Braddon Mary Elizabeth

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
A YOUNG MAN FROM THE COUNTRY

There were two surgeons in the little town of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, in pretty pastoral Midlandshire, – Mr. Pawlkatt, who lived in a big, new, brazen-faced house in the middle of the queer old High Street; and John Gilbert, the parish doctor, who lived in his own house on the outskirts of Graybridge, and worked very hard for a smaller income than that which the stylish Mr. Pawlkatt derived from his aristocratic patients.

John Gilbert was an elderly man, with a young son. He had married late in life, and his wife had died very soon after the birth of this son. It was for this reason, most likely, that the surgeon loved his child as children are rarely loved by their fathers – with an earnest, over-anxious devotion, which from the very first had been something womanly in its character, and which grew with the child's growth. Mr. Gilbert's mind was narrowed by the circle

in which he lived. He had inherited his own patients and the parish patients from his father, who had been a surgeon before him, and who had lived in the same house, with the same red lamp over the little old-fashioned surgery-door, for eight-and-forty years, and had died, leaving the house, the practice, and the red lamp to his son.

If John Gilbert's only child had possessed the capacity of a Newton or the aspirations of a Napoleon, the surgeon would nevertheless have shut him up in the surgery to compound aloes and conserve of roses, tincture of rhubarb and essence of peppermint. Luckily for the boy, he was only a commonplace lad, with a good-looking, rosy face; clear grey eyes, which stared at you frankly; and a thick stubble of brown hair, parted in the middle and waving from the roots. He was tall, straight, and muscular; a good runner, a first-rate cricketer, tolerably skilful with a pair of boxing-gloves or single-sticks, and a decent shot. He wrote a fair business-like hand, was an excellent arithmetician, remembered a smattering of Latin, a random line here and there from those Roman poets and philosophers whose writings had been his torment at a certain classical and commercial academy at Wareham. He spoke and wrote tolerable English, had read Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, and infinitely preferred the latter, though he made a point of skipping the first few chapters of the great novelist's fictions in order to get at once to the action of the story. He was a very good young man, went to church two or three times on a

Sunday, and would on no account have broken any one of the Ten Commandments on the painted tablets above the altar by so much as a thought. He was very good; and, above all, he was very good-looking. No one had ever disputed this fact: George Gilbert was eminently good-looking. No one had ever gone so far as to call him handsome; no one had ever presumed to designate him plain. He had those homely, healthy good looks which the novelist or poet in search of a hero would recoil from with actual horror, and which the practical mind involuntarily associates with tenant-farming in a small way, or the sale of butcher's meat.

I will not say that poor George was ungentlemanly, because he had kind, cordial manners, and a certain instinctive Christianity, which had never yet expressed itself in any very tangible form, but which lent a genial flavour to every word upon his lips, to every thought in his heart. He was a very trusting young man, and thought well of all mankind; he was a Tory, heart and soul, as his father and grandfather had been before him; and thought especially well of all the magnates round about Wareham and Graybridge, holding the grand names that had been familiar to him from his childhood in simple reverence, that was without a thought of meanness. He was a candid, honest, country-bred young man, who did his duty well, and filled a small place in a very narrow circle with credit to himself and the father who loved him. The fiery ordeal of two years' student-life at St. Bartholomew's had left the lad almost as innocent as a girl; for John Gilbert had planted his son during those two awful years in

the heart of a quiet Wesleyan family in the Seven-Sisters Road, and the boy had enjoyed very little leisure for disporting himself with the dangerous spirits of St. Bartholomew's. George Gilbert was two-and-twenty, and in all the course of those two-and-twenty years which made the sum of the young man's life, his father had never had reason to reproach him by so much as a look. The young doctor was held to be a model youth in the town of Graybridge; and it was whispered that if he should presume to lift his eyes to Miss Sophronia Burdock, the second daughter of the rich maltster, he need not aspire in vain. But George was by no means a coxcomb, and didn't particularly admire Miss Burdock, whose eyelashes were a good deal paler than her hair, and whose eyebrows were only visible in a strong light. The surgeon was young, and the world was all before him; but he was not ambitious; he felt no sense of oppression in the narrow High Street at Graybridge. He could sit in the little parlour next the surgery reading Byron's fiercest poems, sympathizing in his own way with Giaours and Corsairs; but with no passionate yearning stirring up in his breast, with no thought of revolt against the dull quiet of his life.

George Gilbert took his life as he found it, and had no wish to make it better. To him Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne was all the world. He had been in London, and had felt a provincial's brief sense of surprised delight in the thronged streets, the clamour, and the bustle; but he had very soon discovered that the great metropolis was a dirty and disreputable place as compared to

Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, where you might have taken your dinner comfortably off any doorstep as far as the matter of cleanliness is concerned. The young man was more than satisfied with his life; he was pleased with it. He was pleased to think that he was to be his father's partner, and was to live and marry, and have children, and die at last in the familiar rooms in which he had been born. His nature was very adhesive, and he loved the things that he had long known, because they were old and familiar to him; rather than for any merit or beauty in the things themselves.

The 20th of July, 1852, was a very great day for George Gilbert, and indeed for the town of Graybridge generally; for on that day an excursion train left Wareham for London, conveying such roving spirits as cared to pay a week's visit to the great metropolis upon very moderate terms. George had a week's holiday, which he was to spend with an old schoolfellow who had turned author, and had chambers in the Temple, but who boarded and lodged with a family at Camberwell. The young surgeon left Graybridge in the maltster's carriage at eight o'clock upon that bright summer morning, in company with Miss Burdock and her sister Sophronia, who were going up to London on a visit to an aristocratic aunt in Baker Street, and who had been confided to George's care during the journey.

The young ladies and their attendant squire were in very high spirits. London, when your time is spent between St. Bartholomew's Hospital and the Seven-Sisters Road, is not the

most delightful city in the world; but London, when you are a young man from the country, with a week's holiday, and a five-pound note and some odd silver in your pocket, assumes quite another aspect. George was not enthusiastic; but he looked forward to his holiday with a placid sense of pleasure, and listened with untiring good humour to the conversation of the maltster's daughters, who gave him a good deal of information about their aunt in Baker Street, and the brilliant parties given by that lady and her acquaintance. But, amiable as the young ladies were, George was glad when the Midlandshire train steamed into the Euston Terminus, and his charge was ended. He handed the Misses Burdock to a portly and rather pompous lady, who had a clarence-and-pair waiting for her, and who thanked him with supreme condescension for his care of her nieces. She even went so far as to ask him to call in Baker Street during his stay in London, at which Sophronia blushed. But, unhappily, Sophronia did not blush prettily; a faint patchy red broke out all over her face, even where her eyebrows ought to have been, and was a long time dispersing. If the blush had been Beauty's bright, transient glow, as brief as summer lightning in a sunset sky, George Gilbert could scarcely have been blind to its flattering import; but he looked at the young lady's emotion from a professional point of view, and mistook it for indigestion.

"You're very kind, ma'am," he said. "But I'm going to stay at Camberwell; I don't think I shall have time to call in Baker Street."

The carriage drove away, and George took his portmanteau and went to find a cab. He hailed a hansom, and he felt as he stepped into it that he was doing a dreadful thing, which would tell against him in Graybridge, if by any evil chance it should become known that he had ridden in that disreputable vehicle. He thought the horse had a rakish, unkempt look about the head and mane, like an animal who was accustomed to night-work, and indifferent as to his personal appearance in the day. George was not used to riding in hansoms; so, instead of balancing himself upon the step for a moment while he gave his orders to the charioteer, he settled himself comfortably inside, and was a little startled when a hoarse voice at the back of his head demanded "Where to, sir?" and suggested the momentary idea that he was breaking out into involuntary ventriloquism.

"The Temple, driver; the Temple, in Fleet Street," Mr. Gilbert said, politely.

The man banged down a little trap-door and rattled off eastwards.

I am afraid to say how much George Gilbert gave the cabman when he was set down at last at the bottom of Chancery Lane; but I think he paid for five miles at eightpence a mile, and a trifle in on account of a blockade in Holborn; and even then the driver did not thank him.

George was a long time groping about the courts and quadrangles of the Temple before he found the place he wanted, though he took a crumpled letter out of his waistcoat-pocket, and

referred to it every now and then when he came to a standstill.

Wareham is only a hundred and twenty miles from London; and the excursion train, after stopping at every station on the line, had arrived at the terminus at half-past two o'clock. It was between three and four now, and the sun was shining upon the river, and the flags in the Temple were hot under Mr. Gilbert's feet.

He was very warm himself, and almost worn out, when he found at last the name he was looking for, painted very high up, in white letters, upon a black door-post, – "4th Floor: Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith."

It was in the most obscure corner of the dingiest court in the Temple that George Gilbert found this name. He climbed a very dirty staircase, thumping the end of his portmanteau upon every step as he went up, until he came to a landing, midway between the third and fourth stories; here he was obliged to stop for sheer want of breath, for he had been lugging the portmanteau about with him throughout his wanderings in the Temple, and a good many people had been startled by the aspect of a well-dressed young man carrying his own luggage, and staring at the names of the different rows of houses, the courts and quadrangles in the grave sanctuary.

George Gilbert stopped to take breath; and he had scarcely done so, when he was terrified by the apparition of a very dirty boy, who slid suddenly down the baluster between the floor above and the landing, and alighted face to face with the young surgeon.

The boy's face was very black, and he was evidently a child of tender years, something between eleven and twelve, perhaps; but he was in nowise discomfited by the appearance of Mr. Gilbert; he ran up-stairs again, and placed himself astride upon the slippery baluster with a view to another descent, when a door above was suddenly opened, and a voice said, "You know where Mr. Manders, the artist, lives?"

"Yes, sir; – Waterloo Road, sir, Montague Terrace, No. 2."

"Then run round to him, and tell him the subject for the next illustration in the 'Smuggler's Bride.' A man with his knee upon the chest of another man, and a knife in his hand. You can remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And bring me a proof of chapter fifty-seven."

"Yes, sir."

The door was shut, and the boy ran down-stairs, past George Gilbert, as fast as he could go. But the door above was opened again, and the same voice called aloud, —

"Tell Mr. Manders the man with the knife in his hand must have on top-boots."

"All right, sir," the boy called from the bottom of the staircase.

George Gilbert went up, and knocked at the door above. It was a black door, and the names of Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith were painted upon it in white letters as upon the door-post below.

A pale-faced young man, with a smudge of ink upon the end

of his nose, and very dirty wrist-bands, opened the door.

"Sam!"

"George!" cried the two young men simultaneously, and then began to shake hands with effusion, as the French playwrights say.

"My dear old George!"

"My dear old Sam! But you call yourself Sigismund now?"

"Yes; Sigismund Smith. It sounds well; doesn't it? If a man's evil destiny makes him a Smith, the least he can do is to take it out in his Christian name. No Smith with a grain of spirit would ever consent to be a Samuel. But come in, dear old boy, and put your portmanteau down; knock those papers off that chair – there, by the window. Don't be frightened of making 'em in a muddle; they can't be in a worse muddle than they are now. If you don't mind just amusing yourself with the 'Times' for half an hour or so, while I finish this chapter of the 'Smuggler's Bride,' I shall be able to strike work, and do whatever you like; but the printer's boy is coming back in half an hour for the end of the chapter."

"I won't speak a word," George said, respectfully. The young man with the smudgy nose was an author, and George Gilbert had an awful sense of the solemnity of his friend's vocation. "Write away, my dear Sam; I won't interrupt you."

He drew his chair close to the open window, and looked down into the court below, where the paint was slowly blistering in the July sun.

CHAPTER II.
A SENSATION AUTHOR

Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, "sensation," had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. Sigismund Smith was the author of about half-a-dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco – very strong. Sigismund had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form; he appeared in weekly numbers at a penny, and was always so appearing; and except on one occasion when he found himself, very greasy and dog's-eared at the edges, and not exactly pleasant to the sense of smell, on the shelf of a humble librarian and newsvendor, who dealt in tobacco and sweetstuff as well as literature, Sigismund had never known what it was to be bound. He was well paid for his work, and he was contented. He had his ambition, which was to write a great novel; and the archetype of this *magnum opus* was the dream which he carried about with him wherever he went, and fondly nursed by night and day. In the meantime he wrote for his public, which was a public that bought its literature in the

same manner as its pudding – in penny slices.

There was very little to look at in the court below the window; so George Gilbert fell to watching his friend, whose rapid pen scratched along the paper in a breathless way, which indicated a dashing and Dumas-like style of literature, rather than the polished composition of a Johnson or an Addison. Sigismund only drew breath once, and then he paused to make frantic gashes at his shirt-collar with an inky bone paper-knife that lay upon the table.

"I'm only trying whether a man would cut his throat from right to left, or left to right," Mr. Smith said, in answer to his friend's look of terror; "it's as well to be true to nature; or as true as one can be, for a pound a page – double-column pages, and eighty-one lines in a column. A man would cut his throat from left to right: he couldn't do it in the other way without making perfect slices of himself."

"There's a suicide, then, in your story?" George said, with a look of awe.

"*A* suicide!" exclaimed Sigismund Smith; "*a* suicide in the 'Smuggler's Bride!' why, it teems with suicides. There's the Duke of Port St. Martin's, who walls himself up alive in his own cellar; and there's Leonie de Pasdebasque, the ballet-dancer, who throws herself out of Count Cæsar Maraschetti's private balloon; and there's Lilia, the dumb girl, – the penny public like dumb girls, – who sets fire to herself to escape from the – in fact, there's lots of them," said Mr. Smith, dipping his pen in his ink, and

hurrying wildly along the paper.

The boy came back before the last page was finished, and Mr. Smith detained him for five or ten minutes; at the end of which time he rolled up the manuscript, still damp, and dismissed the printer's emissary.

"Now, George," he said, "I can talk to you."

Sigismund was the son of a Wareham attorney, and the two young men had been schoolfellows at the Classical and Commercial Academy in the Wareham Road. They had been schoolfellows, and were very sincerely attached to each other. Sigismund was supposed to be reading for the Bar; and for the first twelve months of his sojourn in the Temple the young man had worked honestly and conscientiously; but finding that his legal studies resulted in nothing but mental perplexity and confusion, Sigismund beguiled his leisure by the pursuit of literature.

He found literature a great deal more profitable and a great deal easier than the study of Coke upon Lyttleton, or Blackstone's Commentaries; and he abandoned himself entirely to the composition of such works as are to be seen, garnished with striking illustrations, in the windows of humble newsvendors in the smaller and dingier thoroughfares of every large town. Sigismund gave himself wholly to this fascinating pursuit, and perhaps produced more sheets of that mysterious stuff which literary people call "copy" than any other author of his age.

It would be almost impossible for me adequately to describe

the difference between Sigismund Smith as he was known to the very few friends who knew anything at all about him, and Sigismund Smith as he appeared on paper.

In the narrow circle of his home Mr. Smith was a very mild young man, with the most placid blue eyes that ever looked out of a human head, and a good deal of light curling hair. He was a very mild young man. He could not have hit any one if he had tried ever so; and if you had hit him, I don't think he would have minded – much. It was not in him to be very angry; or to fall in love, to any serious extent; or to be desperate about anything. Perhaps it was that he exhausted all that was passionate in his nature in penny numbers, and had nothing left for the affairs of real life. People who were impressed by his fictions, and were curious to see him, generally left him with a strong sense of disappointment, if not indignation.

Was this meek young man the Byronic hero they had pictured? Was this the author of "Colonel Montefiasco, or the Brand upon the Shoulder-blade?" They had imagined a splendid creature, half magician, half brigand, with a pale face and fierce black eyes, a tumbled mass of raven hair, a bare white throat, a long black velvet dressing-gown, and thin tapering hands, with queer agate and onyx rings encircling the flexible fingers.

And then the surroundings. An oak-panelled chamber, of course – black oak, with grotesque and diabolic carvings jutting out at the angles of the room; a crystal globe upon a porphyry pedestal; a mysterious picture, with a curtain drawn before

it – certain death being the fate of him who dared to raise that curtain by so much as a corner. A mantel-piece of black marble, and a collection of pistols and scimitars, swords and yataghans – especially yataghans – glimmering and flashing in the firelight. A little show of eccentricity in the way of household pets: a bear under the sofa, and a tame rattlesnake coiled upon the hearth-rug. This was the sort of thing the penny public expected of Sigismund Smith; and, lo, here was a young man with perennial ink-smudges upon his face, and an untidy chamber in the Temple, with nothing more romantic than a waste-paper basket, a litter of old letters and tumbled proofs, and a cracked teapot simmering upon the hob.

This was the young man who described the reckless extravagance of a Montefiasco's sumptuous chamber, the mysterious elegance of a Diana Firmiani's dimly-lighted boudoir. This was the young man in whose works there were more masked doors, and hidden staircases, and revolving picture-frames and sliding panels, than in all the old houses in Great Britain; and a greater length of vaulted passages than would make an underground railway from the Scottish border to the Land's End. This was the young man who, in an early volume of poems – a failure, as it is the nature of all early volumes of poems to be – had cried in passionate accents to some youthful member of the aristocracy, surname unknown —

"Lady Mable, Lady May, no pæan in your praise I'll sing;

My shattered lyre all mutely tells
The tortured hand that broke the string.
Go, fair and false, while jangling bells
Through golden waves of sunshine ring;
Go, mistress of a thousand spells:
But know, midst those you've left forlorn,
One, lady, gives you scorn for scorn."

"Now, George," Mr. Smith said, as he pushed away a very dirty inkstand, and wiped his pen upon the cuff of his coat, – "now, George, I can attend to the rights of hospitality. You must be hungry after your journey, poor old boy! What'll you take?"

There were no cupboards in the room, which was very bare of furniture, and the only vestiges of any kind of refreshment were a brown crockery-ware teapot upon the hob, and a roll and pat of butter upon a plate on the mantel-piece.

"Have something!" Sigismund said. "I know there isn't much, because, you see, I never have time to attend to that sort of thing. Have some bread and marmalade?"

He drew out a drawer in the desk before which he was sitting, and triumphantly displayed a pot of marmalade with a spoon in it.

"Bread and marmalade and cold tea's capital," he said; "you'll try some, George, won't you? and then we'll go home to Camberwell."

Mr. Gilbert declined the bread and marmalade; so Sigismund prepared to take his departure.

"Morgan's gone into Buckinghamshire for a week's fishing," he said, "so I've got the place to myself. I come here of a morning, you know, work all day, and go home to tea and a chop or a steak in the evening. Come along, old fellow."

The young men went out upon the landing. Sigismund locked the black door and put the key in his pocket. They went downstairs, and through the courts, and across the quadrangles of the Temple, bearing towards that outlet which is nearest Blackfriars Bridge.

"You'd like to walk, I suppose, George?" Mr. Smith asked.

"Oh, yes; we can talk better walking."

They talked a great deal as they went along. They were very fond of one another, and had each of them a good deal to tell; but George wasn't much of a talker as compared to his friend Sigismund. That young man poured forth a perpetual stream of eloquence, which knew no exhaustion.

"And so you like the people at Camberwell?" George said.

"Oh yes, they're capital people; free and easy, you know, and no stupid stuck-up gentility about them. Not but what Sleaford's a gentleman; he's a barrister. I don't know exactly where his chambers are, or in what court he practises when he's in town; but he *is* a barrister. I suppose he goes on circuit sometimes, for he's very often away from home for a long time together; but I don't know what circuit he goes on. It doesn't do to ask a man those sort of questions, you see, George; so I hold my tongue. I don't think he's rich, that's to say not rich in a regular way. He's

flush of money sometimes, and then you should see the Sunday dinners – salmon and cucumber, and duck and green peas, as if they were nothing."

"Is he a nice fellow?"

"Oh yes; a jolly, out-spoken sort of a fellow, with a loud voice and black eyes. He's a capital fellow to me, but he's not fond of company. He seldom shows if I take down a friend. Very likely you mayn't see him all the time you stay there. He'll shut himself up in his own room when he's at home, and won't so much as look at you."

George seemed to be rather alarmed at this prospect.

"But if Mr. Sleaford objects to my being in the house," he began, "perhaps I'd better – "

"Oh, he doesn't object, bless you!" Sigismund cried, hastily; "not a bit of it. I said to Mrs. Sleaford the other morning at breakfast, 'A friend of mine is coming up from Midlandshire; he's as good a fellow as ever breathed,' I said, 'and good-looking into the bargain,' – don't you blush, George, because it's spooney, – and I asked Mrs. S. if she could give you a room and partially board you, – I'm a partial boarder, you know, – for a week or so. She looked at her husband, – she's very sharp with all of *us*, but she's afraid of *him*, – and Sleaford said yes; my friend might come and should be welcome, as long as he wasn't bothered about it. So your room's ready, George, and you come as my visitor; and I can get orders for all the theatres in London, and I'll give you a French dinner in the neighbourhood

of Leicester Square every day of your life, if you like; and we'll fill the cup of dissipation to the highest top sparkle."

It was a long walk from the Temple to Camberwell; but the two young men were good walkers, and as Sigismund Smith talked unceasingly all the way, there were no awkward pauses in the conversation. They walked the whole length of the Walworth Road, and turned to the left soon after passing the turn-pike. Mr. Smith conducted his friend by mazy convolutions of narrow streets and lanes, where there were pretty little villas and comfortable cottages nestling amongst trees, and where there was the perpetual sound of clattering tin pails and the slopping of milk, blending pleasantly with the cry of the milkman. Sigismund led George through these shady little retreats, and past a tall stern-looking church, and along by the brink of a canal, till they came to a place where the country was wild and sterile in the year 1852. I dare say that railways have cut the neighbourhood all to pieces by this time, and that Mr. Sleaford's house has been sold by auction in the form of old bricks; but on this summer afternoon the place to which Sigismund brought his friend was quite a lonely, countrified spot, where there was one big, ill-looking house, shut in by a high wall, and straggling rows of cottages dwindling away into pigsties upon each side of it.

Standing before a little wooden door in the wall that surrounded Mr. Sleaford's garden, George Gilbert could only see that the house was a square brick building, with sickly ivy straggling here and there about it, and long narrow windows

considerably obscured by dust and dirt. It was not a pleasant house to look at, however agreeable it might be as a habitation; and George compared it unfavourably with the trim white-walled villas he had seen on his way, – those neat little mansions at five-and-thirty pounds a year; those cosy little cottages, with shining windows that winked and blinked in the sunshine by reason of their cleanliness; those dazzling brass plates, which shone like brazen shields upon the vivid green of newly-painted front doors. If Mr. Sleaford's house had ever been painted within Mr Sleaford's memory, the barrister must have been one of the oldest inhabitants of that sterile region on the outskirts of Camberwell; if Mr. Sleaford held the house upon a repairing lease, he must have anticipated a prodigious claim for dilapidations at the expiration of his tenancy. Whatever could be broken in Mr. Sleaford's house was broken; whatever could fall out of repair had so fallen. The bricks held together, and the house stood; and that was about all that could be said for the barrister's habitation.

The bell was broken, and the handle rattled loosely in a kind of basin of tarnished brass, so it was no use attempting to ring; but Sigismund was used to this. He stooped down, put his lips to a hole broken in the wood-work above the lock of the garden-door, and gave a shrill whistle.

"They understand that," he said; "the bell's been broken ever since I've lived here, but they never have anything mended."

"Why not?"

"Because they're thinking of leaving. I've been with them two

years and a half, and they've been thinking of leaving all the time. Sleaford has got the house cheap, and the landlord won't do anything; so between them they let it go. Sleaford talks about going to Australia some of these days."

The garden-door was opened while Mr. Smith was talking, and the two young men went in. The person who had admitted them was a boy who had just arrived at that period of life when boys are most obnoxious. He had ceased to be a boy pure and simple, and had not yet presumed to call himself a young man. Rejected on one side by his juniors, who found him arrogant and despotic, mooting strange and unorthodox theories with regard to marbles, and evincing supreme contempt for boys who were not familiar with the latest vaticinations of the sporting prophets in "Bell's Life" and the "Sunday Times;" and flouted on the other hand by his seniors, who offered him halfpence for the purchase of hardbake, and taunted him with base insinuations when he was seized with a sudden fancy for going to look at the weather in the middle of a strong cheroot, – the hobbledehoy sought vainly for a standing-place upon the social scale, and finding none, became a misanthrope, and wrapped himself in scorn as in a mantle. For Sigismund Smith the gloomy youth cherished a peculiar hatred. The young author was master of that proud position to obtain which the boy struggled in vain. He was a man! He could smoke a cigar to the very stump, and not grow ashy pale, or stagger dizzily once during the operation; but how little he made of his advantages! He could stay out late of nights, and there was no

one to reprove him, *He* could go into a popular tavern, and call for gin-and-bitters, and drink the mixture without so much as a wry face, and slap his money upon the pewter counter, and call the barmaid "Mary;" and there was no chance of *his* mother happening to be passing at that moment, and catching a glimpse of his familiar back-view through the half-open swinging door, and rushing in, red and angry, to lead him off by the collar of his jacket, amid the laughter of heartless bystanders. No; Sigismund Smith was a MAN. He might have got tipsy if he had liked, and walked about London half the night, ringing surgeons' bells, and pulling off knockers, and being taken to the station-house early in the morning, to be bailed out by a friend by-and-by, and to have his name in the Sunday papers, with a sensational heading, "Another tipsy swell," or "A modern spring-heeled Jack."

Yes; Horace Sleaford hated his mother's partial boarder; but his hatred was tempered by disdain. What did Mr. Smith make of all his lofty privileges? Nothing; absolutely nothing. The glory of manhood was thrown away upon a mean-spirited cur, who, possessed of liberty to go where he pleased, had never seen a fight for the championship of England, or the last grand rush for the blue riband of the turf; and who, at four-and-twenty years of age, ate bread and marmalade openly in the face of contemptuous mankind. Master Sleaford shut the door with a bang, and locked it. There was one exception to the rule of no repairs in Mr. Sleaford's establishment, the locks were all kept in excellent order. The disdainful boy took the key from the lock,

and carried it in-doors on his little finger. He had warts upon his hands, and warts are the stigmata of boyhood; and the sleeves of his jacket were white and shiny at the elbows, and left him cruelly exposed about the wrists. The knowledge of his youth, and that shabby frouziness of raiment peculiar to middle-class hobbledehoyhood, gave him a sulky fierceness of aspect, which harmonized well with a pair of big black eyes and a tumbled shock of blue-black hair. He suspected everybody of despising him, and was perpetually trying to look-down the scorn of others with still deeper scorn. He stared at George Gilbert, as the young man came into the garden, but did not deign to speak. George was six feet high, and that was in itself enough to make *him* hateful.

"Well, Horace!" Mr. Smith said, good-naturedly.

"Well, young 'un," the boy answered, disdainfully, "how do *you* find yourself?"

Horace Sleaford led the way into the house. They went up a flight of steps leading to a half-glass door. It might have been pretty once upon a time, when the glass was bright, and the latticed porch sheltered by clustering roses and clematis; but the clematis had withered, and the straggling roses were choked with wild convolvulus tendrils, that wound about the branches like weedy serpents, and stifled buds and blossoms in their weedy embrace.

The boy banged open the door of the house, as he had banged-to the door of the garden. He made a point of doing every thing with a bang; it was one way of evincing his contempt for his

species.

"Mother's in the kitchen," he said; "the boys are on the common flying a kite, and Izzie's in the garden."

"Is your father at home?" Sigismund asked.

"No, he isn't, Clever; you might have known that without asking. Whenever is he at home at this time of day?"

"Is tea ready?"

"No, nor won't be for this half-hour," answered the boy, triumphantly; "so, if you and your friend are hungry, you'd better have some bread and marmalade. There's a pot in your drawer up-stairs. I haven't taken any, and I shouldn't have seen it if I hadn't gone to look for a steel pen; so, if you've made a mark upon the label, and think the marmalade's gone down lower, it isn't *me*. Tea won't be ready for half-an-hour; for the kitchen-fire's been smokin', and the chops can't be done till that's clear; and the kettle ain't on either; and the girl's gone to fetch a fancy loaf, – so you'll have to wait."

"Oh, never mind that," Sigismund said; "come into the garden, George; I'll introduce you to Miss Sleaford."

"Then *I* shan't go with you," said the boy; "I don't care for girls' talk. I say, Mr. Gilbert, you're a Midlandshire man, and you ought to know something. What odds will you give me against Mr. Tomlinson's brown colt, Vinegar Cruet, for the Conventford steeple-chase?"

Unfortunately Mr. Gilbert was lamentably ignorant of the merits or demerits of Vinegar Cruet.

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you, then," the boy said; "I'll take fifteen to two against him in fourpenny-bits, and that's one less than the last Manchester quotation."

George shook his head. "Horse-racing is worse than Greek to me, Master Sleaford," he said.

The "Master" goaded the boy to retaliate.

"Your friend don't seem to have seen much life," he said to Sigismund. "I think we shall be able to show him a thing or two before he goes back to Midlandshire, eh, Samuel?"

Horace Sleaford had discovered that fatal name, Samuel, in an old prayer-book belonging to Mr. Smith; and he kept it in reserve, as a kind of poisoned dart, always ready to be hurled at his foe.

"We'll teach him a little life, eh, SAMUEL?" he repeated, "Haw, haw, haw!"

But his gaiety was cut suddenly short; for a door in the shadowy passage opened, and a woman's face, thin and vinegary of aspect, looked out, and a shrill voice cried:

"Didn't I tell you I wanted another penn'orth of milk fetched, you young torment? But, law, you're like the rest of them, that's all! *I* may slave my life out, and there isn't one of you will as much as lift a finger to help me."

The boy disappeared upon this, grumbling sulkily; and Sigismund opened a door leading into a parlour.

The room was large, but shabbily furnished and very untidy. The traces of half-a-dozen different occupations were scattered

about, and the apartment was evidently inhabited by people who made a point of never putting anything away. There was a work-box upon the table, open, and running over with a confusion of tangled tapes, and bobbins, and a mass of different-coloured threads, that looked like variegated vermicelli. There was an old-fashioned desk, covered with dusty green baize, and decorated with loose brass-work, which caught at people's garments or wounded their flesh when the desk was carried about; this was open, like the work-box, and was littered with papers that had been blown about by the summer breeze, and were scattered all over the table and the floor beneath it. On a rickety little table near the window there was a dilapidated box of colours, a pot of gum with a lot of brushes sticking up out of it, half-a-dozen sheets of Skelt's dramatic scenes and characters lying under scraps of tinsel, and fragments of coloured satin, and neatly-folded packets of little gold and silver dots, which the uninitiated might have mistaken for powders. There were some ragged-looking books on a shelf near the fire-place; two or three different kinds of inkstands on the mantel-piece; a miniature wooden stage, with a lop-sided pasteboard proscenium and greasy tin lamps, in one corner of the floor; a fishing-rod and tackle leaning against the wall in another corner; and the room was generally pervaded by copy-books, slate-pencils, and torn Latin grammars with half a brown-leather cover hanging to the leaves by a stout drab thread. Everything in the apartment was shabby, and more or less dilapidated; nothing was particularly

clean; and everywhere there was the evidence of boys.

I believe Mr. Sleaford's was the true policy. If you have boys, "cry havoc, and let loose the dogs of war;" shut your purse against the painter and the carpenter, the plumber and glazier, the upholsterer and gardener; "let what is broken, so remain," – reparations are wasted labour and wasted money. Buy a box of carpenter's tools for your boys, if you like, and let them mend what they themselves have broken; and, if you don't mind their sawing off one or two of their fingers occasionally, you may end by making them tolerably useful.

Mr. Sleaford had one daughter and four sons, and the sons were all boys. People ceased to wonder at the shabbiness of his furniture and the dilapidation of his house, when they were made aware of this fact. The limp chintz curtains that straggled from the cornice had been torn ruthlessly down to serve as draperies for Tom when he personated the ghost in a charade, or for Jack when he wanted a sail to fasten to his fishing-rod, firmly planted on the quarter-deck of the sofa. The chairs had done duty as blocks for the accommodation of many an imaginary Anne Boleyn and Marie Antoinette, upon long winter evenings, when Horace decapitated the sofa-pillow with a smoky poker, while Tom and Jack kept guard upon the scaffold, and held the populace – of one – at bay with their halberds – the tongs and shovel. The loose carpets had done duty as raging oceans on many a night, when the easy-chair had gone to pieces against the sideboard, with a loss of two wine-glasses, and all hands

had been picked up in a perishing state by the crew of the sofa, after an undramatic interlude of slaps, cuffs, and remonstrances from the higher powers, who walked into the storm-beaten ocean with cruel disregard of the unities. Mr. Sleaford had a room to himself up-stairs – a Bluebeard chamber, which the boys never entered; for the barrister made a point of locking his door whenever he left his room, and his sons were therefore compelled to respect his apartment. They looked through the keyhole now and then, to see if there was anything of a mysterious nature in the forbidden chamber; but, as they saw nothing but a dingy easy-chair and an office-table, with a quantity of papers scattered about it, their curiosity gradually subsided, and they ceased to concern themselves in any manner about the apartment, which they always spoke of as "Pa's room."

CHAPTER III.
ISABEL

The garden at the back of Mr. Sleaford's house was a large square plot of ground, with fine old pear-trees sheltering a neglected lawn. A row of hazel-bushes screened all the length of the wall upon one side of the garden; and wherever you looked, there were roses and sweet-brier, espaliered apples, and tall straggling raspberry-bushes, all equally unfamiliar with the gardener's pruning knife; though here and there you came to a luckless bush that had been hacked at and mutilated in some amateur operations of "the boys."

It was an old-fashioned garden, and had doubtless once been beautifully kept; for bright garden-flowers grew up amongst the weeds summer after summer, as if even neglect or cruel usage could not disroot them from the familiar place they loved. Thus rare orchids sprouted up out of beds that were half full of chickweed, and lilies-of-the-valley flourished amongst the ground-sel in a shady corner under the water-butt. There were vines, upon which no grape had ever been suffered to ripen during Mr. Sleaford's tenancy, but which yet made a beautiful screen of verdant tracery all over the back of the house, twining their loving tendrils about the dilapidated Venetian shutters, that rotted slowly on their rusted hinges. There were strawberry-

beds, and there was an arbour at one end of the garden in which the boys played at "beggar my neighbour," and "all fours," with greasy, dog's-eared cards in the long summer afternoons; and there were some rabbit-hutches – sure evidence of the neighbourhood of boys – in a sheltered corner under the hazel-bushes. It was a dear old untidy place, where the odour of distant pigsties mingled faintly with the perfume of the roses; and it was in this neglected garden that Isabel Sleaford spent the best part of her idle, useless life.

She was sitting in a basket-chair under one of the pear-trees when Sigismund Smith and his friend went into the garden to look for her. She was lolling in a low basket-chair, with a book on her lap, and her chin resting on the palm of her hand, so absorbed by the interest of the page before her that she did not even lift her eyes when the two young men went close up to her. She wore a muslin dress a good deal tumbled and not too clean, and a strip of black velvet was tied round her long throat. Her hair was almost as black as her brother's, and was rolled up in a great loose knot, from which a long untidy curl fell straggling on her white throat – her throat was very white, with the dead, yellowish whiteness of ivory.

"I wish that was 'Colonel Montefiasco,'" said Mr. Smith, pointing to the book which the young lady was reading. "I should like to see a lady so interested in one of *my* books that she wouldn't so much as look up when a gentleman was waiting to be introduced to her."

Miss Sleaford shut her book and rose from her low chair, abashed by this reproach; but she kept her thumb between the pages, and evidently meant to go on with the volume at the first convenient opportunity. She did not wait for any ceremonious introduction to George, but held out her hand to him, and smiled at him frankly.

"Yon are Mr. Gilbert, I know," she said. "Sigismund has been talking of you incessantly for the last week. Mamma has got your room ready; and I suppose we shall have tea soon. There are to be some chops on purpose for your friend, Sigismund, mamma told me to tell you."

She glanced downwards at the book, as much as to say that she had finished speaking, and wanted to get back to it.

"What is it, Izzie?" Sigismund asked, interpreting her look.

"Algerman Mountfort."

"Ah, I thought so. Always *his* books."

A faint blush trembled over Miss Sleaford's pale face.

"They are so beautiful!" she said.

"Dangerously beautiful, I'm afraid, Isabel," the young man said, gravely; "beautiful sweetmeats, with opium inside the sugar. These books don't make you happy, do they, Izzie?"

"No, they make me unhappy; but" – she hesitated a little, and then blushed as she said – "I like that sort of unhappiness. It's better than eating and drinking and sleeping, and being happy that way."

George could only stare at the young lady's kindling face,

which lighted up all in a moment, and was suddenly beautiful, like some transparency which seems a dingy picture till you put a lamp behind it. The young surgeon could only stare wonderingly at Mr. Sleaford's daughter, for he hadn't the faintest idea what she and his friend were talking about. He could only watch her pale face, over which faint blushes trembled and vanished like the roseate reflections of a sunset sky. George Gilbert saw that Isabel Sleaford had eyes that were large and black, like her brother's, but which were entirely different from his, notwithstanding; for they were soft and sleepy, with very little light in them, and what little light there was, only a dim dreamy glimmer in the depths of the large pupils. Being a very quiet young man, without much to say for himself, George Gilbert had plenty of leisure in which to examine the young lady's face as she talked to her mother's boarder, who was on cordial brotherly terms with her. George was not a very enthusiastic young man, and he looked at Miss Sleaford's face with no more emotion than if she had been a statue amongst many statues in a gallery of sculpture. He saw that she had small delicate features and a pale face, and that her great black eyes alone invested her with a kind of weird and melancholy beauty, which kindled into warmer loveliness when she smiled.

George did not see the full extent of Isabel Sleaford's beauty, for he was merely a good young man, with a tolerable commonplace intellect, and Isabel's beauty was of a poetical kind, which could only be fully comprehended by a poet; but

Mr. Gilbert arrived at a vague conviction that she was what he called "pretty," and he wondered how it was that her eyes looked a tawny yellow when the light shone full upon them, and a dense black when they were shadowed by their dark lashes.

George was not so much impressed by Miss Sleaford's beauty as by the fact that she was entirely different from any woman he had ever seen before; and I think herein lay this young lady's richest charm, by right of which she should have won the homage of an emperor. There was no one like her. Whatever beauty she had was her own, and no common property shared with a hundred other pretty girls. You saw her once, and remembered her for ever; but you never saw any mortal face that reminded you of hers.

She shut her book altogether at Sigismund's request, and went with the two young men to show George the garden; but she carried the dingy-looking volume lovingly under her arm, and she relapsed into a dreamy silence every now and then, as if she had been reading the hidden pages by some strange faculty of clairvoyance.

Horace Sleaford came running out presently, and summoned the wanderers to the house, where tea was ready.

"The boys are to have theirs in the kitchen," he said; "and we elders tea together in the front parlour."

Three younger boys came trooping out as he spoke, and one by one presented a dingy paw to Mr. Gilbert. They had been flying a kite, and fishing in the canal, and helping to stack some hay

in the distant meadow; and they were rough and tumbled, and smelt strongly of out-door amusements. They were all three very much like their brother; and George, looking at the four boys as they clustered round him, saw eight of the blackest eyes he ever remembered having looked upon; but not one of those four pairs of eyes bore any resemblance to Isabel's. The boys were only Miss Sleaford's half-brothers. Mr. Sleaford's first wife had died three years after her marriage, and Isabel's only memory of her mother was the faint shadow of a loving, melancholy face; a transient shadow, that came to the motherless girl sometimes in her sleep.

An old servant, who had come one day, long ago, to see the Sleafords, told Isabel that her mother had once had a great trouble, and that it had killed her. The child had asked what the great trouble was; but the old servant only shook her head, and said, "Better for you not to know, my poor, sweet lamb; better for you never to know."

There was a pencil-sketch of the first Mrs. Sleaford in the best parlour; a fly-spotted pencil-sketch, which represented a young woman like Isabel, dressed in a short-waisted gown, with big balloon sleeves; and this was all Miss Sleaford knew of her mother.

The present Mrs. Sleaford was a shrewish little woman, with light hair, and sharp grey eyes; a well-meaning little woman, who made everybody about her miserable, and who worked from morning till night, and yet never seemed to finish any task

she undertook. The Sleafords kept one servant, a maid-of-all-work, who was called the girl; but this young person very rarely emerged from the back kitchen, where there was a perpetual pumping of water and clattering of hardware, except to disfigure the gooseberry-bushes with pudding-cloths and dusters, which she hung out to dry in the sunshine. To the ignorant mind it would have seemed that the Sleafords might have been very nearly as well off without a servant; for Mrs. Sleaford appeared to do all the cooking and the greater part of the house-work, while Isabel and the boys took it in turns to go upon errands and attend to the garden-door.

The front parlour was a palatial chamber as compared to the back; for the boys were chased away with slaps by Mrs. Sleaford when they carried thither that artistic paraphernalia which she called their "rubbish," and the depredations of the race were, therefore, less visible in this apartment. Mrs. Sleaford had made herself "tidy" in honour of her new boarder, and her face was shining with the recent application of strong yellow soap. George saw at once that she was a very common little woman, and that any intellectual graces inherited by the boys must have descended to them from their father. He had a profound reverence for the higher branch of the legal profession, and he pondered that a barrister should have married such a woman as Mrs. Sleaford, and should be content to live in the muddle peculiar to a household where the mistress is her own cook, and the junior branches are amateur errand boys.

After tea the two young men walked up and down the weedy pathways in the garden, while Isabel sat under her favourite pear-tree reading the volume she had been so loth to close. Sigismund and his Midlandshire friend walked up and down, smoking cigars, and talking of what they called old times; but those old times were only four or five years ago, though the young men talked like greybeards, who look back half a century or so, and wonder at the folly of their youth.

Isabel went on with her book; the light was dying away little by little, dropping down behind the pear-trees at the western side of the garden, and the pale evening star glimmered at the end of one of the pathways. She read on more eagerly, almost breathlessly, as the light grew less; for her step-mother would call her in by-and-by, and there would be a torn jacket to mend, perhaps, or a heap of worsted socks to be darned for the boys; and there would be no chance of reading another line of that sweet sentimental story, that heavenly prose, which fell into a cadence like poetry, that tender, melancholy music which haunted the reader long after the book was shut and laid aside, and made the dull course of common life so dismally unendurable.

Isabel Sleaford was not quite eighteen years of age. She had been taught a smattering of everything at a day-school in the Albany Road; rather a stylish seminary in the opinion of the Camberwellians. She knew a little Italian, enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread, and just so much of modern history as enabled her to pick out

all the sugar-plums in the historian's pages, – the Mary Stuarts, and Joan of Arcs, and Anne Boleyns, the Iron Masks and La Vallières, the Marie Antoinettes and Charlotte Cordays, luckless Königsmarks and wicked Borgias; all the romantic and horrible stories scattered amid the dry records of Magna Chartas and Reform Bills, clamorous Third Estates and Beds of Justice. She played the piano a little, and sang a little, and painted wishy-washy-looking flowers on Bristol-board *from* nature, but not at all *like* nature; for the passion-flowers were apt to come out like blue muslin frills, and the fuchsias would have passed for prawns with short-sighted people.

Miss Sleaford had received that half-and-half education which is popular with the poorer middle classes. She left the Albany Road seminary in her sixteenth year, and set to work to educate herself by means of the nearest circulating library. She did not feed upon garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction, and read her favourite novels over and over again, and wrote little extracts of her own choosing in penny account-books, usually employed for the entry of butcher's-meat and grocery. She knew whole pages of her pet authors by heart, and used to recite long sentimental passages to Sigismund Smith in the dusky summer evenings; and I am sorry to say that the young man, going to work at Colonel Montefiasco next morning, would put neat paraphrases of Bulwer, or Dickens, or Thackeray into that gentleman's mouth, and invest the heroic brigand with the genial humour of a John Brodie, the spirituality

of a Zanoni, and the savage sarcasm of a Lord Steyne. Perhaps there never was a wider difference between two people than that which existed between Isabel Sleaford and her mother's boarder. Sigismund wrote romantic fictions by wholesale, and yet was as unromantic as the prosiest butcher who ever entered a cattle-market. He sold his imagination, and Isabel lived upon hers. To him romance was something which must be woven into the form most likely to suit the popular demand. He slapped his heroes into marketable shape as coolly as a butterman slaps a pat of butter into the semblance of a swan or a crown, in accordance with the requirements of his customers. But poor Isabel's heroes were impalpable tyrants, and ruled her life. She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine, – unhappy perhaps, and dying early. She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes. She fancied every time she had a little cough that the consumption was coming, and she began to pose herself, and was gently melancholy to her half-brothers, and told them one by one, in confidence, that she did not think she should be with them long. They were slow to understand the drift of her remarks, and would ask her if she was going out as a governess; and, if she took the trouble to explain her dismal meaning, were apt to destroy the sentiment of the situation by saying, "Oh, come now, Hookee Walker. Who ate a plum-dumpling yesterday for dinner, and asked for more? That's the only sort of consumption *you've* got, Izzie; two helps of pudding at dinner, and no end of bread-

and-butter for breakfast."

It was not so that Florence Dombey's friends addressed her. It was not thus that little Paul would have spoken to his sister; but then, who could tolerate these great healthy boys after reading about little Paul?

Poor Izzie's life was altogether vulgar and commonplace, and she could not extract one ray of romance out of it, twist it as she would. Her father was not a Dombey, or an Augustine Caxton, or even a Rawdon Crawley. He was a stout, broad-shouldered, good-tempered-looking man, who was fond of good eating, and drank three bottles of French brandy every week of his life. He was tolerably fond of his children; but he never took them out with him, and he saw very little of them at home. There was nothing romantic to be got out of him. Isabel would have been rather glad if he had ill-used her; for then she would have had a grievance, and that would have been something. If he would have worked himself up into a rage, and struck her on the stairs, she might have run out into the lane by the canal; but, alas, she had no good Captain Cuttle with whom to take refuge, no noble-hearted Walter to come back to her, with his shadow trembling on the wall in the dim firelight! Alas, alas! she looked north and south and east and west, and the sky was all dark; so she was obliged to go back to her intellectual opium-eating, and become a dreamer of dreams. She had plenty of grievances in a small way, such as having to mend awkward three-cornered rents in her brothers' garments, and being sent to fetch butter in the Walworth Road;

but she was willing enough to do these things when once you had wrenched her away from her idolized books; and she carried her ideal world wherever she went, and was tending delirious Byron at Missolonghi, or standing by the deathbed of Napoleon the Great while the shopman slapped the butter on the scale, and the vulgar people hustled her before the greasy counter.

If there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organize her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her; but there was no friendly finger to point a pathway in the intellectual forest, and Isabel rambled as her inclination led her, now setting up one idol, now superseding him by another; living as much alone as if she had resided in a balloon, for ever suspended in mid air, and never coming down in serious earnest to the common joys and sorrows of the vulgar life about her.

George and Sigismund talked of Miss Sleaford when they grew tired of discoursing upon the memories of their schoolboy life in Midlandshire.

"You didn't tell me that Mr. Sleaford had a daughter," George said.

"Didn't I?'

"No. She – Miss Sleaford – is very pretty."

"She's gorgeous," answered Sigismund, with enthusiasm; "she's lovely. I do her for all my dark heroines, – the good heroines, not the wicked ones. Have you noticed Isabel's eyes? People call them black; but they're bright orange-colour, if you

look at them in the sunshine. There's a story of Balzac's called 'The Girl with the Golden Eyes.' I never knew what golden eyes were till I saw Isabel Sleaford."

"You seem very much at home with her?"

"Oh, yes; we're like brother and sister. She helps me with my work sometimes; at least she throws out suggestions, and I use them. But she's dreadfully romantic. She reads too many novels."

"Too many?"

"Yes. Don't suppose that I want to depreciate the value of the article. A novel's a splendid thing after a hard day's work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world, a healthy race on the barren moorland of life, a hearty wrestling match in the universal ring. Sit down then and read 'Ernest Maltravers,' or 'Eugene Aram,' or the 'Bride of Lammermoor,' and the sweet romance lulls your tired soul to rest, like the cradle-song that soothes a child. No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrases of their favourite books. That girl yonder wouldn't look at a decent young fellow in a Government office with three hundred a year and the chance of advancement," said Mr. Smith, pointing to Isabel Sleaford with a backward jerk of his thumb. "*She's* waiting for a melancholy creature, with a murder on his mind."

They went across the grass to the pear-tree, under which Isabel was still seated. It was growing dark, and her pale face and black

eyes had a mysterious look in the dusky twilight. George Gilbert thought she was fitted to be the heroine of a romance, and felt himself miserably awkward and commonplace as he stood before her, struggling with the sensation that he had more arms and legs than he knew what to do with. I like to think of these three people gathered in this neglected suburban garden upon the 21st of July, 1852, for they were on the very threshold of life, and the future lay before them like a great stage in a theatre; but the curtain was down, and all beyond it was a dense mystery. These three foolish children had their own ideas about the great mystery. Isabel thought that she would meet a duke some day in the Walworth Road; the duke would be driving his cab, and she would be wearing her best bonnet and *not* going to fetch butter; and the young patrician would be struck by her, and would drive off to her father, and there and then make a formal demand of her hand; and she would be married to him, and wear ruby velvet and a diamond coronet ever after, like Edith Dombey in Mr. Hablot Browne's grand picture. Poor George fashioned no such romantic destiny in his day-dreams. He thought that he would marry some pretty girl, and have plenty of patients, and perhaps some day be engaged in a great case which would be mentioned in the "Lancet," and live and die respected, as his grandfather had done before him, in the old house with the red-tiled roof and oaken gable-ends painted black. Sigismund had, of course, only one vision, – and that was the publication of that great book, which should be written about by the reviewers and

praised by the public. He could afford to take life very quietly himself; for was he not, in a vicarious manner, going through more adventures than ever the mind of man imagined? He came home to Camberwell of an afternoon, and took half a pound of rump-steak and three or four cups of weak tea, and lounged about the weedy garden with the boys; and other young men who saw what his life was, sneered at him and called him "slow." Slow, indeed! Is it slow to be dangling from a housetop with a frayed rope slipping through your hands and seventy feet of empty space below you? Is it slow to be on board a ship on fire in the middle of the lonely Atlantic, and to rescue the entire crew on one fragile raft, with the handsomest female passenger lashed to your waist by means of her back hair? Is it slow to go down into subterranean passages, with a dark lantern and half-a-dozen bloodhounds, in pursuit of a murderer? This was the sort of thing that Sigismund was doing all day and every day – upon paper; and when the day's work was done, he was very well contented to loll in a garden-chair and smoke his cigar, while enthusiastic Isabel talked to him about Byron, and Shelley, and Napoleon the First; for the two poets and the warrior were her three idols, and tears came into her eyes when she talked of the sorrowful evening after Waterloo, or the wasted journey to Missolonghi, just as if she had known and loved these great men.

The lower windows of the house were lighted by this time, and Mrs. Sleaford came to the back-parlour window to call the young people to supper. They kept primitive hours at Camberwell, and

supper was the pleasantest meal in the day; for Mrs. Sleaford's work was done by that time, and she softened into amiability, and discoursed plaintively of her troubles to Sigismund and her children. But to-night was to be a kind of gala, on account of the young man from the country. So there was a lobster and a heap of lettuces, – very little lobster in proportion to the green-stuff, – and Sigismund was to make a salad. He was very proud of his skill in this department of culinary art, and as he was generally about five-and-twenty minutes chopping, and sprinkling, and stirring, and tasting, and compounding, before the salad was ready, there was ample time for conversation. To-night George Gilbert talked to Isabel; while Horace enjoyed the privilege of sitting up to supper chiefly because there was no one in the house strong enough to send him to bed, since he refused to retire to his chamber unless driven there by force. He sat opposite his sister, and amused himself by sucking the long feelers of the lobster, and staring reflectively at George with his elbows on the table, while Sigismund mixed the salad.

They were all very comfortable and very merry, for Isabel forgot her heroes, and condescended to come down temporarily to George's level, and talk about the Great Exhibition of the previous year, and the pantomime she had seen last Christmas. He thought her very pretty, as she smiled at him across the table; but he fell to wondering about her again, and wondered why it was she was so different from Miss Sophronia Burdock and the young ladies of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, whom he had

known all his life, and in whom he had never found cause for wonder.

The salad was pronounced ready at last, and the "six ale," as Horace called it, was poured out into long narrow glasses, and being a light frisky kind of beverage, was almost as good as champagne. George had been to supper-parties at Graybridge at which there had been real champagne, and jellies, and trifles, but where the talk had not been half so pleasant as at this humble supper-table, on which there were not two forks that matched one another, or a glass that was free from flaw or crack. The young surgeon enjoyed his first night at Camberwell to his heart's content; and Sigismund's spirits rose perceptibly with the six ale. It was when the little party was gayest that Horace jumped up suddenly with the empty lobster-shell in his hand, and told his companions to "hold their noise."

"I heard him," he said.

A shrill whistle from the gate sounded as the boy spoke.

"That's him again!" he exclaimed, running to the door of the room. "He's been at it ever so long, perhaps; and won't he just give it me if he has!"

Everybody was silent; and George heard the boy opening the hall-door and going out to the gate. He heard a brief colloquy, and a deep voice with rather a sulky tone in it, and then heavy footsteps coming along the paved garden-walk and counting the steps before the door.

"It's your pa, Izzie," Mrs. Sleaford said. "He'll want a candle:

you'd better take it out to him; I don't suppose he'll care about coming in here."

George Gilbert felt a kind of curiosity about Isabel's father, and was rather disappointed when he learnt that Mr. Sleaford was not coming into the parlour. But Sigismund Smith went on eating bread and cheese, and fishing pickled onions out of a deep stone jar, without any reference to the movements of the barrister.

Isabel took a candle, and went out into the hall to greet her father. She left the door ajar, and George could hear her talking to Mr. Sleaford; but the barrister answered his daughter with a very ill grace, and the speech which George heard plainest gave him no very favourable impression of his host.

"Give me the light, girl, and don't bother!" Mr. Sleaford said. "I've been worried this day until my head's all of a muddle. Don't stand staring at me, child! Tell your mother I've got some work to do, and mayn't go to bed all night."

"You've been worried, papa?"

"Yes; infernally. And I don't want to be bothered by stupid questions now I've got home. Give me the light, can't you?"

The heavy footsteps went slowly up the uncarpeted staircase, a door opened on the floor above, and the footsteps were heard in the room over the parlour.

Isabel came in, looking very grave, and sat down, away from the table.

George saw that all pleasure was over for that night; and even Sigismund came to a pause in his depredations on the cheese,

and meditated, with a pickled onion on the end of his fork.

He was thinking that a father who ill-used his daughter would not be a bad subject for penny numbers; and he made a mental plan of the plot for a new romance.

If Mr. Sleaford had business which required to be done that night, he seemed in no great hurry to begin his work; for the heavy footsteps tramped up and down, up and down the floor overhead, as steadily as if the barrister had been some ascetic Romanist who had appointed a penance for himself, and was working it out in the solitude of his own chamber. A church clock in the distance struck eleven presently, and a Dutch clock in the kitchen struck three, which was tolerably near the mark for any clock in Mr. Sleaford's house. Isabel and her mother made a stir, as if about to retire; so Sigismund got up, and lighted a couple of candles for himself and his friend. He undertook to show George to the room that had been prepared for him, and the two young men went up-stairs together, after bidding the ladies good night. Horace had fallen asleep, with his elbows upon the table, and his hair flopping against the flaring tallow-candle near him. The young surgeon took very little notice of the apartment to which he was conducted. He was worn out by his journey, and all the fatigue of the long summer day; so he undressed quickly, and fell asleep while his friend was talking to him through the half-open door between the two bedrooms. George slept, but not soundly; for he was accustomed to a quiet house, in which no human creature stirred after ten o'clock at night; and the heavy tramp

of Mr. Sleaford's footsteps in a room near at hand disturbed the young man's slumbers, and mixed themselves with his dreams.

It seemed to George Gilbert as if Mr. Sleaford walked up and down his room all night, and long after the early daylight shone through the dingy window-curtains. George was not surprised, therefore, when he was told at breakfast next morning that his host had not yet risen, and was not likely to appear for some hours. Isabel had to go to the Walworth Road on some mysterious mission; and George overheard fragments of a whispered conversation between the young lady and her mother in the passage outside the parlour-door, in which the word "poor's rates," and "summonses," and "silver spoons," and "backing," and "interest," figured several times.

Mrs. Sleaford was busy about the house, and the boys were scattered; so George and Sigismund took their breakfast comfortably together, and read Mr. Sleaford's "Times," which was not as yet required for that gentleman's own use. Sigismund made a plan of the day. He would take a holiday for once in a way, he said, and would escort his friend to the Royal Academy, and divers other picture-galleries, and would crown the day's enjoyment by a French dinner.

The two young men left the house at eleven o'clock. They had seen nothing of Isabel that morning, nor of the master of the house. All that George Gilbert knew of that gentleman was the fact that Mr. Sleaford had a heavy footstep and a deep sulky voice.

The 21st of July was a blazing summer's day, and I am ashamed to confess that George Gilbert grew very tired of staring at the pictures in the Royal Academy. To him the finest works of modern art were only "pretty pictures," more or less interesting according to the story they told; and Sigismund's disquisitions upon "modelling," and "depth," and "feeling," and tone, and colour, and distance, were so much unintelligible jargon; so he was glad when the day's work was over, and Mr. Smith led him away to a very dingy street a little way behind the National Gallery.

"And now I'm going to give you a regular French dinner, George, old fellow;" Sigismund said, in a triumphant tone.

Mr. Gilbert looked about him with an air of mystification. He had been accustomed to associate French dinners with brilliantly lighted cafés and gorgeous saloons, where the chairs were crimson velvet and gold, and where a dozen vast sheets of looking-glass reflected you as you ate your soup. He was a little disappointed, perhaps, when Sigismund paused before a narrow doorway, on each side of which there was an old-fashioned window with queer-shaped wine and liqueur bottles neatly ranged behind the glass. A big lantern-shaped lamp hung over the door, and below one of the windows was an iron grating, through which a subtle flavour of garlic and mock-turtle soup steamed out upon the summer air.

"This is Boujeot's," said Mr. Smith. "It's the jolliest place; no grandeur, you know, but capital wine and first-rate cooking.

The Emperor of the French used to dine here almost every day when he was in England; but he never told any one his name, and the waiters didn't know who he was till they saw his portrait as President in the 'Illustrated News.'"

It is a popular fiction that the Prince Louis Napoleon was in the habit of dining daily at every French restaurant in London during the years of his exile; a fiction which gives a romantic flavour to the dishes, and an aroma of poetry to the wines. George Gilbert looked about him as he seated himself at a little table chosen by his friend, and he wondered whether Napoleon the Third had ever sat at that particular table, and whether the table-cloth had been as dirty in his time. The waiters at Boujeot's were very civil and accommodating, though they were nearly harassed off their legs by the claims of desultory gentlemen in the public apartments, and old customers dining by pre-arrangement in the private rooms up-stairs. Sigismund pounced upon a great sheet of paper, which looked something like a chronological table, and on the blank margins of which the pencil records of dinners lately consumed and paid for had been hurriedly jotted down by the harassed waiters. Mr. Smith was a long time absorbed in the study of this mysterious document; so George Gilbert amused himself by staring at some coffee-coloured marine views upon the walls, which were supposed to represent the Bay of Biscay and the Cape of Good Hope, with brown waves rolling tempestuously under a brown sky. George stared at these, and at a gentleman who was engaged in the soul-

absorbing occupation of paying his bill; and then the surgeon's thoughts went vagabondizing away from the little coffee-room at Boujeot's to Mr. Sleaford's garden, and Isabel's pale face and yellow-black eyes, glimmering mysteriously in the summer twilight. He thought of Miss Sleaford because she was so unlike any other woman he had ever seen, and he wondered how his father would like her. Not much, George feared; for Mr. Gilbert senior expected a young woman to be very neat about her back-hair, which Isabel was not, and handy with her needle, and clever in the management of a house and the government of a maid-of-all-work; and Isabel could scarcely be that, since her favourite employment was to loll in a wicker-work garden-chair and read novels.

The dinner came in at last, with little pewter covers over the dishes, which the waiter drew one by one out of a mysterious kind of wooden oven, from which there came a voice, and nothing more. The two young men dined; and George thought that, except for the fried potatoes, which flew about his plate when he tried to stick his fork into them, and a flavour of garlic, that pervaded everything savoury, and faintly hovered over the sweets, a French dinner was not so very unlike an English one. But Sigismund served out the little messes with an air of swelling pride, and George was fain to smack his lips with the manner of a connoisseur when his friend asked him what he thought of the *filets de sole à la maître d'hôtel*, or the *rognons à la* South African sherry.

Somehow or other, George was glad when the dinner was eaten and paid for, and it was time to go home to Camberwell. It was only seven o'clock as yet, and the sun was shining on the fountains as the young men went across Trafalgar Square. They took an omnibus at Charing Cross, and rode to the turnpike at Walworth, in the hope of being in time to get a cup of tea before Mrs. Sleaford let the fire out; for that lady had an aggravating trick of letting out the kitchen-fire at half-past seven or eight o'clock on summer evenings, after which hour hot water was an impossibility; unless Mr. Sleaford wanted grog, in which case a kettle was set upon a bundle of blazing firewood.

George Gilbert did not particularly care whether or not there was any tea to be procured at Camberwell, but he looked forward with a faint thrill of pleasure to the thought of a stroll with Isabel in the twilit garden. He thought so much of this, that he was quite pleased when the big, ill-looking house and the dead wall that surrounded it became visible across the barren waste of ground that was called a common. He was quite pleased, not with any fierce or passionate emotion, but with a tranquil sense of pleasure. When they came to the wooden door in the garden-wall, Sigismund Smith stooped down and gave his usual whistle at the keyhole; but he looked up suddenly, and cried:

"Well, I'm blest!"

"What's the matter?"

"The door's open."

Mr. Smith pushed it as he spoke, and the two young men went

into the front garden.

"In all the time I've lived with the Sleafords, that never happened before," said Sigismund. "Mr. Sleaford's awfully particular about the gate being kept locked. He says that the neighbourhood's a queer one, and you never know what thieves are hanging about the place; though, *inter nos*, I don't see that there's much to steal hereabouts," Mr. Smith added, in a confidential whisper.

The door of the house, as well as that of the garden, was open. Sigismund went into the hall, followed closely by George. The parlour door was open too, and the room was empty – the room was empty, and it had an abnormal appearance of tidiness, as if all the litter and rubbish had been suddenly scrambled together and carried away. There was a scrap of old frayed rope upon the table, lying side by side with some tin-tacks, a hammer, and a couple of blank luggage-labels.

George did not stop to look at these; he went straight to the open window and looked out into the garden. He had so fully expected to see Isabel sitting under the pear-tree with a novel in her lap, that he started and drew back with an exclamation of surprise at finding the garden empty; the place seemed so strangely blank without the girlish figure lolling in the basket-chair. It was as if George Gilbert had been familiar with that garden for the last ten years, and had never seen it without seeing Isabel in her accustomed place.

"I suppose Miss Sleaford – I suppose they're all out," the

surgeon said, rather dolefully.

"I suppose they *are* out," Sigismund answered, looking about him with a puzzled air; "and yet, that's strange. They don't often go out; at least, not all at once. They seldom go out at all, in fact, except on errands. I'll call the girl."

He opened the door and looked into the front parlour before going to carry out this design, and he started back upon the threshold as if he had seen a ghost.

"What is it?" cried George.

"My luggage and your portmanteau, all packed and corded; look!"

Mr. Smith pointed as he spoke to a couple of trunks, a hatbox, a carpet-bag, and a portmanteau, piled in a heap in the centre of the room. He spoke loudly in his surprise; and the maid-of-all-work came in with her cap hanging by a single hair-pin to a knob of tumbled hair.

"Oh, sir!" she said, "they're all gone; they went at six o'clock this evenin'; and they're going to America, missus says; and she packed all your things, and she thinks you'd better have 'em took round to the greengrocer's immediant, for fear of being seized for the rent, which is three-quarters doo; but you was to sleep in the house to-night, if you pleased, and your friend likewise; and I was to get you your breakfastes in the morning, before I take the key round to the Albany Road, and tell the landlord as they've gone away, which he don't know it yet."

"GONE AWAY!" said Sigismund; "GONE AWAY!"

"Yes, sir, every one of 'em; and the boys was so pleased that they would go shoutin' 'ooray, 'ooray, all over the garding, though Mr. Sleaford swore at 'em awful, and did hurry and tear so, I thought he was a-goin' mad. But Miss Isabel, she cried about goin' so sudden and seemed all pale and frightened like. And there's a letter on the chimbley-piece, please, which she put it there."

Sigismund pounced upon the letter, and tore it open. George read it over his friend's shoulder. It was only two lines.

"DEAR MR. SMITH, – Don't think hardly of us for going away so suddenly. Papa says it must be so.

"Yours ever faithfully,

"ISABEL."

"I should like to keep that letter," George said, blushing up to the roots of his hair. "Miss Sleaford writes a pretty hand."

CHAPTER IV.
THE END OF GEORGE GILBERT'S HOLIDAY

The two young men acted very promptly upon that friendly warning conveyed in Mrs. Sleaford's farewell message. The maid-of-all-work went to the greengrocer's, and returned in company with a dirty-looking boy – who was "Mrs. Judkin's son, please, sir" – and a truck. Mrs. Judkin's son piled the trunks, portmanteau, and carpet-bag on the truck, and departed with his load, which was to be kept in the custody of the Judkin family until the next morning, when Sigismund was to take the luggage away in a cab. When this business had been arranged, Mr. Smith and his friend went out into the garden and talked of the surprise that had fallen upon them.

"I always knew they were thinking of leaving," Sigismund said, "but I never thought they'd go away like this. I feel quite cut up about it, George. I'd got to like them, you know, old boy, and to feel as if I was one of the family; and I shall never be able to partial-board with any body else."

George seemed to take the matter quite as seriously as his friend, though his acquaintance with the Sleafords was little more than four-and-twenty hours old.

"They must have known before to-day that they were going,"

he said. "People don't go to America at a few hours' notice."

Sigismund summoned the dirty maid-of-all-work, and the two young men subjected her to a very rigorous cross-examination; but she could tell them very little more than she had told them all in one breath in the first instance.

"Mr. Sleaford 'ad 'is breakfast at nigh upon one o'clock, leastways she put on the pertaturs for the boys' dinner before she biled 'is egg; and then he went out, and he come tarin' 'ome agen in one of these 'ansom cabs at three o'clock in the afternoon; and he told missus to pack up, and he told the 'ansom cabman to send a four-wheeler from the first stand he passed at six o'clock precise; and the best part of the luggage was sent round to the greengrocer's on a truck, and the rest was took on the roof of the cab, and Master 'Orace rode alongside the cabman, and would smoke one of them nasty penny pickwicks, which they always made 'im bilious; and Mr. Sleaford he didn't go in the cab, but walked off as cool as possible, swinging his stick, and 'olding his 'ead as 'igh as hever."

Sigismund asked the girl if she had heard the address given to the cabman who took the family away.

"No," the girl said. Mr. Sleaford had given no address. He directed the cabman to drive over Waterloo Bridge, and that was all the girl heard.

Mr. Smith's astonishment knew no bounds. He walked about the deserted house, and up and down the weedy pathways between the espaliers, until long after the summer moon was

bright upon the lawn, and every trailing branch and tender leaflet threw its sharp separate shadow on the shining ground.

"I never heard of such a thing in all my life," the young author cried; "it's like penny numbers. With the exception of their going away in a four-wheeler cab instead of through a sliding panel and subterranean passage, it's for all the world like penny numbers."

"But you'll be able to find out where they've gone, and why they went away so suddenly," suggested George Gilbert; "some of their friends will be able to tell you."

"Friends!" exclaimed Sigismund; "they never had any friends – at least not friends that they visited, or anything of that kind. Mr. Sleaford used to bring home some of his friends now and then of an evening, after dark generally, or on a Sunday afternoon. But we never saw much of them, for he used to take them up to his own room; and except for his wanting French brandy and cigars fetched, and chops and steaks cooked, and swearing at the girl over the balusters if the plates weren't hot enough, we shouldn't have known that there was company in the house. I suppose his chums were in the law, like himself," Mr. Smith added, musingly; "but they didn't look much like barristers, for they had straggling moustachios, and a kind of would-be military way; and if they hadn't been Sleaford's friends, I should have thought them raffish-looking."

Neither of the young men could think of anything or talk of anything that night except the Sleafords and their abrupt departure. They roamed about the garden, staring at the long

grass and the neglected flower-beds; at the osier arbour, dark under the shadow of a trailing vine, that was half-smothered by the vulgar luxuriance of wild hops, – the osier arbour in which the spiders made their home, and where, upon the rotten bench, romantic Izzie had sat through the hot hours of drowsy summer days, reading her favourite novels, and dreaming of a life that was to be like the plot of a novel.

They went into the house, and called for candles, and wandered from room to room, looking blankly at the chairs and tables, the open drawers, the disordered furniture, as if from those inanimate objects they might obtain some clue to the little domestic mystery that bewildered them. The house was pervaded by torn scraps of paper, fragments of rag and string, morsels of crumpled lace and muslin, bald hair-brushes lying in the corners of the bedrooms, wisps of hay and straw, tin-tacks, and old kid-gloves. Everywhere there were traces of disorder and hurry, except in Mr. Sleaford's room. That sanctuary was wide open now, and Mr. Smith and his friend went into it and examined it. To Sigismund a newly-excavated chamber in a long-buried city could scarcely have been more interesting. Here there was no evidence of reckless haste. There was not a single fragment of waste paper in any one of the half-dozen open drawers on either side of the desk. There was not so much as an old envelope upon the floor. A great heap of grey ashes upon the cold hearthstone revealed the fact that Mr. Sleaford had employed himself in destroying papers before his hasty departure. The candlestick

that Isabel had given him upon the previous night stood upon his desk, with the candle burnt down to the socket. George remembered having heard his host's heavy footsteps pacing up and down the room; and the occasional opening and shutting of drawers, and slamming of the lids of boxes, which had mixed with his dreams all through that brief summer's night. It was all explained now. Mr Sleaford had of course been making his preparations for leaving Camberwell – for leaving England; if it was really true that the family were going to America.

Early the next morning there came a very irate gentleman from the Albany Road. This was the proprietor of the neglected mansion, who had just heard of the Sleaford hegira, and who was in a towering passion because of those three quarter's rent which he was never likely to behold. He walked about the house with his hands in his pockets, kicking the doors open, and denouncing his late tenants in very unpleasant language. He stalked into the back parlour, where George and Sigismumd were taking spongy French rolls and doubtful French eggs, and glared ferociously at them, and muttered something to the effect that it was like their impudence to be making themselves so "jolly comfortable" in his house when he'd been swindled by that disreputable gang of theirs. He used other adjectives besides that word "disreputable" when he spoke of the Sleafords; but Sigismund got up from before the dirty table-cloth, and protested, with his mouth full, that he believed in the honesty of the Sleafords; and that, although temporarily under a cloud, Mr. Sleaford would no doubt make a

point of looking up the three quarter's rent, and would forward post-office orders for the amount at the earliest opportunity. To this the landlord merely replied, that he hoped his – Sigismund's – head would not ache till Mr. Sleaford *did* send the rent; which friendly aspiration was about the only civil thing the proprietor of the mansion said to either of the young men. He prowled about the rooms, poking the furniture with his stick, and punching his fist into the beds to see if any of the feathers had been extracted therefrom. He groaned over the rents in the carpets, the notches and scratches upon the mahogany, the entire absence of handles and knobs wherever it was possible for handles or knobs to be wanting; and every time he found out any new dilapidation in the room where the two young men were taking their breakfast, he made as if he would have come down upon them for the cost of the damage.

"Is that the best teapot you're a-having your teas out of? Where's the Britannia metal as I gave thirteen-and-six for seven year ago? Where did that twopenny-halfpenny blown-glass sugar-basin come from? It ain't mine; mine was di'mond-cut. Why, they've done me two hundred pound mischief. I could afford to forgive 'em the rent. The rent's the least part of the damage they've done me."

And then the landlord became too forcible to be recorded in these pages, and then he went groaning about the garden; whereupon George and Sigismund collected their toilet-apparatus, and such trifling paraphernalia as they had retained

for the night's use, and hustled them into a carpet-bag, and fled hastily and fearfully, after giving the servant-maid a couple of half-crowns, and a solemn injunction to write to Sigismund at his address in the Temple if she should hear any tidings whatever of the Sleafords.

So, in the bright summer morning, George Gilbert saw the last of the old house which for nearly seven years had sheltered Mr. Sleaford and his wife and children, the weedy garden in which Isabel had idled away so many hours of her early girlhood; the straggling vines under which she had dreamed bright sentimental dreams over the open leaves of her novels.

The young men hired a cab at the nearest cab-stand, and drove to the establishment of the friendly greengrocer who had given shelter to their goods. It was well for them, perhaps, that the trunks and portmanteau had been conveyed to that humble sanctuary; for the landlord was in no humour to hesitate at trifles, and would have very cheerfully impounded Sigismund's simple wardrobe, and the bran-new linen shirts which George Gilbert had brought to London.

They bestowed a small gratuity upon Mrs. Judkin, and then drove to Sigismund's chambers, where they encamped, and contrived to make themselves tolerably comfortable, in a rough gipsy kind of way.

"You shall have Morgan's room," Sigismund said to his friend, "and I can make up a bed in the sitting-room; there's plenty of mattresses and blankets."

They dined rather late in the evening at a celebrated tavern in the near neighbourhood of those sacred precincts where law and justice have their head-quarters, and after dinner Sigismund borrowed the "Law List."

"We may find out something about Mr. Sleaford in that," he said.

But the "Law List" told nothing of Mr. Sleaford. In vain Sigismund and George took it in turn to explore the long catalogue of legal practitioners whose names began with the letter S. There were St. Johns and Simpsons, St. Evremonds and Smitherses, Standishes and Sykeses. There was almost every variety of appellation, aristocratic and plebeian; but the name of Sleaford was not in the list: and the young men returned the document to the waiter, and went home wondering how it was that Mr. Sleaford's name had no place among the names of his brotherhood.

I have very little to tell concerning the remaining days which the conditions of George Gilbert's excursion ticket left him free to enjoy in London. He went to the theatres with his friend, and sat in stifling upper boxes, in which there was a considerable sprinkling of the "order" element, during these sunshiny summer evenings. Sigismund also took him to divers *al fresco* entertainments, where there were fireworks, and "polking," and bottled stout; and in the daytime George was fain to wander about the streets by himself, staring at the shop-windows, and hustled and frowned at for walking on the

wrong side of the pavement; or else to loll on the window-seat in Sigismund's apartment, looking down into the court below, or watching his friend's scratching pen scud across the paper. Sacred as the rites of hospitality may be, they must yet give way before the exigencies of the penny press; and Sigismund was rather a dull companion for a young man from the country who was bent upon a week's enjoyment of London life.

For very lack of employment, George grew to take an interest in his friend's labour, and asked him questions about the story that poured so rapidly from his hurrying pen.

"What's it all about, Sigismund?" he demanded. "Is it funny?"

"Funny!" cried Mr. Smith, with a look of horror; "I should think not, indeed. Who ever heard of penny numbers being funny? What the penny public want is plot, and plenty of it; surprises, and plenty of 'em; mystery, as thick as a November fog. Don't you know the sort of thing? 'The clock of St. Paul's had just sounded eleven hours;' – it's generally a translation, you know, and St. Paul's stands for Notre Dame; – 'a man came to appear upon the quay which extends itself all the length between the bridges of Waterloo and London.' There isn't any quay, you know; but you're obliged to have it so, on account of the plot. 'This man – who had a true head of vulture, the nose pointed, sharp, terrible; all that there is of the most ferocious; the eyes cavernous, and full of a sombre fire – carried a bag upon his back. Presently he stops himself. He regards with all his eyes the quay, nearly desert; the water, black and shiny, which stretches itself at

his feet. He listens, but there is nothing. He bends himself upon the border of the quay. He puts aside the bag from his shoulders, and something of dull, heavy, slides slowly downwards and falls into the water. At the instant that the heavy burthen sinks with a dull noise to the bottom of the river, there is a voice, loud and piercing, which seems to elevate itself out of the darkness: 'Philip Launay, what dost thou do there with the corpse of thy victim?' – That's the sort of thing for the penny public," said Mr. Smith; "or else a good strong combination story."

"What do you call a combination story?" Mr. Gilbert asked, innocently.

"Why, you see, when you're doing four great stories a week for a public that must have a continuous flow of incident, you can't be quite as original as a strict sense of honour might prompt you to be; and the next best thing you can do, if you haven't got ideas of your own, is to steal other people's ideas in an impartial manner. Don't empty one man's pocket, but take a little bit all round. The combination novel enables a young author to present his public with all the brightest flowers of fiction neatly arranged into every variety of garland. I'm doing a combination novel now – the 'Heart of Midlothian' and the 'Wandering Jew.' You've no idea how admirably the two stories blend. In the first place, I throw my period back into the Middle Ages – there's nothing like the Middle Ages for getting over the difficulties of a story. Good gracious me! why, what is there that isn't possible if you go back to the time of the Plantagenets? I make Jeannie Deans a dumb

girl, – there's twice the interest in her if you make her dumb, – and I give her a goat and a tambourine, because, you see, the artist likes that sort of thing for his illustrations. I think you'd admit that I've very much improved upon Sir Walter Scott – a delightful writer, I allow, but decidedly a failure in penny numbers – if you were to run your eye over the story, George; there's only seventy-eight numbers out yet, but you'll be able to judge of the plot. Of course I don't make Aureola, – I call my Jeannie 'Aureola;' rather a fine name, isn't it? and entirely my own invention, – of course I don't make Aureola walk from Edinburgh to London. What would be the good of that? why, anybody *could* walk it if they only took long enough about it. I make her walk from London to ROME, to get a Papal Bull for the release of her sister from the Tower of London. That's something like a walk, I flatter myself; over the Alps – which admits of Aureola's getting buried in the snow, and dug out again by a Mount St. Bernard's dog; and then walled up alive by the monks because they suspect her of being friendly to the Lollards; and dug out again by Cæsar Borgia, who happens to be travelling that way, and asks a night's lodging, and heard Aureola's tambourine behind the stone wall in his bedroom, and digs her out and falls in love with her; and she escapes from his persecution out of a window, and lets herself down the side of the mountain by means of her gauze scarf, and dances her way to Rome, and obtains an audience of the Pope, and gets mixed up with the Jesuits: – and that's where I work into the 'Wandering Jew,'" concluded Mr. Smith.

George Gilbert ventured to suggest that in the days when the Plantagenet ruled our happy isle, Ignatius Loyola had not yet founded his wonderful brotherhood; but Mr. Smith acknowledged this prosaic suggestion with a smile of supreme contempt.

"Oh, if you tie me down to facts," he said, "I can't write at all."

"But you like writing?"

"For the penny public? Oh, yes; I like writing for them. There's only one objection to the style – it's apt to give an author a tendency towards bodies."

Mr. Gilbert was compelled to confess that this last remark was incomprehensible to him.

"Why, you see, the penny public require excitement," said Mr. Smith; "and in order to get the excitement up to a strong point, you're obliged to have recourse to bodies. Say your hero murders his father, and buries him in the coal-cellar in No. 1. What's the consequence? There's an undercurrent of the body in the coal-cellar running through every chapter, like the subject in a fugue or a symphony. You drop it in the treble, you catch it up in the bass; and then it goes sliding up into the treble again, and then drops down with a melodious groan into the bass; and so on to the end of the story. And when you've once had recourse to the stimulant of bodies, you're like a man who's accustomed to strong liquors, and to whose vitiated palate simple drinks seem flat and wishy-washy. I think there ought to be a literary temperance pledge by which the votaries of the ghastly and melodramatic school might

bind themselves to the renunciation of the bowl and dagger, the midnight rendezvous, the secret grave dug by lantern-light under a black grove of cypress, the white-robed figure gliding in the grey gloaming athwart a lonely churchyard, and all the alcoholic elements of fiction. But, you see, George, it isn't so easy to turn teetotaller," added Mr. Smith, doubtfully; "and I scarcely know that it is so very wise to make the experiment. Are not reformed drunkards the dullest and most miserable of mankind? Isn't it better for a man to do his best in the style that is natural to him than to do badly in another man's line of business? 'Box and Cox' is not a great work when criticised upon sternly æsthetic principles; but I would rather be the author of 'Box and Cox,' and hear my audience screaming with laughter from the rise of the curtain to the fall thereof, than write a dull five-act tragedy, in the unities of which Aristotle himself could find no flaw, but from whose performance panic-stricken spectators should slink away or ere the second act came to its dreary close. I think I should like to have been Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the father and prince of melodrama, the man whose dramas were acted thirty thousand times in France before he died (and how many times in England?); the man who reigned supreme over the playgoers of his time, and has not yet ceased to reign. Who ever quotes any passage from the works of Guilbert de Pixérécourt, or remembers his name? But to this day his dramas are acted in every country theatre; his persecuted heroines weep and tremble; his murderous scoundrels run their two hours' career of villany,

to be dragged off scowling to subterranean dungeons, or to die impenitent and groaning at the feet of triumphant virtue. Before nine o'clock to-night there will be honest country-folks trembling for the fate of Theresa, the Orphan of Geneva, and simple matrons weeping over the peril of the Wandering Boys. But Guilbert de Pixérécourt was never a great man; he was only popular. If a man can't have a niche in the Walhalla, isn't it something to have his name in big letters in the play-bills on the boulevard? and I wonder how long my friend Guilbert would have held the stage, if he had emulated Racine or Corneille. He did what it was in him to do, honestly; and he had his reward. Who would not wish to be great? Do you think I wouldn't rather be the author of the 'Vicar of Wakefield' than of 'Colonel Montefiasco?' I *could* write the 'Vicar of Wakefield,' too, but – "

George stared aghast at his excited friend.

"But not Oliver Goldsmith's 'Vicar of Wakefield,'" Sigismund explained.

He had thrown down his pen now, and was walking up and down the room with his hands thrust deep down in his pockets, and his face scarlet with fierce excitement.

"I should do the Vicar in the detective pre-Raphaelite style. Moses knows a secret of his father's – forged accommodation-bills, or something of that kind; sets out to go to the fair on a drowsy summer morning, not a leaf stirring in the vicarage garden. You hear the humming of the bees as they bounce against the vicarage-windows; you see the faint light trembling about

Olivia's head, as she comes to watch her brother riding along the road; you see him ride away, and the girl watching him, and feel the hot sleepy atmosphere, and hear the swoop of the sickle in the corn-fields on the other side of the road; and the low white gate swings-to with a little click, and Miss Primrose walks slowly back to the house, and says, 'Papa, it's very warm;' and you know there's something going to happen.

"Then the second chapter comes, and Mr. Primrose has his dinner, and goes out to visit his poor; and the two girls walk about the garden with Mr. Burchell, watching for Moses, who NEVER COMES BACK. And then the serious business of the story begins, and Burchell keeps his eye upon the Vicar. Nobody else suspects good Mr. Primrose; but Burchell's eye is never off him; and one night, when the curtains are drawn, and the girls are sitting at their work, and dear Mrs. Primrose is cutting out comfortable flannels for the poor, the Vicar opens his desk, and begins to write a letter. You hear the faint sound of the light ashes falling on the hearth, the slow ticking of an eight-day clock in the hall outside the drawing-room door, the sharp snap of Mrs. Primrose's scissors as they close upon the flannel. Sophia asks Burchell to fetch a volume from the bookcase behind the Vicar's chair. He is a long time choosing the book, and his eye looks over the Vicar's shoulder. He takes a mental inventory of the contents of the open desk, and he sees amongst the neatly-docketed papers, the receipted bills, and packets of envelopes – what? a glove, a green kid-glove sewn with white, which

he distinctly remembers to have seen worn by Moses when he started on that pleasant journey from which he never returned. Can't you see the Vicar's face, as he looks round at Burchell, and knows that his secret is discovered? I can. Can't you fancy the awful silent duel between the two men, the furtive glances, the hidden allusions to that dreadful mystery, lurking in every word that Burchell utters?

"That's how *I* should do the 'Vicar of Wakefield,'" said Sigismund Smith, triumphantly. "There wouldn't be much in it, you know; but the story would be pervaded by Moses's body lying murdered in a ditch half a mile from the vicarage, and Burchell's ubiquitous eye. I dare say some people would cry out upon it, and declare that it was wicked and immoral, and that the young man who could write about a murder would be ready to commit the deed at the earliest convenient opportunity. But I don't suppose the clergy would take to murdering their sons by reason of my fiction, in which the rules of poetical justice would be sternly adhered to, and Nemesis, in the shape of Burchell, perpetually before the reader."

Poor George Gilbert listened very patiently to his friend's talk, which was not particularly interesting to him. Sigismund preached "shop" to whomsoever would listen to him, or suffer him to talk; which was pretty much the same to this young man. I am afraid there were times when his enthusiastic devotion to his profession rendered Mr. Smith a terrible nuisance to his friends and acquaintance. He would visit a pleasant country-

house, and receive hospitable entertainment, and enjoy himself; and then, when all that was morbid in his imagination had been stimulated by sparkling burgundy and pale hochheimer, this wretched young traitor would steal out into some peaceful garden, where dew-laden flowers flung their odours on the still evening air, and sauntering in the shadowy groves where the nightingale's faint "jug-jug" was beginning to sound, would plan a diabolical murder, to be carried out in seventy-five penny numbers. Sometimes he was honourable enough to ask permission of the proprietor of the country mansion; and when, on one occasion, after admiring the trim flower-gardens and ivied walls, the low turreted towers and grassy moats, of a dear old place that had once been a grange, he ventured to remark that the spot was so peaceful it reminded him of slow poisoning, and demanded whether there would be any objection to his making the quiet grange the scene of his next fiction, – the cordial cheery host cried out, in a big voice that resounded high up among the trees where the rooks were cawing, "People it with fiends, my dear boy! You're welcome to people the place with fiends, as far as I'm concerned."

CHAPTER V.
GEORGE AT HOME

The young surgeon went home to Midlandshire with his fellow-excursionists, when the appointed Monday came round. He met Miss Burdock and her sister on the platform in Euston Square, and received those ladies from the hands of their aunt. Sophronia did not blush now when her eyes met George Gilbert's frank stare. She had danced twice with a young barrister at the little quadrille-party which her aunt had given in honour of the maltster's daughters; a young barrister who was tall and dark and stylish, and who spoke of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne as a benighted place, which was only endurable for a week or so in the hunting season. Miss Sophronia Burdock's ideas had expanded during that week in Baker Street, and she treated her travelling companion with an air of haughty indifference, which might have wounded George to the quick had he been aware of the change in the lady's manner. But poor George saw no alteration in the maltster's daughter; he watched no changes of expression in the face opposite to him as the rushing engine carried him back to Midlandshire. He was thinking of another face, which he had only seen for a few brief hours, and which he was perhaps never again to look upon; a pale girlish countenance, framed with dense black hair; a pale face, out of which there looked large solemn

eyes, like stars that glimmer faintly through the twilight shadows.

Before leaving London, George had obtained a promise from his friend Sigismund Smith. Whatever tidings Mr. Smith should at any time hear about the Sleafords, he was to communicate immediately to the young surgeon of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne. It was, of course, very absurd of George to take such an interest in this singular family; the young man admitted as much himself; but, then, singular people are always more or less interesting; and, having been a witness of Mr. Sleaford's abrupt departure, it was only natural that George should want to know the end of the story. If these people were really gone to America, why, of course, it was all over; but if they had not left London, some one or other of the family might turn up some day, and in that case Sigismund was to write and tell his friend all about it.

George Gilbert's last words upon the platform at Euston Square had relation to this subject; and all the way home he kept debating in his mind whether it was likely the Sleafords had really gone to America, or whether the American idea had been merely thrown out with a view to the mystification of the irate landlord.

Life at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne was as slow and sleepy as the river which widened in the flat meadows outside the town; the dear old river which crept lazily past the mouldering wall of the churchyard, and licked the moss-grown tombstones that had lurched against that ancient boundary. Everything at Graybridge was more or less old and quaint and picturesque;

but the chief glory of Graybridge was the parish church; a grand old edifice which was planted beyond the outskirts of the town, and approached by a long avenue of elms, beneath whose shadow the tombstones glimmered whitely in the sun. The capricious Wayverne, which was perpetually winding across your path wheresoever you wandered in pleasant Midlandshire, was widest here; and on still summer days the grey towers of the old church looked down at other phantasmal towers in the tranquil water.

George used to wander in this churchyard sometimes on his return from a trout-fishing expedition, and, lounging among the tombstones with his rod upon his shoulder, would abandon himself to the simple day-dreams he loved best to weave.

But the young surgeon had a good deal of work to do, now that his father had admitted him to the solemn rights of partnership, and very little time for any sentimental musings in the churchyard. The parish work in itself was very heavy, and George rode long distances on his steady-going grey pony to attend to captious patients, who gave him small thanks for his attendance. He was a very soft-hearted young man, and he often gave his slender pocket-money to those of his patients who wanted food rather than medicine. Little by little people grew to understand that George Gilbert was very different from his father, and had a tender pity for the sorrows and sufferings it was a part of his duty to behold. Love and gratitude for this young doctor may have been somewhat slow to spring up in the hearts of

his parish patients; but they took a deep root, and became hardy, vigorous plants before the first year of George's service was over. Before that year came to a close the partnership between the father and son had been irrevocably dissolved, without the aid of legal practitioners, or any legal formulas whatsoever; and George Gilbert was sole master of the old house with the whitewashed plaster-walls and painted beams of massive oak.

The young man lamented the loss of his father with all that single-minded earnestness which was the dominant attribute of his character. He had been as obedient to his father at the last as he had been at the first; as submissive in his manhood as in his childhood. But in his obedience there had been nothing childish or cowardly. He was obedient because he believed his father to be wise and good, reverencing the old man with simple, unquestioning veneration. And now that the father was gone, George Gilbert began life in real earnest. The poor of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne had good reason to rejoice at the change which had given the young doctor increase of means and power. He was elected unanimously to the post his father's death had left nominally vacant; and wherever there was sickness and pain, his kindly face seemed to bring comfort, his bright blue eyes seemed to inspire courage. He took an atmosphere of youth and hope and brave endurance with him everywhere, which was more invigorating than the medicines he prescribed; and, next to Mr. Neate the curate, George Gilbert was the best-beloved and most popular man in Graybridge.

He had never had any higher ambition than this. He had no wish to strive or to achieve; he only wanted to be useful; and when he heard the parable of the Talents read aloud in the old church, a glow of gentle happiness thrilled through his veins as he thought of his own small gifts, which had never yet been suffered to grow rusty for lack of service.

The young man's life could scarcely have been more sheltered from the storm and tempest of the world, though the walls of some mediæval monastery had encircled his little surgery. Could the tumults of passion ever have a home in the calm breast of these quiet provincials, whose regular lives knew no greater change than the slow alternation of the seasons, whose orderly existences were never disturbed by an event? Away at Conventford there were factory strikes, and political dissensions, and fighting and rioting now and then; but here the tranquil days crept by, and left no mark by which they might be remembered.

Miss Sophronia Burdock did not long cherish the memory of the dark-haired barrister she had met in Baker Street. To do so would have been as foolish as to "love some bright particular star, and think to wed it," in the young damsel's opinion. She wisely banished the barrister's splendid image, and she smiled once more upon Mr. Gilbert when she met him coming out of church in the cold wintry sunlight, looking to especial advantage in his new mourning clothes. But George was blind to the sympathetic smiles that greeted him. He was not in love with Miss Sophronia Burdock. The image of Isabel's pale face had faded into a very

indistinct shadow by this time; nay, it was almost entirely blotted out by the young man's grief for his father's death; but if his heart was empty enough now, there was no place in it for Miss Burdock, though it was hinted at in Graybridge that a dower of four thousand pounds would accompany that fair damsel's hand. George Gilbert had no high-flown or sentimental notions; but he would have thought it no greater shame to rifle the contents of the maltster's iron safe, than to enrich himself with the possessions of a woman he did not love.

In the meantime he lived his peaceful life in the house where he had been born, mourning with simple, natural sorrow for the old father who had so long sat at the opposite side of the hearth, reading a local paper by the light of a candle held between his eyes and the small print, and putting down the page every now and then to descant, at his ease, upon the degeneracy of the times. The weak, loving, fidgety father was gone now, and George looked blankly at the empty chair which had taken the old man's shape; but his sorrow was unembittered by vain remorse or cruel self-reproach: he had been a good son, and he could look back at his life with his dead father, and thank God for the peaceful life that they had spent together.

But he was very lonely now in the old house, which was a bare, blank place, peopled by no bright inanimate creations by which art fills the homes of wealthy hermits with fair semblances of life. The empty walls stared down upon the young man as he sat alone in the dim candlelight, till he was fain to go into the kitchen,

which was the most cheerful room in the house, and where he could talk to William and Tilly, while he lounged against the quaint old angle of the high oaken chimney-piece smoking his cigar.

William and Tilly were a certain Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson, who had come southwards with the pretty young woman whom Mr. John Gilbert had encountered in the course of a holiday-trip to a quiet Yorkshire town, where the fair towers of a minster rose above a queer old street, beyond whose gabled roofs lay spreading common-lands, fair pasture-farms, and pleasant market-gardens. It was in the homestead attached to one of these pasture-farms that John Gilbert had met the bright, rosy-faced girl whom he made his wife; and Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson were poor relations of the young lady's father. At Mrs. Gilbert's entreaty they consented to leave the little bit of garden and meadow-land which they rented near her father's farm, and followed the surgeon's wife to her new home, where Matilda Jeffson took upon herself the duties of housekeeper, general manager, and servant-of-all-work; while her husband looked after the surgeon's table, and worked in the long, old-fashioned garden, where the useful element very much preponderated over the ornamental.

I am compelled to admit that, in common with almost all those bright and noble qualities which can make man admirable, Mr. William Jeffson possessed one failing. He was lazy. But then his laziness gave such a delicious, easy-going tone to his whole character, and was so much a part of his good nature and

benevolence, that to wish him faultless would have been to wish him something less than he was. There are some people whose faults are better than other people's virtues. Mr. Jeffson was lazy. In the garden which it was his duty to cultivate, the snails crawled along their peaceful way, unhindered by cruel rake or hoe; but then, on the other hand, the toads grew fat in shadowy corners under the broad dock-leaves, and the empty shells of their slimy victims attested the uses of those ugly and venomous reptiles. The harmony of the universe asserted itself in that Midlandshire garden, unchecked by any presumptuous interference from Mr. Jeffson. The weeds grew high in waste patches of ground, left here and there amongst the gooseberry-bushes and the cabbages, the raspberries and potatoes; and William Jeffson offered little hindrance to their rank luxuriance. "There was room enough for all he wanted," he said philosophically; "and ground that wouldn't grow weeds would be good for naught. Mr. Gilbert had more fruit and vegetables than he could eat or cared to give away; and surely that was enough for anybody." Officious visitors would sometimes suggest this or that alteration or improvement in the simple garden; but Mr. Jeffson would only smile at them with a bland, sleepy smile, as he lolled upon his spade, and remark, "that he'd been used to gardens all his life, and knew what could be made out of 'em, and what couldn't."

In short, Mr. Jeffson and Matilda Jeffson his wife did as they liked in the surgeon's house, and had done so ever since that day upon which they came to Midlandshire to take friendly service

with their second cousin, pretty Mrs. John Gilbert. They took very small wages from their kinswoman's husband, but they had their own apartments, and lived as they pleased, and ordered the lives of their master and mistress, and idolized the fair-haired baby-boy who was born by-and-by, and who grew day by day under their loving eyes, when the tender gaze of his mother had ceased to follow his toddling footsteps, or yearn for the sight of his frank, innocent face. Mr. Jeffson may have neglected the surgeon's garden, by reason of that lymphatic temperament which was peculiar to him; but there was one business in which he never lacked energy, one pursuit in which he knew no weariness. He was never tired of any labour which contributed to the pleasure or amusement of Mr. Gilbert's only son. He carried the child on his shoulders for long journeys to distant meadows in the sunshiny haymaking season, when all the air was fragrant with the scent of grass and flowers; he clambered through thorny gaps amidst the brambly underwood, and tore the flesh off his poor big hands hunting for blackberries and cob-nuts for Master "Jarge." He persuaded his master into the purchase of a pony when the boy was five years old, and the little fellow trotted to Wareham at Mr. Jeffson's side when that gentleman went on errands for the Graybridge household. William Jeffson had no children of his own, and he loved the surgeon's boy with all the fondness of a nature peculiarly capable of love and devotion.

It was a bitter day for him when Master Jarge went to the

Classical and Commercial Academy at Wareham; and but for those happy Saturday afternoons on which he went to fetch the boy for a holiday that lasted till Sunday evening, poor William Jeffson would have lost all the pleasures of his simple life. What was the good of haymaking if George wasn't in the thick of the fun, clambering on the loaded wain, or standing flushed and triumphant, high up against the sunlit sky on the growing summit of the new-made stack? What could be drearier work than feeding the pigs, or milking the cow, unless Master Jarge was by to turn labour into pleasure by the bright magic of his presence? William Jeffson went about his work with a grave countenance during the boy's absence, and only brightened on those delicious Saturday afternoons when Master Jarge came hurrying to the little wooden gate in Dr. Mulder's playground, shouting a merry welcome to his friend. There was no storm of rain or hail, snow or sleet, that ever came out of the heavens, heavy enough to hinder Mr. Jeffson's punctual attendance at that little gate. What did he care for drenching showers, or thunderclaps that seemed to shake the earth, so long as the little wooden gate opened, and the fair young face he loved poked out at him with a welcoming smile?

"Our boys laid any money you wouldn't come to-day, Jeff," Master Gilbert said sometimes; "but I knew there wasn't any weather invented that would keep you away."

O blessed reward of fidelity and devotion! What did William Jeffson want more than this?

Matilda Jeffson loved her master's son very dearly in her own

way; but her household duties were a great deal heavier than Mr. Jeffson's responsibilities, and she had little time to waste upon the poetry of affection. She kept the boy's wardrobe in excellent order; baked rare batches of hot cakes on Saturday afternoons for his special gratification; sent him glorious hampers, in which there were big jars of gooseberry-jam, pork-pies, plum-loaves, and shrivelled apples. In all substantial matters Mrs. Jeffson was as much the boy's friend as her husband; but that tender, sympathetic devotion which William felt for his master's son was something beyond her comprehension.

"My master's daft about the lad," she said, when she spoke of the two.

George Gilbert taught his companion a good deal in those pleasant Saturday evenings, when the surgeon was away amongst his patients, and the boy was free to sit in the kitchen with Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson. He told the Yorkshireman all about those enemies of boyhood, the classic poets; but William infinitely preferred Shakespeare and Milton, Byron and Scott, to the accomplished Romans, whose verses were of the lamest as translated by George. Mr. Jeffson could never have enough of Shakespeare. He was never weary of Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Romeo, the bright young Prince who tried on his father's crown, bold Hotspur, ill-used Richard, passionate Margaret, murderous Gloster, ruined Wolsey, noble Katharine. All that grand gallery of pictures unrolled its splendours for this man, and the schoolboy wondered at the enthusiasm he was powerless to

understand. He was inclined to think that practical Mrs. Jeffson was right, and that her husband was a little "daft" upon some matters.

The boy returned his humble friend's affection with a steady, honest regard, that richly compensated the gardener, whose love was not of a nature to need much recompense, since its growth was as spontaneous and unconscious as that of the wild flowers amongst the long grass. George returned William Jeffson's affection, but he could not return it in kind. The poetry of friendship was not in his nature. He was honest, sincere, and true, but not sympathetic or assimilative; he preserved his own individuality wherever he went, and took no colour from the people amongst whom he lived.

Mr. Gilbert would have been very lonely now that his father was gone, had it not been for this honest couple, who managed his house and garden, his stable and paddocks, and watched his interests as earnestly as if he had been indeed their son. Whenever he had a spare half-hour, the young man strolled into the old-fashioned kitchen, and smoked his cigar in the chimney-corner, where he had passed so much of his boyhood.

"When I sit here, Jeff," he said sometimes, "I seem to go back to the old school-days again, and I fancy I hear Brown Molly's hoofs upon the frosty road, and my father's voice calling to you to open the gate."

Mr. Jeffson sighed, as he looked up from the mending of a bridle or the patching of a horse-cloth.

"Them was pleasant days, Master Jarge," he said, regretfully. He was thinking that the schoolboy had been more to him and nearer to him than the young surgeon could ever be. They had been children together, these two, and William had never grown weary of his childhood. He was left behind now that his companion had grown up, and the happy childish days were all over. There was a gigantic kite on a shelf in the back-kitchen; a kite that Mr. Jeffson had made with his own patient hands. George Gilbert would have laughed now if that kite had been mentioned to him; but William Jeffson would have been constant to the same boyish sports until his hair was grey, and would have never known weariness of spirit.

"You'll be marrying some fine lady, maybe now, Master Jarge," Mrs. Jeffson said; "and she'll look down upon our north-country ways, and turn us out of the old place where we've lived so long."

But George protested eagerly that, were he to marry the daughter of the Queen of England, which was not particularly likely, that royal lady should take kindly to his old servants, or should be no wife of his.

"When I marry, my wife must love the people I love," said, the surgeon, who entertained those superb theories upon the management of a wife which are peculiar to youthful bachelors.

George further informed his humble friends that he was not likely to enter the holy estate of matrimony for many years to come, as he had so far seen no one who at all approached his idea

of womanly perfection. He had very practical views upon this subject, and meant to wait patiently until some faultless young person came across his pathway; some neat-handed, church-going damsel, with tripping feet and smoothly-banded hair; some fair young sage, who had never been known to do a foolish act or say an idle word. Sometimes the image of Isabel Sleaford trembled faintly upon the magic mirror of the young man's reveries, and he wondered whether, under any combination of circumstances, she would ever arrive at this standard. Oh, no, it was impossible. He looked back to the drowsy summer-time, and saw her lolling in the garden-chair, with the shadows of the branches fluttering upon her tumbled muslin dress, and her black hair pushed anyhow away from the broad low brow.

"I hope that foolish Sigismund won't meet Miss Sleaford again," George thought, very gravely; "he might be silly enough to marry her, and I'm sure she'd never make a good wife for any man."

George Gilbert's father died in the autumn of '52; and early in the following spring the young man received a letter from his friend Mr. Smith. Sigismund wrote very discursively about his own prospects and schemes, and gave his friend a brief synopsis of the romance he had last begun. George skimmed lightly enough over this part of the letter; but as he turned the leaf by-and-by, he saw a name that brought the blood to his face. He was vexed with himself for that involuntary blush, and sorely puzzled to know why he should be so startled by the unexpected

sight of Isabel Sleaford's name.

"You made me promise to tell you anything that turned up about the Sleafords," Sigismund wrote. "You'll be very much surprised to hear that Miss Sleaford came to me the other day here in my chambers, and asked me if I could help her in any way to get her living. She wanted me to recommend her as a nursery-governess, or companion, or something of that kind, if I knew of any family in want of such a person. She was staying at Islington with a sister of her step-mother's, she told me; but she couldn't be a burthen on her any longer. Mrs. Sleaford and the boys have gone to live in Jersey, it seems, on account of things being cheap there; and I have no doubt that boy Horace will become an inveterate smoker. Poor Sleaford is dead. You'll be as much astounded as I was to hear this. Isabel did not tell me this at first; but I saw that she was dressed in black, and when I asked her about her father, she burst out crying, and sobbed as if heart would break. I should like to have ascertained what the poor fellow died of, and all about it, – for Sleaford was not an old man, and one of the most powerful-looking fellows I ever saw, – but I could not torture Izzie with questions while she was in such a state of grief and agitation. 'I'm very sorry you've lost your father, my dear Miss Sleaford,' I said: and she sobbed out something that I scarcely heard, and I got her some cold water to drink, and it was ever so long before she came round again and was able to talk to me. Well, I couldn't think of anybody that was likely to help her that day; but I took the address of her aunt's house at Islington,

and promised to call upon her there in a day or two. I wrote by that day's post to my mother, and asked her if she could help me; and she wrote back by return to tell me that my uncle, Charles Raymond, at Conventford, was in want of just such a person as Miss Sleaford (of course I had endowed Isabel with all the virtues under the sun), and if I really thought Miss S. would suit, and I could answer for the perfect respectability of her connections and antecedents, – it isn't to be supposed that I was going to say anything about that three quarters' rent, or that I should own that Isabel's antecedents were lolling in a garden-chair reading novels, or going on suspicious errands to the *jeweller* ('O my prophetic soul!' *et cetera*) in the Walworth Road, – why, I was to engage Miss S. at twenty pounds a year salary. I went up to Islington that very afternoon, although I was a number and a half behind with 'The Demon of the Galleys' ('The D. of the G.' is a sequel to 'The Brand upon the Shoulder-blade;' the proprietor of the 'Penny Parthenon' insisted upon having a sequel, and I had to bring Colonel Montefiasco to life again, after hurling him over a precipice three hundred feet high), – and the poor girl began to cry when I told her I'd found a home for her. I'm afraid she's had a great deal of trouble since the Sleafords left Camberwell; for she isn't at all the girl she was. Her step-mother's sister is a vulgar woman who lets lodgings, and there's only one servant – such a miserable slavey; and Isabel went to the door three times while I was there. You know my uncle Raymond, and you know what a dear jolly fellow he is; so you may guess the change will be a very

pleasant one for poor Izzie. By the bye, you might call and see her the first time you're in Conventford, and write me word how the poor child gets on. I thought she seemed a little frightened at the idea of going among strangers. I saw her off at Euston Square the day before yesterday. She went by the parliamentary train; and I put her in charge of a most respectable family going all the way through, with six children, and a birdcage, and a dog, and a pack of cards to play upon a tea-tray on account of the train being slow."

Mr. Gilbert read this part of his friend's letter three times over before he was able to realize the news contained in it. Mr. Sleaford dead, and Isabel settled as a nursery-governess at Conventford! If the winding Wayverne had overflowed its sedgy banks and flooded all Midlandshire, the young surgeon could have been scarcely more surprised than he was by the contents of his friend's letter. Isabel at Conventford – within eleven miles of Graybridge; within eleven miles of him at that moment, as he walked up and down the little room, with his hair tumbled all about his flushed good-looking face, and Sigismund's letter in his waistcoat!

What was it to him that Isabel Sleaford was so near? What was she to him, that he should think of her, or be fluttered by the thought that she was within his reach? What did he know of her? Only that she had eyes that were unlike any other eyes he had ever looked at; eyes that haunted his memory like strange stars seen in a feverish dream. He knew nothing of her but this: and that

she had a pretty, sentimental manner, a pensive softness in her voice, and sudden flights and capricious changes of expression that had filled his mind with wonder.

George went back to the kitchen and smoked another cigar in Mr. Jeffson's company. He went back to that apartment fully determined to waste no more of his thoughts upon Isabel Sleaford, who was in sober truth a frivolous, sentimental creature, eminently adapted to make any man miserable; but somehow or other, before the cigar was finished, George had told his earliest friend and confidant all about Mr. Sleaford's family, touching very lightly upon Isabel's attractions, and speaking of a visit to Conventford as a disagreeable duty that friendship imposed.

"Of course I shouldn't think of going all that way on purpose to see Miss Sleaford," he said, "though Sigismund seems to expect me to do so; but I must go to Conventford in the course of the week, to see about those drugs Johnson promised to get me. They won't make a very big parcel, and I can bring them home in my coat-pocket. You might trim Brown Molly's fetlocks, Jeff; she'll look all the better for it. I'll go on Thursday; and yet I don't know that I couldn't better spare the time to-morrow."

"To-morrow's market-day, Master Jarge. I was thinkin' of goin' t' Conventford mysen. I might bring t' droogs for thee, and thoo couldst write a noate askin' after t' young leddy," Mr. Jeffson remarked, thoughtfully.

George shook his head. "That would never do, Jeff," he said;

"Sigismund asks me to go and see her."

Mr. Jeffson relapsed into a thoughtful silence, out of which he emerged by-and-by with a slow chuckle.

"I reckon Miss Sleaford'll be a pretty girl," he remarked, thoughtfully, with rather a sly glance at his young master.

George Gilbert found it necessary to enter into an elaborate explanation upon this subject. No; Miss Sleaford was not pretty. She had no colour in her cheeks, and her nose was nothing particular, – not a beautiful queenlike hook, like that of Miss Harleystone, the belle of Graybridge, who was considered like the youthful members of the peerage, – and her mouth wasn't very small, and her forehead was low; and, in short, some people might think Miss Sleaford plain.

"But thoo doesn't, Master Jarge!" exclaimed Mr. Jeffson, clapping his hand upon his knee with an intolerable chuckle; "thoo thinkst summoat of her. I'll lay; and I'll trim Brown Molly's fetlocks till she looks as genteel as a thoroughbred."

"Thoo'rt an old fondy!" cried Mrs. Jeffson, looking up from her needlework. "It isn't one of these London lasses as'll make a good wife for Master Jarge; and he'd never be that soft as to go running after nursery-governesses at Conventford, when he might have Miss Burdock and all her money, and be one of the first gentlefolks in Graybridge."

"Hold thy noise, Tilly. Thou knowst nowt aboot it. Didn't I marry thee for loove, lass, when I might have had Sarah Peglock, as was only daughter to him as kept t' Red Lion in Belminster;

and didn't I come up to London, where thou wast in service, and take thee away from thy pleace; and wasn't Sarah a'most wild when she heard it? Master Jarge 'll marry for loove, or he'll never marry at all. Don't you remember her as wore the pink sash and shoes wi' sandals at the dancin' school, Master Jarge; and us takin' her a ploom-loaf, and a valentine, and sugar-sticks, and oranges, when you was home for th' holidays?"

Mr. Jeffson had been the confidant of all George's boyish love-affairs, the innocent Leporello of this young provincial Juan; and he was eager to be trusted with new secrets, and to have a finger once more in the sentimental pie. But nothing could be more stern than Mr. Gilbert's denial of any romantic fancy for Miss Sleaford.

"I should be very glad to befriend her in any way," he said gravely; "but she's the very last person in the world that I should ever dream of making my wife."

This young man discussed his matrimonial views with the calm grandiosity of manner with which man, the autocrat, talks of his humble slaves before he has tried his hand at governing them, – before he has received the fiery baptism of suffering, and learned by bitter experience that a perfect woman is not a creature to be found at every street-corner waiting meekly for her ruler.

CHAPTER VI.
TOO MUCH ALONE

Brown Molly's fetlocks were neatly trimmed by Mr. Jeffson's patient hands. I fancy the old mare would have gone long without a clipping, had it not been George's special pleasure that the animal should be smartened up before he rode her to Conventford. Clipping is not a very pleasant labour: but there is no task so difficult that William Jeffson would have shrunk from it, if its achievement could give George Gilbert happiness.

Brown Molly looked a magnificent creature when George came home, after a hurried round of professional visits, and found her saddled and bridled, at eleven o'clock, on the bright March morning which he had chosen for his journey to Conventford. But though, the mare was ready, and had been ready for a quarter of an hour, there was some slight delay while George ran up to his room, – the room which he had slept in from his earliest boyhood (there were some of his toys, dusty and forgotten, amongst the portmanteaus and hat-boxes at the top of the painted deal wardrobe), – and was for some little time engaged in changing his neckcloth, brushing his hair and hat, and making other little improvements in his personal appearance.

William Jeffson declared that his young master looked as if he was going straight off to be married, as he rode away out of the

stable-yard, with a bright eager smile upon his face and the spring breezes blowing amongst his hair. He looked the very incarnation of homely, healthy comeliness, the archetype of honest youth and simple English manhood, radiant with the fresh brightness of an unsullied nature, untainted by an evil memory, pure as a new-polished mirror on which no foul breath has ever rested.

He rode away to his fate, self-deluded, and happy in the idea that his journey was a wise blending of the duties of friendship and the cares of his surgery.

I do not think there can be a more beautiful road in all England than that between Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne and Conventford, and I can scarcely believe that in all England there is an uglier town than Conventford itself. I envy George Gilbert his long ride on that bright March morning, when the pale primroses glimmered among the underwood, and the odour of early violets mingled faintly with the air. The country roads were long avenues, which might have made the glory of a ducal park; and every here and there, between a gap in the budding hedge, a white-walled country villa or grave old red-brick mansion peeped out of some nook of rustic beauty, with shining windows winking in the noontide sun.

Midway between Graybridge and Conventford there is the village of Waverly; the straggling village street over whose quaint Elizabethan roofs the ruined towers of a grand old castle cast their protecting shadows. John of Gaunt was master and founder of the grandest of those old towers, and Henry the Eighth's

wonderful daughter has feasted in the great banqueting-hall, where the ivy hangs its natural garlands round the stone mullions of the Tudor window. The surgeon gave his steed a mouthful of hay and a drink of water before the Waverly Arms, and then sauntered at a foot-pace into the long unbroken arcade which stretches from the quiet village to the very outskirts of the bustling Conventford. George urged Brown Molly into a ponderous kind of canter by-and-by, and went at a dashing rate till he came to the little turnpike at the end of the avenue, and left fair Elizabethan Midlandshire behind him. Before him there was only the smoky, noisy, poverty-stricken town, with hideous factory chimneys blackening the air, and three tall spires rising from amongst the crowded roofs high up into the clearer sky.

Mr. Gilbert drew rein on the green, which was quiet enough to-day, though such an uproarious spot in fair-time; he drew rein, and began to wonder what he should do. Should he go to the chemist's in the market-place and get his drugs, and thence to Mr. Raymond's house, which was at the other end of the town, or rather on the outskirts of the country and beyond the town; or should he go first to Mr. Raymond's by quiet back lanes, which were clear of the bustle and riot of the market-people? To go to the chemist's first would be the wiser course, perhaps; but then it wouldn't be very agreeable to have drugs in his pocket, and to smell of rhubarb and camomile-flowers when he made his appearance before Miss Sleaford. After a good deal of deliberation, George decided on going by the back way to Mr.

Raymond's house; and then, as he rode along the lanes and back slums, he began to think that Mr. Raymond would wonder why he called, and would think his interest in the nursery-governess odd, or even intrusive; and from that a natural transition of thought brought him to wonder whether it would not be better to abandon all idea of seeing Miss Sleaford, and to content himself with the purchase of the drugs. While he was thinking of this, Brown Molly brought him into the lane at the end of which Mr. Raymond's house stood, on a gentle eminence, looking over a wide expanse of grassy fields, a railway cutting, and a white high-road, dotted here and there by little knots of stunted trees. The country upon this side of Conventford was bleak and bare of aspect as compared to that fair park-like region which I venture to call Elizabethan Midlandshire.

If Mr. Raymond had resembled other people, I dare say he would have been considerably surprised – or, it may be, outraged – by a young gentleman in the medical profession venturing to make a morning call upon his nursery-governess; but as Mr. Charles Raymond was the very opposite of everybody else in the world, and as he was a most faithful disciple of Mr. George Combe, and could discover by a glance at the surgeon's head that the young man was neither a profligate nor a scoundrel, he received George as cordially as it was his habit to receive every living creature who had need of his friendliness; and sent Brown Molly away to his stable, and set her master at his ease, before George had quite left off blushing in his first paroxysm

of shyness.

"Come into my room," cried Mr. Raymond, in a voice that had more vibration in it than any other voice that ever rang out upon the air; "come into my room. You've had a letter from Sigismund, – the idea of the absurd young dog calling himself Sigismund! – and he's told you all about Miss Sleaford. Very nice girl, but wants to be educated before she can teach; keeps the little ones amused, however, and takes them out in the meadows; a very nice, conscientious little thing; cautiousness very large; can't get anything out of her about her past life; turns pale and begins to cry when I ask her questions; has seen a good deal of trouble, I'm afraid. Never mind; we'll try and make her happy. What does her past life matter to us if her head's well balanced? Let me have my pick of the young people in Field Lane, and I'll find you an undeveloped Archbishop of Canterbury; take me into places where the crimes of mankind are only known by their names in the Decalogue, and I'll find you an embryo Greenacre. Miss Sleaford's a very good little girl; but she's got too much Wonder and exaggerated Ideality. She opens her big eyes when she talks of her favourite books, and looks up all scared and startled if you speak to her while she's reading."

Mr. Raymond's room was a comfortable little apartment, lined with books from the ceiling to the floor. There were books everywhere in Mr. Raymond's house; and the master of the house read at all manner of abnormal hours, and kept a candle burning by his bedside in the dead of the night, when every

other citizen of Conventford was asleep. He was a bachelor, and the children whom it was Miss Sleaford's duty to educate were a couple of sickly orphans, left by a pale-faced niece of Charles Raymond's, – an unhappy young lady, who seemed only born to be unfortunate, and who had married badly, and lost her husband, and died of consumption, running through all the troubles common to womankind before her twenty-fifth birthday. Of course Mr. Raymond took the children; he would have taken an accidental chimney-sweep's children, if it could have been demonstrated to him that there was no one else to take them. He buried the pale-faced niece in a quiet suburban cemetery, and took the orphans home to his pretty house at Conventford, and bought black frocks for them, and engaged Miss Sleaford for their education, and made less fuss about the transaction than many men would have done concerning the donation of a ten-pound note.

It was Charles Raymond's nature to help his fellow-creatures. He had been very rich once, the Conventford people said, in those far-off golden days when there were neither strikes nor starvation in the grim old town; and he had lost a great deal of money in the carrying out of sundry philanthropic schemes for the benefit of his fellow-creatures, and was comparatively poor in these latter days. But he was never so poor as to be unable to help other people, or to hold his hand when a mechanics' institution, or a working-men's club, or an evening-school, or a cooking-dépôt, was wanted for the benefit and improvement of Conventford.

And all this time, – while he was the moving spirit of half-a-dozen committees, while he distributed cast-off clothing, and coals, and tickets for soup, and orders for flannel, and debated the solemn question as to whether Betsy Scrubbs or Maria Tomkins was most in want of a wadded petticoat, or gave due investigation to the rival claims of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Green to the largess of the soup kitchen, – he was an author, a philosopher, a phrenologist, a metaphysician, writing grave books, and publishing them for the instruction of mankind. He was fifty years of age; but, except that his hair was grey, he had no single attribute of age. That grey hair framed the brightest face that ever smiled upon mankind, and with the liberal sunshine smiled alike on all. George Gilbert had seen Mr. Raymond several times before to-day. Everybody in Conventford, or within a certain radius of Conventford, knew Mr. Charles Raymond; and Mr. Charles Raymond knew everybody. He looked through the transparent screen which shrouded the young surgeon's thoughts: he looked down into the young man's heart, through depths that were as clear as limpid water, and saw nothing there but truth and purity. When I say that Mr. Raymond looked into George Gilbert's heart, I use a figure of speech, for it was from the outside of the surgeon's head he drew his deductions; but I like the old romantic fancy, that a good man's heart is a temple of courage, love, and piety – an earthly shrine of all the virtues.

Mr. Raymond's house was a pretty Gothic building, half villa, half cottage, with bay windows opening into a small

garden, which was very different from the garden at Camberwell, inasmuch as here all was trimly kept by an indefatigable gardener and factotum. Beyond the garden there were the meadows, only separated from Mr. Raymond's lawn by a low privet hedge; and beyond the meadows the roofs and chimneys of Conventford loomed darkly in the distance.

Charles Raymond took George into the drawing-room by-and-by, and from the bay window the young man saw Isabel Sleaford once more, as he had seen her first, in a garden. But the scene had a different aspect from that other scene, which still lingered in his mind, like a picture seen briefly in a crowded gallery. Instead of the pear-trees on the low disorderly grass-plat, the straggling branches green against the yellow sunshine of July, George saw a close-cropped lawn and trim flower-beds, stiff groups of laurel, amid bare bleak fields unsheltered from the chill March winds. Against the cold blue sky he saw Isabel's slight figure, not lolling in a garden-chair reading a novel, but walking primly with two pale-faced children dressed in black. A chill sense of pain crept through the surgeon's breast as he looked at the girlish figure, the pale joyless face, the sad dreaming eyes. He felt that some inexplicable change had come to Isabel Sleaford since that July day on which she had talked of her pet authors, and glowed and trembled with childish love for the dear books out of whose pages she took the joys and sorrows of her life.

The three pale faces, the three black dresses, had a desolate look in the cold sunlight. Mr. Raymond tapped at the glass, and

beckoned to the nursery-governess.

"Melancholy-looking objects, are they not?" he said to George, as the three girls came towards the window. "I've told my housekeeper to give them plenty of roast meat, not too much done; meat's the best antidote for melancholy."

He opened the window and admitted Isabel and her two pupils.

"Here's a friend come to see you, Miss Sleaford," he said; "a friend of Sigismund's; a gentleman who knew you in London."

George held out his hand, but he saw something like terror in the girl's face as she recognized him; and he fell straightway into a profound gulf of confusion and embarrassment.

"Sigismund asked me to call," he stammered. "Sigismund told me to write and tell him how you were."

Miss Sleaford's eyes filled with tears. The tears came unbidden to her eyes now with the smallest provocation.

"You are all very good to me," she said.

"There, you children, go out into the garden and walk about," cried Mr. Raymond. "You go with them, Gilbert, and then come in and have some stilton cheese and bottled beer, and tell us all about your Graybridge patients."

Mr. Gilbert obeyed his kindly host. He went out on to the lawn, where the brown shrubs were putting forth their feeble leaflets to be blighted by the chill air of March. He walked by Isabel's side, while the two orphans prowled mournfully here and there amongst the evergreens, and picked the lonely daisies that

had escaped the gardener's scythe. George and Isabel talked a little; but the young man was fain to confine himself to a few commonplace remarks about Conventford, and Mr. Raymond, and Miss Sleaford's new duties; for he saw that the least allusion to the old Camberwell life distressed and agitated her. There was not much that these two could talk about as yet. With Sigismund Smith, Isabel would have had plenty to say; indeed, it would have been a struggle between the two as to which should do all the talking; but in George Gilbert's company Isabel Sleaford's fancies folded themselves like delicate buds whose fragile petals are shrivelled by a bracing northern breeze. She knew that Mr. Gilbert was a good young man kindly disposed towards her, and, after his simple fashion, eager to please her; but she felt rather than knew that he did not understand her, and that in that cloudy region where her thoughts for ever dwelt he could never be her companion. So, after a little of that deliciously original conversation which forms the staple talk of a morning call amongst people who have never acquired the supreme accomplishment called small-talk, George and Isabel returned to the drawing-room, where Mr. Raymond was ready to preside over a banquet of bread-and-cheese and bottled ale; after which refection the surgeon's steed was brought to the door.

"Come and see us again, Gilbert, whenever you've a day in Conventford," Mr. Raymond said, as he shook hands with the surgeon.

George thanked him for his cordial invitation, but he rode

away from the house rather depressed in spirit, notwithstanding. How stupid he had been during that brief walk on Mr. Raymond's lawn; how little he had said to Isabel, or she to him! How dismally the conversation had died away into silence every now and then, only to be revived by some lame question, some miserable remark apropos to nothing, – the idiotic emanation of despair!

Mr. Gilbert rode to an inn near the market-place, where his father had been wont to take his dinner whenever he went to Conventford. George gave Brown Molly into the ostler's custody, and then walked away to the crowded pavement, where the country people were jostling each other in front of shop-windows and open stalls; the broad stony market-place, where the voices of the hawkers were loud and shrill, where the brazen boastings of quack-medicine vendors rang out upon the afternoon air. He walked through the crowd, and rambled away into a narrow back street leading to an old square, where the great church of Conventford stood amidst a stony waste of tombstones, and where the bells that played a hymn tune when they chimed the hour were booming up in the grand old steeple. The young man went into the stony churchyard, which was lonely enough even on a market-day, and walked about among the tombs, whiling away the time – for the benefit of Brown Molly, who required considerable rest and refreshment before she set out on the return journey – and thinking of Isabel Sleaford.

He had only seen her twice, and yet already her image had fastened itself with a fatal grip upon his mind, and was planted

there – an enduring picture, never again to be blotted out.

That evening at Camberwell had been the one romantic episode of this young man's eventless life; Isabel Sleaford the one stranger who had come across his pathway. There were pretty girls, and amiable girls, in Graybridge: but then he had known them all his life. Isabel came to him in her pale young beauty, and all the latent sentimentality – without which youth is hideous – kindled and thrilled into life at the magic spell of her presence. The mystic Venus rises a full-blown beauty from the sea, and man the captive bows down before his divine enslaver. Who would care for a Venus whose cradle he had rocked, whose gradual growth he had watched, the divinity of whose beauty had perished beneath the withering influence of familiarity?

It was dusk when George Gilbert went to the chemist and received his parcels of drugs. He would not stop to dine at the White Lion, but paid his eighteenpence for Brown Molly's accommodation, and took a hasty glass of ale at the bar before he sprang into the saddle. He rode homeward through the solemn avenue, the dusky cathedral aisle, the infinite temple, fashioned by the great architect Nature. He rode through the long ghostly avenue, until the twinkling lights at Waverly glimmered on him faintly between the bare branches of the trees.

Isabel Sleaford's new life was a very pleasant one. There was no butter to be fetched, no mysterious errands to the Walworth Road. Everything was bright and smooth and trim in Mr. Raymond's household. There was a middle-aged housekeeper

who reigned supreme, and an industrious maidservant under her sway. Isabel and her sickly charges had two cheerful rooms over the drawing-room, and took their meals together, and enjoyed the delight of one another's society all day long. The children were rather stupid, but they were very good. They too had known the sharp ills of poverty, the butter-fetching, the blank days in which there was no bright oasis of dinner, the scraps of cold meat and melancholy cups of tea. They told Isabel their troubles of an evening; how poor mamma had cried when the sheriff's officer came in, and said he was very sorry for her, but must take an inventory, and wouldn't leave even papa's picture or the silver spoons that had been grandmamma's. Miss Sleaford put her shoulder to the wheel very honestly, and went through Pinnock's pleasant abridgments of modern and ancient history with her patient pupils. She let them off with a very slight dose of the Heptarchy and the Normans, and even the early Plantagenet monarchs; but she gave them plenty of Anne Boleyn and Mary Queen of Scots, – fair Princess Mary, Queen of France, and wife of Thomas Brandon, – Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday.

The children only said "Lor'!" when they heard of Mademoiselle Corday's heroic adventure; but they were very much interested in the fate of the young princes of the House of York, and amused themselves by a representation of the smothering business with the pillows on the school-room sofa.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Charles Raymond, who had all the interests of Conventford to claim his attention, could give

much time or trouble to the two pupils or the nursery-governess. He was quite satisfied with Miss Sleaford's head, and was content to entrust his orphan nieces to her care.

"If they were clever children, I should be afraid of her exaggerated ideality," he said; "but they're too stupid to be damaged by any influence of that kind. She's got a very decent moral region – not equal to that young doctor at Graybridge, certainly – and she'll do her duty to the little ones very well, I dare say."

So no one interfered with Isabel or her pupils. The education of association, which would have been invaluable to her, was as much wanting at Conventford as it had been at Camberwell. She lived alone with her books and the dreams which were born of them, and waited for the prince, the Ernest Maltravers, the Henry Esmond, the Steerforth – it was Steerforth's proud image, and not simple-hearted David's gentle shadow, which lingered in the girl's mind when she shut the book. She was young and sentimental, and it was not the good people upon whom her fancy fixed itself. To be handsome and proud and miserable, was to possess an indisputable claim to Miss Sleaford's worship. She sighed to sit at the feet of a Byron, grand and gloomy and discontented, baring his white brow to the midnight blast, and raving against the baseness and ingratitude of mankind. She pined to be the chosen slave of some scornful creature, who should perhaps ill-treat and neglect her. I think she would have worshipped an aristocratic Bill Sykes, and would have

been content to die under his cruel hand, only in the ruined chamber of some Gothic castle, by moonlight, with the distant Alps shimmering whitely before her glazing eyes, instead of in poor Nancy's unromantic garret. And then the Count Guilliaume de Syques would be sorry, and put up a wooden cross on the mountain pathway, to the memory of – , ÂNÁTKH; and he would be found some morning stretched at the foot of that mysterious memorial, with a long black mantle trailing over his king-like form, and an important blood-vessel broken.

There is no dream so foolish, there is no fancy however childish, that did not find a lodgment in Isabel Sleaford's mind during the long idle evenings in which she sat alone in her quiet school-room, watching the stars kindle faintly in the dusk, and the darkening shadows gathering in the meadows, while feeble lights began to twinkle in the distant streets of Conventford. Sometimes, when her pupils were fast asleep in their white-curtained beds, Izzie stole softly down, and went out into the garden to walk up and down in the fair moonlight; the beautiful moonlight in which Juliet had looked more lovely than the light of day to Romeo's enraptured eyes; in which Hamlet had trembled before his father's ghostly face. She walked up and down in the moonlight, and thought of all her dreams; and wondered when her life was going to begin. She was getting quite old; yes – she thought of it with a thrill of horror – she was nearly eighteen! Juliet was buried in the tomb of the Capulets before this age, and haughty Beatrix had lived her life, and Florence Dombey was

married and settled, and the story all over.

A dull despair crept over this foolish girl as she thought that perhaps her life was to be only a commonplace kind of existence, after all; a blank flat level, along which she was to creep to a nameless grave. She was so eager to be *something*. Oh, why was not there a revolution, that she might take a knife in her hand and go forth to seek the tyrant in his lodging, and then die; so that people might talk of her, and remember her name when she was dead?

I think Isabel Sleaford was just in that frame of mind in which a respectable, and otherwise harmless, young person aims a bullet at some virtuous sovereign, in a paroxysm of insensate yearning for distinction. Miss Sleaford wanted to be famous. She wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear.

Vague, and grand, and shadowy, there floated before her the image of the prince; but, oh, how slow he was to come! Would he ever come? Were there any princes in the world? Were there any of those Beings whose manners and customs her books described to her, but whose mortal semblances she had never seen? The Sleeping Beauty in the woods slumbered a century before the appointed hero came to awaken her. Beauty must wait, and wait patiently, for the coming of her fate. But poor Isabel thought she had waited so long, and as yet there was not even the distant shimmer of the prince's plumes dimly visible on the horizon.

There were reasons why Isabel Sleaford should shut away the memory of her past life, and solace herself with visions of a

brighter existence. A little wholesome drudgery might have been good for her, as a homely antidote against the sentimentalism of her nature; but in Mr. Raymond's house she had ample leisure to sit dreaming over her books, weaving wonderful romances in which she was to be the heroine, and the hero – ?

The hero was the veriest chameleon, inasmuch as he took his colour from the last book Miss Sleaford had been reading. Sometimes he was Ernest Maltravers, the exquisite young aristocrat, with violet eyes and silken hair. Sometimes he was Eugene Aram, dark, gloomy, and intellectual, with that awkward little matter of Mr. Clarke's murder preying upon his mind. At another time he was Steerforth, selfish and haughty and elegant, Sometimes, when the orphans were asleep. Miss Sleaford let down her long black hair before the little looking-glass, and acted to herself in a whisper. She saw her pale face, awful in the dusky glass, her lifted arms, her great black eyes, and she fancied herself dominating a terror-stricken pit. Sometimes she thought of leaving friendly Mr. Raymond, and going up to London with a five-pound note in her pocket, and coming out at one of the theatres as a tragic actress. She would go to the manager, and tell him that she wanted to act. There might be a little difficulty at first, perhaps, and he would be rather inclined to be doubtful of her powers; but then she would take off her bonnet, and let down her hair, and would draw the long tresses wildly through her thin white fingers – so; she stopped to look at herself in the glass as she did it, – and would cry, "I am not mad; this

hair I tear is mine!" and the thing would be done. The manager would exclaim, "Indeed, my dear young lady, I was not prepared for such acting as this. Excuse my emotion; but really, since the days of Miss O'Neil, I don't remember to have witnessed anything to equal your delivery of that speech. Come to-morrow evening and play Constance. You don't want a rehearsal? – no, of course not; you know every syllable of the part. I shall take the liberty of offering you fifty pounds a night to begin with, and I shall place one of my carriages at your disposal." Isabel had read a good many novels in which timid young heroines essay their histrionic powers, but she had never read of a dramatically-disposed heroine who had not burst forth a full-blown Mrs. Siddons without so much as the ordeal of a rehearsal.

Sometimes Miss Sleaford thought that her Destiny – she clung to the idea that she had a destiny – designed her to be a poet, an L.E.L.; oh, above all she would have chosen to be L.E.L.; and in the evening, when she had looked over the children's copy-books, and practised a new style of capital B, in order to infuse a dash of variety into the next day's studies, she drew the candles nearer to her, and posed herself, and dipped her pen into the ink, and began to pour forth some melancholy plaint upon the lonely blankness of her life, or some vague invocation of the unknown prince. She rarely finished either the plaint or the invocation, for there was generally some rhythmical difficulty that brought her poetic musings to a dead lock; but she began a great many verses, and spoiled several quires of paper with

abortive sonnets, in which "stars" and "streamlets," "dreams" and "fountains," recurred with a frequency which was inimical to originality or variety of style.

The poor lonely untaught child looked right and left for some anchorage on the blank sea of life, and could find nothing but floating masses of ocean verdure, that drifted her here and there at the wild will of all the winds of heaven. Behind her there was a past that she dared not look back upon or remember; before her lay the unknown future, wrapped in mysterious shadow, grand by reason of its obscurity. She was eager to push onward, to pierce the solemn veil, to tear aside the misty curtain, to penetrate the innermost chamber of the temple.

Late in the night, when the lights of Conventford had died out under the starlit sky, the girl lay awake, sometimes looking up at those mystical stars, and thinking of the future; but never once, in any dream or reverie, in any fantastic vision built out of the stories she loved, did the homely image of the Graybridge surgeon find a place.

George Gilbert thought of her, and wondered about her, as he rode Brown Molly in the winding Midlandshire lanes, where the brown hedge-rows were budding, and the whitethorn bursting into blossom. He thought of her by day and by night, and was angry with himself for so thinking; and then began straightway to consider when he could, with any show of grace, present himself once more before Mr. Raymond's Gothic porch at Conventford.

CHAPTER VII.
ON THE BRIDGE

While George Gilbert was thinking of Isabel Sleaford's pale face and black eyes; while, in his long rides to and fro among the cottages of his parish patients, he solemnly debated as to whether he ought to call upon Mr. Raymond when next he went to Conventford, or whether he ought to go to Conventford for the express purpose of paying his respects to Mr. Raymond, – the hand of Fate turned the wavering balance; and the makeweight which she threw into the scale was no heavier than the ordinary half-ounce of original composition which Government undertakes to convey, not exactly from Indus to the Pole, but from the Land's End to the Highlands, for the small charge of a penny. While George Gilbert hesitated and doubted, and argued and debated with himself, after the manner of every prudent home-bred young man who begins to think that he loves well, and sadly fears that he may not love wisely, – Destiny, under the form of a friend, gave him a push, and he went souse over head and ears into the roaring ocean, and there was nothing left for him but to swim as best he might towards the undiscovered shore upon the other side.

The letter from Sigismund was dated Oakbank, Conventford, May 23rd, 1853.

"Dear George," wrote the author of "The Brand upon the Shoulder-blade," "I'm down here for a few days with my uncle Charles; and we've arranged a picnic in Lord Hurstonleigh's grounds, and we want you to join us. So, if your patients are not the most troublesome people in the world, you can give yourself a holiday, and meet us on Wednesday morning, at twelve, if fine, at the Waverly Road lodge-gate to Hurstonleigh Park. Mrs. Pidgers – Pidgers is my uncle's housekeeper; a regular old dear, and *such* a hand at pie-crusts! – is going to pack up a basket, – and I know what Pidgers's baskets are, – and we shall bring plenty of sparkling, because, when my uncle does this sort of thing, he *does* do it; and we're to drink tea at one of Lord Hurstonleigh's model cottages, in his model village, with a model old woman, who's had all manner of prizes for the tidiest dust-holes, and the whitest hearth-stones, and the neatest knife-boards, and all that kind of thing; and we're going to make a regular holiday of it; and I shall forget that there's such a creature as 'the Demon of the Galleys' in the world, and that I'm a number behind with him, – which I am, – and the artist is waiting for a subject for his next cut.

"The orphans are coming, of course, and Miss Sleaford; and, oh, by the bye, *I* want you to tell me all about poisoning by strychnine, because I think I shall do a case or two in 'The D. of the G.'

"Twelve o'clock, sharp time, remember! We come in a fly. You can leave your horse at Waverly. – Yours, S.S."

Yes; Fate, impatient perhaps of any wavering of the balance

in so insignificant a matter as George Gilbert's destiny, threw this penny-post letter into the scale, and, lo! it was turned. The young man read the letter over and over again, till it was crumpled and soiled with much unfolding and refolding, and taking out of, and putting back into, his waistcoat-pocket. A picnic! a picnic in the Hurstonleigh grounds, with Isabel Sleaford! Other people were to be of the party; but George Gilbert scarcely remembered that. He saw himself, with Isabel by his side, wandering along the winding pathways, straying away into mysterious arcades of verdure, where the low branches of the trees would meet above their heads, and shut them in from all the world. He fancied himself talking to Mr. Sleaford's daughter as he never had talked, nor was ever likely to talk, with any voice audible to mortal ears; he laid out and arranged that day as we are apt to arrange the days that are to come, and which – Heaven help our folly and presumption! – are so different when they do come from the dreams we have dreamed about them. Mr. Gilbert lived that May holiday over and over again between the Monday afternoon on which he received Sigismund's letter, and the appointed Wednesday morning. He lay awake at night, when his day's work was done, thinking of Isabel, and what she would say to him, and how she would look at him, until those fancied words and looks thrilled him to the heart's core, and he was deluded by the thought that it was all a settled thing, and that his love was returned. His love! Did he love her, then, already – this pale-faced young person, whom he had only seen

twice; who might be a Florence Nightingale, or a Madame de Laffarge, for all that he knew either one way or the other? Yes, he loved her; the wondrous flower that never yet "thrived by the calendar" had burst into full bloom. He loved this young woman, and believed in her, and was ready to bring her to his simple home whenever she pleased to come thither; and had already pictured her sitting opposite to him in the little parlour, making weak tea for him in a Britannia-metal teapot, sewing commonplace buttons upon his commonplace shirts, debating with Mrs. Jeffson as to whether there should be roast beef or boiled mutton for the two o'clock dinner, sitting up alone in that most uninteresting little parlour when the surgeon's patients were tiresome and insisted upon being ill in the night, waiting to preside over little suppers of cold meat and pickles, bread-and-cheese and celery. Yes; George pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a domestic story as this, and had no power to divine that there was any incongruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the heroine and the story. Alas, poor Izzie! and are all your fancies, all the pretty stories woven out of your novels, all your long day-dreams about Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday, Edith Dombey and Ernest Maltravers, – all your foolish pictures of a modern Byron, fever-stricken at Missolonghi, and tended by you; a new Napoleon, exiled to St. Helena, and followed, perhaps liberated, by you, – are they all come to this? Are none of the wonderful things that happen to women ever to happen to you? Are you

never to be Charlotte Corday, and die for your country? Are you never to wear ruby velvet, and diamonds in your hair, and to lure some recreant Carker to a foreign hostelry, and there denounce and scorn him? Are all the pages of the great book of life to be closed upon you – you, who seem to yourself predestined, by reason of so many dreams and fancies, to such a wonderful existence? Is all the mystic cloudland of your dreams to collapse and shrivel into this, – a commonplace square-built cottage at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, with a commonplace country surgeon for your husband?

George Gilbert was waiting at the low white gate before the ivy-coloured lodge on the Waverly Road when the fly from Conventford drove up, with Sigismund Smith sitting beside the coachman, and questioning him about a murder that had been committed in the neighbourhood ten years before; and Mr. Raymond, Miss Sleaford, and the orphans inside. The surgeon had been waiting at the gate for a quarter of an hour, and he had been up ever since six o'clock that morning, riding backwards and forwards amongst his patients, doing a day's work in a few hours. He had been home to dress, of course, and wore his newest and most fashionable clothes, and was, in fact, a living realization of one of the figures in a fly-blown fashion-plate for June 1852, still exhibited in the window of a Graybridge tailor. He wore a monthly rosebud in his button-hole, and he carried a bunch of spring flowers, – jonquils and polyanthuses, pink hawthorn, peonies, and sweet-brier, – which Mr. Jeffson had gathered and

tied up, with a view to their presentation to Isabel, – although there were better flowers in Mr. Raymond's garden, as George reminded his faithful steward.

"Don't thee tew thyself about that, Master Jarge," said the Yorkshireman; "th' young wench 'll like the flowers if thoo givest 'em til her."

Of course it never for a moment entered into Mr Jeffson's mind that his young master's attentions could be otherwise than welcome and agreeable to any woman living, least of all to a forlorn young damsel who was obliged to earn her bread amongst strangers.

"I'd like to see Miss Sleaford, Master Jarge," Mr. Jeffson said, in an insinuating manner, as George gathered up the reins and patted Brown Molly's neck, preparatory to riding away from the low white gate of his domain.

George blushed like the peonies that formed the centre of his nosegay.

"I don't know why you should want to see Miss Sleaford any more than other girls, Jeff," he said.

"Well, never you mind why, Master Jarge; I *should* like to see her; I'd give a deal to see her."

"Then we'll try and manage it, Jeff. We're to drink tea at Hurstonleigh; and we shall be leaving there, I suppose, as soon as it's dark – between seven and eight o'clock, I dare say. You might ride the grey pony to Waverly, and bring Brown Molly on to Hurstonleigh, and stop at the alehouse – there's an alehouse,

you know, though it *is* a model village – until I'm ready to come home; and you can leave the horses with the ostler, you know, and stroll about the village, – and you're sure to find us."

"Yes, yes, Master Jarge; I'll manage it."

So George was at his post a quarter of an hour before the fly drove up to the gate. He was there to open the door of the vehicle, and to give his hand to Isabel when she alighted. He felt the touch of her fingers resting briefly on his arm, and trembled and blushed like a girl as he met the indifferent gaze of her great black eyes. Nobody took any notice of his embarrassment. Mr. Raymond and his nephew were busy with the hampers that had been stowed under the seats of the fly, and the orphans were employed in watching their elders, – for to them the very cream of the picnic was in those baskets.

There was a boy at the lodge who was ready to take the basket whithersoever Mr. Raymond should direct; so all was settled very quickly. The driver received his instructions respecting the return journey, and went rumbling off to Hurstonleigh to refresh himself and his horse. The lad went on before the little party, with the baskets swinging on either side of him as he went; and in the bustle of these small arrangements George Gilbert found courage to offer Isabel his arm. She took it without hesitation, and Sigismund placed himself on the other side of her. Mr. Raymond went on before with the orphans, who affected the neighbourhood of the baskets; and the three young people followed, walking slowly over the grass.

Isabel had put off her mourning. She had never had but one black dress, poor child; and that being worn out, she was fain to fall back upon her ordinary costume. If she had looked pretty in the garden at Camberwell, with tumbled hair and a dingy dress, she looked beautiful to-day, in clean muslin, fresh and crisp, fluttering in the spring breezes as she walked, and with her hair smoothly banded under a broad-leaved straw hat. Her face brightened with the brightness of the sunshine and the charm of the landscape; her step grew light and buoyant as she walked upon the springing turf. Her eyes lit up by-and-by, when the little party came to a low iron gate, beyond which there was a grove, a winding woodland patch, and undulating glades, and craggy banks half hidden under foliage, and, in a deep cleft below, a brawling waterfall for ever rushing over moss-grown rockwork, and winding far away to meet the river.

"Oh, how beautiful it is!" cried Isabel; "how beautiful!"

She was a Cockney, poor child, and had spent the best part of her life amidst the suburban districts of Camberwell and Peckham. All this Midlandshire beauty burst upon her like a sudden revelation of Paradise. Could the Garden of Eden have been more beautiful than this woodland grove? – where the ground was purple with wild hyacinths that grew under beeches and oaks centuries old; where the sunlight and shadows flickered on the mossy pathways; where the guttural warble of the blackbirds made perpetual music in the air. George looked wonderingly at the girl's rapt countenance, her parted lips, that

were faintly tremulous with the force of her emotion.

"I did not think there could be any place in England so beautiful," she said by-and-by, when George disturbed her with some trite remark upon the scene. "I thought it was only in Italy and in Greece, and those sort of places – where Childe Harold went – that it was beautiful like this. It makes one feel as if one could never go back to the world again, doesn't it?" she asked naïvely.

George was fain to confess that, although the grove was very beautiful, it inspired him with no desire to turn hermit, and take up his abode therein. But Isabel hardly heard what he said to her. She was looking away into mysterious vistas of light and shadow, and thinking that in such a spot as this the hero of a woman's life might appear in all his shining glory. If she could meet him now, this wonderful unknown being – the Childe Harold, the Lara, of her life! What if it was to be so? what if she was to meet him now, and the story was appointed to begin to-day, – this very day, – and all her life henceforth was to be changed? The day was like the beginning of a story, somehow, inasmuch as it was unlike the other days of her life. She had thought of the holiday, and dreamt about it even more foolishly than George had done; for there had been some foundation for the young man's visions, while hers had been altogether baseless. What if Lord Hurstonleigh should happen to be strolling in his grove, and should see her and rescue her from death by drowning, or a mad bull, or something of that sort, and thereupon fall in love with her? Nothing was more life-

like or likely, according to Izzie's experience of three-volume novels. Unhappily she discovered from Mr. Raymond that Lord Hurstonleigh was an elderly married man, and was, moreover, resident in the south of France; so *that* bright dream was speedily shattered. But there is no point of the compass from which a hero may not come. There was hope yet; there was hope that this bright spring-day might not close as so many days had closed upon the same dull record, the same empty page.

Mr. Raymond was in his highest spirits to-day. He liked to be with young people, and was younger than the youngest of them in his fresh enjoyment of all that is bright and beautiful upon earth. He devoted himself chiefly to the society of his orphan *protégées*, and contrived to impart a good deal of information to them in a pleasant easy-going manner, that took the bitterness out of those Pierian waters, for which the orphans had very small affection. They were stupid and unimpressionable; but, then, were they not the children of that unhappy consumptive niece of his, who had acquired, by reason of her many troubles, a kind of divine right to become a burden upon happy people?

"If she had left me such an orphan as that girl Isabel, I would have thanked her kindly for dying," Mr. Raymond mused "That girl has mental imitation, – the highest and rarest faculty of the human brain, – ideality, and comparison. What could I not make of such a girl as that? And yet – "

Mr. Raymond only finished the sentence with a sigh. He was thinking that, after all, these bright faculties might not be the best

gifts for a woman. It would have been better, perhaps, for Isabel to have possessed the organ of pudding-making and stocking-darning, if those useful accomplishments are represented by an organ. The kindly phrenologist was thinking that perhaps the highest fate life held for that pale girl with the yellow tinge in her eyes was to share the home of a simple-hearted country surgeon, and rear his children to be honest men and virtuous women.

"I suppose that *is* the best," Mr. Raymond said to himself.

He had dismissed the orphans now, and had sent them on to walk with Sigismund Smith, who kindly related to them the story of "Lilian the Deserted," with such suppressions and emendations as rendered the romance suitable to their tender years. The philosopher of Conventford had got rid of the orphans, and was strolling by himself in those delicious glades, swinging his stick as he went, and throwing up his head every now and then to scent all the freshness of the warm spring air.

"Poor little orphan child!" he mused, "will anybody ever fathom her fancies or understand her dreams? Will she marry that good, sheepish country surgeon, who has fallen in love with her? He can give her a home and a shelter; and she seems such a poor friendless little creature, just the sort of girl to get into some kind of mischief if she were left to herself. Perhaps it's about the best thing that could happen to her. I should like to have fancied a brighter fate for her, a life with more colour in it. She's so pretty —*so* pretty; and when she talks, and her face lights up, a sort of picture comes into my mind of what she would

be in a great saloon, with clusters of lights about her, and masses of shimmering colour, making a gorgeous background for her pale young beauty; and brilliant men and women clustering round her, to hear her talk and see her smile. I can see her like this; and then, when I remember what her life is likely to be, I begin to feel sorry for her, just as if she were some fair young nun, foredoomed to be buried alive by-and-by. Sometimes I have had a fancy that if *he* were to come home and see her – but that's an old busybody's dream. When did a matchmaker ever create anything but matrimonial confusion and misery? I dare say Beatrice kept her word, and *did* make Benedick wretched. No; Miss Sleaford must marry whom she may, and be happy or miserable, according to the doctrine of averages; and as for *him*– "

Mr. Raymond stopped; and seeing the rest of the party happily engaged in gathering hyacinths under the low branches of the trees, he seated himself upon a clump of fallen timber, and took a book out of his pocket. It was a book that had been sent by post, for the paper wrapper was still about it. It was a neat little volume, bound in glistening green cloth, with uncut edges, and the gilt-letter title on the back of the volume set forth that the book contained "An Alien's Dreams." An alien's dreams could be nothing but poetry; and as the name of the poet was not printed under the title, it was perhaps only natural that Mr. Raymond should, not open the book immediately, but should sit turning and twisting the volume about in his hands, and looking at it with

a contemptuous expression of countenance.

"An alien!" he exclaimed; "why, in the name of all the affectations of the present day, should a young man with fifteen thousand a year, and one of the finest estates in Midlandshire, call himself an alien? 'An Alien's Dreams' – and such dreams! I had a look at them this morning, without cutting the leaves. It's always a mistake to cut the leaves of young people's poetry. Such dreams! Surely no alien could have been afflicted with anything like them, unless he was perpetually eating heavy suppers of underdone pork, or drinking bad wine, or neglecting the ventilation of his bedroom. Imperfect ventilation has a good deal to do with it, I dare say. To think that Roland Lansdell should write such stuff – such a clever young man as he is, too – such a generous-hearted, high-minded young fellow, who might be – "

Mr. Raymond opened the volume in a very gingerly fashion, almost as if he expected something unpleasant might crawl out of it, and looked in a sideways manner between the leaves, muttering the first line or so of a poem, and then skipping on to another, and giving utterance to every species of contemptuous ejaculation between whiles.

"Imogen!" he exclaimed; "'To Imogen!' As if anybody was ever called Imogen out of Shakespeare's play and Monk Lewis's ballad! 'To Imogen:'

> 'Do you ever think of me, proud and cruel Imogen,
> As I think, ah! sadly think, of thee —

When the shadows darken on the misty lea, Imogen,
And the low light dies behind the sea?'

'Broken!' 'Shattered!' 'Blighted!' Lively titles to tempt the general reader! Here's a nice sort of thing:

'Like an actor in a play,
Like a phantom in a dream,
Like a lost boat left to stray
Rudderless adown the stream, —
This is what my life has grown, Ida Lee,
Since thy false heart left me lone, Ida Lee.
And I wonder sometimes when the laugh is loud,
And I wonder at the faces of the crowd,
And the strange fantastic measures that they tread,
Till I think at last I must be dead —
Till I half believe that I am dead.'

And to think that Roland Lansdell should waste his time in writing this sort of thing! And here's his letter, poor boy! – his long rambling letter, – in which he tells me how he wrote the verses, and how writing them was a kind of consolation to him, a safety-valve for so much passionate anger against a world that doesn't exactly harmonize with the Utopian fancies of a young man with fifteen thousand a year and nothing to do. If some rightful heir would turn up, in the person of one of Roland's gamekeepers, now, and denounce my young friend as a wrongful heir, and turn him out of doors bag and baggage,

and with very little bag and baggage, after the manner of those delightful melodramas which hold the mirror up to nature so exactly, what a blessing it would be for the author of 'An Alien's Dreams!' If he could only find himself without a sixpence in the world, what a noble young soldier in the great battle of life, what a triumphant hero, he might be! But as it is, he is nothing better than a colonel of militia, with a fine uniform, and a long sword that is only meant for show. My poor Roland! my poor Roland!" Mr. Raymond murmured sadly, as he dropped the little volume back into his pocket; "I am so sorry that you too should be infected with the noxious disease of our time, the fatal cynicism that transforms youth into a malady for which age is the only cure."

But he had no time to waste upon any regretful musings about Mr Roland Lansdell, sole master of Lansdell Priory, one of the finest seats in Midlandshire, and who was just now wandering somewhere in Greece, upon a Byronic kind of tour that had lasted upwards of six months, and was likely to last much longer.

It was nearly three o'clock now, and high time for the opening of the hampers, Mr. Raymond declared, when he rejoined the rest of the party, much to the delight of the orphans, who were always hungry, and who ate so much, and yet remained so pale and skeleton-like of aspect, that they presented a pair of perpetual phenomena to the eye of the physiologist. The baskets had been carried to a little ivy-sheltered arbour, perched high above the waterfall; and here Mr. Raymond unpacked them,

bringing out his treasures one after another; first a tongue, then a pair of fowls, a packet of anchovy sandwiches, a great poundcake (at sight of which the eyes of the orphans glistened), delicate caprices in the way of pastry, semi-transparent biscuits, and a little block of Stilton cheese, to say nothing of sundry bottles of Madeira and sparkling Burgundy.

Perhaps there never was a merrier party. To eat cold chicken and drink sparkling Burgundy in the open air on a bright May afternoon is always an exhilarating kind of thing, though the scene of your picnic may be the bleakest of the Sussex Downs, or the dreariest of the Yorkshire Wolds; but to drink the sparkling wine in that little arbour of Hurstonleigh, with the brawling of the waterfall keeping time to your laughter, the shadows of patriarchal oaks sheltering you from all the outer world, is the very acme of bliss in the way of a picnic. And then Mr. Raymond's companions were so young! It was so easy for them to leave all the Past on the threshold of that lovely grove, and to narrow their lives into the life of that one bright day. Even Isabel forgot that she had a Destiny, and consented to be happy in a simple girlish way, without a thought of the prince who was so long coming.

It may be that the sparkling Burgundy had something to do with George Gilbert's enthusiasm; but, by and bye, after the débris of the dinner had been cleared away, and the little party lingered round the rustic table, talking with that expansion of thought and eloquence of language which is so apt to result from

the consumption of effervescing wines in the open air, the young surgeon thought that all the earth could scarcely hold a more lovely creature than the girl who sat opposite to him, with her head resting against the rustic wood-work of the arbour, and her hat lying on her knee. She did not say very much, in comparison with Sigismund and Mr. Raymond, who were neither of them indifferent hands at talking; but when she spoke, there was generally something vague and dreamy in her words, – something that set George wondering about her anew, and made him admire her more than ever. He forgot all the dictates of prudence now; he was false to all the grand doctrines of young manhood; he only remembered that Isabel Sleaford was the loveliest creature upon earth; he only knew that he loved her, and that his love, like all true love, was mingled with modest doubtfulness of his own merits, and exaggerated deference for hers. He loved her as purely and truly as if he had been able to express his passion in the noblest poem ever written; but not being able to express it, his love and himself seemed alike tame and commonplace.

I must not dwell too long on this picnic, though it seemed half a lifetime to George Gilbert, for he walked with Isabel through the lanes between Hurstonleigh grove and Hurstonleigh village, and he loitered with her in the little churchyard at Hurstonleigh, and stood upon the bridge beneath which the Wayverne crept like a riband of silver, winding in and out among the rushes. He lingered there by her side while the orphans and Sigismund and Mr. Raymond were getting tea ready at the model

cottage, and putting the model old woman's wits into such a state of "flustrification," as she herself expressed it, that she could scarcely hold the tea-kettle, and was in imminent peril of breaking one of her best "chaney" saucers, produced from a corner cupboard in honour of her friend and patron, Charles Raymond.

George loitered on the little stone bridge with Isabel, and somehow or other, still emboldened by the sparkling Burgundy, his passion all of a sudden found a voice, and he told her that he loved her, and that his highest hope upon earth was the hope of winning her for his wife.

I suppose that simple little story must be a pretty story, in its way; for when a woman hears it for the first time, she is apt to feel kindly disposed to the person who recites it, however poorly or tamely he may tell his tale. Isabel listened with a most delightful complacency; not because she reciprocated George's affection for her, but because this was the first little bit of romance in her life, and she felt that the story was beginning all at once, and that she was going to be a heroine. She felt this; and with this a kind of grateful liking for the young man at her side, through whose agency all these pleasant feelings came to her.

And all this time George was pleading with her, and arguing, from her blushes and her silence, that his suit was not hopeless. Emboldened by the girl's tacit encouragement, he grew more and more eloquent, and went on to tell her how he had loved her from the first; yes, from that first summer's afternoon – when he had

seen her sitting under the pear-trees in the old-fashioned garden, with the low yellow light behind her.

"Of course I didn't know then that I loved you, Isabel – oh, may I call you Isabel? it is such a pretty name. I have written it over and over and over on the leaves of a blotting-book at home, very often without knowing that I was writing it. I only thought at first that I admired you, because you are so beautiful, and so different from other beautiful women; and then, when I was always thinking of you, and wondering about you, I wouldn't believe that it was because I loved you. It is only to-day – this dear, happy day – that has made me understand what I have felt all along; and now I know that I have loved you from the first, Isabel, dear Isabel, from the very first."

All this was quite as it should be. Isabel's heart fluttered like the wings of a young bird that essays its first flight.

"This is what it is to be a heroine," she thought, as she looked down at the coloured pebbles, the floating river weeds, under the clear rippling water; and yet knew all the time, by virtue of feminine second-sight, that George Gilbert was gazing at her and adoring her. She didn't like *him*, but she liked him to be there talking to her. The words she heard for the first time were delightful to her because of their novelty, but they took no charm from the lips that spoke them. Any other good-looking, respectably-dressed young man would have been quite as much to her as George Gilbert was. But then she did not know this. It was so very easy for her to mistake her pleasure in the "situation;"

the rustic bridge, the rippling water, the bright spring twilight, even the faint influence of that one glass of sparkling Burgundy, and, above all, the sensation of being a heroine for the first time in her life – it was so terribly easy to mistake all these for that which she did not feel, – a regard for George Gilbert.

While the young man was still pleading, while she was still listening to him, and blushing and glancing shyly at him out of those wonderful tawny-coloured eyes, which seemed black just now under the shadow of their drooping lashes, Sigismund and the orphans appeared at the distant gate of the churchyard whooping and hallooing, to announce that the tea was all ready.

"Oh, Isabel!" cried George, "they are coming, and it maybe ever so long before I see you again alone. Isabel, dear Isabel! do tell me that you will make me happy – tell me that you will be my wife!"

He did not ask her if she loved him; he was too much in love with her – too entirely impressed with her grace and beauty, and his own inferiority – to tempt his fate by such a question. If she would marry him, and let him love her, and by-and-by reward his devotion by loving him a little, surely that would be enough to satisfy his most presumptuous wishes.

"Dear Isabel, you will marry me, won't you? You can't mean to say no, – you would have said it before now. You would not be so cruel as to let me hope, even for a minute, if you meant to disappoint me."

"I have known you – you have known me – such a short time,"

the girl murmured.

"But long enough to love you with a love that will last all my life," George answered eagerly. "I shall have no thought except to make you happy, Isabel. I know that you are so beautiful that you ought to marry a very different fellow from me, – a man who could give you a grand house, and carriages and horses, and all that sort of thing; but he could never love you better than I, and he mightn't love you as well, perhaps; and I'll work for you, Isabel, as no man ever worked before. You shall never know what poverty is, darling, if you will be my wife."

"I shouldn't mind being poor," Isabel answered, dreamily.

She was thinking that Walter Gay had been poor, and that the chief romance of Florence's life had been the quiet wedding in the little City church, and the long sea voyage with her young husband. This sort of poverty was almost as nice as poor Edith's miserable wealth, with diamonds flung about and trampled upon, and ruby velvet for every-day wear.

"I shouldn't mind so much being poor," repeated the girl; for she thought, if she didn't marry a duke or a Dombey, it would be at least something to experience the sentimental phase of poverty.

George Gilbert seized upon the words.

"Ah, then, you will marry me, dearest Isabel? you will marry me, my own darling, my beautiful wife?"

He was almost startled by the intensity of his own feelings, as he bent down and kissed the little ungloved hand lying on the

moss-grown stonework of the bridge.

"Oh, Isabel, if you could only know how happy you have made me! if you could only know – "

She looked at him with a startled expression in her face. Was it all settled, then, so suddenly – with so little consideration? Yes, it was all settled; she was beloved with one of those passions that endure for a lifetime. George had said something to that effect. The story had begun, and she was a heroine.

"Good gracious me!" cried Mr. Smith, as he bounded on the parapet of the little bridge, and disported himself there in the character of an amateur Blondin; "if the model old woman who has had so many prizes – we've been looking at her diplomas, framed and glazed, in a parlour that I couldn't have believed to exist out of "Lilian the Deserted" (who begins life as the cottager's daughter, you know, and elopes with the squire in top-boots out of a diamond-paned window – and I've been trying the model old woman's windows, and Lilian couldn't have done it), – but I was about to remark, that if the old woman hasn't had a prize for a model temper, you two will catch it for keeping the tea waiting. Why, Izzie, what's the matter? you and George are both looking as spooney as – is it, eh? – yes, it is: isn't it? Hooray! Didn't I see it from the first?" cried Mr. Smith, striking an attitude upon the balustrade, and pointing down to the two blushing faces with a triumphant finger. "When George asked me for your letter, Izzie, – the little bit of a letter you wrote me when you left Camberwell, – didn't I see him fold it up as gingerly

as if it had been a fifty-pound note and slip it into his waistcoat-pocket, and then try to look as if he hadn't done it? Do you think I wasn't fly, then? A pretty knowledge of human nature I should have, if I couldn't see through that. The creator of Octavio Montefiasco, the Demon of the Galleys, flatters himself that he understands the obscurest diagnostic of the complaint commonly designated 'spoons.' Don't be downhearted, George," exclaimed Sigismund, jumping suddenly off the parapet of the bridge, and extending his hand to his friend. "Accept the congratulations of one who, with a heart long ber-lighted by the ber-lasting in-fer-luence of ker-rime, can-er yet-er feel a generous ther-rob in unison with virr-tue."

After this they all left the bridge, and went straight to the little cottage, where Mr. Raymond had been holding a species of Yankee levée, for the reception of the model villagers, every one of whom knew him, and required his advice on some knotty point of law, medicine, or domestic economy. The tea was laid upon a little round table, close to the window, in the full light of the low evening sun. Isabel sat with her back to that low western light, and George sat next to her, staring at her in a silent rapture, and wondering at himself for his own temerity in having asked her to be his wife. That tiresome Sigismund called Mr. Raymond aside, before sitting down to tea, on the pretence of showing him a highly-coloured representation of Joseph and his Brethren, with a strong family likeness between the brethren; and told him in a loud whisper what had happened on the little bridge. So it

was scarcely wonderful that poor George and Isabel took their tea in silence, and were rather awkward in the handling of their teacups. But they were spared any further congratulations from Sigismund, as that young gentleman found it was as much as he could do to hold his own against the orphans in the demolition of the poundcake, to say nothing of a lump of honeycomb which the model old woman produced for the delectation of the visitors.

The twilight deepened presently, and the stars began to glimmer faintly in an opal-tinted sky. Mr. Raymond, Sigismund, and the orphans, employed themselves in packing the baskets with the knives, plates, and glasses which had been used for the picnic. The fly was to pick them all up at the cottage. Isabel stood in the little doorway, looking dreamily out at the village, the dim lights twinkling in the casement windows, the lazy cattle standing in the pond upon the green, and a man holding a couple of horses before the door of the little inn.

"That man with the horses is Jeffson, my father's gardener; I scarcely like to call him a servant, for he is a kind of connection of my poor mother's family," George said, with a little confusion; for he thought that perhaps Miss Sleaford's pride might take alarm at the idea of any such kindred between her future husband and his servant; "and he is *such* a good fellow! And what do you think, Isabel?" the young man added, dropping his voice to a whisper; "poor Jeffson has come all the way from Gray bridge on purpose to see you, because he has heard me say that you are very beautiful; and I think he guessed ever so long ago that I had

fallen in love with you. Would you have any objection to walk over yonder and see him, Isabel, or shall I call him here?"

"I'll go to him, if you like; I should like very much to see him," the girl answered.

She took the arm George offered her. Of course it was only right that she should take his arm. It was all a settled thing now.

"Miss Sleaford has come to see you, Jeff," the young man said, when they came to where the Yorkshireman was standing.

Poor Jeff had very little to say upon this rather trying occasion. He took off his hat, and stood bareheaded, smiling and blushing – as George spoke of him and praised him – yet all the while keeping a sharp watch upon Isabel's face. He could see that pale girlish face very well in the evening light, for Miss Sleaford had left her hat in the cottage, and stood bareheaded, with her face turned towards the west, while George rambled on about Jeff and his old school-days, when Jeff and he had been such friends and playfellows.

But the fly from Conventford came rumbling out of the inn-yard as they stood there, and this was a signal for Isabel to hurry back to the cottage. She held out her hand to Mr. Jeffson as she wished him good night, and then went back, still attended by George, who handed her into the fly presently, and wished her good night in a very commonplace manner; for he was a young man whose feelings hid themselves from indifferent eyes, and, indeed, only appeared under the influence of extreme emotion.

CHAPTER VIII.
ABOUT POOR JOE TILLET'S YOUNG WIFE

George went back to the Seven Stars, where Mr. Jeffson was waiting with the horses. He went back, after watching the open vehicle drive away; he went back with his happiness which was so new and strange, he thought a fresh life was to begin for him from this day, and would have almost expected to find the diseases of his patients miraculously cured, and a new phase of existence opening for them as well as for himself.

He was going to be married; he was going to have this beautiful young creature for his wife. He thought of her; and the image of this pale-faced girl, sitting in the little parlour at Graybridge, waiting to receive him when he came home from his patients, was such an overpowering vision, that his brain reeled as he contemplated it. Was it true – could it be true – that all this inexpressible happiness was to be his?

By-and-by, when he was riding Brown Molly slowly along the shadowy lanes that lie between Hurstonleigh and Waverly, his silent bliss overflowed his heart and sought to utter itself in words. William Jeffson had always been George's confidant; why should he not be so now, when the young man had such need of some friendly ear to which to impart his happiness?

Somehow or other, the Yorkshireman did not seem so eager as usual to take his part in his master's pleasure; he had seemed to hang back a little; for, under ordinary circumstances, George would have had no occasion to break the ice. But to-night Mr. Jeffson seemed bent on keeping silence, and George was obliged to hazard a preliminary question.

"What do you think of her, Jeff?" he asked.

"What do I think to who, Master Jarge?" demanded the Yorkshireman, in his simple vernacular.

"Why, Isa – Miss Sleaford, of course," answered George, rather indignantly: was there any other woman in the world whom he could possibly think of or speak of to-night?

Mr. Jeffson was silent for some moments, as if the question related to so profound a subject that he had to descend into the farthest depths of his mind before he could answer it. He was silent; and the slow trampling of the horses' hoofs along the lane, and the twittering of some dissipated bird far away in the dim woodland, were the only sounds that broke the evening stillness.

"She's rare an' pretty, Master Jarge," the philosopher said at last, in a very thoughtful tone; "I a'most think I never see any one so pretty; though it isn't that high-coloured sort of prettiness they think so much to in Graybridge. She's still and white, somehow, like the images in York Minster; and her eyes seem far away as you look at her. Yes, she is rare an' pretty."

"I've told her how I love her; and – and you like her, Jeff, don't you?" asked George, in a rapture of happiness that was stronger

than his native shyness. "You like her, and she likes you, Jeff, and will like you better as she comes to know you more. And she's going to be my wife, old Jeff!"

The young man's voice grew tremulous as he made this grand announcement. Whatever enthusiasm there was in his nature seemed concentrated in the emotions of this one day.

He had loved for the first time, and declared his love. His true and constant heart, that wondrous aloe which was to bear a single flower, had burst into sudden blossom, and all the vigour of the root was in that one bright bloom. The aloe-flower might bloom steadily on for ever, or might fade and die; but it could never know a second blossoming.

"She's going to be my wife, Jeff," he repeated, as if to say these words was in itself to taste an overpowering happiness.

But William Jeffson seemed very stupid to-night. His conversational powers appeared to have undergone a kind of paralysis. He spoke slowly, and made long pauses every now and then.

"You're going to marry her, Master Jarge?" he said.

"Yes, Jeff. I love her better than any living creature in this world – better than the world itself, or my own life; for I think, if she had answered me differently to-day, I should have died. Why, you're not surprised, are you, Jeff? I thought you guessed at the very first – before I knew it myself even – that I was in love with Isabel. Isabel! Isabel! what a pretty name! It sounds like a flower, doesn't it?"

"No; I'm not surprised, Master Jarge," the Yorkshireman said, thoughtfully. "I knew you was in love with Miss Sleaford, regular fond about her, you know; but I didn't think – I didn't think – as you'd ask her to marry you so soon."

"But why not, Jeff?" cried the young man. "What should I wait for? I couldn't love her better than I do if I knew her for years and years, and every year were to make her brighter and lovelier than she is now. I've got a home to bring her to, and I'll work for her – I'll work for her as no man ever worked before to make a happy home for his wife."

He struck out his arm, with his fist clenched, as if he thought that the highest round on the ladder of fortune was to be reached by any young surgeon who had the desire to climb.

"Why shouldn't I marry at once, Jeff?" he demanded, with some touch of indignation. "I can give my wife as good a home as that from which I shall take her."

"It isn't that as I was thinkin' of, Master Jarge," William Jeffson answered, growing slower of speech and graver of tone with every word he spoke; "it isn't that. But, you see, you know so little of Miss Sleaford; you know naught but that she's different, somehow, to all the other lasses you've seen, and that she seems to take your fancy like, because of that. You know naught about her, Master Jarge; and what's still worse – ever so much worse than that – you don't know that she loves you. You don't know that, Master Jarge. If you was only sure of *that*, the rest wouldn't matter so much; for there's scarcely anything in this world as true

love can't do; and a woman that loves truly can't be aught but a good woman at heart. I see Miss Sleaford when you was standin' talkin' by the Seven Stars, Master Jarge, and there wasn't any look in her face as if she knew what you was sayin', or thought about it; but her eyes looked ever so far away like: and though there was a kind of light in her face, it didn't seem as if it had anything to do with you. And, Lor' bless your heart, Master Jarge, you should have seen my Tilly's face when she come up the airey steps in the square where she was head-housemaid, and see me come up to London on purpose to surprise her. Why, it was all of a shine like with smiles and brightness, at the sight o' *me*, Master Jarge; and I'm sure *I'm* no great shakes to look at," added Mr. Jeffson, in a deprecating tone.

The reins, lying loose upon Brown Molly's neck, shook with the sudden trembling of the hand that held them. George Gilbert was seized with a kind of panic as he listened to his Mentor's discourse. He had not presumed to solicit any confession of love from Isabel Sleaford; he had thought himself more than blest, inasmuch as she had promised to become his wife; yet he was absolutely terror-stricken at Mr. Jeffson's humiliating suggestion, and was withal very angry at his old playmate's insolence.

"You mean that she doesn't love me?" he said sharply.

"Oh, Master Jarge, to be right down truthful with you, that's just what I do mean. She *doan't* love you; as sure as I've seen true love lookin' out o' my Tilly's face, I see somethin' that wasn't love lookin' out o' hearn to-night. I see just such a look in

Miss Sleaford's eyes as I see once in a pretty young creetur that married a mate o' mine down home; a young man as had got a little bit o' land and cottage, and everything comfortable, and it wasn't the young creetur herself that was in favour o' marryin' him; but it was her friends that worried and bothered her till she said yes. She was a poor foolish young thing, that didn't seem to have the strength to say no. And I was at Joe Tillet's weddin', – his name was Joe Tillet, – and I see the pretty young creetur standin', like as I saw Miss Sleaford to-night, close alongside her husband while he was talkin', and lookin' prettier nor ever in her straw bonnet and white ribands; but her eyes seemed to fix themselves on somethin' far away like; and when her husband turned of a sudden and spoke to her, she started, like as if she was waked out of a dream. I never forgot that look o' hearn, Master Jarge; and I saw the same kind o' look to-night."

"What nonsense you're talking, Jeff!" George answered, with considerable impatience. "I dare say your friend and his wife were very happy?"

"No, Master Jarge, they wasn't. And that's just the very thing that makes me remember the pretty young creetur's look that summer's day, as she stood, dresssed out in her wedding-clothes, by her loving husband's side. He was very fond of her, and for a good two year or so he seemed very happy, and was allus tellin' his friends he'd got the best wife in the three Ridin's, and the quietest and most industrious; but she seemed to pine like; and by-and-by there was a young soldier came home that had been to

the Indies, and that was her first cousin, and had lived neighbours with her family when she was a bit of a girl. I won't tell you the story, Master Jarge; for it isn't the pleasantest kind o' thing to tell, nor yet to hear; but the end of it was, my poor mate Joe was found one summer's morning – just such a day as that when he was married – hanging dead behind the door of one of his barns; and as for the poor wretched young creetur as had caused his death, nobody ever knew what came of her. And yet," concluded Mr. Jeffson, in a meditative tone, "I've heard that poor chap Joe tell me so confident that his wife would get to love him dearly by-and-by, because he loved her so true and dear."

George Gilbert, made no answer to all this. He rode on slowly, with his head drooping. The Yorkshireman kept an anxious watch upon his master; he could not see the expression of the young man's face, but he could see by his attitude that the story of Joseph Tillet's misadventure had not been without a depressing influence upon him.

"Si'thee noo. Master Jarge," said William Jeffson, laying his hand upon the surgeon's wrist, and speaking in a voice that was almost solemn, "marryin' a pretty girl seems no more than gatherin' a wild rose out of the hedge to some men, they do it so light and careless-like, – just because the flower looks pretty where it's growin'. I'd known my Tilly six year before I asked her to be my wife, Master Jarge; and it was only because she'd been true and faithful to me all that time, and because I'd never, look at her when I might, seen anything but love in her face, that I

ventured at last to say to mysen, 'William Jeffson, there's a lass that'll make thee a true wife.' Doan't be in a hurry, Master Jarge; doan't! Take the advice of a poor ignorant chap as has one great advantage over all your learnin', for he's lived double your time in the world. Doan't be in a hurry. If Miss Sleaford loves ye true to-night, she'll love ye ten times truer this night twelvemonths, and truer still this time ten years. If she *doan't* love you, Master Jarge, keep clear of her as you would of a venomous serpent; for she'll bring you worse harm than ever that could do, if it stung you to the heart, and made an end of you at once. I see Joe Tillet lyin' dead after the inquest that was held upon him, Master Jarge; and the thought that the poor desperate creeter had killed hisself warn't so bad to me as the sight of the suffering on his poor dead face, – the suffering that he'd borne nigh upon two year, Master Jarge, *and had held his tongue about*."

CHAPTER IX.
MISS SLEAFORD'S ENGAGEMENT

Isabel Sleaford was "engaged." She remembered this when she woke on the morning after that pleasant day in Hurstonleigh grove, and that henceforward there existed a person who was bound to be miserable because of her. She thought this as she stood before the modest looking-glass, rolling the long plaits of hair into a great knot, that seemed too heavy for her head. Her life was all settled. She was not to be a great poetess or an actress. The tragic mantle of the Siddons might have descended on her young shoulders, but she was never to display its gloomy folds on any mortal stage. She was not to be anything great. She was only to be a country surgeon's wife.

It was very commonplace, perhaps; and yet this lonely girl – this untaught and unfriended creature – felt some little pride in her new position. After all, she had read many novels in which the story was very little more than this, – three volumes of simple love-making, and a quiet wedding at the end of the chapter. She was not to be an Edith Dombey or a Jane Eyre. Oh, to have been Jane Eyre, and to roam away on the cold moorland and starve, – wouldn't *that* have been delicious!

No, there was to be a very moderate portion of romance in

her life; but still some romance. George Gilbert would be very devoted, and would worship her always, of course. She gave her head a little toss as she thought that, at the worst, she could treat him as Edith treated Dombey, and enjoy herself that way; though she was doubtful how far Edith Dombey's style of treatment might answer without the ruby velvet, and diamond coronet, and other "properties" appertaining to the rôle.

In the meanwhile, Miss Sleaford performed her duties as best she could, and instructed the orphans in a dreamy kind of way, breaking off in the middle of the preterperfect tense of a verb to promise them that they should come to spend a day with her when she was married, and neglecting their fingering of the overture to "Masaniello" while she pondered on the colour of her wedding-dress.

And how much did she think of George Gilbert all this time? About as much as she would have thought of the pages who were to support the splendid burden of her trailing robes, if she had been about to be crowned Queen of England. He was the bridegroom, the husband; a secondary character in the play of which she was the heroine.

Poor George's first love-letter came to her on the following day – a vague and rambling epistle, full of shadowy doubts and fears; haunted, as it were, by the phantom of the poor dead-and-gone Joe Tillet, and without any punctuation whatever:

"But oh dearest ever dearest Isabel for ever dear you will be to me if you cast me from you and I should go to America for

life in Graybridge would be worse than odious without you Oh Isabel if you do not love me I implore you for pity sake say so and end my misery I know I am not worthy of your love who are so beautiful and accomplished but oh the thought of giving you up is so bitter unless you yourself should wish it and oh there is no sacrifice on earth I would not make for you."

The letter was certainly not as elegant a composition as Isabel would have desired it to be; but then a love-letter is a love-letter, and this was the first Miss Sleaford had ever received. George's tone of mingled doubt and supplication was by no means displeasing to her. It was only right that he should be miserable: it was only proper that he should be tormented by all manner of apprehensions. They would have to quarrel by-and-by, and to bid each other an eternal farewell, and to burn each other's letters, and be reconciled again. The quietest story could not be made out without such legitimate incidents in the course of the three volumes.

Although Isabel amused herself by planning her wedding-dress, and changed her mind very often as to the colour and material she had no idea of a speedy marriage. Were there not three volumes of courtship to be gone through first?

Sigismund went back to town after the picnic which had been planned for his gratification, and Isabel was left quite alone with her pupils. She walked with them, and took her meals with them, and was with them all day; and it was only of a Sunday that she saw much of Mr. Raymond.

That gentleman was very kind to the affianced lovers. George Gilbert rode over to Conventford every alternate Sunday, and dined with the family at Oakbank. Sometimes he went early enough to attend Isabel and the orphans to church. Mr. Raymond himself was not a church-goer, but he sent his grand-nieces to perform their devotions, as he sent them to have their hair clipped by the hairdresser, or their teeth examined by the dentist. George plunged into the wildest extravagance in the way of waistcoats, in order to do honour to these happy Sundays; and left off mourning for his father a month or so earlier than he had intended, in order to infuse variety into his costume. Everything he wore used to look new on these Sundays; and Isabel, sitting opposite to him in the square pew would contemplate him thoughtfully when the sermon was dull, and wonder, rather regretfully, why his garments never wore themselves into folds, but always retained a hard angular look, as if they had been originally worn by a wooden figure, and had never got over that disadvantage. He wore a watch-chain that his father had given him, – a long chain that went round his neck, but which he artfully twisted and doubled into the semblance of a short one; and on this chain he hung a lucky sixpence and an old-fashioned silver vinaigrette; which trifles, when seen from a distance, looked almost like the gold charms which the officers stationed at Conventford wore dangling on their waistcoats.

And so the engagement dawdled on through all the bright summer months; and while the leaves were falling in the woods

of Midlandshire, George still entreating that the marriage might speedily take place, and Isabel always deferring that ceremonial to some indefinite period.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.