

Le Fanu Joseph Sheridan

Checkmate



Joseph Le Fanu

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CHAPTER I MORTLAKE HALL

There stands about a mile and a half beyond Islington, unless it has come down within the last two years, a singular and grand old house. It belonged to the family of Arden, once distinguished in the Northumbrian counties. About fifty acres of ground, rich with noble clumps and masses of old timber, surround it; old-world fish-ponds, with swans sailing upon them, tall yew hedges, quincunxes, leaden fauns and goddesses, and other obsolete splendours surround it. It rises, tall, florid, built of Caen stone, with a palatial flight of steps, and something of the grace and dignity of the genius of Inigo Jones, to whom it is ascribed, with the shadows of ancestral trees and the stains of two centuries upon it, and a vague character of gloom and melancholy, not improved by some indications not actually of decay, but of something too like neglect.

It is now evening, and a dusky glow envelopes the scene. The setting sun throws its level beams, through tall drawing-room windows, ruddily upon the Dutch tapestry on the opposite walls, and not unbecomingly lights up the little party assembled there.

Good-natured, fat Lady May Penrose, in her bonnet, sips her tea and chats agreeably. Her carriage waits outside. You will ask who is that extremely beautiful girl who sits opposite, her large soft grey eyes gazing towards the western sky with a look of abstraction, too forgetful for a time of her company, leaning upon the slender hand she has placed under her cheek. How silken and golden-tinted the dark brown hair that grows so near her brows, making her forehead low, and marking with its broad line the beautiful oval of her face! Is there carmine anywhere to match her brilliant lips? And when, recollecting something to tell Lady May, she turns on a sudden, smiling, how soft and pretty the dimples, and how even the little row of pearls she discloses!

This is Alice Arden, whose singularly handsome brother Richard, with some of her tints and outlines translated into masculine beauty, stands leaning on the back of a prie-dieu chair, and chatting gaily.

But who is the thin, tall man – the only sinister figure in the group – with one hand in his breast, the other on a cabinet, as he leans against the wall? Who is that pale, thin-lipped man, “with cadaverous aspect and broken beak,” whose eyes never seem to light up, but maintain their dismal darkness while his pale lips smile? Those eyes are fixed on the pretty face of Alice Arden, as she talks to Lady May, with a strangely intense gaze. His eyebrows rise a little, like those of Mephistopheles, towards his temples, with an expression that is inflexibly sarcastic, and sometimes menacing. His jaw is slightly underhung, a formation which heightens the satirical effect of his smile, and, by contrast, marks the depression of his nose.

There was at this time in London a Mr. Longcluse, an agreeable man, a convenient man, who had got a sort of footing in many houses, nobody exactly knew how. He had a knack of obliging people when they really wanted a trifling kindness, and another of holding fast his advantage, and, without seeming to push, or ever appearing to flatter, of maintaining the acquaintance he had once founded. He looked about eight-and-thirty: he was really older. He was gentlemanlike, clever, and rich; but not a soul of all the men who knew him had ever heard of him at school or college. About his birth, parentage, and education, about his “life and adventures,” he was dark.

How were his smart acquaintance made? Oddly, as we shall learn when we know him a little better. It was a great pity that there were some odd things said about this very agreeable, obliging,

and gentlemanlike person. It was a pity that more was not known about him. The man had enemies, no doubt, and from the sort of reserve that enveloped him their opportunity arose. But were there not about town hundreds of men, well enough accepted, about whose early days no one cared a pin, and everything was just as dark?

Now Mr. Longcluse, with his pallid face, his flat nose, his sarcastic eyebrows, and thin-lipped smile, was overlooking this little company, his shoulder leaning against the frame that separated two pieces of the pretty Dutch tapestry which covered the walls.

“By-the-bye, Mr. Longcluse – you can tell me, for you always know everything,” said Lady May – “is there still any hope of that poor child's recovering – I mean the one in that dreadful murder in Thames Street, where the six poor little children were stabbed?”

Mr. Longcluse smiled.

“I'm so glad, Lady May, I can answer you upon good authority! I stopped to-day to ask Sir Edwin Dudley that very question through his carriage window, and he said that he had just been to the hospital to see the poor little thing, and that it was likely to do well.”

“I'm so glad! And what do they say can have been the motive of the murder?”

“Jealousy, they say; or else the man is mad.”

“I should not wonder. I'm sure I hope he is. But they should take care to put him under lock and key.”

“So they will, rely on it; that's a matter of course.”

“I don't know how it is,” continued Lady May, who was garrulous, “that murders interest people so much, who ought to be simply shocked at them.”

“We have a murder in our family, you know,” said Richard Arden.

“That was poor Henry Arden – I know,” she answered, lowering her voice and dropping her eyes, with a side glance at Alice, for she did not know how she might like to hear it talked of.

“Oh, that happened when Alice was only five months old, I think,” said Richard; and slipping into the chair beside Lady May, he laid his hand upon hers with a smile, and whispered, leaning towards her —

“You are always so thoughtful; it is *so* nice of you!”

And this short speech ended, his eyes remained fixed for some seconds, with a glow of tender admiration, on those of fat Lady May, who simpered with effusion, and did not draw her hand away until she thought she saw Mr. Longcluse glance their way.

It was quite true, all he said of Lady May. It would not be easy to find a simpler or more good-natured person. She was very rich also, and, it was said by people who love news and satire, had long been willing to share her gold and other chattels with handsome Richard Arden, who being but five-and-twenty, might very nearly have been her son.

“I remember that horrible affair,” said Mr. Longcluse, with a little shrug and a shake of his head. “Where was I then – Paris or Vienna? Paris it was. I recollect it all now, for my purse was stolen by the very man who made his escape – Mace was his name; he was a sort of low man on the turf, I believe. I was very young then – somewhere about seventeen, I think.”

“You can't have been more, of course,” said good-natured Lady May.

“I should like very much some time to hear all about it,” continued Mr. Longcluse.

“So you shall,” said Richard, “whenever you like.”

“Every old family has a murder, and a ghost, and a beauty also, though she does not always live and breathe, except in the canvas of Lely, or Kneller, or Reynolds: and they, you know, had roses and lilies to give away at discretion, in their paint-boxes, and were courtiers,” remarked Mr. Longcluse, “who dealt sometimes in the old-fashioned business of making compliments. *I* say happy the man who lives in those summers when the loveliness of some beautiful family culminates, and who may, at ever such a distance, gaze and worship.”

This ugly man spoke in a low tone, and his voice was rather sweet. He looked as he spoke at Miss Arden, from whom, indeed, his eyes did not often wander.

“Very prettily said!” applauded Lady May affably.

“I forgot to ask you, Lady May,” inquired Alice, cruelly, at this moment, “how the pretty little Italian greyhound is that was so ill – better, I hope.”

“Ever so much – quite well almost. I'd have taken him out for a drive to-day, poor dear little Pepsie! but that I thought the sun just a little overpowering. Didn't you?”

“Perhaps a little.”

Mr. Longcluse lowered his eyes as he leaned against the wall and sighed, with a pained smile, that even upon his plain, pallid face, was pathetic.

Did proud Richard Arden perceive the devotion of the dubious Longcluse – undefined in position, in history, in origin, in character, in all things but in wealth? Of course he did, perfectly. But that wealth was said to be enormous. There were Jews, who ought to know, who said he was worth one million eight hundred thousand pounds, and that his annual income was considerably more than a hundred thousand pounds a year.

Was a man like that to be dismissed without inquiry? Had he not found him good-natured and gentlemanlike? What about those stories circulated among Jews and croupiers? Enemies might affect to believe them, and quote the old saw, “There is never smoke without fire;” but dare one of them utter a word of the kind aloud? Did they stand the test of five minutes' inquiry, such even as he had given them? Had he found a particle of proof, of evidence, of suspicion? Not a spark. What man had ever escaped stories who was worth forging a lie about?

Here was a man worth more than a million. Why, if *he* let him slip through his fingers, some duchess would pounce on him for her daughter.

It was well that Longcluse was really in love – well, perhaps, that he did not appreciate the social omnipotence of money.

“Where is Sir Reginald at present?” asked Lady May.

“Not here, you may be sure,” answered Richard. “My father does not admit my visits, you know.”

“Really! And is that miserable quarrel kept up still?”

“Only too true. He is in France at present; at Vichy – ain't it Vichy?” he said to Alice.

But she, not choosing to talk, said simply, “Yes – Vichy.”

“I'm going to take Alice into town again; she has promised to stay with me a little longer. And I think you neglect her a little, don't you? You ought to come and see her a little oftener,” pleaded Lady May, in an undertone.

“I only feared I was boring you all. Nothing, *you* know, would give me half so much pleasure,” he answered.

“Well, then, she'll expect your visits, mind.”

A little silence followed. Richard was vexed with his sister; she was, he thought, snubbing his friend Longcluse.

Well, when once he had spoken his mind and disclosed his treasures, Richard flattered himself he had some influence; and did not Lady May swear by Mr. Longcluse? And was his father, the most despotic and violent of baronets, and very much dipt, likely to listen to sentimental twaddle pleading against a hundred thousand a year? So, Miss Alice, if you were disposed to talk nonsense, it was not very likely to be listened to, and sharp and short logic might ensue.

How utterly unconscious of all this she sits there, thinking, I daresay, of quite another person!

Mr. Longcluse was also for a moment in profound reverie; so was Richard Arden. The secrecy of thought is a pleasant privilege to the thinker – perhaps hardly less a boon to the person pondered upon.

If each man's forehead could project its shadows and the light of his spirit shine through, and the confluence of figures and phantoms that cross and march behind it become visible, how that magic-lantern might appal good easy people!

And now the ladies fell to talking and comparing notes about their guipure lacework.

“How charming yours looks, my dear, round that little table!” exclaimed Lady May in a rapture. “I'm sure I hope mine may turn out half as pretty. I wanted to compare; I'm not quite sure whether it is exactly the same pattern.”

And so on, until it was time for them to order their wings for town.

The gentlemen have business of their own to transact, or pleasures to pursue. Mr. Longcluse has his trap there, to carry them into town when their hour comes. They can only put the ladies into their places, and bid them good-bye, and exchange parting reminders and good-natured speeches.

Pale Mr. Longcluse, as he stands on the steps, looks with his dark eyes after the disappearing carriage, and sighs deeply. He has forgotten all for the moment but one dream. Richard Arden wakens him, by laying his hand on his shoulder.

“Come, Longcluse, let us have a cigar in the billiard-room, and a talk. I have a box of Manillas that I think you will say are delicious – that is, if you like them full-flavoured.”

CHAPTER II

MARTHA TANSEY

“By-the-bye, Longcluse,” said Richard, as they entered together the long tiled passage that leads to the billiard-room, “you like pictures. There is one here, banished to the housekeeper's room, that they say is a Vandyck; we must have it cleaned and backed, and restored to its old place – but would you care to look at it?”

“Certainly, I should like extremely,” said Mr. Longcluse.

They were now at the door of the housekeeper's room, and Richard Arden knocked.

“Come in,” said the quavering voice of the old woman from within.

Richard Arden opened the door wide. The misty rose-coloured light of the setting sun filled the room. From the wall right opposite, the pale portrait of Sir Thomas Arden, who fought for the king during the great Civil War, looked forth from his deep dingy frame full upon them, stern and melancholy; the misty beams touching the softer lights of his long hair and the gleam of his armour so happily, that the figure came out from its dark background, and seemed ready to step forth to meet them. As it happened, there was no one in the room but old Mrs. Tansey, the housekeeper, who received Richard Arden standing.

From the threshold, Mr. Longcluse, lost in wonder at the noble picture, gazed on it, with the exclamation, almost a cry, “Good heaven! what a noble work! I had no idea there could be such a thing in existence and so little known.” And he stood for awhile in a rapture, gazing from the threshold on the portrait.

At sound of that voice, with a vague and terrible recognition, the housekeeper turned with a start towards the door, expecting, you'd have fancied from her face, the entrance of a ghost. There was a tremble in the voice with which she cried, “Lord! what's that?” a tremble in the hand extended towards the door, and a shake also in the pale frowning face, from which shone her glassy eyes.

Mr. Longcluse stepped in, and the old woman's gaze became, as he did so, more shrinking and intense. When he saw her he recoiled, as a man might who had all but trod upon a snake; and these two people gazed at one another with a strange, uncertain scowl.

In Mr. Longcluse's case, this dismal caprice of countenance did not last beyond a second or two. Richard Arden, as he turned his eyes from the picture to say a word to his companion, saw it for a moment, and it faded from his features – saw it, and the darkened countenance of the old housekeeper, with a momentary shock. He glanced from one to the other quickly, with a look of unconscious surprise. That look instantly recalled Mr. Longcluse, who, laying his hand on Richard Arden's arm, said, with a laugh – “I do believe I'm the most nervous man in the world.”

“You don't find the room too hot?” said Richard, inwardly ruminating upon the strange looks he had just seen exchanged. “Mrs. Tansey keeps a fire all the year round – don't you, Martha?”

Martha did not answer, nor seem to hear; she pressed her lean hand, instead, to her heart, and drew back to a sofa and sat down, muttering, “My God, lighten our darkness, we beseech thee!” and she looked as if she were on the point of fainting.

“That is a true Vandyck,” said Mr. Longcluse, who was now again looking stedfastly at the picture. “It deserves to rank among his finest portraits. I have never seen anything of his more forcible. You really ought not to leave it here, and in this state.” He walked over and raised the lower end of the frame gently from the wall. “Yes, just as you said, it wants to be backed. That portrait would not stand a shake, I can tell you. The canvas is perfectly rotten, and the paint – if you stand here you'll see – is ready to flake off. It is an awful pity. You shouldn't leave it in such danger.”

“No,” said Richard, who was looking at the old woman. “I don't think Martha's well – will you excuse me for a moment?” And he was at the housekeeper's side. “What's the matter, Martha?” he said kindly. “Are you ill?”

“Very bad, Sir. I beg your pardon for sitting, but I could not help; and the gentleman will excuse me.”

“Of course – but what's the matter?” said Richard.

“A sudden fright like, Sir. I'm all over on a tremble,” she quavered.

“See how exquisitely that hand is painted,” continued Mr. Longcluse, pursuing his criticism, “and the art with which the lights are managed. It is a wonderful picture. It makes one positively angry to see it in that state, and anywhere but in the most conspicuous and honourable place. If I owned that picture, I should never be tired showing it. I should have it where everyone who came into my house should see it; and I should watch every crack and blur on its surface, as I should the symptoms of a dying child, or the looks of the mistress of my heart. Now just look at this. Where is he? Oh!”

“I beg your pardon, a thousand times, but I find my old friend Martha feels a little faint and ill,” said Richard.

“Dear me! I hope she's better,” said Mr. Longcluse, approaching with solicitude. “Can I be of any use? Shall I touch the bell?”

“I'm better, Sir, I thank you; I'm much better,” said the old woman. “It won't signify nothing, only – ” She was looking hard again at Mr. Longcluse, who now seemed perfectly at his ease, and showed in his countenance nothing but the commiseration befitting the occasion. “A sort of a weakness – a fright like – and I can't think, quite, what came over me.”

“Don't you think a glass of wine might do her good?” asked Mr. Longcluse.

“Thanks, Sir, I don't drink it. Oh, lighten our darkness, we beseech thee! Good Lord, a' mercy on us! I take them drops, hartshorn and valerian, on a little water, when I feel nervous like. I don't know when I was took wi' t' creepins before.”

“You look better,” said Richard.

“I'm quite right again, Sir,” she said, with a sigh. She had taken her “drops,” and seemed restored.

“Hadn't you better have one of the maids with you? I'm going now; I'll send some one,” he said. “You must get all right, Martha. It pains me to see you ill. You're a very old friend, remember. You must be all right again; and, if you like, we'll have the doctor out, from town.”

He said this, holding her thin old hand very kindly, for he was by no means without good-nature. So sending the promised attendant, he and Longcluse proceeded to the billiard-room, where, having got the lamps lighted, they began to enjoy their smoke. Each, I fancy, was thinking of the little incident in the housekeeper's room. There was a long silence.

“Poor old Tansey! She looked awfully ill,” said Richard Arden at last.

“By Jove! she did. Is that her name? She rather frightened me,” said Mr. Longcluse. “I thought we had stumbled on a mad woman – she stared so. Has she ever had any kind of fit, poor thing?”

“No. She grumbles a good deal, but I really think she's a healthy old woman enough. She says she was frightened.”

“We came in too suddenly, perhaps?”

“No, that wasn't it, for I knocked first,” said Arden.

“Ah, yes, so you did. I only know she frightened me. I really thought she was out of her mind, and that she was going to stick me with a knife, perhaps,” said Mr. Longcluse, with a little laugh and a shrug.

Arden laughed, and puffed away at his cigar till he had it in a glow again. Was this explanation of what he had seen in Longcluse's countenance – a picture presented but for a fraction of a second, but thenceforward ineffaceable – quite satisfactory?

In a short time Mr. Longcluse asked whether he could have a little brandy and water, which accordingly was furnished. In his first glass there was a great deal of brandy, and very little water indeed; and his second, sipped more at his leisure, was but little more diluted. A very faint flush tinged his pallid cheeks.

Richard Arden was, by this time, thinking of his own debts and ill-luck, and at last he said, "I wonder what the art of getting on in the world is. Is it communicable? or is it no art at all, but a simple run of luck?"

Mr. Longcluse smiled scornfully. "There are men who have immense faith in themselves," said he, "who have indomitable will, and who are provided with craft and pliancy for any situation. Those men are giants from the first to the last hour of action, unless, as happened to Napoleon, success enervates them. In the cradle, they strangle serpents; blind, they pull down palaces; old as Dandolo, they burn fleets and capture cities. It is only when they have taken to bragging that the *lues Napoleonica* has set in. Now I have been, in a sense, a successful man – I am worth some money. If I were the sort of man I describe, I should be worth, if I cared for it, ten times what I have in as many years. But I don't care to confess I made my money by flukes. If, having no tenderness, you have two attributes – profound cunning and perfect audacity – nothing can keep you back. I'm a commonplace man, I say; but I know what constitutes power. Life is a battle, and the general's qualities win."

"I have not got the general's qualities, I think; and I know I haven't luck," said Arden; "so for my part I may as well drift, with as little trouble as may be, wherever the current drives. Happiness is not for all men."

"Happiness is for *no* man," said Mr. Longcluse. And a little silence followed. "Now suppose a fellow has got more money than ever he dreamed of," he resumed, "and finds money, after all, not quite what he fancied, and that he has come to long for a prize quite distinct and infinitely more precious; so that he finds, at last, that he never can be happy for an hour without it, and yet, for all his longing and his pains, sees it is unattainable as that star." (He pointed to a planet that shone down through the skylight.) "Is that man happy? He carries with him, go where he may, an aching heart, the pangs of jealousy and despair, and the longing of the damned for Paradise. That is *my* miserable case."

Richard Arden laughed, as he lighted his second cigar.

"Well, if that's your case, you can't be one of those giants you described just now. Women are not the obdurate and cruel creatures you fancy. They are proud, and vain, and unforgiving; but the misery and the perseverance of a lover constitute a worship that first flatters and then wins them. Remember this, a woman finds it very hard to give up a worshipper, except for another. Now why should you despair? You are a gentleman, you are a clever fellow, an agreeable fellow; you are what is accounted a young man still, and you can make your wife rich. They all like that. It is not avarice, but pride. I don't know the young lady, but I see no good reason why you should fail."

"I wish, Arden, I dare tell you all; but some day I'll tell you more."

"The only thing is – You'll not mind my telling you, as you have been so frank with me?"

"Pray say whatever you think. I shall be ever so much obliged. I forget so many things about English manners and ways of thinking – I have lived so very much abroad. Should I be put up for a club?"

"Well, I should not mind a club just yet, till you know more people – quite time enough. But you must manage better. Why should those Jew fellows, and other people, who don't hold, and never can, a position the least like yours, be among your acquaintance? You must make it a rule to drop all objectionable persons, and know none but good people. Of course, when you are strong enough it doesn't so much matter, provided you keep them at arm's length. But you passed your younger days abroad, as you say, and not being yet so well known here, you will have to be particular – don't you see? A man is so much judged by his acquaintance; and, in fact, it is essential."

"A thousand thanks for any hints that strike you," said Longcluse good-humouredly.

“They sound frivolous; but these trifles have immense weight with women,” said Arden. “By Jove!” he added, glancing at his watch, “we shall be late. Your trap is at the door – suppose we go?”

CHAPTER III

MR. LONGCLUSE OPENS HIS HEART

The old housekeeper had drawn near her window, and stood close to the pane, through which she looked out upon the star-lit night. The stars shine down over the foliage of huge old trees. Dim as shadows stand the horse and tax-cart that await Mr. Longcluse and Richard Arden, who now at length appear. The groom fixes the lamps, one of which shines full on Mr. Longcluse's peculiar face.

"Ay – the voice; I could a' sworn to that," she muttered. "It went through me like a scythe. But that's a strange face; and yet there's summat in it, just a hint like, to call my thoughts out a-seeking up and down, and to and fro; and 'twill not let me rest until I come to find the truth. Mace? No, no. Langly? Not he. Yet 'twas summat *that night*, I think – summat awful. And who *was* there? No one. Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord! for my heart is sore troubled."

Up jumped the groom. Mr. Longcluse had the reins in his hand, and he and his companion passed swiftly by the window, and the flash of the lamps crossed the panelled walls of the housekeeper's room. The light danced wildly from corner to corner of the wainscot, accompanied by the shadows of two geraniums in bow-pots on the window-stool. The lamps flew by, and she still stood there, with the palsied shake of her head and hand, looking out into the darkness, in rumination.

Arden and Longcluse glided through the night air in silence, under the mighty old trees that had witnessed generations of Ardens, down the darker, narrow road, and by the faded old inn, once famous in those regions as the "Guy of Warwick," representing still on its board, in tarnished gold and colours, that redoubted champion, with a boar's head on the point of his sword, and a grotesque lion winding itself fawningly about his horse's legs.

As they passed swiftly along this smooth and deserted road, Longcluse spoke. *Aperit prae cordia vinum*. In his brandy and water he had not spared alcohol, and the quantity was considerable.

"I have lots of money, Arden, and I can talk to people, as you say," he suddenly said, as if Richard Arden had spoken but a moment before; "but, on the whole, is there on earth a more miserable dog than I? There are things that trouble me that would make you laugh; there are others that would, if I dare tell them, make you sigh. Soon I shall be able; soon you shall know all. I'm not a bad fellow. I know how to give away money, and, what is harder to bestow on others, my time and labour. But who to look at me would believe it? I'm not a worse fellow than Penruddock. I can cry for pity and do a kind act like him; but I look in my glass, and I also feel like him, 'the mark of Cain' is on me – cruelty in my face. Why should Nature write on some men's faces such libels on their characters? Then here's another thing to make you laugh – you, a handsome fellow, to whom beauty belongs, I say, by right of birth – it would make me laugh also if I were not, as I am, forced every hour I live to count up, in agonies of hope and terror, my chances in that enterprise in which all my happiness for life is staked so wildly. Common ugliness does not matter, it is got over. But such a face as mine! Come, come! you are too good-natured to say. I'm not asking for consolation; I am only summing up my curses."

"You make too much of these. Lady May thinks your face, she says, very interesting – upon my honour, she does."

"Oh, heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Longcluse, with a shrug and a laugh.

"And what is more to the purpose (will you forgive my reporting all this – you won't mind?), some young lady friends of hers who were by said, I assure you, that you had so much expression, and that your features were extremely refined."

"It won't do, Arden; you are too good-natured," said he, laughing more bitterly.

"I should much rather be as I am, if I were you, than be gifted with vulgar beauty – plump, pink and white, with black beady eyes, and all that," said Arden.

“But the heaviest curse upon me is that which, perhaps, you do not suspect – the curse of – secrecy.”

“Oh, really!” said Arden, laughing, as if he had thought up to then that Mr. Longcluse's history was as well known as that of the ex-Emperor Napoleon.

“I don't say that I shall come out like the enchanted hero in a fairy tale, and change in a moment from a beast into a prince; but I am something better than I seem. In a short time, if you cared to be bored with it, I shall have a great deal to tell you.”

There followed here a silence of two or three minutes, and then, on a sudden, pathetically, Mr. Longcluse broke forth —

“What has a fellow like me to do with love? and less than beloved, can I ever be happy? I know something of the world – not of this London world, where I live less than I seem to do, and into which I came too late ever to understand it thoroughly – I know something of a greater world, and human nature is the same everywhere. You talk of a girl's pride inducing her to marry a man for the sake of his riches. Could I possess my beloved on those terms? I would rather place a pistol in my mouth, and blow my skull off. Arden, I'm unhappy; I'm the most miserable dog alive.”

“Come, Longcluse, that's all nonsense. Beauty is no advantage to a man. The being agreeable is an immense one. But success is what women worship, and if, in addition to that, you possess wealth – not, as I said, that they are sordid, but only vain-glorious – you become very nearly irresistible. Now *you* are agreeable, successful and wealthy – you must see what follows.”

“I'm out of spirits,” said Longcluse, and relapsed into silence, with a great sigh.

By this time they had got within the lamps, and were threading streets, and rapidly approaching their destination. Five minutes more, and these gentlemen had entered a vast room, in the centre of which stood a billiard-table, with benches rising tier above tier to the walls, and a gallery running round the building above them, brilliantly lighted, as such places are, and already crowded with all kinds of people. There is going to be a great match of a “thousand up” played between Bill Hood and Bob Markham. The betting has been unusually high; it is still going on. The play won't begin for nearly half an hour. The “admirers of the game” have mustered in great force and variety. There are young peers, with sixty thousand a year, and there are gentlemen who live by their billiards. There are, for once in a way, grave persons, bankers, and counsel learned in the law; there are Jews and a sprinkling of foreigners; and there are members of Parliament and members of the swell mob.

Mr. Longcluse has a good deal to think about this night. He *is* out of spirits. Richard Arden is no longer with him, having picked up a friend or two in the room. Longcluse, with folded arms, and his shoulders against the wall, is in a profound reverie, his dark eyes for the time lowered to the floor, beside the point of his French boot. *There* unfold themselves beneath him picture after picture, the scenes of many a year ago. Looking down, there creeps over him an old horror, a supernatural disgust, and he sees in the dark a pair of wide, white eyes, staring up at him in an agony of terror, and a shrill yell, piercing a distance of many years, makes him shake his ears with a sudden chill. Is this the witches' Sabbath of our pale Mephistopheles – his night of goblins? He raised his eyes, and they met those of a person whom he had not seen for a very long time – a third part of his whole life. The two pairs of eyes, at nearly half across the room, have met, and for a moment fixed. The stranger smiles and nods. Mr. Longcluse does neither. He affects now to be looking over the stranger's shoulder at some more distant object. There is a strange chill and commotion at his heart.

CHAPTER IV

MONSIEUR LEBAS

Mr. Longcluse leaned still with folded arms, and his shoulder to the wall. The stranger, smiling and fussy, was making his way to him. There is nothing in this man's appearance to associate him with tragic incident or emotion of any kind. He is plainly a foreigner. He is short, fat, middle-aged, with a round fat face, radiant with good humour and good-natured enjoyment. His dress is cut in the somewhat grotesque style of a low French tailor. It is not very new, and has some spots of grease upon it. Mr. Longcluse perceives that he is now making his way towards him. Longcluse for a moment thought of making his escape by the door, which was close to him; but he reflected, "He is about the most innocent and good-natured soul on earth, and why should I seem to avoid him? Better, if he's looking for me, to let him find me, and say his say." So Longcluse looked another way, his arms still folded, and his shoulders against the wall as before.

"Ah, ha! Monsieur is thinking profoundly," said a gay voice in French. "Ah, ha, ha, ha! you are surprised, Sir, to see me here. So am I, my faith! I saw you. I never forget a face."

"Nor a friend, Lebas. Who could have imagined anything to bring you to London?" answered Longcluse, in the same language, shaking him warmly by the hand, and smiling down on the little man. "I shall never forget your kindness. I think I should have died in that *illness* but for you. How can I ever thank you half enough?"

"And the grand secret – the political difficulty – Monsieur found it well evaded," he said, mysteriously touching his upper lip with two fingers.

"Not all quiet yet. I suppose you thought I was in Vienna?"

"Eh? well, yes – so I did," answered Lebas, with a shrug. "But perhaps you think this place safer."

"Hush! You'll come to me to-morrow. I'll tell you where to find me before we part, and you'll bring your portmanteau and stay with me while you remain in London, and the longer the better."

"Monsieur is too kind, a great deal; but I am staying for my visit to London with my brother-in-law, Gabriel Laroque, the watchmaker. He lives on the Hill of Ludgate, and he would be offended if I were to reside anywhere but in his house while I stay. But if Monsieur would be so good as to permit me to call –"

"You must come and dine with me to-morrow; I have a box for the opera. You love music, or you are not the Pierre Lebas whom I remember sitting with his violin at an open window. So come early, come before six; I have ever so much to ask you. And what has brought you to London?"

"A very little business and a great deal of pleasure; but all in a week," said the little man, with a shrug and a hearty laugh. "I have come over here about some little things like that." He smiled archly as he produced from his waistcoat pocket a little flat box with a glass top, and shook something in it. "Commerce, you see. I have to see two or three more of the London people, and then my business will have terminated, and nothing remain for the rest of the week but pleasure – ha, ha!"

"You left all at home well, I hope – children?" He was going to say "Madame," but a good many years had passed.

"I have seven children. Monsieur will remember two. Three are by my first marriage, four by my second, and all enjoy the very best health. Three are very young – three, two, one year old; and they say a fourth is not impossible very soon," he added archly.

Longcluse laughed kindly, and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"You must take charge of a little present for each from me, and one for Madame. And the old business still flourishes?"

“A thousand thanks! yes, the business is the same – the file, the chisel, and knife.” And he made a corresponding movement of his hand as he mentioned each instrument.

“*Hush!*” said Longcluse, smiling, so that no one who did not hear him would have supposed there was so much cautious emphasis in the word. “My good friend, remember there are details we talk of, you and I together, that are not to be mentioned so suitably in a place like this,” and he pressed his hand on his wrist, and shook it gently.

“A thousand pardons! I am, I know, too careless, and let my tongue too often run before my caution. My wife, she says, ‘You can’t wash your shirt but you must tell the world.’ It is my weakness truly. She is a woman of extraordinary penetration.”

Mr. Longcluse glanced from the corners of his eyes about the room. Perhaps he wished to ascertain whether his talk with this man, whom you would have taken to be little above the level of a French mechanic, had excited anyone’s attention. But there was nothing to make him think so.

“Now, Pierre, my friend, you must win some money upon this match – do you see? And you won’t deny me the pleasure of putting down your stake for you; and, if you win, you shall buy something pretty for Madame – and, win or lose, I shall think it friendly of you after so many years, and like you the better.”

“Monsieur is too good,” he said with effusion.

“Now look. Do you see that fat Jew over there on the front bench – you can’t mistake him – with the velvet waistcoat all in wrinkles, and the enormous lips, who talks to every second person who passes?”

“I see perfectly, Monsieur.”

“He is betting three to one upon Markham. You must take his offer, and back Hood. I’m told *he’ll* win. Here are ten pounds, you may as well make them thirty. Don’t say a word. Our English custom is to *tip*, as we say, our friend’s sons at school, and to make presents to everybody, as often as we like. Now there – not a word.” He quietly slipped into his hand a little rouleau of ten pounds in gold. “If you say one word you wound me,” he continued. “But, good Heaven! my dear friend, haven’t you a breast-pocket?”

“No, Monsieur; but this is quite safe. I was paid, only five minutes before I came here, fifteen pounds in gold, a cheque of forty-four pounds, and –”

“Be silent. You may be overheard. Speak here in a very low tone, as I do. And do you mean to tell me that you carry all that money in your coat pocket?”

“But in a pocket-book, Monsieur.”

“All the more convenient for the *chevalier d’industrie*,” said Longcluse. “Stop. Pray don’t produce it; your fate is, perhaps, sealed if you do. There are gentlemen in this room who would hustle and rob you in the crowd as you get out; or, failing that, who, seeing that you are a stranger, would follow and murder you in the streets, for the sake of a twentieth part of that sum.”

“Gabriel thought there would be none here but men distinguished,” said Lebas, in some consternation.

“Distinguished by the special attention of the police, some of them,” said Longcluse.

“Hé! that is very true,” said Monsieur Lebas – “very true, I am sure of it. See you that man there, Monsieur? Regard him for a moment. The tall man, who leans with his shoulder to the metal pillar of the gallery. My faith! he has observed my steps and followed me. I thought he was a spy. But my friend he says ‘No, that is a man of bad character, dismissed for bad practices from the police.’ Aha! he has watched me sideways, with the corner of his eye. I will watch him with the corner of mine – ha, ha!”

“It proves, at all events, Lebas, that there are people here other than gentlemen and men of honest lives,” said Longcluse.

“But,” said Lebas, brightening a little, “I have this weapon,” producing a dagger from the same pocket.

“Put it back this instant. Worse and worse, my good friend. Don't you know that just now there is a police activity respecting foreigners, and that two have been arrested only yesterday on no charge but that of having weapons about their persons? I don't know what the devil you had best do.”

“I can return to the Hill of Ludgate – eh?”

“Pity to lose the game; they won't let you back again,” said Longcluse.

“What shall I do?” said Lebas, keeping his hand now in his pocket on his treasure.

Longcluse rubbed the tip of his finger a little over his eyebrow, thinking.

“Listen to me,” said Longcluse, suddenly. “Is your brother-in-law here?”

“No, Monsieur.”

“Well, you have some London friend in the room, haven't you?”

“One – yes.”

“Only be sure he is one whom you can trust, and who has a safe pocket.”

“Oh, yes, Monsieur, entirely! and I saw him place his purse so,” he said, touching his coat, over his heart, with his fingers.

“Well, now, you can't manage it here, under the gaze of the people; but —*where* is best? Yes – you see those two doors at opposite sides in the wall, at the far end of the room? They open into two parallel corridors leading to the hall, and a little way down there is a cross passage, in the middle of which is a door opening into a smoking-room. That room will be deserted now, and there, unseen, you can place your money and dagger in his charge.”

“Ah, thank you a hundred thousand times, Monsieur!” answered Lebas. “I shall be writing to the Baron van Boeren to-morrow, and I will tell him I have met Monsieur.”

“Don't mind; how is the baron?” asked Longcluse.

“Very well. Beginning to be not so young, you know, and thinking of retiring. I will tell him his work has succeeded. If he demolishes, he also secures. If he sometimes sheds blood – ”

“*Hush!*” whispered Longcluse, sternly.

“There is no one,” murmured little Lebas, looking round, but dropping his voice to a whisper. “He also saves a neck sometimes from the blade of the guillotine.”

Longcluse frowned, a little embarrassed. Lebas smiled archly. In a moment Longcluse's impatient frown broke into a mysterious smile that responded.

“May I say one word more, and make one request of Monsieur, which I hope he will not think very impertinent?” asked Monsieur Lebas, who had just been on the point of taking his leave.

“It mayn't be in my power to grant it; but you can't be what you say – I am too much obliged to you – so speak quite freely,” said Longcluse.

So they talked a little more and parted, and Monsieur Lebas went on his way.

CHAPTER V

A CATASTROPHE

The play has commenced. Longcluse, who likes and understands the game, sitting beside Richard Arden, is all eye. He is intensely eager and delighted. He joins modestly in the clapping that now and then follows a stroke of extraordinary brilliancy. Now and then he whispers a criticism in Arden's ear. There are many vicissitudes in the game. The players have entered on the third hundred, and still "doubtful it stood." The excitement is extraordinary. The assembly is as hushed as if it were listening to a sermon, and, I am afraid, more attentive. Now, on a sudden, Hood scores a hundred and sixty-eight points in a single break. A burst of prolonged applause follows, and, during the clapping, in which he had at first joined, Longcluse says to Arden, —

"I can't tell you how that run of Hood's delights me. I saw a poor little friend of mine here before the play began — I had not seen him since I was little more than a boy — a Frenchman, a good-natured little soul, and I advised him to back Hood, and I have been trembling up to this moment. But I think he's safe now to win. Markham can't score this time. If he's in 'Queer Street,' as they whisper round the room, you'll find he'll either give a simple miss, or put himself into the pocket."

"Well, I'm sure I hope your friend will win, because it will put three hundred and eighty pounds into my pocket," said Richard Arden.

And now silence was called, and the building became, in a moment, hushed as a cathedral before the anthem; and Markham knocked his own ball into the pocket as Longcluse had predicted.

On sped the game, and at last Hood scored a thousand, and won the match, greeted by an uproar of applause that, now being no longer restrained, lasted for nearly five minutes. The assemblage had, by this time, descended from the benches, and crowded the floor in clusters, discussing the play or settling bets. The people in the gallery were pouring down by the four staircases, and adding to the crowd and buzz.

Suddenly there is a sort of excitement perceptible of a new kind — a gathering and pressure of men about one of the doors at the far corner of the room. Men are looking back and beckoning to their companions; others are shouldering forward as strenuously as they can. What is it — any dispute about the score? — a pair of men boxing in the passage?

"No suspicion of fire?" the men at this near end exclaim, and sniff over their shoulders, and look about them, and move toward the point where the crowd is thickening, not knowing what to make of the matter. But soon there runs a rumour about the room — "a man has just been found murdered in a room outside," and the crowd now press forward more energetically to the point of attraction.

In the cross-passage which connects the two corridors, as Mr. Longcluse described, there is an awful crush, and next to no light. A single jet of gas burns in the smoking room, where the pressure of the crowd is not quite so much felt. There are two policemen in that chamber, in the ordinary uniform of the force, and three detectives in plain clothes, one supporting a corpse already stiffening, in a sitting posture, as it was found, in a far angle of the room, on the bench to your left as you look in. All the people are looking up the room. You can see nothing but hats, and backs of heads, and shoulders. There is a ceaseless buzz and clack of talk and conjecture. Even the policemen are looking, as the rest do, at the body. The man who has mounted on the chair near the door, with the other beside him, who has one foot on the rung and another on the seat, and an arm round the first gentleman's neck, although he has not the honour of his acquaintance, to support himself, can see, over the others' heads, the one silent face which looks back towards the door, upon so many gaping, and staring, and gabbling ones. The light is faint. It has occurred to no one to light the gas lamps in the centre. But that forlorn face is distinct enough. Fixed and leaden it is, with the chin a little raised. The eyes are

wide open, with a deep and awful gaze; the mouth slightly distorted with what the doctors call “a convulsive smile,” which shows the teeth a little, and has an odd, wincing look.

As I live, it is the little Frenchman, Pierre Lebas, who was talking so gaily to-night with Mr. Longcluse!

The ebony haft of a dagger, sticking straight out, shows where the hand of the assassin planted the last stab of four, through his black satin waistcoat, embroidered with green leaves, red strawberries, and yellow flowers, which, I suppose, was one of the finest articles in the little wardrobe that Madame Lebas packed up for his holiday. It is not worth much now. It has four distinct cuts, as I have said, on the left side, right through it, and is soaked in blood.

His pockets have been rifled. The police have found nothing in them but a red pocket-handkerchief and a papier-maché snuff-box. If that dumb mouth could speak but fifty words, what a world of conjecture it would end, and poor Lebas's story would be listened to as never was story of his before!

A policeman now takes his place at the door to prevent further pressure. No new-comers will be admitted, except as others go out. Those outside are asking questions of those within, and transmitting, over their shoulders, particulars, eagerly repeated. On a sudden there is a subsidence of the buzz and gabble within, and one voice, speaking almost at the pitch of a shriek, is heard declaiming. White as a sheet, Mr. Longcluse, in high excitement, is haranguing in the smoking-room, mounted on a table.

“I say,” he cried, “gentlemen, excuse me. There are so many together here, so many known to be wealthy, it is an opportunity for a word. Things are coming to a pretty pass – garotters in our streets and assassins in our houses of entertainment! Here is a poor little fellow – look at him – here to-night to see the game, perfectly well and happy, murdered by some miscreant for the sake of the money he had about him. It might have been the fate of anyone of us. I spoke to him to-night. I had not seen him since I was a boy almost. Seven children and a wife, he told me, dependent on him. I say there are two things wanted – first, a reward of such magnitude as will induce exertion. I promise, for my own share, to put down double the amount promised by the highest subscriber. Secondly, something should be done for the family he has left, in proportion to the loss they have sustained. Upon this point I shall make inquiry myself. But this is plain, the danger and scandal have attained a pitch at which none of us who cares to walk the streets at night, or at any time to look in upon amusements like that we attended this evening, can permit them longer to stand. There is a fatal defect somewhere. Are our police awake and active? Very possibly; but if so the force is not adequate. I say this frightful scandal must be abated if, as citizens of London, we desire to maintain our reputation for common sense and energy.”

There was a tall thin fellow, shabbily dressed, standing nearly behind the door, with a long neck, and a flat mean face, slightly pitted with small-pox, rather pallid, who was smiling lazily, with half-closed eyes, as Mr. Longcluse declaimed; and when he alluded pointedly to the inadequacy of the police, this man's amusement improved, and he winked pleasantly at the clock which he was consulting at the moment with the corner of his eye.

And now a doctor arrived, and Gabriel Laroque the watchmaker, and more police, with an inspector. Laroque faints when he sees his murdered friend. Recovered after a time, he identifies the body, identifies the dagger also as the property of poor Lebas.

The police take the matter now quite into their hands, and clear the room.

CHAPTER VI TO BED

Mr. Longcluse jumped into a cab, and told the man to drive to his house in Bolton Street, Piccadilly. He rolled his coat about him with a kind of violence, and threw himself into a corner. Then, as it were, *in furore*, and with a stamp on the floor, he pitched himself into the other corner.

"I've seen to-night what I never thought I should see. What devil possessed me to tell him to go into that black little smoking-room?" he muttered. "What a room it is! It has seized my brain somehow. Am I in a fever, or going mad, or what? That cursed smoking-room! I can't get out of it. It is in the centre of the earth. I'm built round and round in it. The moment I begin to think, I'm in it. The moment I close my eyes, its four stifling walls are round me. There is no way out. It is like hell."

The wind had come round to the south, and a soft rain was pattering on the windows. He stopped the cab somewhere near St. James's Street, and got out. It was late – it was just past two o'clock, and the streets were quiet. Wonderfully still was the great city at this hour, and the descent of the rain went on with a sound like a prolonged "hush" all round. He paid the man, and stood for a while on the kerbstone, looking up and down the street, under the downpour of the rain. You might have taken this millionaire for a man who knew not where to lay his head that night. He took off his hat, and let the refreshing rain saturate his hair, and stream down his forehead and temples.

"Your cab's stuffy and hot, ain't it? Standing half the day with the glass in the sun, I daresay," said he to the man, who was fumbling in his pockets, and pretending a difficulty about finding change.

"See, never mind, if you haven't got change; I'll go on. Heavier rain than I fancied; very pleasant though. When did the rain begin?" asked Mr. Longcluse, who seemed in no hurry to get back again.

"A trifle past ten, Sir."

"I say, your horse's knees are a bit broken, ain't they? Never mind, I don't care. He can pull you and me to Bolton Street, I daresay."

"Will you please to get in, Sir?" inquired the cabman.

Mr. Longcluse nodded, frowning and thinking of something else; the rain still descending on his bare head, his hat in his hand.

The cabman thought this "cove" had been drinking and must be a trifle "tight." He would not mind if he stood so for a couple of hours; it would run his fare up to something pretty. So cabby had thoughts of clapping a nosebag to his horse's jaws, and was making up his mind to a bivouac. But Mr. Longcluse on a sudden got in, repeating his direction to the driver in a gay and brisk tone, that did not represent his real sensations.

"Why should I be so disturbed at that little French fellow? Have I been ill, that my nerve is gone and I such a fool? One would think I had never seen a dead fellow till now. Better for him to be quiet than at his wit's ends, devising ways and means to keep his seven cubs in bread and butter. I should have gone away when the game was over. What earthly reason led me into that d – d room, when I heard the fuss there? I've a mind to go and play hazard, or see a doctor. Arden said he'd look in, in the morning. I should like that; I'll talk to Arden. I sha'n't sleep, I know; I can't, all night; I've got imprisoned in that suffocating room. Shall I ever close my eyes again?"

They had now reached the door of the small, unpretending house of this wealthy man. The servant who opened the door, though he knew his business, stared a little, for he had never seen his master return in such a plight before, and looking so haggard.

"Where's Franklin?"

"Arranging things in your room, Sir."

"Give me a candle. The cab is paid. Mr. Arden, mind, may call in the morning; if I should not be down, show him to my room. You are not to let him go without seeing me."

Up-stairs went the pale master of the house. "Franklin!" he called, as he mounted the last flight of stairs, next his bed-room.

"Yes, Sir."

"I sha'n't want you to-night, I think – that is, I shall manage what I want for myself; but I mean to ring for you by-and-by." He was in his dressing-room by this time, and looked round to see that his comforts were provided for as usual – his foot-bath and hot water.

"Shall I fetch your tea, Sir?"

"I'll drink no tea to-night; I've been disgusted. I've seen a dead man, quite unexpectedly; and I sha'n't get over it for some hours, I daresay. I feel ill. And what you must do is this: when I ring my bell, you come back, and you must sit up here till eight in the morning. I shall leave the door between this and the next room open; and should you hear me sleeping uneasily, moaning, or anything like nightmare, you must come in and waken me. And you are not to go to sleep, mind; the moment I call, I expect you in my room. Keep yourself awake how you can; you may sleep all to-morrow, if you like."

With this charge Franklin departed.

But Mr. Longcluse's preparations for bed occupied a longer time than he had anticipated. When nearly an hour had passed, Mr. Franklin ventured up-stairs, and quietly approached the dressing-room door; but there he heard his master still busy with his preparations, and withdrew. It was not until nearly half-an-hour more had passed that his bell gave the promised signal, and Mr. Franklin established himself for the night, in the easy-chair in the dressing-room, with the connecting door between the two rooms open.

Mr. Longcluse was right. The shock which his nerves had received did not permit him to sleep very soon. Two hours later he called for the Eau-de-Cologne that stood on his dressing-table; and although he made belief to wet his temples with it, and kept it at his bedside with that professed design, it was Mr. Franklin's belief that he drank the greater part of what remained in the capacious cut-glass bottle. It was not until people were beginning to "turn out" for their daily labour that sleep at length visited the wearied eye-balls of the Cræsus.

Three hours of death-like sleep, and Mr. Longcluse, with a little start, was wide awake.

"Franklin!"

"Yes, Sir." And Mr. Franklin stood at his bedside.

"What o'clock is it?"

"Just struck ten, Sir."

"Hand me the *Times*." This was done.

"Tell them to get breakfast as usual. I'm coming down. Open the shutters, and draw the curtains, quite."

When Franklin had done this and gone down, Mr. Longcluse read the *Times* with a stern eagerness, still in bed. The great billiard match between Hood and Markham was given in spirited detail; but he was looking for something else. Just under this piece of news, he found it – "Murder and Robbery, in the Saloon Tavern." He read this twice over, and then searched the paper in vain for any further news respecting it. After this search, he again read the short account he had seen before, very carefully, and more than once. Then he jumped out of bed, and looked at himself in the glass in his dressing-room.

"How awfully seedy I am looking!" he muttered, after a careful inspection. "Better by-and-by."

His hand was shaking like that of a man who had made a debauch, or was worn out with ague. He looked ten years older.

"I should hardly know myself," muttered he. "What a confounded, sinful old fogey I look, and I so young and innocent!"

The sneer was for himself and at himself. The delivery of such is an odd luxury which, at one time or other, most men indulge in. Perhaps it should teach us to take them more kindly when other

people crack such cynical jokes on our heads, or, at least, to perceive that they don't always argue personal antipathy.

The sour smile which had, for a moment, flickered with a wintry light on his face, gave place suddenly to a dark fatigue; his features sank, and he heaved a long, deep, and almost shuddering sigh.

There are moments, happily very rare, when the idea of suicide is distinct enough to be dangerous, and having passed which, a man feels that Death has looked him very nearly in the face. Nothing more trite and true than the omnipresence of suffering. The possession of wealth exempts the unfortunate owner from, say, two-thirds of the curse that lies heavy on the human race. Two thirds is a great deal; but so is the other third, and it may have in it, at times, something as terrible as human nature can support.

Mr. Longcluse, the millionaire, had, of course, many poor enviers. Had any one of all these uttered such a sigh that morning? Or did any one among them feel wearier of life?

“When I have had my tub, I shall be quite another man,” said he.

But it did not give him the usual fillip; on the contrary, he felt rather chilled.

“What can the matter be? I'm a changed man,” said he, wondering, as people do at the days growing shorter in autumn, that time had produced some changes. “I remember when a scene or an excitement produced no more effect upon me, after the moment, than a glass of champagne; and now I feel as if I had swallowed poison, or drunk the cup of madness. Shaking! – hand, heart, every joint. I have grown such a muff!”

Mr. Longcluse had at length completed his very careless toilet, and looking ill, went downstairs in his dressing-gown and slippers.

CHAPTER VII

FAST FRIENDS

In little more than half-an-hour, as Mr. Longcluse was sitting at his breakfast in his dining-room, Richard Arden was shown in.

“Dressing-gown and slippers – what a lazy dog I am compared with you!” said Longcluse gaily as he entered.

“Don't say another word on that subject, I beg. I should have been later myself, had I dared; but my Uncle David had appointed to meet me at ten.”

“Won't you take something?”

“Well, as I have had no breakfast, I don't mind if I do,” said Arden, laughing.

Longcluse rang the bell.

“When did you leave that place last night?” asked Longcluse.

“I fancy about the same time that you went – about five or ten minutes after the match ended. You heard there was a man murdered in a passage there? I tried to get down and see it but the crowd was awful.”

“I was more lucky – I came earlier,” said Longcluse. “It was perfectly sickening, and I have been seedy ever since. You may guess what a shock it was to me. The murdered man was that poor little Frenchman I told you of, who had been talking to me, in high spirits, just before the play began – and there he was, poor fellow! You'll see it all there; it makes me sick.”

He handed him the *Times*.

“Yes, I see. I daresay the police will make him out,” said Arden, as he glanced hastily over it. “Did you remark some awfully ill-looking fellows there?”

“I never saw so many together in a place of the kind before,” said Longcluse.

“That's a capital account of the match,” said Arden, whom it interested more than the tragedy of poor little Lebas did. He read snatches of it aloud as he ate his breakfast: and then, laying the paper down, he said, “By-the-bye, I need not bother you by asking your advice, as I intended. My uncle David has been blowing me up, and I think he'll make everything straight. When he sends for me and gives me an awful lecture, he always makes it up to me afterwards.”

“I wish, Arden, I stood as little in need of your advice as you do, it seems, of mine,” said Longcluse suddenly, after a short silence. His dark eyes were fixed on Richard Arden's. “I have been fifty times on the point of making a confession to you, and my heart has failed me. The hour is coming. These things won't wait. I must speak, Arden, soon or never —*very* soon, or never. *Never*, perhaps, would be wisest.”

“Speak *now*, on the contrary,” said Arden, laying down his knife and fork, and leaning back. “Now is the best time always. If it's a bad thing, why, it's over; and if it's a good one, the sooner we have it the better.”

Longcluse rose, looking down in meditation, and in silence walked slowly to the window, where, for a time, without speaking he stood in a reverie. Then, looking up, he said, “No man likes a crisis. ‘No good general ever fights a pitched battle if he can help it.’ Wasn't that Napoleon's saying? No man who has not lost his head likes to get together all he has on earth, and make one stake of it. I have been on the point of speaking to you often. I have always recoiled.”

“Here I am, my dear Longcluse,” said Richard Arden, rising and following him to the window, “ready to hear you. I ought to say, only too happy if I can be of the least use.”

“Immense! everything?” said Longcluse vehemently. “And yet I don't know how to ask you – how to begin – so much depends. Don't you conjecture the subject?”

“Well, perhaps I do – perhaps I don't. Give me some clue.”

“Have you formed no conjecture?” asked Longcluse.

“Perhaps.”

“Is it anything in any way connected with your sister, Miss Arden?”

“It may be, possibly.”

“Say what you think, Arden, I beseech you.”

“Well, I think, perhaps, you admire her.”

“Do I? Do I? Is that all? Would to God I could say that is all! Admiration, what is it? – Nothing. Love? – Nothing. Mine is adoration and utter madness. I have told my secret. What do you say? Do you hate me for it?”

“Hate you, my dear fellow! Why on earth should I hate you? On the contrary, I ought, I think, to like you better. I'm only a little surprised that your feelings should so much exceed anything I could have supposed.”

“Yesterday, Arden, you spoke as if you liked me. As we drove into that place, I fancied you half understood me; and cheered by what you then said, I have spoken that which might have died with me, but for that.”

“Well, what's the matter? My dear Longcluse, you talk as if I had shown signs of wavering friendship. Have I? Quite the contrary.”

“Quite the contrary, that is true,” said Longcluse eagerly. “Yes, you *should* like me better for it – that is true also. Yours is no wavering friendship, I'm sure of it. Let us shake hands upon it. A treaty, Arden, a treaty!”

With a fierce smile upon his pale face, and a sudden fire in his eyes, he extended his hand energetically, and took that of Arden, who answered the invitation with a look in which gleamed faintly something of amusement.

“Now, Richard Arden,” he continued excitedly, “you have more influence with Miss Arden than falls commonly to the lot of a brother. I have observed it. It results from her having had during her earlier years little society but yours, and from your being some years her senior. It results from her strong affection for you, from her admiration of your talents, and from her having neither brother nor sister to divide those feelings. I never yet saw brother possessed of so evident and powerful an influence with a sister. You must use it all for me.”

He continued to hold Arden's hand in his as he spoke.

“You can withdraw your hand if you decline,” said he. “I sha'n't complain. But your hand remains – you don't. It is a treaty, then. Henceforward we live *fædere icto*. I'm an exacting friend, but a good one.”

“My dear fellow, you do me but justice. I am your friend, altogether. But you must not mistake me for a guardian or a father in the matter. I wish I could make my sister think exactly as I do upon every subject, and *that* above all others. All I can say is, in me you have a fast friend.”

Longcluse pressed his hand, which he had not relinquished, at these words, with a firm grasp and a quick shake.

“Now listen. I must speak on this point, the one that is in my mind, my chief difficulty. Personally, there is not, I think, a living being in England who knows my history. I am glad of it, for reasons which you will approve by-and-by. But this is an enormous disadvantage, though only temporary, and the friends of the young lady must weigh my wealth against it for the present. But when the time comes, which can't now be distant, upon my honour! upon my soul! – by Heaven, I'll show you I'm of as good and old a family as any in England! We have been gentlemen up to the time of the Conqueror, here in England, and as far before him as record can be traced in Normandy. If I fail to show you this when the hour comes, stigmatise me as you will.”

“I have not a doubt, dear Longcluse. But you are urging a point that really has no weight with us people in England. We have taken off our hats to the gentlemen in casques and tabards, and feudal glories are at a discount everywhere but in Debrett, where they are taken with allowance. Your ideas

upon these matters are more Austrian than ours. We expect, perhaps, a little more from the man, but certainly less from his ancestors than our forefathers did. So till a title turns up, and the heralds want them, make your mind easy on matters of pedigree, and then you can furnish them with effect. All I can tell you is this – there are hardly fifty men in England who dare tell all the truth about their families.”

“We are friends, then; and in that relation, Arden, if there are privileges, there are also liabilities, remember, and both extend into a possibly distant future.”

Longcluse spoke with a gloomy excitement that his companion did not quite understand.

“That is quite true, of course,” said Arden.

Each was looking in the other's face for a moment, and each face grew suddenly dark, darker – and the whole room darkened as the air was overshadowed by a mass of cloud that eclipsed the sun, threatening thunder.

“By Jove! How awfully dark in a moment!” said Arden, looking from the face thus suddenly overcast through the window towards the sky.

“Dark as the future we were speaking of,” said Longcluse, with a sad smile.

“Dark in one sense, I mean unseen, but not darkened in the ill-omened sense,” said Richard Arden. “I have great confidence in the future. I suppose I am sanguine.”

“I ought to be sanguine, if having been lucky hitherto should make one so, and yet I'm not. *My* happiness depends on that which I cannot, in the least, control. Thought, action, energy, contribute nothing, and so I but drift, and – my heart fails me. Tell me, Arden, for Heaven's sake, truth – spare me nothing, conceal nothing. Let me but know it, however bitter. First tell me, does Miss Arden dislike me – has she an antipathy to me?”

“Dislike you! Nonsense. How could that be? She evidently enjoys your society, when you are in spirits and choose to be amusing. Dislike you? Oh, my dear Longcluse, you can't have fancied such a thing!” said Arden.

“A man placed as I am may fancy anything – things infinitely more unlikely. I sometimes hope she has never perceived my admiration. It seems strange and cruel, but I believe where a man cannot be beloved, nothing is so likely to make him *hated* as his presuming to love. *There* is the secret of half the tragedies we read of. The man cannot cease to love, and the idol of his passion not only disregards but insults it. It is their cruel nature; and thus the pangs of jealousy and the agitations of despair are heightened by a peculiar torture, the hardest of all hell's torture to endure.”

“Well, I have seen you pretty often together, and you must see there is nothing of that kind,” said Arden.

“You speak quite frankly, do you? For Heaven's sake don't spare me!” urged Longcluse.

“I say exactly what I think. There can't be any such feeling,” said Arden.

Longcluse sighed, looked down thoughtfully, and then, raising his eyes again, he said —

“You must answer me another question, dear Arden, and I shall, for the present, task your kindness no more. If you think it a fair question, will you promise to answer me with unsparing frankness? Let me hear the worst.”

“Certainly,” answered his companion.

“Does your sister like anyone in particular – is she attached to anyone – are her affections quite disengaged?”

“So far as I am aware, certainly. She never cared for any one among all the people who admired her, and I am quite certain such a thing could not be without my observing it,” answered Richard Arden.

“I don't know; perhaps not,” said Longcluse. “But there is a young friend of yours, who I thought was an admirer of Miss Arden's, and possibly a favoured one. You guess, I daresay, who it is I mean?”

“I give you my honour I have not the least idea.”

“I mean an early friend of yours – a man about your own age – who has often been staying in Yorkshire and at Mortlake with you, and who was almost like a brother in your house – very intimate.”

“Surely you can't mean Vivian Darnley?” exclaimed Richard Arden.

“I do. I mean no other.”

“Vivian Darnley? Why, he has hardly enough to live on, much less to marry on. He has not an idea of any such thing. If my father fancied such an absurdity possible, he would take measures to prevent his ever seeing her more. You could not have hit upon a more impossible man,” he resumed, after a moment's examination of a theory which, notwithstanding, made him a little more uneasy than he would have cared to confess. “Darnley is no fool either, and I think he is a honourable fellow; and altogether, knowing him as I do, the thing is utterly incredible. And as for Alice, the idea of his imagining any such folly, I can undertake to say, positively never entered her mind.”

Here was another pause. Longcluse was again thoughtful.

“May I ask one other question, which I think you will have no difficulty in answering?” said he.

“What you please, dear Longcluse; you may command me.”

“Only this, how do you think Sir Reginald would receive me?”

“A great deal better than he will ever receive me; with his best bow – no, not that, but with open arms and his brightest smile. I tell you, and you'll find it true, my father is a man of the world. Money won't, of course, do everything; but it can do a great deal. It can't make a vulgar man a gentleman, but it may make a gentleman anything. I really think you would find him a very fast friend. And now I must leave you, dear Longcluse. I have just time, and no more, to keep my appointment with old Mr. Blount, to whom my uncle commands me to go at twelve.”

“Heaven keep us both, dear Arden, in this cheating world! Heaven keep us true in this false London world! And God punish the first who breaks faith with the other!”

So spoke Longcluse, taking his hand again, and holding it hard for a moment, with his unfathomable dark eyes on Arden. Was there a faint and unconscious menace in his pale face, as he uttered these words, which a little stirred Arden's pride?

“That's a comfortable litany to part with – a form of blessing elevated so neatly, at the close, into a malediction. However, I don't object. Amen, by all means,” laughed Arden.

Longcluse smiled.

“A malediction? I really believe it was. Something very like it, and one that includes myself, doesn't it? But we are not likely to earn it. An arrow shot into the sea, it can hurt no one. But oh, dear Arden, what does such language mean but suffering? What is all bitterness but pain? Is any mind that deserves the name ever cruel, except from misery? We are good friends, Arden: and if ever I seem to you for a moment other than friendly, just say, ‘It is his heart-ache and not he that speaks.’ Good-bye! God bless you!”

At the door there was another parting.

“There's a long dull day before me – say, rather, *night*; weary eyes, sleepless brain,” murmured Longcluse, in a rather dismal soliloquy, standing in his slippers and dressing-gown again at the window. “Suspense! What a hell is in that word! Chain a man across a rail, in a tunnel – pleasant situation! let him listen for the faint fiving and drumming of the engine, miles away, not knowing whether deliverance or death may come first. Bad enough, that suspense. What is it to mine! I shall see her to-night. I shall see her, and how will it all be? Richard Arden wishes it – yes, he does. ‘Away, slight man!’ It is Brutus who says that, I think. Good Heaven! Think of my life – the giddy steps I go by. That dizzy walk by moonlight, when I lost my way in Switzerland – beautiful nightmare! – the two mile ledge of rock before me, narrow as a plank; up from my left, the sheer wall of rock; at my right so close that my glove might have dropped over it, the precipice; and curling vapour on the cliffs above, that seem about to break, and envelope all below in blinding mist. There is my life translated into landscape. It has been one long adventure – danger – fatigue. Nature is full of beauty

– many a quiet nook in life, where peace resides; many a man whose path is broad and smooth. Woe to the man who loses his way on Alpine tracks, and is benighted!”

Now Mr. Longcluse recollected himself. He had letters to read and note. He did this rapidly. He had business in town. He had fifty things on his hands; and, the day over, he would see Alice Arden again.

CHAPTER VIII CONCERNING A BOOT

Several pairs of boots were placed in Mr. Longcluse's dressing-room.

"Where are the boots that I wore yesterday?" asked he.

"If you please, Sir," said Mr. Franklin, "the man called this morning for the right boot of that pair."

"What man?" asked Mr. Longcluse, rather grimly.

"Mr. Armagnac's man, Sir."

"Did you desire him to call for it?" asked Mr. Longcluse.

"No, Sir. I thought you must have told some one else to order him to send for it," said Franklin.

"*I?* You ought to know I leave those things to *you*," said Mr. Longcluse, staring at him more aghast and fierce than the possible mislaying of a boot would seem to warrant. "Did you see Armagnac's man?"

"No, Sir. It was Charles who came up, at eight o'clock, when you were still asleep, and said the shoemaker had called for the right boot of the pair you wore yesterday. I had placed them outside the door, and I gave it him, Sir, supposing it all right."

"Perhaps it *was* all right; but you know Charles has not been a week here. Call him up. I'll come to the bottom of this."

Franklin disappeared, and Mr. Longcluse, with a stern frown, was staring vaguely at the varnished boot, as if it could tell something about its missing companion. His brain was already at work. What the plague was the meaning of this manœuvre about his boot? And why on earth, think I, should he make such a fuss and a tragedy about it? Charles followed Mr. Franklin up the stairs.

"What's all this about my boot?" demanded Mr. Longcluse, peremptorily. "*Who* has got it?"

"A man called for it this morning, Sir."

"What man?"

"I think he said he came from Mr. Armagnac's, Sir."

"You *think*. Say what you *know*, Sir. What *did* he say?" said Mr. Longcluse, looking dangerous.

"Well, Sir," said the man, mending his case, "he did say, Sir, he came from Mr. Armagnac's, and wanted the right boot."

"What right boot? —*any* right boot?"

"No, Sir, please; the right boot of the pair you wore last night," answered the servant.

"And *you* gave it to him?"

"Yes, Sir, 'twas me," answered Charles.

"Well, you mayn't be quite such a fool as you look. I'll sift all this to the bottom. You go, if you please, this moment, to Monsieur Armagnac, and say I should be obliged to him for a line to say whether he this morning sent for my boot, and got it — and I must have it back, mind; *you* shall bring it back, you understand? And you had better make haste."

"I made bold, Sir," said Mr. Franklin, "to send for it myself, when you sent me down for Charles; and the boy will be back, Sir, in two or three minutes."

"Well, come you and Charles here again when the boy comes back, and bring him here also. I'll make out who has been playing tricks."

Mr. Longcluse shut his dressing-room door sharply; he walked to the window, and looked out with a vicious scowl; he turned about, and lifted up his clenched hand, and stamped on the floor. A sudden thought now struck him.

"The right foot? By Jove! it may not be the one."

The boot that was left was already in his hand. He was examining it curiously.

“Ay, by heaven! The right *was* the boot! What's the meaning of this? Conspiracy? I should not wonder.”

He examined it carefully again, and flung it into its corner with violence.

“If it's an accident, it is a very odd one. It is a suspicious accident. It may be, of course, all right. I daresay it *is* all right. The odds are ten, twenty, a thousand to one that Armagnac has got it. I should have had a warm bath last night, and taken a ten miles' ride into the country this morning. It must be all right, and I am plaguing myself without a cause.”

Yet he took up the boot, and examined it once more; then, dropping it, went to the window and looked into the street – came back, opened his door, and listened for the messenger's return.

It was not long deferred. As he heard them approach, Mr. Longcluse flung open his door and confronted them, in white waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, and with a very white and stern face – face and figure all white.

“Well, what about it? Where's the boot?” he demanded, sharply.

“The boy inquired, Sir,” said Mr. Franklin, indicating the messenger with his open hand, and undertaking the office of spokesman; “and Mr. Armagnac did not send for the boot, Sir, and has not got it.”

“Oh, oh! very good. And now, Sir,” he said, in rising fury, turning upon Charles, “what have *you* got to say for yourself?”

“The man said he came from Mr. Armagnac, please, Sir,” said Charles, “and wanted the boot, which Mr. Franklin should have back as early as he could return it.”

“Then you gave it to a common thief with that cock-and-a-bull story, and you wish me to believe that you took it all for gospel. There are men who would pitch you over the bannisters for a less thing. If I could be certain of it, I'd put you beside him in the dock. But, by heavens! I'll come to the bottom of the whole thing yet.”

He shut the door with a crash, in the faces of the three men, who stood on the lobby.

Mr. Franklin was a little puzzled at these transports, all about a boot. The servants looked at one another without a word. But just as they were going down, the dressing-room door opened, and the following dialogue ensued: —

“See, Charles, it was you who saw and spoke with that man?” said Longcluse.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Should you know him again?”

“Yes, Sir, I think I should.”

“What kind of man was he?”

“A very common person, Sir.”

“Was he tall or short? What sort of figure?”

“Tall, Sir.”

“Go on; what more? Describe him.”

“Tall, Sir, with a long neck, and held himself straight; very flat feet, I noticed; a thin man, broad in the shoulders – pretty well that.”

“Describe his face,” said Longcluse.

“Nothing very particular, Sir; a shabby sort of face – a bad colour.”

“How?”

“A bad white, Sir, and pock-marked something; a broad face and flat, and a very little bit of a nose; his eyes almost shut, and a sort of smile about his mouth, and stingy bits of red whiskers, in a curl, down each cheek.”

“How old?”

“He might be nigh fifty, Sir.”

“Ha, ha! very good. How was he dressed?”

“Black frock coat, Sir, a good deal worn; an old flowered satin waistcoat, worn and dirty, Sir; and a pair of rather dirty tweed trousers. Nothing fitted him, and his hat was brown and greasy, begging your parding, Sir; and he had a stick in his hand, and cotton gloves – a-trying to look genteel.”

“And he asked for the right boot?” asked Mr. Longcluse.

“Yes, Sir.”

“You are quite sure of that? Did he take the boot without looking at it, or did he examine it before he took it away?”

“He looked at it sharp enough, Sir, and turned up the sole, and he said ‘It's all right,’ and he went away, taking it along with him.”

“He asked for the boot I wore yesterday, or last night – which did he say?” asked Mr. Longcluse.

“I think it was last night he said, Sir,” answered Charles.

“Try to recollect yourself. Can't you be certain? Which was it?”

“I think it was *last night*, Sir, he said.”

“It doesn't signify,” said Mr. Longcluse; “I wanted to see that your memory was pretty clear on the subject. You seem to remember all that passed pretty accurately.”

“I recollect it perfectly well, Sir.”

“H'm! That will do. Franklin, you'll remember that description – let every one of you remember it. It is the description of a thief; and when you see that fellow again, hold him fast till you put him in the hands of a policeman. And, Charles, you must be prepared, d'ye see, to swear to that description; for I am going to the detective office, and I shall give it to the police.”

“Yes, Sir,” answered Charles.

“I sha'n't want you, Franklin; let some one call a cab.”

So he returned to his dressing-room, and shut the door, and thought – “That's the fellow whom that miserable little fool, Lebas, pointed out to me at the saloon last night. He watched him, he said, wherever he went. *I* saw him. There may be other circumstances. That is the fellow – that is the very man. Here's matter to think over! By heaven! that fellow must be denounced, and discovered, and brought to justice. It is a strong case – a pretty hanging case against him. We shall see.”

Full of surmises about his lost boot, *Atra Cura* walking unheard behind him, with her cold hand on his shoulder, and with the image of the ex-detective always gliding before or beside him, and peering with an odious familiarity over his shoulder into his face, Mr. Longcluse marched eastward with a firm tread and a cheerful countenance. Friends who nodded to him, as he walked along Piccadilly, down Saint James's Street, and by Pall Mall, citywards, thought he had just been listening to an amusing story. Others, who, more deferentially, saluted the great man as he walked lightly by Temple Bar, towards Ludgate Hill, for a moment perplexed themselves with the thought, “What stock is up, and what down, on a sudden, to-day, that Longcluse looks so radiant?”

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN WITHOUT A NAME

Mr. Longcluse had made up his mind to a certain course – a sharp and bold one. At the police office he made inquiry. “He understood a man had been lately dismissed from the force, answering to a certain description, which he gave them; and he wished to know whether he was rightly informed, because a theft had been that morning committed at his house by a man whose appearance corresponded, and against whom he hoped to have sufficient evidence.”

“Yes, a man like that had been dismissed from the detective department within the last fortnight.”

“What was his name?” Mr. Longcluse asked.

“Paul Davies, Sir.”

“If it should turn out to be the same, I may have a more serious charge to bring against him,” said Mr. Longcluse.

“Do you wish to go before his worship, and give an information, Sir?” urged the officer, invitingly.

“Not quite ripe for that yet,” said Mr. Longcluse, “but it is likely very soon.”

“And what might be the nature of the more serious charge, Sir?” inquired the officer, insinuatingly.

“I mean to give my evidence at the coroner's inquest that will be held to-day, on the Frenchman who was murdered last night at the Saloon Tavern. It is not conclusive – it does not fix anything upon him; it is merely inferential.”

“Connecting him with the murder?” whispered the man, something like reverence mingling with his curiosity, as he discovered the interesting character of his interrogator.

“I can only say possibly connecting him in some way with it. Where does the man live?”

“He did live in Rosemary Court, but he left that, I think. I'll ask, if you please, Sir. Tompkins – hi! You know where Paul Davies puts up. Left Rosemary Court?”

“Yes, five weeks. He went to Gold Ring Alley, but he's left that a week ago, and I don't know where he is now, but will easy find him. Will it answer at eight this evening, Sir?”

“Quite. I want a servant of mine to have a sight of him,” said Longcluse.

“If you like, Sir, to leave your address and a stamp, we'll send you the information by post, and save you calling here.”

“Thanks, yes, I'll do that.”

So Mr. Longcluse took his leave, and proceeded to the place where the coroner was sitting. Mr. Longcluse was received in that place with distinction. The moneyed man was honoured – eyes were gravely fixed on him, and respectful whispers went about. A seat was procured for him; and his evidence, when he came to give it, was heard with marked attention, and a general hush of expectation.

The reader, with his permission, must now pass away, seaward, from this smoky London, for a few minutes, into a clear air, among the rustling foliage of ancient trees, and the fragrance of hay-fields, and the song of small birds.

On the London and Dover road stands, as you know, the “Royal Oak,” still displaying its ancient signboard, where you behold King Charles II sitting with laudable composure, and a crown of Dutch gold on his head, and displaying his finery through an embrasure in the foliage, with an ostentation somewhat inconsiderate, considering the proximity of the halberts of the military emissaries in search of him to the royal features. As you drive towards London, it shows at the left side of the road, a good old substantial inn and posting-house. Its business has dwindled to something very small indeed, for the traffic prefers the rail, and the once bustling line of road is now quiet. The sun had set,

but a reflected glow from the sky was still over everything; and by this somewhat lurid light Mr. Truelock, the innkeeper, was observing from the steps the progress of a chaise, with four horses and two postilions, which was driving at a furious pace down the gentle declivity about a quarter of a mile away, from the Dover direction towards the “Royal Oak” and London.

“It's a runaway. Them horses has took head. What do you think, Thomas?” he asked of the old waiter who stood beside him.

“No. See, the post-boys is whipping the hosses. No, Sir, it's a gallop, but no runaway.”

“There's luggage a' top?” said the innkeeper.

“Yes, Sir, there's something,” answered Tom.

“I don't see nothing a-followin' them,” said Mr. Truelock, shading his eyes with his hand as he gazed.

“No – there *is* nothing,” said Tom.

“They're in fear o' summat, or they'd never go at that lick,” observed Mr. Truelock, who was inwardly conjecturing the likelihood of their pulling up at his door.

“Lawk! *there* was a jerk. They *was* nigh over at the finger-post turn,” said Tom, with a grin.

And now the vehicle and the reeking horses were near. The post-boys held up their whips by way of signal to the “Royal Oak” people on the steps, and pulled up the horses with all their force before the door. Trembling, snorting, rolling up wreaths of steam, the exhausted horses stood.

“See to the gentleman, will ye?” cried one of the postilions.

Mr. Truelock, with the old-fashioned politeness of the English innkeeper, had run down in person to the carriage door, which Tom had opened. Master and man were a little shocked to behold inside an old gentleman, with a very brown, or rather a very bilious visage, thin, and with a high nose, who looked, as he lay stiffly back in the corner of the carriage, enveloped in shawls, with a velvet cap on, as if he were either dead or in a fit. His eyes were half open, and nothing but the white balls partly visible. There was a little froth at his lips. His mouth and delicately-formed hands were clenched, and all the furrows and lines of a selfish face fixed, as it seemed, in the lock of death. John Truelock said not a word, but peered at this visitor with a horrible curiosity.

“If he's dead,” whispered Tom in his ear, “we don't take in no dead men here. Ye'll have the coroner and his jury in the house, and the place knocked up-side down; and if ye make five pounds one way ye'll lose ten the tother.”

“Ye'll have to take him on, I'm thinkin',” said Mr. Truelock, rousing himself, stepping back a little, and addressing the post-boys sturdily. “You've no business bringin' a deceased party to my house. You must go somewhere else, if so be he *is* deceased.”

“He's not gone dead so quick as that,” said the postilion, dismounting from the near leader, and throwing the bridle to a boy who stood by, as he strutted round bandily to have a peep into the chaise. The postilion on the “wheeler” had turned himself about in the saddle in order to have a peep through the front window of the carriage. The innkeeper returned to the door.

If the old London and Dover road had been what it once was, there would have been a crowd about the carriage by this time. Except, however, two or three servants of the “Royal Oak,” who had come out to see, no one had yet joined the little group but the boy who was detained, bridle in hand, at the horse's head.

“He'll not be dead yet,” repeated the postilion dogmatically.

“What happened him?” asked Mr. Truelock.

“I don't know,” answered the post-boy.

“Then how can you say whether he be dead or no?” demanded the innkeeper.

“Fetch me a pint of half-and-half,” said the dismounted post-boy, aside, to one of the “Royal Oak” people at his elbow.

“We was just at this side of High Hixton,” said his brother in the saddle, “when he knocked at the window with his stick, and I got a cove to hold the bridle, and I came round to the window to

him. He had scarce any voice in him, and looked awful bad, and he said he thought he was a-dying. 'And how far on is the next inn?' he asked; and I told him the 'Royal Oak' was two miles; and he said, 'Drive like lightning, and I'll give you half a guinea a-piece' – I hope he's not gone dead – 'if you get there in time.'"

By this time their heads were in the carriage again.

"Do you notice a sort of a little jerk in his foot, just the least thing in the world?" inquired the landlord, who had sent for the doctor. "It will be a fit, after all. If he's living, we'll fetch him into the 'ouse."

The doctor's house was just round the corner of the road, where the clump of elms stands, little more than a hundred yards from the sign of the "Royal Oak."

"Who is he?" inquired Mr. Truelock.

"I don't know," answered the postilion.

"What's his name?"

"Don't know that, neither."

"Why, it'll be on that box, won't it?" urged the innkeeper, pointing to the roof, where a portmanteau with a glazed cover was secured.

"Nothing on that but 'R. A.,'" answered the man, who had examined it half an hour before, with the same object.

"Royal Artillery, eh?"

While they were thus conjecturing, the doctor arrived. He stepped into the chaise, felt the old man's hand, tried his pulse, and finally applied the stethoscope.

"It is a nervous seizure. He is in a very exhausted state," said the doctor, stepping out again, and addressing Truelock. "You must get him into bed, and don't let his head down; take off his handkerchief, and open his shirt-collar – do you mind? I had best arrange him myself."

So the forlorn old man, without a servant, without a name, is carried from the chaise, possibly to die in an inn.

The Rev. Peter Sprott, the rector, passing that way a few minutes later, and hearing what had befallen, went up to the bed-room, where the old gentleman lay in a four-poster, still unconscious.

"Here's a case," said the doctor to his clerical friend. "A nervous attack. He'd be all right in no time, but he's so low. I daresay he crossed the herring-pond to-day, and was ill; he's in such an exhausted state. I should not wonder if he sank; and here we are, without a clue to his name or people. No servant, no name on his trunk; and, certainly, it would be awkward if he died unrecognised, and without a word to apprise his relations."

"Is there no letter in his pockets?"

"Not one," Truelock says.

The rector happened to take up the great-coat of the old gentleman, in which he found a small breast pocket, that had been undiscovered till now, and in this a letter. The envelope was gone, but the letter, in a lady's hand began: "My dearest papa."

"We are all right, by Jove, we're in luck!"

"How does she sign herself?" said the doctor.

"'Alice Arden,' and she dates from 8, Chester Terrace," answered the clergyman.

"We'll telegraph forthwith," said the doctor. "It had best be in your name – the clergyman, you know – to a young lady."

So together they composed the telegram.

"Shall it be *ill* simply, or *dangerously* ill?" inquired the clergyman.

"Dangerously," said the doctor.

"But *dangerously* may terrify her."

"And if we say only *ill*, she mayn't come at all," said the doctor.

So the telegram was placed in Truelock's hands, who went himself with it to the office; and we shall follow it to its destination.

CHAPTER X

THE ROYAL OAK

Three people were sitting in Lady May Penrose's drawing-room, in Chester Terrace, the windows of which, as all her ladyship's friends are aware, command one of the parks. They were looking westward, where the sky was all a-glow with the fantastic gold and crimson of sunset. It is quite a mistake to fancy that sunset, even in the heart of London – which this hardly could be termed – has no rural melancholy and poetic fascination in it. Should that hour by any accident overtake you, in the very centre of the city, looking, say, from an upper window, or any other elevation toward the western sky beyond stacks of chimneys, roofs, and steeples, even through the smoke of London, you will feel the melancholy and poetry of sunset, in spite of your surroundings.

A little silence had stolen over the party; and young Vivian Darnley, who stole a glance now and then at beautiful Alice Arden, whose large, dark, grey eyes were gazing listlessly towards the splendid mists, that were piled in the west, broke the silence by a remark that, without being very wise, or very new, was yet, he hoped, quite in accord with the looks of the girl, who seemed for a moment saddened.

“I wonder why it is that sunset, which is so beautiful, makes us all sad!”

“It never made me sad,” said good Lady May Penrose, comfortably. “There is, I think, something very pleasant in a good sunset; there *must* be, for all the little birds begin to sing in it – it must be cheerful. Don't you think so, Alice?”

Alice was, perhaps, thinking of something quite different, for rather listlessly, and without a change of features, she said, “Oh, yes, very.”

“So, Mr. Darnley, you may sing, ‘Oh, leave me to my sorrow!’ for we won't mope with you about the sky. It is a very odd taste, that for being dolorous and miserable. I don't understand it – I never could.”

Thus rebuked by Lady Penrose, and deserted by Alice, Darnley laughed and said —

“Well, I do seem rather to have put my foot in it – but I did not mean miserable, you know; I meant only that kind of thing that one feels when reading a bit of really good poetry – and most people do not think it a rather pleasant feeling.”

“Don't mind that moping creature, Alice; let us talk about something we can all understand. I heard a bit of news to-day – perhaps, Mr. Darnley, you can throw a light upon it. You are a distant relation, I think, of Mr. David Arden.”

“Some very remote cousinship, of which I am very proud,” answered the young man gaily, with a glance at Alice.

“And what is that – what about uncle David?” inquired the young lady, with animation.

“I heard it from my banker to-day. Your uncle, you know, dear, despises us and our doings, and lives, I understand, very quietly; I mean, he has chosen to live quite out of the world, so we have no chance of hearing anything except by accident, from people we are likely to know. Do you see much of your uncle, my dear?”

“Not a great deal; but I am very fond of him – he is such a good man, or at least, what is better,” she laughed, “he has always been so very kind to me.”

“You know him, Mr. Darnley?” inquired Lady May.

“By Jove, I do!”

“And like him?”

“No one on earth has better reason to like him,” answered the young man warmly – “he has been my best friend on earth.”

“It is pleasant to know two people who are not ashamed to be grateful,” said fat Lady May, with a smile.

The young lady returned her smile very kindly. I don't think you ever beheld a prettier creature than Alice Arden. Vivian Darnley had wasted many a secret hour in sketching that oval face. Those large, soft, grey eyes, and long dark lashes, how difficult they are to express! And the brilliant lips! Could art itself paint anything quite like her? Who could paint those beautiful dimples that made her smiles so soft, or express the little circlet of pearly teeth whose tips were just disclosed? Stealthily he was now, for the thousandth time, studying that bewitching smile again.

“And what is the story about Uncle David?” asked Alice again.

“Well, what will you say – and you, Mr. Darnley, if it should be a story about a young lady?”

“Do you mean that Uncle David is going to marry? I think it would be an awful pity!” exclaimed Alice.

“Well, dear, to put you out of pain, I'll tell you at once; I only know this – that he is going to provide for her somehow, but whether by adopting her as a child, or taking her for a wife, I can't tell. Only I never saw any one looking archer than Mr. Brounker did to-day when he told me; and I fancied from that it could not be so dull a business as merely making her his daughter.”

“And who is the young lady?” asked Alice.

“Did you ever happen to meet anywhere a Miss Grace Maubray?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Alice quickly. “She was staying, and her father, Colonel Maubray, at the Wymerings' last autumn. She's quite lovely, I think, and very clever – but I don't know – I think she's a little ill-natured, but very amusing. She seems to have a talent for cutting people up – and a little of that kind of thing, you know, is very well, but one does not care for it *always*. And is she really the young lady?”

“Yes, and – Dear me! Mr. Darnley, I'm afraid my story has alarmed you.”

“Why should it?” laughed Vivian Darnley, partly to cover, perhaps, a little confusion.

“I can't tell, I'm sure, but you blushed as much as a man can; and you know you did. I wonder, Alice, what this under-plot can be, where all is so romantic. Perhaps, after all, Mr. David Arden is to adopt the young lady, and some one else, to whom he is also kind, is to marry her. Don't you think that would be a very natural arrangement?”

Alice laughed, and Darnley laughed; but he was embarrassed.

“And Colonel Maubray, is he still living?” asked Alice.

“Oh, no, dear; he died ten or eleven months ago. A very foolish man, you know; he wasted a very good property. He was some distant relation, also; Mr. Brounker said your uncle, Mr. David Arden, was very much attached to him – they were schoolfellows, and great friends all their lives.”

“I should not wonder,” said Alice smiling – and then became silent.

“Do you know the young lady, this fortunate Miss Maubray?” said Lady May, turning to Vivian Darnley again.

“I? Yes – that is, I can't say more than a mere acquaintance – and not an old one. I made her acquaintance at Mr. Arden's house. He is her guardian. I don't know about any other arrangements. I daresay there may be.”

“Well, I know her a little, also,” said Lady May. “I thought her pretty – and she sings a little, and she's clever.”

“She's all that,” said Alice. “Oh, here comes Dick! What do you say, Richard – is not Miss Maubray very pretty? We are making a plot to marry her to Vivian Darnley, and get Uncle David to contribute her *dot*.”

“What benevolent people! *You* don't object, I dare say, Vivian.”

“I have not been consulted,” said he; “and, of course, Uncle David need not be consulted, as he has simply to transfer the proper quantity of stock.”

Richard Arden had drawn near Lady May, and said a few words in a low tone, which seemed not unwelcome to her.

“I saw Longcluse this morning. He has not been here, has he?” he added, as a little silence threatened the conversation.

“No, he has not turned up. And what a charming person he is!” exclaimed Lady May.

“I quite agree with you, Lady May,” said Arden. “He is, take him on every subject, I think, about the cleverest fellow I ever met – art, literature, games, *chess*, which I take to be a subject by itself. He is very great at chess – for an amateur, I mean – and when I was chess-mad, nearly a year ago and beginning to grow conceited, he opened my eyes, I can tell you; and Airly says he is the best musical critic in England, and can tell you at any hour who is who in the opera, all over Europe; and he really understands, what so few of us here know anything about, foreign politics, and all the people and their stories and scandals he has at his fingers' ends. And he is such good company, when he chooses, and such a gentleman always!”

“He is very agreeable and amusing when he takes the trouble; I always like to listen when Mr. Longcluse talks,” said Alice Arden, to the secret satisfaction of her brother, whose enthusiasm was, I think, directed a good deal to her – and to, perhaps, the vexation of other people, whom she did not care at that moment to please.

“An Admirable Crichton!” murmured Vivian Darnley, with a rather hackneyed sneer. “Do you like his style of —*beauty*, I suppose I should call it? It has the merit of being very uncommon, at least, don't you think?”

“Beauty, I think, matters very little. He has no beauty, but his face has what, in a man, I think a great deal better – I mean refinement, and cleverness, and a kind of satire that rather interests one,” said Miss Arden, with animation.

Sir Walter Scott, in his “Rob Roy” – thinking, no doubt, of the Diana Vernon of his early days, the then beautiful lady, long afterwards celebrated by Basil Hall as the old Countess Purgstorf (if I rightly remember the title), and recurring to some cherished incident, and the thrill of a pride that had ceased to agitate, but was at once pleasant and melancholy to remember – wrote these words: “She proceeded to read the first stanza, which was nearly to the following purpose. [Then follow the verses.] ‘There is a great deal of it,’ said she, glancing along the paper, and interrupting the sweetest sounds that mortal ears can drink in – those of a youthful poet's verses, namely, read by the lips which are dearest to them.” So writes Walter Scott. On the other hand, in certain states, is there a pain intenser than that of listening to the praises of another man from the lips we love?

“Well,” said Darnley, “as you say so, I suppose there is all that, though I can't see it. Of course, if he tries to make himself agreeable (which he never does to me), it makes a difference, it affects everything – it affects even his looks. But I should not have thought him good-looking. On the contrary, he appears to me about as ugly a fellow as one could see in a day.”

“He's not that,” said Alice. “No one could be ugly with so much animation and so much expression.”

“You take up the cudgels very prettily, my dear, for Mr. Longcluse,” said Lady May. “I'm sure he ought to be extremely obliged to you.”

“So he would be,” said Richard Arden. “It would upset him for a week, I have no doubt.”

There are few things harder to interpret than a blush. At these words the beautiful face of Alice Arden flushed, first with a faint, and then, as will happen, with a brighter crimson. If Lady May had seen it, she would have laughed, probably, and told her how much it became her. But she was, at that moment, going to her chair in the window, and Richard Arden would, of course, accompany her. He did see it, as distinctly as he saw the glow in the sky over the park trees. But, knowing what a slight matter will sometimes make a recoil, and even found an antipathy, he wisely chose to see it not – and chatting gaily, followed Lady May to the window.

But Vivian Darnley, though he said nothing, saw that blush, of which Alice, with a sort of haughty defiance, was conscious. It did not make him like or admire Mr. Longcluse more.

“Well, I suppose he is very charming – I don't know him well enough myself to give an opinion. But he makes his acquaintances rather oddly, doesn't he? I don't think any one will dispute that.”

“I don't know really. Lady May introduced him to me, and she seems to like him very much. So far as I can see, people are very well pleased at knowing him, and don't trouble their heads as to how it came about,” said Miss Arden.

“No, of course; but people not fortunate enough to come within the influence of his fascination, can't help observing. How did he come to know your brother, for instance? Did any one introduce him? Nothing of the kind. Richard's horse was hurt or lame at one of the hunts in Warwickshire, and he lent him a horse, and introduced himself, and they dined together that evening on the way back, and so the thing was done.”

“Can there be a better introduction than a kindness?” asked Alice.

“Yes, where it *is* a kindness, I agree; but no one has a right to push his services upon a stranger who does not ask for them.”

“I really can't see. Richard need not have taken his horse if he had not liked,” she answered.

“And Lady May, who thinks him such a paragon, knows no more about him than any one else. She had her footman behind her – didn't she tell you all about it?”

“I really don't recollect; but does it very much matter?”

“I think it does – that is, it has been a sort of system. He just gave her his arm over a crossing, where she had taken fright, and then pretended to think her a great deal more frightened than she really can have been, and made her sit down to recover in a confectioner's shop, and so saw her home, and *that* affair was concluded. I don't say, of course, that he is never introduced in the regular way; but a year or two ago, when he was beginning, he always made his approaches by means of that kind of stratagem; and the fact is, no one knows anything on earth about him; he has emerged, like a figure in a phantasmagoria, from total darkness, and may lose himself in darkness again at any moment.”

“I am interested in that man, whoever he is; his entrance, and his probable exit, so nearly resemble mine,” said a clear, deep-toned voice close to them; and looking up, Miss Arden saw the pale face and peculiar smile of Mr. Longcluse in the fading twilight.

Mr. Longcluse was greeted by Lady May and by Richard Arden, and then again he drew near Alice, and said, “Do you recollect, Miss Arden, about ten days ago I told you a story that seemed to interest you – the story of a young and eloquent friar, who died of love in his cell in an abbey in the Tyrol, and whose ghost used to be seen pensively leaning on the pulpit from which he used to preach, too much thinking of the one beautiful face among his audience, which had enthralled him. I had left the enamel portrait I told you of at an artist's in Paris, and I wrote for it, thinking you might wish to see it – hoping you might care to see it,” he added, in a lower tone, observing that Vivian Darnley, who was not in a happy temper, had, with a sudden impulse of disdain, removed himself to another window, there to contemplate the muster of the stars in the darkening sky, at his leisure.

“That was so kind of you, Mr. Longcluse! You have had a great deal of trouble. It *is* such an interesting story!” said Alice.

In his reception, Mr. Longcluse found something that pleased, almost elated him. Had Richard Arden been speaking to her on the subject of their morning's conversation? He thought not, Lady May had mentioned that he had not been with them till just twenty minutes ago, and Arden had told him that he had dined with his uncle David and Mr. Blount, upon the same business on which he had been occupied with both nearly all day. No, he could not have spoken to her. The slight change which made him so tumultuously proud and happy, was entirely spontaneous.

“So it seemed to me – an eccentric and interesting story – but pray do not wound me by speaking of trouble. I only wish you knew half the pleasure it has been to me to get it to show you. May I hold the lamp near for a moment while you look at it?” he said, indicating a tiny lamp which stood on a

pier-table, showing a solitary gleam, like a lighthouse, through the gloom; “you could not possibly see it in this faint twilight.”

The lady assented. Had Mr. Longcluse ever felt happier?

CHAPTER XI

THE TELEGRAM ARRIVES

Mr. Longcluse placed the little oval enamel, set in gold, in Miss Arden's fingers, and held the lamp beside her while she looked.

"How beautiful! – how very interesting!" she exclaimed. "What suffering in those thin, handsome features! What a strange enthusiasm in those large hazel eyes! I could fancy that monk the maddest of lovers, the most chivalric of saints. And did he really suffer that incredible fate? Did he really die of love?"

"So they say. But why incredible? I can quite imagine that wild shipwreck, seeing what a raging sea love is, and how frail even the strongest life."

"Well, I can't say, I am sure. But your own novelists laugh at the idea of any but women – whose business it is, of course, to pay that tribute to their superiors – dying of love. But if any man could die such a death, he must be such as this picture represents. What a wild, agonised picture of passion and asceticism! What suicidal devotion and melancholy rapture! I confess I could almost fall in love with that picture myself."

"And I think, were I he, I could altogether die to earn one such sentence, so spoken," said Mr. Longcluse.

"Could you lend it to me for a very few days?" asked the young lady.

"As many – as long as you please. I am only too happy."

"I should so like to make a large drawing of this in chalks!" said Alice, still gazing on the miniature.

"You draw so beautifully in chalks! Your style is not often found here – your colouring is so fine."

"Do you really think so?"

"You must know it, Miss Arden. You are too good an artist not to suspect what everyone else must see, the real excellence of your drawings. Your colouring is better understood in France. Your master, I fancy, was a Frenchman?" said Mr. Longcluse.

"Yes, he was, and we got on very well together. Some of his young lady pupils were very much afraid of him."

"Your poetry is fired by that picture, Miss Arden. Your copy will be a finer thing than the original," said he.

"I shall aim only at making it a faithful copy; and if I can accomplish anything like that, I shall be only too glad."

"I hope you will allow me to see it?" pleaded Longcluse.

"Oh, certainly," she laughed. "Only I'm a little afraid of you, Mr. Longcluse."

"What can you mean, Miss Arden?"

"I mean, you are so good a critic in art, every one says, that I really *am* afraid of you," answered the young lady, laughing.

"I should be very glad to forfeit any little knowledge I have, if it were attended with such a misfortune," said Longcluse. "But I don't flatter; I tell you truly, a critic has only to admire, when he looks at your drawings; they are quite above the level of an amateur's work."

"Well, whether you mean it or not, I *am* very much flattered," she laughed. "And though wise people say that flattery spoils one, I can't help thinking it very agreeable to be flattered."

At this point of the dialogue Mr. Vivian Darnley – who wished that it should be plain to all, and to one in particular, that he did not care the least what was going on in other parts of the room – began to stumble through the treble of a tune at the piano with his right hand. And whatever other

people may have thought of his performance, to Miss Alice Arden it seemed very good music indeed, and inspired her with fresh animation. Such as it was, Mr. Darnley's solo also turned the course of Miss Arden's thoughts from drawing to another art, and she said —

“You, Mr. Longcluse, who know everything about the opera, can you tell me – of course you can – anything about the great basso who is coming?”

“Stentoroni?”

“Yes; the newspapers and critics promise wonders.”

“It is nearly two years since I heard him. He was very great, and deserves all they say in ‘Robert le Diable.’ But there his greatness began and ended. The voice, of course, you had, but everything else was defective. It is plain, however, that the man who could make so fine a study of one opera, could with equal labour make as great a success in others. He has not sung in any opera for more than a year and a half, and has been working diligently; and so everyone is in the dark very much, and I am curious to hear the result – and nobody knows more than I have told you. You are sure of a good ‘Robert le Diable,’ but all the rest is speculation.”

“And now, Mr. Longcluse, I shall try your good-nature.”

“How?”

“I am going to make Lady May ask you to sing a song.”

“Pray don't.”

“Why not?”

“I should so much rather you asked me yourself.”

“That's very good of you; then I certainly shall. I *do* ask you.”

“And I instantly obey. And what shall the song be?” asked he, approaching the piano, to which she also walked.

“Oh, that ghostly one that I liked so much when you sang it here about a week ago,” she answered.

“I know it – yes, with pleasure.” And he sat down at the piano, and in a clear, rich baritone, sang the following odd song: —

“The autumn leaf was falling
At midnight from the tree,
When at her casement calling,
‘I'm here, my love,’ says he.
‘Come down and mount behind me,
And rest your little head,
And in your white arms wind me,
Before that I be dead.

“‘You've stolen my heart by magic,
I've kissed your lips in dreams:
Our wooing wild and tragic
Has been in ghostly scenes.
The wondrous love I bear you
Has made one life of twain,
And it will bless or scare you,
In deathless peace or pain.

“‘Our dreamland shall be glowing,
If you my bride will be;
To darkness both are going,

Unless you come with me,
Come now, and mount behind me,
And rest your little head,
And in your white arms wind me,
Before that I be dead.”

“Why, dear Alice, will you choose that dismal song, when you know that Mr. Longcluse has so many others that are not only charming, but cheery and natural?”

“It is because it is *unnatural* that I like that song so much; the air is so ominous and spectral, and yet so passionate. I think the idea is Icelandic – those ghostly lovers that came in the dark to win their beloved maidens, who as yet knew nothing of their having died, to ride with them over the snowy fields and frozen rivers, to join their friends at a merry-making which they were never to see; but there is something more mysterious even in this lover, for his passion has unearthly beginnings that lose themselves in utter darkness. Thank you very much, Mr. Longcluse. It is so very kind of you! And now, Lady May, isn't it your turn to choose? May she choose, Mr. Longcluse?”

“Any one, if you desire it, may choose anything I possess, and have it,” said he, in a low impassioned murmur.

How the young lady would have taken this, I know not, but all were suddenly interrupted. For at this moment a servant entered with a note, which he presented, upon a salver, to Mr. Longcluse.

“Your servant is waiting, Sir, please, for orders in the awl,” murmured the man.

“Oh, yes – thanks,” said Mr. Longcluse, who saw a shabby letter, with the words “Private” and “Immediate” written in a round, vulgar hand over the address.

“Pray read your note, Mr. Longcluse, and don't mind us,” said Lady May.

“Thank you very much. I think I know what this is. I gave some evidence to-day at an inquest,” began Mr. Longcluse.

“That wretched Frenchman,” interposed Lady May, “Monsieur Lebrun or – ”

“Lebas,” said Vivian Darnley.

“Yes, so it was, Lebas; what a frightful thing that was!” continued Lady May, who was always well up in the day's horrors.

“Very melancholy, and very alarming also. It is a selfish way of looking at it, but one can't help thinking it might just as well have happened to any one else who was there. It brings it home to one a little uncomfortably,” said Mr. Longcluse, with an uneasy smile and a shrug.

“And you actually gave evidence, Mr. Longcluse?” said Lady May.

“Yes, a little,” he answered. “It may lead to something. I hope so. As yet it only indicates a line of inquiry. It will be in the papers, I suppose, in the morning. There will be, I daresay, a pretty full report of that inquest.”

“Then you saw something occur that excited your suspicions?” said Lady May.

Mr. Longcluse recounted all he had to tell, and mentioned having made inquiries as to the present abode of the man, Paul Davies, at the police office.

“And this note, I daresay, is the one they promised to send me, telling the result of their inquiries,” he added.

“Pray open it and see,” said Lady May.

He did so. He read it in silence. From his foot to the crown of his head there crept a cold influence as he read. Stream after stream, this *aura* of fear spread upwards to his brain. Pale Mr. Longcluse shrugged and smiled, and smiled and shrugged, as his dark eye ran down the lines, and with a careless finger he turned the page over. He smiled, as prizefighters smile for the spectators, while every nerve quivered with pain. He looked up, smiling still, and thrust the note into his breast-pocket.

“Well, Mr. Longcluse, a long note it seems to have been,” said Lady May, curiously.

“Not very long, but what is as bad, very illegible,” said Mr. Longcluse gaily.

“And what about the man – the person the police were to have inquired after?” she persisted.

“I find it is no police information, nothing of the kind,” answered Longcluse with the same smile. “It comes by no means from one of that long-headed race of men; on the contrary, poor fellow, I believe he is literally a little mad. I make him a trifling present every Christmas, and that is a very good excuse for his plaguing me all the year round. I was in hopes this letter might turn out an amusing one, but it is not; it is a failure. It is rather sensible, and disgusting.”

“Well, then, I must have my song, Mr. Longcluse,” said Lady May, who, under cover of music, sometimes talked a little, in gentle murmurs, to that person with whom talk was particularly interesting.

But that song was not to be heard in Lady May's drawing-room that night, for a kindred interruption, though much more serious in its effects upon Mr. Longcluse's companions, occurred. A footman entered, and presented on a salver a large brown envelope to Miss Alice Arden.

“Oh, dear! It is a telegram,” exclaimed Miss Arden, who had taken it to the window. Lady May Penrose was beside her by this time. Alice looked on the point of fainting.

“I'm afraid papa is very ill,” she whispered, handing the paper, which trembled very much in her hand, to Lady May.

“H'm! Yes – but you may be sure it's exaggerated. Bring some sherry and water, please. You look a little frightened, my dear. Sit down, darling. There now! These messages are always written in a panic. What do you mean to do?”

“I'll go, of course,” said Alice.

“Well, yes – I think you must go. What is the place? Twyford, the ‘Royal Oak?’ Look out Twyford, please Mr. Darnley – there's a book there. It must be a post-town. It was thoughtful saying it is on the Dover coach road.”

Vivian Darnley was gazing in deep concern at Alice. Instantly he began turning over the book, and announced in a few moments more – “It is a post-town – only thirty-six miles from London,” said Mr. Darnley.

“Thanks,” said Lady May. “Oh, here's the wine – I'm so glad! You must have a little, dear; and you'll take Louisa Diaper with you, of course; and you shall have one of my carriages, and I'll send a servant with you, and he'll arrange everything; and how soon do you wish to go?”

“Immediately, instantly – thanks, darling. I'm *so* much obliged!”

“Will your brother go with you?”

“No, dear. Papa, you know, has not forgiven him, and it is, I think, two years since they met. It would only agitate him.”

And with these words she hurried to her room, and in another moment, with the aid of her maid, was completing her hasty preparations.

In wonderfully little time the carriage was at the door. Mr. Longcluse had taken his leave. So had Richard Arden, with the one direction to the servant, “If anything should go *very* wrong, be sure to telegraph for me. Here is my address.”

“Put this in your purse, dear,” said Lady May. “Your father is so thoughtless, he may not have brought money enough with him; and you will find it is as I say – he'll be a great deal better by the time you get there; and God bless you, my dear.”

And she kissed her as heartily as she dared, without communicating the rouge and white powder which aided her complexion.

As Alice ran down, Vivian Darnley awaited her outside the drawing-room door, and ran down with her, and put her into the carriage. He leaned for a moment on the window, and said —

“I hope you didn't mind that nonsense Lady May was talking just now about Miss Grace Maubray. I assure you it is utter folly. I was awfully vexed; but you didn't believe it?”

“I didn't hear her say anything, at least seriously. Wasn't she laughing? I'm in such trouble about that message! I am so longing to be at my journey's end!”

He took her hand and pressed it, and the carriage drove away. And standing on the steps, and quite forgetting the footman close behind him, he watched it as it drove rapidly southward, until it was quite out of sight, and then with a great sigh and “God for ever bless you!” – uttered not above his breath – he turned about, and saw those powdered and liveried effigies, and walked up with his head rather high to the drawing-room, where he found Lady May.

“I sha'n't go to the opera to-night; it is out of the question,” said she. “But *you* shall. You go to my box, you know; Jephson will put you in there.”

It was plain that the good-natured soul was unhappy about Alice, and, Richard Arden having departed, wished to be alone. So Vivian took his leave, and went away – but not to the opera – and sauntered for an hour, instead, in a melancholy romance up and down the terrace, till the moon rose and silvered the trees in the park.

CHAPTER XII

SIR REGINALD ARDEN

The human mind being, in this respect, of the nature of a kaleidoscope, that the slightest hitch, or jolt, or tremor is enough to change the entire picture that occupies it, it is not to be supposed that the illness of her father, alarming as it was, could occupy Alice Arden's thoughts to the exclusion of every other subject, during every moment of her journey. One picture, a very pretty one, frequently presented itself, and always her heart felt a strange little pain as this pretty phantom appeared. It was the portrait of a young girl, with fair golden hair, a brilliant complexion, and large blue eyes, with something *riant*, triumphant, and arch to the verge of mischief, in her animated and handsome face.

The careless words of good Lady May, this evening, and the very obvious confusion of Vivian Darnley at mention of the name of Grace Maubray, troubled her. What was more likely than that Uncle David, interested in both, should have seriously projected the union which Lady May had gaily suggested? If she – Alice Arden – liked Vivian Darnley, it was not very much, her pride insisted. In her childhood they had been thrown together. He had seemed to like her; but had he ever spoken? Why was he silent? Was she fool enough to like him? – that cautious, selfish young man, who was thinking, she was quite certain now, of a marriage of prudence or ambition with Grace Maubray? It was a cold, cruel, sordid world!

But, after all, why should he have spoken? or why should he have hoped to be heard with favour? She had been to him, thank Heaven, just as any other pleasant, early friend. There was nothing to regret – nothing fairly to blame. It was just that a person whom she had come to regard as a property was about to go, and belong quite, to another. It was the foolish little jealousy that everyone feels, and that means nothing. So she told herself; but constantly recurred the same pretty image, and with it the same sudden little pain at her heart.

But now came the other care. As time and space shorten, and the moment of decision draws near, the pain of suspense increases. They were within six miles of Twyford. Her heart was in a wild flutter – now throbbing madly, now it seemed standing still. The carriage window was down. She was looking out on the scenery – strange to her – all bright and serene under a brilliant moon. What message awaited her at the inn to which they were travelling at this swift pace? How frightful it might be!

“Oh, Louisa!” she every now and then imploringly cried to her maid, “how do you think it will be? Oh! how will it be? Do you think he'll be better? Oh! do you think he'll be better? Tell me again about his other illness, and how he recovered? Don't you think he will this time? Oh, Louisa, darling! don't you think so? Tell me —*tell* me you do!”

Thus, in her panic, the poor girl wildly called for help and comfort, until at last the carriage turned a curve in the road at which stood a shadowy clump of elms, and in another moment the driver pulled up under the sign of the “Royal Oak.”

“Oh, Louisa! Here it is,” cried the young lady, holding her maid's wrist with a trembling grasp.

The inn-door was shut, but there was light in the hall, and light in an upper room.

“Don't knock – only ring the bell. He may be asleep, God grant!” said the young lady.

The door was quickly opened, and a waiter ran down to the carriage window, where he saw a pair of large wild eyes, and a very pale face, and heard the question – “An old gentlemen has been ill here, and a telegram was sent; is he – how is he?”

“He's better, Ma'am,” said the man.

With a low, long “O – Oh!” and clasped hands and upturned eyes, she leaned back in the carriage, and a sudden flood of tears relieved her. Yes; he was a great deal better. The attack was quite over; but he had not spoken. He seemed much exhausted; and having swallowed some claret,

which the doctor prescribed, he had sunk into a sound and healthy sleep, in which he still lay. A message by telegraph had been sent to announce the good news, but Alice was some way on her journey before it had reached.

Now the young lady got down, and entered the homely old inn, followed by her maid. She could have dropped on her knees in gratitude to her Maker; but true religion, like true affection, is shy of demonstrating its fervours where sympathy is doubtful.

Gently, hardly breathing, guided by the “chambermaid,” she entered her father's room, and stood at his bedside. There he lay, yellow, lean, the lines of his face in repose still forbidding, the thin lips and thin nose looking almost transparent, and breathing deeply and regularly, as a child in his slumbers. In that face Alice could not discover what any stranger would have seen. She only saw the face of her father. Selfish and capricious as he was, and violent too – a wicked old man, if one could see him justly – he was yet proud of her, and had many schemes and projects afloat in his jaded old brain, of which her beauty was the talisman, of which she suspected nothing, and with which his head was never more busy than at the very moment when he was surprised by the *aura* of his coming fit.

The doctor's conjecture was right. He had crossed the Channel that morning. In his French *coupée*, he had for companion the very man he had most wished and contrived to travel homeward with. This was Lord Wynderbroke.

Lord Wynderbroke was fifty years old and upwards. He was very much taken with Alice, whom he had met pretty often. He was a man who was thought likely to marry. His estate was in the nattiest order. He had always been prudent, and cultivated a character. He had, moreover, mortgages over Sir Reginald Arden's estate, the interest of which the baronet was beginning to find it next to impossible to pay. They had been making a little gouty visit to Vichy, and Sir Reginald had taken good care to make the journey homeward with Lord Wynderbroke, who knew that when he pleased he could be an amusing companion, and who also felt that kind of interest in him which everyone experiences in the kindred of the young lady of whom he is enamoured.

The baronet, who tore up or burnt his letters for the most part, had kept this particular one by which his daughter had been traced and summoned to the “Royal Oak.” It was, he thought, clever. It was amusing, and had some London gossip. He had read bits of it to Lord Wynderbroke in the *coupée*. Lord Wynderbroke was delighted. When they parted, he had asked leave to pay him a visit at Mortlake.

“Only too happy, if you are not afraid of the old house falling in upon us. Everything *there*, you know, is very much as my grandfather left it. I only use it as a caravanserai, and alight there for a little, on a journey. Everything there is tumbling to pieces. But you won't mind – no more than I do.”

So the little visit was settled. The passage was rough. Peer and baronet were ill. They did not care to reunite their fortunes after they touched English ground. As the baronet drew near London, for certain reasons he grew timid. He got out with a portmanteau and dressing-case, and an umbrella, at Drowark station, sent his servant on with the rest of the luggage by rail, and himself took a chaise; and, after one change of horses, had reached the “Royal Oak” in the state in which we first saw him.

The doctor had told the people at that inn that he would look in, in the course of the night, some time after one o'clock, being a little uneasy about a possible return of the old man's malady. There was that in the aristocratic looks and belongings of his patient, and in the very fashionable address to which the message to his daughter was transmitted, which induced in the mind of the learned man a suspicion that a “swell” might have accidentally fallen into his hands.

By this time, thanks to the diligence of Louisa Diaper, every one in the house had been made acquainted with the fact that the sick man was no other than Sir Reginald Arden, Bart., and with many other circumstances of splendour, which would not, perhaps, have so well stood the test of inquiry. The doctor and his crony, the rector – simplest of parsons – who had agreed to accompany him in this nocturnal call, being a curious man, as gentlemen inhabiting quiet villages will be – these two gentlemen now heard all this lore in the hall at a quarter past one, and entered the patient's

chamber (where they found Miss Arden and her maid) accordingly. In whispers, the doctor made to Miss Arden a most satisfactory report. He made his cautious inspection of the patient, and again had nothing but what was cheery to say.

If the rector had not prided himself upon his manners, and had been content with one bow on withdrawing from the lady's presence, they would not that night have heard the patient's voice – and perhaps, all things considered, so much the better.

“I trust, Madam, in the morning Sir Reginald may be quite himself again. It is pleasant, Madam, to witness slumber so quiet,” murmured the clergyman kindly, and in perfect good faith. “It is the slumber of a tranquil mind – a spirit at peace with itself.”

Smiling kindly in making the last stiff bow which accompanied these happy words, the good man tilted over a little table behind him, on which stood a decanter of claret, a water caraffe, and two glasses, all of which came to the ground with a crash that wakened the baronet. He sat up straight in his bed and stared round, while the clergyman, in consternation, exclaimed – “Good gracious!”

“Hollo! what is it?” cried the fierce, thin voice of the baronet. “What the devil's all this? Where's Crozier? Where's my servant? Will you, will you, some of you, say where the devil I am?” He was screaming all this, and groping and clutching at either side of the bed's head for a bell-rope, intending to rouse the house. “Where's Crozier, I say? Where the devil's my servant? eh? He's gone by rail, ain't he? No one came with me. And where's this? What is it? Are you all tongue-tied? – haven't you a word among you?”

The clergyman had lifted his hands in terror at the harangue of the old man of the “tranquil mind.” Alice had taken his thin hand, standing beside him, and was speaking softly in his ear. But his prominent brown eyes were fiercely scanning the strangers, and the hand which clutched hers was trembling with eager fury. “Will some of you say what you mean, or what you are doing, or where I am?” and he screeched another sentence or two, that made the old clergyman very uncomfortable.

“You arrived here, Sir Reginald, about six hours ago – extremely ill, Sir,” said the doctor, who had placed himself close to his patient, and spoke with official authority; “but we have got you all right again, we hope; and this is the ‘Royal Oak,’ the principal hotel of Twyford, on the Dover and London road; and my name is Proby.”

“And what's all this?” cried the baronet, snatching up one of the medicine-bottles from the little table by his bed, and plucking out the cork and smelling at the fluid. “By heaven?” he screamed, “this is the very thing. I could not tell what d – d taste was in my mouth, and here it is. Why, my doctor tells me – and he knows his business – it is as much as my life's worth to give me anything like – like that, pah! assafoetida! If my stomach is upset with this filthy stuff, I give myself up! I'm gone. I shall sink, Sir. Was there no one here, in the name of Heaven, with a grain of sense or a particle of pity, to prevent that beast from literally poisoning me? Egad! I'll make my son punish him! I'll make my family hang him if I die!” There was a quaver of misery in his shriek of fury, as if he was on the point of bursting into tears. “Doctor, indeed! who sent for him? I didn't. Who gave him leave to drug me? Upon my soul, I've been poisoned. To think of a creature in my state, dependent on nourishment every hour, having his digestion destroyed! Doctor, indeed! Pay him? Not I, begad,” and he clenched his sentence with an ugly expletive.

But all this concluding eloquence was lost upon the doctor, who had mentioned, in a lofty “aside” to Miss Arden, that “unless sent for he should not call again;” and with a marked politeness to her, and no recognition whatever of the baronet, he had taken his departure.

“I'm not the doctor, Sir Reginald; I'm the clergyman,” said the Reverend Peter Sprott, gravely and timidly, for the prominent brown eyes were threatening him.

“Oh, the clergyman! Oh, I see. Will you be so good as to ring the bell, please, and excuse a sick man giving you that trouble. And is there a post-office near this?”

“Yes, Sir – close by.”

“This is you, Alice? I'm glad you're here. You must write a letter this moment – a note to your brother. Don't be afraid – I'm better, a good deal – and tell the people, when they come, to get me some strong soup this moment, and – good evening, Sir, or good-night, or morning, or whatever it is,” he added, to the clergyman, who was taking his leave. “What o'clock is it?” he asked Alice. “Well, you'll write to your brother to meet me at Mortlake. I have not seen him, now, for how many years? I forget. He's in town, is he? Very good. And tell him it is perhaps the last time, and I expect him. I suppose he'll come. Say at a quarter past nine in the evening. The sooner it's over the better. I expect no good of it; it is only just to try. And I shall leave this early – immediately after breakfast – as quickly as we can. I hate it!”

CHAPTER XIII ON THE ROAD

Next morning the baronet was in high good-humour. He has written a little reminder to Lord Wynderbroke. He will expect him at Mortlake the day he named, to dinner. He remembers he promised to stay the night. He can offer him, still, as good a game of piquet as he is likely to find in his club; and he almost feels that he has no excuse but a selfish one, for exacting the performance of a promise which gave him a great deal of pleasure. His daughter, who takes care of her old father, will make their tea and —*voilà tout!*

Sir Reginald was in particularly good spirits as he sent the waiter to the post-office with this little note. He thinks within himself that he never saw Alice in such good looks. His selfish elation waxes quite affectionate, and Alice never remembered him so good-natured. She doesn't know what to make of it exactly; but it pleases her, and she looks all the more brilliant.

And now these foreign birds, whom a chance storm has thrown upon the hospitality of the "Royal Oak," are up and away again. The old baronet and his pretty daughter, Louisa Diaper sitting behind, in cloaks and rugs, and the footman in front, to watch the old man's signals, are whirling dustily along with a team of four horses; for Sir Reginald's arrangements are never economical, and a pair would have brought them over these short stages and home very nearly as fast. Lady May's carriage pleases the old man, and helps his transitory good-humour: it is so much more luxurious than the jolty hired vehicle in which he had arrived.

Alice is permitted her thoughts to herself. The baronet has taken his into companionship, and is leaning back in his corner, with his eyes closed; and his pursed mouth, with its wonderful involution of wrinkles round it, is working unconsciously; and his still dark eyebrows, now elevating, now knitting themselves, indicate the same activity of brain.

With a silent look now and then at his face – for she need not ask whether Sir Reginald wants anything, or would like anything changed, for the baronet needs no inquiries of this kind, and makes people speedily acquainted with his wants and fancies – she occupies her place beside him, for the most part looking out listlessly from the window, and thinks of many things. The baronet opens his eyes at last, and says abruptly,

"Charming prospect! Charming day! You'll be glad to hear, Alice, I'm not tired; I'm making my journey wonderfully! It is so pretty, and the sun so cheery. You are looking so well, it is quite a pleasure to look at you – charming! You'll come to me at Mortlake for a few days, to take care of me, you know. I shall go on to Buxton in a week or so, and you can return to Lady May to-night, and come to Mortlake shortly; and your brother, graceless creature! I suppose, will come to-night. I expect nothing from his visit, absolutely. He has been nothing to me but a curse all his life. I suppose, if there's justice anywhere, he'll have his deserts some day. But for the present I put him aside – I sha'n't speak of him. He disturbs me."

They drove through London over Westminster Bridge, the servant thinking that they were to go to Lady May Penrose's in Chester Terrace. It was the first time that day, since he had talked of his son, that a black shadow crossed Sir Reginald's face. He shrunk back. He drew up his Chinese silk muffler over his chin. He was fearful lest some prowling beak or eagle-eyed Jew should see his face, for Sir Reginald was just then in danger. Glancing askance under the peak of his travelling cap, he saw Talkington, with Wynderbroke on his arm, walking to their club. How free and fearless those happy mortals looked! How the old man yearned for his chat and his glass of wine at B – 's, and his afternoon whist at W – 's! How he chafed and blasphemed inwardly at the invisible obstacle that insurmountably interposed, and with what a fiery sting of malice he connected the idea of his son with the fetters that bound him!

“You know that man?” said Sir Reginald sharply, as he saw Mr. Longcluse raise his hat to her as they passed.

“Yes, I've met him pretty often at Lady May's.”

“H'm! I had not an idea that anyone knew him. He's a man who might be of use to one.”

Here followed a silence.

“I thought, papa, you wished to go direct to Mortlake, and I don't think this is the way,” suggested Alice.

“Eh? heigho! You're right, child; upon my life, I was not thinking,” said Sir Reginald, at the same time signalling vehemently to the servant, who, having brought the carriage to a stand-still, came round to the window.

“We don't stop anywhere in town, we go straight to Mortlake Hall. It is beyond Islington. Have you ever been there? Well, you can tell them how to reach it.”

And Sir Reginald placed himself again in his corner. They had not started early, and he had frequently interrupted their journey on various whimsical pretexts. He remembered one house, for instance, where there was a stock of the very best port he had ever tasted, and then he stopped and went in, and after a personal interview with the proprietor, had a bottle opened, and took two glasses, and so paid at the rate of half a guinea each for them. It had been an interrupted journey, late begun, and the sun was near its setting by the time they had got a mile beyond the outskirts of Islington, and were drawing near the singular old house where their journey was to end.

Always with a melancholy presentiment, Alice approached Mortlake Hall. But never had she felt it more painfully than now. If there be in such misgivings a prophetic force, was it to be justified by the coming events of Miss Arden's life, which were awfully connected with that scene?

They passed a quaint little village of tall stone houses, among great old trees, with a rural and old-world air, and an ancient inn, with the sign of “Guy of Warwick” – an inn of which we shall see more by-and-by – faded, and like the rest of this little town, standing under the shadow of old trees. They entered the road, dark with double hedge-rows, and with a moss-grown park-wall on the right, in which, in a little time, they reached a great iron gate with fluted pillars. They drove up a broad avenue, flanked with files of gigantic trees, and showing grand old timber also upon the park-like grounds beyond. The dusky light of evening fell upon these objects, and the many windows, the cornices, and the smokeless chimneys of a great old house. You might have fancied yourself two hundred miles away from London.

“You don't stay here to-night, Alice. I wish you to return to Lady May, and give her the note I am going to write. You and she come out to dine here on Friday. If she makes a difficulty, I rely on you to persuade her. I must have someone to meet Mr. Longcluse. I have reasons. Also, I shall ask my brother David, and his ward Miss Maubray. I knew her father: he was a fool, with his head full of romance, and he married a very pretty woman who was a devil, without a shilling on earth. The girl is an orphan, and David is her guardian, and he would like any little attention we can show her. And we shall ask Vivian Darnley also. And that will make a very suitable party.”

Sir Reginald wrote his note, talking at intervals.

“You see, I want Lady May to come here again in a day or two, to stay only for two or three days. She can go into town and remain there all day, if she likes it. But Wynderbroke will be coming, and I should not like him to find us quite deserted; and she said she'd come, and she may as well do it now as another time. David lives so quietly, we are sure of him; and I commit May Penrose to you. You must persuade her to come. It will be cruel to disappoint. Here is her note – I will send the others myself. And now, God bless you, dear Alice!”

“I am so uncomfortable at the idea of leaving you, papa.” Her hand was on his arm, and she was looking anxiously into his face.

“So of course you should be; only that I am so perfectly recovered, that I must have a quiet evening with Richard; and I prefer your being in town to-night, and you and May Penrose can come out to-morrow. Good-bye, child, God bless you!”

CHAPTER XIV

MR. LONGCLUSE'S BOOT FINDS A TEMPORARY ASYLUM

In the papers of that morning had appeared a voluminous report of the proceedings of the coroner's inquest which sat upon the body of the deceased Pierre Lebas. I shall notice but one passage referring to the evidence which, it seems, Mr. Longcluse volunteered. It was given in these terms: —

“At this point of the proceedings, Mr. R. D. Longcluse, who had arrived about half an hour before, expressed a wish to be examined. Mr. Longcluse was accordingly sworn, and deposed that he had known the deceased, Pierre Lebas, when he (Mr. Longcluse) was little more than a boy, in Paris. Lebas at that time let lodgings, which were neat and comfortable, in the Rue Victoire. He was a respectable and obliging man. He had some other occupation besides that of letting lodgings, but he (Mr. Longcluse) could not say what it might be.” Then followed particulars with which we are already acquainted; and the report went on to say: “He seemed surprised when witness told him that there might be in the room persons of the worst character; and he then, in considerable alarm, pointed out to him (witness) a man who was and had been following him from place to place, he fancied with a purpose. Witness observed the man and saw him watch deceased, turning his eyes repeatedly upon him. The man had no companions, so far as he could see, and affected to be looking in a different direction. It was sideways and stealthily that he was watching deceased, who had incautiously taken out and counted some of his money in the room. Deceased did not conceal from the witness his apprehensions from this man, and witness advised him again to place his money in the hands of some friend who had a secure pocket, and recommended, in case his friend should object to take so much money into his care — Lebas having said he had a large sum about him — under the gaze of the public, that he should make the transfer in the smoking-room, the situation of which he described to him. Mr. Longcluse then proceeded to give an exact description of the man who had been dogging the deceased; the particulars were as follows: —”

Here I arrest my quotation, for I need not recapitulate the details of the tall man's features, dress, and figure, which are already familiar to the reader.

In a court off High Holborn there was, and perhaps is, a sort of coffee-shop, in the small drawing-rooms of which, thrown into one room, are many small and homely tables, with penny and halfpenny papers, and literature with startling woodcuts. Here working mechanics and others snatch a very early breakfast, and take their dinners, and such as can afford time loiter their half-hour or so over this agreeable literature. One penny morning paper visited that place of refection, for three hours daily, and then flitted away to keep an appointment elsewhere. It was this dull time in that peculiar establishment — namely, about nine o'clock in the morning — and there was but one listless guest in the room. It was the identical tall man in question. His flat feet were planted on the bare floor, and he leaned a shoulder against the window-case, with a plug of tobacco in his jaw, as, at his leisure, he was getting through the coroner's inquest on Pierre Lebas. He was smiling with half-closed eyes and considerable enjoyment, up to the point where Mr. Longcluse's evidence was suddenly directed upon him. There was a twitching scowl, as if from a sudden pain; but his smile continued from habit, although his face grew paler. This man, whose name was Paul Davies, winked hard with his left eye, as he got on, and read fiercely with his right. His face was whiter now, and his smile less easy. It was a queerish situation, he thought, and might lead to consequences.

There was a little bit of a looking-glass, picked up at some rubbishy auction, as old as the hills, with some tarnished gilding about it, in the narrow bit of wall between the windows. Paul Davies could look at nothing quite straight. He looked now at himself in this glass, but it was from the corners of his eyes, askance, and with his sly, sleepy depression of the eye-lids, as if he had not overmuch

confidence even in his own shadow. He folded the morning paper, and laid it, with formal precision, on the table, as if no one had disturbed it; and taking up the *Halfpenny Illustrated Broadsheet of Fiction*, and with it flourishing in his hand by the corner, he called the waiter over the bannister, and paid his reckoning, and went off swiftly to his garret in another court, a quarter of a mile nearer to Saint Paul's – taking an obscure and devious course through back-lanes and sequestered courts.

When he got up to his garret, Mr. Davies locked his door and sat down on the side of his creaking settle-bed, and, in his playful phrase, “put on his considering cap.”

“That's a dangerous cove, that Mr. Longcluse. He's done a bold stroke. And now it's him or me, I do suppose – him or me; me or him. Come, Paul, shake up your knowledge-box; I'll not lose this cast simple. He's gave a description of me. The force will know it. And them feet o' mine, they *are* a bit flat: but any chap can make a pair of insteps with a penn'orth o' rags. I wouldn't care tuppence if it wasn't for them pock-marks. There's no managing them. A scar or a wart you may touch over with paint and sollible gutta-percha, or pink wafers and gelatine, but pock-marks is too many for any man.”

He was looking with some anxiety in the triangular fragment of looking-glass – balanced on a nail in the window-case – at his features.

“I can take off them whiskers; and the long neck he makes so much of, if it was as long as an oystich, with fourpenn'orth of cotton waste and a cabbage-net, I'd make a bull of it, and run my shoulders up to my ears. I'll take the whiskers off, anyhow. That's no treason; and he mayn't identify me. If I'm not had up for a fortnight my hair would be grew a bit, and that would be a lift. But a fellow must think twice before he begins disguisin'. Juries smells a rat. Howsomever, a cove may shave, and no harm done; or his hair may grow a bit, and how can he help it? Longcluse knows what he's about. He's a sharp lad, but for all that Paul Davies 'ill sweat him yet.”

Mr. Davies turned the button of his old-fashioned window, and let it down. He shut out his two scarlet geraniums, which accompanied him in all his changes from one lodging to another.

“Suppose he tries the larceny – that's another thing he may do, seeing what my lay is. It wouldn't do to lose that thing; no more would it answer to let them find it.”

This last idea seemed to cause Paul Davies a good deal of serious uneasiness. He began looking about at the walls, low down near the skirting, and up near the ceiling, tapping now and then with his knuckles, and sounding the plaster as a doctor would the chest of a wheezy patient. He was not satisfied. He scratched his head, and fiddled with his ear, and plucked his short nose dubiously, and winked hard at his geraniums through the window.

Paul Davies knew that the front garret was not let. He opened his door and listened. Then he entered that room. I think he had a notion of changing his lodgings, if only he could find what he wanted. That was such a hiding-place as professional seekers were not likely to discover. But he could not satisfy himself.

A thought struck him, however, and he went into the lobby again; he got on a chair and pushed open the skylight, and out went Mr. Davies on the roof. He looked and poked about here. He looked to the neighbouring roofs, lest any eye should be upon him; but there was no one. A maid hanging clothes upon a line, on a sort of balcony, midway down the next house, was singing, “The Ratcatcher's Daughter,” he thought rather sweetly – so well, indeed, that he listened for two whole verses – but that did not signify.

Paul Davies kneeled down, and loosed and removed, one after the other, several slates near the lead gutter, between the gables; and, having made a sufficient opening in the roof for his purpose, he returned, let himself down lightly through the skylight, entered his room, and locked himself up. He then unlocked his trunk and took from under his clothes, where it lay, a French boot – the veritable boot of Mr. Longcluse – which, for greater security, he popped under the coarse coverlet of his bed. He next took from his trunk a large piece of paper which, being unfolded at the window, disclosed a rude drawing with a sentence or two underneath, and three signatures, with a date preceding.

Having read this document over twice or thrice, with a rather menacing smile, he rolled it up in brown paper and thrust it into the foot of the boot, which he popped under the coverlet and bolster. He then opened his door wide. Too long a silence might possibly have seemed mysterious, and called up prying eyes, so, while he filled his pipe with tobacco, he whistled, "Villikins and his Dinah" lustily. He was very cautious about this boot and paper. He got on his great-coat and felt hat, and took his pipe and some matches – the enjoying a quiet smoke without troubling others with the perfume was a natural way of accounting for his visit to the roof. He listened. He slipped his boot and its contents into his capacious great-coat pocket, with a rag of old carpet tied round it; and then, whistling still cheerily, he mounted the roof again, and placed the precious parcel within the roof, which he, having some skill as a slater, proceeded carefully and quickly to restore.

Down came Mr. Davies now, and shaved off his whiskers. Then he walked out, with a bundle consisting of the coat, waistcoat, and blue necktie he had worn on the evening of Lebas's murder. He was going to pay a visit to his mother, a venerable greengrocer, who lived near the Tower of London; and on his way he pledged these articles at two distinct and very remote pawnbrokers', intending on his return to release, with the proceeds, certain corresponding articles of his wardrobe, now in ward in another establishment. These measures of obliteration he was taking quietly. His visit to his mother, a very honest old woman, who believed him to be the most virtuous, agreeable, and beautiful young man extant, was made with a very particular purpose.

"Well, Ma'am," he said, in reply to the old lady's hospitable greeting, "I won't refuse a pot of half-and-half and a couple of eggs, and I'll go so far as a cut or two of bacon, bein' 'ungry; and I'm a-goin' to write a paper of some consequence, if you'll oblige me with a sheet of foolscap and a pen and ink; and I may as well write it while the things is a-gettin' ready, accordin' to your kind intentions."

And accordingly Mr. Paul Davies sat in silence, looking very important – as he always did when stationery was before him – at a small table, in a dark back room, and slowly penned a couple of pages of foolscap.

"And now," said he, producing the document after his repast, "will you be so good, Ma'am, as to ask Mr. Sildyke and Mrs. Rumble to come down and witness my signing of this, which I mean to leave it in your hands and safe keepin', under lock and key, until I take it away, or otherwise tells you what you must do with it. It is a police paper, Ma'am, and may be wanted any time. But you keep it dark till I tells you."

This settled, Mr. Sildyke and Mrs. Rumble arrived obligingly; and Paul Davies, with an adroit wink at his mother – who was a little shocked and much embarrassed by the ruse, being a truth-loving woman – told them that here was his last will and testament, and he wanted only that they should witness his signature; which, with the date, was duly accomplished. Paul Davies was, indeed, a man of that genius which requires to proceed by stratagem, cherishing an abhorrence of straight lines, and a picturesque love of the curved and angular. So, if Mr. Longcluse was doing his duty at one end of the town, Mr. Davies, at the other, was by no means wanting in activity, or, according to the level of his intellect and experience, in wisdom.

We have recurred to these scenes in which Mr. Paul Davies figures, because it was indispensable to the reader's right understanding of some events that follow. Be so good, then, as to find Sir Reginald exactly where I left him, standing on the steps of Mortlake Hall. His daughter would have stayed, but he would not hear of it. He stood on the steps, and smirked a yellow and hollow farewell, waving his hand as the carriage drove away. Then he turned and entered the lofty hall, in which the light was already failing.

Sir Reginald did not like the trouble of mounting the stairs. His bed-room and sitting-room were on a level with the hall. As soon as he came in, the gloom of his old prison-house began to overshadow him, and his momentary cheer and good-humour disappeared.

“Where is Tansey? I suppose she's in her bed, or grumbling in toothache,” he snarled to the footman. “And where the devil's Crozier? I have the fewest and the worst servants, I believe, of any man in England.”

He poked open the door of his sitting-room with the point of his walking-stick.

“Nothing ready, I dare swear,” he quavered, and shot a peevish and fiery glance round it.

Things were not looking quite so badly as he expected. There was just the little bit of expiring fire in the grate which he liked, even in summer. His sealskin slippers were on the hearth-rug, and his easy-chair was pushed into its proper place.

“Ha! Crozier, at last! Here, get off this coat, and these mufflers, and – I was d – d near dying in that vile chaise. I don't remember how they got me into the inn. There, don't mind condoling. You're privileged, but don't do that. As near dying as possible – rather an awkward business for useless old servants here, if I had. I'll dress in the next room. My son's coming this evening. Admit him, mind. I'll see him. How long is it since we met last? Two years, egad! And Lord Wynderbroke has his dinner here – I don't know what day, but some day very soon – Friday, I think; and don't let the people here go to sleep. Remember!”

And so on, with his old servant, he talked, and sneered, and snarled, and established himself in his sitting-room, with his reviews, and his wine, and his newspapers.

Night fell over dark Mortlake Hall, and over the blazing city of London. Sir Reginald listened, every now and then, for the approach of his son. Talk as he might, he did expect something – and a great deal – from the coming interview. Two years without a home, without an allowance, with no provision except a hundred and fifty pounds a year, might well have tamed that wilful beast!

With the tremor of acute suspense, the old man watched and listened. Was it a good or an ill sign, his being so late?

The city of London, with its still roaring traffic and blaze of gas-lamps, did not contrast more powerfully with the silent shadows of the forest-grounds of Mortlake, than did the drawing-room of Lady May Penrose, brilliant with a profusion of light, and resonant with the gay conversation of inmates, all disposed to enjoy themselves, with the dim and vast room in which Sir Reginald sat silently communing with his own dismal thoughts.

Nothing so contagious as gaiety. Alice Arden, laughingly, was “making her book” rather prematurely in dozens of pairs of gloves, for the Derby. Lord Wynderbroke was deep in it. So was Vivian Darnley.

“Your brother and I are to take the reins, turn about, Lady May says. He's a crack whip. He's better than I, I think,” said Vivian to Alice Arden.

“You mustn't upset us, though. I am so afraid of you crack whips!” said Alice. “Nor let your horses run away with us; I've been twice run away with already.”

“I don't the least wonder at Miss Arden's being run away with very often,” said Lord Wynderbroke, with all the archness of a polite man of fifty.

“Very prettily said, Wynderbroke,” smiled Lady May. “And where is your brother? I thought he'd have turned up to-night,” asked she of Alice.

“I quite forgot. He was to see papa this evening. They wanted to talk over something together.”

“Oh, I see!” said Lady May, and she became thoughtful.

What was the exact nature of the interest which good Lady May undoubtedly took in Richard Arden? Was it quite so motherly as years might warrant? At that time people laughed over it, and were curious to see the progress of the comedy. Here was light and gaiety – light within, lamps without; spirited talk in young anticipation of coming days of pleasure; and outside the roll of carriage-wheels making a humming bass to this merry treble.

Over the melancholy precincts of Mortlake the voiceless darkness of night descends with unmitigated gloom. The centre – the brain of this dark place – is the house: and in a large dim room, near the smouldering fire, sits the image that haunts rather than inhabits it.

CHAPTER XV FATHER AND SON

Sir Reginald Arden had fallen into a doze, as he sat by the fire with his *Revue des Deux Mondes*, slipping between his finger and thumb, on his knees. He was recalled by Crozier's voice, and looking up, he saw, standing near the door, as if in some slight hesitation, a figure not seen for two years before.

For a moment Sir Reginald doubted his only half-awakened senses. Was that handsome oval face, with large, soft eyes, with such brilliant lips, and the dark-brown moustache, so fine, and silken, that had never known a razor, an unsubstantial portrait hung in the dim air, or his living son? There were perplexity and surprise in the old man's stare.

"I should have been here before, Sir, but your letter did not reach me until an hour ago," said Richard Arden.

"By heaven! Dick? And so you came! I believe I was asleep. Give me your hand. I hope, Dick, we may yet end this miserable quarrel happily. Father and son can have no real interests apart."

Sir Reginald Arden extended his thin hand, and smiled invitingly but rather darkly on his son. Graceful and easy this young man was, and yet embarrassed, as he placed his hand within his father's.

"You will take something, Dick, won't you?"

"Nothing, Sir, thanks."

Sir Reginald was stealthily reading his face. At last he began circuitously —

"I've a little bit of news to tell you about Alice. How long shall I allow you to guess what it is?"

"I'm the worst guesser in the world — pray don't wait for me, Sir."

"Well, I have in my desk there — would you mind putting it on the table here? — a letter from Wynderbroke. You know him?"

"Yes, a little."

"Well, Wynderbroke writes — the letter arrived only an hour ago — to ask my leave to marry your sister, if she will consent; and he says all he will do, which is very handsome — very generous indeed. Wait a moment. Yes, here it is. Read that."

Richard Arden did read the letter, with open eyes and breathless interest. The old man's eyes were upon him as he did so.

"Well, Richard, what do you think?"

"There can be but one opinion about it. Nothing can be more handsome. Everything suitable. I only hope that Alice will not be foolish."

"She sha'n't be that, I'll take care," said the old man, locking down his desk again upon the letter.

"It might possibly be as well, Sir, to prepare her a little at first. I may possibly be of some little use, and so may Lady May. I only mean that it might hardly be expedient to make it from the first a matter of authority, because she has romantic ideas, and she is spirited."

"I'll sleep upon it. I sha'n't see her again till to-morrow evening. She does not care about anyone in particular, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of," said Richard.

"You'll find it will all be right — it *will* — all right. It *shall* be right," said Sir Reginald. And then there was a silence. He was meditating the other business he had in hand, and again circuitously he proceeded.

"What's going on at the opera? Who is your great danseuse at present?" inquired the baronet, with a glimmer of a leer. "I haven't seen a ballet for more than six years. And why? I needn't tell you. You know the miserable life I lead. Egad! there are fellows placed everywhere to watch me. There would be an execution in this house this night, if the miserable tables and chairs were not my brother

David's property. Upon my life, Craven, my attorney, had to serve two notices on the sheriff in one term, to caution him not to sell your uncle's furniture for my debts. I shouldn't have had a joint-stool to sit down on, if it hadn't been for that. And I had to get out of the railway-carriage, by heaven! for fear of arrest, and come home – if home I can call this ruin – by posting all the way, except a few miles. I did not dare to tell Craven I was coming back. I wrote from Twyford, where I – I – took a fancy to sleep last night, to no human being but yourself. My comfort is that they and all the world believe that I'm still in France. It is a pleasant state of things!”

“I am grieved, Sir, to think you suffer so much.”

“I know it. I knew it. I know you are, Dick,” said the old man eagerly. “And my life is a perfect hell. I can nowhere in England find rest for the sole of my foot. I am suffering perpetually the most miserable mortifications, and the tortures of the damned. I know you are sorry. It can't be pleasant to you to see your father the miserable outcast, and fugitive, and victim he so often is. And I'll say distinctly – I'll say at once – for it was with this one purpose I sent for you – that no son with a particle of human feeling, with a grain of conscience, or an atom of principle, could endure to see it, when he knew that by a stroke of his pen he could undo it all, and restore a miserable parent to life and liberty! Now, Richard, you have my mind. I have concealed nothing, and I'm sure, Dick, I know, I *know* you won't see your father perish by inches, rather than sign the warrant for his liberation. For God's sake, Dick, my boy speak out! Have you the heart to reject your miserable father's petition? Do you wish me to kneel to you? I love you, Dick, although you don't admit it. I'll kneel to you, Dick – I'll kneel to you. I'll go on my knees to you.”

His hands were clasped; he made a movement. His great prominent eyes were fixed on Richard Arden's face, which he was reading with a great deal of eagerness, it is true, but also with a dark and narrow shrewdness.

“Good heaven, Sir, don't stir, I implore! If you do, I must leave the room,” said Richard, embarrassed to a degree that amounted to agitation. “And I must tell you, Sir – it is very painful, but, I could not help it, necessity drove me to it – if I were ever so desirous, it is out of my power now. I have dealt with my reversion. I have executed a deed.”

“You have been with the Jews!” cried the old man, jumping to his feet. “You have been dealing, by way of *post obit*, with my estate!”

Richard Arden looked down. Sir Reginald was as nearly white as his yellow tint would allow; his large eyes were gleaming fire – he looked as if he would have snatched the poker, and brained his son.

“But what could I do, Sir? I had no other resource. I was forbidden your house; I had no money.”

“You lie, Sir!” yelled the old man, with a sudden flash, and a hammer of his thin trembling fist on the table. “You had a hundred and fifty pounds a year of your mother's.”

“But that, Sir, could not possibly support any one. I was compelled to act as I did. You really, Sir, left me no choice.”

“Now, now, now, now, now! you're not to run away with the thing, you're not to run away with it; you sha'n't run away with it, Sir. You could have made a submission, you know you could. I was open to be reconciled at any time – always too ready. You had only to do as you ought to have done, and I'd have received you with open arms; you know I would – I *would* – you had only to unite our interests in the estates, and I'd have done everything to make you happy, and you know it. But you have taken the step – you have done it, and it is irrevocable. You have done it, and you've ruined me; and I pray to God you have ruined yourself!”

With every sinew quivering, the old man was pulling the bell-rope violently with his left hand. Over his shoulder, on his son, he glanced almost maniacally. “Turn him out!” he screamed to Crozier, stamping; “put him out by the collar. Shut the door upon him, and lock it; and if he ever dares to call here again, slam it in his face. I have done with him for ever!”

Richard Arden had already left the room, and this closing passage was lost on him. But he heard the old man's voice as he walked along the corridor, and it was still in his ears as he passed the

hall-door; and, running down the steps, he jumped into his cab. Crozier held the cab-door open, and wished Mr. Richard a kind good-night. He stood on the steps to see the last of the cab as it drove down the shadowy avenue and was lost in gloom. He sighed heavily. What a broken family it was! He was an old servant, born on their northern estate – loyal, and somewhat rustic – and, certainly, had the baronet been less in want of money, not exactly the servant he would have chosen.

“The old gentleman cannot last long,” he said, as he followed the sound of the retreating wheels with his gaze, “and then Master Richard will take his turn, and what one began the other will finish. It is all up with the Ardens. Sir Reginald ruined, Master Harry murdered, and Master David turned tradesman! There's a curse on the old house.”

He heard the baronet's tread faintly, pacing the floor in agitation, as he passed his door; and when he reached the housekeeper's room, that old lady, Mrs. Tansey, was alone and all of a tremble, standing at the door. Before her dim staring eyes had risen an oft-remembered scene: the ivy-covered gatehouse at Mortlake Hall; the cold moon glittering down through the leafless branches; the grey horse on its side across the gig-shaft, and the two villains – one rifling and the other murdering poor Henry Arden, the baronet's gay and reckless brother.

“Lord, Mr. Crozier! what's crossed Sir Reginald?” she said huskily, grasping the servant's wrist with her lean hand. “Master Dick, I do suppose. I thought he was to come no more. They quarrel always. I'm like to faint, Mr. Crozier.”

“Sit ye down, Mrs. Tansey, Ma'am; you should take just a thimbleful of something. What has frightened you?”

“There's a scritch in Sir Reginald's voice – mercy on us! – when he raises it so; it is the very cry of poor Master Harry – his last cry, when the knife pierced him. I'll never forget it!”

The old woman clasped her fingers over her eyes, and shook her head slowly.

“Well, that's over and ended this many a day, and past cure. We need not fret ourselves no more about it – 'tis thirty years since.”

“Two-and-twenty the day o' the Longden steeple-chase. I've a right to remember it.” She closed her eyes again. “Why can't they keep apart?” she resumed. “If father and son can't look one another in the face without quarrelling, better they should turn their backs on one another for life. Why need they come under one roof? The world's wide enough.”

“So it is – and no good meeting and argufying; for Mr. Dick will never open the estate,” remarked Mr. Crozier.

“And more shame for him!” said Mrs. Tansey. “He's breaking his father's heart. It troubles him more,” she added in a changed tone, “I'm thinking, than ever poor Master Harry's death did. There's none living of his kith or kin cares about it now but Master David. He'll never let it rest while he lives.”

“He *may* let it rest, for he'll never make no hand of it,” said Crozier. “Would you object, Ma'am, to my making a glass of something hot? – you're gone very pale.”

Mrs. Tansey assented, and the conversation grew more comfortable. And so the night closed over the passions and the melancholy of Mortlake Hall.

CHAPTER XVI

A MIDNIGHT MEETING

A couple of days passed; and now I must ask you to suppose yourself placed, at night, in the centre of a vast heath, undulating here and there like a sea arrested in a ground-swell, lost in a horizon of monotonous darkness all round. Here and there rises a scrubby hillock of furze, black and rough as the head of a monster. The eye aches as it strains to discover objects or measure distances over the blurred and black expanse. Here stand two trees pretty close together – one in thick foliage, a black elm, with a funereal and plume-like stillness, and blotting out many stars with its gigantic canopy; the other, about fifty paces off, a withered and half barkless fir, with one white branch left, stretching forth like the arm of a gibbet. Nearly under this is a flat rock, with one end slanting downwards, and half buried in the ferns and the grass that grow about that spot. One other fir stands a little way off, smaller than these two trees, which in daylight are conspicuous far away as landmarks on a trackless waste. Overhead the stars are blinking, but the desolate landscape lies beneath in shapeless obscurity, like drifts of black mist melting together into one wide vague sea of darkness that forms the horizon. Over this comes, in fitful moanings, a melancholy wind. The eye stretches vainly to define the objects that fancy sometimes suggests, and the ear is strained to discriminate the sounds, real or unreal, that seem to mingle in the uncertain distance.

If you can conjure up all this, and the superstitious freaks that in such a situation imagination will play in even the hardest and coarsest natures, you have a pretty distinct idea of the feelings and surroundings of a tall man who lay that night his length under the blighted tree I have mentioned, stretched on its roots, with his chin supported on his hands, and looking vaguely into the darkness. He had been smoking, but his pipe was out now, and he had no occupation but that of forming pictures on the dark back-ground, and listening to the moan and rush of the distant wind, and imagining sometimes a voice shouting, sometimes the drumming of a horse's hoofs approaching over the plain. There was a chill in the air that made this man now and then shiver a little, and get up and take a turn back and forward, and stamp sharply as he did so, to keep the blood stirring in his legs and feet. Then down he would lay again, with his elbows on the ground, and his hands propping his chin. Perhaps he brought his head near the ground, thinking that thus he could hear distant sounds more sharply. He was growing impatient, and well he might.

The moon now began to break through the mist in fierce red over the far horizon. A streak of crimson, that glowed without illuminating anything, showed through the distant cloud close along the level of the heath. Even this was a cheer, like a red ember or two in a pitch-dark room. Very far away he thought now he heard the tread of a horse. One can hear miles away over that level expanse of death-like silence. He pricked his ears, he raised himself on his hands, and listened with open mouth. He lost the sound, but on leaning his head again to the ground, that vast sounding-board carried its vibration once more to his ear. It was the canter of a horse upon the heath. He was doubtful whether it was approaching, for the sound subsided sometimes; but afterwards it was renewed, and gradually he became certain that it was coming nearer. And now, like a huge, red-hot dome of copper, the moon rose above the level strips of cloud that lay upon the horizon of the heath, and objects began to reveal themselves. The stunted fir, that had looked to the fancy of the solitary watcher like a ghostly policeman, with arm and truncheon raised, just starting in pursuit, now showed some lesser branches, and was more satisfactorily a tree; distances became measurable, though not yet accurately, by the eye; and ridges and hillocks caught faintly the dusky light, and threw blurred but deep shadows backward.

The tread of the horse approaching had become a gallop as the light improved, and horse and horseman were soon visible. Paul Davies stood erect, and took up a position a few steps in advance of the blighted tree at whose foot he had been stretched. The figure, seen against the dusky glare of

the moon, would have answered well enough for one of those highwaymen who in old times made the heath famous. His low-crowned felt hat, his short coat with a cape to it, and the leather casings, which looked like jack-boots, gave this horseman, seen in dark outline against the glow, a character not unpicturesque. With a sudden strain of the bridle, the gaunt rider pulled up before the man who awaited him.

“What are you doing there?” said the horseman roughly.

“Counting the stars,” answered he.

Thus the signs and countersigns were exchanged, and the stranger said —

“You're alone, Paul Davies, I take it.”

“No company but ourselves, mate,” answered Davies.

“You're up to half a dozen dodges, Paul, and knows how to lime a twig; that's your little game, you know. This here tree is clean enough, but that 'ere has a hatful o' leaves on it.”

“I didn't put them there,” said Paul, a little sulkily.

“Well, no. I do suppose a sight o' you wouldn't exactly put a tree in leaf, or a rose-bush in blossom; nor even make wegitables grow. More like to blast 'em, like that rum un over your head.”

“What's up?” asked the ex-detective.

“Jest this – there's leaves enough for a bird to roost there, so this won't do. Now, then, move on you with me.”

As the gaunt rider thus spoke, his long red beard was blowing this way and that in the breeze; and he turned his horse, and walked him towards that lonely tree in which, as he lay gazing on its black outline, Paul had fancied the shape of a phantom policeman.

“I don't care a cuss,” said Davies. “I'm half sorry I came a leg to meet yer.”

“Growlin', eh?” said the horseman.

“I wish you was as cold as me, and you'd growl a bit, maybe, yourself,” said Paul. “I'm jolly cold.”

“Cold, are ye?”

“Cold as a lock-up.”

“Why didn't ye fetch a line o' the old author with you?” asked the rider – meaning brandy.

“I had a pipe or two.”

“Who'd a-guessed we was to have a night like this in summer-time?”

“I do believe it freezes all the year round in this queer place.”

“Would ye like a drop of the South-Sea mountain (gin)?” said the stranger, producing a flask from his pocket, which Paul Davies took with a great deal of good-will, much to the donor's content, for he wished to find that gentleman in good-humour in the conversation that was to follow.

“Drink what's there, mate. D'ye like it?”

“It ain't to be by no means sneezed at,” said Paul Davies.

The horseman looked back over his shoulder. Paul Davies remarked that his shoulders were round enough to amount almost to a deformity. He and his companion were now a long way from the tree whose foliage he feared might afford cover to some eavesdropper.

“This tree will answer. I suppose you like a post to clap your back to while we are palaverin',” said the rider. “Make a finish of it, Mr. Davies,” he continued, as that person presented the half-emptied flask to his hand. “I'm as hot as steam, myself, and I'd rather have a smoke by-and-by.”

He touched the bridle here, and the horse stood still, and the rider patted his reeking neck, as he stooped with a shake of his ears and a snort, and began to sniff the scant herbage at his feet.

“I don't mind if I have another pull,” said Paul, replenishing the goblet that fitted over the bottom of the flask.

“Fill it again, and no heel-taps,” said his companion.

Mr. Davies sat down, with his mug in his hand, on the ground, and his back against the tree. Had there been a donkey near, to personate the immortal Dapple, you might have fancied, in that

uncertain gloom, the Knight and Squire of La Mancha overtaken by darkness, and making one of their adventurous bivouacs under the boughs of the tree.

“What you saw in the papers three days ago did give you a twist, I take it?” observed the gentleman on horseback, with a grin that made the red bristles on his upper lip curl upwards and twist like worms.

“I can't tumble to a right guess what you means,” said Mr. Davies.

“Come, Paul, that won't never do. You read every line of that there inquest on the French cove at the Saloon, and you have by rote every word Mr. Longcluse said. It must be a queer turning of the tables, for a clever chap like you to have to look slippy, for fear other dogs should lag you.”

“Tain't me that 'ill be looking slippy, as you and me well knows; and it's jest because you knows it well you're here. I suppose it ain't for love of *me* quite?” sneered Paul Davies.

“I don't care a rush for Mr. Longcluse, no more nor I care for you; and I see he's goin' where he pleases. He made a speech in yesterday's paper, at the meetin' at the Surrey Gardens. He was canvassin' for Parliament down in Derbyshire a week ago; and he printed a letter to the electors only yesterday. He don't care two pins for you.”

“A good many rows o' pins, I'm thinkin',” sneered Mr. Davies.

“Thinkin' won't make a loaf, Mr. Davies. Many a man has bin too clever, and *thought* himself into the block-house. You're making too fine a game, Mr. Davies; a playin' a bit too much with edged tools, and fiddlin' a bit too freely with fire. You'll burn your fingers, and cut 'em too, do ye mind? unless you be advised, and close the game where you stand to win, as I rather think you do now.”

“So do I, mate,” said Paul Davies, who could play at brag as well as his neighbour.

“I'm on another lay, a safer one by a long sight. My maxim is the same as yours, ‘Grab all you can;’ but *I* do it safe, d'ye see? You are in a fair way to end your days on the twister.”

“Not if I knows it,” said Paul Davies. “I'm afeared o' no man livin'. Who can say black's the white o' my eye? Do ye take me for a child? What do ye take me for?”

“I take you for the man that robbed and done for the French cove in the Saloon. That's the child I take ye for,” answered the horseman cynically.

“You lie! You don't! You know I han't a pig of his money, and never hurt a hair of his head. You say that to rile me, jest.”

“Why should I care a cuss whether you're riled or no? Do you think I want to get anything out o' yer? I knows everything as well as you do yourself. You take me for a queer gill, I'm thinking; that's not my lay. I wouldn't wait here while you'd walk round my hoss to have every secret you ever know'd.”

“A queer gill, mayhap. I think I know you,” said Mr. Davies, archly.

“You do, do ye? Well, come, who do you take me for?” said the stranger, turning towards him, and sitting erect in the saddle, with his hand on his thigh, to afford him the amplest view of his face and figure.

“Then I take you for Mr. Longcluse,” said Paul Davies, with a wag of his head.

“For Mr. Longcluse!” echoed the horseman, with a boisterous laugh. “Well, *there's* a guess to tumble to! The worst guess I ever heer'd made. Did you ever see him? Why, there's not two bones in our two bodies the same length, and not two inches of our two faces alike. There's a guess for a detective! Be my soul, it's well for you it ain't him, for I think he'd a shot ye!”

The rider lifted his hand from his coat-pocket as he said this, but there was no weapon in it. Mistaking his intention, however, Paul Davies skipped behind the tree, and levelled a revolver at him.

“Down with that, you fool!” cried the horseman. “There's nothing here.” And he gave his horse the spur, and made him plunge to a little distance, as he held up his right hand. “But I'm not such a fool as to meet a cove like you without the lead towels, too, in case you should try that dodge.” And dipping his hand swiftly into his pocket again, he also showed in the air the glimmering barrels of a pistol. “If you must be pullin' out your barkers every minute, and can't talk like a man, where's the

good of coming all this way to palaver with a cove. It ain't not tuppence to me. Crack away if you likes it, and see who shoots best; or, if you likes it better, I don't mind if I get down and try who can hit hardest t'other way, and you'll find my fist tastes very strong of the hammer.”

“I thought you were up for mischief,” said Davies, “and I won't be polished off simple, that's all. It's best to keep as we are, and no nearer; we can hear one another well enough where we stand.”

“It's a bargain,” said the stranger, “and I don't care a cuss who you take me for. I'm not Mr. Longcluse; but you're welcome, if it pleases you, to give me his name, and I wish I could have the old bloke's tin as easy. Now here's my little game, and I don't find it a bad one. When two gentlemen – we'll say, for instance, you and Mr. Longcluse – differs in opinion (you says he did a certain thing, and he says he didn't, or goes the whole hog and says *you* did it, and not him), it's plain, if the matter is to be settled amigable, it's best to have a man as knows what he's about, and can find out the cove as threatens the rich fellow, and deal with him handsome, according to circumstances. My terms is moderate. I takes five shillins in the pound, and not a pig under; and that puts you and I in the same boat, d'ye see? Well, I gets all I can out of him, and no harm can happen me, for I'm but a cove a-carryin' of messages betwixt you, and the more I gets for you the better for me. I settled many a business amigable the last five years that would never have bin settled without me. I'm well knowing to some of the swellest lawyers in town, and whenever they has a dilikite case, like a gentleman threatened with informations or the like, they sends for me, and I arranges it amigable, to the satisfasching of both parties. It's the only way to settle sich affairs with good profit and no risk. I have spoke to Mr. Longcluse. He was all for having your four bones in the block-house, and yourself on the twister; and he's not a cove to be bilked out of his tin. But he would not like the bother of your cross-charge, either, and I think I could make all square between ye. What do you say?”

“How can I tell that you ever set eyes on Mr. Longcluse?” said Davies, more satisfied as the conference proceeded that he had misdirected his first guess at the identity of the horseman. “How can I tell you're not just a-gettin' all you can out o' me, to make what you can of it on your own account in that market?”

“That's true, you can't tell, mate.”

“And what do I know about you? What's your name?” pursued Paul Davies.

“I forgot my name, I left it at home in the cupboard; and you know nothing about me, that's true, excepting what I told you, and you'll hear no more.”

“I'm too old a bird for that; you're a born genius, only spoilt in the baking. I'm thinking, mate, I may as well paddle my own canoe, and sell my own secret on my own account. What can you do for me that I can't do as well for myself?”

“You don't think that, Paul. You dare not show to Mr. Longcluse, and you know he's in a wax; and who can you send to him? You'll make nothing o' that brag. Where's the good of talking like a blast to a chap like me? Don't you suppose I take all that at its vally? I tell you what, if it ain't settled now, you'll see me no more, for I'll not undertake it.” He pulled up his horse's head, preparatory to starting.

“Well, what's up now? – what's the hurry?” demanded Mr. Davies.

“Why, if this here meetin' won't lead to business, the sooner we two parts and gets home again, the less time wasted,” answered the cavalier, with his hand on the crupper of the saddle, as he turned to speak.

Each seemed to wait for the other to add something.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. LONGCLUSE AT MORTLAKE HALL

“If you let me go this time, Mr. Wheeler, you’ll not catch me a-walking out here again,” said Mr. Davies sourly. “If there’s business to be done, now’s the time.”

“Well, I can’t make it no plainer – ’tis as clear as mud in a wine-glass,” said the mounted man gaily, and again he shook the bridle and hitched himself in the saddle, and the horse stirred uneasily, as he added, “Have you any more to say?”

“Well, supposin’ I say ay, how soon will it be settled?” said Paul Davies, beginning to think better of it.

“These things doesn’t take long with a rich cove like Mr. Longcluse. It’s where they has to scrape it up, by beggin’ here and borrowin’ there, and sellin’ this and spoutin’ that – there’s a wait always. But a chap with no end o’ tin – that has only to wish and have – that’s your sort. He swears a bit, and threatens, and stamps, and loses his temper summat, ye see; and if I was the prencipal, like you are in this ’ere case, and the police convenient, or a poker in his fist, he might make a row. But seein’ I’m only a messenger like, it don’t come to nothin’. He claps his hand in his pocket, and outs with the rino, and there’s all; and jest a bit of paper to sign. But I won’t stay here no longer. I’m getting a bit cold myself; so it’s on or off *now*. Go yourself to Longcluse, if you like, and see if you don’t catch it. The least you get will be seven-penn’orth, for extortin’ money by threatenin’ a prosecution, if he don’t hang you for the murder of the Saloon cove. How would you like that?”

“It ain’t the physic that suits my complaint, guvnor. But I have him there. I have the statement wrote, in sure hands, and other hevidence, as he may suppose, and dated, and signed by respectable people; and I know his dodge. He thinks he came out first with his charge against me, but he’s out there; and if he *will* have it, and I split, he’d best look slippy.”

“And how much do you want? Mind, I’ll funk him all I can, though he’s a wideawake chap; for it’s my game to get every pig I can out of him.”

“I’ll take two thousand pounds, and go to Canada or to New York, my passage and expenses being paid, and sign anything in reason he wants; and that’s the shortest chalk I’ll offer.”

“Don’t you wish you may get it? *I* do, I know, but I’m thinking you might jest as well look for the naytional debt.”

“What’s your name?” again asked Davies, a little abruptly.

“My name fell out o’ window and was broke, last Tuesday mornin’. But call me Tom Wheeler, if you can’t talk without calling me something.”

“Well, Tom, that’s the figure,” said Davies.

“If you want to deal, speak now,” said Wheeler. “If I’m to stand between you, I must have a power to close on the best offer I’m like to get. I won’t do nothing in the matter else-ways.”

With this fresh exhortation, the conference on details proceeded; and when at last it closed, with something like a definite understanding, Tom Wheeler said, – “Mind, Paul Davies, I comes from no one, and I goes to no one; and I never seed you in all my days.”

“And where are you going?”

“A bit nearer the moon,” said the mysterious Mr. Wheeler, lifting his hand and pointing towards the red disk, with one of his bearded grins. And wheeling his horse suddenly, away he rode at a canter, right toward the red moon, against which for a few moments the figure of the retreating horse and man showed black and sharp, as if cut out of cardboard.

Paul Davies looked after him with his left eye screwed close, as was his custom, in shrewd rumination. Before the horseman had got very far, the moon passed under the edge of a thick cloud, and the waste was once more enveloped in total darkness. In this absolute obscurity the retreating

figure was instantaneously swallowed, so that the shrewd ex-detective, who had learned by rote every article of his dress, and every button on it, and could have sworn to every mark on his horse at York Fair, had no chance of discovering in the ultimate line of his retreat, any clue to his destination. He had simply emerged from darkness, and darkness had swallowed him again.

We must now see how Sir Reginald's little dinner-party, not a score of miles away, went off only two days later. He was fortunate, seeing he had bidden his guests upon very short notice, not one disappointed.

I daresay that Lady May – whose toilet, considering how quiet everything was, had been made elaborately – missed a face that would have brightened all the rooms for her. But the interview between Richard Arden and his father had not, as we know, ended in reconciliation, and Lady May's hopes were disappointed, and her toilet labour in vain.

When Lady May entered the room with Alice, she saw standing on the hearth-rug, at the far end of the handsome room, a tall and very good-looking man of sixty or upwards, chatting with Sir Reginald, one of whose feet was in a slipper, and who was sitting in an easy-chair. A little bit of fire burned in the grate, for the day had been chill and showery. This tall man, with white silken hair, and a countenance kind, frank, and thoughtful, with a little sadness in it, was, she had no doubt, David Arden, whom she had last seen with silken brown locks, and the cheerful aspect of early manhood.

Sir Reginald stood up, with an uncomfortable effort, and, smiling, pointed to his slippers in excuse for his limping gait, as he shuffled forth across the carpet to meet her, with a good-humoured shrug.

“Wasn't it good of her to come?” said Alice.

“She's better than good,” said Sir Reginald, with his thin, yellow smile, extending his hand, and leading her to a chair; “it is visiting the sick and the halt, and doing real good, for it is a pleasure to see her – a pleasure bestowed on a miserable soul who has very few pleasures left;” and with his other thin hand he patted gently the fingers of her fat hand. “Here is my brother David,” continued the baronet. “He says you will hardly know him.”

“She'll hardly believe it. She was very young when she last saw me, and the last ten years have made some changes,” said Uncle David, laughing gently.

At the baronet's allusion to that most difficult subject, the lapse of time, Lady May winced and simpered uneasily; but she expanded gratefully as David Arden disposed of it so adroitly.

“We'll not speak of years of change. I knew you instantly,” said Lady May happily. “And you have been to Vichy, Reginald. What stay do you make here?”

“None, almost; my crippled foot keeps me always on a journey. It seems a paradox, but so it is. I'm ordered to visit Buxton for a week or so, and then I go, for change of air, to Yorkshire.”

As Alice entered, she saw the pretty face, the original of the brilliant portrait which had haunted her on her night journey to Twyford, and she heard a very silvery voice chatting gaily. Mr. Longcluse was leaning on the end of the sofa on which Grace Maubray sat; and Vivian Darnley, it seemed in high spirits, was standing and laughing nearly before her. Alice Arden walked quickly over to welcome her handsome guest. With a misgiving and a strange pain at her heart, she saw how much more beautiful this young lady had grown. Smiling radiantly, with her hand extended, she greeted and kissed her fair kinswoman; and, after a few words, sat down for a little beside her; and asked Mr. Longcluse how he did; and finally spoke to Vivian Darnley, and then returned to her conventional dialogue of welcome and politeness with her cousin —*how* cousin, she could not easily have explained.

The young ladies seemed so completely taken up with one another that, after a little waiting, the gentlemen fell into a desultory talk, and grew gradually nearer to the window. They were talking now of dogs and horses, and Mr. Longcluse was stealing rapidly into the good graces of the young man.

“When we come up after dinner, you must tell me who these people are,” said Grace Maubray, who did not care very much what she said. “That young man is a Mr. Vivian, ain't he?”

“No – Darnley,” whispered Alice; “Vivian is his Christian name.”

“Very romantic names; and, if he really means half he says, he is a very romantic person.” She laughed.

“What has he been saying?” Alice wondered. But, after all, it was possible to be romantic on almost any subject.

“And the other?”

“He's a Mr. Longcluse,” answered Alice.

“He's rather clever,” said the young lady, with a grave decision that amused Alice.

“Do you think so? Well, so do I; that is, I know he can interest one. He has been almost everywhere, and he tells things rather pleasantly.”

Before they could go any further, Vivian Darnley, turning from the window toward the two young ladies, said – “I've just been saying that we must try to persuade Lady May to get up that party to the Derby.”

“I can place a drag at her disposal,” said Mr. Longcluse.

“And a splendid team – I saw them,” threw in Darnley.

“There's nothing I should like so much,” said Alice. “I've never been to the Derby. What do you say, Grace? Can you manage Uncle David?”

“I'll try,” said the young lady gaily.

“We must all set upon Lady May,” said Alice. “She is so good-natured, she can't resist us.”

“Suppose we begin now?” suggested Darnley.

“Hadn't we better wait till we have her quite to ourselves? Who knows what your papa and your uncle might say?” said Grace Maubray, turning to Alice. “I vote for saying nothing to them until Lady May has settled, and then they must only submit.”

“I agree with you quite,” said Alice laughing.

“Sage advice!” said Mr. Longcluse, with a smile; “and there's time enough to choose a favourable moment. It comes off exactly ten days from this.”

“Oh, anything might be done in ten days,” said Grace. “I'm sorry it is so far away.”

“Yes, a great deal might be done in ten days; and a great deal might happen in ten days,” said Longcluse, listlessly looking down at the floor – “a great deal might happen.”

He thought he saw Miss Arden's eye turned upon him, curiously and quickly, as he uttered this common-place speech, which was yet a little odd.

“In this busy world, Miss Arden, there is no such thing as quiet, and no one acts without imposing on other people the necessity for action,” said Mr. Longcluse; “and I believe that often the greatest changes in life are the least anticipated by those who seem to bring them about spontaneously.”

At this moment, dinner being announced, the little party transferred itself to the dining-room, and Miss Arden found herself between Mr. Longcluse and Uncle David.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PARTY IN THE DINING-ROOM

And now, all being seated, began the talk and business of dinner.

“I believe,” said Mr. Longcluse, with a laugh, “I am growing metaphysical.”

“Well, shall I confess, Mr. Longcluse, you do sometimes say things that are, I fear, a little too wise for my poor comprehension?”

“I don't express them; it is my fault,” he answered, in a very low tone. “You have *mind*, Miss Arden, for anything. There is no one it is so delightful to converse with, owing in part to that very faculty – I mean quick apprehension. But I know my own defects. I know how imperfectly I often express myself. By-the-way, you seemed to wish to have that curious little wild Bohemian air I sang the other night, ‘The Wanderer's Bride’ – the song about the white lily, you know. I ventured to get a friend, who really is a very good musician, to make a setting of it, which I so very much hope you will like. I brought it with me. You will think me very presumptuous, but I hoped so much you might be tempted to try it.”

When Mr. Longcluse spoke to Alice, it was always in a tone so very deferential, that it was next to impossible that a very young girl should not be flattered by it – considering, especially, that the man was reputed clever, had seen the world, and had met with a certain success, and that by no means of a kind often obtained, or ever quite despised. There was also a directness in his eulogy which was unusual, and which spoken with a different manner would have been embarrassing, if not offensive. But in Mr. Longcluse's manner, when he spoke such phrases, there appeared a real humility, and even sadness, that the boldness of the sentiment was lost in the sincerity and dejection of the speaker, which seemed to place him on a sudden at the immeasurable distance of a melancholy worship.

“I am so much obliged!” said Alice. “I did wish so much to have it when you sang it. It may not do for my voice at all, but I longed to try it. When a song is sung so as to move one, it is sure to be looked out and learned, without any thought wasted on voice, or skill, or natural fitness. It is, I suppose, like the vanity that makes one person dress after another. Still, I do wish to sing that song, and I am so much obliged!”

From the other side her uncle said very softly – “What do you think of my ward, Grace Maubray?”

“Oughtn't I to ask, rather, what you think of her?” she laughed archly.

“Oh! I see,” he answered, with a pleasant and honest smile; “you have the gift of seeing as far as other clever people into a millstone. But, no – though perhaps I ought to thank you for giving me credit for so much romance and good taste – I don't think I shall ever introduce you to an aunt. You must guess again, if you will have a matrimonial explanation; though I don't say there is any such design. And perhaps, if there were, the best way to promote it would be to leave the intended hero and heroine very much to themselves. They are both very good-looking.”

“Who?” asked Alice, although she knew very well whom he meant.

“I mean that pretty creature over there, Grace Maubray, and Vivian Darnley,” said he quietly. She smiled, looking very much pleased and very arch.

With how Spartan a completeness women can hide the shootings and quiverings of mental pain, and of bodily pain too, when the motive is sufficient! Under this latter they are often clamorous, to be sure; but the demonstration expresses not want of patience, but the feminine yearning for compassion.

“I fancy nothing would please the young rogue Vivian better. I wish I were half so sure of her. You girls are so unaccountable, so fanciful, and – don't be angry – so uncertain.”

“Well, I suppose, as you say, we must only have patience, and leave the matter in the hands of Time, who settles most things pretty well.”

She raised her eyes, and fancied she saw Grace Maubray at the same moment withdraw hers from her face. Lady May was talking from the end of the table with Mr. Longcluse.

“Your neighbour who is talking to Lady May is a Mr. Longcluse?”

“Yes.”

“He is a City notability; but oddly, I never happened to see him till this evening. Do you think there is something curious in his appearance?”

“Yes, a little, perhaps. Don't you?”

“So odd that he makes my blood run cold,” said Uncle David, with a shrug and a little laugh. “Seriously, I mean unpleasantly odd. What is Lady May talking about? Yes – I thought so – that horrid murder at the ‘Saloon Tavern.’ For so good-natured a person, she has the most bloodthirsty tastes I know of; she's always deep in some horror.”

“My brother Dick told me that Mr. Longcluse made a speech there.”

“Yes, so I heard; and I think he said what is true enough. London is growing more and more insecure; and that certainly was a most audacious murder. People make money a little faster, that is true; but what is the good of money, if their lives are not their own? It is quite true that there are streets in London, which I remember as safe as this room, through which no one suspected of having five pounds in his pocket could now walk without a likelihood of being garotted.”

“How dreadful!” said Alice, and Uncle David laughed a little at her horror.

“It is too true, my dear. But, to pass to pleasanter subjects, when do you mean to choose among the young fellows, and present me to a new nephew?” said Uncle David.

“Do you fancy I would tell anyone if I knew?” she answered, laughing. “How is it that you men, who are always accusing us weak women of thinking of nothing else, can never get the subject of matrimony out of your heads? Now, uncle, as you and I may talk confidentially, and at our ease, I'll tell you two things. I like my present spinster life very well – I should like it better, I think, if it were in the country; but town or country, I don't think I should ever like a married life. I don't think I'm fit for command.”

“Command! I thought the prayer-book said something about obeying, on the contrary,” said Uncle David.

“You know what I mean. I'm not fit to rule a household; and I am afraid I am a little idle, and I should not like to have it to do – and so I could never do it well.”

“Nevertheless, when the right man comes, he need but beckon with his finger, and away you go, Miss Alice, and undertake it all.”

“So we are whistled away, like poodles for a walk, and that kind of thing! Well, I suppose, uncle, you are right, though I can't see that I'm quite so docile a creature. But if my poor sex is so willing to be won, I don't know how you are to excuse your solitary state, considering how very little trouble it would have taken to make some poor creature happy.”

“A very fair retort!” laughed Uncle David. And he added, in a changed tone, for a sudden recollection of his own early fortunes crossed him – “But even when the right man does come, it does not always follow, Miss Alice, that he dares make the sign; fate often interposes years, and in them death may come, and so the whole card-castle falls.”

“I've had a long talk,” he resumed, “with Richard; he has made me promises, and I hope he will be a better boy for the future. He has been getting himself into money troubles, and acquiring – I'm afraid I should say cultivating – a taste for play. I know you have heard something of this before; I told you myself. But he has made me promises, and I hope, for your sake, he'll keep them; because, you know, I and your father can't last for ever, and he ought to take care of you; and how can he do that, if he's not fit to take care of himself? But I believe there is no use in thinking too much about what is to come. One has enough to do in the present. I think poor Lady May has been disappointed,” he said, with a very cautious smile, his eye having glanced for a moment on her; “she looks a little forlorn, I think.”

“Does she? And why?”

“Well, they say she would not object to be a little more nearly related to you than she is.”

“You can't mean papa – or *yourself*!”

“Oh, dear, no!” he answered, laughing. “I mean that she misses Dick a good deal.”

“Oh, dear! uncle, you can't be serious!”

“It might be a very serious affair for her; but I don't know that he could do a wiser thing. The old quarrel is still raging, he tells me, and that he can't appear in this house.”

“It is a great pity,” said she.

“Pity! Not at all. They never could agree; and it is much better for Dick they should not – on the terms Reginald proposes, at least. I see Lady May trying to induce you to make her the sign at which ladies rise, and leave us poor fellows to shift for ourselves.”

“Ungallant old man! I really believe she is.”

And in a moment more the ladies were floating from the room, Vivian Darnley standing at the door. Somehow he could not catch Alice's eye as they passed; she was smiling an answer to some gabble of Lady May's. Grace gave him a very kind look with her fine eyes as she went by; and so the young man, who had followed them up the massive stairs with his gaze, closed the door and sat down again, before his claret glass, and his little broken cluster of grapes, and half-dozen distracted bits of candied fruit, and sighed deeply.

“That murder in the City that you were speaking of just now to Lady May is a serious business for men who walk the streets, as I do sometimes, with money in their pockets,” said David Arden, addressing Mr. Longcluse.

“So it struck me – one feels that instinctively. When I saw that poor little good-natured fellow dead, and thought how easily I might have walked in there myself, with the assassin behind me, it seemed to me simply the turn of a die that the lot had not fallen upon me,” said Longcluse.

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