Le Fanu Joseph Sheridan

The Tenants of Malory. Volume 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
A LARK

"There's some 'Old Tom,' isn't there? Get it, and glasses and cold water, *here*," said Cleve to his servant, who, patient, polite, sleepy, awaited his master. "You used to like it – and here are cigars;" and he shook out a shower upon his drawing-room table cover. "And where did you want to go at this time of night?"

"To Wright's, to see the end of the great game of billiards – Seller and Culverin, you know; I've two pounds on it."

"I don't care if I go with you, just now. What's this? – When the devil did this come?" Cleve had picked up and at one pale glance read a little note that lay on the table; and then he repeated coolly enough —

"I say, when did this come?"

"Before one, sir, I think," said Shepperd.

"Get me my coat," and Shepperd disappeared.

"Pestered to *death*," he said, moodily. "See, you have got the

things here, and cigars. I shan't be five minutes away. If I'm longer, don't wait for me; but finish this first."

Cleve had turned up the collar of his outer coat, and buttoned it across his chin, and pulled a sort of travelling cap down on his brows, and away he went, looking very pale and anxious.

He did not come back in five minutes; nor in ten, twenty, or forty minutes. The "Old Tom" in the bottle had run low; Sedley looked at his watch; he could wait no longer.

When he got out upon the flagway, he felt the agreeable stimulus of the curious "Old Tom" sufficiently to render a little pause expedient for the purpose of calling to mind with clearness the geographical bearings of Wright's billiard-rooms – whither accordingly he sauntered – eastward, along deserted and echoing streets, with here and there a policeman poking into an area, or loitering along his two-mile-an-hour duty march, and now and then regaled by the unearthly music of love-sick cats among the roofs.

These streets and squares, among which he had in a manner lost himself, had in their day been the haunts and quarters of fashion, a fairy world, always migrating before the steady march of business. Sedley had quite lost his reckoning. If he had been content to go by Ludgate-hill, he would have been at Wright's half an hour before. Sedley did not know these dingy and respectable old squares; he had not even seen a policeman for the last twenty minutes, and was just then quite of the Irish lawyer's opinion that life is not long enough for short cuts.

In a silent street he passed a carriage standing near a lamp. The driver on the flagway looked hard at him. Sedley was not a romantic being only; he had also his waggish mood, and loved a lark when it came. He returned the fellow's stare with a glance as significant, slackening his pace.

"Well?" said Sedley.

"Well!" replied the driver.

"Capital!" answered Sedley.

"Be you him?" demanded the driver, after a pause.

"No; be *you*?" answered Sedley.

The driver seemed a little puzzled, and eyed Sedley doubtfully; and Sedley looked into the carriage, which, however, was empty, and then at the house at whose rails it stood; but it was dark from top to bottom.

He had thoughts of stepping in and availing himself of the vehicle; but seeing no particular fun in the procedure, and liking better to walk, he merely said, nodding toward the carriage —

"Lots of room."

"Room enough, I dessay."

"How long do you mean to wait?"

"As long as I'm paid for."

"Give my love to your mother."

"Feard she won't vally it."

"Take care of yourself – for *my* sake."

Doubtless there was a retort worthy of so sprightly a dialogue; but Sedley could not hear distinctly as he paced on, looking up

at the moon, and thinking how beautifully she used to shine, and was no doubt then shining, on the flashing blue sea at Cardyllian, and over the misty mountains. And he thought of his pretty cousin Agnes Etherage; and "Yes," said he within himself, quickening his pace, "if I win that two pounds at Wright's, I'll put two pounds to it, the two pounds I should have lost, that is – there's nothing extravagant in that – and give little Agnes something pretty; I said I would; and though it was only joke, still it's a promise."

Some tradesmen's bills that morning had frightened him, and as he periodically did, he had bullied himself into resolutions of economy, out of which he ingeniously reasoned himself again. "What shall it be? I'll look in to-morrow at Dymock and Rose's – they have lots of charming little French trifles. Where the deuce are we now?"

He paused, and looking about him, and then down a stable-lane between two old-fashioned houses of handsome dimensions, he saw a fellow in a great coat loitering slowly down it, and looking up vigilantly at the two or three windows in the side of the mansion.

"A robbery, by George!" thought Sedley, as he marked the prowling vigilance of the man, and his peculiar skulking gait.

He had no sort of weapon about him, not even a stick; but he is one of the best sparrers extant, and thinks pluck and "a fist-full of fives" well worth a revolver.

Sedley hitched his shoulders, plucked off the one glove that

remained on, and followed him softly a few steps, dogging him down the lane, with that shrewd, stern glance which men exchange in the prize-ring. But when on turning about the man in the surtout saw that he was observed, he confirmed Sedley's suspicions by first pausing irresolutely, and ultimately withdrawing suddenly round the angle.

Sedley had not expected this tactique. For whatever purpose, the man had been plainly watching the house, and it was nearly three o'clock. Thoroughly blooded now for a "lark," Sedley followed swiftly to the corner, but could not see him; so, as he returned, a low window in the side wall opened, and a female voice said, "Are you there?"

"Yes," replied Tom Sedley, confidentially drawing near.

"Take this."

"All right" – and thereupon he received first a bag and then a box, each tolerably heavy.

Sedley was amused. A mystification had set in; a quiet robbery, and he the receiver. He thought of dropping the booty down the area of the respectable house round the corner, but just then the man in the surtout emerged from the wing, so to speak, and marching slowly up the perspective of the lane, seemed about to disturb him, but once more changed his mind, and disappeared.

"What is to happen next?" wondered Tom Sedley. In a few minutes a door which opens from the back yard or garden of the house from which he had received his burthen, opened

cautiously, and a woman in a cloak stepped out, carrying another bag, a heavy one it also seemed, and beckoning to him, said, so soon as he was sufficiently near —

"Is the carriage come?"

"Yes'm," answered Tom, touching his hat, and affecting as well as he could the ways of a porter or a cabman.

"When they comes," she resumed, "you'll bring us to where it is, mind, and fetch the things with you – and mind ye, no noise nor talking, and walk as light as you can."

"All right," said Tom, in the same whisper in which she spoke.

It could not be a robbery – Tom had changed his mind; there was an air of respectability about the servant that conflicted with that theory, and the discovery that the carriage was waiting to receive the party was also against it.

Tom was growing more interested in his adventure; and entering into the fuss and mystery of the plot.

"Come round, please, and show me where the carriage stands," said the woman, beckoning to Tom, who followed her round the corner.

She waited for him, and laid her hand on his elbow, giving him a little jog by way of caution.

"Hush – not a word above your breath, mind," she whispered; "*I* see that's it; well, it needn't come no nearer, mind."

"All right, ma'am."

"And there's the window," she added in a still more cautious whisper, and pointing with a nod and a frown at a window next

the hall door, through the shutter of which a dim light was visible.

"Ha!" breathed Tom, looking wise, "and all safe *there*?"

"We're never sure; sometimes awake; sometimes not; sometimes quiet; sometimes quite wild-like; and the window pushed open, for hair! Hoffle he is!"

"And always was," hazarded Tom.

"Wuss now, though," whispered she, shaking her head ruefully, and she returned round the angle of the house and entered the door through which she had issued, and Tom set down his load not far from the same point.

Before he had waited many minutes the same door re-opened, and two ladies, as he judged them to be from something in their air and dress, descended the steps together, followed by the maid carrying the black-leather bag as before. They stopped just under the door, which the servant shut cautiously and locked; and then these three female figures stood for a few seconds whispering together; and after that they turned and walked up the lane towards Tom Sedley, who touched his hat as they approached, and lifted his load again.

The two ladies were muffled in cloaks. The taller wore no hat or bonnet; but had instead a shawl thrown over her head and shoulders, hood-wise. She walked, leaning upon the shorter lady, languidly, like a person very weak, or in pain, and the maid at the other side, placed her arm tenderly round her waist, under her mufflers, and aided her thus as she walked. They crossed the street at the end of the stable-lane, and walked at that side toward

the carriage. The maid signed to Tom, who carried his luggage quickly to its destination on the box, and was in time to open the carriage-door.

"Don't you mind," said the woman, putting Tom unceremoniously aside, and herself aiding the taller lady into the old-fashioned carriage. As she prepared to get in, Tom for a moment fancied a recognition; something in the contour of the figure, muffled as it was, for a second struck him; and at the same moment all seemed like a dream, and he stepped backward involuntarily in amazement. Had he not seen the same gesture. The arm, exactly so, and that slender hand in a gardening glove, holding a tiny trowel, under the dark foliage of old trees.

The momentary gesture was gone. The lady leaning back, a muffled figure, in the corner of the carriage, silent. Her companion, who he thought looked sharply at him, from within, now seated herself beside her; and the maid also from her place inside, told him from the window —

"Bid him drive now where he knows, quickly," and she pulled up the window.

Tom was too much interested now to let the thread of his adventure go. So to the box beside the driver he mounted, and delivered the order he had just received.

Away he drove swiftly, Citywards, through silent and empty streets. Tom quickly lost his bearings; the gas lamps grew few and far between; he was among lanes and arches, and sober, melancholy streets, such as he had never suspected of an

existence in such a region.

Here the driver turned suddenly up a narrow way between old brick walls, with tufts of dingy grass here and there at top, and the worn mortar lines overlaid with velvet moss. This short passage terminated in two tall brick piers, surmounted by worn and moss-grown balls of stone.

Tom jumped down and pushed back the rusty iron gates, and they drove into an unlighted, melancholy court-yard; and Tom thundered at a tall narrow hall-door, between chipped and worn pilasters of the same white stone, surmounted by some carved heraldry, half effaced.

Standing on the summit of the steps he had to repeat his summons, till the cavernous old mansion pealed again with the echo, before a light gave token of the approach of a living being to give them greeting.

Tom opened the carriage door, and let down the steps, perhaps a little clumsily, but he was getting through his duties wonderfully.

The party entered the spacious wainscoted hall, in which was an old wooden bench, on which, gladly, it seemed, the sick lady sat herself down. A great carved doorway opened upon a square second hall or lobby, through which the ray of the single candle glanced duskily, and touched the massive banisters of a broad staircase.

This must have been the house of a very great man in its day, a Lord Chancellor, perhaps, one of those Hogarthian mansions

in which such men as my Lord Squanderfield might have lived in the first George's days.

"How could any man have been such an idiot," thought Sedley, filled with momentary wonder, "as to build a palace like this in such a place?"

"Dear me! what a place – what a strange place!" whispered the elder lady, "where are we to go?"

"Up-stairs, please'm," said the woman with a brass candlestick in her hand.

"I hope there's fire, and more light, and – and proper comfort there?"

"Oh! yes'm, please; everythink as you would like, please."

"Come, dear," said the old lady tenderly, giving her arm to the languid figure resting in the hall.

So guided and lighted by the servant they followed her up the great well staircase.

CHAPTER II.
A NEW VOICE

The ladies ascended, led by the maid with the candle, and closely followed by their own servant, and our friend Tom Sedley brought up the rear, tugging the box and the bag with him.

At the stair-head was a great gallery from which many doors opened. Tom Sedley halted close by the banister for orders, depositing his luggage beside him. The maid set the candle down upon a table, and opened one of these tall doors, through which he saw an angle of the apartment, a fire burning in the grate, and a pleasant splendour of candlelight; he saw that the floor was carpeted, and the windows curtained, and though there was disclosed but a corner of a large room, there were visible such pieces of furniture as indicated general comfort.

In a large arm-chair, at the further side of the fire-place, sat the lady who had thrilled him with a sudden remembrance. She had withdrawn the shawl that hung in hood-like fashion over her head, and there was no longer a doubt. The Beatrice Cenci was there – his Guido – very pale, dying he thought her, with her white hands clasped, and her beautiful eyes turned upward in an agony of prayer.

The old lady, Miss Sheckleton, came near, leaned over her, kissed her tenderly, and caressingly smoothed her rich chestnut

hair over her temples, and talked gently in her ear, and raised her hand in both hers, and kissed it, and drawing a chair close to hers, she sat by her, murmuring in her ear with a countenance of such kindness and compassion, that Tom Sedley loved her for it.

Looking up, Miss Sheckleton observed the door open, and Tom fancied perceived him in the perspective through it, for she rose suddenly, shut it, and he saw no more. Tom had not discovered in the glance of the old lady any sign of recognition, and for the sake of appearances he had buttoned his gray wrapper close across his throat and breast so as to conceal the evidences of his ball costume; his shining boots, however, were painfully conspicuous, but for that incongruity there was no help.

And now the servant who had let them in told Tom to bring the box and bag into the servants' room, to which she led him across the gallery.

There was a large fire, which was pleasant, a piece of matting on the floor, a few kitchen utensils ranged near the fire-place, a deal table, and some common kitchen chairs. Dismal enough would the room have looked, notwithstanding its wainscoting, had it not been for the glow diffused by the fire.

By this fire, on a kitchen chair, and upon his own opera hat, which he wished specially to suppress, sat Tom Sedley, resolved to see his adventure one hour or so into futurity, before abandoning it, and getting home to his bed, and in the meantime doing his best to act a servant, as he fancied such a functionary would appear in his moments of ease unbending in the kitchen or

the servants' hall. The maid who had received the visitors in the hall, Anne Evans by name, square, black-haired, slightly pitted with smallpox, and grave, came and sat down at the other side of the fire, and eyed Tom Sedley in silence.

Now and then Tom felt uncomfortably about his practical joke, which was degenerating into a deception. But an hour or so longer could not matter much; and might he not make himself really useful if the services of a messenger were required?

Anne Evans was considering him in silence, and he turned a little more toward the fire, and poked it, as he fancied a groom would poke a fire for his private comfort.

"Are you servant to the ladies?" at last she asked.

Tom smiled at the generality of the question, but interpreting in good faith —

"No," said he, "I came with the carriage."

"Servant to the gentleman?" she asked.

"What gentleman?"

"You know well."

Tom had not an idea, but could not well say so. He therefore poked the fire again, and said, "Go on, miss; I'm listening."

She did not go on, however, for some time, and then it was to say —

"My name is Anne Evans. What may your name be?"

"Can't tell that. I left my name at home," said Tom, mysteriously.

"Won't tell?"

"Can't."

"I'm only by the month. Come in just a week to-morrow," observed Anne Evans.

"They'll not part with you in a month, Miss Evans. No; they has some taste and feelin' among them. I wouldn't wonder if you was here for ever!" said Tom, with enthusiasm; "and what's this place, miss – this house I mean – whose house is it?"

"Can't say, only I hear it's bought for a brewery, to be took down next year."

"Oh, criky!" said Tom; "that's a pity."

There was a short pause.

"I saw you 'ide your 'at," said Anne Evans.

"Not 'ide it," said Tom; "only sits on it – always sits on my 'at."

Tom produced it, let it bounce up like a jack-in-a-box, and shut it down again.

Miss Evans was neither amused nor surprised.

"Them's hopera 'ats – first quality – they used to come in boxes on 'em, as long as from here to you, when I was at Mr. Potterton's, the hatter. Them's for gents – they air – and not for servants."

"The gov'nor gives me his old uns," said Tom, producing the best fib he could find.

"And them French boots," she added, meditatively.

"Perquisite likewise," said Tom.

Miss Anne Evans closed her eyes, and seemed disposed to take a short nap in her chair. But on a sudden she opened them

to say —

"I think you're the gentleman himself."

"The old gentleman?" said Tom.

"No. The young un."

"I'm jest what I tell you, not objectin' to the compliment all the same," said Tom.

"And a ring on your finger?"

"A ring on my finger – yes. I wear it two days in the week. My grand-uncle's ring, who was a gentleman, being skipper of a coal brig."

"What's the lady's name?"

"Can't tell, Miss Evans; dussn't."

"Fuss about nothin'!" said she, and closed her eyes again, and opened them in a minute more, to add, "but I think you're him, and that's *my* belief."

"No, I ain't miss, as you'll see, by-and-by."

"Tisn't nothin' to me, only people *is* so close."

The door opened, and a tall woman in black, with a black net cap on, came quietly but quickly into the room.

"You're the man?" said she, with an air of authority, fixing her eyes askance on Tom.

"Yes 'm, please."

"Well, you don't go on no account, for you'll be wanted just now."

"No, ma'am."

"Where's the box and bag you're in charge of?"

"Out here," said Tom.

"Hish, man, quiet; don't you know there's sickness? Walk easy, *can't* you? *please*, consider."

Tom followed her almost on tip-toe to the spot where the parcels lay.

"Gently now; into this room, please," and she led the way into that sitting-room into which Tom Sedley had looked some little time since, from the stair-head.

The beautiful young lady was gone, but Miss Sheckleton was standing at the further door of the room with her hands clasped, and her eyes raised in prayer, and her pale cheeks wet with tears.

Hearing the noise, she gently closed the door, and hastily drying her eyes, whispered, "Set them down *there*," pointing to a sofa, on which Tom placed them accordingly. "Thanks – that will do. You may go."

When Sedley had closed the door —

"Oh, Mrs. Graver," whispered Anne Sheckleton, clasping her wrists in her trembling fingers, "is she *very* ill?"

"Well, ma'am, she *is* ill."

"But, oh, my God, you don't think we are going to lose her?" she whispered wildly, with her imploring gaze in the nurse's eyes.

"Oh, no, please God, ma'am, it will all be right. You must not fuss yourself, ma'am. You must not let her see you like this, on no account."

"Shall I send for him now?"

"No, ma'am; he'd only be in the way. *I*'ll tell you when; and

his man's here, ready to go, any minute. I must go back to her now, ma'am. Hish!"

And Mrs. Graver disappeared with a little rustle of her dress, and no sound of steps. That solemn bird floated very noiselessly round sick beds, and you only heard, as it were, the hovering of her wings.

And then, in a minute more, in glided Miss Sheckleton, having dried her eyes very carefully.

And now came a great knocking at the hall door, echoing dully through the house. It was Doctor Grimshaw, who had just got his coat off, and was winding his watch, when he was called from his own bed-side by this summons, and so was here after a long day's work, to make a new start, and await the dawn in this chamber of pain.

In he came, and Miss Sheckleton felt that light and hope entered the room with him. Florid, portly, genial, with a light, hopeful step, and a good, decided, cheery manner, he inspired confidence, and seemed to take command, not only of the case, but of the ailment itself.

Miss Sheckleton knew this good doctor, and gladly shook his hand; and he recognised her with a hesitating look that seemed to ask a question, but was not meant to do so, and he spoke cheerfully to the patient, and gave his directions to the nurse, and in about half an hour more told good Anne Sheckleton that she had better leave the patient.

So, with the docility which an able physician inspires, good

Anne Sheckleton obeyed, and in the next room – sometimes praying, sometimes standing and listening, sometimes wandering from point to point, in the merest restlessness – she waited and watched for more than an hour, which seemed to her longer than a whole night, and at last tapped very gently at the door, a lull having come for a time in the sick chamber, and unable longer to endure her suspense.

A little bit of the door was opened, and Anne Sheckleton saw the side of Mrs. Graver's straight nose, and one of her wrinkled eyes, and her grim mouth.

"How is she?" whispered Miss Sheckleton, feeling as if she was herself about to die.

"Pretty well, ma'am," answered the nurse, but with an awful look of insincerity, under which the old lady's heart sank down and down, as if it had foundered.

"One word to Dr. Grimshaw," she whispered, with white lips.

"You *can't*, ma'am," murmured the nurse, sternly, and about to shut the door in her face.

"Wait, *wait*," whispered the voice of kind old Doctor Grimshaw, and he came into the next room to Miss Sheckleton, closing the door after him.

"Oh, doctor!" she gasped.

"Well, Miss Sheckleton, I hope she'll do very well; I've just given her something – a slight stimulant – and I've every confidence everything will be well. Don't make yourself uneasy; it is not going on badly."

"Oh, Doctor Grimshaw, shall I send for him? He'd never forgive me; and I promised her, darling Margaret, to send."

"*Don't* send – on *no account* yet. Don't bring him here – he's better away. I'll tell you when to send."

The doctor opened the door.

"Still quiet?"

"Yes, sir," whispered Mrs. Graver.

Again he closed the door.

"Nice creature she seems. A relation of yours?" asked the Doctor.

"My cousin."

"When was she married?"

"About a year ago."

"Never any tendency to consumption?"

"Never."

"Nothing to make her low or weak? Is she hysterical?"

"No, hardly that, but nervous and excitable."

"I know; very good. I think she'll do very nicely. If anything goes the least wrong I'll let you know. Now stay quiet in there."

And he shut the door, and she heard his step move softly over the next room floor, so great was the silence; and she kneeled down and prayed as helpless people pray in awful peril; and more time passed, and more, slowly, very slowly. Oh, would the dawn ever come, and the daylight again?

Voices and moans she heard from the room. Again she prayed on her knees to the throne of mercy, in the agony of her suspense,

and now over the strange roofs spread the first faint gray of the coming dawn; and there came a silence in the room, and on a sudden was heard a new tiny voice crying.

"The little child!" cried old Anne Sheckleton, springing to her feet, with clasped hands, in the anguish of delight, and such a gush of tears – as she looked up, thanking God with her smiles – as comes only in such moments.

Margaret's clear voice faintly said something; Anne could not hear what.

"A boy," answered the cheery voice of Doctor Grimshaw.

"Oh! he'll be so glad!" answered the faint clear voice in a kind of rapture.

"Of course he will," replied the same cheery voice. And another question came, too low for old Anne Sheckleton's ears.

"A *beautiful* boy! as fine a fellow as you could desire to look at. Bring him here, nurse."

"Oh! the darling!" said the same faint voice. "I'm so *happy*."

"Thank God! thank God! thank God!" sobbed delighted Anne Sheckleton, her cheeks still streaming in showers of tears as she stood waiting at the door for the moment of admission, and hearing the sweet happy tones of Margaret's voice sounding in her ears like the voice of one who had just now died, heard faintly through the door of heaven.

For thus it has been, and thus to the end, it will be – the "sorrow" of the curse is remembered no more, "for joy that a man is born into the world."

CHAPTER III.
CLEVE COMES

Tom Sedley was dozing in his chair, by the fire, when he was roused by Mrs. Graver's voice.

"You'll take this note at once, please, to your master; there's a cab at the door, and the lady says you mustn't make no delay."

It took some seconds to enable Tom to account for the scene, the actor and his own place of repose, his costume, and the tenor of the strange woman's language. In a little while, however, he recovered the context, and the odd passage in his life became intelligible.

Still half asleep, Tom hurried down-stairs, and in the hall, with a shock, read the address, "Cleve Verney, Esq." At the hall-door steps he found a cab, into which he jumped, telling the man to drive to Cleve Verney's lodgings.

There were expiring lights in the drawing-room, the blinds of which were up, and as the cab stopped at the steps a figure appeared at one of the windows, and Cleve Verney opened it, and told the driver, "Don't mind knocking, I'll go down."

"Come up-stairs," said Cleve, as he stood at the open door, addressing Sedley, and mistaking him for the person whom he had employed.

Up ran Tom Sedley at his heels.

"Hollo! *Sedley*– what brings *you* here?" said Cleve, when Tom appeared in the light of the candles. "You don't mean to say the ball has been going on till now – or is it a scrape?"

"Nothing – only this I've been commissioned to give you," and he placed Miss Sheckleton's note in his hand.

Cleve had looked wofully haggard and anxious as Tom entered. But his countenance changed now to an ashy paleness, and there was no mistaking his extreme agitation.

He opened the note – a very brief one it seemed – and read it.

"Thank God!" he said with a great sigh, and then he walked to the window and looked out, and returned again to the candles and read the note once more.

"How did you know I was up, Tom?"

"The lights in the windows."

"Yes. Don't let the cab go."

Cleve was getting on his coat, and speaking like a man in a dream.

"I say, Tom Sedley, how did *you* come by this note?" he said, with a sudden pause, and holding Miss Sheckleton's note in his fingers.

"Well, quite innocently," hesitated Sedley.

"How the devil was it, sir? Come, you may as well – by heaven, Sedley, you *shall* tell me the truth!"

Tom looked on his friend Cleve, and saw his eyes gleaming sharply on him, and his face very white.

"Of course I'll tell you, Cleve," said Tom, and with this

exordium he stumbled honestly through his story, which by no means quieted Cleve Verney.

"You d – d little Paul Pry!" said he. "Well, you have got hold of a secret now, like the man in the iron mask, and by – you had better keep it."

A man who half blames himself already, and is in a position which he hates and condemns, will stand a great deal more of hard language, and even of execration, than he would under any other imaginable circumstances.

"You can't blame me half as much as I do myself. I assure you, Cleve, I'm awfully sorry. It was the merest lark – at first – and then – when I saw that beautiful – that young lady – "

"Don't talk of that lady any more; I'm her husband. *There*, you have it all, and if you whisper it to mortal you *may ruin* me; but one or other of us shall die for it!"

Cleve was talking in a state of positive exasperation.

"Whisper it! – tell it! You don't in the least understand me, Cleve," said Tom, collecting himself, and growing a little lofty; "I don't whisper or tell things; and as for daring or not daring, I don't know what you mean; and I hope, if occasion for *dying* came, I should funk it as little as any other fellow."

"I'm going to this d – d place now. I don't much care what you do: I almost wish you'd shoot me."

He struck his hand on the table, looking not at Tom Sedley, but with a haggard rage through the window, and away toward the gray east; and without another word to Sedley, he ran down,

shutting the hall-door with a crash that showed more of his temper than of his prudence, and Tom saw him jump into the cab and drive away.

The distance is really considerable, but in Cleve's intense reverie time and space contracted, and before he fancied they had accomplished half the way, he found himself at the tall door and stained pilasters and steps of the old red-brick house.

Anne Evans, half awake, awaited his arrival on the steps. He ran lightly up the stairs, under her covert scrutiny; and, in obedience to Mrs. Graver's gesture of warning, as she met him with raised hand and her frowning "Hish" at the head of the stairs, he checked his pace, and in a whisper he made his eager inquiries. She was going on very nicely.

"I must see Miss Sheckleton – the old lady – where is she?" urged Cleve.

"Here, sir, please" – and Mrs. Graver opened a door, and he found tired Miss Sheckleton tying on her bonnet, and getting her cloak about her.

"Oh! Cleve, dear" – she called him "Cleve" now – "I'm so delighted; she's doing *very* well; the doctor's quite *pleased* with her, and it's a boy, Cleve, and – and I wish you joy with all my heart."

And as she spoke, the kind old lady was shaking both his hands, and smiling up into his handsome face, like sunshine; but that handsome face, though it smiled down darkly upon her, was, it seemed to her, strangely joyless, and even troubled.

"And Cleve, dear, my *dear* Mr. Verney – I'm *so* sorry; but I must go immediately. I make his chocolate in the morning, and he sometimes calls for it at half-past seven. This miserable attack that has kept him here, and the risk in which he is at every day he stays in this town, it *is so* distracting. And if I should not be at home and ready to see him when he calls, he'd be sure to suspect something; and I really see nothing but ruin from his temper and violence to all of us, if he were to find out how it is. So good-bye, and God bless you. The doctor says he thinks you may see her in a very little time – half an hour or so – if you are very careful not to let her excite or agitate herself; and – God bless you – I shall be back, for a little, in an hour or two."

So that kindly, fluttered, troubled, and happy old lady disappeared; and Cleve was left again to his meditations.

"Where's the doctor?" asked Cleve of the servant.

"In the sitting-room, please, sir, writing; his carriage is come, sir, please."

And thus saying, Mistress Anne Evans officiously opened the door, and Cleve entered. The doctor, having written a prescription, and just laid down his pen, was pulling on his glove.

Cleve had no idea that he was to see Doctor Grimshaw. Quite another physician, with whom he had no acquaintance, had been agreed upon between him and Miss Sheckleton. As it turned out, however, that gentleman was now away upon an interesting visit, at a country mansion, and Doctor Grimshaw was thus unexpectedly summoned.

Cleve was unpleasantly surprised, for he had already an acquaintance with that good man, which he fancied was not recorded in his recollection to his credit. I think if the doctor's eye had not been directed toward the door when he entered, that Cleve Verney would have drawn back; but that would not do now.

"Doctor Grimshaw?" said Cleve.

"Yes, sir;" said the old gentleman.

"I think, Doctor Grimshaw, you know me?"

"Oh, yes, sir; of course I do;" said the Doctor, with an uncomfortable smile, ever so little bitter, and a slight bow, "Mr. Verney, yes." And the doctor paused, looking toward him, pulling on his other glove, and expecting a question.

"Your patient, Doctor Grimshaw, doing very well, I'm told?"

"Nicely, sir – very nicely now. I was a little uncomfortable about her just at one time, but doing very well now; and it's a boy – a fine child. Good morning, sir."

He had taken up his hat.

"And Doctor Grimshaw, just one word. May I beg, as a matter of professional *honour*, that this – all this, shall be held as strictly *secret*– everything connected with it as strictly confidential?"

The doctor looked down on the carpet with a pained countenance. "Certainly, sir," he said, drily. "That's all, I suppose? Of course, Mr. Verney, I shan't – since such I suppose to be the wish of all parties – mention the case."

"Of *all* parties, certainly; and it is in tenderness to others, not to myself, that I make the request."

"I'm sorry it should be necessary, sir;" said Doctor Grimshaw, almost sternly. "I know Miss Sheckleton and her family; this poor young lady, I understand, is a cousin of hers. I am *sorry*, sir, upon her account, that any mystery should be desirable."

"It *is* desirable, and, in fact, *indispensable*, sir," said Cleve, a little stiffly, for he did not see what right that old doctor had to assume a lecturer's tone toward him.

"No one shall be compromised by me, sir," said the doctor, with a sad and offended bow.

And the Doctor drove home pretty well tired out. I am afraid that Cleve did not very much care whom he might compromise, provided he himself were secure. But even from himself the utter selfishness, which toned a character passionate and impetuous enough to simulate quite unconsciously the graces of magnanimity and tenderness, was hidden.

Cleve fancied that the cares that preyed upon his spirits were for Margaret, and when he sometimes almost regretted their marriage, that his remorse was principally for her, that all his caution and finesse were exacted by his devotion to the interests of his young wife, and that the long system of mystery and deception, under which her proud, frank, spirit was pining, was practised solely for her advantage.

So Cleve was in his own mind something of a hero – self-sacrificing, ready, if need be, to shake himself free, for sake of his love and his liberty, of all the intoxications and enervations of his English life, and *fortis colonus*, to delve the glebe of Canada

or to shear the sheep of Australia. He was not conscious that all these were the chimeras of insincerity, that ambition was the breath of his nostrils, and that his idol was – himself.

And if he mistakes himself, do not others mistake him also, and clothe him with the nobleness of their own worship? Can it be that the lights and the music and the incense that surround him are but the tributes of a beautiful superstition, and that the idol in the midst is cold and dumb?

Cleve, to do him justice, was moved on this occasion. He did – shall I say? – yearn to behold her again. There was a revival of tenderness, and he waited with a real impatience to see her.

He did see her – just a little gleam of light in the darkened room; he stood beside the bed, clasping that beautiful hand that God had committed to his, smiling down in that beautiful face that smiled unutterable love up again into his own.

"Oh! Cleve, darling – oh, Cleve! I'm so happy."

The languid hands are clasped on his, the yearning eyes, and the smile, look up. It is like the meeting of the beloved after shipwreck.

"And look, Cleve;" and with just ever so little a motion of her hand she draws back a silken coverlet, and he sees in a deep sleep a little baby, and the beautiful smile of young maternity falls upon it like a blessing and a caress. "Isn't it a darling? *Poor* little thing! how quietly it sleeps. I think it is the dearest little thing that ever was seen —*our* little baby!"

Is there a prettier sight than the young mother smiling, in this

the hour of her escape, upon the treasure she has found? The wondrous gift, at sight of which a new fountain of love springs up – never, while life remains, to cease its flowing. Looking on such a sight in silence, I think I hear the feet of the angels round the bed – I think I see their beautiful eyes smiling on the face of the little mortal, and their blessed hands raised over the head of the fair young mother.

CHAPTER IV.
LOVE'S REMORSE

"Teach me, ye groves, some art to ease my pain,
Some soft resentments that may leave no stain
On her loved name, and then I will complain."

Next day, after dinner, Lord Verney said to Cleve, as they two sat alone, "I saw you at Lady Dorminster's last night. I saw you – about it. It seems to me you go to too many places, with the House to attend to; you stay too long; one can look in, you know. Sometimes one meets a person; I had a good deal of interesting conversation last night, for instance, with the French Ambassador. No one takes a hint better; they are very good listeners, the French, and that is the way they pick up so much information and opinion, and things. I had a cup of tea, and we talked about it, for half-an-hour, until I had got my ideas well before him. A very able man, a brilliant person, and seemed – he appeared to go with me – about it – and very well up upon our history – and things – and – and – looking at you, it struck me – you're looking a good deal cut up, about it – and – and as if you were doing too much. And I said, you know, you were to look about, and see if there was any young person you liked – that was suitable – and – that kind of thing; but you know you

must not fatigue yourself, and I don't want to hurry you; only it is a step you ought to take with a view to strengthen your position – ultimately. And – and – I hear it is too late to consider about Ethel – that would have been very nice, it struck me; but that is now out of the question, I understand – in fact, it is certain, although the world don't know it yet; and therefore we must consider some other alliance; and I don't see any very violent hurry. We must look about – and – and – you'll want some money, Cleve, when you have made up your mind."

"You are always too good," said Cleve.

"I – I mean with your *wife*– about it;" and Lord Verney coughed a little. "There's never any harm in a little money; the more you get, the more you can do. I always was of that opinion. Knowledge is power, and money is power, though in different ways; that was always my idea. What I want to impress on your mind, however, at this moment, particularly, is, that there is nothing very pressing as to time; we can afford a little time. The Onslow motto, you know, *it* conveys it, and your mother was connected with the Onslows."

It would not be easy to describe how the words of his noble uncle relieved Cleve Verney. Every sentence lifted a load from his burthen, or cut asunder some knot in the cordage of his bonds. He had not felt so much at ease since his hated conversation with Lord Verney in the library.

Not very long after this, Cleve made the best speech by many degrees he had ever spoken – a really forcible reply upon a

subject he had very carefully made up, of which, in fact, he was a master. His uncle was very much pleased, and gave his hearers to understand pretty distinctly from what fountain he had drawn his inspiration, and promised them better things still, now that he had got him fairly in harness, and had him into his library, and they put their heads together; and he thought his talking with him a little did him no harm, Cleve's voice was so good, he could make himself heard – you must be able to reach their ears or you can hardly hope to make an impression; and Lord Verney's physician insisted on his sparing his throat.

So Lord Verney was pleased. Cleve was Lord Verney's throat, and the throat emitted good speeches, and everyone knew where the head was. Not that Cleve was deficient; but Cleve had very unusual advantages.

Tom Sedley and Cleve were on rather odd terms now. Cleve kept up externally their old intimacy when they met. But he did not seek him out in those moods which used to call for honest Tom Sedley, when they ran down the river together to Greenwich, when Cleve was lazy, and wanted to hear the news, and say what he liked, and escape from criticism of every kind, and enjoy himself indolently.

For Verney now there was a sense of constraint wherever Tom Sedley was. Even in Tom's manner there was a shyness. Tom had learned a secret, which he had not confided to him. He knew he was safe in Tom Sedley's hands. Still he was in his power, and Sedley knew it, and that galled his pride, and made

an estrangement.

In the early May, "when winds are sweet though they unruly be," Tom Sedley came down again to Cardyllian. Miss Charity welcomed him with her accustomed emphasis upon the Green. How very pretty Agnes looked. But how cold her ways had grown.

He wished she was not so pretty – so *beautiful*, in fact. It pained him, and somehow he had grown strange with her; and she was changed, grave, and silent, rather, and, as it seemed, careless quite whether he was there or not, although he could never charge her with positive unkindness, much less with rudeness. He wished she would be rude. He would have liked to upbraid her. But her gentle, careless cruelty was a torture that justified no complaint, and admitted no redress.

He could talk volubly and pleasantly enough for hours with Charity, not caring a farthing whether he pleased her or not, and thinking only whether Agnes, who sat silent at her work, liked his stories and was amused by his fun; and went away elated for a whole night and day because a joke of his had made her laugh. Never had Tom felt more proud and triumphant in all his days.

But when Charity left the room to see old Vane Etherage in the study, a strange silence fell upon Tom. You could hear each stitch of her tambour-work. You could hear Tom's breathing. He fancied she might hear the beating of his heart. He was ashamed of his silence. He could have been eloquent had he spoken from that loaded heart. But he dare not, and failing this he must be

silent.

By this time Tom was always thinking of Agnes Etherage, and wondering at the perversity of fate. He was in love. He could not cheat himself into any evasion of that truth – a tyrant truth that had ruled him mercilessly; and there was she pining for love of quite another, and bestowing upon him, who disdained it, all the treasure of her heart, while even a look would have been cherished with gratitude by Sedley.

What was the good of his going up every day to Hazelden, Tom Sedley thought, to look at her, and talk to Charity, and laugh, and recount entertaining gossip, and make jokes, and be agreeable, with a heavy and strangely suffering heart, and feel himself every day more and more in love with her, when he knew that the sound of Cleve's footsteps, as he walked by, thinking of himself, would move her heart more than all Tom Sedley, adoring her, could say in his lifetime?

What a fool he was! Before Cleve appeared she was fancy free; no one else in the field, and his opportunities unlimited. He had lapsed his time, and occasion had spread its wings and flown.

"What beautiful sunshine! What do you say to a walk on the Green?" said Tom to Charity, and listening for a word from Agnes. She raised her pretty eyes and looked out, but said nothing.

"Yes. I think it would be very nice; and there is no wind. What do *you* say, Agnes?"

"I don't know. I'm lazy to-day, I think, and I have this to

finish," said Agnes.

"But you ought to take a walk, Agnes; it would do you good; and Thomas Sedley and I are going for a walk on the Green."

"Pray, do," pleaded Tom, timidly.

Agnes smiled and shook her head, looking out of the window, and, making no other answer, resumed her work.

"You are *very* obstinate," remarked Charity.

"Yes, and lazy, like the donkeys on the Green, where you are going; but you don't want me particularly – I mean *you*, Charrie – and Mr. Sedley, I know, will excuse me, for I really feel that it would tire me to-day. It would tire me to death," said Agnes, winding up with an emphasis.

"Well, *I'll* go and put on my things, and if you *like* to come you *can* come, and if you don't you can stay where you are. But I wish you would not be a fool. It is a beautiful day, and nothing on earth to prevent you."

"I don't like the idea of a walk to-day. I know I should feel tired immediately, and have to bring you back again; and I've really grown interested in this little bit of work, and I feel as if I must finish it to-day."

"Why *need* you finish it to-day? You *are* such a goose, Agnes," said Charity, marching out of the room.

Tom remained there standing, his hat in his hand, looking out of the window – longing to speak, his heart being full, yet not knowing how to begin, or how to go on if he had begun.

Agnes worked on diligently, and looked out from the window

at her side over the shorn grass and flower-beds, through the old trees in the foreground – over the tops of the sloping forest, with the back-ground of the grand Welsh mountains, and a glimpse of the estuary, here and there, seen through the leaves, stretching far off, in dim gold and gray.

"You like that particular window," said Tom, making a wonderful effort; "I mean, why do you like always to sit there?" He spoke in as careless a way as he could, looking still out of his window, which commanded a different view.

"This window! oh, my frame stands here always, and when one is accustomed to a particular place, it puts one out to change."

Then Agnes dropped her pretty eyes again to her worsted, and worked and hummed very faintly a little air, and Tom's heart swelled within him, and he hummed as faintly the same gay air.

"I thought perhaps you liked that view?" said Tom Sedley, arresting the music.

She looked out again.

"Well, it's very pretty."

"The best from these windows; some people think, I believe, the prettiest view you have," said Tom, gathering force, "the water is always so pretty."

"Yes, the water," she assented listlessly.

"Quite a romantic view," continued Sedley, a little bitterly.

"Yes, every pretty view *is* romantic," she acquiesced, looking out for a moment again. "If one knew exactly what *romantic* means – it's a word we use so often, and so vaguely."

"And can't you define it, Agnes?"

"Define it? I really don't think I could."

"Well, that does surprise me."

"You are so much more clever than I, of course it does."

"No, quite the contrary; you are clever – I'm serious, I assure you – and I'm a dull fellow, and I know it quite well —*I* can't define it; but *that* doesn't surprise me."

"Then we are both in the same case; but I won't allow it's stupidity – the idea is quite undefinable, and that is the real difficulty. You can't describe the perfume of a violet, but you know it quite well, and I really think flowers a more interesting subject than romance."

"Oh, really! not, surely, than the romance of *that* view. It *is* so romantic!"

"You seem quite in love with it," said she, with a little laugh, and began again with a grave face to stitch in the glory of her saint in celestial yellow worsted.

"The water – yes – and the old trees of Ware, and just that tower, at the angle of the house."

Agnes just glanced through her window, but said nothing.

"I think," said Sedley, "if *I* were peopling this scene, you know, I should put my hero in that Castle of Ware – that is, if I could invent a romance, which, of course, I couldn't." He spoke with a meaning, I think.

"Why should there be heroes in romances?" asked Miss Agnes, looking nevertheless toward Ware, with her hand and the

needle resting idly upon the frame. "Don't you think a romance ought to resemble reality a little; and do you ever find such a monster as a hero in the world? *I* don't expect to see one, I know," and she laughed again, but Tom thought, a little bitterly, and applied once more diligently to her work, and hummed a few bars of her little air again.

And Tom, standing now in the middle of the room, leaning on the back of a chair, by way of looking still upon the landscape which they had been discussing, was really looking, unobserved, on her, and thinking that there was not in all the world so pretty a creature.

Charity opened the door, equipped for the walk, and bearing an alpaca umbrella, such as few gentlemen would like to walk with in May Fair.

"Well, you won't come, I see. I think you are very obstinate. Come, Thomas Sedley. Good-bye, Agnes;" and with these words the worthy girl led forth my friend Tom, and as they passed the corner of the house, he saw Agnes standing in the window, looking out sadly, with her fingertips against the pane.

"She's lonely, poor little thing!" thought he, with a pang. "Why wouldn't she come? Listlessness – apathy, I suppose. How selfish and odious any trifling with a girl's affections is;" and then aloud to Charity, walking by her side, he continued, "You have not seen Cleve since the great day of Lord Verney's visit, I suppose?"

"No, nothing of him, and don't desire to see him. He has been the cause of a great deal of suffering, as you see, and I think

he has behaved *odiously*. She's very odd; she doesn't choose to confide in me. I don't think it's nice or kind of her, but, of course, it's her own affair; only this is plain to me, that she'll never think of any one else now but Cleve Verney."

"It's an awful pity," said Tom Sedley, quite sincerely.

They were walking down that steep and solitary road, by which Vane Etherage had made his memorable descent a few months since, now in deep shadow under the airy canopy of transparent leaves, and in total silence, except for the sounds, far below, of the little mill-stream struggling among the rocks.

"Don't you know Mr. Cleve Verney pretty well?"

"Intimately – that is, I *did*. I have not lately seen so much of him."

"And do you think, Thomas Sedley, that he will ever come forward?" said blunt Miss Charity.

"Well, I happen to know that Cleve Verney has no idea of anything of the kind. In fact, I should be deceiving you, if I did not say distinctly that I know he won't."

Tom was going to say he *can't*, but checked himself. However, I think he was not sorry to have an opportunity of testifying to this fact, and putting Cleve Verney quite out of the field of conjecture as a possible candidate.

"Then I must say," said Miss Charity, flushing brightly, "that Mr. Verney is a villain."

From this strong position Tom could not dislodge her, and finding that expostulation involved him in a risk of a similar

classification, he abandoned Cleve to his fate.

Up and down the Green they walked until Miss Flood espied and arrested Charity Etherage, and carried her off upon a visit of philanthropy in her pony-carriage, and Tom Sedley transferred his charge to fussy, imperious Miss Flood; and he felt strangely incensed with her, and walked the Green, disappointed and bereft. Was not Charity Agnes's sister? While he walked with her, he could talk of Agnes. He was still in the halo of Hazelden, and near Agnes. But now he was adrift, in the dark. He sat down, looking toward the upland woods that indicate Hazelden, and sighed with a much more real pain than he had ever sighed toward Malory; and he thought evil of meddling Miss Flood, who had carried away his companion. After a time he walked away toward Malory, intending a visit to his old friend Rebecca Mervyn, and thinking all the way of Agnes Etherage.

CHAPTER V.
MRS. MERVYN'S DREAM

He found himself, in a little time, under the windows of the steward's house. Old Rebecca Mervyn was seated on the bench beside the door, plying her knitting-needles; she raised her eyes on hearing his step.

"Ha, he's come!" she said, lowering her hands to her knees, and fixing her dark wild gaze upon him, "I ought to have known it – so strange a dream must have had a meaning."

"They sometimes have, ma'am, I believe. I hope you are pretty well, Mrs. Mervyn."

"No, sir, I am not well."

"Very sorry, very sorry indeed, ma'am," said Tom Sedley. "I've often thought this must be a very damp, unhealthy place – too much crowded up with trees; they say nothing is more trying to health. You'd be much better, I'm sure, anywhere else."

"Nowhere else; my next move shall be my last. I care not how soon, sir."

"Pray, don't give way to low spirits; you really mustn't," said Tom.

"Tell me what it is, sir; for I know you have come to tell me something."

"No, I assure you; merely to ask you how you are, and whether

I can be of any use."

"Oh! sir; what use? —*no*."

"Do you wish me to give any message to that fellow, Dingwell? Pray make use of me in any way that strikes you. I hear he is on the point of leaving England again."

"I'm glad of it," exclaimed the old lady. "Why do I say so? I'm glad of nothing; but I'm sure it's better. What business could he and Mr. Larkin, and that Jew, have with my child, who, thank God, is in Heaven, and out of the reach of their hands, *evil* hands, I dare say."

"So I rather think also, ma'am; and Mr. Larkin tried, did he?"

"Larkin; – yes, that was the name. He came here, sir, about the time I saw you; and he talked a great deal about my poor little child. It is dead, you know, but I did not tell him so. I promised Lady Verney I'd tell nothing to strangers – they all grow angry then. Mr. Larkin was angry, I think. But I do not speak – and you advised me to be silent – and though he said he was their lawyer, I would not answer a word."

"I have no doubt you acted wisely, Mrs. Mervyn; you cannot be too cautious in holding any communication with such people."

"I'd tell you, sir – if I dare; but I've promised, and I *dare*n't. Till old Lady Verney's gone, I daren't. I know nothing of law papers – my poor head! How should I? And *she* could not half understand them. So I promised. *You* would understand them. Time enough – time enough."

"I should be only too happy, whenever you please," said Tom,

making ready tender of his legal erudition.

"And you, sir, have come to tell me something; what is it?"

"I assure you I have nothing particular to say; I merely called to inquire how you are."

"Nothing more needless, sir; how can a poor lonely old woman be, whose last hope has perished and left her alone in the world? For twenty years – more, *more* than twenty – I have been watching, day and night; and now, sir, I look at the sea no more. I will never see those headlands again. I sit here, sir, from day to day, thinking; and, oh, dear, I wish it was all over."

"Any time you should want me, I should be only too happy, and this is my address."

"And you have nothing to tell me?"

"No, ma'am, nothing more than I said."

"It was wonderful: I dreamed last night I was looking toward Pendillion, watching as I used; the moon was above the mountain, and I was standing by the water, so that the sea came up to my feet, and I saw a speck of white far away, and something told me it was his sail at last, and nearer and nearer, very fast it came; and I walked out in the shallow water, with my arms stretched out to meet it, and when it came very near, I saw it was Arthur himself coming upright in his shroud, his feet on the water, and with his feet, hands, and face, as white as snow, and his arms stretched to meet mine; and I felt I was going to die; and I covered my eyes with my hands, praying to God to receive me, expecting his touch; and I heard the rush of the water about his

feet, and a voice – it was *yours*, not his – said, 'Look at me,' and I did look, and saw you, and you looked like a man that had been drowned – your face as white as his, and your clothes dripping, and sand in your hair; and I stepped back, saying, 'My God! how have you come here?' and you said, 'Listen, I have great news to tell you;' and I waked with a shock. I don't believe in dreams more I believe than other people, but this troubles me still."

"Well, thank God, I have had no accident by land or by water," said Tom Sedley, smiling in spite of himself at the awful figure he cut in the old lady's vision; "and I have no news to tell, and I think it will puzzle those Jews and lawyers to draw me into their business, whatever it is. I don't like that sort of people; you need never be afraid of me, ma'am, I detest them."

"Afraid of *you*, sir! Oh no. You have been very kind. See, this view here is under the branches; you can't see the water from this, only those dark paths in the wood; and I walk round sometimes through that hollow and on the low road toward Cardyllian in the evening, when no one is stirring, just to the ash tree, from which you can see the old church and the churchyard; and oh! sir, I wish I were lying there."

"You must not be talking in that melancholy way, ma'am," said Tom, kindly; "I'll come and see you again if you allow me; I think you are a great deal too lonely here; you ought to go out in a boat, ma'am, and take a drive now and then, and just rattle about a little, and you can't think how much good it would do you; and – I must go – and I hope I shall find you a great deal better when

I come back" – and with these words he took his leave, and as he walked along the low narrow road that leads by the inland track to Cardyllian, of which old Rebecca Mervyn spoke, whom should he encounter but Miss Charity coming down the hill at a brisk pace with Miss Flood in that lady's pony-carriage. Smiling, hat in hand, he got himself well against the wall to let them pass; but the ladies drew up, and Miss Charity had a message to send home if he, Thomas Sedley, would be so good as to call at Jones's they would find a messenger, merely to tell Agnes that she was going to dine with Miss Flood, and would not be home till seven o'clock.

So Tom Sedley undertook it; smiled and bowed his adieus, and then walked faster toward the town, and instead of walking direct to Mrs. Jones's, sauntered for a while on the Green, and bethought him what mistakes such messengers as Mrs. Jones could provide sometimes make, and so resolved himself to be Miss Charity's Mercury.

Sedley felt happier, with an odd kind of excited and unmeaning happiness, as he walked up the embowered steep toward Hazelden, than he had felt an hour or two before while walking down it. When he reached the little flowery platform of closely-mown grass, on which stands the pretty house of Hazelden, he closed the iron gate gently and looked toward the drawing-room windows that reach the grass, and felt a foolish flutter at his heart as he saw that the frame stood in Agnes's window without its mistress.

"Reading now, I suppose," whispered Tom, as if he feared to disturb her. "She has changed her place and she is reading;" and he began to speculate whether she sat on the ottoman, or on the sofa, or in the cushioned arm-chair, with her novel in her hands. But his sidelong glances could not penetrate the panes, which returned only reflections of the sky or black shadow, excepting of the one object, the deserted frame which stood close to their surface.

There was a time, not long ago either, when Tom Sedley would have run across the grass to the drawing-room windows, and had he seen Agnes within would have made a semi-burglarious entry through one of them. But there had come of late, on a sudden, a sort of formality in his relations with Agnes; and so he walked round by the hall-door, and found the drawing-rooms empty, and touching the bell, learned that Miss Agnes had gone out for a walk.

"I've a message to give her from Miss Charity; have you any idea which way she went?"

He found himself making excuses to the servant for his inquiry. A short time since he would have asked quite frankly where she was, without dreaming of a reason; but now had grown, as I say, a reserve, which has always the more harmless incidents of guilt. He was apprehensive of suspicion; he was shy even of this old servant, and was encountering this inquiry by an explanation of his motives.

"I saw her go by the beech-walk, sir," said the man.

"Oh! thanks; very good."

And he crossed the grass, and entered the beech-walk, which is broad and straight, with towering files of beech at each side, and a thick screen of underwood and evergreens, and turning the clump of rhododendrons at the entrance of the walk, he found himself, all on a sudden, quite close to Agnes, who was walking toward him.

She stopped. He fancied she changed colour: had she mistaken him for some one else?

"Well, Agnes, I see the sun and the flowers prevailed, though we couldn't; and I'm glad, at all events, that you have had a little walk."

"Oh! yes, after all, I couldn't really resist; and is Charity coming?"

"No, you are not to expect her till tea-time. She's gone with Miss Flood somewhere, and she sent me to tell you."

"Oh! thanks;" and Agnes hesitated, looking towards home, as if she intended returning.

"You may as well walk once more up and down; it does look so jolly, doesn't it?" said Tom; "pray do, Agnes."

"Well, yes, once more I will; but that is all, for I really am a little tired."

They set out in silence, and Tom, with a great effort, said, —

"I wonder, Agnes, you seem so cold, I mean so unfriendly, with me; I think you do; and you must be quite aware of it; you must, *indeed*, Agnes. I *think* if you knew half the pain you are

giving me – I really do – that you wouldn't."

The speech was very inartificial, but it had the merit of going direct to the point, and Miss Agnes began, —

"I haven't been at all unfriendly."

"Oh! but you *have—indeed* you have – you are quite *changed*. And I don't know what I have done – I wish you'd tell me – to deserve it; because – even if there was – another – anything – no matter what – I'm an old friend, and I think it's very unkind; *you* don't perceive it, perhaps, but you are awfully changed."

Agnes laughed a very little, and she answered, looking down on the walk before her, as Sedley thought, with a very pretty blush; and I believe there was.

"It is a very serious accusation, and I don't deserve it. No, indeed, and even if it were true, it rather surprises me that it should in the least interest you; because we down here have seen so little of you that we might very reasonably suspect that you had begun to forget us."

"Well, I *have* been an *awful* fool, it is quite true, and you have punished me, not more than I deserve; but I think you might have remembered that you had not on earth a better friend – I mean a more earnest one – particularly *you*, Agnes, than I."

"I really don't know what I have done," pleaded she, with another little laugh.

"I was here, you know, as intimate almost as a brother. I don't say, of course, there are not many things I had no right to expect to hear anything about; but if I had, and been thought worthy of

confidence, I would at all events have spoken honestly. But – may I speak quite frankly, Agnes? You won't be offended, will you?"

"No; I shan't – I'm quite sure."

"Well, it was only this – you *are* changed, Agnes, you know you are. Just this moment, for instance, you were going home, only because *I* came here, and you fancied I might join you in your walk; and this change began when Cleve Verney was down here staying at Ware, and used to walk with you on the Green."

Agnes stopped short at these words and drew back a step, looking at Sedley with an angry surprise.

"I don't understand you – I'm certain I don't. I can't conceive what you mean," she said.

Sedley paused in equal surprise.

"I – I beg pardon; I'm awfully sorry – you'll never know *how* sorry – if I have said anything to vex you; but I *did* think it was some influence or something connected with that time."

"I really don't pretend to understand you," said Agnes, coldly, with eyes, however, that gleamed resentfully. "I do recollect perfectly Mr. Cleve Verney's walking half-a-dozen times with Charity and me upon the Green, but what that can possibly have to do with your fancied wrongs, I cannot imagine. I fancied you were a friend of Mr. Verney's."

"So I was – so I am; but no such friend as I am of yours —*your* friend, Agnes. There's no use in saying it; but, Agnes, I'd die for you – I would indeed."

"I thought it very strange, your coming so very seldom to

inquire for papa, when he was so poorly last year, when you were at Cardyllian. *He* did not seem to mind it; but considering, as you say, how much you once used to be here, it did strike me as very unkind – I may as well say what I really thought – not only unkind, but rude. So that if there has been any change, you need not look to other people for the cause of it."

"If you knew how I blame myself for that, I think, bad as it was, you'd forgive me."

"I think it showed that you did not very much care what became of us."

"Oh! Agnes, you did not think that – you never thought it. Unless *you* are happy, I *can't* be happy, nor even then unless I think you have forgiven me; and I think if I could be sure you liked me ever so little, even in the old way, I should be one of the happiest fellows in the world. I don't make any excuses – I was the stupidest fool on earth – I only throw myself on your mercy, and ask you to forgive me."

"I've nothing to forgive," said Agnes, with a cruel little laugh, but changing colour.

"Well – well, *forget*– oh, *do*! and shake hands like your old self. You've no idea how miserable I have been."

Lowering her eyes, with a very beautiful blush and a smile – a little shy, and so gratified – and a little silvery laugh, Agnes relented, and did give her hand to Tom Sedley.

"Oh, Agnes! Oh, Agnes! I'm so happy and so grateful! Oh, Agnes, you won't take it away – just for a moment."

She drew her hand to remove it, for Tom was exceeding his privilege, and kissing it.

"*Now* we are friends," said Agnes, laughing.

"Are we *quite* friends?"

"Yes, quite."

"You must not take your hand away – one moment more. Oh, Agnes! I can never tell you – never, how I love you. You are my darling, Agnes, and I can't live without you."

Agnes said something – was it reproof or repulse? He only knew that the tones were very sad and gentle, and that she was drawing her hand away.

"Oh, darling, I adore you! You would not make me miserable for life. There is nothing I won't do – nothing I won't try – if you'll only say you like me – ever so little. Do sit down here just for a moment" – there was a rustic seat beside them – "only for a moment."

She did sit down, and he beside her. That "moment" of Tom Sedley's grew as such moments will, like the bean that Jack sowed in his garden, till it reached – Titania knows whither! I know that Miss Charity on her return surprised it still growing.

"I made the tea, Agnes, fancying you were in your room. I've had such a search for you. I really think you might have told Edward where you were going. Will you drink tea with us, Thomas Sedley, this evening? though I am afraid you'll find it perfectly cold."

If Miss Charity had been either suspicious or romantic, she

would have seen by a glance at the young people's faces what had happened; but being neither, and quite pre-occupied with her theory about Cleve Verney, and having never dreamed of Tom Sedley as possibly making his *début* at Hazelden in the character of a lover – she brought her prisoners home with only a vague sense now and then that there was either something a little odd in their manner or in her own perceptions, and she remarked, looking a little curiously at Tom, in reference to some query of hers, —

"I've asked you that question twice without an answer, and now you say something totally unmeaning."

CHAPTER VI.
TOM HAS A "TALK" WITH THE ADMIRAL

"Will *you* tell her?" whispered Sedley to Agnes.

"Oh, no. Do *you*," she entreated.

They both looked at Charity, who was preparing the little dog's supper of bread and milk in a saucer.

"I'll go in and see papa, and you shall speak to her," said Agnes.

Which Tom Sedley did, so much to her amazement that she set the saucer down on the table beside her, and listened, and conversed for half an hour; and the poodle's screams, and wild jumping and clawing at her elbow, at last reminded her that he had been quite forgotten.

So, while its mistress was apologising earnestly to poor Bijou, and superintending his attentions to the bread and milk, now placed upon the floor, in came Agnes, and up got Charity, and kissed her with a frank, beaming smile, and said, —

"I'm *excessively* glad, Agnes. I was always *so* fond of Thomas Sedley; and I *wonder* we never thought of it before."

They were all holding hands in a ring by this time.

"And what do you think Mr. Etherage will say?" inquired Tom.

"Papa! why of *course* he will be *delighted*," said Miss Charity. "He likes you *extremely*."

"But you know, Agnes might do so much better. She's such a treasure, there's no one that would not be proud of her, and no one could help falling in love with her, and the Ad – I mean Mr. Etherage, may think me so presumptuous; and, you know, he may think me quite too poor."

"If you mean to say that papa would object to you because you have only four hundred a year, you think most meanly of him. I know *I* should not like to be connected with anybody that I thought so meanly of, because that kind of thing I look upon as really *wicked*; and I should be sorry to think papa was wicked. I'll go in and tell him all that has happened this moment."

In an awful suspense, pretty Agnes and Tom Sedley, with her hand in both his, stood side by side, looking earnestly at the double door which separated them from this conference.

In a few minutes they heard Vane Etherage's voice raised to a pitch of testy bluster, and then Miss Charity's rejoinder with shrill emphasis.

"Oh! gracious goodness! he's very angry. What shall we do?" exclaimed poor little Agnes, in wild helplessness.

"I *knew* it – I *knew* it – I *said* how it would be – he can't endure the idea, he thinks it such audacity. I knew he must, and I really think I shall lose my reason. I could not – I *could* not live. Oh! Agnes, I *could*n't if he prevents it."

In came Miss Charity, very red and angry.

"He's just in one of his odd tempers. I don't mind one *word* he says to-night. He'll be quite different, you'll *see*, in the morning. We'll sit up here, and have a good talk about it, till it's time for you to go; and you'll see I'm quite right. I'm *surprised*," she continued, with severity, "at his talking as he did to-night. I consider it quite worldly and *wicked*! But I contented myself with telling him that he did not think one word of what he said, and that he *knew* he didn't, and that he'd tell me so in the morning; and instead of feeling it, as I thought he would, he said something intolerably rude."

Old Etherage, about an hour later, when they were all in animated debate, shuffled to the door, and put in his head, and looked surprised to see Tom, who looked alarmed to see him. And the old gentleman bid them all a glowering good night, and shortly afterwards they heard him wheeled away to his bed-room, and were relieved.

They sat up awfully late, and the old servant, who poked into the room oftener than he was wanted towards the close of their sitting, looked wan and bewildered with drowsiness; and at last Charity, struck by the ghastly resignation of his countenance, glanced at the French clock over the chimney-piece, and ejaculated —

"Why, merciful goodness! is it possible? A quarter to one! It *can't possibly be*. Thomas Sedley, *will* you look at your watch, and tell us what o'clock it really is?"

His watch corroborated the French clock.

"*If* papa heard this! I really can't the least *conceive* how it happened. I did not think it could have been *eleven*. Well, it is *undoubtedly* the *oddest* thing that *ever* happened in this house!"

In the morning, between ten and eleven, when Tom Sedley appeared again at the drawing-room windows, he learned from Charity, in her own emphatic style of narration, what had since taken place, which was not a great deal, but still was uncomfortably ambiguous.

She had visited her father at his breakfast in the study, and promptly introduced the subject of Tom Sedley, and he broke into this line of observation —

"I'd like to know what the deuce Tom Sedley means by talking of business to girls. I'd like to know it. I say, if he has anything to say, why doesn't he *say* it, that's what *I* say. Here I *am*. What has he to *say*. I don't object to hear him, be it sense or be it nonsense – out with it! That's my maxim; and be it sense or be it nonsense, I won't have it at second-*hand*. That's *my* idea."

Acting upon this, Miss Charity insisted that he ought to see Mr. Etherage; and, with a beating heart, he knocked at the study door, and asked an audience.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.