Le Fanu Joseph Sheridan

The Tenants of Malory. Volume 2

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
IN THE OAK PARLOUR – A MEETING AND PARTING

"Gossiping place Cardyllian is," said Miss Anne Sheckleton, after they had walked on a little in silence. "What nonsense the people do talk. I never heard anything like it. Did you ever hear such a galamathias?"

The young lady walking by her side answered by a cold little laugh —

"Yes, I suppose so. All small country towns *are*, I believe," said she.

"And that good old soul, Mrs. Jones, she does invent the most absurd gossip about every body that imagination can conceive. Wilmot told me the other day that she had given her to understand that your father is a madman, sent down here by London doctors for change of air. I make it a point never to mind one word she says; although her news, I confess, does amuse me."

"Yes, it is, very foolish. Who are those Etherages?" said Margaret.

"Oh! They are village people – oddities," said Miss Sheckleton. "From all I can gather, you have no idea what absurd people they are."

"He was walking with them. Was not he?" asked the young lady.

"Yes – I think so," answered her cousin.

Then followed a long silence, and the elder lady at length said —

"How fortunate we have been in our weather; haven't we? How beautiful the hills look this evening!" said the spinster; but her words did not sound as if she cared about the hills or the light. I believe the two ladies were each acting a part.

"Yes," said Margaret; "so they do."

The girl felt as if she had walked fifty miles instead of two – quite worn out – her limbs aching with a sense of fatigue; it was a trouble to hold her head up. She would have liked to sit down on the old stone bench they were passing now, and to die there like a worn-out prisoner on a march.

Two or three times that evening as they sat unusually silent and listless, Miss Anne Sheckleton peeped over her spectacles, lowering her work for a moment, with a sad inquiry, into her face, and seemed on the point of speaking. But there was nothing inviting to talk, in Margaret's face, and when she spoke there was no reference to the subject on which Miss Sheckleton would have

liked to speak.

So, at last, tired, with a pale, wandering smile, she kissed the kind old spinster, and bid her good night. When she reached her room, however, she did not undress, but having secured her door, she sat down to her little desk, and wrote a letter; swiftly and resolutely the pen glided over the page. Nothing added – nothing erased; each line remained as she penned it first.

Having placed this letter in its envelope, and addressed it to "Cleve Verney, Esq., Ware," she opened her window. The air was mild; none of the sharpness in it that usually gives to nights at that time of year, a frosty foretaste of winter. So sitting by the window, which, placed in one of the gables of the old house, commands a view of the uplands of Cardyllian, and to the left, of the sea, and the misty mountains – she sat there, leaning upon her hand.

Here, with the letter on her lap, she sat, pale as a meditating suicide, and looking dreamily over the landscape. It is, at times, some little incident of by-play, or momentary hesitation of countenance, that gives its whole character and force to a situation. Before the retina of Margaret one image was always visible, that of Cleve Verney as she saw him to-day, looking under Agnes Etherage's bonnet, with interest, into her eyes, as he talked and walked by her side, on the Green of Cardyllian.

Of course there are false prophecies as well as true, in love; illusions as well as inspirations, and fancied intimations may mislead. But Margaret could not doubt here. All the time she

smiled and assumed her usual tone and manner, there was an agony at her heart.

Miss Fanshawe would trust no one with her secret. She was not like other girls. Something of the fiery spirit of her southern descent she had inherited. She put on the shawl and veil she had worn that day, unbarred the hall-door, and at two o'clock, when Cardyllian was locked in the deepest slumber, glided through its empty streets, to the little wooden portico, over which that day she had read "Post-office," and placed in it the letter which next morning made quite a little sensation in the Post-office *coterie*.

Under the awful silence and darkness of the old avenue, she reached again the hall-door of Malory. She stood for a moment upon the steps looking seaward – I think towards Ware – pale as a ghost, with one slender hand clenched, and a wild sorrow in her face. She cared very little, I think, whether her excursion were discovered or not. The messenger had flown from her empty hand; her voice could not recall it, or delay it for an hour – quite irrevocable, and all was over.

She entered the hall, closed and barred the door again, ascended to her room, and lay awake, through the long night, with her hand under her cheek, not stunned, not dreaming, but in a frozen apathy, in which she saw all with a despairing clearness.

Next day Cleve Verney received a note, in a hand which he knew not; but having read – could not mistake – a cold, proud note, with a gentle cruelty, ending all between them, quite decisively, and not deigning a reason for it.

I dare say that Cleve could not himself describe with much precision the feelings with which he read this letter.

Cleve Verney, however, could be as impetuous and as rash too, on occasion, as other people. There was something of rage in his soul which scouted all consequences. Could temerity be imagined more audacious than his?

Right across from Ware to the jetty of Malory ran his yacht, audaciously, in open sea, in broad daylight. There is, in the Dower House, a long low room, wainscoted in black shining panels from floor to ceiling, and which in old times was called the oak parlour. It has two doors, in one of its long sides, the farther opening near the stairs, the other close to the hall door.

Up the avenue, up the steps, into the hall, and, taking chance, into this room, walked Cleve Verney, without encountering interruption or even observation. *Fortuna favet fortibus*, so runs the legend in faded gold letters, under the dim portrait of Sir Thomas Verney, in his armour, fixed in the panel of the hall. So it had proved with his descendant.

Favoured by fortune, without having met a human being, and directed by the same divinity it would seem, he had entered the room I have described; and at the other end, alone, awaiting Miss Sheckleton, who was to accompany her in a little ramble among the woods, stood Miss Fanshawe, dressed for her walk.

In came Cleve pale with agitation; approached her quickly, and stopped short, saying —

"I've come; I'm here to ask – how could you – my God! – how

could you write the letter you sent this morning?"

Miss Fanshawe was leaning a little against the oak window-frame, and did not change this pose, which was haughty and almost sullen.

"*Why* I wrote that letter, *no* one has a right to ask me, and I shall say no more than is contained in the letter itself." She spoke so coldly and quietly that there seemed almost a sadness in her tones.

"I don't think you can really mean it," said Cleve, "I'm *sure* you can't; you can't *possibly* think that any one would use another so, without a reason."

"*Not* without a reason," said she.

"But I say, surely I have a right to hear it," urged Cleve. "Is it fair to condemn me, as your letter does, unheard, and to punish me, in ignorance?"

"*Not* in ignorance; at this moment, you *know* the reason perfectly," replied the girl, and he felt as if her great hazel eyes lighted up all the dark labyrinths of his brain, and disclosed every secret that lurked there.

Cleve was for a moment embarrassed, and averted his eyes. It was true. He *did* know; he could not fail to guess the cause. He had been cursing his ill luck all the morning, and wondering what malign caprice could have led her, of all times and places, at that moment, to the Green of Cardyllian.

In the "Arabian Nights," that delightful volume which owes nothing to trick or book-craft, and will preserve its charm

undimmed through all the mutations of style and schools, which, projecting its images from the lamp and hues of a dazzling fancy, can no more be lectured into neglect than the magic lantern, and will preserve its popularity while the faculty of imagination and the sense of colour remain, we all remember a parallel. In the "Sultan's Purveyor's Story," where the beautiful favourite of Zobaïde is about to make the bridegroom of her love quite happy, and in the moment of his adoration, starts up transformed with a "lamentable cry," and hate and fury in her aspect, all about an unfortunate "ragout made with garlic," and thereupon, with her own hand and a terrible scourge, lashes him, held down by slaves, into a welter of blood, and then orders the executioner to strike off, at the wrist, his offending hand.

"*Yes!* you *do* know, self-convicted, *why* I think it better for both that we should part now – better that we should thus early be undeceived; with little pain and less reluctance, forget the precipitation and folly of an hour, and go our several ways through life apart. You are fickle; you are selfish; you are reckless; you are quite unworthy of the love you ask for; if you are trifling with that young lady, Miss Etherage, how cruel and unmanly! and if *not*, by what right do you presume to stand here?"

Could he ever forget that beautiful girl as he saw her before him there, almost terrible – her eyes – the strange white light that seemed to flicker on her forehead – her attitude, Italian more than English, statuesque and wild?

On a sudden came another change, sad as a broken-hearted death and farewell – the low tone – the fond lingering – of an unspeakable sorrow, and eternal leave-taking.

"In either case my resolution is taken. I have said *Farewell*; and I will see you no more – no more – never."

And as she spoke, she left the room by the door that was beside her.

It was a new sensation for Cleve Verney to feel as he did at that moment. A few steps he followed toward the door, and then hesitated. Then with a new impulse, he did follow and open it. But she was gone. Even the sound of her step was lost.

He turned back, and paused for a minute to collect his thoughts. Of course this must not be. The idea of giving her up so, was simple nonsense, and not to be listened to.

The door at which the young lady had left the room but two or three minutes before, now opened, and Miss Sheckleton's natty figure and kind old face came in. Quite aghast she looked at him.

"For God's sake, Mr. Verney, why are you here? How *can* you be so rash?" she almost gasped. "You *must* go, *instantly*."

"How could you advise the cruelty and folly of that letter?" he said, impetuously.

"What letter?"

"Oh! Miss Sheckleton, do let us be frank; only say what have I done or said, or thought, that I should be condemned and discarded without a hearing?"

Hereupon Miss Sheckleton, still urging his departure in

frightened whispers, protested her innocence of his meaning, and at last bethought her of persuading him, to leave the house, and meet her for the purpose of explaining all, of which he soon perceived she was honestly ignorant, in their accustomed trysting-place.

There, accordingly, among the old trees, they met, and discussed, and she blamed and pitied him; and promised, with such caution as old ladies use in speaking for the resolves of the young of their own sex, that Margaret should learn the truth from her, although she could not of course say what she might think of it, taking as she did such decided, and, sometimes, strange views of things.

So they parted kindly. But Cleve's heart was disquieted within him, and his sky this evening was wild and stormy.

CHAPTER II
JUDÆUS APELLA

On the stillest summer day did you ever see nature quite still, even that circumscribed nature that hems you round with densest trees, as you lounge on your rustic seat, in lazy contemplation, amid the shorn grass of your flower-beds, while all things are oppressed and stifled with heat and slumber? Look attentively, and you will see a little quiver like a dying pulse, in the hanging flower-bells, and a light faint tremble in this leaf and that. Of nature, which is, being interpreted, life, the law is motion, and this law controls the moral as well as the physical world. Thus it is that there is nowhere any such thing as absolute repose, and everywhere we find change and action.

Over Malory, if anywhere, broods the spirit of repose. Buried in deep forest – fenced on one side by the lonely estuary – no town or village lying beyond it; seaward the little old-world road that passes by it is quite forsaken by traffic. Even the sound of children's laughter and prattle is never heard there, and little but the solemn caw of the rooks and the baying of the night-dog. Yet chance was then invading that quiet seclusion with an unexpected danger.

A gentleman driving that day to the "George Inn" at Cardyllian, from a distant station on the Great London line, and

having picked up from his driver, a Cardyllian man, all he could about Malory, and an old Mrs. Mervyn who lived there, stopped suddenly at the corner of the old road, which, two miles below Cardyllian, turns off inland, and rambles with many pleasant windings into the road that leads to Penruthyn Priory.

This gentleman, whose dress was in the cheap and striking style, and whose jewellery was conspicuous, was high-shouldered, with a very decided curve, though not exactly a hunch. He was small, with rather long arms. His hair, whiskers, and beard were glossy black, and his features Jewish. He switched and twirled a black walking-cane, with silver knobs on it, in his hand, and he had two or three rings on his fingers.

His luggage had gone on to the "George," and whenever opportunity occurred along that solitary road he renewed his inquiries about Malory, with a slight peculiarity of accent which the unsophisticated rustics in that part of the world had never heard before.

By this time it was evening, and in the light of the approaching sunset, he might now, as the view of the sea and the distant mountains opened, have enjoyed a pleasure for which, however, he had no taste; these evening glows and tints were to him but imperfect light, and he looked along the solemn and shadowy hills as he would have run his eye along the shops in Cheapside – if with any interest, simply to amuse himself with a calculation of what they might be worth in money.

He was now passing the pretty church-yard of Llanderris.

The gray head-stones and grass-grown graves brought home to him no passing thought of change and mortality; death was to him an arithmetical formula by which he measured annuities and reversions and policies. And now he had entered the steep road that leads down with an irregular curve to Malory.

He looked down upon the grand old wood. He had a smattering of the value of timber, and remembered what a hit Rosenthal and Solomons had made of their purchase of the wood at East Milton, when the railway was about to be made there; and what a nice bit of money they had made of their contract for sleepers and all sorts of other things. Could not Jos. Larkin, or some better man, be found to get up a little branch line from Llwynan to Cardyllian? His large mouth almost watered as he thought of it; and how that eight or nine miles of rail would devour every inch of timber that grew there – not a branch would be lost.

But now he was descending toward Malory, and the banks at the right hand and the left shut out the view. So he began to descend the slope at his leisure, looking up and about him and down at the worn road for material for thought, for his mind was bustling and barren.

The road is not four steps across. It winds steeply between high banks. Over these stoop and mingle in the perspective, the gray stems of tall ash trees mantled in ivy, which here and there climbs thickly among the boughs, and makes a darker umbrage among the foliage of the trees. Beneath, ascending the steep banks, grow

clumps of nettles, elder, hazel, and thorn. Only down the slope of the road can the passenger see anything of the country it traverses, for the banks out-top him on either side. The rains have washed its stones so bare, wearing a sort of gulley in the centre, as to give it the character in some sort of a forest ravine.

The sallow, hatchet-faced man, with prominent black eyes, was walking up this steep and secluded road. Those sharp eyes of his were busy. A wild bee hummed over his head, and he cut at it pleasantly with his stick, but it was out of reach, and he paused and eyed its unconscious flight, with an ugly smile, as if he owed it a grudge for having foiled him. There was little life in that secluded and dark track. He spied a small dome-shaped black beetle stumbling through the dust and pebbles, across it.

The little man drew near and peered at it with his piercing eyes and a pleasant grin. He stooped. The point of his pale nose was right over it. Across the desert the beetle was toiling. His path was a right line. The little man looked across to see what he was aiming at, or where was his home. There was nothing particular that he could perceive in the grass and weeds at the point witherward he was tending in a right line. The beetle sprawled and stumbled over a little bead of clay, recovered his feet and his direction, and plodded on in a straight line. The little man put his stick, point downward, before him. The beetle rounded it carefully, and plodded on inflexibly in the same direction. Then he of the black eyes and long nose knocked him gently in the face, and again and again, jerking him this way or that. Still, like

a prize-fighter he rallied between the rounds, and drove right on in his old line. Then the little man gave him a sharper knock, which sent him a couple of feet away, on his back; right and left sprawled and groped the short legs of the beetle, but alas! in vain. He could not right himself. He tried to lurch himself over, but in vain. Now and then came a frantic gallop with his little feet; it was beating the air. This was pleasant to the man with the piercing eyes, who stooped over, smiling with his wide mouth, and showing his white fangs. I wonder what the beetle thought of his luck – what he thought of it all. The paroxysms of hope, when his feet worked so hard, grew shorter. The intervals of despair and inaction grew longer. The beetle was making up his mind that he must lie on his back and die slowly, or be crushed under a hoof, or picked up and swallowed by a wandering farm-yard fowl.

Though it was pleasant to witness his despair, the man with the prominent eyes tired of the sight, he gave him a poke under the back, and tumbled him up again on his feet, and watched him. The beetle seemed a little bothered for a while, and would have shaken himself I'm sure if he could. But he soon came to himself, turned in his old direction, and, as it seemed to the observer, marched stumbling on with indomitable perseverance toward the selfsame point. I know nothing of beetle habits. I can make no guess why he sought that particular spot. Was it merely a favourite haunt, or were there a little beetle brood, and a wife awaiting him there? A strong instinct of some sort urged him,

and a most heroic perseverance.

And now I suppose he thought his troubles over, and that his journey was about surely to be accomplished. Alas! it will never be accomplished. There is an influence near which you suspect not. The distance is lessening, the green grass, and dock leaves, and mallows, very near. Alas! there is no sympathy with your instinct, with the purpose of your life, with your labours and hopes. An inverted sympathy is *there*; a sympathy with the difficulty – with "the Adversary" – with death. The little man with the sharp black eyes brought the point of his stick near the beetle's back, having seen enough of his pilgrimage, and squelched him.

The pleasure of malice is curious. There are people who flavour their meals with their revenges, whose future is made interesting by the hope that this or that person may come under their heel. Which is pleasantest, building castles in the air for ourselves, or dungeons in pandemonium for our enemies? It is well for one half of the human race that the other has not the disposal of them. More rare, more grotesque, more exquisitely fiendish, is that sport with the mysteries of agony, that lust of torture, that constitute the desire and fruition of some monstrous souls.

Now, having ended that beetle's brief life in eternal darkness, and reduced all his thoughts and yearnings to cypher, and dissolved his persevering and resolute little character, never to be recombined, this young gentleman looked up among the yellow

leaves in which the birds were chirping their evening gossip, and treated them to a capital imitation of a wild cat, followed by a still happier one of a screech-owl, which set all the sparrows in the ivy round twittering in panic; and having sufficiently amused himself, the sun being now near the horizon, he bethought him of his mission to Malory. So on he marched whistling an air from an opera, which, I am bound to admit, he did with the brilliancy and precision of a little flageolet, in so much that it amounted to quite a curiously pretty accomplishment, and you would have wondered how a gentleman with so unmistakeable a vein of the miscreant in him, could make such sweet and bird-like music.

A little boy riding a tired donkey into Cardyllian, pointed out to him the gate of the old place, and with a jaunty step, twirling his cane, and whistling as he went, he reached the open space before the door steps.

The surly servant who happened to see him as he hesitated and gaped at the windows, came forth, and challenged him with tones and looks the reverse of hospitable.

"Oh! Mrs. Mervyn?" said he; "well, she doesn't live here. Get ye round that corner there, and you'll see the steward's house with a hatch-door to it, and you may ring the bell, and leave, d'ye mind, by the back way. You can follow the road by the rear o' the house."

So saying, he warned him off peremptorily with a flunkey's contempt for a mock gentleman, and the sallow man with the black eyes and beard, not at all put out by that slight treatment, for

he had seen all sorts of adventures, and had learned unaffectedly to despise contempt, walked listlessly round the corner of the old house, with a somewhat knock-kneed and ungainly stride, on which our bandy friend sneered gruffly.

CHAPTER III
MR. LEVI VISITS MRS. MERVYN

And now the stranger stood before the steward's house, which is an old stone building, just three stories high, with but few rooms, and heavy stone shafts to the windows, with little diamond lattices in them, all stained and gray with age – antiquaries assign it to the period of Henry VII. – and when the Jewish gentleman, his wide, loose mouth smiling in solitary expectation, slapped and rattled his cane upon the planks of the hatch, as people in old times called "house!" to summon the servants, he was violating the monastic silence of a building as old as the bygone friars, with their matin bells and solemn chants.

A little Welsh girl looked over the clumsy banister, and ran up with his message to Mrs. Mervyn.

"Will you please come up stairs, sir, to the drawing-room?" asked the child.

He was amused at the notion of a "drawing-room" in such a place, and with a lazy sneer climbed the stairs after her.

This drawing-room was very dark at this hour, except for the patch of red light that came through the lattice and rested on the old cupboard opposite, on which stood, shelf above shelf, a grove of coloured delf candlesticks, tea-cups, jugs, men, women, teapots, and beasts, all in an old-world style, a decoration

which prevails in humble Welsh chambers, and which here was a property of the house, forgotten, I presume, by the great house of Verney, and transmitted from tenant to tenant, with the lumbering furniture.

The flighty old lady, Mrs. Mervyn of the large eyes, received him with an old-fashioned politeness and formality which did not in the least embarrass her visitor, who sate himself down, smiling his moist, lazy smile, with his knees protruded under the table, on which his elbows rested, and with his heels on the rung of his chair, while his hat and cane lay in the sunlight beside him.

"The maid, I think, forgot to mention your name, sir?" said the old lady gently, but in a tone of inquiry.

"Very like, ma'am – very like, indeed – because, I think, I forgot to mention my name to her," he drawled pleasantly. "I've taken a deal of trouble – I have – to find you out, ma'am, and two hundred and forty-five miles here, ma'am, and the same back again – a journey of four hundred and ninety miles – is not just nothing. I'm glad to see you, ma'am – happy to find you in your drawing-room, ma'am – hope you find yourself as well, ma'am, as your numerous friends could wish you. My name, ma'am, is Levi, being junior governor of the firm of Goldshed and Levi, well known on 'Change, ma'am, and justly appreciated by a large circle of friends, as you may read upon this card."

The card which he tendered did not, it must be allowed, speak of these admiring friends, but simply announced that "Goldshed and Levi" were "Stockbrokers," pursuing their calling at "Offices

– 10, Scroop Street, Gimmel Lane," in the City. And having held this card before her eyes for a sufficient time, he put it into his pocket.

"You see, ma'am, I've come all this way for our house, to ask you whether you would like to hear some news of your governor, ma'am?"

"Of whom, sir?" inquired the tall old lady, who had remained standing all this time, as she had received him, and was now looking at him with eyes, not of suspicion, but of undisguised fear.

"Of your husband, ma'am, I mean," drawled he, eyeing her with his cunning smile.

"You don't mean, sir – " said she faintly, and thereupon she was seized with a trembling, and sat down, and her very lips turned white, and Mr. Levi began to think "the old girl was looking uncommon queerish," and did not like the idea of "its happening," under these circumstances.

"There, ma'am – don't take on! Where's the water? Da-a-a-mn the drop!" he exclaimed, turning up mugs and jugs in a flurry. "I say – Mary Anne – Jane – chick-a-biddy – girl – be alive there, will ye?" howled the visitor over the banister. "Water, can't ye? Old woman's sick!"

"Better now, sir – better – just open that – a little air, please," the old lady whispered.

With some hurried fumbling he succeeded in getting the lattice open.

"Water, will you? What a time you're about it, little beast!" he bawled in the face of the child.

"Much better, thanks – very much better," whispered the old lady.

"Of course, you're better, ma'am. Here it is at la-a-ast. Have some water, ma'am? Do. Give her the water, you little fool."

She sipped a little.

"Coming round – all right," he said tenderly. "What cattle them old women are! drat them." A little pause followed.

"A deal better now, ma'am?"

"I'm startled, sir."

"Of course you're startled, ma'am."

"And faint."

"Why not, ma'am?"

Mrs. Rebecca Mervyn breathed three or four great sighs, and began to look again like a living woman.

"Now she looks quite nice," (he pronounced it ni-i-ishe) "doesn't she? You may make tracksh, young woman; go, will you?"

"I feel so much better," said the old lady when they were alone, "pray go on."

"You do – quite – ever so much better. *Shall* I go on?"

"Pray do, sir."

"Well now, see, if I do, there must be no more of that, old lady. If you can't talk of the governor, we'll just let him alone," said Levi, sturdily.

"For God's sake, sir, if you mean my husband, tell me all you know."

"All aint a great deal, ma'am; but a cove has turned up who knew him well."

"Some one who knew him?"

"Just so, ma'am." He balanced whether he should tell her that he was dead or not, but decided that it would be more convenient, though less tragic, to avoid getting up a new scene like the other, so he modified his narrative. "He's turned up, ma'am, and knew him very intimate; and has got a meogny" (he so pronounced mahogany) "desk of his, gave in charge to him, since he could not come home at present, containing a law paper, ma'am, making over to his son and yours some property in England."

"Then, he is not coming?" said she.

"Not as I knowzh, ma'am."

"He has been a long time away," she continued.

"So I'm informed, ma'am," he observed.

"I'll tell you how it was, and when he went away."

"Thank ye, ma'am," he interposed. "I've heard – melancholy case, ma'am; got seven penn'orth, didn't he, and never turned up again?"

"Seven what, sir?"

"Seven years, ma'am; seven penn'orth we call it, ma'am, familiar like."

"I don't understand you, sir – I don't know what it means; I saw him sail away. It went off, off, off."

"I'll bet a pound it did, ma'am," said Mr. Levi.

"Only to be for a very short time; the sail – I could see it very far – how pretty they look on the sea; but very lonely, I think – too lonely."

"A touch of solitary, ma'am," acquiesced Levi.

"Away, in the yacht," she dreamed on.

"The royal yacht, ma'am, no doubt."

"The yacht, we called it. He said he would return next day; and it went round Pendillion – round the headland of Pendillion, I lost it, and it never came again; but I think it will, sir – don't you? I'm sure it will – he was so confident; only smiled and nodded, and he said, 'No, I won't say good-bye.' He would not have said that if he did not mean to return – he could not so deceive a lonely poor thing like me, that adored him."

"No, he couldn't ma'am, not he; no man could. Betray the girl that adored him! Ba-a-ah! impossible," replied Mr. Levi, and shook his glossy ringlets sleepily, and dropped his eyelids, smiling. This old girl amused him, her romance was such a joke. But the light was perceptibly growing more dusky, and business must not wait upon fun, so Mr. Levi said —

"He'sh no chicken by this time, ma'am – your son, ma'am; I'm told he'sh twenty-sheven yearsh old – thatsh no chicken – twenty-sheven next birthday."

"Do you know anything of him, sir? Oh, no, he doesn't," she said, looking dreamily with her great sad eyes upon him.

"Jest you tell me, ma'am, where was he baptised, and by what

name?" said her visitor.

A look of doubt and fear came slowly and wildly into her face as she looked at him.

"Who is he – I've been speaking to you, sir?"

"Oh! yesh, mo-o-st *beautiful*, you 'av, ma'am," answered he; "and I am your son's best friend – and yours, ma'am; only you tell me where to find him, and he'sh a made man, for all his dayzh."

"Where has he come from? – a stranger," she murmured.

"I *told* you, ma'am."

"I don't know you, sir; I don't know your name," she dreamed on.

"Benjamin Levi. I'll *spell* it for you, if you like," he answered, beginning to grow testy. "I told you my name, and showed you my ca-a-ard. Bah! it ravels at one end, as fast as it knits at the other."

And again he held the card of the firm of Goldshed and Levi, with his elbows on the table, between the fingers of his right and left hand, bowed out like an old-fashioned shopboard, and looking as if it would spring out elastically into her face.

"*There*, ma'am, that'sh the ticket!" said he, eyeing her over it.

"Once, sir, I spoke of business to a stranger, and I was always sorry; I did mischief," said the old woman, with a vague remorsefulness.

"I'm *no* stranger, ma'am, begging your pardon," he replied, insolently; "you don't half know what you're saying, I do think. Goldshed and Levi – not know us; sich precious rot, I *never*!"

"I did mischief, sir."

"I only want to know where to find your son, ma'am, if you know, and if you won't tell, you *ruin* that poor young man. It aint a pound to me, but it'sh a deal to him," answered the good-natured Mr. Levi.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I once did mischief by speaking to a gentleman whom I didn't know. Lady Verney made me promise, and I'm sure she was right, never to speak about business without first consulting some member of her family. I don't understand business – never did," pleaded she.

"Well, here's a go! not understaan'? Why, there's *nothing* to understaan'. It isn't business. S-o-n," he spelt "*son*. H-u-s-b-a-n-d —*uzbaan*' that aint business – da-a-m me! *Where's* the business? Ba-ah!"

"Sir," said the old lady, drawing herself up, "I've answered you. It was about my husband – God help me – I spoke before, and did mischief without knowing it. I won't speak of him to strangers, except as Lady Verney advises – to any stranger – especially to you, sir."

There was a sound of steps outside, which, perhaps, modified the answer of Mr. Levi. He was very much chagrined, and his great black eyes looked very wickedly upon her helpless face.

"Ha, ha, ha! as you please, ma'am. It isn't the turn of a shilling to *me*, but you *ru*-in the *poo-or* young man, your son, for da-a-am me, if I touch his bushinesh again, if it falls through *now*; mind you *that*. So, having *ruined* your own flesh and blood, you

tell me to go as I came. It's *nau-thing* to me – mind that – but ruin to him; here's my hat and stick – I'm going, only just I'll give you one chance more for that poor young man, just a minute to think again." He had stood up, with his hat and cane in his hand. "Just one chance – you'll be sending for me again, and I won't come. No – no – never, da-a-am me!"

"Good evening, sir," said the lady.

Mr. Levi bit his thumb-nail.

"You don't know what you're a-doing, ma'am," said he, trying once more.

"I can't, sir – I *can't*," she said, distractedly.

"Come, think – I'm going —*going*; just think – what do you shay?"

He waited.

"I won't speak, sir."

"You won't?"

"No, sir."

He lingered for a moment, and the red sunlight showed like a flush of anger on his sallow face. Then, with an insolent laugh, he turned, sticking his hat on his head, and walked down the stairs, singing.

Outside the hatch, he paused for a second.

"I'll get it all another way," he thought. "Round here," he said, "wasn't it – the back way. Good evening, you stupid old crazy cat," and he saluted the windows of the steward's house with a vicious twitch of his cane.

CHAPTER IV
MR. BENJAMIN LEVI RECOGNISES AN ACQUAINTANCE

Mr. Benjamin Levi, having turned the corner of the steward's house, found himself before two great piers, passing through the gate of which he entered the stable-yard, at the further side of which was a second gate, which he rightly conjectured would give him access to that back avenue through which he meant to make his exit.

He glanced round this great quadrangle, one end of which was over-looked by the rear of the old house, and that quaint old refectory with its clumsy flight of stone steps, from the windows of which our friend Sedley had observed the ladies of Malory while engaged in their garden work.

There was grass growing between the paving stones, and moss upon the walls, and the stable doors were decaying upon their rusty hinges. Commenting, as so practical a genius naturally would, upon the surrounding capabilities and decay, Mr. Levi had nearly traversed this solitude when he heard some one call, "Thomas Jones!" twice or thrice, and the tones of the voice arrested him instantly.

He was a man with a turn for musical business, and not only dabbled in concerts and little operatic speculations, but, having a naturally musical ear, had a retentive memory for voices – and this blind man's faculty stood him in stead here, for, with a malicious thrill of wonder and delight, he instantly recognised this voice.

The door of that smaller yard which is next the house opened now, and Sir Booth Fanshawe entered, bawling with increased impatience – "Thomas Jones!"

Sir Booth's eye lighted on the figure of Mr. Levi, as he stood close by the wall at the other side, hoping to escape observation.

With the same instinct Sir Booth stepped backward hastily into an open stable door, and Mr. Levi skipped into another door, within which unfortunately, a chained dog, Neptune, was dozing.

The dog flew the length of his tether at Mr. Levi's legs, and the Jewish gentleman sprang forth more hastily even than he had entered.

At the same moment, Sir Booth's pride determined *his* vacillation, and he strode boldly forward and said —

"I think I know you, sir; don't I?"

As there was still some little distance between them, Mr. Levi affected near-sightedness, and, compressing his eyelids, smiled dubiously, and said —

"Rayther think not, sir. No, sir – I'm a stranger; my name is Levi – of Goldshed and Levi – and I've been to see Mrs. Mervyn, who lives here, about her young man. I don't know you, sir – no

– it is a mishtake."

"No, Mr. Levi – you *do* know me – you do," replied Sir Booth, with a grim oath, approaching, while his fingers clutched at his walking-stick with an uneasy gripe, as if he would have liked to exercise it upon the shoulders of the Israelite.

"Oh! crikey! Ay, to be sure – why, it's Sir Booth Fanshawe! I beg pardon, Sir Booth. We thought you was in France; but no matter, Sir Booth Fanshawe, none in the world, for all that little bushiness is blow'd over, quite. We have no interest – no more than your horse – in them little securities, upon my shoul; we sold them two months ago to Sholomons; we were glad to sell them to Sholomons, we were; he hit us pretty hard with some of Wilbraham and Cumming's paper, and I don't care if he never sees a shilling of it – we would rayther *like* it." And Mr. Levi again made oath to that confession of feeling.

"Will you come into the house and have a glass of sherry or something?" said Sir Booth, on reflection.

"Well, I don't mind," said Mr. Levi.

And in he went and had a glass of sherry and a biscuit, and grew friendly and confidential.

"Don't you be running up to town, Sir Booth – Sholomons is looking for you. Clever man, Sholomons, and you should get quietly out of this country as soon as you conveniently can. He thinks you're in France now. He sent Rogers – you know Rogers?"

He paused so long here that Sir Booth had to answer "No."

"Well, he sent him – a good man, Rogers, you know, but drinks a bit – after you to Vichy, ha, ha, ha! Crikey! it *was* rich. Sholomons be blowed! It was worth a pound to see his face – ugly fellow. You know Sholomons?"

And so Mr. Levi entertained his host, who neither loved nor trusted him, and at his departure gave him all sorts of friendly warnings and sly hints, and walked and ran partly to the "George," and got a two-horse vehicle as quickly as they could harness the horses, and drove at great speed to Llywnan, where he telegraphed to his partner to send a writ down by the next train for Sir Booth, the message being from Benjamin Levi, George Inn, Cardyllian, to Goldshed and Levi, &c., &c., London.

Mr. Levi took his ease in his inn, sipped a good deal of brandy and water, and smoked many cigars, with a serene mind and pleasant anticipations, for, if nothing went wrong, the telegram would be in his partner's hand in ample time to enable him, with his accustomed diligence, to send down a "beak" with the necessary documents by the night train who would reach Cardyllian early, and pay his little visit at Malory by nine o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Levi, as prosperous gentlemen will, felt his solitude, though luxurious, too dull for the effervescence of his spirits, and having questioned his host as to the amusements of Cardyllian, found that its normal resources of that nature were confined to the billiard and reading rooms, where, on payment of a trifling benefaction to the institution, he enjoyed, as a "visitor," the

exhilarating privileges of a member of the club.

In the billiard-room, accordingly, that night, was the fragrance of Mr. Levi's cheroot agreeably perceptible, the sonorous drawl of his peculiar accent vocal amongst pleasanter intonations, and his "cuts," "double doubles," and "long crosses," painfully admired by the gentlemen whose shillings he pocketed at pool. And it was pleasant to his exquisitively commercial genius to think that the contributions of the gentlemen to whom he had "given a lesson," and whose "eyes he had opened," would constitute a fund sufficient to pay his expenses at the "George," and even to leave something towards his return fare to London.

The invalid who was suffering from asthma in the bed-room next his was disturbed by his ejaculations as he undressed, and by his repeated bursts of laughter, and rang his bell and implored the servant to beg of the two gentlemen who were conversing in the next room to make a little less noise, in consideration of his indisposition.

The manner in which he had "potted" the gentlemen in the billiard-room, right and left, and the uncomfortable admiration of his successes exhibited in their innocent countenances, had, no doubt, something to do with these explosions of merriment. But the chief source of his amusement was the anticipated surprise of Sir Booth, when the little domiciliary visit of the next morning should take place, and the recollection of his own adroitness in mystifying the Baronet.

So he fell into a sweet slumber, uncrossed by even an ominous

dream, not knowing that the shrewd old bird for whom his chaff was spread and his pot simmering had already flown with the scream of the whistle on the wings of the night train to Chester, and from that centre to an unknown nook, whence, in a day or two more, he had flitted to some continental roost, which even clever Mr. Levi could not guess.

Next morning early, the ladies were on their way to London, through which they were to continue their journey, and to join Sir Booth abroad.

Two persons were, therefore, very much disappointed next day at Malory; but it could not be helped. One was Cleve Verney, who tried the inexorable secrecy of the servant in every way, but in vain; possibly because the servant did not himself know where "the family" were gone. The other was Mr. Benjamin Levi, who resented Sir Booth's selfish duplicity with an exasperation which would hardly have been appeased by burning that "old mizzled robber" alive.

Mr. Levi flew to Chester with his "beak" in a third-class carriage, and thence radiated telegraphic orders and entreaties affecting Sir Booth wherever he had a friend, and ready, on a hint by the wires, to unleash his bailiff on his track, and fix him on the soil, immovable as the petrified witch of Mucklestane Muir, by the spell of his parchment legend.

But no gleam of light rewarded his labours. It was enough to ruffle even Mr. Levi's temper, which, accordingly, *was* ruffled. To have been so near! To have had his hand, as it were, upon the

bird. If he had only had the writ himself in his pocket he might have dropped, with his own fingers, the grain of salt upon his tail. But it was not to be. At the moment of possession, Mr. Levi was balked. He could grind curses under his white teeth, and did not spare them now. Some of them were, I dare say, worthy of that agile witch, "Cuttie Sark," as she stood baffled on the "key-stane" of the bridge, with Meggie's severed tail in her grip.

In the meantime, for Cleve Verney, Malory is stricken with a sudden blight. Its woods are enchanted no longer; it is dark, now, and empty. His heart aches when he looks at it.

He missed his accustomed walk with the Etherage girls. He wrote to tell old Vane Etherage that he was suffering from a severe cold, and could not dine with him, as he had promised. The cold was a lie – but was he really well? Are the spirits no part of health; and where were his?

About a fortnight later, came a letter from his good friend, Miss Sheckleton. How delightfully interesting, though it contained next to nothing. But how interesting! How often he read it through! How every solitary moment was improved by a glance into it!

It was a foreign letter. It would be posted, she said, by a friend in Paris. She could not yet tell, even to a friend so kind as he, the address which would find them. She hoped, however, *very* soon to be at liberty to do so. *All* were well. Her young friend had never alluded since to the subject of the last painful interview. *She*, Miss Sheckleton, could not, unless a favourable

opening presented, well invite a conversation on the matter. She had no doubt, however, that an opportunity would occur. She understood the peculiar character of her beautiful young cousin, and saw a difficulty, and even danger, in pressing the question upon her, possibly prematurely. When he, Cleve, wrote – which she supposed he would so soon as he was in possession of her address – he could state exactly what he wished her to say. Meanwhile, although as she had before hinted, dear Margaret was admired and *sought* by a man both of rank and fortune, with very great constancy, (she thought it not improbable that Cleve had already suspected that affair,) there was in *her* opinion nothing to apprehend, at least at present, in that gentleman's suit – flattered, of course, she must be by a constancy so devoted; but she hardly thought there was a chance that the feeling would grow to anything beyond *that*. So, she bid God bless him, and wrote Anne Sheckleton at the foot of the page.

The physician who, mistaking a complaint, administers precisely the concoction which debilitates the failing organ, or inflames the tortured nerve, commits just such an innocent cruelty as good Miss Sheckleton practised, at the close of her letter, upon Cleve Verney.

She had fancied that he knew something of the suit to which she referred for the purpose of relieving an anxiety to which her thoughtful allusion introduced him, in fact, for the first time.

Who was this faithful swain? He knew enough of Sir Booth Fanshawe's surroundings, his friends and intimates, to

count up four, or five, or six possible rivals. He knew what perseverance might accomplish, and absence undo, and his heart was disquieted within him.

If he had consulted his instinct, he would have left Ware forthwith, and pursued to the Continent, and searched every town in France; but he could not act quite according to impulse. He had told the Cardyllian people that he was not to leave Ware till the fourteenth; would no remark attend his sudden departure, following immediately upon the mysterious flitting of the Malory people? He knew what wonderful stories might thereupon arise in Cardyllian, and how sure they would be, one way or another, to reach his uncle Kiffyn, and how that statesman's suspicions might embarrass him. Then a letter might easily reach Ware while he was away, and be lost, or worse.

So he resolved to see out the rest of his time where he was. In Cardyllian church, how dark and cold looked the cavity of the Malory pew! The saints and martyrs in the great eastern window were subdued, and would not glow, and their glories did not burn, but only smouldered that day. And oh! how long was Dr. Splayfoot's sermon! And how vague was his apprehension of the "yarn" to which Miss Charity Etherage treated him all the way from the church porch to the top of Castle Street.

He was glad when the fifteenth, which was to call him away from Ware, approached. He was glad to leave this changed place, glad to go to London —*anywhere*.

Just as all was ready for his flight by the night train, on the

evening of the 14th, to his great joy, came a letter, a note, almost, so short, from kind Anne Sheckleton.

All– underlined – were well. There was nothing more, in fact, but one satisfactory revelation, which was the address which would now find them.

So Cleve Verney made the journey to London that night in better spirits.

CHAPTER V
A COUNCIL OF THREE

Messrs. Goldshed and Levi have a neat office in Scroop Street. As stockbrokers, strictly, they don't, I am told, do anything like so large a business as many of their brethren. Those brethren, for the most part, are not proud of them. Their business is of a somewhat contraband sort. They have been examined once or twice uncomfortably before Parliamentary Committees. They have been savagely handled by the great Mr. Hackle, the Parliamentary counsel. In the great insurance case of "The executors of Shakerly *v.* The Philanthropic Union Company," they were hideously mangled and eviscerated by Sergeant Bilhooke, whose powers are well known. They have been called "harpies," "ghouls," "Madagascar bats," "vermin," "wolves," and "mousing owls," and are nothing the worse of it. Some people think, on the contrary, rather the better, as it has helped to advertise them in their particular line, which is in a puffing, rigging, fishy, speculative, "queerish" business, at which moral stockbrokers turn up their eyes and noses, to the amusement of Messrs. Goldshed and Levi, who have – although the sober office in Scroop Street looks sometimes a little neglected – no end of valuable clients, of the particular kind whom they covet, and who frequent the other office, in

Wormwood Court, which looks so dirty, mean, and neglected, and yet is the real seat of power.

The "office" in Wormwood Court is an old-fashioned, narrow-fronted, dingy house. It stands apart, and keeps its own secrets, having an uninhabited warehouse on one side, and a shabby timber-yard at the other. In front is a flagged court-yard, with dingy grass sprouting here and there, and lines of slimy moss, grimed with soot.

The gate is, I believe, never opened – I don't know that its hinges would work now. If you have private business with the firm on a wet day, you must jump out of your cab in the street, and run up through the side door, through the rain, over the puddled flags, and by the famous log of mahogany which the Messrs. Goldshed and Levi and their predecessors have sold, in bill transactions, nearly six thousand distinct times, without ever losing sight of it.

In the street this day there stood a cab, at that door. Mr. Jos. Larkin, the Gylingden attorney, was in consultation with the firm. They were sitting in "the office," the front room which you enter at your right from the hall. A high, old-fashioned chimney-piece cuts off the far angle of the room, obliquely. It is wainscoted in wood, in tiny square panels, except over the fireplace, where one great panel runs across, and up to the ceiling, with somebody's coat of arms carved in relief upon it. This woodwork has been painted white, long ago, but the tint has degenerated to a cream or buff colour, and a good washing

would do it no harm. Mr. Levi and others have pencilled little sums in addition, subtraction, and multiplication on it. You can see the original oak where the hat-rack was removed, near the window, as also in those places where gentlemen have cut their names or initials.

The window is covered with dust and dirt, beaten by the rain into all sorts of patterns. A chastened light enters through this screen, and you can't see from without who is in the room.

People wonder why Messrs. Goldshed and Levi, with so well-appointed an office in Scroop Street, will keep this private office in so beggarly a state; without a carpet, only a strip of nearly-obliterated oil-cloth on its dirty floor. Along the centre of the room extends a great old, battered, oblong mahogany quadrangle, full of drawers, with dingy brass handles, and having midway a sort of archway, like a bridge under a railway embankment, covered with oil-cloth of an undistinguishable pattern, blotched with old stains of red ink and black, and dribblings of sealing-wax, curling up here and there dustily, where office-knives, in fiddling fingers, have scarred its skin. On top of this are two clumsy desks. Behind one sits the junior partner, on a high wooden stool, and behind the other, the senior, on a battered office chair, with one of its haircloth angles protruding, like the corner of a cocked hat, in front, dividing the short, thick legs of Mr. Goldshed, whose heels were planted on the rungs, bending his clumsy knees, and reminding one of the attitude in which an indifferent rider tries to keep his seat on a restive horse.

Goldshed is the senior in every sense. He is bald, he is fat, he is short. He has gems on his stumpy fingers, and golden chains, in loops and curves, cross the old black velvet waistcoat, which is always wrinkled upward by the habit he has of thrusting his broad, short hands into his trousers pockets.

At the other side, leaning back in his chair, and offering, he flatters himself, a distinguished contrast to the vulgar person opposite, sat Mr. Jos. Larkin, of the Lodge, Gylingden. His tall, bald head was thrown a little back; one arm, in its glossy black sleeve, hung over the back of his chair, with his large red knuckles near the floor. His pink eyes wore their meek and dove-like expression; his mouth a little open, in repose; an air of resignation and beatitude, which, together with his well-known elegance, his long, lavender tinted trousers, and ribbed silk waistcoat of the same favourite hue, presented a very perfect picture, in this vulgar Jewish setting, of a perfect Christian gentleman.

"If everything favours, Mr. Goldshed, Mr. Dingwell may be in town to-morrow evening. He sends for me immediately on his arrival, to my quarters, you understand, and I will send him on to you, and you to Mrs. Sarah Rumble's lodgings."

"*Mish* Rumble," drawled Goldshed; "not married —*a girl, Mish*."

"Yes, *Mrs.* Rumble," continued Larkin, gently, "there's no harm in saying Mrs.; many ladies in a position of responsibility, prefer that style to *Miss*, for obvious reasons."

Here Goldshed, who was smiling lazily, winked at his junior, who returned that signal in safety, for Mr. Larkin, whose countenance was raised toward the ceiling, had closed his eyes. The chaste attorney's discretion amused them, for Miss Sarah Rumble was an industrious, careworn girl of two-and-fifty, taciturn, and with a brown pug face, and tresses somewhat silvery.

"We are told by the apostle," continued Mr. Larkin, musingly, "not only to avoid evil, but the appearance of evil. I forgot, however, our religions differ."

"Yes – ay – our religions differ, he says; they differ, Levi, don't they?"

"Yes, they do," drawled that theologian.

"Yes, they do; we see our way to that," concluded Goldshed.

Larkin sighed.

There was a short silence here. Mr. Larkin opened his pink eyelids, and showing his small, light blue eyes, while he maintained his easy and gentlemanlike attitude.

The senior member of the firm looked down on his desk, thoughtfully, and picked at an old drop of sealing wax with his office knife, and whistled a few slow bars, and Mr. Levi, looking down also, scribbled the cipher of the firm thirteen times, with flourishes, on a piece of paper.

Mr. Goldshed worked his short thick knees and his heels a little uneasily; the office chair was growing a little bit frisky, it seemed.

"Nishe shailing, Mr. Larkin, and oh, dear! a great lot of delicashy! What do you think?" said Mr. Goldshed, lifting up the office knife, with the edge toward the attorney, and letting it fall back two or three times, between his finger and thumb, dubiously. "The parties being swells, makesh it more delicate – ticklish – ticklish; do you shinsherely think it's all quite straight?"

"Of course, it's straight. I should hope, Mr. Goldshed, I have never advised any course that was not so," said Mr. Larkin, loftily.

"I don't mean religious – law blesh you – I mean *safe*," said Mr. Goldshed, soothingly.

A light pink flush touched the bald forehead of the attorney.

"Whatever is right, sir, is safe; and that, I think, can hardly be wrong – I *hope* not – by which all parties are benefited," said the attorney.

"All parties be diddled – except our shelves. I'm thinking of my shelf – and Mr. Levi, here – and, of courshe, of *you*. Very much of you," he added, courteously.

Mr. Larkin acknowledged his care by a faint meek bow.

"They're swells," repeated Mr. Goldshed.

"He saysh they're swelsh," repeated Mr. Levi, whose grave look had something of the air of a bully in it, fixing his dark prominent eyes on Mr. Larkin, and turning his cheek that way a little, also. "There's a danger in handling a swell – in them matters specially."

"Suppose theresh a contempt?" said Mr. Goldshed, whose

chair grew restive, and required management as he spoke.

"He saysh a *contempt*," repeated Mr. Levi, "or shomething worse," and he heightened the emphasis with an oath.

"I'll guarantee you for twopence, Mr. Levi; and pray consider me, and do *not* swear," urged Mr. Larkin.

"If you guarantee us, with a penalty," began Mr. Levi, who chose to take him literally.

"I said *that*, of *course*, Mr. Levi, by way of illustration, only; no one, of *course*, dreams of guaranteeing another without a proper consideration. I should have hoped you *could* not have misunderstood me. I don't understand guarantees, it is a business I have never touched. I'm content, I hope, with the emoluments of my profession, and what my landed property gives me. I only mean this – that there *is* no risk. What do *we* know of Mr. Dingwell, that is not perfectly above board – perfectly? I challenge the world upon *that*. If anything should happen to fall through, *we*, surely, are not to blame. At the same time if you – looking at it with your experience – apprehend any risk, of course, I couldn't think of allowing you to go on. I can arrange, this evening, and not very far from this house, either."

As Mr. Larkin concluded, he made a feint of rising.

"Ba-ah!" exclaimed Levi. "You don't think we want to back out of thish transhaction, Mr. Larkin? *no*-o-oh! That's not the trick of thish offishe – is it, gov'nor? He saysh *no*."

"No," echoed Goldshed.

"No, never – noways! you hear him?" reiterated Mr. Levi. "In

for a penny, in for a pound – in for a shilling, in for a thousand. Ba-ah! – No, never."

"No, noways – never!" reverberated Goldshed, in deep, metallic tones. "But, Levi, there, must look an inch or two before his noshe – and sho must I – and sho, my very good friend, Mr. Larkin, must *you*– a bit before your noshe. I don't see no great danger. We all know, the Honourable Arthur Verney is *dead*. We are *sure* of *that*– and all the rest is not worth the odd ha'pensh in that book," and he touched the mighty ledger lying by him, in which millions were entered. "The *rest* is Dingwell's affair."

"Just so, Mr. Goldshed," acquiesced Mr. Larkin. "We go together in that view."

"Dingwell be blowed! – what need *we* care for Dingwell?" tolled out Mr. Goldshed, with his ringing bass.

"Ba-ah! – drat him!" echoed the junior.

"Yes – a – quite as you say – but where's the good of imprecation? With *that* exception, I quite go with you. It's Dingwell's affair – not *ours*. *We*, of course, go straight – and *I* certainly have no reason to suspect Dingwell of anything crooked or unworthy."

"Oh, no – ba-ah! —*nothing*!" said Levi.

"Nor I," added Goldshed.

"It'sh delicate – it *izh* delicate – but very promishing," said Mr. Goldshed, who was moistening a cigar in his great lips. "Very – and *no*-thing crooked about it."

"No-thing crooked —*no*!" repeated Mr. Levi, shaking his

glossy curls slowly. "But very delicate."

"Then, gentlemen, it's understood – I'm at liberty to assume – that Mr. Dingwell finds one or other of you here whenever he calls after dark, and you'll arrange at once about the little payments."

To which the firm having promptly assented, Mr. Larkin took his leave, and, being a client of consideration, was accompanied to the shabby doorstep by Mr. Levi, who, standing at the hall-door, with his hands in his pockets, nodded slily to him across the flagged court-yard, into the cab window, in a way which Mr. Jos. Larkin of the Lodge thought by many degrees too familiar.

"Well —*there's* a cove!" said Mr. Levi, laughing lazily, and showing his long rows of ivory fangs, as he pointed over his shoulder, with the point of his thumb, towards the street.

"Rum un!" said Mr. Goldshed, laughing likewise, as he held his lighted cigar between his fingers.

And they laughed together tranquilly for a little, till, with a sudden access of gravity, Mr. Goldshed observed, with a little wag of his head —

"He's da-a-am clever!"

"Ay – yes – da-a-am clever!" echoed Levi.

"Not as much green as you'd put your finger on – I tell you – no muff – devilish good lay, as *you* shall see," continued Goldshed.

"Devilish good – no, no muff – nothing green," repeated Mr. Levi, lighting his cigar. "Good head for speculation – might be a bit too clever, I'm thinking," and he winked gently at his

governor.

"Believe you, my son, if we'd let him – but we won't – will we?" drawled Mr. Goldshed, jocosely.

"Not if I knows it," said Mr. Levi, sitting on the table, with his feet on the stool, and smoking towards the wall.

CHAPTER VI
MR. DINGWELL ARRIVES

Messrs. Goldshed and *Levi* owned four houses in Rosemary Court, and Miss Sarah Rumble was their tenant. The court is dark, ancient, and grimy. Miss Rumble let lodgings, worked hard, led an anxious life, and subsisted on a remarkably light diet, and at the end of the year never had a shilling over. Her Jewish landlords used to pay her a visit now and then, to receive the rent, and see that everything was right. These visits she dreaded; they were grumbling and minatory, and enlivened by occasional oaths and curses. But though it was part of their system to keep their tenants on the alert by perpetual fault-findings and menaces, they knew very well that they got every shilling the house brought in, that Miss Rumble lived on next to nothing, and never saved a shilling, and was, in fact, *their* underfed, overworked, and indefatigable slave.

With the uncomplaining and modest charity of the poor, Sarah Rumble maintained her little orphan niece and nephew by extra labour at needle-work, and wonderful feats of domestic economy.

This waste of resources Mr. Levi grudged. He had never done complaining of it, and demonstrating that it could only be accomplished by her holding the house at too low a rent;

how else could it be? Why was she to keep other people's brats at the expense of Messrs. Goldshed and Levi? What was the workhouse for? This perpetual pressure was a sore trouble to the poor woman, who had come to love the children as if they were her own; and after one of Mr. Levi's minatory visits she often lay awake sobbing, in the terror and yearnings of her unspeakable affection, whilst its unconscious objects lay fast asleep by her side.

From Mr. Levi, in his accustomed vein, Miss Rumble had received full instructions for the reception and entertainment of her new lodger, Mr. Dingwell. He could not say when he would arrive, neither the day nor the hour; and several days had already elapsed, and no arrival had taken place. This evening she had gone down to "the shop," so designated, as if there had been but one in London, to lay out a shilling and seven pence very carefully, leaving her little niece and nephew in charge of the candle and the house, and spelling out their catechism for next day.

A tapping came to the door; not timid, nor yet menacing; a sort of double knock, delivered with a walking-cane; on the whole a sharp but gentlemanlike summons, to which the little company assembled there were unused. The children lifted their eyes from the book before them, and stared at the door without answering. It opened with a latch, which, without more ado, was raised, and a tall, white-haired gentleman, with a stoop, and a very brown skin, looked in inquisitively, and said, with a smile that was not

pleasant, and a voice not loud but somewhat harsh and cold —

"Mrs. or *Miss* Rumble hereabouts, my dears?"

"Miss Rumble; that's aunt, please, sir;" answered the little girl, slipping down from her chair, and making a courtesy.

"Well, *she's* the lady I want to speak with, my love. Where *is* she?" said the gentleman, glancing round the homely chamber from under his white eyebrows with a pair of cold, gray, restless eyes.

"She's – she's" – hesitated the child.

"Not in bed, I see; nor in the cupboard" (the cupboard door was open). "Is she up the chimney, my charming child?"

"No, sir, please; she's gone to Mrs. Chalk's for the bacon."

"Mrs. Chalk's for the bacon?" echoed the gentleman. "Very good! Excellent woman! excellent bacon, I dare say. But how far away is it? – how soon shall we have your aunt back again?"

"Just round the corner, please, sir; aunt's never no time," answered the child. "Would you please call in again?"

"Charming young lady! So accomplished! Who taught you your grammar? So polite – so *suspicious*. Do you know the meaning of that word, my dear?"

"No, sir, please."

"And I'm vastly obliged for your invitation to call again; but I find your company much too agreeable to think of going away; so, if you allow me – and do shut that door, my sweet child; many thanks – I'll do myself the honour to sit down, if I may venture, and continue to enjoy your agreeable conversation, till your aunt

returns to favour us with her charming presence – and bacon."

The old gentleman was glancing from under his brows, from corner to corner of this homely chamber; an uneasy habit, not curiosity; and, during his ceremonious speech, he kept bowing and smiling, and set down a black leather bag that he had in his hand, on the deal table, together with his walking-cane, and pulled off his gloves, and warmed his hands at the tiny bit of fire. When his back was toward them the children exchanged a glance, and the little boy looked frightened, and on the point of bursting into tears.

"*Hish!*" whispered the girl, alarmed, for she could not tell what effect the demonstration might have upon the stranger – "*quiet!*" – and she shook her finger in urgent warning at Jemmie. "A *very* nice gent, as has money for aunty —*there*!"

So the tears that stood in Jemmie's big eyes were not followed by an outcry, and the gentleman, with his hat and outside wrapper on, stood, now, with his back to the little fire, looking, in his restless way, over the children's heads, with his white, cold eyes, and the same smile. There was a dreamy idea haunting Lucy Maria's head that this gentleman was very like a white animal she had seen at the Surrey Zoological Gardens when her uncle had treated her to that instructive show; the same sort of cruel grin, and the same restless oscillation before the bars of its cage.

"Hey! so she'll be back again?" said he, recollecting the presence of the two children; "the excellent lady, your aunt, I mean. Superb apartment this is, but it strikes me,

hardly sufficiently *lighted*, hey? *One* halfpenny candle, however brilliant, can hardly do justice to such a room; pretty taper – very pretty – isn't it? Such nice mutton fat, my dear young lady, and such a fine long snuff – like a chimney, with a Quaker's hat on the top of it – you don't see such fine things everywhere! And who's this young gentleman, who enjoys the distinction of being admitted to your salon; a page, or what?"

"It's Jemmie, sir; stand up, and bow to the gentleman, Jemmie."

Jemmie slipped down on the floor, and made a very alarmed bow, with his great eyes staring deprecatingly in the visitor's face.

"I'm charmed to make your acquaintance. What grace and ease! It's perfectly charming! I'm too much honoured, Mr. Jemmie. And so exquisitely got up, too! There's only one little toilet refinement I would venture to recommend. The worthy lady, Mrs. Chalks, who contributes bacon to this house, and, I presume, candles – could, I dare say, also supply another luxury, with which you are not so well acquainted, called *soap*– one of the few perfectly safe cosmetics. Pray try it; you'll find it soluble in water. And, ho? reading too! What have you been reading out of that exquisite little volume?"

"Catechism, please sir," answered the little girl.

"Ho, Catechism? Delightful! What a wonderful people we English are!" The latter reflection was made for his own entertainment, and he laughed over it in an undertone. "Then your aunt teaches you the art of godliness? You've read about

Babel, didn't you? – the accomplishment of getting up to heaven is so nice!"

"Sunday school, sir, please," said the girl.

"Oh, it's *there* you learn it? Well, I shall ask you only one question in your Catechism, and that's the first – what's your name?"

"Lucy Maria."

"Well, Lucy Maria and Mr. Jemmie, I trust your theological studies may render you at last as pious as I am. You know how death and sin came into the world, and you know what they are. Sin is doing anything on earth that's pleasant, and death's the penalty of it. Did you ever see any one dead, my sweet child – not able to raise a finger or an eyelid? rather a fix, isn't it? – and screwed up in a stenching box to be eaten by worms – all alone, under ground? *You*'ll be so, egad, and your friend, Jemmie, there, perhaps before me – though I'm an old boy. Younkers go off sometimes by the score. I've seen 'em trundled out in fever and plague, egad, lying in rows, like plucked chickens in a poulterer's shop. And they say you have scarlatina all about you *here*, now; bad complaint, you know, that kills the little children. You need not frighten yourselves though, because it *must* happen, sooner or later – die you *must*. It's the penalty, you know, because Eve once eat an apple."

"Yes, sir."

"Rather hard lines on us, isn't it? She eat an apple, and sin, and death, and colic – I never eat an apple in consequence —*colic*

came into the world, and cider, as a consequence – the worst drink ever invented by the devil. And now go on and learn your Church Catechism thoroughly, and you'll both turn into angels. Upon my life, I think I see the feathers beginning to sprout from your shoulders already. You'll have wings, you know, if all goes right, and tails for anything I know."

The little boy looked in his face perplexed and frightened – the little girl, answering his haggard grin with an attempted smile, showed also bewilderment and dismay in her eyes. They were both longing for the return of their aunt.

Childish nature, which is only human nature without its scarf skin, is always afraid of irony. It is not its power, but its treachery that is dreadful – the guise of friendship hiding a baleful purpose underneath. One might fancy the seasoned denizens of Gehenna welcoming, complimenting, and instructing new comers with these profound derisions. How children delight in humour! how they wince and quail under irony! Be it ever so rudely fashioned and clumsily handled, still it is to them a terrible weapon. If children are to be either ridiculed or rebuked, let it be honestly, in direct terms. We should not scare them with this jocularity of devils.

Having thus amused himself with the children for a time, he unlocked his leather bag, took out two or three papers, ordered the little girl to snuff the candle, and pulled it across the table to the corner next himself, and, sitting close by, tried to read, holding the letter almost in the flame, screwing his

white eyebrows together, and shifting his position, and that of the candle also, with very little regard to the studious convenience of the children.

He gave it up. The red and smoky light tried his eyes too severely. So, not well pleased, he locked his letters up again.

"Cat's eyes – owls! How the devil they read by it passes my comprehension. Any more candles here – hey?" he demanded with a sudden sharpness that made the children start.

"Three, please sir."

"Get 'em."

"On the nail in the closet, please sir."

"Get 'em, d – n it!"

"Closet's locked, please sir. Aunt has the key."

"Ha!" he snarled, and looked at the children as if he would like to pick a quarrel with them.

"Does your aunt allow you to let the fire out on nights like this – hey? You're a charming young lady, *you*– and this young gentleman, in manners and appearance, everything the proudest aunt could desire; but I'm curious to know whether either one or the other is of the slightest earthly use; and secondly, whether she keeps a birch-rod in that closet – hey? – and now and then *flogs* you – ha, ha, ha! The expense of the rod is trifling, the pain not worth mentioning, and soon over, but the moral effects are admirable, better and more durable – take my word for it – than all the catechisms in Paternoster Row."

The old gentleman seemed much tickled by his own

pleasantries, and laughed viciously as he eyed the children.

"You did not tell me a fib, I hope, my dear, about your aunt? She's a long time about coming; and, I say, do put a little coal on the fire, will you?"

"Coal's locked up, please sir," said the child, who was growing more afraid of him every minute.

"'Gad, it seems to me that worthy woman's afraid you'll carry off the bricks and plaster. Where's the poker? Chained to the wall, I suppose. Well, there's a complaint called kleptomania – it comes with a sort of irritation at the tips of the fingers, and I should not be surprised if you and your friend Jemmie, there, had got it."

Jemmie looked at his fingers' ends, and up in the gentleman's face, in anxious amazement.

"But there's a cure for it – essence of cane – and if that won't do, a capital charm – nine tails of a gray cat, applied under competent direction. Your aunt seems to understand that disorder – it begins with an itching in the fingers, and ends with a pain in the back – ha, ha, ha! You're a pair of theologians, and, if you've read John Bunyan, no doubt understand and enjoy an allegory."

"Yes, sir, please, we will," answered poor Lucy Maria, in her perplexity.

"And we'll be very good friends, Miss Maria Louise, or whatever your name is, I've no doubt, provided you play me no tricks and do precisely whatever I bid you; and, upon my soul, if

you don't, Til take the devil out of my pocket and frighten you out of your wits, I will – ha, ha, ha! – so sure as you live, into *fits*!"

And the old gentleman, with an ugly smile on his thin lips, and a frown between his white eyebrows, fixed his glittering gaze on the child and wagged his head.

You may be sure she was relieved when, at that moment, she heard her aunt's well-known step on the lobby, and the latch clicked, the door opened, and Miss Rumble entered.

CHAPTER VII
MR. DINGWELL MAKES HIMSELF COMFORTABLE

"Ah! —*ho!* you are Miss Rumble – hey?" said the old gentleman, fixing a scrutinising glance from under his white eyebrows upon Sally Rumble, who stood in the doorway, in wonder, not unmixed with alarm; for people who stand every hour in presence of Giant Want, with his sword at their throats, have lost their faith in fortune, and long ceased to expect a benevolent fairy in any stranger who may present himself dubiously, and anticipate rather an enemy. So, looking hard at the gentleman who stood before the little fire, with his hat on, and the light of the solitary dipt candle shining on his by no means pleasant countenance, she made him a little frightened courtesy, and acknowledged that she was Sally Rumble, though she could not tell what was to follow.

"I've been waiting; I came here to see you – pray, shut the door – from two gentlemen, Jews whom you know —*friends*– don't be uneasy – friends of *mine*, friends of *yours*– Mr. Goldshed and Mr. Levi, the kindest, sweetest, sharpest fellows alive, and here's a note from them – you can *read*?"

"Read! Law bless you – yes, sir," answered Sally.

"Thanks for the blessing: read the note; it's only to tell you I'm

the person they mentioned this morning, Mr. Dingwell. Are the rooms ready? You can make me comfortable – eh?"

"In a humble way, sir," she answered, with a courtesy.

"Yes, of course; I'm a humble fellow, and – I hear you're a sensible young lady. These little pitchers here, of course, have ears: I'll say all that's necessary as we go up: there's a fellow with a cab at the door, isn't there? Well, there's some little luggage of mine on it – we must get it up stairs; give the Hamal something to lend a hand; but first let me see my rooms."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.