

Reid Mayne

Gwen Wynn: A Romance of the Wye



Томас Майн Рид

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PROLOGUE

Hail to thee, Wye – famed river of Siluria! Well deserving fame, worthy of warmest salutation! From thy fountain-head on Plinlimmon's far slope, where thou leapest forth, gay as a girl on her skip-rope, through the rugged rocks of Brecon and Radnor, that like rude men would detain thee, snatching but a kiss for their pains – on, as woman grown, with statelier step, amid the wooded hills of Herefordshire, which treat thee with more courtly consideration – still on, and once more rudely assailed by the bold ramparts of Monmouth – through all thou makest way – in despite all, preserving thy purity! If defiled before espousing the ocean, the fault is not thine, but Sabrina's – sister born of thy birth, she too cradled on Plinlimmon's breast, but since childhood's days separated from thee, and straying through other shrines – perchance leading a less reputable life. No blame to thee, beautiful Vaga – from source to Severn pure as the spring that begets thee – fair to the eye, and full of interest to reflect on. Scarce a reach of thy channel, or curve of thy course, but is redolent of romance, and rich in the lore of history. On thy shores, through the long centuries, has been enacted many a scene of gayest pleasure and sternest strife; many an exciting episode, in which love and hate, avarice and ambition – in short, every human passion has had play. Overjoyed were the Roman Legionaries to behold their silver eagles reflected from thy pellucid wave; though they did not succeed in planting them on thy western shore till after many a tough struggle with the gallant, but ill-starred, Caractacus. Long, too, had the Saxons to battle before they could make good their footing on the Silurian side – as witness the Dyke of Offa. Later, the Normans obtained it only through treachery, by the murder of the princely Llewellyn; and, later still, did the bold Glendower make thy banks the scene of patriotic strife; while, last of all, sawest thou conflict in still nobler cause – as of more glorious remembrance – when the earnest soldiers of the Parliament encountered the so-called Cavaliers, and purged thy shores of the ribald rout, making them pure as thy waters.

But, sweet Wye! not all the scenes thou hast witnessed have been of war. Love, too, has stamped thee with many a tender souvenir, many a tale of warm, wild passion. Was it not upon thy banks that the handsome "Harry of Monmouth," hero of Agincourt, first saw the light; there living, till manhood-grown, when he appeared "armed *cap-à-pie*, with beaver on"? And did not thy limpid waters bathe the feet of Fair Rosamond, in childhood's days, when she herself was pure? In thee, also, was mirrored the comely form of Owen Tudor, which caught the eye of a queen – the stately Catherine – giving to England a race of kings; and by thy side the beauteous Saxon, Ædgytha, bestowed her heart and hand on a Cymric prince.

Nor are such episodes all of the remote past, but passing now; now, as ever, pathetic – as ever impassioned. For still upon thy banks, Vaga, are men brave, and women fair, as when Adelgisa excited the jealousy of the Druid priestess, or the maid of Clifford Castle captured a king's heart, to become the victim of a queen's vengeance.

Not any fairer than the heroine of my tale; and she was born there, there brought up, and there — Ah! that is the story to be told.

CHAPTER I

THE HEROINE

A tourist descending the Wye by boat from the town of Hereford to the ruined Abbey of Tintern, may observe on its banks a small pagoda-like structure; its roof, with a portion of the supporting columns, o'er-topping a spray of evergreens. It is simply a summer-house, of the kiosk or pavilion pattern, standing in the ornamental grounds of a gentleman's residence. Though placed conspicuously on an elevated point, the boat traveller obtains view of it only from a reach of the river above. When opposite he loses sight of it; a spinny of tall poplars drawing curtain-like between him and the higher bank. These stand on an oblong island, which extends several hundred yards down the stream, formed by an old channel, now forsaken. With all its wanderings the Wye is not suddenly capricious; still, in the lapse of long ages it has here and there changed its course, forming *aits*, or *eyots*, of which this is one.

The tourist will not likely take the abandoned channel. He is bound and booked for Tintern – possibly Chepstow – and will not be delayed by lesser "lions." Besides, his hired boatmen would not deviate from their terms of charter, without adding an extra to their fare.

Were he free, and disposed for exploration, entering this unused water-way he would find it tortuous, with scarce any current, save in times of flood; on one side the eyot, a low marshy flat, thickly overgrown with trees; on the other a continuous cliff, rising forty feet sheer, its *façade* grim and grey, with flakes of reddish hue, where the frost has detached pieces from the rock – the old red sandstone of Herefordshire. Near its entrance he would catch a glimpse of the kiosk on its crest; and, proceeding onward, will observe the tops of laurels and other exotic evergreens, mingling their glabrous foliage with that of the indigenous holly, ivy, and ferns; these last trailing over the cliff's brow, and wreathing it with fillets of verdure, as if to conceal its frowning corrugations.

About midway down the old river's bed he will arrive opposite a little embayment in the high bank, partly natural, but in part quarried out of the cliff – as evinced by a flight of steps, leading up at back, chiselled out of the rock *in situ*.

The cove thus contrived is just large enough to give room to a row-boat, and if not out upon the river, one will be in it, riding upon its painter; this attached to a ring in the red sandstone. It is a light, two-oared affair – a pleasure-boat, ornamentally painted, with cushioned thwarts, and tiller ropes of coloured cord athwart its stern, which the tourist will have turned towards him, in gold lettering, "The Gwendoline."

Charmed by this idyllic picture, he may forsake his own craft, and ascend to the top of the stair. If so, he will have before his eyes a lawn of park-like expanse, mottled with clumps of coppice, here and there a grand old tree – oak, elm, or chestnut – standing solitary; at the upper end a shrubbery of glistening evergreens, with gravelled walks, fronting a handsome house; or, in the parlance of the estate agent, a noble mansion. That is Llangorren Court, and there dwells the owner of the pleasure-boat, as also prospective owner of the house, with some two thousand acres of land lying adjacent.

The boat bears her baptismal name, the surname being Wynn, while people, in a familiar way, speak of her as "Gwen Wynn"; this on account of her being a lady of proclivities and habits that make her somewhat of a celebrity in the neighbourhood. She not only goes boating, but hunts, drives a pair of spirited horses, presides over the church choir, plays its organ, looks after the poor of the parish – nearly all of it her own, or soon to be – and has a bright smile, with a pleasant word, for everybody.

If she be outside, upon the lawn, the tourist, supposing him a gentleman, will withdraw; for across the grounds of Llangorren Court there is no "right of way," and the presence of a stranger upon them would be deemed an intrusion. Nevertheless, he would go back down the boat-stair reluctantly,

and with a sigh of regret, that good manners do not permit his making the acquaintance of Gwen Wynn without further loss of time, or any ceremony of introduction.

But my readers are not thus debarred; and to them I introduce her, as she saunters over this same lawn, on a lovely April morn.

She is not alone; another lady, by name Eleanor Lees, being with her. They are nearly of the same age – both turned twenty – but in all other respects unlike, even to contrast, though there is kinship between them. Gwendoline Wynn is tall of form, fully developed; face of radiant brightness, with blue-grey eyes, and hair of that chrome yellow almost peculiar to the Cymri – said to have made such havoc with the hearts of the Roman soldiers, causing these to deplore the day when recalled home to protect their seven-hilled city from Goths and Visigoths.

In personal appearance Eleanor Lees is the reverse of all this; being of dark complexion, brown-haired, black-eyed, with a figure slender and *petite*. Witha she is pretty; but it is only prettiness – a word inapplicable to her kinswoman, who is pronouncedly beautiful.

Equally unlike are they in mental characteristics; the first-named being free of speech, courageous, just a trifle fast, and possibly a little imperious. The other of a reserved, timid disposition, and habitually of subdued mien, as befits her station; for in this there is also disparity between them – again a contrast. Both are orphans; but it is an orphanage under widely different circumstances and conditions: the one heiress to an estate worth some ten thousand pounds per annum, the other inheriting nought save an old family name – indeed, left without other means of livelihood than what she may derive from a superior education she has received.

Notwithstanding their inequality of fortune, and the very distant relationship – for they are not even near as cousins – the rich girl behaves towards the poor one as though they were sisters. No one seeing them stroll arm-in-arm through the shrubbery, and hearing them hold converse in familiar, affectionate tones, would suspect the little dark damsel to be the paid "companion" of the lady by her side. Yet in such capacity is she residing at Llangorren Court.

It is just after the hour of breakfast, and they have come forth in morning robes of light muslin – dresses suitable to the day and the season. Two handsome ponies are upon the lawn, its herbage dividing their attention with the horns of a pet stag, which now and then threaten to assail them.

All three, soon as perceiving the ladies, trot towards them; the ponies stretching out their necks to be patted, the cloven-hoofed creature equally courting caresses. They look especially to Miss Wynn, who is more their mistress.

On this particular morning she does not seem in the humour for dallying with them; nor has she brought out their usual allowance of lump sugar; but, after a touch with her delicate fingers, and a kindly exclamation, passes on, leaving them behind, to all appearance disappointed.

"Where are you going, Gwen?" asks the companion, seeing her step out straight, and apparently with thoughts preoccupied. Their arms are now disunited, the little incident with the animals having separated them.

"To the summer-house," is the response. "I wish to have a look at the river. It should show fine this bright morning."

And so it does; as both perceive after entering the pavilion, which commands a view of the valley, with a reach of the river above – the latter, under the sun, glistening like freshly polished silver.

Gwen views it through a glass – a binocular she has brought out with her; this of itself proclaiming some purpose aforethought, but not confided to the companion. It is only after she has been long holding it steadily to her eye, that the latter fancies there must be some object within its field of view more interesting than the Wye's water, or the greenery on its banks.

"What is it?" she naïvely asks. "You see something?"

"Only a boat," answers Gwen, bringing down the glass with a guilty look, as if conscious of being caught. "Some tourist, I suppose, making down to Tintern Abbey – like as not a London cockney."

The young lady is telling a "white lie." She knows the occupant of that boat is nothing of the kind. From London he may be – she cannot tell – but certainly no sprig of cockneydom – unlike it as Hyperion to the Satyr; at least so she thinks. But she does not give her thought to the companion; instead, concealing it, she adds, —

"How fond those town people are of touring it upon our Wye!"

"Can you wonder at that?" asks Ellen. "Its scenery is so grand – I should say, incomparable; nothing equal to it in England."

"I don't wonder," says Miss Wynn, replying to the question. "I'm only a little bit vexed seeing them there. It's like the desecration of some sacred stream, leaving scraps of newspapers in which they wrap their sandwiches, with other picnicing débris on its banks! To say nought of one's having to encounter the rude fellows that in these degenerate days go a-rowing – shopboys from the towns, farm labourers, colliers, hauliers, all sorts. I've half a mind to set fire to the *Gwendoline*, burn her up, and never again lay hand on an oar."

Ellen Lees laughs incredulously as she makes rejoinder.

"It would be a pity," she says, in serio-comic tone. "Besides, the poor people are entitled to a little recreation. They don't have too much of it."

"Ah, true," rejoins Gwen, who, despite her grandeeism, is neither Tory nor aristocrat. "Well, I've not yet decided on that little bit of incendiarism, and shan't burn the *Gwendoline*— at all events not till we've had another row out of her."

Not for a hundred pounds would she set fire to that boat, and never in her life was she less thinking of such a thing. For just then she has other views regarding the pretty pleasure craft, and intends taking seat on its thwarts within less than twenty minutes' time.

"By the way," she says, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to her, "we may as well have that row now – whether it's to be the last or not."

Cunning creature! She has had it in her mind all the morning; first from her bed-chamber window, then from that of the breakfast-room, looking up the river's reach, with the binocular at her eye too, to note if a certain boat, with a salmon-rod bending over it, passes down. For one of its occupants is an angler.

"The day's superb," she goes on; "sun's not too hot – gentle breeze – just the weather for a row. And the river looks so inviting – seems calling us to come! What say you, Nell?"

"Oh! I've no objections."

"Let us in, then, and make ready. Be quick about it! Remember it's April, and there may be showers. We mustn't miss a moment of that sweet sunshine."

At this the two forsake the summer-house; and, lightly recrossing the lawn, disappear within the dwelling.

While the angler's boat is still opposite the grounds, going on, eyes are observing it from an upper window of the house; again those of Miss Wynn herself, inside her dressing-room, getting ready for the river.

She had only short glimpses of it, over the tops of the trees on the eyot, and now and then through breaks in their thinner spray. Enough, however, to assure her that it contains two men, neither of them cockneys. One at the oars she takes to be a professional waterman. But he seated in the stern is altogether unknown to her, save by sight – that obtained when twice meeting him out on the river. She knows not whence he comes, or where he is residing; but supposes him a stranger to the neighbourhood, stopping at some hotel. If at the house of any of the neighbouring gentry, she would certainly have heard of it. She is not even acquainted with his name, though longing to learn it. But she is shy to inquire, lest that might betray her interest in him. For such she feels, has felt, ever since setting eyes on his strangely handsome face.

As the boat again disappears behind the thick foliage she sets, in haste, to affect the proposed change of dress, saying, in soliloquy – for she is now alone, —

"I wonder who, and what he can be? A gentleman, of course. But, then, there are gentlemen and gentlemen; single ones and – "

She has the word "married" on her tongue, but refrains speaking it. Instead, she gives utterance to a sigh, followed by the reflection —

"Ah, me! That would be a pity – a dis – "

Again she checks herself, the thought being enough unpleasant without the words.

Standing before the mirror, and sticking long pins into her hair, to keep its rebellious plaits in their place, she continues soliloquising —

"If one only had a word with that young waterman who rows him! And were it not that my own boatman is such a chatterer, I'd put him up to getting that word. But no! It would never do. He'd tell aunt about it; and then Madame la Chatelaine would be talking all sorts of serious things to me – the which I mightn't relish. Well, in six months more the old lady's trusteeship of this young lady is to terminate – at least legally. Then I'll be my own mistress; and then 'twill be time enough to consider whether I ought to have – a master. Ha, ha, ha!"

So laughing, as she surveys her superb figure in a cheval glass, she completes the adjustment of her dress by setting a hat upon her head, and tightening the elastic, to secure against its being blown off while in the boat. In fine, with a parting glance at the mirror, which shows a satisfied expression upon her features, she trips lightly out of the room, and on down the stairway.

CHAPTER II

THE HERO

Than Vivian Ryecroft handsomer man never carried sling-jacket over his shoulder, or sabretasche on his hip. For he is in the Hussars – a captain.

He is not on duty now, nor anywhere near the scene of it. His regiment is at Aldershot, himself rustivating in Herefordshire – whither he has come to spend a few weeks' leave of absence.

Nor is he, at the time of our meeting him, in the saddle, which he sits so gracefully; but in a row-boat on the river Wye – the same just sighted by Gwen Wynn through the double lens of her lorgnette. No more is he wearing the braided uniform and "busby"; but, instead, attired in a suit of light Cheviots, piscator-cut, with a helmet-shaped cap of quilted cotton on his head, its rounded rim of spotless white in striking, but becoming, contrast with his bronzed complexion and dark military moustache.

For Captain Ryecroft is no mere stripling nor beardless youth, but a man turned thirty, browned by exposure to Indian suns, experienced in Indian campaigns, from those of Scinde and the Punjaub to that most memorable of all – the Mutiny.

Still is he personally as attractive as he ever was – to women, possibly more; among these causing a flutter, with *rapprochement* towards him almost instinctive, when and wherever they may meet him. In the present many a bright English lady sighs for him, as in the past many a dark damsel of Hindostan; and without his heaving sigh, or even giving them a thought in return. Not that he is of cold nature, or in any sense austere; instead, warm-hearted, of cheerful disposition, and rather partial to female society. But he is not, and never has been, either man-flirt or frivolous trifler; else he would not be fly-fishing on the Wye – for that is what he is doing there – instead of in London, taking part in the festivities of the "season," by day dawdling in Rotten Row, by night exhibiting himself in opera-box or ball-room. In short, Vivian Ryecroft is one of those rare individuals, to a high degree endowed, physically as mentally, without being aware of it, or appearing so; while to all others it is very perceptible.

He has been about a fortnight in the neighbourhood, stopping at the chief hotel of a riverine town much affected by fly-fishermen and tourists. Still he has made no acquaintance with the resident gentry. He might, if wishing it; which he does not, his purpose upon the Wye not being to seek society, but salmon, or rather the sport of taking it. An ardent disciple of the ancient Izaak, he cares for nought else – at least, in the district where he is for the present sojourning.

Such is his mental condition up to a certain morning; when a change comes over it, sudden as the spring of a salmon at the gaudiest or most tempting of his flies – this brought about by a face, of which he has caught sight by merest accident, and while following his favourite occupation. Thus it has chanced: —

Below the town where he is staying, some four or five miles by the course of the stream, he has discovered one of those places called "catches," where the king of river fish delights to leap at flies, whether natural or artificial – a sport it has oft reason to rue. Several times so at the end of Captain Ryecroft's line and rod; he having there twice hooked a twenty-pounder, and once a still larger specimen, which turned the scale at thirty. In consequence that portion of the stream has become his choicest angling ground, and at least three days in the week he repairs to it. The row is not much going down, but a good deal returning; five miles up stream, most of it strong adverse current. That, however, is less his affair than his oarsman's – a young waterman by name Wingate, whose boat and services the Hussar officer has chartered by the week – indeed, engaged them for so long as he may remain upon the Wye.

On the morning in question, dropping down the river to his accustomed whipping-place, but at a somewhat later hour than usual, he meets another boat coming up – a pleasure craft, as shown by its style of outside ornament and inside furniture. Of neither does the salmon fisher take much note; his eyes all occupied with those upon the thwarts. There are three of them, two being ladies seated in the stern sheets, the third an oarsman on a thwart well forward, to make better balance. And to the latter the Hussar officer gives but a glance – just to observe that he is a serving-man, wearing some of its insignia in the shape of a cockaded hat, and striped sable-waistcoat. And not much more than a glance at one of the former; but a gaze, concentrated and long as good manners will permit, at the other, who is steering; when she passes beyond sight, her face remaining in his memory, vivid as if still before his eyes.

All this at a first encounter; repeated in a second, which occurs on the day succeeding, under similar circumstances, and almost in the self-same spot; then the face, if possible, seeming fairer, and the impression made by it on Vivian Ryecroft's mind sinking deeper – indeed, promising to be permanent. It is a radiant face, set in a luxuriance of bright amber hair – for it is that of Gwendoline Wynn.

On the second occasion he has a better view of her, the boats passing nearer to one another; still, not so near as he could wish, good manners again interfering. For all, he feels well satisfied – especially with the thought, that his own gaze earnestly given, though under such restraint, has been with earnestness returned. Would that his secret admiration of its owner were in like manner reciprocated!

Such is his reflective wish as the boats widen the distance between; one labouring slowly up, the other gliding swiftly down.

His boatman cannot tell who the lady is, nor where she lives. On the second day he is not asked – the question having been put to him on that preceding. All the added knowledge now obtained is the name of the craft that carries her; which, after passing, the waterman, with face turned towards its stern, makes out to be the *Gwendoline* – just as on his own boat – the *Mary*, – though not in such grand golden letters.

It may assist Captain Ryecroft in his inquiries, already contemplated, and he makes note of it.

Another night passes; another sun shines over the Wye; and he again drops down stream to his usual place of sport – this day only to draw blank, neither catching salmon, nor seeing hair of amber hue; his reflecting on which is, perchance, a cause of the fish not taking to his flies, cast carelessly.

He is not discouraged; but goes again on the day succeeding – that same when his boat is viewed through the binocular. He has already formed a half suspicion that the home of the interesting water nymph is not far from that pagoda-like structure he has frequently noticed on the right bank of the river. For, just below the outlying eyot is where he has met the pleasure-boat, and the old oarsman looked anything but equal to a long pull up stream. Still, between that and the town are several other gentlemen's residences on the river side, with some standing inland. It may be any of them.

But it is not, as Captain Ryecroft now feels sure, at sight of some floating drapery in the pavilion, with two female heads showing over its baluster rail; one of them with tresses glistening in the sunlight, bright as sunbeams themselves.

He views it through a telescope – for he, too, has come out provided for distant observation – this confirming his conjectures just in the way he would wish. Now there will be no difficulty in learning who the lady is – for of one only does he care to make inquiry.

He would order Wingate to hold way, but does not relish the idea of letting the waterman into his secret; and so, remaining silent, he is soon carried beyond sight of the summer-house, and along the outer edge of the islet, with its curtain of tall trees coming invidiously between.

Continuing on to his angling ground, he gives way to reflections – at first of a pleasant nature. Satisfactory to think that she, the subject of them, at least lives in a handsome house; for a glimpse got of its upper storey tells it to be this. That she is in social rank a lady, he has hitherto had no doubt.

The pretty pleasure craft and its appendages, with the venerable domestic acting as oarsman, are all proofs of something more than mere respectability – rather evidences of style.

Marring these agreeable considerations is the thought he may not to-day meet the pleasure-boat. It is the hour that, from past experience, he might expect it to be out – for he has so timed his own piscatorial excursion. But, seeing the ladies in the summer-house, he doubts getting nearer sight of them – at least for another twenty-four hours. In all likelihood they have been already on the river, and returned home again. Why did he not start earlier?

While thus fretting himself, he catches sight of another boat – of a sort very different from the *Gwendoline* – a heavy barge-like affair, with four men in it; hulking fellows, to whom rowing is evidently a new experience. Notwithstanding this, they do not seem at all frightened at finding themselves upon the water. Instead, they are behaving in a way that shows them either very courageous, or very regardless of a danger – which, possibly, they are not aware of. At short intervals one or other is seen starting to his feet, and rushing fore or aft – as if on an empty coal-waggon, instead of in a boat – and in such fashion, that were the craft at all crank it would certainly be upset!

On drawing nearer them Captain Ryecroft and his oarsman get the explanation of their seemingly eccentric behaviour – its cause made clear by a black bottle, which one of them is holding in his hand, each of the others brandishing tumbler, or teacup. They are drinking; and that they have been so occupied for some time is evident by their loud shouts and grotesque gesturing.

"They look an ugly lot!" observes the young waterman, viewing them over his shoulder; for, seated at the oars, his back is towards them. "Coal fellows, from the Forest o' Dean, I take it."

Ryecroft, with a cigar between his teeth, dreamily thinking of a boat with people in it so dissimilar, simply signifies assent with a nod.

But soon he is roused from his reverie, at hearing an exclamation louder than common, followed by words whose import concerns himself and his companion. These are: —

"Dang it, lads! le's goo in for a bit o' a lark! Yonner be a boat coomin' down wi' two chaps in 't: some o' them spickspan city gents! S'pose we gie 'em a capsize?"

"Le's do it! Le's duck 'em!" shouted the others assentingly; he with the bottle dropping it into the boat's bottom, and laying hold of an oar instead.

All act likewise, for it is a four-oared craft that carries them; and in a few seconds' time they are rowing it straight for that of the angler's.

With astonishment, and fast gathering indignation, the Hussar officer sees the heavy barge coming bow on for his light fishing skiff, and is thoroughly sensible of the danger; the waterman becoming aware of it at the same instant of time.

"They mean mischief," mutters Wingate; "what'd we best do, Captain? If you like I can keep clear, and shoot the *Mary* past 'em – easy enough."

"Do so," returns the salmon fisher, with the cigar still between his teeth – but now held bitterly tight, almost to biting off the stump. "You can keep on!" he adds, speaking calmly, and with an effort to keep down his temper; "that will be the best way, as things stand now. They look like they'd come up from below; and, if they show any ill manners at meeting, we can call them to account on return. Don't concern yourself about your course. I'll see to the steering. There! hard on the starboard oar!"

This last, as the two boats have arrived within less than three lengths of one another. At the same time Ryecroft, drawing tight the port tiller-cord, changes course suddenly, leaving just sufficient sea-way for his oarsman to shave past, and avoid the threatened collision.

Which is done the instant after – to the discomfiture of the would-be capsizers. As the skiff glides lightly beyond their reach, dancing over the river swell, as if in triumph and to mock them, they drop their oars, and send after it a chorus of yells, mingled with blasphemous imprecations.

In a lull between, the Hussar officer at length takes the cigar from his lips, and calls back to them —

"You ruffians! You shall rue it! Shout on – till you're hoarse. There's a reckoning for you, perhaps sooner than you expect."

"Yes, ye d – d scoun'rels!" adds the young waterman, himself so enraged as almost to foam at the mouth. "Ye'll have to pay dear for sich a dastartly attemp' to waylay Jack Wingate's boat. That will ye."

"Bah!" jeeringly retorts one of the roughs. "To blazes wi' you, an' yer boat!"

"Ay, to the blazes wi' ye!" echo the others in drunken chorus; and, while their voices are still reverberating along the adjacent cliffs, the fishing skiff drifts round a bend of the river, bearing its owner and his fare out of their sight, as beyond earshot of their profane speech.

CHAPTER III

A CHARON CORRUPTED

The lawn of Llangorren Court, for a time abandoned to the dumb quadrupeds, that had returned to their tranquil pasturing, is again enlivened by the presence of the two young ladies; but so transformed, that they are scarce recognisable as the same late seen upon it. Of course, it is their dresses that have caused the change; Miss Wynn now wearing a pea jacket of navy blue, with anchor buttons, and a straw hat set coquettishly on her head, its ribbons of azure hue trailing over, and prettily contrasting with the plaits of her chrome-yellow hair, gathered in a grand coil behind. But for the flowing skirt below, she might be mistaken for a young mid, whose cheeks as yet show only the down – one who would "find sweethearts in every port."

Miss Lees is less nautically attired; having but slipped over her morning dress a paletot of the ordinary kind, and on her head a plumed hat of the Neopolitan pattern. For all, a costume becoming; especially the brigand-like head-gear which sets off her finely-chiselled features and skin, dark as any daughter of the South.

They are about starting towards the boat-dock, when a difficulty presents itself – not to Gwen, but the companion.

"We have forgotten Joseph!" she exclaims.

Joseph is an ancient retainer of the Wynn family, who, in its domestic affairs, plays parts of many kinds – among them the *métier* of boatman. It is his duty to look after the *Gwendoline*, see that she is snug in her dock, with oars and steering apparatus in order; go out with her when his young mistress takes a row on the river, or ferry any one of the family who has occasion to cross it – the last a need by no means rare, since for miles above and below there is nothing in the shape of a bridge.

"No, we haven't," rejoins Joseph's mistress, answering the exclamation of the companion. "I remembered him well enough – too well."

"Why too well?" asks the other, looking a little puzzled.

"Because we don't want him."

"But surely, Gwen, you wouldn't think of our going alone."

"Surely I would, and do. Why not?"

"We've never done so before."

"Is that any reason we shouldn't now?"

"But Miss Linton will be displeased, if not very angry. Besides, as you know, there may be danger on the river."

For a short while Gwen is silent, as if pondering on what the other has said. Not on the suggested danger. She is far from being daunted by that. But Miss Linton is her aunt – as already hinted, her legal guardian till of age – head of the house, and still holding authority, though exercising it in the mildest manner. And just on this account it would not be right to outrage it, nor is Miss Wynn the one to do so. Instead, she prefers a little subterfuge, which is in her mind as she makes rejoinder —

"I suppose we must take him along; though it's very vexatious, and for various reasons."

"What are they? May I know them?"

"You're welcome. For one, I can pull a boat just as well as he, if not better. And for another, we can't have a word of conversation without his hearing it – which isn't at all nice, besides being inconvenient. As I've reason to know, the old curmudgeon is an incorrigible gossip, and tattles all over the parish; I only wish we'd someone else. What a pity I haven't a brother to go with us! *But not to-day.*"

The reserving clause, despite its earnestness, is not spoken aloud. In the aquatic excursion intended, she wants no companion of the male kind – above all, no brother. Nor will she take Joseph, though she signifies her consent to it, by desiring the companion to summon him.

As the latter starts off for the stable-yard, where the ferryman is usually to be found, Gwen says, in soliloquy —

"I'll take old Joe as far as the boat stairs, but not a yard beyond. I know what will stay him there – steady as a pointer with a partridge six feet from its nose. By the way, have I got my purse with me?"

She plunges her hand into one of her pea-jacket pockets; and, there feeling the thing sought for, is satisfied.

By this Miss Lees has got back, bringing with her the versatile Joseph – a tough old servitor of the respectable family type, who has seen some sixty summers, more or less.

After a short colloquy, with some questions as to the condition of the pleasure-boat, its oars, and steering gear, the three proceed in the direction of the dock.

Arrived at the bottom of the boat stairs, Joseph's mistress, turning to him, says —

"Joe, old boy, Miss Lees and I are going for a row; but, as the day's fine, and the water smooth as glass, there's no need for our having you along with us. So you can stay here till we return."

The venerable retainer is taken aback by the proposal. He has never listened to the like before; for never before has the pleasure-boat gone to river without his being aboard. True, it is no business of his; still, as an ancient upholder of the family, with its honour and safety, he cannot assent to this strange innovation without entering protest. He does so, asking:

"But, Miss Gwen, what will your aunt say to it? She mayent like you young ladies to go rowin' by yourselves? Besides, miss, ye know there be some not werry nice people as moat meet ye on the river. 'Deed some v' the roughest and worst o' blaggarts."

"Nonsense, Joseph! The Wye isn't the Niger, where we might expect the fate of Mungo Park. Why, man, we'll be as safe on it as upon our own carriage drive, or the little fishpond. As for aunt, she won't say anything, because she won't know. Shan't, can't, unless you peach on us. The which, my amiable Joseph, you'll not do – I'm sure you will not."

"How'm I to help it, Miss Gwen? When you've goed off, some o' the house sarvints 'll see me here, an', hows'ever I keep my tongue in check – "

"Check it now!" abruptly breaks in the heiress, "and stop palavering, Joe. The house servants won't see you – not one of them. When we're off on the river, you'll be lying at anchor in those laurel bushes above. And to keep you to your anchorage, here's some shining metal."

Saying which, she slips several shillings into his hand, adding, as she notes the effect —

"Do you think it sufficiently heavy? If not – but never mind now. In our absence you can amuse yourself weighing and counting the coins. I fancy they'll do."

She is sure of it, knowing the man's weakness to be money, as it now proves.

Her argument is too powerful for his resistance, and he does not resist. Despite his solicitude for the welfare of the Wynn family, with his habitual regard of duty, the ancient servitor, refraining from further protest, proceeds to undo the knot of the *Gwendoline's* painter.

Stepping into the boat, the other Gwendoline takes the oars, Miss Lees seating herself to steer.

"All right! Now, Joe, give us a push off."

Joseph, having let all loose, does as directed, which sends the light craft clear out of its dock. Then, standing on the bottom step, with an adroit twirl of the thumb, he spreads the silver pieces over his palm – so that he may see how many – and, after counting and contemplating with pleased expression, slips them into his pocket, muttering to himself —

"I dar say it'll be all right. Miss Gwen's a oner to take care o' herself; an' the old lady neen't a know anythin' about it."

To make his last words good, he mounts briskly back up the boat stairs, and ensconces himself in the heart of a thick-leaved laurestinus – to the great discomfort of a pair of missel-thrushes, which have there made nest, and commenced incubation.

CHAPTER IV ON THE RIVER

The fair rower, vigorously bending to the oars, soon brings through the bye-way, and out into the main channel of the river.

Once in mid-stream she suspends her stroke, permitting the boat to drift down with the current; which, for a mile below Llangorren, flows gently through meadow land but a few feet above its own level, and flush with it in times of flood.

On this particular day there is none such – no rain having fallen for a week – and the Wye's water is pure and clear. Smooth, too, as the surface of a mirror; only where, now and then, a light zephyr, playing upon it, stirs up the tiniest of ripples; a swallow dips its scimitar wings; or a salmon in bolder dash causes a purl, with circling eddies, whose wavelets extend wider and wider as they subside. So, with the trace of their boat's keel; the furrow made by it instantly closing up, and the current resuming its tranquillity; while their reflected forms – too bright to be spoken of as shadows – now fall on one side, now on the other, as the capricious curving of the river makes necessary a change of course.

Never went boat down the Wye carrying freight more fair. Both girls are beautiful, though of opposite types, and in a different degree; while with one – Gwendolyn Wynn – no water Nymph, or Naiad, could compare; her warm beauty in its real embodiment far excelling any conception of fancy, or flight of the most romantic imagination.

She is not thinking of herself now; nor, indeed, does she much at any time – least of all in this wise. She is anything but vain; instead, like Vivian Ryecroft, rather underrates herself. And possibly more than ever this morning; for it is with him her thoughts are occupied – surmising whether his may be with her, but not in the most sanguine hope. Such a man must have looked on many a form fair as hers, won smiles of many a woman beautiful as she. How can she expect him to have resisted, or that his heart is still whole?

While thus conjecturing, she sits half turned on the thwart, with oars out of water, her eyes directed down the river, as though in search of something there. And they are; that something a white helmet hat.

She sees it not; and as the last thought has caused her some pain, she lets down the oars with a plunge, and recommences pulling; now, and as in spite, at each dip of the blades breaking her own bright image!

During all this while Ellen Lees is otherwise occupied; her attention partly taken up with the steering, but as much given to the shores on each side – to the green pasture-land, of which, at intervals, she has a view, with the white-faced "Herefords" straying over it, or standing grouped in the shade of some spreading trees, forming pastoral pictures worthy the pencil of a Morland or Cuyp. In clumps, or apart, tower up old poplars, through whose leaves, yet but half unfolded, can be seen the rounded burrs of the mistletoe, looking like nests of rooks. Here and there one overhangs the river's bank, shadowing still deep pools, where the ravenous pike lies in ambush for "salmon pink" and such small fry; while on a bare branch above may be observed another of their persecutors, the kingfisher, its brilliant azure plumage in strong contrast with everything on the earth around, and like a bit of sky fallen from above. At intervals it is seen darting from side to side, or in longer flight following the bend of the stream, and causing scamper among the minnows – itself startled and scared by the intrusion of the boat upon its normally peaceful domain.

Miss Lees, who is somewhat of a naturalist, and has been out with the District Field Club on more than one "ladies' day," makes note of all these things. As the *Gwendoline* glides on, she observes beds of the water ranunculus, whose snow-white corollas, bending to the current, are oft

rudely dragged beneath; while on the banks above, their cousins of golden sheen, mingling with the petals of yellow and purple loose-strife – for both grow here – with anemones, and pale, lemon-coloured daffodils – are but kissed, and gently fanned, by the balmy breath of spring.

Easily guiding the craft down the slow-flowing stream, she has a fine opportunity of observing Nature in its unrestrained action, and takes advantage of it. She looks with delighted eye at the freshly-opened flowers, and listens with charmed ear to the warbling of the birds – a chorus, on the Wye, sweet and varied as anywhere on earth. From many a deep-lying dell in the adjacent hills she can hear the song of the thrush, as if endeavouring to outdo, and cause one to forget, the matchless strain of its nocturnal rival, the nightingale; or making music for its own mate, now on the nest, and occupied with the cares of incubation. She hears, too, the bold whistling carol of the blackbird, the trill of the lark soaring aloft, the soft sonorous note of the cuckoo, blending with the harsh scream of the jay, and the laughing cackle of the green woodpecker – the last loud beyond all proportion to the size of the bird, and bearing close resemblance to the cry of an eagle. Strange coincidence besides, in the woodpecker being commonly called "eekol" – a name, on the Wye, pronounced with striking similarity to that of the royal bird!

Pondering upon this very theme, Ellen has taken no note of how her companion is employing herself. Nor is Miss Wynn thinking of either flowers, or birds. Only when a large one of the latter, a kite, shooting out from the summit of a wooded hill, stays awhile soaring overhead, does she give thought to what so interests the other.

"A pretty sight!" observes Ellen, as they sit looking up at the sharp, slender wings, and long bifurcated tail, cut clear as a cameo against the cloudless sky. "Isn't it a beautiful creature?"

"Beautiful, but bad," rejoins Gwen, "like many other animated things – too like, and too many of them. I suppose it's on the look-out for some innocent victim, and will soon be swooping down at it. Ah, me! it's a wicked world, Nell, with all its sweetness! One creature preying upon another, the strong seeking to devour the weak – these ever needing protection! Is it any wonder we poor women, weakest of all, should wish to –"

She stays her interrogatory, and sits in silence, abstractedly toying with the handles of the oars, which she is balancing above water.

"Wish to do what?" asked the other.

"Get married!" answers the heiress of Llangorren, elevating her arms, and letting the blades fall with a splash, as if to drown a speech so bold; withal, watching its effect upon her companion, as she repeats the question in a changed form. "Is it strange, Ellen?"

"I suppose not," Ellen timidly replies; blushing too, for she knows how nearly the subject concerns herself, and half believes the interrogatory aimed at her. "Not at all strange," she adds, more affirmatively. "Indeed very natural, I should say – that is, for women who *are* poor and weak, and really need a protector. But you, Gwen, who are neither one nor the other, but instead rich and strong, have no such need."

"I'm not so sure of that. With all my riches and strength – for I am a strong creature; as you see, can row this boat almost as ably as a man" – she gives a vigorous pull or two, as proof, then continuing, "Yes, and I think I've got great courage too. Yet, would you believe it, Nelly, notwithstanding all, I sometimes have a strange fear upon me?"

"Fear of what?"

"I can't tell. That's the strangest part of it; for I know of no actual danger. Some sort of vague apprehension that now and then oppresses me – lies on my heart, making it heavy as lead – sad and dark as the shadow of that wicked bird upon the water. Ugh!" she exclaims, taking her eyes off it, as if the sight, suggestive of evil, had brought on one of the fear spells she is speaking of.

"If it were a magpie," observes Ellen laughingly, "you might view it with suspicion. Most people do – even some who deny being superstitious. But a kite – I never heard of that being ominous of evil. No more its shadow; which as you see it there is but a small speck compared with the wide bright

surface around. If your future sorrows be only in like proportion to your joys, they won't signify much. See! Both the bird and its shadow are passing away – as will your troubles, if you ever have any."

"Passing – perhaps, soon to return. Ha! look there. As I've said!"

This, as the kite swoops down upon a wood-quest, and strikes at it with outstretched talons. Missing it, nevertheless; for the strong-winged pigeon, forewarned by the other's shadow, has made a quick double in its flight, and so shunned the deadly clutch. Still, it is not yet safe; its tree covert is far off on the wooded slope, and the tyrant continues the chase. But the hawk has its enemy too, in a gamekeeper with his gun. Suddenly it is seen to suspend the stroke of its wings, and go whirling downward; while a shot rings out on the air, and the cushat, unharmed, flies on for the hill.

"Good!" exclaims Gwen, resting the oars across her knees, and clapping her hands in an ecstasy of delight. "The innocent has escaped!"

"And for that *you* ought to be assured, as well as gratified," puts in the companion, "taking it as a symbol of yourself, and those imaginary dangers you've been dreaming about."

"True," assents Miss Wynn musingly; "but, as you see, the bird found a protector – just by chance, and in the nick of time."

"So will you; without any chance, and at such time as may please you."

"Oh!" exclaims Gwen, as if endowed with fresh courage. "I don't want one – not I! I'm strong to stand alone." Another tug at the oars to show it. "No," she continues, speaking between the plunges, "I want no protector – at least not yet: nor for a long while."

"But there's one wants you," says the companion, accompanying her words with an interrogative glance. "And soon – soon as he can have you."

"Indeed! I suppose you mean Master George Shenstone. Have I hit the nail upon the head?"

"You have."

"Well; what of him?"

"Only that everybody observes his attentions to you."

"Everybody is a very busy body. Being so observant, I wonder if this everybody has also observed how I receive them?"

"Indeed, yes."

"How then?"

"With favour. 'Tis said you think highly of him."

"And so I do. There are worse men in the world than George Shenstone – possibly few better. And many a good woman would, and might, be glad to become his wife. For all, I know one of a very indifferent sort who wouldn't – that's Gwen Wynn."

"But he's very good-looking!" Ellen urges; "the handsomest gentleman in the neighbourhood. Everybody says so."

"There your everybody would be wrong again – if they thought as they say. But they don't. I know one who thinks somebody else much handsomer than he."

"Who?" asks Miss Lees, looking puzzled; for she has never heard of Gwendoline having a preference, save that spoken of.

"The Rev. William Musgrave," replies Gwen, in turn bending inquisitive eyes on her companion, to whose cheeks the answer has brought a flush of colour, with a spasm of pain at the heart. Is it possible her rich relative – the heiress of Llangorren Court – can have set her eyes upon the poor curate of Llangorren Church, where her own thoughts have been secretly straying? With an effort to conceal them now, as the pain caused her, she rejoins interrogatively, but in faltering tone, —

"You think Mr. Musgrave handsomer than Mr. Shenstone?"

"Indeed I don't! Who says I do?"

"Oh – I thought," stammers out the other, relieved – too pleased just then to stand up for the superiority of the curate's personal appearance – "I thought you meant it that way."

"But I didn't. All I said was, that somebody thinks so; and that isn't I. Shall I tell you who it is?"

Ellen's heart is again quiet; she does not need to be told, already divining who it is – herself.

"You may as well let me," pursues Gwen, in a bantering way. "Do you suppose, Miss Lees, I haven't penetrated your secret long ago? Why, I knew it last Christmas, when you were assisting his demure reverence to decorate the church! Who could fail to observe that pretty hand play, when you two were twining the ivy around the altar-rail? And the holly, you were both so careless in handling, I wonder it didn't prick your fingers to the bone! Why, Nell, 'twas as plain to me, as if I'd been at it myself. Besides, I've seen the same thing scores of times, so has everybody in the parish. Ha! you see, I'm not the only one with whose name this everybody has been busy; the difference being, that about me they've been mistaken, while concerning yourself they haven't; instead, speaking pretty near the truth. Come, now, confess! Am I not right? Don't have any fear; you can trust me."

She does confess; though not in words. Her silence is equally eloquent; drooping eyelids, and blushing cheeks, making that eloquence emphatic. She loves Mr. Musgrave.

"Enough!" says Gwendoline, taking it in this sense; "and, since you have been candid with me, I'll repay you in the same coin. But, mind you, it mustn't go further."

"Oh! certainly not," assents the other, in her restored confidence about the curate willing to promise anything in the world.

"As I've said," proceeds Miss Wynn, "there are worse men in the world than George Shenstone, and but few better. Certainly none behind hounds, and I'm told he's the crack shot of the county, and the best billiard player of his club – all accomplishments that have weight with us women – some of us. More still; he's deemed good-looking, and is, as you say, known to be of good family and fortune. For all, he lacks one thing that's wanted by –"

She stays her speech till dipping the oars – their splash, simultaneous with, and half-drowning, the words, "Gwen Wynn."

"What is it?" asks Ellen, referring to the deficiency thus hinted at.

"On my word, I can't tell – for the life of me I cannot. It's something undefinable; which one feels without seeing or being able to explain – just as ether, or electricity. Possibly it is the last. At all events, it's the thing that makes us women fall in love; as no doubt you've found when your fingers were – were – well, so near being pricked by that holly. Ha, ha, ha!"

With a merry peal she once more sets to rowing; and for a time no speech passes between them, the only sounds heard being the songs of the birds, in sweet symphony with the rush of the water along the boat's sides, and the rumbling of the oars in their rowlocks.

But for a brief interval is their silence between them, Miss Wynn again breaking it by a startled exclamation: —

"See!"

"Where? where?"

"Up yonder! We've been talking of kites and magpies. Behold, two birds of worse augury than either!"

They are passing the mouth of a little affluent stream, up which at some distance are seen two men, one of them seated in a small boat, the other standing on the bank talking down to him. He in the boat is a stout, thick-set fellow in velveteens and coarse fur cap, the one above a spare thin man, habited in a suit of black – of clerical, or rather sacerdotal, cut. Though both are partially screened by the foliage, the little stream running between wooded banks, Miss Wynn has recognised them. So, too, does the companion; who rejoins, as if speaking to herself —

"One's the French priest who has a chapel up the river, on the opposite side; the other's that fellow who's said to be such an incorrigible poacher."

"Priest and poacher it is! An oddly-assorted pair; though in a sense not so ill-matched either. I wonder what they're about up there, with their heads so close together. They appeared as if not wishing we should see them. Didn't it strike you so, Nelly?"

The men are now out of sight, the boat having passed the rivulet's mouth.

"Indeed, yes," answered Miss Lees; "the priest, at all events. He drew back among the bushes on seeing us."

"I'm sure his reverence is welcome. I've no desire ever to set eyes on him – quite the contrary."

"I often meet him on the roads."

"I too – and off them. He seems to be about everywhere skulking and prying into people's affairs. I noticed him the last day of our hunting, among the rabble – on foot, of course. He was close to my horse, and kept watching me out of his owlish eyes all the time; so impertinently I could have laid the whip over his shoulders. There's something repulsive about the man; I can't bear the sight of him."

"He's said to be a great friend and very intimate associate of your worthy cousin, Mr. – ."

"Don't name *him*, Nell! I'd rather not think, much less talk of him. Almost the last words my father ever spoke – never to let Lewin Murdock cross the threshold of Llangorren. No doubt, he had his reasons. My word! this day with all its sunny brightness seems to abound in dark omens. Birds of prey, priests, and poachers! It's enough to bring on one of my fear fits. I now rather regret leaving Joseph behind. Well, we must make haste and get home again."

"Shall I turn the boat back?" asks the steerer.

"No; not just yet. I don't wish to repass those two uncanny creatures. Better leave them awhile, so that on returning we mayn't see them, to disturb the priest's equanimity – more like his conscience."

The reason is not exactly as assigned; but Miss Lees, accepting it without suspicion, holds the tiller cords so as to keep the course on down stream.

CHAPTER V

DANGERS AHEAD

For another half-mile, or so, the *Gwendoline* is propelled onward, though not running trimly; the fault being in her at the oars. With thoughts still preoccupied, she now and then forgets her stroke, or gives it unequally – so that the boat zig-zags from side to side, and, but for a more careful hand at the tiller, would bring up against the bank.

Observing her abstraction, as also her frequent turning to look down the river – but without suspicion of what is causing it – Miss Lees at length inquires, —

"What's the matter with you, Gwen?"

"Oh, nothing," she evasively answers, bringing back her eyes to the boat, and once more giving attention to the oars.

"But why are you looking so often below? I've noticed you do so at least a score of times."

If the questioner could but divine the thoughts at that moment in the other's mind, she would have no need thus to interrogate, but would know that below there is another boat, with a man in it who possesses that unseen something, like ether or electricity, and to catch sight of whom Miss Wynn has been so oft straining her eyes. She has not given all her confidence to the companion.

Not receiving immediate answer, Ellen again asked —

"Is there any danger you fear?"

"None that I know of – at least, for a long way down. Then there are some rough places."

"But you are pulling so unsteadily! It takes all my strength to keep in the middle of the river."

"Then you pull, and let me do the steering," returns Miss Wynn, pretending to be in a pout; as she speaks starting up from the thwart, and leaving the oars in their thole pins.

Of course, the other does not object; and soon they have changed places.

But Gwen in the stern behaves no better than when seated amidships. The boat still keeps going astray, the fault now in the steerer.

Soon something more than a crooked course calls the attention of both, for a time engrossing it. They have rounded an abrupt bend, and got into a reach where the river runs with troubled surface and great velocity – so swift there is no need to use oars down stream, while upward 'twill take stronger arms than theirs. Caught in its current, and rapidly, yet smoothly, borne on, for a while they do not think of this. Only a short while; then the thought comes to them in the shape of a dilemma – Miss Lees being the first to perceive it.

"Gracious goodness!" she exclaims, "what are we to do? We can never row back up this rough water – it runs so strong here!"

"That's true," says Gwen, preserving her composure. "I don't think we could."

"But what's to be the upshot? Joseph will be waiting for us, and auntie sure to know all, if we shouldn't get back in time."

"That's true also," again observes Miss Wynn assentingly, and with an admirable *sang froid*, which causes surprise to the companion.

Then succeeds a short interval of silence, broken by an exclamatory phrase of three short words from the lips of Miss Wynn.

They are – "I have it!"

"What have you?" joyfully asks Ellen.

"The way to get back – without much trouble, and without disturbing the arrangements we've made with old Joe the least bit."

"Explain yourself!"

"We'll keep on down the river to Rock Weir. There we can leave the boat, and walk across the neck to Llangorren. It isn't over a mile, though it's five times that by the course of the stream. At the Weir we can engage some water fellow to take back the *Gwendoline* to her moorings. Meanwhile, we'll make all haste, slip into the grounds unobserved, get to the boat-dock in good time, and give Joseph the cue to hold his tongue about what's happened. Another half-crown will tie it firm and fast, I know."

"I suppose there's no help for it," says the companion, assenting, "and we must do as you say."

"Of course we must. As you see, without thinking of it, we've drifted into a very cascade, and are now a long way down it. Only a regular waterman could pull up again. Ah! 'twould take the toughest of them, I should say. So —*nolens volens*— we'll have to go on to Rock Weir, which can't be more than a mile now. You may feather your oars, and float a bit. But, by the way, I must look more carefully to the steering. Now, that I remember, there are some awkward bars and eddies about here, and we can't be far from them. I think they're just below the next bend."

So saying, she sets herself square in the stern sheets, and closes her fingers firmly upon the tiller cords.

They glide on, but now in silence; the little flurry, with the prospect of peril ahead, making speech inopportune.

Soon they are round the bend spoken of, discovering to their view a fresh reach of the river; when again the steerer becomes neglectful of her duty, the expression upon her features, late a little troubled, suddenly changing to cheerfulness — almost joy. Nor is it that the dangerous places have been passed; they are still ahead, and at some distance below. But there is something else ahead to account for the quick transformation — a row-boat drawn up by the river's edge, with men upon the bank beside.

Over Gwen Wynn's countenance comes another change, sudden as before, and as before, its expression reversed. She has mistaken the boat; it is not that of the handsome fisherman! Instead, a four-oared craft, manned by four men, for there is this number on the bank. The angler's skiff had in it only two — himself and his oarsman.

But she has no need to count heads, nor scrutinise faces. Those now before her eyes are all strange, and far from well favoured; not any of them in the least like the one which has so prepossessed her. And while making this observation another is forced upon her — that their natural plainness is not improved by what they have been doing, and are still — drinking.

Just as the young ladies made this observation, the four men, hearing oars, face towards them. For a moment there is silence, while they in the *Gwendoline* are being scanned by the quartette on the shore. Through maudlin eyes, possibly, the fellows mistake them for ordinary country lasses, with whom they may take liberties. Whether or not one cries out —

"Petticoats, by gee — ingo!"

"Ay!" exclaims another, "a pair o' them. An' sweet wenches they be, too. Look at she wi' the gooldy hair — bright as the sun itself. Lord, meeats! if we had she down in the pit, that head o' her ud gi'e as much light as a dozen Davy's lamps. An't she a bewty? I'm boun' to have a smack fra them red lips o' hers."

"No," protests the first speaker, "she be myen. First spoke soonest sarved. That's Forest law."

"Never mind, Rob," rejoins the other, surrendering his claim, "she may be the grandest to look at, but not the goodiest to go. I'll lay odds the black 'un beats her at kissin'. Le's get grup o' 'em an' see! Coom on, meeats!"

Down go the drinking vessels, all four making for their boat, into which they scramble, each laying hold of an oar.

Up to this time the ladies have not felt actual alarm. The strange men being evidently intoxicated, they might expect — were, indeed, half-prepared for — coarse speech; perhaps indelicate, but nothing beyond. Within a mile of their own home, and still within the boundary of the Llangorren

land, how could they think of danger such as is threatening? For that there is danger they are now sensible – becoming convinced of it as they draw nearer to the four fellows, and get a better view of them. Impossible to mistake the men – roughs from the Forest of Dean, or some other mining district, their but half-washed faces showing it; characters not very gentle at any time, but very rude, even dangerous, when drunk. This known from many a tale told, many a Petty and Quarter Sessions report read in the county newspapers. But it is visible in their countenances, too intelligible in their speech – part of which the ladies have overheard – as in the action they are taking.

They in the pleasure-boat no longer fear, or think of bars and eddies below. No whirlpool, not Maelstrom itself, could fright them as those four men. For it is fear of a something more to be dreaded than drowning.

Withal, Gwendoline Wynn is not so much dismayed as to lose presence of mind. Nor is she at all excited, but cool as when caught in the rapid current. Her feats in the hunting field, and dashing drives down the steep "pitches" of the Herefordshire roads, have given her strength of nerve to face any danger; and, as her timid companion trembles with affright, muttering her fears, she but says —

"Keep quiet, Nell! Don't let them see you're scared. It's not the way to treat such as they, and will only encourage them to come at us."

This counsel, before the men have moved, fails in effect; for as they are seen rushing down the bank and into their boat, Ellen Lees utters a terrified shriek, scarcely leaving her breath to add the words —

"Dear Gwen! what shall we do?"

"Change places," is the reply, calmly but hurriedly made. "Give me the oars! Quick!"

While speaking she has started up from the stern, and is making for 'midships. The other, comprehending, has risen at the same instant, leaving the oars to trail.

By this the roughs has shoved off from the bank, and are making for mid-stream, their purpose evident – to intercept the *Gwendoline*. But the other Gwendoline has now got settled to the oars; and pulling with all her might, has still a chance to shoot past them.

In a few seconds the boats are but a couple of lengths apart, the heavy craft coming bow-on for the lighter; while the faces of those in her, slewed over their shoulders, show terribly forbidding. A glance tells Gwen Wynn 'twould be idle making appeal to them; nor does she. Still she is not silent. Unable to restrain her indignation, she calls out —

"Keep back, fellows! If you run against us 'twill go ill for you. Don't suppose you'll escape punishment."

"Bah!" responds one, "we an't a-frightened at yer threats – not we. That an't the way wi' us Forest chaps. Besides, we don't mean ye any much harm. Only gi'e us a kiss all round, an' then – maybe, we'll let ye go."

"Yes; kisses all round!" cries another. "That's the toll ye're got to pay at our pike; an' a bit o' squeeze by way o' boot."

The coarse jest elicits a peal of laughter from the other three. Fortunately for those who are its butt, since it takes the attention of the rowers from their oars, and before they can recover a stroke or two lost, the pleasure-boat glides past them, and goes dancing on, as did the fishing skiff.

With a yell of disappointment they bring their boat's head round, and row after; now straining at their oars with all strength. Luckily, they lack skill; which, fortunately for herself, the rower of the pleasure-boat possesses. It stands her in stead now, and, for a time, the *Gwendoline* leads without losing ground. But the struggle is unequal, four to one – strong men against a weak woman! Verily is she called on to make good her words, when saying she could row almost as ably as a man.

And so does she for a time. Withal it may not avail her. The task is too much for her woman's strength, fast becoming exhausted. While her strokes grow feebler, those of the pursuers seem to get stronger. For they are in earnest now; and, despite the bad management of their boat, it is rapidly gaining on the other.

"Pull, meeats!" cries one, the roughest of the gang, and apparently the ringleader, "pull like – hic – hic!" – his drunken tongue refuses the blasphemous word. "If ye lay me 'longside that girl wi' the gooc – goeeldy hair, I'll stan' someat stiff at the 'Kite's Nest' whens we get hic – 'ome."

"All right, Bob!" is the rejoinder, "we'll do that. Ne'er a fear."

The prospect of "someat stiff" at the Forest hostelry inspires them to increase their exertion, and their speed proportionately augmented, no longer leaves a doubt of their being able to come up with the pursued boat. Confident, of it they commence jeering the ladies – "wenches" they call them – in speech profane, as repulsive.

For these, things look black. They are but a couple of boats' length ahead, and near below is a sharp turn in the river's channel; rounding which they will lose ground, and can scarcely fail to be overtaken. What then?

As Gwen Wynn asks herself the question, the anger late flashing in her eyes gives place to a look of keen anxiety. Her glances are sent to right, to left, and again over her shoulder, as they have been all day doing, but now with very different design. Then she was searching for a man, with no further thought than to feast her eyes on him; now she is looking for the same, in hopes he may save her from insult – it may be worse.

There is no man in sight – no human being on either side of the river! On the right a grim cliff rising sheer, with some goats clinging to its ledges. On the left a grassy slope with browsing sheep, their lambs astretch at their feet; but no shepherd, no one to whom she can call "Help!"

Distractedly she continues to tug at the oars; despairingly as the boats draw near the bend. Before rounding it she will be in the hands of those horrid men – embraced by their brawny, bear-like arms!

The thought restrengthens her own, giving them the energy of desperation. So inspired, she makes a final effort to elude the ruffian pursuers, and succeeds in turning the point.

Soon as round it, her face brightens up, joy dances in her eyes, as with panting breath she exclaims, —

"We're saved, Nelly! We're saved! Thank Heaven for it!"

Nelly does thank Heaven, rejoiced to hear they are saved; but without in the least comprehending how!

CHAPTER VI

A DUCKING DESERVED

Captain Ryecroft has been but a few minutes at his favourite fishing-place – just long enough to see his tackle in working condition, and cast his line across the water; as he does the last, saying —

"I shouldn't wonder, Wingate, if we don't see a salmon to-day. I fear that sky's too bright for his dainty kingship to mistake feathers for flies."

"Ne'er a doubt the fish'll be a bit shy," returns the boatman; "but," he adds, assigning their shyness to a different cause, "'tain't so much the colour o' the sky; more like it's that lot of Foresters has frightened them, with their hulk o' a boat makin' as much noise as a Bristol steamer. Wonder what brings such rubbish on the river anyhow. They han't no business on't; an' in my opinion theer ought to be a law 'gainst it – same's for trespassin' after game."

"That would be rather hard lines, Jack. These mining gentry need outdoor recreation as much as any other sort of people. Rather more I should say, considering that they're compelled to pass the greater part of their time underground. When they emerge from the bowels of the earth to disport themselves on its surface, it's but natural they should like a little aquatics; which you, by choice, an amphibious creature, cannot consistently blame them for. Those we've just met are doubtless out for a holiday, which accounts for their having taken too much drink – in some sense an excuse for their conduct. I don't think it at all strange seeing them on the water."

"Their faces han't seed much o' it anyhow," observes the waterman, seeming little satisfied with the Captain's reasoning. "And as for their being out on holiday, if I an't mistook, it be holiday as lasts all the year round. Two o' 'em may be miners – them as got the grimiest faces. As for t'other two, I don't think eyther ever touch't pick or shovel in their lives. I've seed both hangin' about Lydbrook, which be a queery place. Besides, one I've seed 'long wi' a man whose company is enough to gi'e a saint a bad character – that's Coracle Dick. Take my word for 't, Captain, there ain't a honest miner 'mong that lot – eyther in the way of iron or coal. If there wor I'd be the last man to go again them havin' their holiday; 'cepting I don't think they ought to take it on the river. Ye see what comes o' sich as they humbuggin' about in a boat?"

At the last clause of this speech – its Conservatism due to a certain professional jealousy – the Hussar officer cannot resist smiling. He had half forgotten the rudeness of the revellers – attributing it to intoxication – and more than half repented of his threat to bring them to a reckoning, which might not be called for, but might, and in all likelihood would, be inconvenient. Now, reflecting on Wingate's words, the frown which had passed from off his face again returns to it. He says nothing, however, but sits rod in hand, less thinking of the salmon than how he can chastise the "d – d scoun'rels," as his companion has pronounced them, should he, as he anticipates, again come in collision with them.

"Lissen!" exclaims the waterman; "that's them shoutin'! Comin' this way, I take it. What should we do to 'em, Captain?"

The salmon-fisher is half determined to reel in his line, lay aside the rod, and take out a revolving pistol he chances to have in his pocket – not with any intention to fire it at the fellows, but only frighten them.

"Yes," goes on Wingate, "they be droppin' down again – sure; I dar' say they've found the tide a bit too strong for 'em up above. An' I don't wonder; sich louty chaps as they thinkin' they cud guide a boat 'bout the Wye! Jist like mountin' hogs a-horseback!"

At this fresh sally of professional spleen the soldier again smiles, but says nothing, uncertain what action he should take, or how soon he may be called on to commence it. Almost instantly after he is called on to take action, though not against the four riotous Foresters, but a silly salmon, which

has conceived a fancy for his fly. A purl on the water, with a pluck quick succeeding, tells of one on the hook, while the whizz of the wheel and rapid rolling out of catgut proclaims it a fine one.

For some minutes neither he nor his oarsman has eye or ear for aught save securing the fish, and both bend all their energies to "fighting" it. The line runs out, to be spun up and run off again; his river majesty, maddened at feeling himself so oddly and painfully restrained in his desperate efforts to escape, now rushing in one direction, now another, all the while the angler skilfully playing him, the equally skilled oarsman keeping the boat in concerted accord.

Absorbed by their distinct lines of endeavour they do not hear high words, mingled with exclamations, coming from above; or hearing, do not heed, supposing them to proceed from the four men they had met, in all likelihood now more inebriated than ever. Not till they have well-nigh finished their "fight," and the salmon, all but subdued, is being drawn towards the boat – Wingate, gaff in hand, bending over ready to strike it – not till then do they note other sounds, which even at that critical moment make them careless about the fish, in its last feeble throes, when its capture is good as sure, causing Ryecroft to stop winding his wheel, and stand listening.

Only for an instant. Again the voices of men, but now also heard the cry of a woman, as if she sending it forth were in danger or distress!

They have no need for conjecture, nor are they long left to it. Almost simultaneously they see a boat sweeping round the bend, with another close in its wake, evidently in chase, as told by the attitudes and gestures of those occupying both – in the one pursued two young ladies, in that pursuing four rough men readily recognisable. At a glance the Hussar officer takes in the situation – the waterman as well. The sight saves a salmon's life, and possibly two innocent women from outrage. Down goes Ryecroft's rod, the boatman simultaneously dropping his gaff; as he does so hearing thundered in his ears —

"To your oars, Jack! Make straight for them! Row with all your might!"

Jack Wingate needs neither command to act nor word to stimulate him. As a man he remembers the late indignity to himself; as a gallant fellow he now sees others submitted to the like. No matter about their being ladies; enough that they are women suffering insult; and more than enough at seeing who are the insulters.

In ten seconds' time he is on his thwart, oars in hand, the officer at the tiller; and in five more, the *Mary*, brought stem up stream, is surging against the current, going swiftly as if with it. She is set for the big boat pursuing – not now to shun a collision, but seek it.

As yet some two hundred yards are between the chased craft and that hastening to its rescue. Ryecroft, measuring the distance with his eyes, is in thought tracing out a course of action. His first instinct was to draw a pistol, and stop the pursuit with a shot. But no; it would not be English. Nor does he need resort to such deadly weapon. True there will be four against two; but what of it?

"I think we can manage them, Jack," he mutters through his teeth, "I'm good for two of them – the biggest and best."

"An' I t'other two – sich clumsy chaps as them! Ye can trust me takin' care o' 'em, Captin."

"I know it. Keep to your oars till I give the word to drop them."

"They don't 'pear to a sighted us yet. Too drunk I take it. Like as not when they see what's comin' they'll sheer off."

"They shan't have the chance. I intend steering bow dead on to them. Don't fear the result. If the *Mary* gets damaged I'll stand the expense of repairs."

"Ne'er a mind 'bout that, Captain. I'd gi'e the price o' a new boat to see the lot chestised – specially that big black fellow as did most o' the talkin'."

"You shall see it, and soon!"

He lets go the ropes, to disembarass himself of his angling accoutrements; which he hurriedly does, flinging them at his feet. When he again takes hold of the steering tackle the *Mary* is within six lengths of the advancing boats, both now nearly together, the bow of the pursuer overlapping

the stern of the pursued. Only two of the men are at the oars; two standing up, one amidships, the other at the head.

Both are endeavouring to lay hold of the pleasure-boat, and bring it alongside. So occupied they see not the fishing skiff, while the two rowing, with backs turned, are equally unconscious of its approach. They only wonder at the "wenches," as they continue to call them, taking it so coolly, for these do not seem so much frightened as before.

"Coom, sweet lass!" cries he in the bow – the black fellow it is – addressing Miss Wynn. "Tain't no use you tryin' to get away. I must ha' my kiss. So drop yer oars, and ge'et to me!"

"Insolent fellow!" she exclaims, her eyes ablaze with anger. "Keep your hands off my boat! I command you!"

"But I ain't to be c'mmanded, ye minx. Not till I've had a smack o' them lips; an' by G – I s'll have it."

Saying which he reaches out to the full stretch of his long, ape-like arms, and with one hand succeeds in grasping the boat's gunwale, while with the other he gets hold of the lady's dress, and commences dragging her towards him.

Gwen Wynn neither screams, nor calls "Help!" She knows it is near.

"Hands off!" cries a voice in a volume of thunder, simultaneous with a dull thud against the side of the larger boat, followed by a continued crashing as her gunwale goes in. The roughs, facing round, for the first time see the fishing skiff, and know why it is there. But they are too far gone in drink to heed or submit – at least their leader seems determined to resist. Turning savagely on Ryecroft, he stammers out —

"Hic – ic – who the blazes be you, Mr. White Cap? An' what d'ye want wi' me?"

"You'll see."

At the words he bounds from his own boat into the other; and, before the fellow can raise an arm, those of Ryecroft are around him in tight hug. In another minute the hulking scoundrel is hoisted from his feet, as though but a feather's weight, and flung overboard.

Wingate has meanwhile also boarded, grappled on to the other on foot, and is threatening to serve him the same.

A plunge, with a wild cry – the man going down like a stone; another, as he comes up among his own bubbles; and a third, yet wilder, as he feels himself sinking for the second time!

The two at the oars, scared into a sort of sobriety, one of them cries out —

"Lor' o' mercy! Rob'll be drowned! He can't sweem a stroke."

"He's a-drownin' now!" adds the other.

It is true. For Rob has again come to the surface, and shouts with feeblor voice, while his arms tossed frantically about tell of his being in the last throes of suffocation!

Ryecroft looks regretful – rather alarmed. In chastising the fellow he had gone too far. He must save him!

Quick as the thought off goes his coat, with his boots kicked into the bottom of the boat; then himself over its side!

A splendid swimmer, with a few bold sweeps he is by the side of the drowning man. Not a moment too soon – just as the latter is going down for the third, likely the last time. With the hand of the officer grasping his collar, he is kept above water. But not yet saved. Both are now imperilled – the rescuer and he he would rescue. For, far from the boats, they have drifted into a dangerous eddy, and are being whirled rapidly round!

A cry from Gwen Wynn – a cry of real alarm, now – the first she has uttered! But before she can repeat it, her fears are allayed – set to rest again – at sight of still another rescuer. The young waterman has leaped back to his own boat, and is pulling straight for the strugglers. A few strokes, and he is beside them; then, dropping his oars, he soon has both safe in the skiff.

The half-drowned, but wholly frightened Rob is carried back to his comrades' boat, and dumped in among them; Wingate handling him as though he were but a wet coal sack, or piece of old tarpaulin. Then giving the "Forest chaps" a bit of his mind he bids them "be off."

And off go they, without saying word; as they drop down stream their downcast looks showing them subdued, if not quite sobered, and rather feeling grateful than aggrieved.

The other two boats soon proceed upward, the pleasure craft leading. But not now rowed by its owner; for Captain Ryecroft has hold of the oars. In the haste, or the pleasurable moments succeeding, he has forgotten all about the salmon left struggling on his line, or caring not to return for it, most likely will lose rod, line, and all. What matter? If he has lost a fine fish, he may have won the finest woman on the Wye!

And she has lost nothing – risks nothing now – not even the chiding of her aunt! For now the pleasure-boat will be back in its dock in time to keep undisturbed the understanding with Joseph.

CHAPTER VII

AN INVETERATE NOVEL READER

While these exciting incidents are passing upon the river, Llangorren Court is wrapped in that stately repose becoming an aristocratic residence – especially where an elderly spinster is head of the house, and there are no noisy children to go romping about. It is thus with Llangorren, whose ostensible mistress is Miss Linton, the aunt and legal guardian already alluded to. But, though presiding over the establishment, it is rather in the way of ornamental figure-head; since she takes little to do with its domestic affairs, leaving them to a skilled housekeeper who carries the keys.

Kitchen matters are not much to Miss Linton's taste, being a dame of the antique brocaded type, with pleasant memories of the past, that go back to Bath and Cheltenham; where, in their days of glory, as hers of youth, she was a belle, and did her share of dancing, with a due proportion of flirting, at the Regency balls. No longer able to indulge in such delightful recreations, the memory of them has yet charms for her, and she keeps it alive and warm by daily perusal of the *Morning Post* with a fuller hebdomadal feast from the *Court Journal*, and other distributors of fashionable intelligence. In addition she reads no end of novels, her favourites being those which tell of Cupid in his most romantic escapades and experiences, though not always the chastest. Of the prurient trash there is a plenteous supply, furnished by scribblers of both sexes, who ought to know better, and doubtless do; but knowing also how difficult it is to make their lucubrations interesting within the legitimate lines of literary art, and how easy out of them, thus transgress the moralities.

Miss Linton need have no fear that the impure stream will cease to flow, any more than the limpid waters of the Wye. Nor has she; but reads on, devouring volume after volume, in triunes as they issue from the press, and are sent her from the Circulating Library.

At nearly all hours of the day, and some of the night, does she so occupy herself. Even on this same bright April morn, when all nature rejoices, and every living thing seems to delight in being out of doors – when the flowers expand their petals to catch the kisses of the warm Spring sun – Dorothea Linton is seated in a shady corner of the drawing-room, up to her ears in a three-volume novel, still odorous of printer's ink and binder's paste; absorbed in a love dialogue between a certain Lord Lutestring and a rustic damsel – daughter of one of his tenant farmers – whose life he is doing his best to blight, and with much likelihood of succeeding. If he fail, it will not be for want of will on his part, nor desire of the author to save the imperilled one. He will make the tempted iniquitous as the tempter, should this seem to add interest to the tale, or promote the sale of the book.

Just as his lordship has gained a point and the girl is about to give way, Miss Linton herself receives a shock, caused by a rat-tat at the drawing-room door, light, such as well-trained servants are accustomed to give before entering a room occupied by master or mistress.

To her command "Come in!" a footman presents himself, silver waiter in hand, on which is a card.

She is more than annoyed, almost angry, as taking the card, she reads —

"Reverend William Musgrave."

Only to think of being thus interrupted on the eve of such an interesting climax, which seemed about to seal the fate of the farmer's daughter.

It is fortunate for his Reverence, that before entering within the room another visitor is announced, and ushered in along with him. Indeed the second caller is shown in first; for, although George Shenstone rung the front door bell after Mr. Musgrave had stepped inside the hall, there is no domestic of Llangorren but knows the difference between a rich baronet's son and a poor parish

curate, as which should have precedence. To this nice, if not very delicate appreciation, the Reverend William is now indebted more than he is aware. It has saved him from an outburst of Miss Linton's rather tart temper, which, under the circumstances, otherwise he would have caught. For it so chances that the son of Sir George Shenstone is a great favourite with the old lady of Llangorren; welcome at all times, even amid the romantic gallantries of Lord Lutestring. Not that the young country gentleman has anything in common with the titled Lothario, who is habitually a dweller in cities. Instead, the former is a frank, manly fellow, devoted to field sports and rural pastimes, a little brusque in manner, but for all well-bred, and, what is even better, well-behaved. There is nothing odd in his calling at that early hour. Sir George is an old friend of the Wynn family – was an intimate associate of Gwen's deceased father – and both he and his son have been accustomed to look in at Llangorren Court *san ceremonie*.

No more is Mr. Musgrave's matutinal visit out of order. Though but the curate, he is in full charge of parish duties, the rector being not only aged but an absentee – so long away from the neighbourhood as to have become almost a myth to it. For this reason his vicarial representative can plead scores of excuses for presenting himself at "The Court." There is the school, the church choir, and clothing club, to say nought of neighbouring news, which on most mornings make him a welcome visitor to Miss Linton; and no doubt would on this, but for the glamour thrown around her by the fascinations of the dear delightful Lutestring. It even takes all her partiality for Mr. Shenstone to remove its spell, and get him vouchsafed friendly reception.

"Miss Linton," he says, speaking first, "I've just dropped in to ask if the young ladies would go for a ride. The day's so fine, I thought they might like to."

"Ah, indeed," returns the spinster, holding out her fingers to be touched, but, under the plea of being a little invalided, excusing herself from rising. "Yes; no doubt they would like it very much."

Mr. Shenstone is satisfied with the reply; but less the curate, who neither rides nor has a horse. And less Shenstone himself – indeed both – as the lady proceeds. They have been listening, with ears all alert, for the sound of soft footsteps and rustling dresses. Instead, they hear words, not only disappointing, but perplexing.

"Nay, I am sure," continues Miss Linton, with provoking coolness, "they would have been glad to go riding with you; delighted –"

"But why can't they?" asked Shenstone impatiently, interrupting.

"Because the thing's impossible; they've already gone rowing."

"Indeed!" cry both gentlemen in a breath, seeming alike vexed by the intelligence, Shenstone mechanically interrogating:

"On the river?"

"Certainly?" answers the lady, looking surprised. "Why, George; where else could they go rowing? You don't suppose they've brought the boat up to the fishpond!"

"Oh, no," he stammers out. "I beg pardon. How very stupid of me to ask such a question. I was only wondering why Miss Gwen – that is, I am a little astonished – but – perhaps you'll think it impertinent of me to ask another question?"

"Why should I? What is it?"

"Only whether – whether she – Miss Gwen, I mean – said anything about riding to-day?"

"Not a word – at least not to me."

"How long since they went off – may I know, Miss Linton?"

"Oh, hours ago! Very early, indeed – just after taking breakfast. I wasn't down myself – as I've told you, not feeling very well this morning. But Gwen's maid informs me they left the house then, and I presume they went direct to the river."

"Do you think they'll be out long?" earnestly interrogates Shenstone.

"I should hope not," returns the ancient toast of Cheltenham, with aggravating indifference, for Lutestring is not quite out of her thoughts. "There's no knowing, however. Miss Wynn is accustomed to come and go, without much consulting me."

This with some acerbity – possibly from the thought that the days of her legal guardianship are drawing to a close, which will make her a less important personage at Llangorren.

"Surely they won't be out all day," timidly suggests the curate; to which she makes no rejoinder, till Mr. Shenstone puts it in the shape of an inquiry.

"Is it likely they will, Miss Linton?"

"I should say not. More like they'll be hungry, and that will bring them home. What's the hour now? I've been reading a very interesting book, and quite forgot myself. Is it possible?" she exclaims, looking at the ormolu dial on the mantel-shelf. "Ten minutes to one! How time does fly, to be sure! I couldn't have believed it near so late – almost luncheon time! Of course you'll stay, gentlemen? As for the girls, if they are not back in time they'll have to go without. Punctuality is the rule of this house – always will be with me. I shan't wait one minute for them."

"But, Miss Linton, they may have returned from the river, and are now somewhere about the grounds. Shall I run down to the boat-dock and see?"

It is Mr. Shenstone who thus interrogates.

"If you like – by all means. I shall be too thankful. Shame of Gwen to give us so much trouble. She knows our luncheon hour, and should have been back by this. Thanks, much, Mr. Shenstone."

As he is bounding off, she calls after —

"Don't you be staying too, else you shan't have a pick. Mr. Musgrave and I won't wait for any of you. Shall we, Mr. Musgrave?"

Shenstone has not tarried to hear either question or answer. A luncheon for Apicius were, at that moment, nothing to him; and little more to the curate, who, though staying, would gladly go along. Not from any rivalry with, or jealousy of, the baronet's son: they revolve in different orbits, with no danger of collision. Simply that he dislikes leaving Miss Linton alone – indeed, dare not. She may be expecting the usual budget of neighbourhood intelligence he daily brings her.

He is mistaken. On this particular day it is not desired. Out of courtesy to Mr. Shenstone, rather than herself, she had laid aside the novel; and it now requires all she can command to keep her eyes off it. She is burning to know what befel the farmer's daughter!

CHAPTER VIII

A SUSPICIOUS STRANGER

While Mr. Musgrave is boring the elderly spinster about new scarlet cloaks for the girls of the church choir, and other parish matters, George Shenstone is standing on the topmost step of the boat stair, in a mood of mind even less enviable than hers. For he has looked down into the dock, and there sees no Gwendoline – neither boat nor lady – nor is there sign of either upon the water, far as he can command a view of it. No sounds, such as he would wish, and might expect to hear – no dipping of oars, nor, what would be still more agreeable to his ear, the soft voices of women. Instead only the note of a cuckoo, in monotonous repetition, the bird balancing itself on a branch near by; and, farther off, the *hiccol*, laughing, as if in mockery – and at him! Mocking his impatience; ay, something more, almost his misery! That it is so his soliloquy tells:

"Odd her being out on the river! She promised me to go riding to-day. Very odd indeed! Gwen isn't the same she was – acting strange altogether for the last three or four days. Wonder what it means? By Jove, I can't comprehend it!"

His noncomprehension does not hinder a dark shadow from stealing over his brow, and there staying.

It is not unobserved. Through the leaves of the evergreen Joseph notes the pained expression, and interprets it in his own shrewd way – not far from the right one.

The old servant soliloquizing in less conjectural strain, says, or rather thinks —

"Master George be mad sweet on Miss Gwen. The country folk are all talkin' o't; thinking she's same on him, as if they knew anything about it. I knows better. An' he ain't no ways confident, else there wouldn't be that queery look on's face. It's the token o' jealousy for sure. I don't believe he have suspicion o' any rival particklar. Ah! it don't need that wi' sich a grand beauty as she be. He as love her might be jealous o' the sun kissing her cheeks, or the wind tossin' her hair!"

Joseph is a Welshman of Bardic ancestry, and thinks poetry. He continues —

"I know what's took her on the river, if he don't. Yes – yes, my young lady. Ye thought yerself wonderful clever, leavin' old Joe behind, tellin' him to hide hisself, and bribin' him to stay hid! And d'y 'spose I didn't obsarve them glances exchanged twixt you and the salmon fisher – sly, but, for all that, hot as streaks o' fire? And d'ye think I didn't see Mr. Whitecap going down, afore ye thought o' a row yerself? Oh, no; I noticed nothin' o' all that, not I! 'Twarn't meant for me – not for Joe – ha, ha!"

With a suppressed giggle at the popular catch coming in so *apropos*, he once more fixes his eyes on the face of the impatient watcher, proceeding with his soliloquy, though in changed strain:

"Poor young gentleman! I do pity he to be sure. He are a good sort, an' everybody likes him. So do she, but not the way he want her to. Well; things o' that kind allers do go contrarywise – never seem to run smooth like. I'd help him myself if 'twar in my power, but it ain't. In such cases help can only come frae the place where they say matches be made – that's Heaven. Ha! he's lookin' a bit brighter! What's cheerin' him? The boat coming back? I can't see it from here, nor I don't hear any rattle o' oars!"

The change he notes in George Shenstone's manner is not caused by the returning pleasure craft. Simply a reflection, which crossing his mind, for the moment tranquillizes him.

"What a stupid I am!" he mutters self-accusingly. "Now I remember, there was nothing said about the hour we were to go riding, and I suppose she understood in the afternoon. It was so the last time we went out together. By Jove! yes. It's all right, I take it; she'll be back in good time yet."

Thus reassured he remains listening. Still more satisfied, when a dull thumping sound, in regular repetition, tells him of oars working in their rowlocks. Were he learned in boating tactics he would know there are two pairs of them, and think this strange too; since the *Gwendoline* carries only one.

But he is not so skilled – instead, rather averse to aquatics – his chosen home the hunting-field, his favourite seat in a saddle, not on a boat's thwart. It is only when the plashing of the oars in the tranquil water of the bye-way is borne clear along the cliff, that he perceives there are two pairs at work, while at the same time he observes two boats approaching the little dock, where but one belongs!

Alone at that leading boat does he look: with eyes in which, as he continues to gaze, surprise becomes wonderment, dashed with something like displeasure. The boat he has recognised at the first glance – the *Gwendoline* – as also the two ladies in the stern. But there is also a man on the mid thwart, plying the oars.

"Who the deuce is he?"

Thus to himself George Shenstone puts it. Not old Joe, not the least like him. Nor is it the family Charon who sits solitary on the thwarts of that following. Instead, Joseph is now by Mr. Shenstone's side, passing him in haste – making to go down the boat stair!

"What's the meaning of all this, Joe?" asks the young man, in stark astonishment.

"Meanin' o' what, sir?" returns the old boatman, with an air of assumed innocence. "Be there anythin' amiss?"

"Oh, nothing," stammers Shenstone. "Only I supposed you were out with the young ladies. How is it you haven't gone?"

"Well, sir, Miss Gwen didn't wish it. The day bein' fine, an' nothing o' flood in the river, she sayerd she'd do the rowin' herself."

"She hasn't been doing it for all that," mutters Shenstone to himself, as Joseph glides past and on down the stair; then repeating, "Who the deuce is he?" the interrogation as before referring to him who rows the pleasure boat.

By this it has been brought, bow in, to the dock, its stern touching the bottom of the stair; and, as the ladies step out of it, George Shenstone overhears a dialogue, which, instead of quieting his perturbed spirit, but excites him still more – almost to madness. It is Miss Wynn who has commenced it, saying, —

"You'll come up to the house, and let me introduce you to my aunt?"

This to the gentleman who has been pulling her boat, and has just abandoned the oars soon as seeing its painter in the hands of the servant.

"Oh, thank you!" he returns. "I would, with pleasure; but, as you see, I'm not quite presentable just now – anything but fit for a drawing-room. So I beg you'll excuse me to-day."

His saturated shirt-front, with other garments dripping, tells why the apology; but does not explain either that or aught else to him on the top of the stair, who, hearkening further, hears other speeches, which, while perplexing him, do nought to allay the wild tempest now surging through his soul. Unseen himself – for he has stepped behind the tree lately screening Joseph – he sees Gwen Wynn holding out her hand to be pressed in parting salute – hears her address the stranger in words of gratitude, warm as though she were under some great obligation to him!

Then the latter leaps out of the pleasure boat into the other brought alongside, and is rowed away by his waterman: while the ladies ascend the stair – Gwen lingeringly, at almost every step, turning her face towards the fishing skiff, till this, pulled around the upper end of the eyot, can no more be seen.

All this George Shenstone observes, drawing deductions which send the blood in chill creep through his veins. Though still puzzled by the wet garments, the presence of the gentleman wearing them seems to solve that other enigma, unexplained as painful – the strangeness he has of late observed in the ways of Miss Wynn. Nor is he far out in his fancy, bitter though it be.

Not until the two ladies have reached the stair head do they become aware of his being there; and not then, till Gwen has made some observations to the companion, which, as those addressed to the stranger, unfortunately for himself, George Shenstone overhears.

"We'll be in time for luncheon yet, and aunt needn't know anything of what's delayed us – at least, not just now. True, if the like had happened to herself – say some thirty or forty years ago – she'd want all the world to hear of it, particularly that part of the world yclept Cheltenham. The dear old lady! Ha, ha!" After a laugh, continuing: "But, speaking seriously, Nell, I don't wish any one to be the wiser about our bit of an escapade – least of all, a certain young gentleman, whose Christian name begins with a G., and surname with an S."

"Those initials answer for mine," says George Shenstone, coming forward and confronting her. "If your observation was meant for me, Miss Wynn, I can only express regret for my bad luck in being within earshot of it."

At his appearance, so unexpected and abrupt, Gwen Wynn had given a start, feeling guilty, and looking it. Soon, however, reflecting whence he has come, and hearing what said, she feels less self-condemned than indignant, as evinced by her rejoinder.

"Ah! you've been overhearing us, Mr. Shenstone! Bad luck, you call it. Bad or good, I don't think you are justified in attributing it to chance. When a gentleman deliberately stations himself behind a shady bush, like that laurestinus for instance, and there stands listening – intentionally – "

Suddenly she interrupts herself, and stands silent too – this on observing the effect of her words, and that they have struck terribly home. With bowed head the baronet's son is stooping towards her, the cloud on his brow telling of sadness – not anger. Seeing it, the old tenderness returns to her, with its familiarity, and she exclaims: —

"Come, George! There must be no quarrel between you and me. What you've just seen and heard, will be all explained by something you have yet to hear. Miss Lees and I have had a little bit of an adventure; and if you'll promise it shan't go further, we'll make you acquainted with it."

Addressed in this style, he readily gives the promise – gladly, too. The confidence so offered seems favourable to himself. But, looking for explanation on the instant, he is disappointed. Asking for it, it is denied him, with reason assigned thus:

"You forget we've been full four hours on the river, and are as hungry as a pair of kingfishers – hawks, I suppose, you'd say, being a game preserver. Never mind about the simile. Let us in to luncheon, if not too late."

She steps hurriedly off towards the house, the companion following, Shenstone behind both.

However hungry they, never man went to a meal with less appetite than he. All Gwen's cajoling has not tranquillized his spirit, nor driven out of his thoughts that man with the bronzed complexion, dark moustache, and white helmet hat.

CHAPTER IX

JEALOUS ALREADY

Captain Ryecroft has lost more than rod and line; his heart is as good as gone too – given to Gwendoline Wynn. He now knows the name of the yellow-haired Naiad – for this, with other particulars, she imparted to him on return up stream.

Neither has her confidence thus extended, nor the conversation leading to it, belied the favourable impression made upon him by her appearance. Instead, so strengthened it, that for the first time in his life he contemplates becoming a benedict. He feels that his fate is sealed – or no longer in his hands, but hers.

As Wingate pulls him on homeward, he draws out his cigar case, sets fire to a fresh weed, and, while the blue smoke wreaths up round the rim of his topee, reflects on the incidents of the day, – reviewing them in the order of their occurrence.

Circumstances apparently accidental have been strangely in his favour. Helped as by Heaven's own hand, working with the rudest instruments. Through the veriest scum of humanity he has made acquaintance with one of its fairest forms. More than mere acquaintance, he hopes; for surely those warm words, and glances far from cold, could not be the sole offspring of gratitude! If so a little service on the Wye goes a long way. Thus reflects he in modest appreciation of himself, deeming that he has done but little. How different the value put upon it by Gwen Wynn!

Still he knows not this, or at least cannot be sure of it. If he were, his thoughts would be all rose-coloured, which they are not. Some are dark as the shadows of the April showers now and then drifting across the sun's disc.

One that has just settled on his brow is no reflection from the firmament above – no vague imagining – but a thing of shape and form – the form of a man, seen at the top of the boat-stair, as the ladies were ascending, and not so far off as to have hindered him from observing the man's face, and noting that he was young and rather handsome. Already the eyes of love have caught the keenness of jealousy. A gentleman evidently on terms of intimacy with Miss Wynn. Strange, though, that the look with which he regarded her on saluting seemed to speak of something amiss! What could it mean? Captain Ryecroft has asked this question as his boat was rounding the end of the eyot, with another in the self-same formulary of interrogation, of which but the moment before he was himself the subject: —

"Who the deuce can *he* be?"

Out upon the river, and drawing hard at his Regalia, he goes on: —

"Wonderfully familiar the fellow seemed! Can't be a brother! I understood her to say she had none. Does he live at Llangorren? No. She said there was no one there in the shape of masculine relative – only an old aunt, and that little dark damsel, who is cousin or something of the kind. But who in the deuce is the gentleman? Might *he* be a cousin?"

So propounding questions without being able to answer them, he at length addresses himself to the waterman – saying:

"Jack, did you observe a gentleman at the head of the stair?"

"Only the head and shoulders o' one, captain."

"Head and shoulders? that's enough. Do you chance to know him?"

"I ain't thorough sure; but I think he be a Mr. Shenstone."

"Who is Mr. Shenstone?"

"The son o' Sir George."

"Sir George! What do you know of *him*?"

"Not much to speak of – only that he be a big gentleman, whose land lies along the river, two or three miles below."

The information is but slight, and slighter the gratification it gives. Captain Ryecroft has heard of the rich baronet whose estate adjoins that of Llangorren, and whose title, with the property attached, will descend to an only son. It is the *torso* of this son he has seen above the red sandstone rock. In truth, a formidable rival! So he reflects, smoking away like mad.

After a time, he again observes, —

"You've said you don't know the ladies we've helped out of their little trouble?"

"Parsonally, I don't, captain. But, now as I see where they live, I know who they be. I've heerd talk 'bout the biggest o' them – a good deal."

The biggest of them! As if she were a salmon! In the boatman's eyes, bulk is evidently her chief recommendation!

Ryecroft smiles, further interrogating: —

"What have you heard of her?"

"That she be a *tidy* young lady. Wonderful fond o' field sport, such as hunting and that like. Fr' all, I may say that up to this day, I never set eyes on her afore."

The Hussar officer has been long enough in Herefordshire to have learnt the local signification of "tidy" – synonymous with "well-behaved." That Miss Wynn is fond of field sports – flood pastimes included – he has gathered from herself while rowing her up the river.

One thing strikes him as strange – that the waterman should not be acquainted with every one dwelling on the river's bank, at least for a dozen miles up and down. He seeks an explanation.

"How is it, Jack, that you, living but a short league above, don't know all about these people?"

He is unaware that Wingate though born on the Wye's banks, as he has told him, is comparatively a stranger to its middle waters – his birthplace being far up in the shire of Brecon. Still that is not the solution of the enigma, which the young waterman gives in his own way, —

"Lord love ye, sir! That shows how little you understand this river. Why, captain, it crooks an' crooks, and goes wobblin' about in such a way, that folks as lives less'n a mile apart knows no more o' one the other than if they wor ten. It comes o' the bridges bein' so few and far between. There's the ferry boats, true; but people don't take to 'em more'n they can help 'specially women – seein' there be some danger at all times, and a good deal o't when the river's aflood. That's frequent, summer well as winter."

The explanation is reasonable; and, satisfied with it, Ryecroft remains for a time wrapt in a dreamy reverie, from which he is aroused as his eyes rest upon a house – a quaint antiquated structure, half timber, half stone, standing not on the river's edge, but at some distance from it up a dingle. The sight is not new to him; he has before noticed the house – struck with its appearance, so different from the ordinary dwellings.

"Whose is it, Jack?" he asks.

"B'longs to a man, name o' Murdock."

"Odd looking domicile!"

"Ta'nt a bit more that way than he be – if half what they say 'bout him be true."

"Ah! Mr. Murdock's a character, then?"

"Ay; an' a queery one."

"In what respect? what way?"

"More'n one – a goodish many."

"Specify, Jack."

"Well; for one thing, he a'nt sober to say half o' his time."

"Addicted to dipsomania."

"'Dicted to getting dead drunk. I've seen him so, scores o' 'casions."

"That's not wise of Mr. Murdock."

"No, captain; 'ta'nt neyther wise nor well. All the worse, considerin' the place where mostly he go to do his drinkin'."

"Where may that be?"

"The Welsh Harp – up at Rogue's Ferry."

"Rogue's Ferry? Strange appellation! What sort of place is it? Not very nice, I should say – if the name be at all appropriate."

"It's parfitly 'propriate, though I b'lieve it wa'nt that way bestowed. It got so called after a man the name o' Rugg, who once keepled the Welsh Harp and the ferry too. It's about two mile above, a little ways back. Besides the tavern, there be a cluster o' houses, a bit scattered about, wi' a chapel an' a grocery shop – one as deals truckways, an' a'nt partickler as to what they take in change – stolen goods welcome as any – ay, welcomer, if they be o' worth. They got plenty o' them, too. The place be a regular nest o' poachers, an' worse than that – a good many as have sarved their spell in the Penitentiary."

"Why, Wingate, you astonish me! I was under the impression your Wyeseide was a sort of Arcadia, where one only met with innocence and primitive simplicity."

"You won't meet much o' either at Rogue's Ferry. If there be an uninnocent set on earth it's they as live there. Them Forest chaps we came 'cross a'nt no ways their match in wickedness. Just possible drink made them behave as they did – some o' 'em. But drink or no drink it be all the same wi' the Ferry people – maybe worse when they're sober. Any ways they're a rough lot."

"With a place of worship in their midst! That ought to do something towards refining them."

"Ought; and would, I daresay, if 'twar the right sort – which it a'nt. Instead, o' a kind as only the more corrupts 'em – being Roman."

"Oh! A Roman Catholic chapel. But how does it corrupt them?"

"By makin' 'em believe they can get cleared of their sins, hows'ever black they be. Men as think that way a'nt like to stick at any sort of crime – 'specially if it brings 'em the money to buy what they calls absolution."

"Well, Jack, it's very evident you're no friend, or follower, of the Pope."

"Neyther o' Pope nor priest. Ah! captain; if you seed him o' the Rogue's Ferry Chapel, you wouldn't wonder at my havin' a dislike for the whole kit o' them."

"What is there 'specially repulsive about him?"

"Don't know as there be anythin' very special, in partickler. Them priests all look 'bout the same – such o' 'em as I've ever set eyes on. And that's like stoats and weasels, shootin' out o' one hole into another. As for him we're speakin' about, he's here, there, an' everywhere; sneakin' along the roads an' paths, hidin' behind bushes like a cat after birds, an' poppin' out where nobody expects him. If ever there war a spy meaner than another it's the priest of Rogue's Ferry."

"No," he adds, correcting himself. "There be one other in these parts worse than he – if that's possible. A different sort o' man, true; and yet they be a good deal thegither."

"Who is this other?"

"Dick Dempsey – better known by the name of Coracle Dick."

"Ah, Coracle Dick! He appears to occupy a conspicuous place in your thoughts, Jack; and rather a low one in your estimation. Why, may I ask? What sort of fellow is he?"

"The biggest blaggard as lives on the Wye, from where it springs out o' Plinlimmon to its emptying into the Bristol Channel. Talk o' poachers an' night netters. He goes out by night to catch somethin' beside salmon. 'Taint all fish as comes into his net, I know."

The young waterman speaks in such hostile tone both about priest and poacher, that Ryecroft suspects a motive beyond the ordinary prejudice against men who wear the sacerdotal garb, or go trespassing after game. Not caring to inquire into it now, he returns to the original topic, saying, —

"We've strayed from our subject, Jack – which was the hard-drinking owner of yonder house."

"Not so far, captain; seein' as he be the most intimate friend the priest have in these parts; though if what's said be true, not nigh so much as his Missus."

"Murdock is married, then?"

"I won't say that – leastwise I shouldn't like to swear it. All I know is, a woman lives wi' him, s'posed to be his wife. Odd thing she."

"Why odd?"

"'Cause she beant like any other o' womankind 'bout here."

"Explain yourself, Jack. In what does Mrs. Murdock differ from the rest of your Herefordshire fair?"

"One way, captain, in her not bein' fair at all. 'Stead, she be dark complected; most as much as one o' them women I've seed 'bout Cheltenham, nursin' the children o' old officers as brought 'em from India —*ayers* they call 'em. She a'nt one o' 'em, but French, I've heerd say; which in part, I suppose explains the thickness 'tween her an' the priest – he bein' the same."

"Oh! His reverence is a Frenchman, is he?"

"All o' that, captain. If he wor English, he woudn't – coudn't – be the contemptible sneakin' hound he is. As for Mrs. Murdock, I can't say I've seed her more'n twice in my life. She keeps close to the house; goes nowhere! an' it's said nobody visits her nor him – leastwise none o' the old gentry. For all Mr. Murdock belongs to the best of them."

"He's a gentleman, is he?"

"Ought to be – if he took after his father."

"Why so?"

"Because he wor a squire – regular of the old sort. He's not been so long dead. I can remember him myself, though I hadn't been here such a many years – the old lady too – this Murdock's mother. Ah! now I think on't, she wor t'other squire's sister – father to the tallest o' them two young ladies – the one with the reddish hair."

"What! Miss Wynn?"

"Yes, captain; her they calls Gwen."

Ryecroft questions no farther. He has learnt enough to give him food for reflection – not only during the rest of that day, but for a week, a month – it may be throughout the remainder of his life.

CHAPTER X

THE CUCKOO'S GLEN

About a mile above Llangorren Court, but on the opposite side of the Wye, stands the house which had attracted the attention of Captain Ryecroft; known to the neighbourhood as "Glyngog" – Cymric synonym for "Cuckoo's Glen." Not immediately on the water's edge, but several hundred yards back, near the head of a lateral ravine which debouches on the valley of the river, to the latter contributing a rivulet.

Glyngog House is one of those habitations, common in the county of Hereford as other western shires – puzzling the stranger to tell whether they be gentleman's residence, or but the dwelling of a farmer. This from an array of walls, enclosing yard, garden, even the orchard – a plenitude due to the red sandstone being near, and easily shaped for building purposes.

About Glyngog House, however, there is something besides the circumvallation to give it an air of grandeur beyond that of the ordinary farm homestead; certain touches of architectural style which speak of the Elizabethan period – in short that termed Tudor. For its own walls are not altogether stone; instead, a framework of oaken uprights, struts, and braces, black with age, the panelled masonry between plastered and white-washed, giving to the structure a quaint, almost fantastic, appearance, heightened by an irregular roof of steep pitch, with projecting dormers, gables acute angled, overhanging windows, and carving at the coigns. Of such ancient domiciles there are yet many to be met with on the Wye – their antiquity vouched for by the materials used in their construction, when bricks were a costly commodity, and wood to be had almost for the asking.

About this one, the enclosing stone walls have been a later erection, as also the pillared gate entrance to its ornamental grounds, through which runs a carriage drive to the sweep in front. Many a glittering equipage may have gone round on that sweep; for Glyngog was once a manor-house. Now it is but the remains of one, so much out of repair as to show smashed panes in several of its windows, while the *enceinte* walls are only upright where sustained by the upholding ivy; the shrubbery run wild; the walks and carriage drive weed-covered; on the latter neither recent track of wheel, nor hoof-mark of horse.

For all, the house is not uninhabited. Three or four of the windows appear sound, with blinds inside them; while at most hours smoke may be seen ascending from at least two of the chimneys.

Few approach near enough the place to note its peculiarities. The traveller gets but a distant glimpse of its chimney-pots; for the country road, avoiding the dip of the ravine, is carried round its head, and far from the house. It can only be approached by a long, narrow lane, leading nowhere else, so steep as to deter any explorer save a pedestrian; while he, too, would have to contend with an obstruction of over-growing thorns and trailing brambles.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, Glyngog has something to recommend it – a prospect not surpassed in the western shires of England. He who selected its site must have been a man of tastes rather æsthetic than utilitarian. For the land attached and belonging – some fifty or sixty acres – is barely arable; lying against the abruptly sloping sides of the ravine. But the view is superb. Below, the Wye, winding through a partially wood-covered plain, like some grand constrictor snake; its sinuosities only here and there visible through the trees, resembling a chain of detached lakes – till sweeping past the Cuckoo's Glen, it runs on in straight reach towards Llangorren.

Eye of man never looked upon lovelier landscape; mind of man could not contemplate one more suggestive of all that is, or ought to be, interesting in life. Peaceful smokes ascending out of far-off chimneys; farm-houses, with their surrounding walls, standing amid the greenery of old homestead trees – now in full leaf, for it is the month of June – here and there the sharp spire of a church, or the showy façade of a gentleman's mansion – in the distant background, the dark blue mountains

of Monmouthshire; among them conspicuous the Blorenges, Skerrid, and Sugar Loaf. The man who could look on such a picture, without drawing from it inspirations of pleasure, must be out of sorts with the world, if not weary of it.

And yet just such a man is now viewing it from Glyngog House, or rather the bit of shrubbery ground in front. He is seated on a rustic bench partly shattered, barely enough of it whole to give room beside him for a small japanned tray on which are tumbler, bottle and jug – the two last respectively containing brandy and water; while in the first is an admixture of both. He is smoking a meerschaum pipe, which at short intervals he removes from his mouth to give place to the drinking glass.

The personal appearance of this man is in curious correspondence with the bench on which he sits, the walls around, and the house behind. Like all these, he looks dilapidated. Not only is his apparel out of repair, but his constitution too, as shown by hollow cheeks and sunken eyes, with crows feet ramifying around them. This due not, as with the surrounding objects, to age; for he is still under forty. Nor yet any of the natural infirmities to which flesh is heir; but evidently to drink. Some reddish spots upon his nose and flecks on the forehead, with the glass held in shaking hand, proclaims this the cause. And it is.

Lewin Murdock – such is the man's name – has led a dissipated life. Not much of it in England; still less in Herefordshire; and only its earlier years in the house he now inhabits – his paternal home. Since boyhood he has been abroad, staying none can say where, and straying no one knows whither – often seen, however, at Baden, Homburg, and other "hells," punting high or low, as the luck has gone for or against him. At a later period in Paris, during the Imperial *régime* – worst hell of all. It has stripped him of everything; driven him out and home, to seek asylum at Glyngog, once a handsome property, now but a *pied à terre*, on which he may only set his foot with a mortgage around his neck. For even the little land left to it is let out to a farmer, and the rent goes not to him. He is, in fact, only a tenant on his patrimonial estate; holding but the house at that, with the ornamental grounds and an acre or two of orchard, of which he takes no care. The farmer's sheep may scale the crumbling walls, and browse the weedy enclosure at will: give Lewin Murdock his meerschaum pipe, with enough brandy and water, and he but laughs. Not that he is of a jovial disposition, not at all given to mirth; only that it takes something more than the pasturage of an old orchard to excite his thoughts, or turn them to cupidity.

For all, land does this – the very thing. No limited tract; but one of many acres in extent – even miles – the land of Llangorren.

It is now before his face, and under his eyes, as a map unfolded. On the opposite side of the river it forms the foreground of the landscape; in its midst the many-windowed mansion, backed by stately trees, with well-kept grounds, and green pastures; at a little distance the "Grange," or home-farm, and farther off others that look of the same belonging – as they are. A smiling picture it is; spread before the eyes of Lewin Murdock, whenever he sits in his front window, or steps outside the door. And the brighter the sun shines on it, the darker the shadow on his brow.

Not much of an enigma either. That land of Llangorren belonged to his grandfather, but now is, or soon will be, the property of his cousin – Gwendoline Wynn. Were she not, it would be his. Between him and it runs the Wye, a broad, deep river. But what its width or depth, compared with that other something between? A barrier stronger and more impassable than the stream, yet seeming slight as a thread. For it is but the *thread of a life*. Should it snap, or get accidentally severed, Lewin Murdock would only have to cross the river, proclaim himself master of Llangorren, and take possession.

He would scarce be human not to think of all this. And being human he does – has thought of it oft, and many a time. With feelings too, beyond the mere prompting of cupidity. These due to a legend handed down to him, telling of an unfair disposal of the Llangorren property; but a pittance given to his mother, who married Murdock of Glyngog; while the bulk went to her brother, the father of Gwen Wynn. All matters of testament, since the estate is unentailed; the only grace of the

grandfather towards the Murdock branch being a clause entitling them to possession, in the event of the collateral heirs dying out. And of these but one is living – the heroine of our tale.

"Only she – but she!" mutters Lewin Murdock, in a tone of such bitterness, that, as if to drown it, he plucks the pipe out of his mouth, and gulps down the last drop in the glass.

CHAPTER XI

A WEED BY THE WYESIDE

"Only she – but she!" he repeats, grasping the bottle by the neck, and pouring more brandy into the tumbler.

Though speaking *sotto voce*, and not supposing himself overheard, he is, nevertheless – by a woman, who, coming forth from the house, has stepped silently behind him, there pausing.

Odd-looking apparition she, seen upon the Wyeseide; altogether unlike a native of it, but altogether like one born upon the banks of the Seine, and brought up to tread the Boulevards of Paris – like the latter from the crown of her head to the soles of her high-heeled boots, on whose toes she stands poised and balancing. In front of that ancient English manor-house, she seems grotesquely out of place – as much as a costermonger, driving his moke-drawn cart among the Pyramids, or smoking a "Pickwick" by the side of the Sphinx.

For all there is nothing mysterious, or even strange in her presence there. She is Lewin Murdock's wife. If he has left his fortune in foreign lands, with the better part of his life and health, he has thence brought her, his better-half.

Physically a fine-looking woman, despite some ravages due to time, and possibly more to crime. Tall and dark as the daughters of the Latinic race, with features beautiful in the past – even still attractive to those not repelled by the beguiling glances of sin.

Such were hers, first given to him in a *café chantant* of the Tuileries – oft afterwards repeated in *jardin, bois*, and *bals* of the demi-monde, till at length she gave him her hand in the Eglise La Madeleine.

Busied with his brandy, and again gazing at Llangorren, he has not yet seen her; nor is he aware of her proximity till hearing an exclamation: —

"*Eh, bien?*"

He starts at the interrogatory, turning round.

"You think too loud, Monsieur – that is if you wish to keep your thoughts to yourself. And you might – seeing that it's a love secret! May I ask who is this *she* you're soliloquising about? Some of your old English *bonnes amies*, I suppose?"

This, with an air of affected jealousy she is far from feeling. In the heart of the *ex-cocotte* there is no place for such a sentiment.

"Got nothing to do with *bonnes amies*, young or old," he gruffly replies. "Just now I've got something else to think of than sweethearts. Enough occupation for my thoughts in the how I'm to support a wife – yourself, madame."

"It wasn't me you meant. No, indeed. Some other, in whom you appear to feel a very profound interest."

"There you're right, it was one other, in whom I feel all that."

"*Merci, Monsieur! Ma foi!* your candour deserves all thanks. Perhaps you'll extend it, and favour me with the lady's name? A lady, I presume. The grand Seigneur Lewin Murdock would not be giving his thoughts to less."

Ignorance pretended. She knows, or surmises, to whom he has been giving them; for she has been watching him from a window, and observed the direction of his glances. And she has more than a suspicion as to the nature of his reflections; since she is well aware as he of that something besides a river separating them from Llangorren.

"Her name?" she again asks, in tone of more demand, her eyes bent searchingly on his.

Avoiding her glance, he still pulls away at his pipe, without making answer.

"It is a love secret, then? I thought so. It's cruel of you, Lewin! This is the return for giving you – all I had to give!"

She may well speak hesitatingly, and hint at a limited sacrifice. Only her hand; and it more than tenderly pressed by scores – ay hundreds – of others, before being bestowed upon him. No false pretence, however, on her part. He knew all that, or should have known it. How could he help? Olympe, the belle of the Jardin Mabille, was no obscurity in the *demi-monde* of Paris – even in its days of glory under Napoleon le Petite.

Her reproach is also a pretence, though possibly with some sting felt. She is drawing on to that term of life termed *passé*; and begins to feel conscious of it. He may be the same. Not that for his opinion she cares a straw – save in a certain sense, and for reasons altogether independent of slighted affection – the very purpose she is now working upon, and for which she needs to hold over him the power she has hitherto had. And well knows she how to retain it, rekindling love's fire when it seems in danger of dying out, either through appeal to his pity, or exciting his jealousy, which she can adroitly do, by her artful French ways and dark flashing eyes.

As he looks in them now, the old flame flickers up, and he feels almost as much her slave as when he first became her husband.

For all he does not show it. This day he is out of sorts with himself, and her, and all the world besides; so instead of reciprocating her sham tenderness – as if knowing it such – he takes another swallow of brandy, and smokes on in silence.

Now really incensed, or seeming so, she exclaims: —

"*Perfide!*" adding with a disdainful toss of the head, such as only the dames of the *demi-monde* know how to give, "Keep your secret! What care I?" Then changing tone, "*Mon Dieu!* France – dear France! Why did I ever leave you?"

"Because your dear France became too dear to live in."

"Clever *double entendre!* No doubt you think it witty! Dear, or not, better a garret there – a room in its humblest *entresol* than this. I'd rather serve in a cigar shop – keep a *gargot* in the Faubourg Montmartre – than lead such a *triste* life as we're now doing. Living in this wretched kennel of a house, that threatens to tumble on our heads!"

"How would you like to live in that over yonder?"

He nods towards Llangorren Court.

"You are merry, Monsieur. But your jests are out of place – in presence of the misery around us."

"You may some day," he goes on, without heeding her observation.

"Yes; when the sky falls we may catch larks. You seem to forget that Mademoiselle Wynn is younger than either of us, and by the natural laws of life will outlive both. Must, unless she break her neck in the hunting-field, get drowned out of a boat, or meet *some other mischance.*"

She pronounces the last three words slowly and with marked emphasis, pausing after she has spoken them, and looking fixedly in his face, as if to note their effect.

Taking the meerschaum from his mouth, he returns her look – almost shuddering as his eyes meet hers, and he reads in them a glance such as might have been given by Messalina, or the murderess of Duncan. Hardened as his conscience has become through a long career of sin, it is yet tender in comparison with hers. And he knows it, knowing her history, or enough of it – her nature as well – to make him think her capable of anything, even the crime her speech seems to point to – neither more nor less than —

He dares not think, let alone pronounce, the word. He is not yet up to that; though day by day, as his desperate fortunes press upon him, his thoughts are being familiarised with something akin to it – a dread, dark design, still vague, but needing not much to assume shape, and tempt to execution. And that the tempter is by his side he is more than half conscious. It is not the first time for him to listen to fell speech from those fair lips.

To-day he would rather shun allusion to a subject so grave, yet so delicate. He has spent part of the preceding night at the Welsh Harp – the tavern spoken of by Wingate – and his nerves are unstrung, yet not recovered from the revelry. Instead of asking her what she means by "some other mischance," he but remarks, with an air of careless indifference, —

"True, Olympe; unless something of that sort were to happen, there seems no help for us but to resign ourselves to patience, and live on expectations."

"Starve on them, you mean."

This in a tone, and with a shrug, which seem to convey reproach for its weakness.

"Well, *chère*," he rejoins, "we can at least feast our eyes on the source whence our fine fortunes are to come. And a pretty sight it is, isn't it? *Un coup d'œil charmant!*"

He again turns his eyes upon Llangorren, as also she, and for some time both are silent.

Attractive at any time, the Court is unusually so on this same summer's day. For the sun, lighting up the verdant lawn, also shines upon a large white tent there erected – a marquee – from whose ribbed roof projects a signal staff, with flag floating at its peak. They have had no direct information of what all this is for – since to Lewin Murdock and his wife the society of Herefordshire is tabooed. But they can guess from the symbols that it is to be a garden party, or something of the sort, there often given. While they are still gazing its special kind is declared, by figures appearing upon the lawn and taking stand in groups before the tent. There are ladies gaily attired – in the distance looking like bright butterflies – some dressed *à la Diane*, with bows in hand, and quivers slung by their sides, the feathered shafts showing over their shoulders; a proportionate number of gentlemen attendant; while liveried servants stride to and fro erecting the ringed targets.

Murdock himself cares little for such things. He has had his surfeit of fashionable life; not only sipped its sweets, but drank its dregs of bitterness. He regards Llangorren with something in his mind more substantial than its sports and pastimes.

With different thoughts looks the Parisian upon them – in her heart a chagrin only known to those whose zest for the world's pleasure is of keenest edge, yet checked and baffled from indulgence – ambitions uncontrollable, but never to be attained. As Satan gazed back when hurled out of the Garden of Eden, so she at that scene upon the lawn of Llangorren. No *jardin* of Paris – not the Bois itself – ever seemed to her so attractive as those grounds, with that aristocratic gathering – a heaven none of her kind can enter, and but few of her country.

After long regarding it with envy in her eyes, and spleen in her soul – tantalized, almost to torture – she faces towards her husband, saying —

"And you've told me, between all that and us, there's but one life – "

"Two!" interrupts a voice – not his.

Both turning, startled, behold —*Father Rogier!*

CHAPTER XII

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Father Rogier is a French priest of a type too well known over all the world – the Jesuitical. Spare of form, thin-lipped, nose with the cuticle drawn across it tight as drum parchment, skin dark and cadaverous, he looks Loyola from head to heel.

He himself looks no one straight in the face. Confronted, his eyes fall to his feet, or turn to either side, not in timid abashment, but as those of one who feels himself a felon. And but for his habiliments he might well pass for such; though even the sacerdotal garb, and assumed air of sanctity, do not hinder the suspicion of a wolf in sheep's clothing – rather suggesting it.

And in truth is he one; a very Pharisee – Inquisitor to boot, cruel and keen as ever sate in secret Council over an *Auto da Fé*.

What is such a man doing in Herefordshire? What, in Protestant England? Time was, and not so long ago, when these questions would have been asked with curiosity, and some degree of indignation. As for instance, when our popular Queen added to her popularity, by somewhat ostentatiously declaring, that "no foreign priest should take tithe or toll in her dominions," even forbidding them their distinctive dress. Then they stole timidly, and sneakingly, through the streets, usually seen hunting in couples, and looking as if conscious their pursuit was criminal, or, at the least, illegal.

All that is over now; the ban removed, the boast unkept – to all appearance forgotten! Now they stalk boldly abroad, or saunter in squads, exhibiting their shorn crowns and pallid faces, without fear or shame; instead, triumphantly flouting their vestments in public walks or parks, or loitering in the vestibules of convents and monasteries, which begin to show thick over the land – threatening us with a curse as that anterior to the time of bluff King Hal. No one now thinks it strange to see shovel-hatted priest, or sandalled monk – no matter in what part of England, nor would wonder at one of either being resident upon Wyeseide. Father Rogier, one of the former, is there with similar motive, and for the same purpose, his sort are sent everywhere – to enslave the souls of men and get money out of their purses, in order that other men, princes, and priests like himself, may lead luxurious lives, without toil and by trickery. The same old story, since the beginning of the world, or man's presence upon it. The same craft as the rain-maker of South Africa, or the medicine man of the North American Indian; differing only in some points of practice; the religious juggler of a higher civilization, finding his readiest tools not in roots, snake-skins, and rattles, but the weakness of woman. Through this, as by sap and mine, many a strong citadel has been carried, after bidding defiance to the boldest and most determined assault.

Père Rogier well knows all this; and by experience, having played the propagandist game with some success since his settling in Herefordshire. He has not been quite three years resident on Wyeseide, and yet has contrived to draw around him a considerable coterie of weak-minded Marthas and Marys, built him a little chapel, with a snug dwelling house, and is in a fair way of further feathering his nest. True, his neophytes are nearly all of the humbler class, and poor. But the Peter's pence count up in a remarkable manner, and are paid with a regularity which only blind devotion, or the zeal of religious partizanship, can exact. Fear of the Devil, and love of him, are like effective in drawing contributions to the box of the Rugg's Ferry chapel, and filling the pockets of its priest.

And if he have no grand people among his flock, and few disciples of the class called middle, he can boast of at least two claiming to be genteel – the Murdocks. With the man no false assumption either; neither does he assume, or value it. Different the woman. Born in the Faubourg Montmartre, her father a common *ouvrier*, her mother a *blanchisseuse* – herself a beautiful girl – Olympe Renault soon found her way into a more fashionable quarter. The same ambition made her Lewin Murdock's wife, and has brought her on to England. For she did not marry him without some knowledge of his

reversionary interest in the land of which they have just been speaking, and at which they are still looking. That was part of the inducement held out for obtaining her hand; her heart he never had.

That the priest knows something of the same, indeed all, is evident from the word he has responsingly pronounced. With step, silent and cat-like – his usual mode of progression – he has come upon them unawares, neither having note of his approach till startled by his voice. On hearing it, and seeing who, Murdock rises to his feet, as he does so saluting. Notwithstanding long years of a depraved life, his early training has been that of a gentleman, and its instincts at times return to him. Besides, born and brought up Roman Catholic, he has that respect for his priest habitual to a proverb – would have, even if knowing the latter to be the veriest Pharisee that ever wore single-breasted black coat.

Salutations exchanged, and a chair brought out for the new comer to sit upon, Murdock demands explanation of the interrupting monosyllable, asking:

"What do you mean, Father Rogier, by 'two'?"

"What I've said, M'sieu; that there are two between you and that over yonder, or soon will be – in time perhaps ten. A fair *paysage* it is!" he continues, looking across the river; "a very vale of Tempé, or Garden of the Hesperides. *Parbleu!* I never believed your England so beautiful. Ah! what's going on at Llangorren?" This as his eyes rest upon the tent, the flags, and gaily-dressed figures. "A *fête champêtre*: Mademoiselle making merry! In honour of the anticipated change, no doubt."

"Still I don't comprehend," says Murdock, looking puzzled. "You speak in riddles, Father Rogier."

"Riddles easily read, M'sieu. Of this particular one you'll find the interpretation there."

This, pointing to a plain gold ring on the fourth finger of Mrs. Murdock's left hand, put upon it by Murdock himself on the day he became her husband.

He now comprehends – his quick-witted wife sooner.

"Ha!" she exclaims, as if pricked by a pin, "Mademoiselle to be married?"

The priest gives an assenting nod.

"That's news to me," mutters Murdock, in a tone more like he was listening to the announcement of a death.

"*Moi aussi!* Who, *Père*? Not Monsieur Shenstone, after all?"

The question shows how well she is acquainted with Miss Wynn – if not personally, with her surroundings and predilections!

"No," answers the priest. "Not he."

"Who then?" asked the two simultaneously.

"A man likely to make many heirs to Llangorren – widen the breach between you and it – ah! to the impossibility of that ever being bridged."

"*Père Rogier!*" appeals Murdock, "I pray you speak out! Who is to do this? His name?"

"*Le Capitaine Ryecroft.*"

"Captain Ryecroft! Who – what is he?"

"An officer of Hussars – a fine-looking fellow – sort of combination of Mars and Apollo; strong as Hercules! As I've said, likely to be father to no end of sons and daughters, with Gwen Wynn for their mother. *Helas!* I can fancy seeing them now – at play over yonder, on the lawn!"

"Captain Ryecroft!" repeats Murdock musingly; "I never saw – never heard of the man!"

"You hear of him now, and possibly see him too. No doubt he's among those gay toxophilites – Ha! no, he's nearer! What a strange coincidence! The old saw, 'speak of the fiend.' There's *your* fiend, Monsieur Murdock!"

He points to a boat on the river with two men in it; one of them wearing a white cap. It is dropping down in the direction of Llangorren Court.

"Which?" asks Murdock mechanically.

"He with the *chapeau blanc*. That's whom you have to fear. The other's but the waterman Wingate – honest fellow enough, whom no one need fear – unless indeed our worthy friend Coracle Dick, his competitor for the smiles of the pretty Mary Morgan. Yes, *mes amis*! Under that conspicuous *kepi* you behold the future lord of Llangorren."

"Never!" exclaims Murdock, angrily gritting his teeth. "Never!"

The French priest and *ci-devant* French courtesan exchange secret, but significant, glances; a pleased expression showing on the faces of both.

"You speak excitedly, M'sieu," says the priest, "emphatically, too. But how is it to be hindered?"

"I don't know," sourly rejoins Murdock; "I suppose it can't be," he adds, drawing back, as if conscious of having committed himself. "Never mind, now; let's drop the disagreeable subject. You'll stay to dinner with us, Father Rogier?"

"If not putting you to inconvenience."

"Nay; it's you who'll be inconvenienced – starved, I should rather say. The butchers about here are not of the most amiable type; and, if I mistake not, our *menu* for to-day is a very primitive one – bacon and potatoes, with some greens from the old garden."

"Monsieur Murdock! It's not the fare, but the fashion, which makes a meal enjoyable. A crust and welcome is to me better cheer than a banquet with a grudging host at the head of the table. Besides, your English bacon is a most estimable dish, and with your succulent cabbages delectable. With a bit of Wye salmon to precede, and a pheasant to follow, it were food to satisfy Lucullus himself."

"Ah! true," assents the broken-down gentleman, "with the salmon and pheasant. But where are they? My fishmonger, who is conjointly also a game-dealer, is at present as much out with me as is the butcher; I suppose, from my being too much in with them – in their books. Still, they have not ceased acquaintance, so far as calling is concerned. That they do with provoking frequency. Even this morning, before I was out of bed, I had the honour of a visit from both the gentlemen. Unfortunately, they brought neither fish nor meat; instead, two sheets of that detestable blue paper, with red lines and rows of figures – an arithmetic not nice to be bothered with at one's breakfast. So, *Père*, I am sorry I can't offer you any salmon; and as for pheasant – you may not be aware, that it is out of season."

"It's never out of season, any more than barn-door fowl; especially if a young last year's *coq*, that hasn't been successful in finding a mate."

"But it's close time now," urges the Englishman, stirred by his old instincts of gentleman sportsman.

"Not to those who know how to open it," returns the Frenchman with a significant shrug. "And suppose we do that to-day?"

"I don't understand. Will your Reverence enlighten me?"

"Well, M'sieu; being Whit-Monday, and coming to pay you a visit, I thought you mightn't be offended by my bringing along with me a little present – for Madame here – that we're talking of – salmon and pheasant."

The husband, more than the wife, looks incredulous. Is the priest jesting? Beneath the *froc*, fitting tight his thin spare form, there is nothing to indicate the presence of either fish or bird.

"Where are they?" asks Murdock mechanically. "You say you've brought them along?"

"Ah! that was metaphorical. I meant to say I had sent them. And if I mistake not, they are near now. Yes; there's my messenger!"

He points to a man making up the glen, threading his way through the tangle of wild bushes that grow along the banks of the rivulet.

"Coracle Dick!" exclaims Murdock, recognising the poacher.

"The identical individual," answers the priest, adding, "who, though a poacher, and possibly has been something worse, is not such a bad fellow in his way – for certain purposes. True, he's neither the most devout nor best behaved of my flock; still a useful individual, especially on Fridays, when one has to confine himself to a fish diet. I find him convenient in other ways as well; as so might you,

Monsieur Murdock – some day. Should you ever have need of a strong hard hand, with a heart in correspondence, Richard Dempsey possesses both, and would no doubt place them at your service – for a consideration."

While Murdock is cogitating on what the last words are meant to convey, the individual so recommended steps upon the ground. A stout thick-set fellow, with a shock of black curly hair coming low down, almost to his eyes, thus adding to their sinister and lowering look. For all a face not naturally uncomely, but one on which crime has set its stamp, deep and indelible.

His garb is such as gamekeepers usually wear, and poachers almost universally affect, a shooting coat of velveteen, corduroy smalls, and sheepskin gaiters buttoned over thick-soled shoes iron-tipped at the toes. In the ample skirt pockets of the coat – each big as a game-bag – appear two protuberances, that about balance one another – the present of which the priest has already delivered the invoice – in the one being a salmon "blotcher" weighing some three or four pounds, in the other a young cock pheasant.

Having made obeisance to the trio in the grounds of Glyngog, he is about drawing them forth when the priest prevents him, exclaiming: —

"*Arretez!* They're not commodities that keep well in the sun. Should a water-bailiff, or one of the Llangorren gamekeepers chance to set eyes on them, they'd spoil at once. Those lynx-eyed fellows can see a long way, especially on a day bright as this. So, worthy Coracle, before uncarting, you'd better take them back to the kitchen."

Thus instructed the poacher strides off round to the rear of the house; Mrs. Murdock entering by the front door to give directions about dressing the dinner. Not that she intends to take any hand in cooking it – not she. That would be *infra dig.* for the *ancien belle of Mabilie*. Poor as is the establishment of Glyngog, it can boast of a plain cook, with a *slavey* to assist.

The other two remain outside, the guest joining his host in a glass of brandy and water. More than one; for Father Rogier, though French, can drink like a born Hibernian. Nothing of the Good Templar in him.

After they have been for nigh an hour hobnobbing, conversing, Murdock still fighting shy of the subject, which is nevertheless uppermost in the minds of both, the priest once more approaches it, saying: —

"*Parbleu!* They appear to be enjoying themselves over yonder!" He is looking at the lawn where the bright forms are flitting to and fro. "And most of all, I should say, Monsieur White Cap – foretasting the sweets of which he'll ere long enter into full enjoyment; when he becomes master of Llangorren."

"That – never!" exclaims Murdock, this time adding an oath. "Never while I live. When I'm dead – "

"*Diner!*" interrupts a female voice from the house – that of its mistress seen standing on the doorstep.

"Madame summons us," says the priest, "we must in, M'sieu. While picking the bones of the pheasant, you can complete your unfinished speech. *Allons!*"

CHAPTER XIII

AMONG THE ARROWS

The invited to the archery meeting have nearly all arrived, and the shooting has commenced; half a dozen arrows in the air at a time, making for as many targets.

Only a limited number of ladies compete for the first score, each having a little coterie of acquaintances at her back.

Gwen Wynn herself is in this opening contest. Good with the bow, as at the oar – indeed with county celebrity as an archer – carrying the champion badge of her club – it is almost a foregone conclusion she will come off victorious.

Soon, however, those who are backing her begin to anticipate disappointment. She is not shooting with her usual skill, nor yet earnestness. Instead, negligently, and, to all appearance, with thoughts abstracted; her eyes every now and then straying over the ground, scanning the various groups, as if in search of a particular individual. The gathering is large – nearly a hundred people present – and one might come or go without attracting observation. She evidently expects one to come who is not yet there; and oftener than elsewhere her glances go towards the boat-dock, as if the personage expected should appear in that direction. There is a nervous restlessness in her manner, and after each reconnaissance of this kind, an expression of disappointment on her countenance.

It is not unobserved. A gentleman by her side notes it, and with some suspicion of its cause – a suspicion that pains him. It is George Shenstone; who is attending on her, handing the arrows – in short acting as her *aide-de-camp*. Neither is he adroit in the exercise of his duty; instead performs it bunglingly; his thoughts preoccupied, and eyes wandering about. His glances, however, are sent in the opposite direction – to the gate entrance of the park, visible from the place where the targets are set up.

They are both "prospecting" for the self-same individual, but with very different ideas – one eagerly anticipating his arrival, the other as earnestly hoping he may not come. For the expected one is a gentleman – no other than Vivian Rycroft.

Shenstone knows the Hussar officer has been invited, and, however hoping or wishing it, has but little faith he will fail. Were it himself, no ordinary obstacle could prevent his being present at that archery meeting, any more than would five-barred gate, or bullfinch, hinder him from keeping up with hounds.

As time passes without any further arrivals, and the tardy guest has not yet put in appearance, Shenstone begins to think he will this day have Miss Wynn to himself, or at least without any very formidable competitor. There are others present who seek her smiles – some aspiring to her hand – but none he fears so much as the one still absent.

Just as he is becoming calm and confident, he is saluted by a gentleman of the genus "swell," who, approaching, draws out the interrogatory: —

"Who is that fella, Shenstone?"

"What fellow?"

"He with the vewy peculya head gear. Indian affair —*topee*, I bewieve they call it."

"Where?" asks Shenstone, starting and staring to all sides.

"Yondaw! Appwoaching from the diwection of the rivaw. Looks a fwesh awival. I take it he must have come by bawt! Knew him?"

George Shenstone, strong man though he be, visibly trembles. Were Gwen Wynn at that moment to face about, and aim one of her arrows at his breast, it would not bring more pallor upon his cheeks, nor pain to his heart. For he wearing the "peculya head gear" is the man he most fears, and whom he had hoped not to see this day.

So much is he affected, he does not answer the question put to him; nor indeed has he opportunity, as just then Miss Wynn, sighting the *topee* too, suddenly turning, says to him: —

"George! be good enough to take charge of these things." She holds her bow with an arrow she had been affixing to the string. "Yonder's a gentleman just arrived; who you know is a stranger. Aunt will expect me to receive him. I'll be back soon as I've discharged my duty."

Delivering the bow and unspent shaft, she glides off without further speech or ceremony.

He stands looking after; in his eyes anything but a pleased expression. Indeed sullen, almost angry, as watching her every movement he notes the manner of her reception — greeting the new comer with a warmth and cordiality he, Shenstone, thinks uncalled for, however much stranger the man may be. Little irksome to her seems the discharge of that so-called duty; but so exasperating to the baronet's son, he feels like crushing the bow stick between his fingers, or snapping it in twain across his knee!

As he stands with eyes glaring upon them, he is again accosted by his inquisitive acquaintance, who asks:

"What's the matter, Jawge? Yaw haven't answered my intewogatowy!"

"What was it? I forget."

"Aw, indeed! That's stwange. I merely wished to know who Mr. White Cap is?"

"Just what I'd like to know myself. All I can tell you is, that he's an army fellow — in the Cavalry I believe — by name Ryecroft."

"Aw yas; Cavalwy. That's evident by the bend of his legs. Wyquoft — Wyquoft, you say?"

"So he calls himself — a captain of Hussars — his own story."

This in a tone and with a shrug of insinuation.

"But yaw don't think he's an adventuwer?"

"Can't say whether he is, or not."

"Who's his endawser? How came he intwoduuced at Llangowen?"

"That I can't tell you."

He could though; for Miss Wynn, true to her promise, has made him acquainted with the circumstances of the river adventure, though not those leading to it; and he, true to his, has kept them a secret. In a sense therefore, he could not tell, and the subterfuge is excusable.

"By Jawve! The Light Bob appears to have made good use of his time — however intwoduuced. Miss Gwen seems quite familiaw with him; and yondaw the little Lees shaking hands, as though the two had been acquainted evaw since coming out of their cwaddles! See! They're dwagging him up to the ancient spinster, who sits enthawned in her chair like a queen of the Tawnament times. Vewy mediæval the whole affair — vewy!"

"Instead, very modern; in my opinion disgustingly so!"

"Why d'yaw say that, Jawge?"

"Why! Because in either olden or mediæval times such a thing couldn't have occurred — here in Herefordshire."

"What thing, pway?"

"A man admitted into good society without endorsement or introduction. Now-a-days any one may be so; claim acquaintance with a lady, and force his company upon her, simply from having had the chance to pick up a dropped pocket-handkerchief, or offer his umbrella in a skiff of a shower!"

"But, shawly, that isn't how the gentleman yondaw made acquaintance with the fair Gwendoline?"

"Oh! I don't say that," rejoins Shenstone, with forced attempt at a smile — more natural, as he sees Miss Wynn separate from the group they are gazing at, and come back to reclaim her bow. Better satisfied, now, he is rather worried by his importunate friend, and to get rid of him adds:

"If you are really desirous to know how Miss Wynn became acquainted with him, you can ask the lady herself."

Not for all the world would the swell put that question to Gwen Wynn. It would not be safe; and thus snubbed he saunters away, before she is up to the spot.

Ryecroft, left with Miss Linton, remains in conversation with her. It is not his first interview; for several times already has he been a visitor at Llangorren – introduced by the young ladies as the gentleman who, when the pleasure-boat was caught in a dangerous whirl, out of which old Joseph was unable to extricate it, came to their rescue – possibly to the saving of their lives! Thus, the version of the adventure vouchsafed to the aunt – sufficient to sanction his being received at the Court.

And the ancient toast of Cheltenham has been charmed with him. In the handsome Hussar officer she beholds the typical hero of her romance reading; so much like it, that Lord Lutestring has long ago gone out of her thoughts – passed from her memory as though he had been but a musical sound. Of all who bend before her this day, the worship of none is so welcome as that of the martial stranger.

Resuming her bow, Gwen shoots no better than before. Her thoughts, instead of being concentrated on the painted circles, as her eyes, are half the time straying over her shoulders to him behind, still in a *tête-à-tête* with the aunt. Her arrows fly wild and wide, scarce one sticking in the straw. In fine, among all the competitors, she counts lowest score – the poorest she has herself ever made. But what matters it? She is only too pleased when her quiver is empty, and she can have excuse to return to Miss Linton, on some question connected with the hospitalities of the house.

Observing all this, and much more besides, George Shenstone feels aggrieved – indeed exasperated – so terribly, it takes all his best breeding to withhold him from an exhibition of bad behaviour. He might not succeed were he to remain much longer on the ground – which he does not. As if misdoubting his power of restraint, and fearing to make a fool of himself, he too frames excuse, and leaves Llangorren long before the sports come to a close. Not rudely, or with any show of spleen. He is a gentleman, even in his anger; and bidding a polite, and formal, adieu to Miss Linton, with one equally ceremonious, but more distant, to Miss Wynn, he slips round to the stables, orders his horse, leaps into the saddle, and rides off.

Many the day he has entered the gates of Llangorren with a light and happy heart – this day he goes out of them with one heavy and sad.

If missed from the archery meeting, it is not by Miss Wynn. Instead, she is glad of his being gone. Notwithstanding the love passion for another now occupying her heart – almost filling it – there is still room there for the gentler sentiment of pity. She knows how Shenstone suffers – how could she help knowing? – and pities him.

Never more than at this same moment, despite that distant, half-disdainful adieu, vouchsafed to her at parting; by him intended to conceal his thoughts, as his sufferings, while but the better revealing them. How men underrate the perception of women! In matters of this kind a very intuition.

None keener than that of Gwen Wynn. She knows why he has gone so short away – well as if he had told her. And with the compassionate thought still lingering, she heaves a sigh; sad as she sees him ride out through the gate – going in reckless gallop – but succeeded by one of relief, soon as he is out of sight!

In an instant after, she is gay and gladsome as ever; once more bending the bow, and making the catgut twang. But now shooting straight – hitting the target every time, and not unfrequently lodging a shaft in the "gold." For he who now attends on her, not only inspires confidence, but excites her to the display of skill. Captain Ryecroft has taken George Shenstone's place as her aide-de-camp; and while he hands the arrows, she spending them, others of a different kind pass between them – the shafts of Cupid – of which there is a full quiver in the eyes of both.

CHAPTER XIV

BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH

Naturally, Captain Ryecroft is the subject of speculation among the archers at Llangorren. A man of his mien would be so anywhere – if stranger. The old story of the unknown knight suddenly appearing on the tourney's field with closed visor, only recognisable by a love-lock or other favour of the lady whose cause he comes to champion.

He, too, wears a distinctive badge – in the white cap. For though our tale is of modern time, it antedates than when Brown began to affect the *pugaree* – sham of Manchester Mills – as an appendage to his cheap straw hat. That on the head of Captain Ryecroft is the regular forage cap, with quilted cover. Accustomed to it in India – whence he has but lately returned – he adheres to it in England, without thought of its attracting attention, and as little caring whether it does or not.

It does, however. Insular, we are supremely conservative – some might call it "caddish" – and view innovations with a jealous eye; as witness the so-called "moustache movement" not many years ago, and the fierce controversy it called forth.

For other reasons the officer of Hussars is at this same archery gathering a cynosure of eyes. There is a perfume of romance about him; in the way he has been introduced to the ladies of Llangorren; a question asked by others besides the importunate friend of George Shenstone. The true account of the affair with the drunken foresters has not got abroad – these keeping dumb about their own discomfiture; while Jack Wingate, a man of few words, and on this special matter admonished to silence, has been equally close-mouthed; Joseph also mute for reasons already mentioned.

Withal, a vague story has currency in the neighbourhood, of a boat, with two young ladies, in danger of being capsized – by some versions actually upset – and the ladies rescued from drowning by a stranger who chanced to be salmon-fishing near by – his name, Ryecroft. And as this tale also circulates among the archers at Llangorren, it is not strange that some interest should attach to the supposed hero of it, now present.

Still, in an assemblage so large, and composed of such distinguished people – many of whom are strangers to one another – no particular personage can be for long an object of special concern; and if Captain Ryecroft continue to attract observation, it is neither from curiosity as to how he came there, nor the peculiarity of his head-dress, but the dark handsome features beneath it. On these more than one pair of bright eyes occasionally become fixed, regarding them with admiration.

None so warmly as those of Gwen Wynn; though hers neither openly nor in a marked manner. For she is conscious of being under the surveillance of other eyes, and needs to observe the proprieties.

In which she succeeds; so well, that no one watching her could tell, much less say, there is aught in her behaviour to Captain Ryecroft beyond the hospitality of host – which in a sense she is – to guest claiming the privileges of a stranger. Even when during an interregnum of the sports the two go off together, and, after strolling for a time through the grounds, are at length seen to step inside the summer-house, it may cause, but does not merit, remark. Others are acting similarly, sauntering in pairs, loitering in shady places, or sitting on rustic benches. Good society allows the freedom, and to its credit. That which is corrupt alone may cavil at it, and shame the day when such confidence be abused and abrogated.

Side by side they take stand in the little pavilion, under the shadow of its painted zinc roof. It may not have been all chance their coming thither – no more the archery party itself. That Gwendoline Wynn, who suggested giving it, can alone tell. But standing there with their eyes bent on the river, they are for a time silent, so much, that each can hear the beating of the other's heart – both brimful of love.

At such moment one might suppose there could be no reserve or reticence, but confession, full, candid, and mutual. Instead, at no time is this farther off. If *le joie fait peur*, far more *l'amour*.

And with all that has passed is there fear between them. On her part springing from a fancy she has been over forward – in her gushing gratitude for that service done, given too free expression to it, and needs being more reserved now. On his side speech is stayed by a reflection somewhat akin, with others besides. In his several calls at the Court his reception has been both welcome and warm. Still, not beyond the bounds of well-bred hospitality. But why on each and every occasion has he found a gentleman there – the same every time – George Shenstone by name? There before him, and staying after! And this very day, what meant Mr. Shenstone by that sudden and abrupt departure? Above all, why her distraught look, with the sigh accompanying it, as the baronet's son went galloping out of the gate? Having seen the one, and heard the other, Captain Ryecroft has misinterpreted both. No wonder his reluctance to speak words of love.

And so for a time they are silent, the dread of misconception, with consequent fear of committal, holding their lips sealed. On a simple utterance now may hinge their life's happiness, or its misery.

Nor is it so strange, that in a moment fraught with such mighty consequence, conversation should be not only timid, but commonplace. They who talk of love's eloquence, but think of it in its lighter phases – perhaps its lying. When truly, deeply felt, it is dumb, as devout worshipper in the presence of the Divinity worshipped. Here, side by side, are two highly organized beings – a man handsome and courageous, a woman beautiful and aught but timid – both well up in the accomplishments, and gifted with the graces of life – loving each other to their souls' innermost depths, yet embarrassed in manner, and constrained in speech, as though they were a couple of rustics! More; for Corydon would fling his arms around his Phyllis, and give her an eloquent smack, which she, with like readiness would return.

Very different the behaviour of these in the pavilion. They stand for a time silent as statues – though not without a tremulous motion, scarce perceptible – as if the amorous electricity around stifled their breathing, for the time hindering speech. And when at length this comes, it is of no more significance than what might be expected between two persons lately introduced, and feeling but the ordinary interest in one another!

It is the lady who speaks first: —

"I understand you've been but a short while resident in our neighbourhood, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Not quite three months, Miss Wynn. Only a week or two before I had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"Thank you for calling it a pleasure. Not much in the manner, I should say; but altogether the contrary," she laughs, adding —

"And how do you like our Wye?"

"Who could help liking it?"

"There's been much said of its scenery – in books and newspapers. You really admire it?"

"I do, indeed." His preference is pardonable under the circumstances. "I think it the finest in the world."

"What! you such a great traveller! In the tropics too; upon rivers that run between groves of evergreen trees, and over sands of gold! Do you really mean that, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Really – truthfully. Why not, Miss Wynn?"

"Because I supposed those grand rivers we read of were all so much superior to our little Herefordshire stream; in flow of water, scenery, everything – "

"Nay, not everything!" he says interruptingly. "In volume of water they may be; but far from it in other respects. In some it is superior to them all – Rhine, Rhone, ah! Hippocrene itself!"

His tongue is at length getting loosed.

"What other respects?" she asks.

"The forms reflected in it," he answers hesitatingly.

"Not those of vegetation! Surely our oaks, elms, and poplars cannot be compared with the tall palms and graceful tree ferns of the tropics?"

"No; not those."

"Our buildings neither, if photography tells truth, which it should. Those wonderful structures – towers, temples, pagodas – of which it has given us the *fac similes*– far excel anything we have on the Wye – or anything in England. Even our Tintern, which we think so very grand, were but as nothing to them. Isn't that so?"

"True," he says assentingly. "One must admit the superiority of Oriental architecture."

"But you've not told me what form our English river reflects, so much to your admiration!"

He has a fine opportunity for poetical reply. The image is in his mind – her own – with the word upon his tongue, "woman's." But he shrinks from giving it utterance. Instead, retreating from the position he had assumed, he rejoins evasively: —

"The truth is, Miss Wynn, I've had a surfeit of tropical scenery, and was only too glad once more to feast my eyes on the hill and dale landscapes of dear old England. I know none to compare with these of the Wyese." "

"It's very pleasing to hear you say that – to me especially. It's but natural I should love our beautiful Wye – I, born on its banks, brought up on them, and, I suppose, likely to – "

"What?" he asks, observing that she has paused in her speech.

"Be buried on them!" she answers laughingly. She intended to have said "Stay on them the rest of my life." "You'll think that a very grave conclusion," she adds, keeping up the laugh.

"One at all events very far off – it is to be hoped. An eventuality not to arise, till after you've passed many long and happy days – whether on the Wye, or elsewhere."

"Ah! who can tell? The future is a sealed book to all of us."

"Yours need not be – at least as regards its happiness. I think that is assured."

"Why do you say so, Captain Ryecroft?"

"Because it seems to me, as though you had yourself the making of it."

He is saying no more than he thinks; far less. For he believes she could make fate itself – control it, as she can his. And as he would now confess to her – is almost on the eve of it – but hindered by recalling that strange look and sigh sent after Shenstone. His fond fancies, the sweet dreams he has been indulging in ever since making her acquaintance, may have been but illusions. She may be playing with him, as he would with a fish on his hook. As yet, no word of love has passed her lips. Is there thought of it in her heart – for him?

"In what way? What mean you?" she asks, her liquid eyes turned upon him with a look of searching interrogation.

The question staggers him. He does not answer it as he would, and again replies evasively – somewhat confusedly —

"Oh! I only meant, Miss Wynn – that you so young – so – well, with all the world before you – surely have your happiness in your own hands."

If he knew how much it is in his he would speak more courageously, and possibly with greater plainness. But he knows not, nor does she tell him. She, too, is cautiously retentive, and refrains taking advantage of his words, full of suggestion.

It will need another *séance*– possibly more than one – before the real confidence can be exchanged between them. Natures like theirs do not rush into confession as the common kind. With them it is as with the wooing of eagles.

She simply rejoins:

"I wish it were," adding with a sigh, "Far from it, I fear."

He feels as if he had drifted into a dilemma – brought about by his own *gaucherie*– from which something seen up the river, on the opposite side, offers an opportunity to escape – a house. It is the quaint old habitation of Tudor times. Pointing to it, he says:

"A very odd building, that! If I've been rightly informed, Miss Wynn, it belongs to a relative of yours?"

"I have a cousin who lives there."

The shadow suddenly darkening her brow, with the slightly explicit rejoinder, tells him he is again on dangerous ground. He attributes it to the character he has heard of Mr. Murdock. His cousin is evidently disinclined to converse about him.

And she is; the shadow still staying. If she knew what is at that moment passing within Glyngog – could but hear the conversation carried on at its dining table – it might be darker. It is dark enough in her heart, as on her face – possibly from a presentiment.

Ryecroft more than ever embarrassed, feels it a relief when Ellen Lees, with the Rev. Mr. Musgrave as her cavalier attendant – they, too, straying solitarily – approach near enough to be hailed, and invited into the pavilion.

So the dialogue between the cautious lovers comes to an end – to both of them unsatisfactory enough. For this day their love must remain unrevealed; though never man and woman more longed to learn the sweet secret of each other's heart.

CHAPTER XV

A SPIRITUAL ADVISER

While the sports are in progress outside Llangorren Court, inside Glyngog House is being eaten that dinner to commence with salmon in season and end with pheasant out.

It is early; but the Murdocks often glad to eat what Americans call a "square meal," have no set hours for eating, while the priest is not particular.

In the faces of the trio seated at the table a physiognomist might find interesting study, and note expressions that would puzzle Lavater himself. Nor could they be interpreted by the conversation which, at first, only refers to topics of a trivial nature. But now and then, a *mot* of double meaning let down by Rogier, and a glance surreptitiously exchanged between him and his countryman, tell that the thoughts of these two are running upon themes different from those about which are their words.

Murdock, by no means of a trusting disposition, but oftentimes furiously jealous, has nevertheless, in this respect, no suspicion of the priest, less from confidence than a sort of contempt for the pallid puny creature, whom he feels he could crush in a moment of mad anger. And broken though he be, the stalwart, and once strong, Englishman could still do that. To imagine such a man as Rogier a rival in the affections of his own wife, would be to be little himself. Besides, he holds fast to that proverbial faith in the spiritual adviser, not always well founded – in his case certainly misplaced. Knowing nought of this, however, their exchanged looks, however markedly significant, escape his observation. Even if he did observe, he could not read in them aught relating to love. For, this day there is not; the thoughts of both are absorbed by a different passion – cupidity. They are bent upon a scheme of no common magnitude, but grand and comprehensive – neither more nor less than to get possession of an estate worth £10,000 a year – that Llangorren. They know its value as well as the steward who gives receipts for its rents.

It is no new notion with them; but one for some time entertained, and steps considered; still nothing definite either conceived, or determined on. A task, so herculean, as dangerous and difficult, will need care in its conception, and time for its execution. True, it might be accomplished almost instantaneously with six inches of steel, or as many drops of belladonna. Nor would two of the three seated at the table stick at employing such means. Olympe Renault, and Gregorie Rogier have entertained thoughts of them – if not more. In the third is the obstructor. Lewin Murdock would cheat at dice and cards, do money-lenders without remorse, and tradesmen without mercy, ay, steal, if occasion offered; but murder – that is different – being a crime not only unpleasant to contemplate, but perilous to commit. He would be willing to rob Gwendoline Wynn of her property – glad to do it, if he only knew how – but to take away her life, he is not yet up to that.

But he is drawing up to it, urged by desperate circumstances, and spurred on by his wife, who loses no opportunity of bewailing their broken fortunes, and reproaching him for them; at her back the Jesuit secretly instructing, and dictating.

Not till this day have they found him in the mood for being made more familiar with their design. Whatever his own disposition, his ear has been hitherto deaf to their hints, timidly, and ambiguously given. But to-day things appear more promising, as evinced by his angry exclamation "Never!" Hence their delight at hearing it.

During the earlier stages of the dinner, as already said, they converse about ordinary subjects, like the lovers in the pavilion silent upon that paramount in their minds. How different the themes – as love itself from murder! And just as the first word was unspoken in the summer-house at Llangorren, so is the last unheard in the dining-room of Glyngog.

While the blotcher is being carved with a spoon – there is no fish slice among the chattels of Mr. Murdock – the priest in good appetite, and high glee pronounces it "crimp." He speaks English like a native, and is even up in its provincialisms; few in Herefordshire whose dialect is of the purest.

The phrase of the fishmonger received smilingly, the salmon is distributed and handed across the table; the attendance of the slavey, with claws not over clean, and ears that might be unpleasantly sharp, having been dispensed with.

There is wine without stint; for although Murdock's town tradesmen may be hard of heart, in the Welsh Harp there is a tender string he can still play upon; the Boniface of the Rugg's Ferry hostelry having a belief in his *post obit* expectations. Not such an indifferent wine either, but some of the choicest vintage. The guests of the Harp, however rough in external appearance and rude in behaviour, have wonderfully refined ideas about drink, and may be often heard calling for "fizz" – some of them as well acquainted with the qualities of Mœt and Cliquot, as a connoisseur of the most fashionable club.

Profiting by their æsthetic tastes, Lewin Murdock is enabled to set wines upon his table of the choicest brands. Light Bordeaux first with the fish, then sherry with the heavier greens and bacon, followed by champagne as they get engaged upon the pheasant.

At this point the conversation approaches a topic hitherto held in reserve, Murdock himself starting it: —

"So my Cousin Gwen's going to get married, eh! Are you sure of that, Father Rogier?"

"I wish I were as sure of going to heaven."

"But what sort of man is he? you haven't told us."

"Yes, I have. You forget my description, Monsieur – cross between Mars and Phoebus – strength herculean; sure to be father to a progeny numerous as that which spring from the head of Medusa – enough of them to make heirs for Llangorren to the end of time – keep you out of the property if you lived to be the age of Methuselah. Ah! a fine looking fellow, I can assure you; against whom the baronet's son, with his rubicund cheeks and hay-coloured hair, wouldn't stand the slightest chance – even were there nothing more to recommend the martial stranger. But there is."

"What more?"

"The mode of his introduction to the lady – that quite romantic."

"How was he introduced?"

"Well, he made her acquaintance on the water. It appears Mademoiselle Wynn and her companion Lees, were out on the river for a row alone. Unusual that! Thus out, some fellows – Forest of Dean dwellers – offered them insult; from which a gentleman angler, who chanced to be whipping the stream close by, saved them – he no other than *le Capitaine Ryecroft*. With such commencement of acquaintance, a man couldn't be much worth who didn't know how to improve it – even to terminating in marriage if he wished. And with such a rich heiress as Mademoiselle Gwendoline Wynn – to say nought of her personal charms – there are few men who wouldn't wish it so to end. That he, the Hussar officer – captain, colonel, or whatever his rank – does, I've good reason to believe, as also that he will succeed in accomplishing his desires; no more doubt of it than of my being seated at this table. Yes; sure as I sit here that man will be the master of Llangorren."

"I suppose he will – must," rejoins Murdock, drawing out the words as though not greatly concerned, one way or the other.

Olympe looks dissatisfied, but not Rogier, nor she after a glance from the priest, which seems to say "Wait." He himself intends waiting till the drink has done its work.

Taking the hint, she remains silent, her countenance showing calm, as with the content of innocence, while in her heart is the guilt of hell, and the deceit of the devil.

She preserves her composure all through, and soon as the last course is ended, with a show of dessert placed upon the table – poor and *pro forma* – obedient to a look from Rogier, with a slight nod in the direction of the door, she makes her *congé*, and retires.

Murdock lights his meerschaum, the priest one of his paper cigarettes – of which he carries a case – and for some time they sit smoking and drinking; talking, too, but upon matters with no relation to that uppermost in their minds. They seem to fear touching it, as though it were a thing to contaminate. It is only after repeatedly emptying their glasses, their courage comes up to the standard required; that of the Frenchman first; who, nevertheless, approaches the delicate subject with cautious circumlocution.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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