile district, abounding in farms, where some of the best cheeses in the county are made.

To reach Brackley Hall, however, they had to cross an extensive heath, a great part of which was very wild and marshy.

But this brown and uncultivated tract, where turf alone was cut, and where there were two or three dangerous swamps, offered the charm of contrast to the rich meadows they had just quitted. Here there were no farm-houses, no cow-sheds, no large bams, no orchards; but the air was fresh and pleasant, and lighted up by the brilliant sunshine, even Brackley Heath looked well. At

least, our fair friends thought so, and the ponies were compelled to walk in consequence. Yet there was nothing remarkable in the prospect, as the reader shall judge. The whole scene owed its charm to the fine weather.

On the left the heath was bordered by the woods belonging to Brackley Hall, and, through a break in them, the upper part of the fine old timber and plaster mansion could be descried.

On the right the country was flat and uninteresting, planted in places by rows of tall poplars, and a canal ran through it, communicating with the River Mersey.

In front, but at some distance, rose a hill crowned by the ruins of an old castle, and having a small village and grey old church in the immediate neighbourhood.

In bad weather the heath had a dreary and desolate aspect. Here and there a hut could be perceived, but these miserable habitations were far removed from the road, and might have been deserted, since no smoke issued from them, and nothing could be seen of their occupants. A few sheep were scattered about in spots where the turf was covered with herbage; but they seemed wholly untended. Rooks there were in flocks from Brackley Park, plovers, and starlings. Even seagulls found their way to the morass.

While the ladies were contemplating this scene, which they thought highly picturesque, and commenting upon its beauties, they were startled, and indeed terrified, by the sudden appearance of two formidable-looking fellows, who had been

watching their approach from behind an aged and almost branchless oak that grew near the road.

Evidently, from their peculiar garb, tawny skin, black eyes, and raven locks, these individuals were gipsies. They did not leave their purpose in doubt for a moment, but rushing towards the ladies with threatening gestures, shouted to them to stop.

Mrs. Calverley tried to whip on the ponies, but before they could start off they were checked by one of the gipsies, who seized the reins, while his comrade, addressing Mrs. Calverley, demanded her whip, and, as she hesitated to give it up, he snatched it from her, and threw it on the ground.

"Excuse my freedom, my lady," he said, in accents meant to be polite, but that sounded gruff and menacing. "We can't allow you to go till we've had some talk with you; but we won't detain you longer nor we can help. We wants any money you may have about you, together with ornaments, rings, watches, ear-rings, and sich like. Deliver 'em up quietly, and you won't be molested – will they, Ekiel?"

"No," replied the other ruffian, who stood at the heads of the ponies. "It would hurt our feelin's to use wiolence to two sich lovely creaters."

Meanwhile, Mildred, who wished to preserve her watch, which had been given her by her father, was trying to detach it from the guard, but could not accomplish her object without attracting the attention of the gipsy near Mrs. Calverley.

Dashing round to the other side of the carriage, he caught hold

of the chain, and broke it, but failed to secure the watch.

Mildred screamed loudly, though she had little expectation of help.

"Look quick, Clynch!" shouted Ekiel, in a warning voice.

"Give me the watch without more ado!" cried the gipsy to Mildred.

But she spread her hands over it, and redoubled her outcries.

"Here, take my purse and begone!" said Mrs. Calverley.

"Thank ye, my lady," rejoined Clynch, quickly appropriating the purse. "But that's not enough. We must have everything you've got about you!"

"You shall have nothing more, fellow!" cried Mrs. Calverley, with great spirit. "And see! assistance is at hand! If you stay a minute longer you will be caught!"

And, as she spoke, a gentleman was seen galloping towards them, followed by a groom.

Baulked of their prey, the gipsies ran off, and made for the morass, with the intricacies of which they seemed well acquainted.

A minute or so afterwards their deliverer came up. A fine-looking young man, between twenty and thirty, and having decidedly a military air, but a stranger to them both.

VII. CAPTAIN DANVERS

"I hope you have lost nothing, ladies?" cried the stranger

"The robbers have taken, my purse," replied Mrs. Calverley; "and but for your timely aid, they would have carried off all our ornaments."

"My chain is gone," said Mildred. "But I don't mind it. They did not get my watch, which I value extremely. I owe its preservation entirely to you, sir," she added, with a grateful look at the stranger.

"I am happy to find I have been of any service to you," he replied, bowing. "Follow the rascals, Tom," he added to his groom, "and try to capture one or both of them."

"Impossible, I fear, captain," replied the groom. "They can go where no horse can go in that marsh, if they know the ground, as they seem to do. But I'll do my best."

And he speeded after the fugitives, who were still in sight.

"Hold the reins for a minute, Mildred, while I pick up my whip," said Mrs. Calverley.

"Allow me!" cried the stranger.

And, jumping down from the saddle, he presented the whip to Mrs. Calverley, who gracefully acknowledged the attention.

"We are really very much indebted to you, sir," she said.

"You greatly overrate the service," he rejoined. "I have literally done nothing. Hearing cries, and perceiving you were stopped by robbers, I galloped on to your aid – that is all."

"May we learn the name of our deliverer?" she asked.

"I am Captain Charles Danvers," he replied; "nephew to Sir Lycester Barfleur, of Brackley Hall, which you can see through the trees yonder. But I dare say you know the place?"

"We were on our way thither, to call on Lady Barfleur, when we met with this alarming adventure," observed Mrs. Calverley.

An idea seemed suddenly to occur to Captain Danvers.

"Are you not Mrs. Calverley, of Ouselcroft?" he inquired.

She replied in the affirmative; adding, "And this is my step-daughter, Miss Calverley."

"I felt convinced of it!" he cried, again bowing. "I am indeed fortunate in obtaining an introduction to a young lady of whom I have heard so much."

"You can pay compliments as well as rescue ladies from robbers, it seems, Captain Danvers," observed Mildred, slightly blushing. "We should have met you, I have no doubt, at Brackley Hall."

"Very likely," he rejoined. "But I prefer an accidental meeting of this kind; it is more romantic. I hope you are not going to turn back. If you are, you must allow me to escort you. But they will be delighted to see you, I am sure, at Brackley, and you can recount your adventure to them."

"And extol your gallantry at the same time, Captain Danvers," laughed Mildred. "I have quite recovered from my fright, mamma, so I think we may as well go on."

"Do, by all means!" cried Captain Danvers, vaulting on his horse.

Mrs. Calverley assented; and they were just setting off, when the groom was seen returning, so they waited until he came up.

"I see you have failed, Tom," said his master.

"Yes, captain," replied the man, touching, his hat. "I'm very sorry, but it was no use attempting to follow them. I should have got over head and ears in a quagmire."

"Immediate information of the robbery must be given to the police at Frodsham," said Captain Danvers.

"It is scarcely worth while to take any more trouble about the matter," said Mrs. Calverley. "My purse had very little in it."

"And I don't care much for my chain, since my watch is safe," added Mildred.

The party then set off, but not at a very quick pace, for Captain Danvers rode by the side of the pony-carriage, and chatted with its fair occupants.

VIII. BRACKLEY HALL

Captain Danvers lias already been described as a handsome young man of about five-and-twenty, and it may now be added that he was tall, well-made, and had marked features – the manly character of his physiognomy being heightened by his brown moustaches.

A dark velveteen shooting-coat, boots of supple leather, that ascended to the knee, where they were met by a pair of knickerbockers – loose, Dutch-looking trousers – formed his costume, while his brown curling locks were covered by a black felt hat. Such as it was, the dress suited him, and both ladies thought it very becoming.

Captain Danvers was in a cavalry regiment, which was quartered at Madras, and he had recently come home on leave. His father, Sir Gerard Danvers, resided at Offham Court, in Kent, and was thought very wealthy. Unluckily Charles Danvers was not an eldest son.

The party had now entered the park, and were proceeding along a fine avenue leading to the house, which stood right in front of them.

Brackley Hall, which was in admirable preservation considering its great antiquity, dated back to the period of Edward the Fourth, or even earlier.

Constructed almost entirely of timber and plaster, it was

remarkable for the singularity of its form. It was only three storeys high, the upper storey projecting far beyond the lower, but the summit of the building was occupied by a lofty gallery, more than a hundred feet in length, that looked externally like a lantern, since it had continuous ranges of windows on every side.

Most curious was the timber-work, the gables and lintels being richly carved, as was the porch. The immense bay windows, which constituted the chief beauty of the house, were framed with heavy transom bars, and exquisitely latticed.

In the court-yard was a chapel, surmounted in olden times by a tall, square tower, but this had been taken down.

The hall was surrounded by a moat, and approached by a wide stone bridge. Another bridge communicated with the gardens, which were extensive, and laid out in a quaint, formal style, with terraces, stone steps, fountains, quincunxes, clipped yew-trees, alleys, and a bowling-green. We must not omit to mention that the old mansion had the reputation of being haunted.

Adjoining the house was a grove of noble elms, wherein a colony of rooks had been settled for centuries.

About half a mile off, at the rear of the mansion, was a small lake, or mere, remarkable for the blackness of its water. But black as was the mere, it abounded with fish, and at certain times of the year was a great resort of wild fowl.

Captain Danvers had sent on his groom to the hall to inform Sir Leycester and Lady Barfleur that Mrs. Calverley was coming on to call on them, and also to explain what had occurred.

Consequently, when the ladies had crossed the bridge and entered the court, they found Sir Leycester and Lady Barfleur, with the fair Emmeline, waiting to receive them, and they had no sooner alighted than they were overwhelmed with expressions of sympathy. Some of the servants who were assembled in the court seemed likewise greatly excited.

Sir Leycester, an old fox-hunter and rather choleric, was excessively wroth, and vowed he would never rest till he had caught the rascals. He had no idea whatever, he said, that the country was infested with such vermin, but catch them he would. Mrs. Calverley endeavoured to dissuade him from his purpose, but in vain. "I only waited to see you, or I should have been off before," he said. "You'll excuse me quitting you so abruptly, since I am going on your business."

"But I'd much rather you didn't go, Sir Leycester," said Mrs. Calverley. "I'm afraid the gipsies may offer a desperate resistance."

"I'm sure they will," added Mildred.

"No matter; I'll have them!" rejoined Sir Leycester.

"If you really are going on this gipsy-hunt, my dear uncle, I'll go with you," said Captain Danvers.

"No, no; I don't want you, Charles," rejoined Sir Leycester. "Remain with the ladies. You must stay till I return, my dear Mrs. Calverley."

She promised that she would; and, after a word or two with Lady Barfleur, he proceeded to the stables, and ordered a hunter

to be saddled immediately. He also told Booth, the coachman, on whom he could place reliance, that he should require him and a couple of grooms to attend him.

While the horses were being saddled, a footman brought a brace of pistols, which Sir Leycester had sent for.

Armed with these, and accompanied by Booth, and one of his own grooms, together with his nephew's groom, Tom, he set out on the expedition, shaping his course towards the further side of the morass, where he expected to find some traces of the robbers.

IX. LADY BARFLEUR

Lady Barfleur had been a very fine woman in her day, and though her beauty was now somewhat passed, she was still a stately dame, and accorded extremely well with the old mansion of which she was mistress.

The drawing-room, to which she conducted her visitors, was a very splendid apartment, and merits a brief description.

The ceiling was adorned with pendants, and the upper part of the walls was covered with a profusion of plaster ornaments, among which were the arms of Elizabeth and James the First. The dark oak wainscoting was richly carved in arches and pilasters, producing a very fine effect.

The principal feature of the room, however, was the magnificent fireplace. Rising to a great height, it was adorned with pillars and sculptured figures that supported the architrave, above which were emblazoned the arms of the Barfleurs.

The furniture was consistent with the antique character of the room – none of it being of a later date than the early part of the seventeenth century.

As Lady Barfleur moved slowly and somewhat stiffly about this noble apartment, or seated herself in a high-backed chair, carved in oak, black as ebony, she looked as if she belonged to the same date as the furniture; and her hair, having become prematurely grey, aided the illusion.

Not so Emmeline. She was a very charming representative of the young lady of our own period.

An exceedingly pretty brunette, she had splendid black eyes, shaded by long silken lashes, and arched over by finely-pencilled brows, lovely features, ripe red lips, and teeth like pearls – and, as she was very lively, the latter were often displayed.

She was not tall, but her figure was symmetry itself, and Cinderella might have envied her tiny feet. She was about the same age as Mildred, and they were great friends.

At first, the discourse turned chiefly upon the robbery, which Lady Barfleur begged might be fully described to her; but it was soon changed to other topics.

For awhile, Captain Danvers seemed undecided whether to devote himself to the beautiful and wealthy widow or her lovely step-daughter; but at length he began to pay exclusive attention to the former, probably because she gave him most encouragement. Indeed, Mrs. Calverley seemed more favourably inclined towards him than to any other suitor since her husband's death.

Captain Danvers, it appeared, had only arrived at Brackley a few days previously, and this accounted for his not having met the ladies of Ouselcroft before.

Whether Mildred was altogether pleased by having him carried off in this manner, we will not say. Not the slightest sign of annoyance was manifest. She laughed and chatted gaily with Emmeline; and when that young lady proposed that they should go and look at the gallery, she readily assented, and left Mrs.

Calverley in quiet possession of the handsome captain.

X. THE GALLERY

Ascending a beautiful spiral oak staircase, the two young ladies soon reached the gallery, which, it has already been mentioned, was situated at the top of the house.

Like all the other rooms in the old mansion, the gallery was maintained in its original state. At all events, it had undergone no alteration since 1570, as appeared from an inscription above the door.

Exceedingly light and cheerful, as might be expected from the multitude of windows, it seemed of immense size. It had a wooden roof – the rafters being painted; and the panels were covered with tapestry, or hung with family portraits. In the room were several curious old cabinets.

"I am always charmed with this gallery," exclaimed Mildred, as she gazed around it in admiration. "If I lived here, I should spend all my time in it."

"You would get tired of it," rejoined Emmeline. "For my part, I prefer my own little chamber, with its carved oak bedstead, and beautiful bay-window."

"Yes, your room is very pretty, but not to be compared with this grand gallery."

"The gallery is too large to be pleasant," said Emmeline. "Indeed, I rarely come here, unless we have company. But do sit down. I want to have a little private and confidential talk with

you."

"I hope you have some affair of the heart to communicate," said Mildred, as she sat down on an old-fashioned sofa, covered with Utrecht velvet, and just large enough for two, while Emmeline placed herself beside her, and took her hand.

"You must know, then," began Miss Barfleur, "that two or three years ago I had a *tête-à-tête* with a very handsome young man. We were seated on this very sofa. Mamma and several other persons were present, but they were too far off to overhear what passed."

"That is one advantage of a very large room," remarked Mildred. "But I am sorry this *tête-à-tête* occurred so long ago. I hope it has been renewed.

"No; and I fear it never will be renewed," sighed Emmeline. "But I have not forgotten it."

"Did it come to a positive proposal?" inquired Mildred.

"Not exactly; but if the gentleman *had* proposed I am sure I should have accepted him; and I feel I never can love any one else."

"You think so now. I suppose he is still unmarried?"

"Shortly after the interview I have mentioned, he was engaged to another person; but the engagement was broken off, and he is now free."

"Have you seen him again lately?"

"Not for a long, long time, Mildred; but I love him still, despite his inconstancy, and I should like to know something about him."

"Emmeline," said Mildred, regarding her fixedly, "you are not referring to my brother Chetwynd?"

"To whom else could I refer?" was the reply. Mildred uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I perfectly remember Chetwynd speaking of you in rapturous terms," she said, "and telling me he had had a strong flirtation with you in the gallery at Brackley Hall, but I had no idea you were at all serious on the occasion. Oh, what a chance of happiness he has missed! Had he been fortunate enough to possess you, how different would have been his life!"

"I loved him!" said Emmeline, with emotion; "and I don't believe Teresa Mildmay ever did."

"I entirely agree with you," remarked Mildred. "I have listened to your recital with the deepest interest, dearest Emmeline, and I wish I could give you a good account of Chetwynd, but I really cannot. I saw him the other day, but only for a few minutes."

"At Ouselcroft?" inquired Emmeline, eagerly.

"Yes. He came there quite unexpectedly, and left immediately."

"I am afraid his hasty departure doesn't look as if he had made up his quarrel with Mrs. Calverley."

"Alas! no; and I greatly fear he never will become reconciled to her. Perhaps you are aware he won't accept anything from her?"

"Yes; and I admire his spirit."

"Still he is very foolish. He is punishing himself, not her."

"But he adhered to his word. I shouldn't like him half so much if he yielded."

"Then your regard won't be lessened, for I feel certain he won't yield."

"I judged him rightly, you see," said Emmeline; "and I persuade myself he will triumph in the end. And now, dearest Mildred, before we finish our discourse, will you faithfully promise to let me know when you next see him or hear from him?"

"I won't delude you, Emmeline. I don't expect either to see him or hear from him. Sir Bridgnorth Charlton has very kindly undertaken to look after him, but he may not have an opportunity of doing so. Unlike anybody else, Chetwynd seems to shun those who love him or would serve him."

"I hope he won't shun me," said Emmeline.

"Not if he could be made aware that you take an interest in him; but how convey the information? He does not correspond with me, and I don't even know his address, or what way a letter could reach him."

"Then I must remain in the same state of uncertainty as ever," said Emmeline, in a despairing tone. "You give me small comfort, Mildred."

"I pity you from my heart, dearest Emmeline; but comfort you I cannot."

For a moment, Emmeline seemed overpowered by emotion. She then found relief in tears, and her head dropped on Mildred's

shoulder.

"Think of him no more – think of him no more!" cried Mildred. "He does not deserve your love, I, his sister, say so."

Emmeline made no response, but continued to sob.

Neither of them were aware that Lady Barfleur had entered the gallery.

Greatly surprised at what she beheld, her ladyship stood still. Fortunately she did not hear the words uttered by Mildred, so she could only guess at the cause of this sudden outburst of grief.

At length she announced her presence by a slight cough, and Mildred perceived her.

"Calm yourself, dearest girl," she whispered to Emmeline. "Your mother is here."

"Here!" exclaimed Emmeline, looking up. "Yes, I see. Can she have heard anything?"

"I think not. But be calm, or you will betray yourself!"

Thereupon they both arose, and Emmeline did her best to repress her emotion, and succeeded in forcing a smile.

"You will scold me, mamma, when you learn that I have been so foolish as to weep at a very pathetic story told me by Mildred," she said.

"I am glad to find it is nothing serious," replied Lady Barfleur.

"Have you come to tell us that papa has captured the gipsies?"

"No; he has not yet returned," replied Lady Barfleur. "I came to let you know that Mrs. Calverly and Captain Danvers have gone to the garden. Perhaps you may like to join them there."

"Shall we, Mildred?"

"By all means," was the reply. "I shouldn't think I had been at Brackley unless I had had a stroll in the delightful old garden."

"Don't wait for me; I'll follow," said Lady Barfleur.

Glad to escape further questioning, the two delinquents flew down the spiral staircase, and hastened to the garden.

XI. WHAT PASSED IN THE GARDEN

|Do you know, Mrs. Calverley, I have never been at your place, Ouselcroft, and I hear it's uncommonly pretty."

This remark was made by Captain Danvers, as he was seated by the side of the charming widow on a bench near one of the fountains.

"Come and see it, and judge," she replied. "We shall be at home to-morrow."

"Give me the greatest pleasure to ride over," he said. "A country place is charming; but I almost wonder you haven't got a house in town."

"I think of taking one," she replied. "Mildred has never been in town – never resided there, I ought to say. Her papa objected to noise and racket – didn't care for the parks or the Opera, and disliked large parties. I don't think he could have stood a season in town. I prefer quietude and the country myself. However, Mildred ought to be considered, and as she wishes to mix a little more with society than she is able to do here, we shall go to London for a time."

"'Pon my soul! you're exceedingly kind," cried the captain.

"Miss Calverley is blessed with a most indulgent mamma – 'sister,' I was going to say, but I recollected myself in time."

"I shall make her as happy as I can, so long as she remains with me," replied Mrs. Calverley. "When my late husband entrusted his daughter to my care, he knew I should do my duty to her."

"And your first duty," he remarked, with a smile, "is to get her well married. That will be easily accomplished, for I hear there are many *prétendants.* No wonder! – she is a most lovely creature."

"And will have a very good fortune," said Mrs. Calverley. "I make no secret that I mean to give her thirty thousand pounds as a marriage portion." Captain Danvers was astounded. If she was to have such a fortune as this, he began to think he had better turn his attention to the step-daughter. He endeavoured to look indifferent, but Mrs. Calverley perceived that the remark had told, as she intended it to do.

"You are the most generous of your sex, Mrs. Calverley," he observed. "Few women, circumstanced as you are, would make so great a sacrifice."

"I don't consider it a sacrifice, Captain Danvers. I regard it as a duty. I simply represent her father. What he would have done, I shall do."

"I cannot withhold my admiration of conduct as rare as it is praiseworthy," said the captain. "I repeat, you deserve infinite credit for your generosity. But Mr. Calverley, I believe, left a son as well as a daughter? What will he say to this magnificent

portion?"

"He has no voice in the matter," replied the lady. "My husband left the entire control of his property to me."

"A wise man! – a very wise man!" cried the captain.

"Chetwynd Calverley has been very wild and extravagant," said the widow. "It was necessary, therefore, to tie up the property."

"Quite necessary! – quite proper!" remarked the captain. "Though I shouldn't like it myself," he thought. "Is Chetwynd satisfied with the arrangement, may I ask?"

"Very much the reverse," she replied. "But that is immaterial."

"He doesn't know what is good for him," said the captain. "None of us do," he mentally ejaculated.

"Then you approve of the course I am about to pursue, Captain Danvers?"

"Entirely, my dear madam – entirely," he replied. "I think it most judicious."

"And now you have asked me a good many questions, let me ask you one in return?" said Mrs. Calverley.

"Delighted to answer any questions you may put to me," he replied, wondering what she was going to say.

"But don't answer this, unless you like," she observed.

"Let me hear it," he rejoined, fearing something unpleasant was coming.

"How is it that your lovely cousin, Emmeline, has not married? I know she has had several very good offers."

"'Pon my honour, I can't tell. I fancy – but mind its only fancy – she has had some disappointment."

"I should think that scarcely possible," observed Mrs. Calverley. "Why, she is an only child, and will be a great heiress!"

"Well, that's the only solution I can give of the mystery. I know Lord Bollington proposed to her, and I know my uncle would have liked the match to take place, but the young lord was refused."

"Possibly she has an attachment," observed Mrs. Calverley, thoughtfully. "If so, it's a great pity."

"Here she comes, with Miss Calverley," said Captain Danvers, as the two young ladies were seen advancing along the terrace.

XII. BRACKLEY MERE

|By this time, all traces of tears had disappeared, and Emmeline's dark eyes looked lustrous as ever

Judging from her lively manner, no one would have dreamed that she nourished a secret attachment. But she kept it carefully locked up in the recesses of her heart, and had no confidante except Mildred.

Captain Danvers rose to meet them, but Mrs. Calverley retained her seat.

"We shall see now how he acts," she thought.

He did not leave her long in doubt. He immediately began an animated conversation with Mildred, and kept by her side as they walked round the garden, leaving Emmeline to amuse Mrs. Calverley.

No doubt the handsome captain could make himself extremely agreeable if he chose, and he now exerted himself to the utmost, and succeeded.

Having expatiated upon the beauty of the formal old garden they were surveying, and saying how much he preferred it to the landscape style, he turned the discourse to the amusements and gaieties of London, and soon found that Mildred was really anxious to spend a season in town; whereupon he expressed the

greatest satisfaction, as he should frequently have an opportunity of meeting her.

By this time Lady Barfleur had made her appearance, and as she could report nothing of Sir Leycester, she suggested a visit to the mere.

"It is a nice shady walk there through the wood," she said; "and if you have not seen the mere, I think you will be struck by it."

"Not by its beauty, mamma," remarked Emmeline, "but rather by its blackness."

"Well, such blackness as that water boasts *is* a beauty," said Captain Danvers. "In my opinion, the mere is well worth seeing."

"There are all sorts of legends attached to it," said Emmeline. "Amongst others, there is a superstition, that when anything is about to happen to our house, a great piece of black oak, that has been sunk for ages at the bottom of the lake, floats to the surface."

"An idle story," remarked Lady Barfleur.

"You excite my curiosity," said Mrs. Calverley. "I should like to see this mysterious lake."

"You must excuse my accompanying you," said Lady Barfleur. "Captain Danvers will conduct you there."

"With the greatest pleasure," said the captain. "I hope you will go too, Miss Calverley?"

"Oh, of course!" she replied.

So they all set off, with the exception of Lady Barfleur, who rarely got beyond the garden.

In a very few minutes, they had plunged into a wood, through which a narrow road led to the mere.

In some places, the path was overarched by trees, and the branches formed a delightful screen on that hot day.

Captain Danvers led the way with Mildred, and the path being only wide enough for two, the others were obliged to follow. As the wood seemed to inspire such a tone, his accents became low and tender.

Suddenly they burst upon the lake in all its sombre grandeur. The water looked intensely black, but when examined, it was found to be perfectly clear. The broad expanse was surrounded by trees, which, in some instances, advanced beyond the bank.

The surface of the mere was unruffled, for not a breath of wind was stirring, and reflected the trees as in a mirror. Occasionally, however, a fish would leap up, and the smooth water was, for a moment, rippled.

But the effect of the scene was not cheerful. An air of gloom brooded over the place, that impressed the beholder with melancholy. Both Mrs. Calverley and Mildred acknowledged the feeling.

At the point where the visitors had approached it, the lake was shallow, and occupied by a large bed of reeds and bullrushes; but, at the opposite extremity, the water was profoundly deep, and supposed, by the common folk, to be unfathomable.

On the left, and not far from where they stood, was a boat-house, and Captain Danvers offered to row them to the further

end of the lake, so that they might have an opportunity of completely surveying it.

The proposal was gladly accepted.

Repairing to the shed, they embarked in a large flat-bottomed boat, better adapted for fishing than moving rapidly through the water.

However, it answered the purpose. Captain Danvers took the sculls, and contrived to get Mildred next him. The clumsy craft moved slowly on, and was now and then stopped that the ladies might look around.

As they drew near the lower end, the lake seemed to become darker, and the trees that shut it in assumed a yet more sombre appearance.

Here it was deepest.

Captain Danvers was tugging at the sculls, but still making very slow progress, when the boat struck against something in the water that gave it a great shock.

The captain ceased rowing, and looking round to see what he had come in contact with, to his surprise and consternation, he beheld the blackened trunk of a huge oak.

Hitherto, the dusky mass had scarcely appeared above the surface, but on being thus forcibly struck, it rolled round in such manner as to display its enormous bulk, and then gradually sank.

All three ladies saw the ill-omened piece of timber at the same time as Captain Danvers.

Uttering a cry of fright, Emmeline stood up, and, pointing to

it, exclaimed:

"'Tis the black oak I told you of. One of my father's house is doomed!"

The others looked aghast, but spoke not. Even Captain Danvers seemed struck dumb.

Without a word, he turned the boat's head, and began to row back.

While he was moving round, Emmeline sat down, and covered her eyes, to shut the hideous object from her view.

"It is gone," said Mildred, in a low tone. "Try not to think about it."

"I ought to think about it," rejoined Emmeline, scarcely above her breath. "It is a death-warning!"

"But not to you, dearest girl," said Mildred.

"I would rather it applied to me than to those I love," she returned.

Silence prevailed among the party till they landed. No more jesting on the part of the captain. He looked very gloomy.

When they got out of the boat, he tried to cheer up his fair cousin, but did not succeed.

They walked back quietly to the Hall, where a painful surprise awaited them.

XIII. PURSUIT OF THE GIPSIES

Sir Leycester Barfleur, as we have shown, had ridden with his attendants to the further side of the morass, where he hoped to intercept the gipsies in their flight, but he could discover nothing of them.

Posting himself with Booth, the coachman, on a little mound near the marsh, he sent off the two grooms to the huts previously mentioned, to ascertain whether the fugitives had taken refuge there; but his emissaries brought him no satisfactory intelligence, and it was the opinion of the turf-cutters who inhabited the huts that the gipsies had gone off altogether.

Sir Leycester, however, felt convinced that the rascals were somewhere about, and ordered his men to make a careful search, directing the turf-cutters to assist them.

Again they were all at fault.

Sir Leycester next tried the wood that skirted the heath, and sent the men on by different routes, fixing a place of meeting in the heart of the thicket..

He himself pursued the main road, attended by Booth.

"It's a pity we didn't bring those two Scotch deerhounds with us, Sir Leycester," observed the coachman. "If the gipsies have taken shelter in this wood, – we shall never be able to find 'em without a dog of some sort."

"I believe you're right, Booth," replied Sir Leycester. "I don't

like hunting men in that way. But what's to be done, if we can't catch them otherwise?"

"It's the only sure plan," rejoined Booth. "We're wasting time now."

"Well, go and fetch the hounds," said Sir Leycester. "Ride to the keeper's lodge as fast as you can. If Rushton shouldn't be at home, go on to the Hall; but use despatch."

"Shall I bring Rushton with me, as well as the hounds, Sir Leycester?" inquired Booth.

"Ay, do," replied the baronet.

"And a bloodhound?" asked the coachman, with a grin.

Sir Leycester signified his assent, and Booth galloped off.

He had scarcely started, when the baronet regretted the last order given, and called out to him not to bring the bloodhound.

Booth, however, was out of hearing.

Sir Leycester then proceeded to the centre of the wood, keeping a sharp look-out on either side as he rode along.

The others had already arrived at the appointed spot, but had nothing to tell.

The baronet felt very much inclined to swear; but, just at the moment, a burly farmer, named Marple, who used to hunt with him, came up, mounted on a well-bred horse.

On hearing what was going on, Marple told the baronet he had just seen a couple of gipsies, who appeared to be hiding on the banks of the Weever, and offered to take him to the exact spot.

"No doubt they are the rogues you are looking for, Sir

Leycester," he added.

"No doubt of it!" cried the baronet, joyfully. "Come along!"

He then rode off with Marple, taking the two grooms with him, and leaving the turf-cutters behind, to wait for Booth and the hounds.

The river Weever described a wide half-circle round the east side of the wood, the spot referred to by Marple being about half a mile off.

As they rode at a rattling pace, they were there in a few minutes; but when they approached the river, they proceeded cautiously.

If the gipsies had not decamped, they felt sure of catching them, the Weever being here very deep, while there was no bridge within a mile.

But, cautiously as they came on, they had been descried, and perfectly understanding their design, the gipsies were endeavouring to escape by creeping along the bank of the river, which was here bordered by willows.

Having got nearly to the end of this screen, the fugitives stopped, determined, if hard pressed, to make for the adjoining wood, and being both extremely fleet, they had no doubt of accomplishing their purpose.

XIV. THE BLOODHOUND

It soon became manifest to the gipsies that their pursuers were following them, and searching carefully about among the willows; and they were still more alarmed by the report of a pistol, discharged by Sir Leycester, with the view of rousing them from the covert.

Accordingly, they dashed off; and so busily were their pursuers occupied, that a minute or two elapsed before their flight was discovered.

A piece of ground, level as a village green, and a couple of meadows, lay between them and the desired place of shelter, and they had gained the first hedge, and were scrambling through it, when they were perceived by Sir Leycester, who instantly shouted a view-halloo, and the whole party started in pursuit.

But not without reason had the gipsies reckoned upon their own speed.

Before Sir Leycester and his attendants cleared the first obstacle, they had leaped a five-barred gate, and were flying across the second field.

In half a minute more they had plunged into the thicket, and fancied themselves secure.

Sir Leycester, on the other hand, who was close at their heels, knew very well they had run into the trap and chuckled at the thought of their speedy capture.

Causing his companions to disperse, he went towards the centre of the wood, expecting to find Booth with the keeper and the hounds.

Meanwhile, the gipsies, being well acquainted with the thicket, made their way to its inmost recesses, where the brambles and underwood would render it difficult, if not impossible, for the horsemen to follow them.

They heard Marple and the others on their left and right, pushing their way through the trees, and vainly endeavouring to get near them. They, therefore, felt quite safe; the only unpleasantness being that they might be detained there till night.

But this feeling of security was quickly dispelled by some sounds they did not at all like. They first heard voices at a distance, accompanied by the crackling of small branches, announcing that some persons on foot were searching for them, and Ekiel remarked, in a low tone, to his comrade:

"Why, that's Ned Rushton, the keeper's voice. We're not safe here, if he's after us."

"Keep quiet," muttered Clynch. "He mayn't come this way."

Shortly afterwards, a low, ominous growl, not to be mistaken by the experienced, reached their ears, and filled them with alarm.

"Ned has got a bloodhound with him, Ekiel," said Clynch. "We must kill the brute! Have you got your Spanish knife with you?"

"Ay! but I daren't attack that hound."

"Give me the knife, then! I'll do it!" cried Clynch. "We must get out of this place as quickly as we can, and run for life."

"Run where?" demanded Ekiel.

"To the marsh," replied Clynch. "That's our only chance."

"That devil of a dog has taken all my strength out of me."

"Don't be afeared of him!" cried Clynch, unclasping the cuchillo, the point of which was as sharp as a needle.

Just then, a long bay proclaimed that the hound had got the scent, while the voice, stated by Ekiel to be that of Ned Rushton, was heard encouraging him.

The gipsies set off; but had not gone far when the formidable hound burst upon them through the underwood.

Quick as lightening, Clynch turned, and dropping on one knee, faced the enemy with the cuchillo in his hand.

For a moment, the hound fixed upon him a red, deep-seated eye, and then sprang at his throat.

But Clynch, whose gaze had never quitted the terrible animal, received him on the point of the knife, and drove the deadly weapon to his heart. With a fierce yell, the hound fell back.

Having thus liberated himself from his formidable foe, Clynch was making off, when Ned Rushton appeared.

Exasperated by the slaughter of his favourite, he discharged both barrels of his gun at the flying gipsy, but without effect. The shot rattled over the head of the fugitive, but did him no harm. Clynch quickly overtook his comrade; and, as soon as the ground became clear of underwood, they speeded off towards

the morass.

XV. THE DEERHOUNDS

|Meanwhile, Sir Leycester had not been idle

He had sent off Ned Rushton with the bloodhound to unkennel the gipsies; but would not allow the other hounds to be unleashed.

However, when he heard the shouts, and caught sight of the fugitives, one of them with a bloodstained knife in his hand, running towards the morass, he shouted to Booth to loose the dogs, and, cheering them on, started in pursuit.

The deerhounds quite understood their business, and rushed after the gipsies at a tremendous pace, followed by Sir Leycester, who vainly endeavoured to keep up with them.

Marple, Booth, and the two grooms likewise joined in the exciting chase.

After a good run, Ekiel dropped; and as the hounds had to be pulled away from him, the incident caused a short delay, that enabled Clynch to reach the morass.

There was for no time hesitation, so he took the first path that offered – a narrow footway that seemed to lead towards the middle of the bog.

He soon found he had made a bad choice, for the path grew narrower, and the ground became soft.

But the deerhounds were after him, and behind them came Sir

Leycester, who had ventured to ride along the pathway, in spite of the warning shouts of Marple and the others.

Clynch ran on a little further, and then stood at bay, preparing to defend himself against the deerhounds with the cuchillo, which he had never relinquished.

At this juncture, Sir Leycester's horse missed his footing, and slipped into the bog, and in the effort to recover himself, threw his rider over his head, completely engulfing him.

Cries of consternation arose from all who witnessed the accident; but they could render no assistance.

Marple, who had all along been apprehensive of disaster, flung himself from his horse, and hurried to the spot; but only to find that the unfortunate baronet had disappeared.

"Call off these dogs, and I'll help you to get him out!" shouted Clynch.

In the hope of saving the baronet's life, Marple complied; and as soon as he was safe from attack, the gipsy flung away the knife, and, setting to work, did his best.

But his help was of no avail. The horse was got out; but Sir Leycester had sunk, and could not be found.

Plenty of other assistance soon arrived. Booth, the coachman; Ned Rushton, the keeper; the turf-cutters – all were there.

But though every effort was made, and every available appliance used, more than an hour elapsed before the body could be recovered.

It was then conveyed to the Hall – Marple having gone on

before, to break the sad intelligence to Lady Barfleur.

END OF THE FIRST BOOK

BOOK THE SECOND – THE HEIRESS OF BRACKLEY HALL

I. THE LAST OF THE OLD CHESHIRE SQUIRES

A terrible sensation was caused at Brackley Hall when tidings were brought there of the fatal accident that had befallen its owner. Sir Leycester had been an excellent master, and was beloved by all his household, and their regrets for his loss were heartfelt.

Lady Barfleur was completely stunned by the shock. Marple endeavoured to break the sad intelligence to her gradually; but his countenance and accents betrayed him.

Rising from the sofa on which she was seated, she seized him by the arm, and commanded him to tell her the truth.

Thus interrogated, he felt compelled to give a direct reply. But he regretted doing so, when he saw the effect his words produced upon her. She looked aghast, placed her hand on her heart, and, then, with a half-stifled cry, sank upon the sofa.

Marple had taken the precaution to station a female servant at the door; and he now summoned her to her mistress. Lady Barfleur had fainted.

Emmeline did not hear of the direful event till she returned from the lake; and she then instantly bethought her of the death-warning she had received. She managed to restrain her emotions till she reached her own room, whither she was accompanied by Mildred, who was almost equally shocked, and then gave way to a paroxysm of grief.

Mrs. Calverley was likewise much distressed. She could not help reproaching herself as being, in some degree, the cause of the accident; though she had endeavoured to dissuade the unfortunate baronet from pursuing the gipsies.

Feeling certain, under the present afflicting circumstances, that Emmeline would not be willing to part with Mildred, she settled in her own mind that the latter should remain with her friend for a few days. Moreover, she herself would spend the night at Brackley, if she could be of any use to Lady Barfleur. Such were her mental resolves.

Hitherto, she had remained in the garden. She now went into the house. It was all in confusion, the servants appearing quite scared. There was no one to whom she could speak, for Captain Danvers had gone off to the marsh.

The drawing-room was deserted. Nothing was changed there. But how different the noble room looked in her eyes from what it had done in the morning! Its splendour seemed dimmed. The great emblazoned shield over the mantelpiece looked like a hatchment.

After gazing round for a few minutes, she sat down.

Melancholy thoughts intruded upon her. Perhaps, even feelings of remorse assailed her. But we shall not search her bosom. She began to feel some disquietude at being left so long alone, and wondered why Mildred did not come down to her. Possibly, she could not leave Emmeline.

Suddenly, her attention was roused by a disturbance in the entrance-hall, that seemed to betoken an arrival.

What it was she could not fail to conjecture.

Trampling of feet, as if caused by men bearing a heavy burden, and muttered voices, were heard. Then followed other sounds, almost equally significant, the opening and shutting of doors, and the congregating of servants in the hall.

She waited for some minutes, in the expectation of being summoned, but as no one came near her, she went forth.

The hall was empty, but the dining-room door stood open, and at it was stationed the butler.

The man had a very sorrowful countenance indeed. He bowed gravely as she approached, and motioned her to enter the room.

A very touching spectacle was presented to her gaze.

On a large carved oak table, covered with a crimson cloth, and placed in the centre of the apartment, was laid the body of the unfortunate baronet.

It was partially covered by a cloak; and the stains from the swamp in which he had been engulfed had been carefully removed from his face and grey locks. Strange to say, his features were not changed, but seemed to wear their customary kindly

expression.

Around were grouped the different members of the household, all of whom looked deeply afflicted, and some of the female servants were weeping bitterly.

On one side stood Ned Eushton, with two of his helpers, behind him. Rarely did Ned's manly visage exhibit such grief as it wore on this sad occasion. After gazing steadfastly at his late kind-hearted master for some minutes, he cast down his eyes, and did not raise them again till the moment of departure.

On the other side stood Marple, who, though burly of frame, was as soft-hearted as a woman. He deeply lamented Sir Leycester, and well he might, for the baronet had ever been a good friend to him.

At the end of the apartment stood Captain Danvers, a quiet but not unmoved spectator of the scene. If his grief made little outward show, it was not the less deep and sincere. He was strongly attached to his uncle, from whom, indeed, he had some expectations, that might never now be realised.

But the principal figures in this touching picture have yet to be described.

Emmeline and Mildred were kneeling down in prayer, at the back, when Lady Barfleur entered the room. She had nerved herself, as she thought, for the ordeal; but on catching sight of the body, she uttered a cry that thrilled all who heard it, rushed up to her dead husband, clasped her arms round his neck, and fell with her head upon his breast.

No one ventured to remove her; and she was still in this attitude when Mrs. Calverley entered the room.

The dark oak ceiling, the dark oak panels, the dim windows, harmonised with the sombre character of the picture, which made an ineffaceable impression upon Mrs. Calverley.

The scene suggested many reflections.

In the room, where for many years he had exercised unbounded hospitality, and where his ancestors had feasted before him, lay the last male representative of the ancient house of Barfleur.

Sir Leycester had had a son, who died when quite young, and the title was now extinct. All the late baronet's estates and possessions would go to his daughter and sole heiress. But Emmeline thought not of the wealth she had thus suddenly acquired. She thought only of the irreparable loss she had sustained in the death of the father who had treated her with constant tenderness and affection, and whom she dearly loved.

But if no selfish thoughts occupied her, reflections somewhat akin to them occurred to one near to her, who well knew how she was circumstanced. Mrs. Calverley knew that Emmeline was her father's sole heiress, and looked upon her as a very important personage, over whom it would be desirable to obtain an influence. Such influence could be easily acquired by Mildred, to whom, it was evident, Emmeline was strongly attached.

Mrs. Calverley knew much, but there was one important matter of which she was totally ignorant. How could she have

been aware that Emmeline cherished a secret attachment to Chetwynd?

The picture we have attempted to describe remained undisturbed for a few minutes, when the new-made widow recovered from the swoon into which she had fallen.

As soon as she could, Mrs. Calverley, who had come up, gently raised her, and helped her to quit the room. Emmeline and Mildred arose and followed.

Captain Danvers remained till the household had withdrawn, and then held a consultation with the butler, to whom the entire management of the house had been entrusted for the present by Lady Barfleur.

As Mrs. Calverley had foreseen, Emmeline would not part with Mildred; and she herself remained till the following day, having despatched a messenger to Ousel-croft with a note to her housekeeper, explaining matters, and desiring her to send back some things that she and Mildred required.

Passing over the dreary interval that comprised the inquest, and the examination and committal of the gipsies, we shall come on to the funeral, to which a great number of important personages – relatives, connexions, and friends of the deceased baronet – had been invited.

Sir Gerard Danvers, of Offham Grange and his eldest son Scrope, Charles's brother, arrived at Brackley Hall on the eve of the sad ceremonial.

Up to this time, Lady Barfleur had not quitted her room;

but she could not refuse to see her brother and nephew, and she, therefore, dined with them. It was a *triste* party, as may be imagined, for her ladyship's presence cast a gloom over it. Emmeline looked ill; Mildred was out of spirits; and Mrs. Calverley, who had come over that afternoon, had to supply the conversation. Both Sir Gerard and Scrope thought her very charming.

Scrope was about thirty, tall, thin, dark-complexioned, and by no means so handsome as his brother; but he was exceedingly gentlemanlike, and would be very rich, and that was much in Mrs. Calver-ley's opinion; so she took some trouble to please him.

It was with difficulty that Captain Danvers could maintain a grave exterior. Mr. Carteret, the solicitor, who had acted professionally for Sir Leycester as he had done for Mr. Calverley, had been over that day; and when the will of the deceased baronet was examined, it was found he had left his nephew Charles five thousand pounds. Impossible, after such a windfall as this, that the captain, who was not over-burdened with cash, could look very dull.

Members of some of the oldest and best Cheshire families – Egerton, Cholmondeley, Leigh, Venables, Vernon, Brereton, Mainwaring, Davenport, and others – attended the funeral.

Sir Bridgnorth Charlton, who had been an old friend of the deceased baronet, was likewise invited, and came.

Before the funeral *cortège* set out, Sir Bridgnorth took an opportunity of speaking to Mildred, and said he would call upon

her in a few days, as he had something to tell her respecting Chetwynd.

Sir Leycester was not interred in the little chapel in the court of the old Hall, where some of his earlier ancestors reposed, but in his family vault in the neighbouring church of Brackley, and was borne thither, according to custom, on the shoulders of the tenantry. Sir Gerald Danvers and his two sons followed on foot, with a long train of mourners composed entirely of the deceased baronet's retainers. The carriages of the important personages we have mentioned closed the procession.

A word respecting Sir Leycester ere we lose sight of him for ever.

Not inappropriately, he might be termed the last of the Cheshire squires, since he left none behind who so completely answered to the description of that traditional character.

He seemed to belong to another age – a ruder but manlier age than our own. Yet Sir Leycester, though sometimes coarse and careless of speech, could be most courteous.

His ancestors had always been loyal – always true to the Stuarts. Brackley Hall had held out against the Parliamentarians in the time of Charles the First, and Sir Chandos Barfleur was killed at the siege. His son Delves was just as faithful to the king's fortunes, and lost part of his property; but it was restored by Charles the Second, and again jeopardised in 1715. Circumstances prevented Sir Wilbraham Barfleur from joining the Rebellion of '45. From this date the Barfleurs became loyal

to the reigning family.

Born in the latter part of the last century, Sir Leycester belonged to that epoch rather than to the present. He retained the manners of his sire and grandsire, and thus became a type of the old school – a type that has now completely disappeared.

In look, bearing, physiognomy, costume, manner, he differed from the present generation. But there was no better gentleman, no cheerier companion, no stauncher friend, no better rider to hounds, than Sir Leycester Barfleur, the last of the old Cheshire squires.

II. A CONSULTATION

About a week after the funeral, Sir Bridgnorth Charlton rode over to Brackley Hall, in fulfilment of his promise to call on Mildred

Lady Barfleur was not well enough to appear; but Emmeline and Mildred, who had been impatiently expecting his visit, received him in the drawing-room.

They were attired in deep mourning; and, though there was no personal resemblance between them, they looked like sisters.

After some inquiries respecting Lady Barfleur, and messages of condolence to her, Sir Bridgnorth looked at Mildred, who interpreted his glance correctly, and said:

"You may speak freely of Chetwynd before Miss Barfleur, Sir Bridgnorth. She takes great interest in him."

"A very great interest," added Emmeline. "I hope you bring us some news of him?"

"Very little," replied Sir Bridgnorth. "And what I do bring is not satisfactory. You desire me to speak plainly about your brother, Miss Calverley?"

"Most certainly!" she replied.

"Well, then, you may remember, when I accidentally met him

at Ouselcroft, I gave him a pocket-book, containing a certain sum of money?"

"I am not likely to forget your kindness," replied Mildred.

"It appears there was rather more in the pocket-book than I thought," pursued Sir Bridgnorth – "bank notes to the amount of three hundred pounds. I mention this, because your brother has most scrupulously repaid me the exact sum, of which he kept a memorandum."

"He behaved like a man of honour!" cried Emmeline.

"Undoubtedly. But I did not want the money back. I want to assist him. I want him to come to me – to talk to me."

"Will he not do so?" said Mildred.

"I fear not. I suspect he is still in difficulties."

"If so, he must be got out of them, and you must manage it, Sir Bridgnorth," said Mildred.

"But I can't manage it, my dear young lady. I don't know where to find him."

"But he *must* be found!" cried Emmeline.

"Easily said; but not so easily accomplished," rejoined Sir Bridgnorth, smiling at her vivacity. "I have used every endeavour, but can obtain no clue to him."

"Is he in London?" asked Mildred.

"I believe so," he replied.

"Surely then he can be discovered?" she remarked.

"I have not succeeded in discovering him, that is all I can say," rejoined Sir Bridgnorth. "And I have really taken a great deal

of trouble in the business. He has been remarkably successful in hiding himself."

"Do not keep anything back from me, I pray you, dear Sir Bridgnorth!" said Mildred. "Is he without resources?"

"I cannot imagine so," he replied. "He must have had some funds to enable him to repay me, unless – " and he paused.

"Unless what?" said Mildred.

"You enjoin me to speak the truth," replied Sir Bridgnorth; "and I will do so at the hazard of giving you and Miss Barfleur pain. My idea is that he has lost money at play. Mind, I have no proof of what I assert. It is simply conjecture."

"I fear you are right, Sir Bridgnorth," said Mildred, heaving a deep sigh.

"In your opinion, Sir Bridgnorth," said Emmeline, who had listened anxiously to the discourse – "in your opinion, I say, has Chetwynd lost a considerable sum of money at play?"

"I fear so."

"Has he paid it?"

"I fear not."

There was a pause, during which the two young ladies regarded each other wistfully.

At length, Mildred spoke.

"Sir Bridgnorth," she said, "Chetwynd's debts of 'honour'" – and she emphasised the word – "must be paid, and shall be paid, at any sacrifice, by me! You will do me the greatest kindness by finding out exactly how he is circumstanced, what he owes, and,

especially, what are his debts of honour."

Emmeline looked earnestly at Sir Bridgnorth, as if she felt equally interested in the inquiry.

Sir Bridgnorth was evidently troubled, and for some moments made no answer.

"Excuse me, my dear Miss Calverley," he said; "if your brother is in a scrape, I think he should be allowed to get out of it – as he best can."

"No!" exclaimed Mildred, decidedly. "It is not like me, Sir Bridgnorth, to give such advice."

"No!" added Emmeline, equally decidedly. "He must be freed!"

"Upon my word," said Sir Bridgnorth, surprised, "whatever may have happened to him, this young man cannot be called unfortunate."

"Then act as a true friend to him, dear Sir Bridgnorth!" said Mildred. "Make immediate arrangements to get him out of all difficulties. You will incur no personal responsibility."

"None whatever," said Emmeline.

Sir Bridgnorth was much touched.

"I think you had better leave him to himself," he said. "But, since you won't, I must needs help you I'll do all I can. But I cannot proceed as expeditiously as I could desire. I have reason to believe Chetwynd is living in London under a feigned name. Since all private inquiries have proved unsuccessful, I will cause some carefully-worded advertisements to be inserted in

the newspapers, that may catch his eye and bring him forward. Could he be made aware that a beautiful young lady takes an interest in him, I am sure he would speedily reappear. But fear no indiscretion on my part. Nothing shall be disclosed till the proper moment arrives." Then, addressing Mildred, he added: "As soon as I can ascertain the amount of his debts, I will let you know."

"Pay them, dear Sir Bridgnorth – pay them!" she rejoined.

"But they may be very large?"

"Never mind; pay them!" cried Emmeline. "Mr. Carteret shall repay you."

"No man ever had such a chance," exclaimed Sir Bridgnorth. "If he does not reform now, he is incorrigible."

"I have no misgivings as to the future," said Mildred.

"Well, I sincerely trust all will come right," observed Sir Bridgnorth. "There seems every probability of it, I must own."

Just then Mrs. Calverley was announced.

"I must take my leave," said Sir Bridgnorth, rising hastily. "You shall hear from me soon, or see me."

"Let us see you, please!" said both young ladies.

Before he could depart, Mrs. Calverley entered, and stopped him.

"Ah, Sir Bridgnorth!" she exclaimed; "I'm delighted to meet you! I want to have a word with you."

Sir Bridgnorth evidently wished to get away. But she begged him to remain for a few minutes; and he could not very well refuse.

Mrs. Calverley then went on to the young ladies. After the usual greetings had passed, she said to Mildred, "I have a letter for you; or, rather, a packet. It arrived this morning."

Having given her the letter, she moved to a little distance.

Glancing at the superscription, Mildred turned pale.

"What is it that disturbs you?" inquired Emmeline.

"A letter from Chetwynd," replied Mildred, in a low voice. "Come to my room, that we may read it together."

Emmeline signified her assent by a look.

Mrs. Calverley took no notice of what was passing, though she must have perceived it.

Before leaving the room, Mildred went up to Sir Bridgnorth, and, addressing him in a low voice, said:

"You must not go, Sir Bridgnorth. I may have something important to tell you about Chetwynd."

"In that case, I will stay as long as you please," he rejoined.

Meanwhile Emmeline prepared to follow her friend.

"Will you mind my leaving you for a few minutes, dear Mrs. Calverley?" she said.

"Don't stand on the slightest ceremony with me, my love," replied the other. "Besides, I want to have a little talk with Sir Bridgnorth."

The two young ladies then went out.

"I am now quite at your service, madam," said Sir Bridgnorth, as soon as he and Mrs. Calverley were alone.

"Then sit down, that we may have a confidential chat," replied

the lady.

III. CHETWYND'S LETTER

In such haste were the two girls to open the packet that they almost ran up the spiral-staircase to Mildred's bedroom, in which was a deep bay window.

In this recess they sat down.

Mildred's hand trembled as she tore open the packet.

It contained a long, closely-written letter, inside which was a folded sheet of paper that looked like a document of some kind.

This document dropped on the table, and was not examined at the moment.

The letter was dated on the previous day, but bore no address.

Ere she had read many lines, a mist seemed to gather over Mildred's vision. Unable to proceed, she laid the letter down.

"You terrify me," cried Emmeline. "What has happened?"

"He meditates self-destruction," replied Mildred. "But read the letter, dearest – I cannot."

Mustering up all her courage, Emmeline read aloud as follows:

"This is the last letter you will ever receive from me, dearest sister, and, in bidding you an eternal farewell, I implore you to think kindly of me.

"With one exception you are the only person in the world whom I love, and my latest thoughts will be of her and you.

"You know her, and will easily guess her name, but I shall not confide it to this sheet of paper. In all respects she is superior

to the artful and treacherous woman by whom I allowed myself to be deceived – superior in beauty and accomplishments, and amiable as beautiful. Had I been fortunate enough to wed her, I should have been a different man. Now it is too late, I see my folly, and comprehend my loss."

"You see that he dearly loved you, Emmeline, for it is to you that he refers," observed Mildred. "But proceed, I entreat you!"

"I have met with the basest ingratitude. Men who have received from me favours innumerable – hangers-on who have sponged upon me, and professed the greatest regard for me, have shrunk from me, and avoided me in my misfortunes – men who have fleeced me, who have ruined me, and driven me to desperation! My funds are almost exhausted, but they will last me out. I owe nothing, for I have paid that kind-hearted Sir Bridgnorth Charlton the exact sum he lent me. Had I not obtained it from him, I should have been called a defaulter. Fortune favoured me for the moment, for I won sufficient to discharge my debt to him. He would lend me more, I doubt not, but I will never borrow again. As to the woman who has robbed me of my inheritance, I have sworn I will accept nothing from her, and I will keep my oath. She will be responsible for her conduct before Heaven."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.