

Fenn George Manville

The Sapphire Cross



George Fenn

The Sapphire Cross

«Public Domain»

Fenn G.

The Sapphire Cross / G. Fenn — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

In the Old Fen-Land	5
Under the Shadow	8
A Glance at the Substance	10
The Happy Pair	11
Too Late	14
Amidst the Pines	17
Balm	20
What Followed	22
Ada's Promise	24
Sir Murray's Gentleman	25
Husbands and Wives	28
Food for Suspicion	30
Brooding	33
Man and Maid	36
The Sapphire Cross	39
An Encounter	42
Jane's Heart	44
Beneath the Shadow	47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	49

Fenn George Manville

The Sapphire Cross

In the Old Fen-Land

“Oh, how sweet the pines smell, Marion! I declare it’s quite bliss to get down here in these wilds, with the free wind blowing the London smoke out of your back hair, and no one to criticise and make remarks. I won’t go to the sea-side any more: pier and band, and esplanade and promenade; in pink to-day and in blue to-morrow, and the next day in green; and then a bow here and a ‘de-do’ there; and ‘how’s mamma?’ and ‘nice day;’ and all the same sickening stuff over again. There! I won’t hear fault found with the Fen-land ever any more. I don’t wonder at that dear old Hereward the Wake loving it. Why, it’s beautiful! and I feel free – as free as the air itself; and could set off and run and jump and shout like a child?”

“Dangerous work, running and jumping here,” said a tall, pale girl, the speaker’s companion, as she picked her way from tuft to tuft of heath and rushes, now plucking a spray of white or creamy-pink moss, now some silky rush, and at last bending long over a cluster of forget-me-nots, peering up from the bright green water plants, like turquoise set in enamelled gold.

“What lovely forget-me-nots!” cried her blonde companion, hurrying to her side, the oozy ground bending beneath her weight, as she pressed forward. “True blue – true blue! I must have a bunch as well.”

“Poor Philip’s favourite flowers,” said the other, sadly. “I have the little dried bouquet at home now that he gave me – six years ago this spring, Ada. Forget-me-not!”

She stood, sad and thoughtful, with the flowers in her hand, the tears the while dropping slowly upon the little blue petals, that seemed like eyes peering up at her. They were standing together upon the edge of a wide stretch of uncultivated marsh, which commenced as soon as the grove of whispering pines through which they had come ceased to flourish; though here and there, just as they had been dragged forth from the boggy depths, lay, waiting for carriage, huge roots of pines, that had been growing, perhaps, two thousand years before, and now, probed for and dragged to the surface, proved to be sound – undecayed, and crystallised with the abundant turpentine, forming a fuel much sought after by the country people.

“Marion, darling,” whispered the fair girl, passing her arm round the other’s waist, and speaking in soft, deep tones – a perfect contrast to her gay accents of a few moments before – “try not to mourn now: it is hardly loyal, and it is of no avail. I too have wept for the dead, many and many a time.”

“Yes; we all weep for our passed away,” said Marion, sadly.

“Yes, true; I mourned, too, for poor Philip, Marion.”

“You, Ada?”

“Yes; why not? I feel no shame in owning that I loved him, too – warmly as ever you could, though I saw his preference and bore it in silence.”

“You, you – Ada?”

“Yes, dear, I. You think me light and frivolous, but may not that be merely on the surface? I wept long when I found that he loved and was engaged to you; but I hid my secret, for my only wish was to see him happy; and you cannot say that I ever failed in my friendship.”

“Never – never, dear,” said Marion, gazing with troubled eyes at her friend, but clinging to her the while; and then, making their way to the pine grove, they sat down amongst the soft shed needles to rest, dreamily pondering over the past, till, starting from her reverie, Ada Lee exclaimed lightly:

“There, this will not do. Poor Philip has gone to his soldier’s grave, honourably fighting for his country. May Heaven rest him! for he was a brave fellow; but life is not long enough for much

time to be spent in weeping. There, Marion, darling, rouse your self; this is not a thing of yesterday. Come! we must get back. Think of the wooing and wedding, and be as merry and light-hearted as I am. Heigho! I wish, though, that some one would marry me, and bring me to live down here in these dear old solemn marshes. How nice for me to be always close to you, wouldn't it? There's a house across there amongst the trees that would do capitally. Who lives there?"

"No one, Ada," said the other, sadly. "That is Merland Hall, where poor Philip should have dwelt."

Ada started, and again her arm was pressed round her companion's waist, when, almost in silence, they walked back to the parsonage, where Ada Lee was staying with her friend, having come down from London to fulfil the office of bridesmaid at Marion's wedding.

But on reaching her bedroom Marion threw herself in a chair, letting the botanical specimens she had been gathering fall upon the carpet beside her, as she leaned her head upon her hand, and remained silent and thoughtful.

"Oh, come – come, darling; this will never do," cried Ada. "Mrs Elstree said that I was to do all I could to cheer and enliven you, and here have I been making you worse with my ill-chosen chatter. Why, you ought to be as happy as the day is long: a fine, handsome husband, young as well as rich; a castle to live in, and he as devoted as possible. Why, I declare I'm almost in love with him myself. Look at the presents he has sent you. Why, one would think, to see that doleful face, that you did not like him!"

"But I do, Ada. I esteem and respect, and I think I love him."

"Think, indeed! why, of course you do. Didn't I see you give him a kiss last night when he asked you as he was going?"

"And I believe that I shall be very happy with him," continued Marion, not heeding her companions words; "but, just now, as I am going to take this irrevocable step, the past all seems to come back, and it almost seems as if I were going to be faithless to poor Philip; and, in spite of all I can do, my poor heart is filled with forebodings."

"Oh dear – oh dear! What a girl it is!" cried Ada. "This won't do, you know. What am I to do with you? Oh! look here! Why, here's a note on the dressing-table, and a case – a jewel-case, I'm sure! Why, it's another present from that dear Sir Murray. Why, you happy, lucky darling! There, pray read your note, and do show me what's in the case, there's a dear sweet girl."

As she spoke, she seized a note lying by a large morocco case upon the dressing-table, and eagerly placed it in her friend's hand, laying the case in her lap, at the same time stroking the hair from her forehead, and kissing her tenderly, though a shade of care and anxiety was plainly visible upon the face she strove to make appear mirthful.

Marion read the note, the colour mantling faintly in her cheek the while.

"He is most kind and affectionate," she said, sadly. "I would that he had chosen one more worthy of his love!"

"How can you talk like that?" cried Ada, reproachfully. "There, do pray chase away this horrible low-spiritedness! It is not right to Sir Murray, dear – it isn't, indeed; and I'm sure you have no cause to blame yourself. But there, my own handsome darling, I know what it is: you feel the step you are going to take, and no wonder; but try – pray try – for his sake, to be brighter. He's coming to dinner, you know; and he's a dear, nice fellow, in spite of his pride and so much of the Spanish grandee. Think, too, how happy it makes Mr and Mrs Elstree to see you so well provided for! – and without going right away. They're as proud as can be, and the dear old rector is making out that he is condescending wonderfully in letting Sir Murray have his darling. But all the time he's reckoning upon your being Lady Gernon, and so is dear aunt. But come, you have not shown me your present; and, look here, if all your specimens are not lying upon the floor! I suppose you will give up botany now you are taking to husbandry."

“The joke is old, Ada,” said Marion, smiling, and, making an effort, she rose from her chair, gathered together her flowers and mosses, and laid them on the table, before turning the handsome gilt key of the morocco case, to display, glittering in the light, a gorgeous suite of sapphires: necklet, bracelets, earrings; and a large cross, a mingling of the same gems with brilliants.

“Oh, what a lovely piece of vanity!” cried Ada, rapturously. “Oh, my darling, how proud I shall feel of my friend Lady Gernon – that is, if she does not grow too stilty for her old friend.”

“For shame, Ada!” cried Marion.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Ada. “I have my forebodings, too, and I think I may as well say good-bye for good when you start to-morrow for your tour.”

“Do you wish to make me more unhappy?” said Marion, reproachfully.

“No, of course not,” said Ada, kissing her. “But, mark my words, it will be so,” she continued, dreamily, as she clasped the jewels upon her friend’s arms and neck. “There, I declare they are quite regal, and must have cost hundreds of pounds! I love sapphires; they are so much like forget-me-nots – true blue, you know. There, how stupid I am, setting you off again! But look, darling, are they not lovely? I never saw a more beautiful suite. That cross, too – it’s magnificent! But you must take care not to lose it. The ring is slight, and it might come detached. Now, then, bathe those eyes, while I put the present away. Really I’ve a great mind to let you wear them at dinner to-night.”

Marion said nothing, and Ada slowly replaced the gems, lingering long over the cross, little thinking it was to be the bane of her cousin’s life.

Under the Shadow

Ada Lee was right: there was a good deal of the Spanish grandee in the aspect of Sir Murray Gernon, who traced back his pedigree to the old Norman days, when, as a recompense for the service of the stout knight, Sir Piers Gernon, his squire, and so many men-at-arms, William gave him the pleasant lands whereon he built his castle, overlooking many an acre of Lincolnshire fen-land – a castle that gave place, in Tudor days, to the fine, square, massive, and roomy building, which still retained the name as well as the broad moat. Sir Murray entered the rectory drawing-room, tall, swarthy, and haughty of bearing, and was chatting graciously to the parents of his intended bride, when she entered the apartment.

To a careless observer the morning's sadness had all departed, and courtly lover could not have been better satisfied with his greeting as Marion crossed the room to meet him, placing both her hands in his, and looking up in his proud face as much as to say, "I am soon to be yours – be gentle with me."

Sir Murray took the hands with quite a protective air, smiling down upon the face, which he saluted with a lordly kiss upon the white forehead; and then, apparently well satisfied with the lady so soon to grace his table, he led her to a chair beside Ada, and in a somewhat cumbersome fashion began to chat about the morning's proceedings.

"Studying dress I presume we should have been?" said Ada. "But we were away by the edge of the marsh, botanising, for half the day. Poor Marion has been taking a farewell of her favourite pursuit," she added, laughingly.

"I don't see that at all," said Sir Murray. "I admire natural history, and shall hope that Lady Gernon will prove a kind and patient instructress."

"I think it was reserved for us at our return to find our brightest specimens, though," said Marion, turning her large, dreamy eyes upon the baronet. "I have to thank you for your present, Murray."

"Oh, don't talk about it – wear it," was the response. "They are the old family jewels reset. I thought you would like them better modernised."

The dinner passed off quietly. Sir Murray Gernon, who prided himself upon his birth, lineage, and wealth, taking matters in a courtly manner, considering that it would be unbecoming, even upon the evening preceding his marriage, to forget his dignity. Hence there was a something that seemed almost verging upon coldness in his farewell that night, even when he whispered the words, "Till to-morrow, dearest." There was no apparent ardour, although he was, certainly, contented and proud; and he rode home that night at a very respectable hour, telling himself that he was one of the happiest men in the kingdom.

When Marion was once more alone with her cousin, the emotion, crushed down, hidden beneath a mask of cheerfulness, asserted itself in a way that alarmed even herself: sobs and hysterical cries seeming to tear themselves from her breast, to be succeeded, though, at last by a calm, as, evidently by a great effort, she overcame the weakness to which she had given way.

"Don't be angry, Ada!" cried the agitated girl, as she clung to her friend. "I am very – very weak, I know; but to-morrow I must be strong, and put weakness aside. To-night, I feel that if I did not give way, my agony would be greater than I could bear. I cannot dissimulate!" she exclaimed, passionately. "I do not love this man as I should; he is cold and haughty, and does not try to make me love him. I have tried – tried hard, for they have set their mind upon it, and what can I do? But the old, old love will come back, and I seem to see poor Philip beckoning to me from the other side of the great black gulf, calling me, as it were, to him; and to go on with this – to keep faith to-morrow, is like being false, when I recall all my vows made before he went away."

“But, Marion, darling,” exclaimed Ada, “does not death solve all those ties? Come, dear, be tranquil, and do not give way to all this weakness. You do not do Sir Murray justice: he is proud and haughty; but look at the pride he has in you. There!” she cried, “I shall be glad when to-morrow is here, and the wooing ended by the wedding. I will not say, fight back all these sad memories, because I know you have tried; but pray, pray think of duty, of what you owe to your betrothed, as well as to your parents. Come, to bed – to bed, or I shall be blamed for the sad, pale face that will be under the orange blossoms to-morrow.”

“Do you think the dead have power to influence us, Ada?” said Marion, who had sat with her hair pressed back from her temples, and had not apparently heard a word her cousin had said.

“The dead! – influence!” said Ada, looking almost with fear in her companion’s face.

“Yes, influence us; for it seems as if Philip were ever present with me, drawing me, as it were, to him, and reproaching me for my want of faith. Shall I always feel this? – always be haunted by his spirit, unseen but by myself? Ada, do you believe in foresight – in a knowledge of what is to be?”

“No, certainly not, you foolish, childish creature!” exclaimed Ada, making an effort to overcome the strange thrill of dread her cousin’s words engendered. “How can you be so weak? It’s cruel of you – unjust.”

“I shall not live long, Ada. I feel it – I am sure of it. If there is such a thing as a broken heart, mine is that heart. But I will do my duty to all, hard as it may be. And now, kiss me, dear, and go to your own room; for I am going to pray for strength to carry me through the trial, and that Heaven will make me to my husband a good and earnest wife.”

What could she say? – how whisper peace to this troubled breast? Ada Lee felt that peace must come from another source, and, kissing tenderly the cold pale cheek, she went softly, tearfully to her own room.

A Glance at the Substance

The moon shone brightly through the window of Ada Lee's bedroom as she seated herself thoughtfully by her dressing-table. She had extinguished her light, and, attracted by the soft sea of silvery mist spread before her sight over the marsh, she gazed dreamily out, watching the play of the moonbeams upon the wreathing vapour, now musing upon the past, now upon the present, and at last letting her eyes fall upon the green lawn beneath the window – one of about half-a-dozen, looking out upon that side of the old ivy-covered rectory. The trees cast dark, massive-looking shadows here and there, while patches of the grass, and now and then a flower-bed stood out, bathed in the soft light.

How long she sat there musing she could not tell, but her reverie was rudely broken by the sight of a dark figure coming forth from amidst the shrubs upon her left, to stand for a moment gazing up at the house.

Her heart beat violently, and a strange swimming sensation made blurred and indistinct the moonlit scene; but when, approaching more nearly to the window-pane, she gazed anxiously out, the dark figure had disappeared; there was nothing visible but the shadows cast by tree and shrub, and, hastily casting aside her fears, she smiled, telling herself that it was but fancy.

What could any one want there at that time of the night? Burglars? Absurd, they would not openly show themselves while there were lights about the house, and even then it was not likely that they would cross the lawn. If not a creation of her brain, it was most probably one of Sir Murray Gernon's keepers out upon his rounds, and taking a short cut to some copse or preserve.

But for all that, Ada Lee sat long watching from her window. The painful beating of her heart was still there, and a cloud of fancies kept flitting through her brain. Strange, wild fancies they were, such as she could not have explained; but, in spite of her efforts, troublous enough to make the tears flow silently from her eyes as she recalled, she knew not why, the heart-aches of the past, and the battle she had had with self to hide from every eye the suffering she had endured.

Again and again, as she rose from her seat by the window and paced up and down the room, she tried to drive away these troubled thoughts, but they were too strong for her, and at last, raging against her weakness the while, she burst into a passionate flood of tears – passionate as any shed by her friend that night, as she threw herself, sobbing, by the bedside.

"There! now I hope you'll be better!" she exclaimed, apostrophising herself in a half-sad, half-bantering spirit. "What we poor weak women would do without a good cry now and then, I'm sure I don't know. Well, it's better to have it now than to break down to-morrow at the altar. But a nice body I am to be preaching to poor little Marion about being weak and childish, for there really is a something at these times that is too much for our poor little weak spirits. I wonder whether men are nervous, or whether they feel it at all!"

Ada Lee's words were light, and she knew that she was trying to deceive herself as she lay down to rest with a smile upon her lip; but when, towards dawn, sleep did come, it was to oppress her with wild and confused dreams, from one of which she awoke, trembling as if from some great horror, but trying vainly to recall the vision. It was of trouble and danger, but she knew no more; and it was with sleep effectually banished from her pillow that she lay at last, waiting for the coming of that eventful day.

The Happy Pair

People came from miles round to see that wedding, for the morning was bright and genial, and there were to be grand doings up at the castle as soon as the happy pair had taken their departure. It was not often that a wedding took place at Merland church, and this was to be no ordinary affair. Hours before the time appointed the people from the village and outlying farms began to assemble. The school children, flower-laden and excited, had rehearsed their part of throwing flowers in the bride's path, and had picked them up again; the ringers were having a preliminary "qu-a-a-art" of the very bad ale sold at the village inn preparatory to looking over the ropes of the three bells, all that Merland tower could boast. Sir Murray Gernon's tenants, and the farmers' daughters, were in an acute state of excitement, and dresses that had been in preparation for days past were being carefully fitted on.

"There could not have been a brighter and happier morning for you, my darling," exclaimed Marion's mother, as she kissed her affectionately, holding her with the clinging fondness of one about to lose a household treasure; proud of the position her child was to take, but, now that it had come to the time, tearful and hard pressed to hide her pain.

"And no bride ever looked better, aunt, I'm sure," said Ada Lee, merrily, as she adjusted a fold here, and arranged some scrap of lace there.

"She'd have had to look strange and fine, if she did, mum, that she would!" exclaimed Jane, handmaiden in ordinary at the rectory, but now to be promoted to the honourable post of maid to Lady Gernon. Jane had first entered the room very red of cheek, due to a salute placed thereon by Mr Gurdon, Sir Murray's gentleman, who had but a few moments before arrived with the bouquet Jane bore in her hand, and a note. But note and flowers, and even the impudence of "that Gurdon," were forgotten in Jane's genuine admiration, as, catching Ada's words, she had delivered her own opinion.

Till now, though pale, Marion's face had been bright and animated as that of her cousin, and to have seen the two girls, no one would have imagined that they had each passed a troubled and almost sleepless night. The forebodings of the past seemed to have been dismissed, and Ada, seeing how bright and happy her cousin appeared, forbore even to hint at last night's tears.

But now came a message from the anxious rector, respecting time, and the last touches were given to the bridal apparel; when, turning round, after hastily adjusting her own veil, Ada exclaimed: "Oh, Marion! Is that wise?"

"Oh, Miss!" exclaimed Jane. "Not wear that beautiful bookey, as Sir Murray sent?"

Marion made no answer, but quietly arranged the bunch of forget-me-nots, culled the previous day in the fen, and utterly regardless of her cousin's words, pinned them on her breast, with a sad smile. Then, turning to Ada, she said, gaily: "You must have that bouquet, Ada."

"But there's ever so many more downstairs, miss, on purpose for the bridesmaids," said Jane, excitedly. And then she raised her hands, as if mutely exclaiming, "What obstinacy!" as she saw Ada take the bouquet and hold it, gazing curiously at Marion's pale, sweet face, and then glancing at the little blue flowers upon her breast.

Marion interpreted her looks, and leaning forward, kissed her tenderly.

"Don't grudge me that little satisfaction, dear," she said. "You see how I am this morning. Are you not satisfied with the way in which I have taken your advice to heart?"

"Oh, yes – yes, dear," exclaimed Ada, clinging to her; "but was this wise?" And she pointed with Sir Murray's bouquet to the simple marsh flowers.

"Wise!" said Marion, "perhaps not; but I placed them there *in memoriam*. Should we forget the dead?"

"There, do pray, for goodness gracious' sake, Miss, mind what you're a doing! You're cramming Miss Marion's veil all to nothing, and I know you'll be sorry for it after."

“Jane’s right,” said Ada, merrily. “I won’t ‘cram’ you any more. Come, dear, there’s uncle going out of his wits because we’re so long. He won’t be happy till the knot is tied. I know he’s afraid that Sir Murray will repent at the eleventh hour, aren’t you, uncle?” she continued, as, on opening the door, she found the anxious father on the landing.

“Come, my dears – come, my dears!” he cried; and then, “Heaven bless you, my darling!”

“Ah – ah! mustn’t touch! Oh, sir, please don’t!” exclaimed Ada and Jane in a breath; for the father was about to clasp his child to his breast.

“There! Bless my soul, I forgot!” exclaimed the rector; and, handing Marion down, in a few minutes more the party were walking across the lawn to the gate in the great hedge, which opened upon the churchyard, where they were saluted by a volley of cheers – heartiest of the hearty; cheers such as had saluted Sir Murray Gernon and his friends, when, a quarter of an hour before, his barouche and four had come along the road, dashed up to the gate, and, proud and elate, the bridegroom had strode into the church, hit, in the process, on the hat, back, and breast with cowslips, hurled at him by the over-excited school children. They could not be restrained till the proper time by their equally excited mistress, who, like the rest of the feminine community present, was ready to fall down and worship the proud handsome man who had just passed into the church.

The cheering ceased, as the rectory party were seen to cross over to the chancel door, and the people crowded into the building. There had not been such a congregation – “no, not since Sir Murray’s father and mother – Heaven rest ’em! – were married in that very church,” said the oldest inhabitant, who wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his smock-frock as he recalled the day.

“And how drunk you did get that day, up ta castle, Joey!” said a crony.

“Well, yes, lad, I did – I did,” said the oldest inhabitant. “But, then, castle ale is stark drink, lad, and old Barnes Thorndike used to brew good stuff.”

“Nought like what they have there now, lad,” said the other old lad, both speakers being over eighty; and comfortably seated as they were upon a tombstone, patiently waiting the conclusion of the ceremony, with one exception, they were now the only occupants of the churchyard.

“Well, I don’t know, lad; but we’ll try it, by and by – by and by. We’ll get a lift up ta castle, some gate or other, and see how things are, for such days as this don’t come often.”

“Nay, not often,” said the other. “But it’s open house up there to-day, and there’s to be fine doings after the squire’s gone with his lady.”

“Where are they going, lad?”

“Oh, furren parts, sure; so my boy Jack tells me.”

“And he’s agoin’ too – ain’t he?”

“Ay, lad. He’s Sir Murray’s head man now, and he’s to be butler when they come back; and butlers keep keys, and there’ll be a rare taste or two – eh?”

“Ay; and my Fan’s gal, Jenny, she’s going, you know – my grandchild as has been at parson’s. She’s going with her young missus; and strikes me, neighbour, as young Jack Gurdon’s thinking about her a good deal. Jane’s mother twitted her with it, and the gal laughed; and there might be more strange things come to pass than for they two to come to be butler and housekeeper up ta old place.”

The old men chuckled and blinked at one another upon the tombstone, for a few minutes, and then one spoke:

“Ain’t they a long time getting of it done?”

“Two parsons, lad,” said the other. “Takes two to do these grand weddings. But they’ll be a-coming out directly, for here’s Miss Minson putting the bairns straight with the flowers. But who’s yon?”

The first old man shaded his eyes with his hands, as a tall figure, in a brown travelling suit, crossed the churchyard hastily from the rectory garden-gate, hurried up to the chancel door, peered in, and then, as if struck a violent blow, he reeled back against a tombstone, to which he clung for a few moments, till, recovering himself, he made his way in a blind, groping fashion, towards the

south door, close to whose porch sat the two old men. There was a fair gravel-path, but he saw it not; but walked straight forward, stumbling over the mounds of the dead in his way, and feeling with outstretched hands the tombs – passing himself along, till, clear of the obstacles, he again pressed on to the great railed vault of the Gernon family, hard by the porch, where, holding by one hand to the iron rails, he tore off his broad soft felt hat, and stood gazing into the church.

The school children, flower-basket in hand, shrank back; for there was something startling in the strangers appearance. For though quietly and gentlemanly dressed, his face was wild – his eyes staring. At first sight a looker-on would have raised his eyebrows, and muttered, “Drunk!” But a second glance would have shown that the owner of that bronzed face, handsome once, but now disfigured by the great scar of a sabre-slash passing obliquely from temple to jaw, was suffering from some great emotion, one which made his breast to heave, as his teeth grated together, one hand tearing the while at his handkerchief, as though he wanted air.

A few seconds, though, and the stranger grew apparently calm, as the people began to flock out, and the children excitedly grasped handfuls of flowers; while, though the newcomer took a step forward, so as to be in front of the double line of children, through which the bridal procession was to pass, he was unnoticed; for now the cry rose of “Here they come!” and the three bells struck up their sonorous chime – sweet, though wanting in proper cadence; for the old bells dated from days when the monks blessed, and threw in their silver offering to the molten metal.

“Now, lads! hooray!” piped one of the old fellows, climbing, by his companion’s aid, to the tombstone, where he stood, bent of back, feebly waving his stick. “Hooray! and long life to Sir Murray and his lady!”

“Hooray!” cheered the crowd, in broken but hearty volleys. Handkerchiefs were waved, flowers thrown, the buzz of excitement was at its height when the proud bridegroom strode forward with his blushing bride, bright, almost radiant in her white drapery, as, slightly flushed, she smiled and bowed in acknowledgment of the greetings of the little ones whom she had often taught, now casting their simple flowery offerings at her feet; or with gentle glance thanked some old villager for the blessing invoked upon her head. Progress was made but slowly: they had advanced but a couple of yards from the porch, and Sir Murray, hat in hand, was intending to wave it in response to the greeting he was receiving, when he felt his wife’s arm snatched from his, and turned to see her with her hands clasped together and raised to the height of her face; the smile gone; a deadly stony pallor overspreading her features; her eyes starting, lips apart – it was as though death had smitten her in an instant; for with one stride the stranger had confronted her, his hand was upon her breast, and he had torn away the bunch of forget-me-nots, to dash them upon the ground, and crush them beneath his heel.

There was no word spoken: the language was of the eye; and the crowd around, who could see the incident, seemed paralysed, as was the bridegroom; but at that instant a wild and piercing shriek rang out from the porch, and there was a sharp movement in the group.

But that cry was not from Lady Gernon, who stood as if turned to stone; for as Sir Murray, recovering himself, had, pale with rage and mortification, exclaimed, “How dare you!” Ada Lee had sprung forward, and almost thrown herself upon the stranger’s breast, pressing him back from her cousin, as she glided between them.

It was but in time; for, mad with rage and hatred, roused by his words, the newcomer had half-turned now to Sir Murray; but Ada clung to him tightly, her bridesmaids veil torn, her flowers crushed, but a bright wild look of joy and eagerness in her countenance, as she exclaimed —

“Back, Philip! Are you mad?”

Too Late

“Now just you put that back where you took it from, Mr Impudence, or I’ll tell your master.”

“There you are, then, my dear; that’s as near the spot as I can recollect,” said the person addressed, giving Jane Barker a hearty smack on her rosy cheek, such a liberty being a little excusable on a wedding-day.

“Take your arm from round me, then; you can tell me without that, I’m sure,” said Jane, shrinking back into the rectory kitchen.

“No, I can’t; and how do I know but what perhaps, after I’ve been loving you with all my might, and saving up so as we may be married, there mayn’t come a foreign lover, a currier, or something of that sort, and cut me out?”

“Don’t be a fool, John!” exclaimed Jane, “and do adone there. I do declare – and serve you right, too! Such impudence!”

There was the sound of a smart slap received upon his cheek by John Gurdon, from the sole of one of the Rector’s very broad old slippers, a weapon held in Jane’s hand at the moment; and now she stood arranging her ruffled plumes, and gazing very defiantly at the red-cheeked gentleman before her.

“Well, that’s pretty, certainly,” he said, half in anger. “What are you doing with that shoe?”

“It’s to slap the other side of your face with, if you’re saucy,” cried Jane, “now then; and if you’re not, it’s to give to cook to throw after the carriage when we go, for luck, you know; and it’s bad enough we need it, I’m sure, for I never saw such a set-out. There’s young missus looking that stony and dreadful and never speaking, it quite frightens me. I wouldn’t care if she would only cry; but she won’t. But do tell me.”

“Well, you won’t let me,” said John Gurdon. “I didn’t see it all; but them two nearly come to a fight, when Miss Lee jumped forward and held Mr Norton, and master carried her ladyship – you mustn’t say ‘young missus’ now – on to the Rectory. Regular row and confusion, you know. I do wish they’d be off. All the company’s gone; and there’s that beautiful breakfast going a-begging, and all because two people want the same woman. Just as if there weren’t plenty of women in the world ready to jump at a husband! I never see such fools!”

“Didn’t you, Mr Greatgrand?” exclaimed Jane, firing up. “You’re a nasty, unfeeling good-for-nothing – there! You’re worse than that Mr Norton himself, shamming dead all these years on purpose to come back and break that poor dear angel’s heart. There, it’s no use; I hate you! that I do; and if I’m to sit in that rumble with you, hour after hour, I shall be ill, that I shall, so now. Keep your hands to yourself, for I have done with you quite. There, go and answer that bell.”

Jane flounced out of the kitchen, and John Gurdon, who was at the Rectory, to help wait at the wedding-breakfast, hurried into the hall, for there had come the loud ringing of a bell, succeeded by a clamour of voices.

“I tell you I will see her!” exclaimed Philip Norton, angrily, as he stood in the hall, with Ada clinging to his arm.

“Come in here, pray! – for Heaven’s sake, come in here, Norton,” cried the Rector, opening the drawing-room door. “This is not seemly – we are all grieved; but do not insult my child.”

“Insult, old man!” exclaimed Norton angrily, as he followed him into the room; and then he uttered a cry of rage, for, unwittingly, the Rector had asked him into the very room where, angry and mortified, his newly-wedded wife up-stairs with her mother, Sir Murray Gernon was striding up and down.

In a moment the young men had each other by the throat, and stood glaring into each other’s eyes, heedless that Ada and the Rector clung to first one and then the other, in a vain attempt to separate them.

“Murray! for my child’s sake!” exclaimed the Rector.

“Philip! oh, for Heaven’s sake, stop this madness!” whispered Ada.

Sir Murray Gernon cooled down in an instant, though still retaining his grasp.

“I am quite calm, Mr Elstree,” he said; “but this man must leave the house at once.”

“Calm!” shouted Philip Norton, mad almost with rage. “Thief! robber! you have stolen her from me. She is mine – my wife – sworn to be mine; and you, amongst you, have made her false to her vows.”

“Mr Norton,” said Sir Murray, “are you a gentleman?”

“How dare you – you dog – ask me that?”

“Leave this house, then; and I will meet you at any future time, should you, in your cooler moments, wish it. I did intend to leave for the Continent this afternoon; but I will stay. I pity you – upon my soul, I do – but you must know that no one is to blame. You are, or ought to be, aware that the *Gazette* published your death nearly four years ago, and that you have been truly mourned for. No one has been faithless, but your memory has been respected as well as cherished. You have come in a strange and mad way; but we are ready to overlook all that, as due to the excitement and bitterness of your feelings. I now ask you, as a gentleman, for the sake of her parents, for your own sake – for the sake of *my wife* – to leave here quietly, and to try to look calmly upon the present state of affairs. I have done.”

As Sir Murray ceased speaking he suffered his hand to fall from Norton’s throat, and stood calmly facing him, gazing into the other’s fierce, wild eyes unblenched, while, as if the calm words of reason had forced themselves to his heart, he, too, allowed his hands to fall, and as the fierce rage seemed to fade out of his countenance, a strange shiver passed through his frame, and he looked in a pitiful, pleading way from face to face, as if seeking comfort, before speaking, in a cracked, hollow voice:

“Too late! – too late! But no, not yet! You,” he exclaimed, turning to Sir Murray, “you will be generous. You will waive this claim. See here!” he cried excitedly, as with outstretched hands he pleaded to the husband: “I was cut down, as you know, in hard fight, and I woke to find myself a prisoner amongst the hill tribes; and ever since, for what has seemed a life-time, I have been held a slave, a captive – beaten, starved, ill-used in every conceivable way; but look here!” he cried, tearing from his breast a little leather purse, and opening it. “See here!” he cried, taking out a few dry flower-stalks: “her flowers, given me when, young and ardent, we plighted troth – forget-me-nots; true blue – and we swore to live one for the other. Man! man! those few withered blossoms have been life to me when, cut and bruised, I could have gladly lain down beneath the hot Indian sun and gasped out my last breath. I believe my captors tried to kill me with ill-usage; but I said I would not die – I would live to look once more upon her face, even though it were to breathe my last at her feet. And now – now, after hardships that would make your blood run cold, I escape, and reach home, what do I find? Her, worse than dead – worse than dead! But no! it cannot be so. You, sir – I ask you humbly – I ask you as a suppliant – forgive my mad words, and tell me that you waive your claim. You will be generous towards us; the law will do the rest. You, sir,” he cried, turning to the Rector, “plead with me. I am no beggar. I come back to find myself rich. Help me, for poor Marion’s sake! Do not condemn her to a life that must be only such a captivity as mine! Am I right? You will both be generous, and this horrid dream of despair is at an end!”

He advanced a step nearer to Sir Murray; but the latter turned from him.

“Speak to him, sir,” he said to the Rector. “It will be better that I should go.”

Sir Murray’s head was bent as he left the room, not daring to trust himself to gaze again upon the wild, appealing face turned towards him; while, as the door closed, Philip Norton turned to the Rector, who, poor man, stood wringing his hands, hardly knowing what to do or say. But the next moment, with a groan of despair, Philip Norton let his head drop upon his breast, for he read his sentence in the old man’s eyes. But again, with an effort, he roused himself, and caught Ada’s hands

in his, sending a wild thrill through the poor girl's frame, as she averted her head, and listened, with beating heart, to his words.

"You turn from me too," he said, bitterly; and he did not retract his words, though Ada started as if stung, and met his gaze, her face breathing, in every lineament, love and sympathy, though he could not read it then. "You know, young as you were then, how I loved her. Plead for me. Ask her to come to me, if but for a minute. But, no – no – no!" he cried, despairingly, "it is too late! I thought to have gained heaven, and the door is shut in my face. Too late – too late!" and then, with the same hopeless, groping, half-blind look in his countenance, he reeled towards the door, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, but, mad with grief, striving blindly to leave the house, his hopes crushed, his life seeming blotted out by the blackness of despair. He passed into the hall, and there stood for a minute; but only to mutter to himself: "Weak – weak – broken – too late!"

There was no one in the hall, and he passed out on to the lawn, making his way towards the little wicket-gate which led into the churchyard, and, passing through, he stumbled over grave after grave, till unseen, with a deep groan, he fell heavily, to lie, with his face buried in his hands, weeping like a child, the strength of his nature crushed out of him by the terrible blow he had received, and for hours after he heard, felt, saw, nothing external.

Meanwhile, struggling hard with herself, Ada Lee had watched Philip as he staggered from the room, the tears welling down her cheeks, and a strange, wild feeling mingled with the compassion she felt for his sufferings. It was only by a violent effort that she restrained herself from running to his side, as she saw his blind, hopeless exit; but, as she heard the door close, the place seemed to swim round, and then, overcome by the excitement of the past hour, she threw out her hands and would have fallen, had not her uncle caught her in his arms.

Two hours later, cold, pale, and without a word in reply to her parents' farewell, Marion, Lady Gernon, took her place in her husband's carriage.

"It is still your wish, then?" said Sir Murray to the Rector, as he stood upon the doorstep.

"Yes, yes! – for Heaven's sake, yes! Go, by all means."

"Give him that note, then, should he make inquiry?" said Sir Murray. "I have your word for that?"

"Yes – yes; indeed you have," said the Rector; "but I have known Philip Norton from a boy. He was my pupil; and when calm, I have no doubt I shall have some influence with him. That and time will do the rest. Heaven bless you! be gentle with her. Marion, my child, good-bye!"

The wheels grated loudly over the gravel; but the heart-broken man, lying prone in the churchyard, heard them not; and five minutes after, when the old Rector had seen the carriage disappear at a turn of the road, he turned to encounter the agitated countenance of Ada Lee.

Amidst the Pines

“Going out, my child?” said the Rector. “Where is your aunt?”

“Gone to lie down,” said Ada; “she feels this excitement.”

“No wonder – no wonder,” said the old gentleman. “Pray Heaven that it may turn out happily!”

The Rector’s prayer was echoed by Ada Lee, as she passed out into the garden and stood thinking for a few minutes upon the lawn. Where should she go? she asked herself, for her mind was strangely agitated, and it seemed to her that to be at rest she must go right away from human habitation, and seek for calm in solitude. The events of the past four-and-twenty hours had been too much for her, she said, and a long quiet walk would restore her.

But, even to herself, Ada Lee could not confess all. She knew that her heart seemed at times to beat wildly, and that though she crushed down such thoughts with all her might, a strange feeling of elation would strive to assert itself; and even while upbraiding herself for her cruelty, she felt that she did not grieve as she should for the sufferings of her friends. She could stay no longer in the house, though she felt that her place should have been at her aunt’s side; and now, hastily crossing the garden, her heart again commenced its tumultuous beating, as she passed over the very spot where she had seen the dark figure the night before – a figure which, she now felt convinced, must have been that of Philip Norton, who had come over from the town too late to see any of the family, while on his arrival at the Rectory that morning he had learned the news which had sent him, reeling, to the church.

If Ada Lee’s intention had been to escape her thoughts by rapid walking, she soon found that her efforts were useless. She sought the wild open moorland where she had walked the previous day with her cousin; but every step seemed to recall some portion of their conversation. Philip Norton’s name was constantly repeating itself in her ears, even out there in the free open waste where she had told herself that she could find peace. She hurried into the pine grove, walking amidst the tall, sombre pillars of the great natural temple, whose darkly interlacing roof was far above, and where her footsteps were silent amidst the pine needles. There was the tree upon which they had rested when they had talked of the past; and had she not there avowed her own love?

It was cruel – most cruel, she told herself, to feel as she did when two hearts were breaking; growing every moment more agitated in her vain efforts to flee, as it were, from self. She had wished for solitude, but the silence of the wood, only broken now and again by the faint whispering roar amidst the pine tops, frightened her. There was a dread solemnity in the place that she could not bear, and hurrying once more to the edge of the marsh, she stopped, gazing across it for a few minutes, with the soft summer wind playing pleasantly upon her heated cheeks, toying with her hair, and fluttering the light dress which draped her form. For the wedding-garments had been hurriedly put aside, and at times it almost seemed that the sorrows of the morning, her troubled night, and gloomy forebodings were things of months ago, while this hurried beating, this anxiety of mind, were things only of the present.

She turned to hurry in another direction, hoping that by thoroughly tiring herself sleep would come to her early, bringing with it calm, when her eyes fell to the ground, but only to fill with tears, as once more the morning scene rushed through her mind; for, with her feet each crushing some of the simple blue flowers, she was standing in the midst of the forget-me-nots, and, recalling Philip Norton’s words, in spite of herself, she knelt down to gather a bunch.

True blue! the flowers that had seemed to give him life in those sore perils; the little bunch that he had so treasured – and for what? To come back to find her wedded to another. But then, had not she herself counselled that Norton should be forgotten, since they believed him dead?

Ada Lee bent over the flowers she had gathered, weeping bitterly – foolish, vain tears, she said; and then, hastily rising, she walked towards the Rectory.

On reaching the village it seemed as if deserted, for, in spite of the damp thrown upon the morning's proceedings, there was high revelling at the Castle. People could not see why the sorrows of one man should interfere with their pleasure: the Squire was married, the feast had been prepared; and, under the management of a relative of Sir Murray, the happy pair were toasted, and the morning's scene was about forgotten.

Ada reached the churchyard, where the flowers scattered by the children lay withering in the hot sun. The blood rushed to her cheeks as she recalled the scene in its every detail; and then, as if anxious to avoid the place which brought back so much, she turned off to reach the Rectory gate, when, right in her path, rising from amidst the graves, she saw Philip Norton.

More than once the question had arisen, where had he gone? A question that she had tried to avoid, merely hoping that there might be no further encounter between him and Sir Murray Gernon. But now, so unexpected was the vision before her, that she stopped short, trembling violently, and she would have turned and fled, she knew not why, had not her limbs refused their office.

But it soon became evident that he saw her not, for groping along from amidst the graves, he reached the path, and making his way out into the road, turned in the direction from which she had so lately come.

Ada stood for a few minutes, too agitated to form a coherent plan; but soon her thoughts began to shape themselves, and it seemed to her that it was not right for Philip Norton to be left at such a time. Judging from his acts, he did not seem to be master of himself; and a shudder passed through her frame, galvanising her, as it were, into action, as she thought of what men had done when under the pressure of some great trouble. Sorrowful and despairing, of what rashness might not Philip Norton be guilty? She shuddered as she evaded the question, and hurrying into the Rectory, she sought, with a sensation as of a hand grasping her heart, for her uncle.

He had gone up to the Castle half an hour ago, when a message had come for him, she was told by one of the servants, while Mrs Elstree was still in her bedroom.

Ada hurried out into the village, seeking for help there, but not a soul was visible; the public-house even was closed; and of the only person she could find, a bedridden old crone, she learned that no one was left.

"Only me, miss – only me. They wanted to carry me up too, but I wouldn't let 'em."

Ada was in despair. Judging from his state of mind, Philip Norton could have taken the direction of the marsh for no good purpose; he was not likely to have gone there at such a time merely for the sake of the walk, and the road soon became lost in dangerous, impassable quagmires, pits, and treacherous morasses, thoroughly known only to the seekers for pine roots and the diggers of peat. In the wild, half-mad condition in which he then was, it would be suicidal to take such a course; and feeling this, Ada's heart sank as she thought of the dangers that would beset a man, reeling blindly about amidst tuft and moss, rush-bed, and black peaty hole full of amber water, whose depths were unknown, save as being the home of huge, slimy, serpent-like eels.

What should she do? – run up to the Castle for aid? It would take her a quarter of an hour to get there, as long to return with help, even if she found it directly; and in half an hour what might not have happened?

"Heaven grant me strength!" exclaimed the agitated girl; and fear lending her wings, she darted along in the direction taken by Norton but a few minutes before, her heart beating wildly, and an undefined dread of something about to happen increasing in strength each moment.

The road wound about past the outlying cottages, so that it was some time before she caught sight of Norton. Once she fancied that he must have struck off to the right or left, or else she must before this have overtaken him; but at the end of another hundred yards she could plainly see him, a good half mile in advance, not reeling and staggering along now, but walking swiftly, straight forward towards the marsh, when, trembling with dread, Ada hurried on, following rapidly upon his track,

pausing not to think of imprudence, but led ever by the feeling that she might be able to avert some terrible impending danger.

Where could he be going? What was his aim? Ada paused and shuddered as she saw him suddenly stop by one of the black water-pits, the spots favoured by the shooting fraternity in winter, as the resort of wild goose, poachard, and divers of rapid flight. Her breath came more easily, though, as she saw that her horrible dread was without foundation, for Norton struck off to the left at a headlong rate, over heath and rush tuft, apparently making for the wildest part of the marsh, so that Ada's powers of endurance were hardly tried as she struggled on, her spirit rising with the difficulties she had to encounter.

But now, as if moved by a fresh impulse, Norton changed his course in a way that enabled Ada to gain ground, for he paid not the slightest heed to his pursuer, making now for the great pine grove, starting off into a run as if to reach the goal he had in view, but falling heavily, twice over, upon the soft, trembling soil, which yielded more or less to every step.

Panting and almost exhausted, Ada pressed on till she saw Norton reach the edge of the pine wood, when, as he dashed in, he coming in an instant lost to sight amidst the tall, bare trunks, her heart for a few moments failed her, and sinking upon her knees, with a faint wail of misery, the hot tears coursed one another down her cheeks. But the next minute she was up again, and hurrying to the edge of the wood, whose gloom cast a chill upon her as she entered its precincts.

Peering anxiously in every direction, her breath drawn in hysterical, laboured sobs, Ada pressed on farther and farther into the great dim, shadowy solitude, trembling horribly the while, and with her imagination picturing some dreadful tragedy taking place. In the vast wood she knew that it was by the merest chance that she could find him, for he had become lost to sight when he entered; while, even if she could discover him alone, mad almost, and with no help at hand, how dared she go near? Her heart whispered, though, that she must proceed, and she still panted along, her eyes ever wandering amidst the dim aisles spread out on every side, but in vain – she could not see him; and again the weak, despairing tears forced themselves from her eyes.

It was, then, useless: she had done everything possible to a human being, and all that was now left was for her to pray; and sinking, with clasped hands, to her knees, she again gave way to the despair of her heart, when a short, sharp snap on her right made her leap to her feet and run hurriedly over the slippery pine needles in the direction from which it had come. For from that sound she felt that her worst fears were realised, and that he had indeed sought this solitude for the horrible purpose she dreaded. But the pistol had missed fire, and she might yet be in time, though so dreadful was the feeling upon her that her energies felt frozen, and to her it seemed that she was barely crawling over the ground. There he stood, not fifty yards from her, fitting a cap upon the pistol he held, and then, every stroke jarring upon her heart, so distinctly in the strained state of her faculties was it heard, she could make out that he was tapping the pistol that the powder might ascend the nipple. But it was all like some horrible nightmare: she could see every act with almost a clairvoyant power – she could hear with a fearful distinctness; but she could not shriek – she could not call to him to desist. It was as though certain of her faculties were chained, while others were goaded into unnatural activity.

A few seconds longer, and she felt that she would be too late – that the dread deed would be accomplished, and she alone with a still, dreadful corpse – when, panting, half-mad with fear and the horror which gave her strength, she ran to Norton's side, grasped at his arm, and then her powers of utterance returned. As she seized his arm he turned upon her fiercely, dashed her to the ground, and raised his pistol; but in an instant Ada was again upon her feet, and grasped the fatal weapon, when there was a bright, blinding flash, a loud report, and then, for Ada Lee, the present became a blank.

Balm

It seemed as though that report awakened Philip Norton from the fit of mad despair that had prompted him to seek in oblivion the rest he could not find here – awakened him to the sense that he must be a murderer; for there, stretched at his feet, her light muslin dress already deeply stained by the blood flowing from her shoulder, lay the brave girl who had struggled to his side to suffer, almost with the loss of her own, for her successful endeavour to save his life. For some minutes, as he stood there in that dim pine arcade, Philip Norton's brain was giddy; he felt as though awakening from some horrible dream, and it was only by an effort that he could recall the present; when, throwing the pistol aside, he knelt down by the fainting girl, and by means of his handkerchief succeeded in staunching the blood flowing from a long, jagged wound torn by the bullet in its passage along her shoulder.

The sight of the wounded girl, as she lay pale and insensible at his feet, and the knowledge that it was his work, seemed to drive back the horrible thoughts of self, forcing him into action; and the next minute, trembling in every limb with anxiety for her safety, he was running to the nearest pit for water, bringing it in his soft hat, a little at a time, to sprinkle her stern marble face. Again and again he ran to and fro, growing more and more excited, but with a healthy excitement that moved his better impulses; for, forgetting his own pain, interest was excited in the deliverer whom he told himself that he had slain, to recompense her for her bravery in his behalf. But it was long before animation began to reappear, and the colour to return to Ada Lee's face. Twice, though, Norton had been encouraged to persevere in his efforts by a sigh; and he had chafed her cold hands, torn off his coat to fold and place beneath her head, seen to, and tightened the bandage so that the blood was staunched, and had at last determined to bear her back into the village at all hazards. Then her soft blue eyes slowly unclosed, as he knelt by her side, his arms gently supporting her against his breast, preparatory to rising and carrying her over the treacherous ground to the footpath.

But the sight of those soft eyes gazing into his so wonderingly, arrested him, and for a few minutes no word was spoken, till by slow degrees, realising all that had passed, Ada's eyes lost their strange wondering look, a shudder ran through her frame, and the old aspect of horror came back.

"Are you hurt?" she gasped.

"No," he said, gently; and there was pity for her in his tones.

"Not hurt?" she gasped again. "But the pistol?"

"Hush!" he said, sadly. "You must not speak. You are wounded, and I am a soldier, and have seen and known many wounds. You must be quiet until I can get you back to the village."

"But you are safe – not hurt?" she said.

"No – no!" he exclaimed, impetuously. "I – I –"

"Yes – yes, I know. I remember all," she said, eagerly. "I startled you – the pistol went off by accident – it struck me."

She smiled in his face as she spoke, while, burning with grief and shame, he cried:

"Oh, Miss Lee, Miss Lee, has it come to this? Good Heaven! am I fallen so low that I must screen myself in this way? I am a coward – a pitiful –"

"Hush – hush!" she cried, and her little hand was laid upon his lips. "I know how you suffered. I was in dread lest you should do anything rashly, and I followed; but it is our – your secret. Let it be hidden for ever. You may trust me."

Philip Norton groaned. "Hidden! How can it be hidden?" he said, as he pointed to her wounded shoulder, when, with the hot blood suffusing her face, she dragged the scarf she wore over the deep stain, and essayed to sit up, but fell back weak, and half fainting.

Laying her gently down, he again fetched water, and bathed her face, when, reviving somewhat, she lay with her eyes half closed, and lips moving gently.

"Did you speak?" he said, as he bent over her.

“No,” she said, after a few moments. “I was praying. Will you try to lift me up?”

Philip raised her a little, but she winced from the sharp pain caused by the movement, upon which he desisted; but, with a smile, she begged him to help her to her feet. A few moments’ trial, though, showed that she was utterly incapable of walking, when, taking her in his arms, Norton slowly and carefully bore her amidst the pine trees to the edge of the marsh, whence, after a brief rest, he again proceeded, bringing her over the soft, springy ground, till, during a longer rest, he said to her, in sad tones:

“I thought the age of miracles was past, but an angel was sent to stay my hand.” Then, heedless of her remonstrance, he continued: “How am I ever to repay you for the injury I have done?”

“By acting as a man should,” she said, softly; “by ceasing to be a coward. You,” she exclaimed excitedly, “a soldier – a man whom we loved – to fly from suffering like that! It was cruel to all – to Marion – to yourself! How could – ”

“For Heaven’s sake, spare me!” he groaned. “The sight of what I have done seems to have brought me back to a life of greater suffering. But you need not fear; I will bear it.”

What Followed

It was an accident – so people said at Merland, and from being a wonder for a time, it was soon forgotten; and when, pale and weak from many months of illness, Ada Lee was seen out, with the tall bronzed soldier pushing her invalid chair, or reading to her from some book, the gossips of the village used to prophesy. And yet no word of love had passed between the invalid and her companion. Ada's prolonged stay at the Rectory had resulted in Mrs Elstree wishing her to make it her home, on the grounds of her own loneliness, now that Sir Murray Gernon had, on account of his wife's health, decided to remain in Italy, where he had taken a residence on the shores of Como. While Ada, continuing weak and ill, accepted Philip's attentions with a smile of pleasure, though there was sorrow at her heart, which bled daily for the sufferings of her companion.

For time seemed to bring no healing to the wounds of Philip Norton, who, apparently disgusted with life, had sold out from the army, to settle down at his own place, Merland Hall, seeing no one, visiting nowhere save at the Rectory.

But the result was what might have been expected. Philip Norton awoke one day to the fact that there was happiness for him yet in this world, and he told himself it would be his duty to devote his life to the suffering invalid – to the blighted woman who paid penalty for his sin. And one evening, when the sun was glowing ruddily in the west, Philip Norton rested his brown hand upon the thin transparent fingers, and then, in the stillness of the evening, he asked her, in low, earnest tones, if she would take him as her protector.

"Ada," he said, calmly, "I cannot love. You know all; but I owe you my life. Will you take that life now, with such devotion as I can attach to it, such tenderness as time will enable me to weave with it? I know I am but a broken, disappointed man; but you know my weaknesses and sufferings; you can help me to get through my journey, and, perhaps, in time you may learn to love me."

Ere he had finished speaking another trembling, fluttering hand was raised, to be placed upon his strong arm, and then, leaning forward, Ada's poor thin pale lips were pressed upon his hand, as one might salute a king, and then softly whispering to herself the words, "At last! At last! Thank God!" the invalid sank back in her chair, fainting from the wild tumult of joyful feelings that, in her then weak state, seemed almost more than she could bear.

For Ada Lee was dying; not, perhaps, in the ordinary sense of the word, for she might have lived on for years; but, none the less, she was fading away. One disappointment she had fought down; but the news of Norton's death had preyed heavily upon her. Then had come his return, the shock, the adventures of the wedding-day, and, lastly, the wound. Her by no means strong constitution had given way beneath this, when, in addition, there had ever been the pang of hope deferred, and the sick heart finding no ease.

It was a strangely unimpassioned wooing, that of Philip Norton; but Ada was content; and at the end of five years, bright, happy of face, and only slightly more matronly, she came one day into her husband's study, to find him stern and thoughtful – looks which passed away as if by magic, as the sturdy little fellow she led by the hand ran to him and climbed upon his knee.

"Is there anything the matter?" exclaimed Ada anxiously, as she leaned upon her husband's shoulder.

"Matter! No, love!" said Norton, heartily – another man now, his face lighting up with pleasure as his child snatched first at pens, then at paper, everything within reach – "unless it is with this young rebel; but what made you ask?"

"Philip," she said, softly, "you keep nothing from me, dear: do not begin now."

"Well, there," he said, "I won't;" and he drew her nearer towards him. "Heaven forbid that I should from the woman to whom I owe life and happiness such as no other man could enjoy. But you see," he said, slightly hesitating, "I have been over to the Rectory this morning."

“Yes,” said Ada, anxiously.

“And they have had a letter from Italy.”

“Well, Philip?” she said, laying her head against his cheek, as one arm drew her nearer and nearer, while the other toyed with the boy’s curls.

“Well, darling, it is nothing; but I could not help it: the news seemed to cause me a vague feeling of uneasiness – nothing but a passing cloud – for thoughts will go backwards sometimes. Not complimentary, that,” he said, laughing; “but I meant no more, love, than a general reference to old troubles.”

“I know – I know,” she said, with unruffled countenance; “but what was the news?”

“Well, dear, it was that workmen are to be sent up to the Castle directly; and there’s to be painting, and paper-hanging, and re-furnishing, and Heaven knows what beside; and I was thinking that Merland has done for years past now uncommonly well with the Castle in its present state, and that, if I had my will, it should remain as it is.”

“And all this means, dear?” said Mrs Norton, quietly.

“Yes, of course,” laughed Norton. “Now, did you ever see anything like the dog? Both his fingers in the ink! Yes, it means, of course, that after five years of absence the Gernons are coming home.”

Ada's Promise

The old love of change and adventure, which in earlier life had led Philip Norton into seeking a commission in the Indian army, clung to him still, and sometimes for days – sometimes even for weeks together, he would absent himself from home, journeying north or south, or even going abroad without making the slightest preparation. He would laugh on his return, and own that it was eccentric; but, perhaps, before many weeks had elapsed, he would again take his departure, while Ada never complained, for by constant study of his character, she felt that to some extent she now knew him well. He had given up all his former pursuits; ambition, too, had been set aside, and he had buried himself in the old Lincolnshire retreat, apparently content with his wife's companionship – for visitors seldom crossed the steps of Merland Hall. "I am not fit for society," Norton used to say, with a smile; and seeing how at times an unsettled, feverish fit would come upon him, resulting in some far off, aimless journey, from which he would return happy and content, Ada quietly forbore all murmurings, accepting her fate, thankful for the quiet, tender affection he displayed towards her. She used at last to laugh about his hurried departures, and long, purposeless trips, telling him that they acted as safety-valves for letting off the pent-up excitement of his nature, and he, taking her words in all seriousness, would earnestly accept her definition.

"I know it seems strange and wild, and even unkind to you, dear; but I think sometimes that if I were chained down entirely to one place I should lose my reason. These fits only come on at times; perhaps during a walk, and then the inclination is so strong that I do not feel either the power or desire to battle with it."

Ada Norton felt no surprise, then, the morning after that on which the news respecting the Gernons had been received, when asking one of the servants if she had seen her master, she learned that he had been driven across to the town, and that the groom had just come back with the dog-cart.

It was nothing new, but taken in conjunction with the last night's conversation, it caused no slight uneasiness in her breast, and as she sat watching the gambols of their child, the weak tears began to course one another down her cheeks. For she felt that he was unsettled by the tidings they had heard; and for a few moments her heart beat rapidly as she recalled the past, trembling for her own empire when thinking of Marion Gernon's return.

Would not the old feeling of love come back, and would they not both hate her? Marion, for her possession of him who should have been her husband; Philip, for her ceaseless efforts to enlase herself round his heart. For, after all, he could not truly love her: he had been gentle, tender, affectionate, ever ready to yield to her every desire, almost worshipping his boy. In short, upon reviewing calmly her married life, with the sole exception of those occasional absences, she was obliged to own that she had all that she could desire, and that, however wanting in the wild, passionate, and romantic, Philip Norton's love for her was imbued with that tender gentleness, based on admiration, trust, and faith, which was far more lasting and satisfying to the soul – a love that would but increase with years; and at last, with an impatient stamp of the foot, she wiped away her tears, upbraiding herself for her want of trust and faith in her noble husband, accusing herself of misjudging him. Catching up her boy, she covered him with kisses, her face lighting up with a joyful maternal pride in the strong link which had been sent to bind them together.

"Heaven helping me," she muttered, "I'll never doubt him."

It was a grave promise – a vow hard to keep, as circumstances wove themselves in the future; and more than once Ada Norton had the excuse of sore temptation; but how she bore herself, how she kept faith in her husband under circumstances that might well raise doubts in the most trusting woman's heart, will be seen in the sequel.

Sir Murray's Gentleman

There had been busy doings at the Castle, and Merland village was in an intense state of excitement. Old Chunt – Jonathan Chunt, who kept the “Black Bull” – said that there was to be some life in the place at last. He knew, for he had it from Mr Gurdon – old Gurdon’s lad, but *Mr* Gurdon now, and an awfully big man in his master’s estimation. He was butler now, and had come over to superintend the getting in order of the place, for Sir Murray was fond of company, and there were to be no end of gaieties at the Castle. Mr Gurdon was setting the old servants to rights and no mistake, for he’d got full power, and they hadn’t had such a waking up for long enough. Why, what with company’s servants coming down to the “Bull,” and post-horses now and then, and one thing and another, it would be a little fortune to him, Chunt said. Time there was a change, too: keeping a house like that shut up for the rats to scamper across the floors, was injuring the trade of the village, where there was no one else but the old people at the Rectory, and them Nortons, who might just as well be a hundred miles off, shutting themselves up as they did.

Chunt knew, and he imparted his knowledge, with no end of nods and winks, to his fellow-tradesmen, as he termed them – to wit, Huttoft, the saddler, who made nothing but harness, and Mouncey, the baker, when they came in for a glass.

“And if here ain’t Mr Gurdon himself!” exclaimed Chunt, one evening, when he had been distilling information to a select knot of customers. “Take a chair, Mr Gurdon, sir. Glad to see you this evening. Very curious coincidence, sir: we were just talking about you and your people;” which was indeed most remarkable, considering that nothing else had been talked of in the village for weeks past. “What’ll you take, sir? only give it a name. Quite an honour to have you distinguished furreners amongst us.”

Mr Gurdon smiled and rubbed his hands; but, evidently considering that he had mistaken his position, he frowned the next moment, and nodded condescendingly to the tradesmen and little yeomen present. Certainly they had, several of them, known him as a boy; but then he had risen in the world, and deserved their respect; besides which, look at the patronage he could bestow. So Mr Gurdon frowned, coughed, and looked important; but, finding that room was made for him, and that incense in abundance was being prepared in his behalf, he condescended to take a seat, and gave what he would take the name of sherry, with which he smoked a cigar, whose aroma whispered strongly of the box from which it had been taken.

Mr Gurdon’s presence, though, did not tend to the increase of comfort in the party assembled, for the gentleman’s gentleman seemed to have imbibed a considerable portion of his master’s dignity, sitting there very haughty and reserved, while, the flow of conversation being stopped, the rest sat still, smoked, breathed hard, and stared.

But Chunt was satisfied, and he winked and nodded, and whispered behind his hand most mysteriously as he took orders from one and another. He expected that Mr Gurdon would thaw in time with a little management, and, putting on his diplomatic cap, he set to work by asking his advice.

“That sherry’s not much account, Mr Gurdon, sir,” he said, in a whisper; “but it’s the best I’ve got to offer you. The long and short of it is, sir, we can’t order enough, in a little house like this, to make a wine-merchant care about sending it good; but I’ve got a few gallons of brandy down now that I should just like you to try, and give me your opinion. You see, it isn’t every day as one has a gent in as understands such things; but you, being used to your cellar, and having good stuff in your bins, yours is an opinion one would like to have. There, sir, now just taste that,” said Chunt, filling a liqueur-glass from a big stone bottle; “that’s, between ourselves, just as it comes – untouched, you know. I’ll mix you a glass hot; but just give me your opinion on it as it is.”

Mr Gurdon was touched in a weak place, for, though his cellar knowledge was almost nil, it was not worth while to say so. Incense was nice – almost as nice as brandy, so accepting Chunt’s

glass, and confidential wink, he tasted the brandy – tasted it again, and then agreed that it wasn't bad, only it wanted age.

"The very words as my spirit-merchant says to me, sir," said Chunt. "If that brandy had age, sir, it wouldn't be surpassed anywhere."

Mr Gurdon felt better, and agreed with one of the visitors present that they wanted rain. Then, after finishing the neat brandy, he commenced the stiff tumbler of hot grog placed before him by Chunt, toyed with the end of his cigar; and, finding a general disposition to pay him respect, and to call him "sir," he gradually unbent – more swiftly, perhaps, than he would have done – under the influence of the brandy and water, for which he had a decided weakness, the potent spirit unlocking, or, as Chunt told his wife, oiling the butlers tongue, so that he gratified the curiosity of the Merlandites that evening to a considerable extent. And there was no lack of brandy and water that night: every one drank it, doing as Mr Gurdon did; and there was quite a struggle amongst the little traders for the honour of "standing" Mr Gurdon's next glass, the most eager of them, so as not to be outdone, requesting Chunt to fill it again, while it was yet but half empty.

"And do you like furren parts, Mr Gurdon, sir?" said Chunt, setting the ball rolling.

"Pretty well – pretty well," said Gurdon. "On the whole, perhaps, better than England. Society's higher there – more titles."

"I suppose Mr Gurdon ain't brought home a Hightalian wife," said Huttoft.

Mr Gurdon did not quite approve of this; and Huttoft had to suffer the frowns of the whole company.

"And so, after all these years, Mr Gurdon, sir," said Mouncey, who was in high spirits with the prospect of bread supplying, "you haven't brought us home a heir to the Castle."

"No," said Mr Gurdon; "and it's my opinion as there'll never be one."

"Turned out a happy match, and all that sort of thing, though, I suppose?" said Mouncey.

"Happy! yes, I should think so. Sir Murray worships her, and she's never happy unless he's along with her, or else going hunting weeds and grass and moss in the hills. Lor' bless you! it's wonderful what a happy pair they are. Awfully jealous man, though, Sir Murray – nearly had a duel with a foreign Count, who wanted to be too attentive to my lady; but when my gentleman found as master meant fight, he cooled down, and made an apology."

"Ladyship changed much?" said Chunt.

"Well, no; not much," said Gurdon. "We all look older at the end of five years. She always was pale, and perhaps she is a bit thinner than when she went away. But there, you'll see her safe enough before long; they'll be home to-morrow, and she'll be always out, either riding or walking."

"I used to fancy that things wouldn't turn out happily after that set-out at the church door," said Huttoft, venturing another remark. "Of course you know as Mr Norton's settled down at the Hall? – married Miss Lee, you know. Good customer of mine, too."

"Ah, yes; we know all about that," said Gurdon, sarcastically. "Her ladyship was frightened, of course; and enough to frighten any lady, to see a mad-brain fellow rush at her like that. Boy and girl love affair, that's what that was. Them sort of things never come to nought; and look how soon he got over it and married. Her ladyship was upset about it, though, when she got the news. She was fond of her cousin, you know, Miss Lee, and you may say what you like here, but we got the right tale over abroad about that Captain Norton shooting her; while, when her ladyship heard that her cousin had been foolish enough to marry him, she had a brain fever, and was bad for weeks. No wonder, neither. He must be half-cracked with sunstroke or drink. They do say them Indy officers drink hard. Well, just one more, gents, and this must be the last."

Mr Mouncey could not help siding with the butler, for he happened to know that Captain Norton was a bit queer at times, as the servants had told him more than once, going rushing off to all parts without saying a word to anybody, not even to Mrs Norton; and he couldn't quite see through it, unless it was, as Mr Gurdon said, the Captain was, after all, a bit touched.

“By the way, though,” said Chunt, “isn’t he taking up with that Iron Company?”

“Iron!” said Gurdon, thickly. “No iron about here.”

“Oh yes,” said Huttoft; “they’ve found a bed, and there’s some talk of trying to work it, bringing coal by canal, but I can’t see as it will answer.”

Soon after this the conversation became general upon the future of the iron, the company being divided, some declaring for riches to those who took shares in the company, others prognosticating that the shareholders would find the iron too hot to hold, and would burn their fingers in a way not to be forgotten. But, at last, remembrances of frowning wives sitting up for absent lords brought the hour into serious consideration, and, after glasses round, the enthusiastic party insisted upon seeing Mr Gurdon home, which they did to the lodge gates, parting from him most affectionately, though it might have been better had they continued their escort until he reached his normal bed, the one he chose, when left to himself, being a bed of verbenas, where he was found, covered with dew, at early morning, by Alexander McCray, one of the under-gardeners, who did not fail to treasure up the circumstance against the next time he might be snubbed.

Husbands and Wives

The Gernons had returned to the Castle for some days before Philip Norton came home, his wife anxiously scanning his countenance, to find him apparently quite happy and untroubled of mind. She had something she wished to say to him, but she shrank from her task, hardly knowing how to commence; her difficulty, though, was ended by Norton himself, who, as they were seated at tea, turned the conversation in the required direction.

“So the Castle folks are back,” he said, quietly.

“Yes; they arrived last Thursday,” said Mrs Norton, uneasily.

“Busy times there’ll be there, then, I expect,” said Norton. “Do the old place good.”

Mrs Norton looked searchingly at him, but not a muscle of his countenance was moved.

“Do you know, love, I’ve been thinking over their return,” he said, after a few moments’ silence, “and I fancy that, perhaps, it would be better if the intimacy between you and Lady Gernon were not resumed. Time works wonders, we know, but I cannot think that there could ever be the cordiality that one would wish to feel towards one’s friends.”

“Can you read my thoughts, dear?” said Mrs Norton, kneeling at his feet, so as to rest her elbows on his knees, and gaze up in his face.

“Well, not all,” he said, laughing. “A great many, though, for you are horribly transparent. But why?”

“Because you have been thoroughly expressing my wishes. Do not think me foolish, but I do, indeed, think it would be better that there should be no intimacy between the families.”

“Foolish!” he laughed. “Why, that would be like blaming myself. But there, I don’t think we need trouble ourselves; for I suppose they will be very grand, and take up only with the county families and grandees from London; they will not want our society. And do you know, dear, we shall have to pinch and save no end, for I have been investing heaps of money in a speculation – one, though, that is certain to pay. Iron mines, you know, that were found last year at Blankesley. Capital thing it is to be, so they tell me.”

“But was it not foolish?” said Mrs Norton. “Had we not enough, dear?”

“Well, yes,” he said, rather impatiently; “enough for ourselves, but we have the child to think of. You do not suppose he will be content to lead his fathers dreary life.”

“Dreary, Philip?”

“Well, no – not dreary. I don’t mean that; but quiet, retired existence; and besides, a little to do with this iron affair – a little occupation – will be the making of me. I’ve grown so rusty,” he said, laughing, “that I have run to iron to polish it off.”

That same night a similar conversation took place at the Castle, where, in quiet, well-chosen words, Sir Murray expressed a wish that there might be no communication held with the inmates of the Hall.

“Do you doubt me, Murray?” said Lady Gernon, rising, and standing looking down upon her husband, as he leaned back in his chair.

“Doubt you!” he said, almost angrily. “My dear Lady Gernon, what a question!”

“Then why should you ask me, now that at your wish we have returned to the Castle, to give up the love, sympathy, and companionship of my cousin? Why did we not stay abroad, if such coldness is to be preserved. I ceased corresponding with her at her marriage, but with what pain and cost you only know. Do not ask more of me.”

“There – there,” he said, “what a trouble you are making of this trifle. It is my wish that the old acquaintanceship should not be renewed. No good can result from it; but, perhaps, for all parties a great deal of heartburning and pain. Be guided by me, Marion.”

“Not in this,” she said, firmly. “Murray, I never yet in anything opposed your wishes, but in this I do. It is my intention to drive over and call upon Ada to-morrow, and I ask you to accompany me. To be distant now would be like disinterring old griefs and sorrows that should before this have been forgotten. Let the past be buried in the past, and let us be, with these our nearest neighbours, upon intimate terms. You do not know Philip and Ada as I know them; and I love them both too dearly to slight them even in thought.”

“As you will,” he said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

“And besides,” she continued, “your wish is almost an insult to your wife, Murray; it is cruel in tone, cruel in wording – harsh as it is unjust – unfair.”

“Do I not say,” he exclaimed, angrily, “do as you will? I gave you my opinion as to what I thought would be best, and you differ. Very well; one of us must give way, and I have yielded. What more would you have? Do I ever play the domestic tyrant? Am I ever unreasonable?”

Lady Gernon was silent, and stood pale and motionless, looking at the table upon which she rested her hand. She was still very beautiful; but there was a sharpness about her features that told of suffering, and the workings of a troubled heart. It was evident that she wished to speak, but the words would not come, and at last, fearing to display her agitation, she glided back to her seat.

But she had gained her end: there was to be reconciliation, and a friendly feeling preserved between the two families. And why not? she asked herself. Were they to be always enemies on account of the past?

Sinking thoughtfully back in her chair, she rested her forehead upon her hand, dreaming over the incidents of the past few years, and even while feeling a dread of the impending meeting, she felt a longing desire to look once more upon her old lover – upon the man who, upon her wedding-day, had seemed, as it were, to cast a blight upon her future life, as he appeared like one rising from the dead to upbraid her with her falling away.

Lady Gernon did not see the curious way in which her husband sat and watched her, marking every change in her countenance, noting every sign. He had been startled by the earnestness with which she had combated his wishes. Her manner had been so new, her eager words so unusual; for during their married life her actions had been of the most subdued nature, and, as if resigning herself to her fate, she had been the quiet, uncomplaining wife, to whom his word had been law, while, proud of her beauty and accomplishments, he had been content.

But no words passed till, rousing herself, Lady Gernon sought to remove any strange impression her utterances might have made – sought, but in vain, for she had unwittingly sown seeds that had already begun to germinate, striking root deeply in her husband’s breast, soon to flourish for ill in a way that should defy her utmost efforts to uproot them.

Food for Suspicion

“Who?” exclaimed Mrs Norton, aghast, as her servant hurriedly made an announcement.

“Sir Murray and Lady Gernon. I saw the carriage come in at the lower gate. There they are, ma’am,” said the girl, as the grating of wheels upon the drive preceded a loud peal at the bell.

“For Heaven’s sake be calm, Philip!” exclaimed Mrs Norton, as she saw him turn ghastly pale, all save the great scar upon his face, which seemed to glow and throb.

“Not at home! We can’t see them!” he exclaimed hoarsely.

“Too late,” she said, unwittingly giving him another pang, as she quoted his despairing words of the day when he had last seen Marion. “But, Philip, love, dear husband, recollect yourself,” she whispered imploringly; and then, trying to recover her composure, she rose as Sir Murray and Lady Gernon entered the room – the former courtly and at ease, the latter to run to Ada, throw her arms round her neck, and kiss her fondly, holding her for a few moments to her throbbing breast, while, overcome by the warmth of the greeting, Mrs Norton as lovingly returned the embrace.

To her great delight, though, as she raised her eyes from her cousin, it was to see that, quite composed and courteously, Philip Norton had advanced to meet his guest, they had shaken hands, and Norton had now turned to greet Marion.

Ada’s heart palpitated, and she hardly dared watch her husband, but turned to look at Sir Murray, who was narrowly scanning every glance and act. But Lady Gernon’s greeting of her old lover was graceful, kind, and yet dignified; her every word and look was unimpeachable, and Ada Norton’s agitation gave place to a feeling of thankfulness as she saw her husband take Marion’s hand without a shade crossing his countenance, press it slightly in a frank greeting, and then place for her a chair; when, apparently himself relieved, Sir Murray engaged his wife’s cousin in conversation, his old stiff, courtly manner being more proud and polished than ever, as he talked of their long absence, the changes that had taken place, expressing, too, a hope that he should see her often at the Castle.

“Will you take me into the garden, Captain Norton?” said Lady Gernon, in a low tone. “I have something to say to you.” Then aloud: “Do you not find the weather very oppressive? I am always longing for the fresh air.”

The remark was too pointed to escape observation, for Lady Gernon was no way skilled in subterfuge, while Norton hesitated for an instant, and there was a slight change in his countenance as he rose, saying:

“You have probably not seen our poor place, Lady Gernon; will you walk round?” She rose on the instant and took his arm, and they passed through the French window on to the lawn, while, half rising, Ada Norton looked anxiously in Sir Murray’s face.

“No,” he replied calmly, as, with a bitter smile on his lip, he read off her unspoken words. “I think we will stay. They will probably return directly;” and then he started, in a cool and indolent way, a fresh topic of conversation, to which, in the agitation she could not conceal, Ada could but reply in monosyllables.

“Well, Marion,” said Norton, calmly, as they stood amidst the flower-beds of the little parterre, “you wish to speak to me?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, eagerly. “I know that it may seem strange, but, Philip, I could not rest till I had spoken to you. Heaven willed that we should not be one, and I am now another’s. You loved me once; will you, for the sake of that old love, make me a promise?”

“Loved you once – promise!” said Norton, bitterly.

“Yes,” she cried, eagerly; “promise me, and then let the past be dead.”

“What would you have me promise?” he said. “Though you fail with yours.”

“Hush!” she said, imploringly; “do not be cruel. Now, at once, promise for the sake of our old dead love, that the past shall all be forgotten, and that you will treat my husband as a friend.”

“The man who robbed me of all my hopes!”

“Oh, hush! Do not speak so, Philip. There was some talk, before we left England, of a meeting – of angry words between you, and it was for this that I fostered Sir Murray’s desire to live abroad. But you will promise me, will you not – on your word – yours, Philip – that there shall never be a quarrel between you?”

“Lady Gernon,” said Philip, coldly, “your husband is safe from me. My madness is at an end, and I am now your cousin’s husband. There, for Heaven’s sake!” he cried, a change coming over him, “never let us refer to the past, and let us meet but seldom. Come back into the house. Forgive me if I speak bitterly, but the sight of your happiness would drive me to forget the duties I owe to others. Why did you come?”

“For my husband’s sake,” said Lady Gernon. “And now, from my soul, I thank you. I know how worthless are my promises,” she said, bitterly; “but I can confide in yours. Now let us return.”

The blood was mantling in Philip Norton’s forehead, and he was about to speak, when an end was put to the painful interview by the merry, prattling voice of a child, and Philip’s bright little fellow came running up, but only to draw back shyly on seeing the strange lady, who sank upon her knees with outstretched hands, as if hungering to clasp the child to her breast.

“Yours? – your boy, Philip?” she said.

“Mine, Lady Gernon,” said Norton, coldly, for he had once more regained control of himself. Then, stooping over the child, “Go to that lady, Brace,” he said; and in obedience the child suffered himself to be caressed, Lady Gernon kissing his bright little face eagerly, a tear or two falling the while upon his sunny hair.

Lady Gernon was still on her knees, holding the boy, who, forgetting his fear, was playing with her watch-chain, when slowly, and with courtly grace, conversing loudly the while, Sir Murray led Ada Norton into the garden, when the dread and undefined feelings in the latter’s heart were chased away, and a happy light beamed in her eye as she caught sight of the group before her; but there was an ill-concealed, angry glance directed at his wife by Sir Murray, and another at the child – an angry, jealous, envious look, but it was gone in an instant, and, stooping down, he too sought to take the child’s hand, but only for it to shrink from him hastily.

“Oh, Ada!” exclaimed Lady Gernon, with swimming eyes, as she laid her hand upon her cousin’s arm; and in those two words there seemed sufficient to disarm every doubt and suspicion – to break off the points of the thorns that had been ready to enter into her soul; and Ada, as much at rest as now seemed Lady Gernon, turned to her smilingly, ready to listen to her praises of the child’s beauty, and her prayers that they might be as of old.

“I have been so lonely abroad, Ada,” said Lady Gernon, sadly. “You will renew the old days, will you not?”

Ada Norton paused for a moment before she answered, looking steadfastly in her cousin’s face, to see there now a calm, sad serenity, that she could hardly understand, when, the words being repeated almost imploringly, the reply was, “Yes.”

“I am at your service, Lady Gernon,” said Sir Murray at that moment, when, once more, embracing the child, Lady Gernon kissed her cousin with the same old tenderness as of yore, turning the next moment to offer her hand, with a sad, quiet smile, to Philip Norton, who led her to the carriage; and then it all seemed to him to have been a dream, while the sound of the carriage-wheels, fast subsiding into a murmur, were but a part of the imaginings of his troubled brain. But the next instant he had started back to the reality, for his wife was gazing anxiously in his troubled face, when, as his eyes met hers, his old quiet smile came back, and, catching the boy in his arms, he made the little fellow shout with glee as he galloped him round the garden, to return with flushed face and tumbled hair to his watching wife.

“Philip?” she said, looking up at him inquiringly.

“My love,” he said, tenderly.

“You have something to say to me, have you not?”

“No,” he said, quietly; “unless it is – better friends than enemies.”

Mrs Norton said no more; but there was a pang at her heart, for she felt that her husband was keeping something from her.

Brooding

People said that Lady Gernon had benefited by the change – that Italy could not have agreed with her – for day by day she seemed to be casting off the dull, heavy languor that oppressed her. There was still a quiet sadness pervading every movement; but Sir Murray, without hearing people's remarks, noted for himself that she took more interest in the affairs of daily life: in place of disliking company, she now gladly met his wishes, concerning dinner or breakfast party. In fact, there was a complete change; but it gave no pleasure to her husband, for he watched her with jaundiced eyes, saying nothing, but followed her every movement uneasily. Even the apparent increase of affection she displayed towards him was distasteful; and he grew in private moody and dissatisfied. But only in private, for he told himself that he had a duty to perform – one which demanded all watchfulness and care, and sternly he set himself to that duty.

The intimacy with the Nortons grew daily more close, and they dined several times at the Castle, the old warm affection between the two cousins growing stronger than ever. Both Lady Gernon and Mrs Norton viewed with satisfaction the quiet, unobtrusive courtesy of Sir Murray; while Captain Norton grew more and more dreamy, just waking up into an animated smile when spoken to, and joining for a few minutes in the conversation; but only to subside again directly after.

No stranger could have imagined that there had ever been more than the simplest of friendly ties between the families, and Sir Murray Gernon again and again owned to himself that his wife's conduct was unimpeachable; but, at the same time, it troubled him, that from the day of the visit to the Hall, and Lady Gernon's unconcealed efforts to obtain a few words with her old lover in private, she had been an altered woman; and he felt that it was not on his account, else why had not the change come during the past five years. It troubled him, too, that there was nothing that he could complain of; and, as he sat one day in his library, thoughtfully brooding, he passed over in review the conduct of those in whom he was most interested. Captain Norton called but seldom, and then with his wife; he was absent, too, a great deal, report said, at the iron mines; and when at the Castle his attentions to Lady Gernon were always of the most formal nature, while, after rendering the duties incumbent on her towards her guest, Lady Gernon seemed to avoid him. Mrs Norton was evidently much attached to her cousin, while Lady Gernon – yes, there was the knot: Lady Gernon was another woman, growing daily brighter and more elate, while his spirit refused to let him believe that it was all due to the change of scene and return to the society of parents and friends.

But he wanted some clue. He was, he told himself, wandering in the dark, for, musing upon imaginary wrong, he had grown into the belief that there was a plot against his happiness – that there were matters in progress that perhaps all but Mrs Norton and himself saw and mocked at. He was too proud to ask confidence, while a hint from any one would have been repulsed with indignation. He knew that others remarked the change in his wife; frequently, in fact, he had grimly thanked friends who had congratulated him. But all his brooding resulted in nothing, and at the end of six months he was soured and angry to find that his labours had been in vain. At times, he almost resented the gentle advances of Marion, telling himself that they were not genuine, but used as a blind; and often and often Lady Gernon went in tears to the Hall to ask her cousin's sympathy – an act which only widened the breach daily growing between husband and wife. And this, too, at a time when Lady Gernon's heart had begun to leap with new hopes – hopes of that happiness which she had envied in others; when the world gave promise to her of a happier future, with fresh cares and interests; so that, even now that this hopeful state lent brightness to her eye, and colour to her cheek, she had new cause for sorrow in her husband's coldness.

Sir Murray Gernon persuaded himself that his suspicions merely wanted confirmation, and, waiting that confirmation, he shut himself up, as it were, within his cold, proud hauteur, and waited – waited, for he would not stir an inch to find proof of his suspicions; it should come to him, and

blankly stare him in the face before he would take step or speak word; and so the months glided on at the Castle, company coming and going, parties following one another rapidly, and Sir Murray Gernon a very pattern of courtly politeness to all. His greatest intimates congratulated him upon his domestic happiness, and he smiled his thanks, and then subsided again into his saturnine gloom, waiting – waiting for what he told himself would some day come.

There was to be a grand party at the Castle, at Sir Murray's wish, on the anniversary of the marriage. The idea had proceeded from Mrs Elstree, during a visit to the Rectory, and Sir Murray had immediately taken it up, though, upon receiving a meaning glance from the Rector, who had seen a shadow cross his daughter's brow, the proposer would gladly have recalled her words.

Great preparations were in progress; but after making his decree that there should be a grand affair, one that should do honour to his name, Sir Murray Gernon took no further interest in the matter.

He was seated, as was his wont, one morning in his library, turning over his letters, and thoughtfully brooding over his wrongs. It was cruel, he said, that he, rich, powerful, and well endowed by nature, should suffer in this way. But he could wait; and he turned to think of what he should do to drive away the ennui which oppressed him. Suddenly a thought came, and ringing sharply, the summons was answered by a footman.

"Send Gurdon here," said the baronet; and then, adopting his most magisterial air, he sat waiting the coming of the butler, upon whom the thunders of his wrath were about to descend.

Mr Gurdon, rather red of nose and pasty of face, soon appeared, wearing on the whole rather a limp expression. But John Gurdon had not improved in appearance; prosperity had not agreed with him. He said that it was his digestion; but Jane Barker – Mrs Barker now, my lady's maid – shook her head at him and sighed, as she thought of the smart young fellow who used to come courting her at the Rectory, laughingly telling her that he'd caught the complaint of his master.

"I think, Gurdon," said Sir Murray, "that this is the third time that I have sent for you into the library."

"Yes – yes, Sir Murray," said Gurdon, with a cough behind his hand.

"It is the last time, then. But for your being an old servant, and son of an old tenant of my late father, I should discharge you at once!"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't, Sir Murray," said the man piteously. "It shall never occur again; it shan't, indeed!"

"You had been drinking again, last night!"

"Only the least drop, Sir Murray – the least drop. I was a little out of order yesterday."

"And you were not fit to come before her ladyship, in the drawing-room?"

"Perhaps not quite, Sir Murray – not quite; but – but –"

"And mind this is the last time. No servant of mine shall be a disgrace to my establishment."

"I humbly beg your pardon, Sir Murray, I do, indeed; and it shall never occur again, it shan't, indeed. I know your ways, Sir Murray, and I should die, if you was to turn me off. Please look over it this once."

"I have looked over it, Gurdon, or I should have given you your wages when you entered the room. Now go and ask her ladyship if she can see me for a few minutes."

"Her ladyship isn't in, Sir Murray."

"Not in?"

"No, Sir Murray; I wanted to see her about the blue-room chandelier, and went up, but she was not there; and Barker said, sir, she had just put on her things and gone out."

"Did she order the pony-carriage?"

"No, Sir Murray; her ladyship often goes out walking."

In spite of himself, Sir Murray Gernon started; for after months of waiting, it seemed to come to him with a sudden light flashing in upon his mind that he had found that which he had sought. He

looked up the next moment in his servant's face, trembling for his pride. Did that sallow, shivering creature who took his pay, and who had been trembling for fear of his frown, read his thoughts? Did he share his suspicions? For a moment, as he caught his eye, Sir Murray felt as if he could strangle him. It seemed to him that this man would henceforth possess a hold upon him, and assert himself upon the strength of his knowledge.

The baronet could hardly arrest a groan; but he sat there, stern and immovable, fighting behind his mask of pride, to regain his composure before again speaking.

"Let me know when her ladyship comes in – at least," he said, correcting himself, "ask her if she will see me upon her return."

"Yes, Sir Murray."

"That will do. You can go," said the baronet, for the man still lingered as if about to speak; but the next moment he made a low bow and left the room.

As the door closed upon the servant, the strength which had been sustained by Sir Murray's pride collapsed, and letting his head fall upon his hands, he groaned bitterly. The lines in his face grew more deeply marked; his lips became parched; and at last he rose from his seat to pace the room with hasty strides, as he turned over and over the thoughts that had flashed upon him.

Yes, she was often out; her old passion for botany had returned, and, it had never struck him before, she did take long, very long walks. And now it was all plain enough: he was the laughing-stock even of his servants – he had read it in that man's eye. True, he might dismiss him, but it was sure to be known throughout the house. But wait awhile; he would not be rash and hasty; he would think matters over.

He smiled as he took his seat once more, but the smile faded into a look of the most bitter misery, and, as he sat there hour after hour awaiting Lady Gernon's return, years seemed to have passed over his head, and not without leaving their marks.

Man and Maid

“Curse him!” muttered Gurdon, as he left the room; “a purse-proud, haughty brute! looks upon a servant as if he were a dog. I know him, though – read him like a book – turn him inside out like a glove. Waited on him, served him as I have all these years, and yet, because a man can’t help giving way just a trifle to his weakness, he’s to be threatened always with the sack. He won’t send me away, though, not he – he knows better. Read him like a book I can, and he knows it too. Pride must have a fall, and he’s full of it – running over with it. Just as if one man wasn’t as good as another. Discharge me, will he? Perhaps I’ll discharge myself before he has the chance. Sitting and sulking there in his old library, day after day. I haven’t forgotten the old affair. I ain’t blind, and I’ll tell him so as soon as I look at him. Here, hi! Jane!”

Mr Gurdon’s legs had conveyed him, as he went on muttering, as far as the housekeeper’s room, when, seeing the flutter of a garment just turning a corner at the end of the passage, he called out, and Jane Barker, rather red of eye, turned round and confronted him.

“Here, come in here, Jenny, I want to talk to you,” he said, catching her by the hand, when, without a word, she followed him into the housekeeper’s room, and he closed the door.

“I knew he hadn’t,” said Jane, who had been watching him from a distance, and had seen him enter and leave the library, “you wouldn’t have looked cross like that, John, if he had.”

“He don’t dare!” said Gurdon, insolently. “It’s all smoke, and he knows now that I’m not blind. Discharge me, indeed! I’ll discharge myself, and have something for holding my tongue into the bargain! Don’t tell me: I can read him like a book, and his pride will humble itself before me like a schoolboy’s. Now, look here, Jenny: there’s been enough nonsense now. We’ve been courting years enough, and you’ve saved up a bit of money. Let’s go at once. I’ve saved nothing; but I’ve had my eyes open, and if I don’t leave the Castle a hundred pounds in pocket it’s a strange thing to me. I’m sick of it, I am; and I know of a decent public-house to let over at Blankesley, where the iron-pits are. There’ll be no end of trade to it, so let’s get married and take it. Now, what do you say?”

“Say?” exclaimed Jane Barker, whose face had been working, while her lips were nipped together, and her arms crossed over her breast, as if to keep down her emotion – “say? Why, that sooner than marry you, and have my little bit of money put in a public-house, for you to be pouring it down your throat all day, I’d go into the union! I’ll own that I did, and I have, loved you very, very much; but you’ve half broke my heart with seeing you, day after day, getting into such sotting ways. You know you wouldn’t have been here now if it hadn’t been for me going down on my knees to my own dear, sweet lady, to ask her not to complain, when you’ve gone up to her, time after time, not fit to be seen, and smelling that horrid that tap-rooms was flower-gardens compared to you! And now, after all her kindness and consideration, you talk like that! I’m ashamed of you – I’m ashamed of you!”

And Jane burst into tears.

“Now, don’t be a fool, Jenny! What’s the good of being so squeamish, and talking such nonsense? We’ve both had enough of this place, and, without anything to trouble me, I should never touch a drop from month’s end to month’s end.”

“No, John – no, John,” she said, disengaging herself from the arm that he had put round her. “I’ll never marry a man who drinks. I’d give you my bit of money if I thought it would do you good; but you’ve drunk till it’s made you hard, and cruel, and suspicious, and wicked; and, though I’ve never said nothing, I’ve thought about all your wicked hints and suspicions. And as to being tied up to a man who was going to get money by telling lies of other people, I’d sooner go down and jump into the lake – that I would!”

“Tisn’t lies,” said Gurdon, sulkily: “it’s truth, and you know it is.”

“It is not, you bad, wicked fellow!” cried Jane, firing up, and stamping one foot upon the floor.

“Tis truth, and he knows it too, my fine, fierce madam!”

“What! have you dared to say a word, or drop one of your nasty, underhanded hints?” cried Jane.

“Never mind,” said Gurdon, maliciously. “I’ve not studied him all these years for nothing. Perhaps I know something about letters – perhaps I don’t; perhaps I’ve seen somebody savage about somebody else taking long walks, after being sulky and upset about what’s to happen now after all these years; perhaps I haven’t seen anything of the kind, but I ain’t blind. I haven’t forgotten what took place six years ago, and now we’re going – good luck to us! – to have an anniversary. I hope everybody will be there to keep it, that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Oh, you serpent!” cried Jane, pale with rage. “You bad, wicked fellow! You’re like the scorpion in the Holy Bible, you are, that turns to rend the hand that fed it. Oh!” she cried, growing gradually more and more furious, “to think that I’ve wasted all my best days about such a traitor – such a cruel, malicious, spiteful, dirty story-teller! Shame on you! How dare you, you villain, hint at such wickedness about my poor dear sweet mistress, whose dear heart is as pure as an angel’s – a sweet, suffering lamb?”

“A sweet, suffering lamb, indeed!” cried Gurdon, savagely. “Yah! There’s a pair of you – she-wolves, more likely.”

“Then I’ll be the wolf that shall shake such a nasty lying cur as you!” cried Jane, furiously. “Go down on your knees, you wicked – wicked – nasty – story-telling – villain – you, or I’ll shake all the breath out of your body!”

In effect, beside herself with rage, Jane had caught the butler by the collar with both hands, and at every word she had given him a furious shake, till, utterly confounded at the suddenness of the attack, he had really, to avoid the onslaught, sunk upon his knees, enabling her, though, to deliver the correction more effectually.

“Say it was all stories – say it was all stories,” cried Jane.

“I won’t: it’s all as true as true, and her – ”

“Take that, you wicked villain!” shrieked Jane; and with the full force of her by no means weak arm, she slapped him across the mouth just as the door opened, and a knot of eager, curious servants appeared.

“What is the matter?” was the cry.

“Let him say a word if he dares,” cried Jane, ending her punishment by a tremendous box on the butler’s ears, to the intense delight of the lookers-on. “He told lies about me, and I hit him – there!” said Jane defiantly, “and let him say it isn’t true if he dares.”

Then, utterly exhausted by her efforts, poor Jane threw herself, sobbing, into a chair.

“Oh, take me away! – take me away!” she cried; and two of the sympathising women ran to her, declaring that it was a shame, that it was; while the stout cook delivered her opinion that it would be a blessing if there wasn’t a man left on the face of the earth, “breaking poor women’s hearts as was faithful unto death.”

Whereupon one of the footmen winked at a very smart and aspiring kitchen-maid, who had whispered to him her suspicions respecting cook’s possessing a similar weakness to Mr Gurdon’s, and requiring stimulants for the due invention of fresh dishes.

“It’s a pity that people don’t know their places,” said Gurdon, sulkily, “and keep to the kitchen and hall, instead of pushing themselves into the housekeeper’s room, where they’re not wanted.”

But somehow, the butler’s words had but very little effect, for in spite of their knowledge of his engagement to Jane Barker, and her great influence in domestic matters with her mistress, John Gurdon’s tenure at the Castle was held to be in a very insecure state.

Nobody therefore stirred – Mr Gurdon’s hint evidently not being sufficiently potent; so, with a scowl at the sobbing woman, he turned and left the room, to don a fresh cravat – the present one being limp, crumpled, and displaying very clearly the encounter in which he had been engaged.

“Let them look out, some of them,” he cried, wrathfully, as soon as he was alone. “If I’m to be dragged down, I’ll pull somebody with me, so let them look out, that’s all I’ve got to say;” and with a savage scowl upon his face, he brought down his fist with a heavy blow upon the table by which he stood.

The Sapphire Cross

“How well Marion looks,” said Ada Norton to her husband, as, seated in one of the brilliantly-lighted drawing-rooms at the Castle, they watched her receiving fresh guests, on the night of the party. The Nortons had dined there, and all had gone off, so far, most successfully; people coming from a great distance just for an hour in the evening, – an invitation to the Castle being something not to be slighted.

“Yes, she looks well,” said Norton, calmly. “The old weary air seems to have passed away entirely. I used to think that Gernon did not use her well, but, thank Heaven, I believe I misjudged him.”

“Oh yes, I think so,” said Mrs Norton, hastily. “I am so much in her confidence that I think something of the kind would have oozed out, if such had been the case. And yet I don’t know,” she continued in a tone of reproach; “Marion has, like other people, her secrets.”

Norton turned sharply round; but Lady Gernon approaching, the conversation ceased.

“Mamma says you have not spoken to her to-night, Ada,” said Lady Gernon, whose face was flushed with excitement; and never had Norton thought her beauty more regal than now, as she stood before him with a brilliant tiara of sapphires and diamonds in her hair, while the large cross of pure and costly gems rose and fell with the soft heaving of her bosom.

“You extravagant woman!” laughed Ada, in reference to her cousin’s jewels. “If I had those sapphires I should never dare to wear them.”

“Murray always likes me to wear them on these particular occasions,” said Lady Gernon, carelessly; and, after exchanging a pleasant smile with Norton, she moved away towards where Mrs Elstree was seated.

In spite of himself, Sir Murray Gernon frowned at the sight of that smile; but he turned away the next moment, to encounter his butler, at whom he gazed for a moment, and then, walking close up to him, he said, severely, “I told you I should not look over the next occasion, sir. Come to the library for your wages at ten to-morrow morning.”

John Gurdon’s face broke out into a profuse perspiration as he heard that sentence – one from which he knew there was no appeal – and he darted a scowling look of hatred at his master as he turned away. For Gurdon knew the justice of the decree: he had been drinking again. He had fought with the temptation, but the fine old wines, constantly to his hand, had been too much for him; and he had again succumbed, so that, as he stood there that moment beneath one of the brilliant chandeliers, in the midst of wealth and splendour, he saw himself beggared and wretched – a poor, out-of-place servant, whom no one would employ on account of his potent vice.

But a feeling of rage and hatred filled his breast the next instant, as he turned to single out his master; but he had disappeared, and with lowering brow the butler left the room to attend to some call.

Sir Murray Gernon had entered the blue-room, one of the handsome suite of drawing-rooms at the Castle, where he came upon a knot of his male friends, amongst whom stood Mr Elstree. He would have avoided them, but for some earnest mention of Norton’s name, that was made in a low tone, and in spite of himself he said hastily:

“What’s that about Captain Norton?”

“Ruined, I fear,” said Mr Elstree. “Those mines have collapsed – perfect crash – heavy calls on the shareholders, I’m told. We were remarking how calmly the poor fellow takes it. Poor Ada cannot know, for she is laughing happily with my wife.”

“These things are better kept from the ladies, I think,” said a friend. “I’m sorry for them, though.”

“Unworldly man!” – “foolish speculation!” – “perfect madness!” were amongst the remarks Sir Murray then heard made, when he turned to gaze at his stricken guest, who, apparently quite calm

and untroubled by a care, had risen from his seat and crossed to where Lady Gernon was standing. A minute after, she had left Mrs Norton with her mother, placed her arm in Captain Norton's, and with him crossed towards the conservatory, where, amidst the golden-fruited oranges, the heavily-scented exotics, and the soft light diffused from flower-encircled and shaded lamp, a few of the guests were seated, or wandering in what seemed to be a fragment of some tropic land.

It was hard work for Sir Murray to preserve his calm and smiling aspect amidst his guests when such thoughts as troubled him were struggling in his breast. But he was determined to show no anger, and, with the intention of walking quietly into the conservatory, he passed through the drawing-room, where Gurdon was handing tea to the party conversing at one of the tables.

Just then a gentleman arrested him, and kept him in conversation upon some political matter for quite a quarter of an hour, his courtly politeness even now preventing him from hurrying away; but at length, with a sinking at his heart, he stepped into the conservatory to see several friends enjoying the soft coolness of the flower-scented place; but those whom he sought were not there.

He turned to leave – a strange feeling of excitement making his breast to throb, and the blood to flush giddily to his head. He passed through the different well-lit rooms, but without seeing the pair of whom he was in quest; and, scarcely in command of his actions, he was about to make some eager inquiry, when Gurdon approached, bearing a small tray with tea.

"Looking for my lady, Sir Murray?" he said. "She's at the back of the orangery with Captain Norton."

John Gurdon's eyes glittered as he spoke, for he was sobered now by the former meeting with his master, and the excitement of what was in his mind. Sir Murray knew that the man saw his emotion, but he could not hide it then; and with a muttered oath he once more entered the conservatory, but had not advanced more than a few paces when he became aware that he was followed.

Turning upon the instant, he found that Gurdon was close behind him with the tray.

"Go back into the drawing-room!" he said, sternly, though he repented his speech the next minute, for, with a meaning smile, the man met his eye, and then stopped short, but made no movement to return.

Gurdon was right; for on turning a corner, Sir Murray came suddenly upon Lady Gernon seated by Captain Norton's side. Her head was bent, and the tears were falling fast, while he was speaking to her earnestly. There was no one near: the voices from the crowded rooms came only in a murmur. They, too, were speaking in soft and subdued tones. But one word fell upon Sir Murray's ear, and that word was "love!" He heard neither the preceding nor the concluding spread over the brightly-tiled floor – he was standing by their side before they were aware of his approach, when, with a start of dread, Lady Gernon half rose from her seat, but only to sink back, gazing at her husband.

For a few moments Sir Murray stood, unable to speak in the calm tones he desired; for even then he dreaded a scene and the comments of his guests, when – approaching quite unheard, so that he, too, was in the midst of the group before his presence was noticed – Gurdon appeared, to look full in his master's face as he handed the tray he bore.

"Tea, sir?" he said.

"Stand back!" exclaimed Sir Murray, fiercely, and with his raised hand he struck the man heavily across the chest, causing him to stagger back, and the tray fell with a crash upon the floor.

"You shall pay for this!" muttered the man, rising, but only to drop on one knee, napkin in hand, the next moment, and commence gathering up the fragments.

"Leave this place, sir, this instant!" exclaimed Sir Murray, fiercely; and muttering still, but with a supercilious leer at all present, Gurdon slouched off, passing between the assembled guests, who, alarmed by the crash and loud, angry words, were now inquiring the cause.

"Nothing – nothing wrong," exclaimed Sir Murray, with a ghastly show of being at ease. "A drunken servant, that is all. Lady Gernon, let me take you into the drawing-room."

Glances were exchanged; but the sullen countenance of Gurdon, the spilled tea, and the broken cups and saucers, afforded sufficient explanation, and the visitors slowly filtered back into the different rooms, in one of which another accident had taken place.

As Sir Murray, trembling with suppressed anger, entered the inner drawing-room, known as the blue-room, he saw Gurdon, napkin and tray in hand, standing as if waiting his coming, his face breaking into a mocking smile upon his master's entrance, closely followed by Captain Norton, who, so far, had not spoken a word.

"Go to your mother, Marion," said Sir Murray. "I must have a few more words with this man."

"With whom?" exclaimed Lady Gernon. "With my servant, madam," said Sir Murray, loudly. "Not with Captain Norton now. But where is your cross?"

"My cross!" stammered Lady Gernon; and her hand involuntarily sought the place where it had hung. "I had it when I – when –"

"Yes, when you entered the conservatory," said Sir Murray, a suspicion crossing his breast; "but where is it now?"

"I do not know!" exclaimed Lady Gernon, whose agitation became extreme.

The rumour of the failing mines; Captain Norton's poverty; his own jealousy; thought after thought flashed across Sir Murray Gernon's brain in an instant of time.

"Go to your guests," he said sternly. "There are people coming this way, and I wish to avoid a scene. James," he said, beckoning to a footman, "see that man, Gurdon, into the little garden-room, lock him up, and then fetch a constable."

"What for – what for?" said Gurdon, loudly. "You don't think, do you, that I've got the cross?"

"Silence, sir! Take him away!" exclaimed Sir Murray, sternly. Then, turning to Captain Norton, he said in a whisper, "There are two things in this world, Philip Norton, that I value: my honour and those old family jewels."

"I am attending to your words," said Norton, coldly; for he had just met an imploring look from Marion.

"I told you, Lady Gernon, to go to your guests!" said Sir Murray, in an angry whisper.

"No, Murray," she said. "I shall stay!"

"In Heaven's name, then, stay!" he said, angrily, "and hear what I would say. I value my honour and those family jewels, Captain Norton," he continued, facing his guest; "and the man who filches from me one or the other does so at the risk of his life!"

"What!" exclaimed Lady Gernon, with a horrified aspect, "do you for a moment suppose, Murray, that Captain Norton –"

"Where is that sapphire cross?" exclaimed Sir Murray.

"Indeed – indeed –"

"Silence, madam! I will have no scene!" hissed Sir Murray, angrily. "You, as my wife, hold those jewels in trust for me; and I should hold him who took them, even as a gift, as a robber of what is mine."

"Sir Murray Gernon, you are mad!" exclaimed Norton – "you know not what you say, and – Hush! sir, no words. Lady Gernon has fainted!"

An Encounter

Sir Murray Gernon had expressed a desire that there should be no scene, but his wish was of no avail, for in a few moments an excited group had collected round his wife. Salts, vinegar, and cold water were sought and applied; but, fortunately, one of the guests was the medical adviser of the family.

“Bed, Sir Murray – empty house – quiet – and,” he said, meaningly, “all going well, I may be able to offer you congratulations before morning.”

Half an hour after, the house was vacated by the last guest, and before morning had dawned the tidings were borne to Sir Murray Gernon that his lady had given birth to a daughter, but that from her ladyship’s critical state Dr Challen wished for further advice, and for a fellow-practitioner to share the burden of his responsibility.

Messages were sent; and in the course of a few hours there was a consultation held respecting Lady Gernon’s state – a consultation over which the medical practitioners shook their heads solemnly. The child was healthy; but its mother still existed, that was all.

Mrs Norton was at her side, where she insisted upon staying for days, in spite of a request from Sir Murray that she would leave; and now it was that for the first time she heard of the loss of the jewels from Jane Barker, who told her, with many sobs, that Gurdon had been suspected by Sir Murray, who had sent for a constable; but after having him searched that morning, his wages had been paid him, and he had been discharged, “threatening horrible things.”

“And oh! ma’am,” whispered Jane, “you were always like my dear lady’s sister; if you should hear anything said about her, it isn’t true. You won’t believe it, I’m sure.”

“You know I should never believe words uttered by an angry servant, Jane,” was the reply; “and if you take my advice you will be silent.”

“I would, ma’am; and I should not have said a word now, only Gurdon went away full of such threatenings, and talked so loudly, that I was afraid it might come to your ears without preparation, for he spoke of Captain Norton, and – ”

“Silence, woman!” exclaimed Ada, fiercely, as she caught the startled maid by the arm. “How dare you bandy about such talk! I will not hear another word.”

Jane stopped, gazing aghast at her mistress’s cousin, as, with her hands pressed upon her bosom, she seemed to be striving to keep back the painful emotion which oppressed her.

“Don’t be angry with me, ma’am, please.” Jane whispered humbly. “I would not have spoken had I known.”

Mrs Norton made her a motion to be silent; and for awhile the girl stood watching her agitated countenance, as she strove to conquer her emotion. She was herself unsuspecting to a degree. She had full faith in her husband, but now thick and fast came blow after blow. She found how calumny was at work – how Sir Murray Gernon’s name was talked of in connection with her husband’s, and at last she felt that for his sake, much as she loved her cousin, her place was at his side; for once more in her life there came the shuddering dread of a great evil, and obtaining from Jane a promise that if her mistress grew worse she should be informed, she returned to the Hall.

It was evening when she reached home, to find the servant looking excited, while, as soon as she entered the house, the sound of a loud and angry voice reached her ear.

“Who is in the drawing-room?” she hastily inquired of the servant.

“Oh’m, I’m so glad you’ve come,” ejaculated the girl. “It’s Sir Murray Gernon.”

For a moment Ada felt as if she could not proceed. Her heart accused her of neglecting home for the past few days, and she told herself that, with the rumours she knew of floating around, she ought not to have stayed away. But at last, with an effort, she hurried forward, opened the door, and

entered the room just as, with a cry of rage, Sir Murray Gernon raised the hunting-whip he held in his hand, and struck her husband furiously across the face.

“Dog!” he exclaimed. “I gave you the chance of meeting me as a gentleman, and you refused, driving me to horsewhip you as the scoundrel and thief you are. Ha!”

He paused, for Ada Norton was clinging to the arm that held the whip, while her husband —

Was he a coward? Was that the man of whose daring she had heard in India, performing deeds of valour that had been chronicled again and again in the despatches sent home? She was no lover of strife, but it was with something akin to shame that she saw her husband stand motionless, with one hand pressed to the red weal across his face. He was very pale, and the old scar and the new seemed to intersect one another, the latter like a bar sinister across honourable quarterings. He was trembling, too, but it was with a sigh of relief that she heard him break the silence at last.

“Sir Murray Gernon,” he said, in a cracked voice that she hardly knew, “when your poor dying wife came here with you, we walked through that window into the garden, where, in memory of our old love, she made me swear that I would never injure you, a promise – I hardly know why – that, though I made, I never even mentioned to my wife.”

Sir Murray laughed scornfully.

“I tell you now again, in the presence of my wife here, that your suspicions are baseless, that you wrong Lady Gernon most cruelly; and that, but for the fact that you dared call me – a poor, but honourable soldier – thief, your last charge is so contemptible that it would not be worthy of an answer. Go now and try to undo the wrong you have done. Thief! robber!” he exclaimed, excitedly. “Who was the thief of my love – of my life? But there; I have done,” he said, calmly. “I thought,” he continued, tenderly, “that hope was crushed out of my existence; that there was to be no future for me. That day, when I cast myself down in the churchyard with the feeling of despair heavy upon me, it seemed as if, with one harsh blow, my life had been snapped in two. And it was nearly so; but Heaven sent his angel to save me, and to prove that there was hope, and rest, and happiness for me yet in this world.”

Ere he had finished speaking Ada had thrown herself into his arms, and was looking proudly in his scarred face.

“Sir Murray Gernon,” he continued, after an instant’s pause, “I refused to meet you, and I have now told you the true reason for my having done so. In this world we shall probably never meet again. Our paths lie, as they ought, in different directions. It is fit they should. But once more, I swear before Heaven that your base charges are false. Go, and by honest, manly confession, try and win her back to life, and obtain her forgiveness. Tell her that I kept my word, even to making myself for her sake a coward in the eyes of the world.”

As he ceased speaking, he turned from Sir Murray to gaze down in his wife’s face. There was a sad, despairing look in his countenance, though, that troubled her; it was the same drawn, haggard aspect that she had looked on years before; but as she clung to him closer and closer, twining her arms more tightly round him, and trying to draw that pale, scarred face to hers, the wild, scared aspect slowly faded away, for from her eyes he seemed to draw life and hope, and at last, with a sigh that seemed torn from his breast’s utmost depths, he pressed his lips upon her forehead, and then turned once more to confront his accuser.

But they were alone; for, after listening with conflicting thoughts to Norton’s words, Sir Murray Gernon had slowly turned upon his heel, leaving the room, unnoticed.

Jane's Heart

“Oh, dear! – oh, dear! what shall I do? – what shall I do?” sobbed Jane Barker. “What a wicked set we must all be for the troubles to come bubbling and rolling over us like this in a great water-flood. There’s poor Sir Murray half-mad with grief, shutting himself up in his library, and never hardly so much as eating or drinking a bit. There’s my own dear, sweet lady lying there day after day, with the lids shut down over those poor soft eyes of hers, never moving, and nobody knowing whether she’s living or dead, only when she gives one of those little sobbing sighs. And then there’s the poor old Rector, coming every day over and over again to see how she is, and looking as if his heart would break; and poor Mrs Elstree wandering up and down the passages like a ghost. Oh, dear! – oh, dear! – oh, dear! the place isn’t like the same, and I don’t know what’s to become of us all. One didn’t need to have jewels missing, and poor servants suspected of taking them, and sent away without a month’s warning, and not a bit of character. But oh, John! – John! – John! it wasn’t a month’s warning you had, but many months’ warning; and it wasn’t you stole the cross, but let something steal away all your good heart and good looks too.”

Here Jane Barker burst out into a passionate fit of weeping, sobbing as though her heart would break. She was sitting by her open window – one looking over a part of the shrubbery which concealed the servants’ offices from the view of those who strolled through the grounds. It was not the first night by many that Jane had sat there bewailing her troubles, for it had become a favourite custom with her to sit there, thoughtful and silent, till her passionate grief brought forth some such outburst as the above. Busy the whole day at her work about the sick-chamber of her lady, Jane told herself that at such times there was something else for her to do beside sorrowing; but when at midnight all about was wrapped in silence, the poor girl would sit or kneel at her window, mourning and crying for hour after hour.

“Oh, my poor dear lady! If it should come to the worst, and her never to look upon the little soft face of that sweet babe, sent to be a comfort to her when she’s been so solitary and unhappy all these years; for she has been. Oh! these men – these men! They break our poor hearts, they do! Why didn’t the Captain come back sooner and make her happy? or why didn’t he die in real earnest over in the hot Ingies, where they said he was killed, and not come back just then to make her heart sore, as I know it has been ever since? though, poor soul, she loves, honours, and obeys her husband as she should. There didn’t never ought to be any marrying at all, for it’s always been an upset to me ever since I thought about it; and him such a proper man, too, as he used to be – such a nice red and white face, and always so smart till he took to the drink; as I told him, he got to love it ever so much better than he loved me, though he always coaxed me round into forgiving him. I always knew it was weak; but then I couldn’t help it, and I didn’t make myself; and if poor women are made weak and helpless, what can they do?

“I always told him it would be his ruin, and begged of him to give it up – and oh! the times he’s kissed me and promised me he would! And then for it to come to this. He’d never have said such cruel things about my lady if it had not been for the drink; and though I’d forgive him almost anything, I couldn’t forgive him for speaking as he did. I do think he likes me, and that it isn’t all for the sake of the bit of money, which he might have and welcome if it would do him any good. If he would only leave off writing to me, and asking me to meet him when he knows I daren’t, and every letter breaking my heart, and at a time, too, when I’ve got nowhere to go and sit down and cry. No; let him mend a bit, and show me that he’s left off the drink, and my poor dear lady get well first, and I’ll leave directly, as I told him I would, and work and slave for him all my life, just for the sake of a few kind words; for I know I’m only a poor ignorant woman; but I can love him very – very much, and – ”

Jane stopped short, listening attentively, for at that moment there was a faint rustling sound beneath the window, and then, after a few minutes’ interval, another and another; a soft rustling sound

as of something forcing its way gently amongst the bushes and low shrubs, for at times a step was audible amongst the dead leaves, and once there came a loud crack, as if a foot had been set upon a dry twig which had snapped sharply.

Then there was utter silence again, and the girl sat listening with pale face, lips apart, and her breath drawn with difficulty, as her heart beat with a heavy throb, throb, throb, at the unwonted sound. It could not be one of the dogs, for they were all chained up; and if it had been a strange step she felt that they would have barked, and given some alarm. The deer never came near the house, and it was extremely doubtful whether any of the cattle in the great park could have strayed into the private grounds through some gate having been left open. Her heart told her what the noise was, and accelerated its beats with excitement, so that when, after a renewal of the soft rustling, she heard a sound as of hard breathing, and then a husky voice whispering her name, she was in no wise surprised.

"Tst – tst, Jane!" seemed to come out of the black darkness below – a darkness that she in vain tried to penetrate.

"Oh, why did you come – why did you come?" sobbed Jane. "Somebody will be sure to hear you, and then you'll be in worse trouble than ever, besides getting me turned out of my place. Oh, John! – oh, John! how can you be such a cruel fellow!"

"Hold your tongue, will you, and don't be a fool," was the husky reply. "I'm going to have you away from here, Jenny, in a few days, and then his proudship shall have some letters as shall make him pay me to hold my tongue, or else have all his pride tumbling about his ears."

"Oh, you wicked wretch!" muttered Jane to herself, for his words roused her slumbering resentment, and drove her troubles away for the present.

"Can you hear all I say?" whispered the voice from below.

"Yes," whispered Jane again; "but what do you want? Oh, pray, pray go!"

"Yes," said Gurdon. "I'll go when I've done; but I want to talk to you first. Who's at home? Is he here?"

"Who? Master? Yes," whispered Jane, "and the doctor, and my lady's pa: they're all here, for she's been very bad to-night."

"But are they all gone to bed?" whispered Gurdon.

"Yes, all but Mrs Elstree, who's sitting up in my lady's room."

"Come down then, softly, into the passage and open the lobby door; you can let me in then, through the billiard-room."

"That I'm sure I'm not going to!" exclaimed Jane, indignantly, "and you ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking me such a thing. It isn't like you, John."

"Hold your tongue, will you!" he exclaimed, gruffly. "Do you want to be heard, and have me shot by one of the keepers, or some one fire at me from one of the windows?"

"N-n-no," gasped Jane; "but pray do go; pray, dear John, go away!"

"Ah, you're very anxious to get rid of me now," said Gurdon, sneeringly, for he could hear that Jane was sobbing; "I may go now, just because I made a slip, and you want to see me no more. It's the way of the world."

"No – no; don't talk like that," cried Jane, "for you know I don't deserve it; but pray, for both our sakes, go away at once. Write to me and say what you want."

"I shan't do nothing of the kind!" hissed Gurdon, angrily. "You do as I tell you: come down and let me in, or it'll be the worse for you. I want to talk to you so as I can't talk here. I've got a deal to say about the future."

"I don't care, and I won't!" said Jane, excitedly, for anger roused in her anger in return. At such times she did not at all feel afraid of John Gurdon, nor of his threats, but was ready to meet him with open resistance. "I'm not going to do any such thing, so there now! It's more than my place is worth, and you know it, John. And besides, it wouldn't be seemly and modest."

“Oh, you’ve grown very modest all at once, you have,” sneered Gurdon, angrily. “It’s all make believe; and if you don’t do as I tell you, I’ll pay you out in a way as’ll startle you! Come down this minute,” he hissed, “and do as I tell you! I will speak to you!”

“You won’t do nothing of the kind,” said Jane, angrily; “you’ve been drinking again, or you wouldn’t have come here to ask such a thing, nor you wouldn’t have thrown them nasty, sneering, jeering words at one that no one can say a word against, so there, now. And now, good night, Mr Gurdon,” she said, frigidly; and he heard the sash begin to close.

“Oh, Jane – Jane, darling! please – please stop, only a minute,” he whined, for he knew that he had played a false card, and that it was time to withdraw it. “Don’t be hard on a poor fellow as is fallen, and who’s put out of temper by his troubles. I didn’t think that you’d turn your back upon me – I didn’t, indeed.”

John Gurdon paused, and gave vent to a snuffle, and something that was either a hiccup or a sob. Jane Barker, too, paused in her act of closing the window, for somehow John Gurdon had wound his way so tightly round her soft heart, that she was ready to strike him one moment, and to go down on her knees and beg forgiveness the next.

“It’s very hard,” sobbed Gurdon, in maudlin tones. “Even she has turned upon me now, even to closing the window, and denying me a hearing – I didn’t think it of her. A woman that I’ve worshipped almost – a woman as I’d have died for a dozen times over; but it isn’t in her nature.”

Gurdon stopped and listened attentively.

“She isn’t a bad one at heart,” he continued, in the same whining, lachrymose tones, “but she’s been set against me, and it’s all over now; and I may as well make an end of myself as try and live. I did think as she’d have come down to listen to me; but no, and it’s all over. The whole world now has shut its doors and windows in my face!”

“Oh, John – John, pray, pray don’t talk so!” sobbed Jane.

“What! not gone?” he exclaimed, in mock ecstasy.

“No, no! How could you think I should be so cruel?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he whined. “But pray, pray come down: I want to have a few words about what’s to be done. I don’t want to take a public-house now, Jane, but to go into the grocery and baking; and there’s a chance before me, if I could only point it out.”

“Well, tell me now,” sobbed Jane.

“No; how can I?” said Gurdon – “I shall be heard. Ah! Jenny, you don’t care for me as you used, or you wouldn’t keep me out here like this!”

“Oh, what shall I do?” sobbed Jane. “I can’t do as he asks, and he knows it; and yet he’s trying to break my heart, he is!”

“Now, then, are you going to listen to me, Jenny?” whispered Gurdon, imploringly.

“Oh, I can’t – I can’t: I daren’t do it!” sobbed poor Jane.

“Oh, please, if you love me, don’t drive me to desperation!” cried Gurdon. “I – ”

“Hush!” whispered Jane, in affrighted tones, for at that moment there was a loud knocking at her bedroom door, and the voice of Mrs Elstree was heard.

“Jane – Jane! Quick! Call Sir Murray! My darling is dying!”

Beneath the Shadow

As, muttering a savage oath, John Gurdon crept through the yielding shrubs, Jane Barker softly closed the window, and then glided to the door.

“Not gone to bed?” exclaimed Mrs Elstree. “Thank Heaven! Rouse Sir Murray and my husband while I run back.”

“Have you called Dr Challen, ma’am?” said Jane, in agitated tones.

“Oh yes: he is in the bedroom,” sobbed Mrs Elstree; and she hurried back.

In a few minutes husband and father were by the bedside, watching with agitated countenances the struggle going on, for truly it seemed that the long lethargy into which Lady Gernon had been plunged was to be terminated by the triumph of the dread shade. As Mrs Elstree had sat watching her, she had suddenly started up to talk in a wild, incoherent manner; and as Sir Murray Gernon stood there in his long dressing-gown, with brow knit, a shade that was not one of sorrow crossed his brow upon hearing some of his stricken wife’s babblings.

“Philip,” she said – and as she spoke her voice softened, and there was a yearning look of gentleness in her countenance – “Philip, the cross: where is the cross? Have you hid it? – have you taken it away? Pray, pray restore it! He will be angry. They are favourite old jewels, that I wear for his sake. You loved me once; for the sake of the old times give it me back! He will ask for it. Where is the cross? Do you see: blue sapphires, each like a little forget-me-not peering up at you. Your flowers – true blue, Philip. But the cross – I must have the cross!”

She was silent for a few minutes, and then, wildly turning to her husband, she caught his hand in hers.

“Philip,” she cried, addressing him, “it is all madness – something of the past. It was not to be, and we have each our path to follow. I heard the rumours: trouble – failure – your income swept away – dearest Ada. But you must not come to want. You will give me back the cross, though; not the forget-me-nots. Keep them, though they are withered and dry – withered and dry as our old love – something of the past. Let me see,” she said – and her eyes assumed a troubled, anxious expression – “you cannot claim me now. I am another’s – his wife. How blue the lake looks! and how plainly it mirrors the mountains! Fair blue waters – blue – true blue. If I could have died then – died when you plucked the flowers from my breast – but it was not to be. I have a duty to fulfil – a burden – a cross” – she said, dreamily – “a cross? Yes – yes – yes, the cross. You will give it me back, Philip,” she whispered, with a smile; “it lies, you see, where once your forget-me-nots lay. I cannot wear them now, but the colour is the same – true blue. But you will find them for me, those bright gems, and all will yet be well.”

She raised Sir Murray’s hand to her lips, and kissed it reverently, as she continued:

“Always true and noble, Philip. You will respect my husband for the sake of the old days. It has been like a cloud always hovering above my life: that great dread lest you should ever meet in anger. Go now – let me sleep – I am weak and weary. But remember your promise.”

Pride, misery, despair, shame, and grief, seemed to have mingled for him a cup of bitterness, forcing him to drink it there in the presence of those who were gathered round the sick woman’s couch; and it was with a step that tottered in spite of all his self-command, that when Lady Gernon loosed his hand, Sir Murray strode slowly from the room, to seek the solitude of the library, where, alone through the rest of that night, he could sit and brood upon his misery. She did not love him – she had never loved him; and he told himself that he could not stay to hear her words – to hold her hand, when her last sigh was breathed. Had not that man risen, as it were, from the dead to blast their wedding, she would have clung to him with a softened, child-like affection; but now – “how could he stay when her thoughts all seemed another’s?”

The tearful eyes of father and mother met across the bed, as Sir Murray left the room, and then as the doctor sat silent and averted of gaze by the bedside, the broken voice of the father rose, as, sinking upon his knees, he prayed long and earnestly that Heaven of its goodness would grant the renewal of life to his child, if but for a short time, that she might prove to her husband that the words he had that night heard were but the vain babblings of her distempered brain. That she might live for his, for her child's, for her parents' sake, and during her life, however short, sweep away the cruel mists of doubt and suspicion that clung to her hearth.

Fervent and low did that prayer sound in the silence of the sick-chamber, where all that wealth could spread in profusion was waiting to minister to the owner's wants. But to those present it seemed as if the splendour were but a mockery; and the story of Lady Gernon's life, well known to all, pointed ever to one great void – a void that no wealth could supply.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.