Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Mohawks: A Novel. Volume 3 of 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
"YOU CALLED ME, AND I CAME HOME TO YOUR HEART."

Another revolution of the social wheel. Summer was over, and Twickenham, Richmond, Bath, and Tunbridge Wells were deserted for the new squares and narrow streets between Soho and Hyde Park Corner. The theatres in Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn were open every night, the opera-house in the Haymarket was crowded, and drums and assemblies, concerts and quadrille-parties, filled the very air with excitement. 'Twas said the young people were younger than they used to be, and all the old had grown young. The new reign began in a blaze of gaiety; King and Queen, flushed with the sense of power, delighted to occupy the first place after having so long held the second rank; conscious, too, of a handsome exchequer, and a clever minister who could

change stones into gold; at peace with other nations, and with leisure to enjoy themselves.

The King had only one objection to London, and that extended to the whole of his British dominions. He would rather have been in Hanover. It needed all her Majesty's subtlety, all Lady Suffolk's subservient devotion, all Walpole's strenuous arguments, to keep him contented at St. James's or Kensington, when his inclinations all pointed to the old German home, and the old German ways of thinking and living.

Lady Judith Topsparkle was a favourite at the new Court. Her beauty and vivacity made her conspicuous even where many other women were beautiful and vivacious. She and Mary Hervey were sworn friends, and Lord Hervey raved about her fine eyes and her sharp tongue. Lady Mary Montagu praised her, and won her money at ombre, being by far the luckier player. Lady Judith's afternoon card-parties, to which only women were admitted, had become the rage. The house in Soho was thronged with hoops and high heads, and although only ladies were allowed a seat at any of the tables, the men soon forced an entrance, and assisted as spectators, sometimes betting furiously on the progress of the game.

Mr. Topsparkle went in and out, shrugged his shoulders with his highly Parisian shrug, and said very little. The play was supposed to be a gentle feminine business, for very modest stakes. The sums that were spoken of seemed almost contemptible for such fine ladies. But these fair ones had a jargon

of their own; they talked and counted in a cipher, and the coins that changed hands in public were but symbols of the debts that were to be paid in private next morning.

"I protest, Lady Judith, I owe you a crown," cried Lady Hervey.

"And I am Lady Polwhele's debtor for a guinea," said Lady Judith, producing the coin from a toy purse; and next morning Juba carried a letter lined with bank-notes from Lady Judith to the Dowager, while Judith received a heartrending plea for grace from a chaplain's wife who had lost half a year of her husband's stipend to her ladyship on a previous afternoon.

Topsparkle called these assemblies the mysteries of the Bona Dea.

"And I'll warrant," said Bolingbroke, "there is always Clodius somewhere in hiding among the hoops and powder, were there only a mother-in-law to unearth him."

Durnford called occasionally in Soho Square to satisfy Lavendale, who was now at his house in Bloomsbury, living in the seclusion of a hermit, although the town with all its pleasures was at his elbow. He looked very ill, and was the victim of an abiding melancholy which moved his friend to deepest compassion. To oblige him, Durnford left his quiet lodging by Russell Street, and took up his quarters in Bloomsbury Square, where he had a whole suite of rooms to himself, and where he was able to keep an eye upon his friend, whose condition filled him with alarm.

He had somewhat agreeable business in hand just now in the

production of his play, which was to be brought out at Drury Lane by his Majesty's company of comedians. Upon the success of this play his future and his marriage in some wise depended, for the production of a successful comedy would at once place him in the highest literary rank. The actors were all sanguine of success, and were pleased at the idea of putting forward a new man. Mr. Cibber declared that *An Old Story* was the best comedy that had been written since *The Conscious Lovers*.

"I wish poor Dick Steele were in health to applaud your play, Mr. Durnford," said the manager. "He was ever generous to a young rival. He would have made the reputation of Savage, had that wild youth been of a less difficult temper. But, alas, Sir Richard is but a wreck, wheeled about in a Bath-chair at his retreat in Shropshire, and with Death walking at his elbow."

The play was a success. Mrs. Oldfield, the brilliant, the elegant Nancy Oldfield, the most admired and indulged of her sex, who could violate all the laws of decorum, and yet be received and courted in the politest society, the finest comedy actress in that age of fine acting, condescended to appear in Mr. Durnford's piece, and her performance of a character of the Lady Betty Modish type, with Wilks as her lover, ravished the town. She had more grace, more distinction, than any woman of quality in London; she was the very quintessence of a fine lady, concentrating in her own person all the airs and graces, caprices and *minauderies*, of half a dozen fashionable coquettes, adopting a shrug from one, a wave of the fan from another, a

twirl of her hoop from a third – bewitching and enchanting her audience, albeit her beauty had long been on the wane, and she was well over forty. It was the last comedy part she ever studied; and she would scarce have undertaken it but for Mr. Durnford's reputation as a man of some slight fashion, and the bosom friend of Lavendale.

Nor was Wilks, the famous Sir Harry Wildair, less admirable as a fine gentleman than Mrs. Oldfield as a fine lady. A young man of good family and liberal education, he had made his *début* in Dublin the year after the Revolution, and coming thence to London, he had quickly caught the grace and dash of the bucks and bloods of that statelier period. As the periwig shortened and manners relaxed, he had cultivated the more careless style of the Hanoverian era, with all its butterfly graces and audacious swagger. There was an insolent self-assurance in his love-making which delighted the fine ladies of the period, with whom modesty and reverence for womanhood were at a discount. Durnford knew Wilks intimately as a boon companion and as an actor. He had taken the exact measure of the veteran comedian's talents and capacities; and in the middle-aged fop of quality had produced a character which promised to become as popular as Wildair or Lord Townley.

All the town rushed to see *An Old Story*, and the patentees were eager for future comedies from the same hand. A single comedy had made Congreve independent for life; and with the success of his play Herrick Durnford felt that his prosperity as a

literary worker was assured. He had tried his pen in the various departments of literature, and had been successful in all. He had won for himself a certain standing in the House of Commons, and had Walpole's promise of a place. In a word, he was as well able to marry as Richard Steele was when he took unto himself the wayward and capricious Mrs. Molly Scurlock, and he had all Steele's pluck, and a good deal more than Steele's industry.

Now then he resolved upon a step which to the outer world would have seemed desperate even to madness, a reckless throwing away of fortune. He resolved upon carrying off the Squire's heiress, and marrying her off-hand at the little chapel which Parson Keith had lately established in Curzon Street. He had always had a Mayfair marriage in his mind as the last revolt against tyranny, and he had reasons for deciding that the time had come when that revolt should be made.

It rested with Irene to give or to withhold her consent to this strong measure. He meant to use no undue persuasion. Freely must she come to his arms, as he had told himself in the dawning of their love. He had not set himself to steal her, but to win her.

When *An Old Story* had run fifteen nights, and had been applauded and approved by all the town, from their Majesties and the Court to the misses in the side-boxes, the apprentices in the shilling gallery, and the orange-girls in the pit, Herrick rode down to Lavendale Manor one October morning, and contrived a meeting by the old oak fence in the waning light between five and six o'clock in the evening. His ever-willing Mercury

had conveyed a note to Miss Bosworth, and she was first at the trysting-place.

"My dearest, this is so good of you," said Herrick, as he clasped her to his breast and kissed the shy, half-reluctant lips.

"'Twas selfish curiosity brought me," she answered. "I have been expiring with anxiety to hear about your play. My father's newspapers told me so little, though they told me 'twas the best comedy that had been written for years; and it's so hard we cannot write to each other freely. I have been pining for a letter."

"Dearest, the time is past for secret letters and stolen meetings. The hour has struck for boldness and liberty – for open, happy, unassailable love. Irene, you have told me more than once that you do not value wealth."

"And I tell you so again," she answered.

"And that you would freely renounce a great fortune to be my wife, the mistress of a modest unluxurious home, such as I am now able to support."

"I think you know that I would be happier with you in a hovel than with any other husband in a palace," she said, in a low sweet voice that thrilled him, and with drooping eyelids, as if she were half ashamed at the boldness of her confession.

"Then break your chains, Rena; fly with the lover who adores you; steal away in the early dawn to-morrow; steal across the park with foot as light and form as graceful as the young fawn's yonder. Meet me at the wicket that opens on the road. I will have a carriage-and-four ready to receive you. I'll whip you up in my

arms and carry you off as Jove carried Europa, and we shall be well over the first stage to London before your gaolers discover their captive has escaped. I saw Parson Keith last night; he will be ready to marry us at ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and his ceremonial will be just as binding as if we were married by an archbishop."

"But can I disobey my father, prove myself an ungrateful daughter?" asked Irene, with a distressed air.

She had been woman enough to know that this crisis in her life must come sooner or later; that love would not wait for ever. She had pondered upon this crucial question in many an hour of solitude, and now it had come and must be answered.

"Dear love, you have to choose between that tyrannic father and me," pleaded Herrick, with impassioned earnestness; "the time has come for that choice to be made. I have hung back hitherto, fearful to trust the future; but I am now assured of a literary career and of Sir Robert Walpole's friendship and patronage. I can afford to tempt fortune so far as to take a wife. I am secure of keeping a roof over my darling's head, and that the pinch of poverty shall never be hers."

"I am not afraid of poverty – I only fear to offend my father."

"That is a hazard which must be run, Irene. We have tried to be dutiful, both of us. I addressed him honourably as a suitor for your hand; urged upon him that my prospects were not hopeless, that I was industrious, patient, and had begun to earn my living. He rejected my proposals with contempt, treated me as harshly as

ever miserly hidalgo in a Spanish comedy treated his daughter's suitor. If you are ever to be mine, Rena, you must brave your father's anger. You will never be mine with his consent, and 'tis ill waiting for dead men's shoes, saying we will put off our happiness till the old man is in his coffin. Let us be happy in spite of him. When the deed is done, I have a way to win him to forgive us both."

"What way, Herrick?" she asked eagerly.

"That is my secret, which I will reveal only to my wife."

"Ah, that is playing on my curiosity to win me to rebellion."

"Not rebellion, Rena; only natural revolt against an unendurable tyranny."

"Do you think he will ever forgive?"

"He will, he must. He will have no right to be angry, from the moment he knows my secret."

"You torture me with your enigmas. Why will you not tell me?"

"To my wife, my wife only," he whispered, drawing her to his breast once again, and stifling her questions with kisses. "That secret is for none but my wife's ear: but, as I am a man of honour, Irene, you will stand free of all reproach for undutifulness. You can look Squire Bosworth in the face and say, 'I am no rebellious daughter;' and if he has a spark of generosity in him he shall take you to his heart as I do now, and give you love for love."

"He is not ungenerous," said Irene. "But I wish you would be less mysterious."

"There shall be no mysteries when I am your husband. And now, love, say that you will come. I have done my part towards your father as a man of honour. I have worked hard as journalist and politician for wife and home. Am I to be disappointed of my reward?"

"No, love," she answered, "you shall not be cheated. I will be your wife; even at the risk of never seeing my father's face again."

He thanked and blest her, in a rapture of love and gratitude; and then came a reiteration of his instructions. She was to creep out of the house before the servants were up; they rose at daybreak, but she must be before them. There was a glass door in the white parlour where they had all dined together – Lavendale, Herrick, the Squire, and his daughter – so often last year. This door opened into the garden, and was fastened with bolts which could be easily withdrawn; especially if Irene would but take the trouble to oil the fastenings over-night, to guard against any tell-tale scrooping of the iron. Then, cloaked and warmly clad, she was to skirt the shrubberies and cross the park to the wicket-gate. There Herrick and his coach would be in readiness; and all the rest was a question of fleet horses and quick relays, of which it was the lover's business to make sure over-night.

"I shall ride to Esher and on to Kingston, and make all preparations before ten o'clock," he said.

Irene was not like Lady Judith. She never thought of her gowns, or asked how she was to carry away her clothes. Not more than the lilies of the field did she consider her raiment

in this solemn crisis of her life. She only knew that soon after daybreak to-morrow morning she would be in her lover's arms, speeding away along the London road to be wedded and made one with him for ever. That she was to leave a noble inheritance and all her frocks and furbelows behind her troubled her not the least. She had no lust for finery, or to shine and dazzle in some new sphere. Blindly, and with a childlike confidence, she threw herself into her lover's arms, believing him wisest and best among all mankind.

So in the gray cold October dawn those two met at the wicket-gate, the coach and four horses standing ready a little way along the road. There had been nothing to hinder Irene's flight, albeit her sharpest gaoler, Mrs. Layburne, lay wakeful and restless as the girl's light foot passed her chamber-door. Irene heard the short dry cough, and the quick impatient sigh that followed; and she knew that her father's mysterious housekeeper was lying there, sleepless and suffering.

"My glorious girl," cried Herrick, as he hurried her to the carriage, "I half feared your courage might fail you."

"There was no fear of that, Herrick," she answered quietly; "but I felt myself a rebel and an undutiful daughter as I crept past my father's room."

"You will not think that to-morrow."

"To-morrow! What do you mean by to-morrow?"

"Only that I intend to beard the lion in his den, Irene, or in other words to ask the Squire's pardon as soon as you are so fast

my wife that no fury of his can part us. We will not behave as most runaway lovers do, go and hide themselves and wait for Providence to melt the paternal heart. We will go straight to the tyrant, and say, 'You see, love is stronger than self-interest. It is not your fortune we want, but your love;' and if he has a heart he will forgive us both, Irene."

"I hope he will," she murmured despondently.

"You hope, but you don't believe. Well, we shall see. And now tell me, sweet, how is the Squire's housekeeper, Mrs. Layburne?"

"Very ill. Indeed, Herrick, I fear the poor soul has not many weeks, or perhaps many days, to live. It is a sad and lonely ending. She shuns all sympathy, and waits for death in a proud silence which has an awful air. Alas, I fear she lacks all the consolations of piety. I have offered to read to her, to pray with her; but she refused with open scorn. She will have nothing to say to Mademoiselle, who is all kindness. Bridget detests her, and yet tries to nurse her and to do all she can to lessen her sufferings: but it is an unthankful office. My father looks miserable, and I think the presence of that dying woman in the house overshadows his life. He has not been to London for weeks. He sits alone in his study, reading or writing, as if he were waiting for Mrs. Layburne's death. Mademoiselle and I have hardly seen him from day to day, yet last year we were all three so happy together. He used always to dine and spend his evenings with us; but now he dines alone, and is shut up in his study till midnight."

The horses were tearing along the London road, past breezy

commons and low-wooded hills, between which flashed now and then a distant glimpse of the river – a silvery streak across the gray of the autumn landscape. Herrick put his head out of the coach window once in a quarter of an hour, to survey the road behind him; but there was no sign of pursuit. The chances were that Irene's absence would not be discovered till eight o'clock, the usual breakfast-hour; and it was not yet seven. They had a clear hour before them.

They changed horses at Kingston, and were crossing Wimbledon Common at eight. The strong fresh horses tore down the hill into Wandsworth, and now Herrick felt that his prize was won. From Wandsworth to the ferry between Lambeth and Westminster was but half an hour's drive. The Abbey clock was striking nine as they stepped into the ferry-boat.

A hackney coach was waiting for them on the other side, bespoken by Durnford before he left London on the previous day, a coach which carried them to Curzon Street in a quarter of an hour, and there was Parson Keith in his surplice, ready to begin the ceremony.

How solemn and how sweet the service sounded to those true lovers, as they stood side by side before the communion-table, in the shabby little chapel which was to be the scene of so many a clandestine union, of so many a love-match doomed to end in mutual aversion! But here Fate promised a more consistent future. Here was no transient passion, born but to die, no will-o'-the-wisp love, leading the lovers over swamps and perilous

places, to expire in a quagmire, but a pure and steady flame that would light their pathway to the close of life.

Durnford left the chapel with his bride on his arm, half expecting to meet Squire Bosworth on the threshold, just half an hour too late to hinder the marriage. He would be likely to guess that the runaway couple would go straight to Parson Keith. But there was no furious father, only the jarvey nodding on his box, and a handful of vagabonds and idlers demanding largesse from the bridegroom, a scurvy crew who always gathered from the adjacent alleys to stare at the gentry whom Mr. Keith made happy.

"To Lord Lavendale's, Bloomsbury Square," said Herrick; and then when they were seated side by side in the coach, he told Irene how Lavendale had insisted that they should lodge at his house till they had one of their own, and that they were to take as much time as ever they could in finding one.

"He has given me a suite of rooms, where we shall be as much alone as if we had a house all to ourselves," he said.

They found the rooms prepared for them, the servants in attendance, and an excellent breakfast of chicken and iced champagne on the table. Lavendale was discreetly absent. The butler told Mr. Durnford that his lordship was not expected home till the evening.

After breakfast, Durnford proposed that Irene should do a little shopping, and then it occurred to the bride for the first time that all her wardrobe was at Fairmile Court.

"And I am to cost you money at the very beginning!" she said dolefully.

"Dearest, it will be bliss to spend my money in such sweet service."

"Ah, but wait! I have twenty guineas in my purse, which my father gave me a week ago, my quarterly allowance of pocket-money. That will buy all I shall want for the present; and I daresay he will let me have my clothes from Fairmile. However angry he may be, he will scarcely insist upon keeping my clothes."

"It would assuredly be a petty form of resentment. Well, dearest, may I go shopping with you? or would you rather go alone in a chair?"

"I would rather go with you."

"Then we'll just walk quietly into Holborn, as if we were an old married couple."

Irene put on her cloak and hood in front of a Venetian glass, while Herrick walked up and down the room and glanced somewhat uneasily from the windows, expecting the Squire's arrival.

They had breakfasted in a leisurely fashion, and it was now two o'clock. There had been ample time for Mr. Bosworth to go to Parson Keith, and having obtained his information from the parson, who knew the destination of the newly-married couple, to come on to Bloomsbury Square. Yet there was still no sign of pursuit. Nor did anything occur all that afternoon to interrupt the serenity of the bride and bridegroom. They went together to

the mercer's and to the milliner's, and Irene made her purchases on a very modest scale, and well within the limits of her pocket-money, while her husband discreetly waited at the door of the shop, and exercised a patience rare after the halcyon days of the honeymoon.

"How good you are to wait for me!" said Irene, as she rejoined him; "shopkeepers are so slow, and they pester one so to buy more than one wants."

"If you were like Mrs. Skerritt, who haunts every sale-room and bids for everything she sees, your catalogue of wants would not be completed half so easily," answered Herrick; "jealous though I am of your absence, I must own you have been vastly quick."

"But pray who is Mrs. Skerritt?" asked Irene. "Stay, she is the lady who was so kind to you. I should like to know her."

"Nay, love, I think it were better not, though there are great ladies who ask her to their houses, and pretend to adore her – Lady Mary Montagu, for instance. But my young wife must choose her friends with the utmost discretion."

"I wish for no friends whom you do not care for," said his bride; "and now, Herrick, when am I to see the new comedy? It is hard that all the town should have admired my husband's play, while I know so little about it."

"Shall we go to Drury Lane this evening?"

"I should love to go."

"Then you shall. Lavendale has hired a box for the run of my

play – he always does things in a princely style – and we can have it all to ourselves this evening. 'Twill be our first public appearance as man and wife, and all the town will guess we are married, and will envy me my prize."

They dined, or pretended to dine, at four, and then Lavendale's chariot drove them to Drury Lane.

What a delight it was for Irene to sit by her lover-husband's side, and watch and listen while the story of the play unfolded itself – to hear the audience laugh and applaud at each brisk retort, each humorous or fondly tender fancy! The play was a story of love and lovers, the old, old story which has been telling itself ever since creation, and which yet seems ever new to the actors in it. There were wit and passion and freshness and manly spirit in Herrick's play, but there was not a single indecency; and the older school of wits and scribblers wondered exceedingly how so milk-and-waterish a comedy could take the town. Mrs. Manley, in a dark little box yonder, whispering behind her fan to a superannuated buck in a periwig that reached his knees, protested that the play was the tamest she had ever sat out.

"Tamer than *The Conscious Lovers*," she said, "though poor Dick lived in such fear of his wife that he dared never give free scope to his wit, lest Mrs. Molly should take offence at him. O, for the days of Etherege and Wycherley!"

"Nay, I protest," said the buck, adjusting a stray curl with his pocket-comb, and ogling the house with weak elderly eyes; "the play may be decent, but it is not tame. Those scenes between

Nancy and Wilks are vastly fine. Stap my vitals if I have not been between laughing and crying all the evening; and this is the seventh time I have seen the piece. I wonder who that pretty creature is in my Lord Lavendale's box, in a plain gray gown and a cherry-coloured hood? She is the finest woman – present company excepted – I have ogled for a decade."

"The gentleman sitting beside her is the author of the play," said Mrs. Manley, screwing up her eyes to peer across the width of the pit. "She is some vizard Miss that ought to be sitting in the slips, I'll be sworn."

"Nay, I'll take my oath she is a modest woman."

"But to sit alone in a box with a bachelor, and a notorious rake into the bargain – Lavendale's boon companion!"

"O, you are talking of the days before the deluge. Mr. Durnford has turned sober, and sits in Parliament. He is one of the doughtiest knights in Sir Robert's phalanx – a rising man, madam; and as for Lavendale, he too has turned sober. One hardly ever meets him at White's, or any of the other chocolate-houses. I am told he is dying."

"When he is dead you may tell me of his sobriety and I will believe you," retorted the bluestocking, "but till then forgive me if I doubt your veracity or your information. It was only last June I saw Lavendale at Vauxhall intriguing with Lady Judith Topsparkle. I almost knocked against them in one of the dark walks, and a woman who saunters in a dark walk at midnight, hanging on the arm of a former lover – "

"Is in a fair way to forget her duty to a latter husband," asserted the buck, regaling himself with a pinch of smoked rappee out of the handle of his clouded cane.

Three or four of Durnford's acquaintance came to the box in the course of the evening, and were duly presented to his bride, whom they had all recognised as the beauty and heiress of Arlington Street, a star that had flashed upon the town for a brief space, to disappear into rustic obscurity.

"I feared, Mrs. Bosworth, that this poor little smoky town of ours was never again to be illumined by your beauty," said Mr. Philter, who was one of the first to press an entrance into the box.

"Mrs. Bosworth belongs only to history," said Herrick; "I have the honour to present you to Mrs. Durnford."

"What, Herrick! you astound me. Can fortune have been so lavish, and can destiny have been so blind, when your obedient servant Thomas Philter still sighs and worships at the shrine of beauty a miserable bachelor?"

"I have heard you boast 'tis your own fault," laughed Herrick. "It is Philter who is wilful and reluctant, not Venus who is unkind."

"I grant that good easy lady has always been gracious," answered the scribbler gaily; "but how did you manage this business, Durnford? how reconcile a wealthy landed gentleman to the incongruity of a man of letters as a son-in-law?"

"Faith, Philter, since the incongruity seemed somewhat irreconcilable, we have taken the matter into our own hands.

'Twas Parson Keith who tied the knot, at ten o'clock this morning."

"The Reverend Alexander is the most useful man of the age, and this new Mayfair chapel is the true gate of Paradise," said Philter; and then with much flourish he congratulated Irene upon her marriage with his friend.

"Your father will come round, madam," he said. "They all do. They curse and rage and stamp and blaspheme for a time, are more furious than in a fit of podagra; but after a storm comes a calm, and the tyrant softens to the doating grandfather. No argument so potent as a son and heir to melt the heart of a wealthy landowner."

"I'm afraid, Philter, your impressions of the paternal character are mostly derived from the stage," said Durnford. "In a comedy the sternest parent is obliged to yield. No father's wrath can survive the fifth act. The curtain cannot come down till the lovers are forgiven. But in actual life I take it there is such a thing as an obstinate anger which lasts till the grave. However, we mean to soften Mr. Bosworth, if dutiful feeling and a proper sense of our own misconduct can soften him."

"Do you mean to tell him you repent, eh, you dog?" asked Philter.

"Not for the world would I utter such a lie. I glory in the rebellion which has gained me this dearest prize."

CHAPTER II
"O, TO WHAT END, EXCEPT A JEALOUS ONE?"

The married lovers were startled at their breakfast next morning by the arrival of Mdlle. Latour in a hackney chair. She had travelled up from Fairmile to the Hercules Pillars in Piccadilly by the heavy night coach, and had come from the inn in a chair. She looked worn and haggard with fatigue and anxiety.

"I knew where I should find my runaway," she said, clasping Irene in her arms, and covering her fair young face with tearful kisses. "I went first to Mr. Durnford's lodgings, where the woman told me he was staying at Lord Lavendale's house in Bloomsbury, and the same chair brought me here. O Irene, what a trick you have played us!"

"I loved him too well to give him up," faltered the girl. "If there had been any hope of winning my father's consent I would have waited for it. But tell me, Maman, how does he take my disobedience? Is he dreadfully angry?"

"Alas, yes, *ma chérie*, his anger is indeed dreadful. I can conceive no kind of wrath more terrible. It is a silent anger. He sits alone in his room, or paces the corridors, and none of us dare approach him. Once he went into Mrs. Layburne's room, and was closeted with her for an hour; and then that awful calm broke in a

tempest of angry words. Do not think that I listened at the door, Rena, in a prying spirit. I was in the hall, near enough to hear those furious tones, but not one word of speech. I could hear her voice, and it had a mocking sound. I believe in my heart, Rena, that the woman is a demoniac, and would glory in any misfortune of her master's. She has brooded over that house like an evil spirit, and the domestic quiet of our lives has been pain and grief to her. And now she flaps her wings like a bird of evil omen, and croaks out her rapture, and riots in your father's anguish."

"Why should he suffer anguish?" asked Irene. "I have married an honest man."

"Ah, but he had his own ambitious schemes for your marriage. You were to be a great lady, or you were at least to join wealth to wealth. Consider that he has given himself up so long to the labour of money-making that he has grown to think of money as the beginning and end of life. He will die with his mind full of 'Change Alley and the rise and fall of stocks."

"Then how could I help disappointing him – I who care so little for money?" pleaded Rena.

"And so Mrs. Layburne has been playing the devil," said Durnford. "Well, I am not surprised. I have heard some particulars of that lady's history from those who were familiar with her in her youth, early in Queen Anne's reign, and who remember her as a handsome fury, with the voice of an angel and the temper of a fiend. She sang in *Camilla* with Valentini, that first mongrel opera in which two or three of the principal

performers sang in Italian and all the rest in English. It was just before Congreve and Vanbrugh opened their new theatre in the Haymarket. She was then in the heyday of her beauty. She is not so old a woman as you may think her. She wore herself out untimely by the indulgence of an evil temper. But what of her health, Mademoiselle? Think you she is long for this world?"

"I believe that a few weeks will see that stormy nature at rest for ever."

"Then, Rena, the sooner we beard the lion – nay, I mean no disrespect to your father – the better for all of us. If Mademoiselle has no objection, we will take her back in our coach. I mean to start for Fairmile as soon as ever we can get a team of horses from the livery-yard."

"What, you will take Rena back to her father!"

"Only to justify my conduct and hers, and to obtain his forgiveness."

"What, in his present mood," exclaimed the little Frenchwoman, with a scared countenence, "before time has softened him, while his anger rages at white heat! You ought to wait at least a year. Let him begin to miss his daughter's presence; to yearn after her, to mourn for her as one who is dead; and then let her stand before him suddenly some day, rising like a ghost out of the grave of the past, and fall on her knees at his feet. That will be the hour for pardon."

"I have a bolder card to play," said Durnford, "and I mean to play it. Mrs. Layburne is an element in my calculations; and I

must have this business settled with the Squire while she is above ground."

"Better wait till she is dead and forgotten. Be assured she will never act the peacemaker. She will fan the flame of Mr. Bosworth's fury and goad him to vengeance. She hates my innocent Rena, hates every creature to whom the Squire was ever civil."

"Her very hatred may be made subservient to our interests. There is no use in arguing the matter, dear Mademoiselle. I mean to have an understanding with Mr. Bosworth, and I think I shall succeed in convincing him that he has very little right to be angry."

"You are an obstinate young man," said Mademoiselle, with a shrug which expressed a kind of despairing resignation.

"Did my father send in pursuit of me?" asked Rena.

"Not he. When we told him you were missing – 'twas I had to do it, I, who had been appointed by him as your guardian, and who had kept so bad a watch – he grew white with anger, and for some moments was speechless. Then he said in a strange voice, which he tried to make calm and steady, 'She has run off with her penniless lover, I make no doubt. So be it. She may starve with him, beg, thieve, die on the gallows with him, for all I care.' I tell you this, Mr. Durnford, to show you the kind of temper he is in, and how unwise it were to make your supplication to him at such a time."

"And he gave no orders for pursuit, made no offer of going

after us in person?" asked Durnford, ignoring the lady's advice.

"Not once did he suggest such a thing. 'She has gone out of my house like an ingrate,' he said; 'I have done with her.' That was all. It was at breakfast-time we missed you, and I went to him straight with the news. About an hour later there came a man who had seen a coach-and-four waiting by the wicket-gate, and that seemed conclusive evidence to Mr. Bosworth. He had no further doubt as to what had happened."

Durnford rang, and requested that a messenger should be sent to the livery-yard to order a coach-and-four. And then he pressed Mademoiselle to refresh herself at the breakfast-table, which was somewhat luxuriously provided. The servants brought a fresh chocolate-pot and a dish of rolls for the new-comer, and although Mademoiselle was too agitated to have any appetite, her quondam pupil hung about her affectionately, and insisted upon her taking a good breakfast.

"And so this fine house belongs to Lord Lavendale," said the little Frenchwoman. "Are you to live here always?"

"Nay, Mademoiselle, do not think so meanly of me as to suppose I would be content to lodge my wife in another man's house, even if I were satisfied to live at free quarters as a bachelor, which I was not. No, to oblige Lavendale, who was very pressing, I accepted the use of this fine house for my honeymoon. It is a kind of enchanted palace in which we are to begin the fairy tale of married life; but so soon as we sober down a little, Rena and I mean to find a home of our own. We shall look for

some rustic cottage in one of the villages near London, Chelsea or Battersea, most likely – for I must not be far from the House – and we shall begin domestic life in an unpretending manner. We will not take a fine house, as poor Steele did, and call it a hovel, and be over head and ears in debt, and our furniture pledged to a good-natured friend. No, we will live from hand to mouth if needs must, but we will pay our way. I have a trifle put by, and I count upon my comedy for giving me the money to furnish our nest."

"And if the Squire should turn me out of doors, as I reckon he will in a day or so, may I come and be your housekeeper?" asked Mademoiselle. "I should save you a servant, for I can cook as well as teach, and I would do all your housework into the bargain, for the sake of being near Rena. I have saved a little money, so I should not be any expense to you; and I would have my little room apart, like Mrs. Layburne, so as not to disturb your *tête-à-tête* life as married lovers."

"Dearest Maman, I should love to have you with us, but not to work for us. That would never do, would it, Herrick?"

"No, indeed, love. And though we are not rich, we shall be able to afford some stout serving-wench. But if Mademoiselle would keep house for us, go to market occasionally, and toss an omelette or mix a salad now and then, just to show our silly British drudge how such things should be done – "

"I will do all that, and more. I love the cares of the *ménage*."

After this came much hugging and kissing between governess

and pupil, and then a footman announced that the coach was at the door, and they all three started for Fairmile.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the four horses, a fresh relay from Kingston, drew up in front of the Squire's door. It had not entered into his mind that his runaway daughter could be so brazen as to come back to the house she had deserted yet awhile, so he issued no orders for her exclusion. She and her husband walked into the house boldly, to the alarm of the old butler, and were ushered straight to the small parlour, the Squire's den, where he sat in a dejected attitude beside a desk strewn and heaped with papers. Uppermost among them was a document in several folios, tied together with green ferret, which looked suspiciously like a will.

He started at his daughter's entrance, lifted his heavy head, and glared at her with angry eyes under scowling brows.

"What, madam, do you dare to intrude upon the solitude of the parent you have outraged?" and then recognising Durnford close at his wife's elbow, "and to bring your pauper-husband at your tail? *That* is an insolence which you will both repent. Leave my house this instant, fellow, or I will have you kicked out of it by my servants."

"I doubt if there is one of them strong enough for the office," said Herrick; "do not vent your spleen upon me, Mr. Bosworth, till you have heard what I have to say in my own defence. That I am here to-day must show you that I mean honestly."

"Honestly, sir! there is no such thing as honesty in a man who

steals an heiress. You have secured your prize, I take it. You have bound her fast in matrimony."

"Yes, sir, we are bound to each other for life. We were married at the chapel in Curzon Street at ten o'clock yesterday morning."

"What, by the Reverend Couple-Beggars, by that scurvy dealer in marriage-lines, Parson Keith? A highly respectable marriage, altogether worthy of a landed gentleman's daughter and heiress – a marriage to be proud of. Leave my house, woman! You and I have nothing more to do with each other."

"Father," she pleaded, sinking on her knee at his feet, where he sat scowling at her, not having stirred from his brooding attitude since her entrance; "father, can you be so cruel to me for having married the man of my choice? As to your fortune, with all hope of being rich in days to come, I resign it without a sigh. What I saw of wealth and splendour, pleasure and fashion, last winter, only served to show me how false and hollow such things are, and how one's heart may ache in the midst of them. I can be happy with the man I love in humble circumstances, or can rejoice in his good fortune if ever he should grow rich: but I cannot be happy without your forgiveness."

"Then you may perish in your sorrow, for I can never forgive. You had best drop sentiment, wench; blot me out of your life, as I have blotted you out of mine. You have had your own way. You had a father, you have a husband; be content to think, you have profited by the exchange."

"Why are you so angry?" she asked piteously.

"Why?" he echoed, "why?" and then bringing his clenched fist down upon the document of many folios, "because I had built all my hopes on you – because I had speculated and hoarded, and calculated and thought, in order to amass a mighty fortune for you and your heirs. I would have made you a Duchess, girl. Yes, by Heaven, I had negotiations in hand with a ducal house, and you would have been taken to town a few weeks hence to be courted by the heir to a dukedom. I should have lived to see my daughter mistress of half a dozen palaces – "

"Not your daughter, sir," said Herrick gravely; "your daughter has long been mistress of one narrow house – a tenement which none would care to dispute with her."

"What are you raving about, fellow?"

The Squire started to his feet, and looked at Durnford in a kind of savage bewilderment.

"I am here to reveal the trick that has been played upon you, sir, and to justify myself as a man of honour," answered Herrick. "I stole no heiress when I took this dear girl from beneath your roof. I counselled no disobedience to a father when I urged her to fly with me. I speculated upon no future fortune, hoped nothing from your relenting bounty. The girl I loved was a nameless waif who for thirteen years has been imposed upon you as a daughter, and who loves you and reverences you as truly as if she were indeed your child."

"Not my daughter?" muttered the Squire; "not my daughter? It is a foul lie – a lie hatched by you, sir, to cozen and torment

me – an outrageous, obvious, shallow, impudent lie!"

"Should I invent a lie which deprives my wife of any claim to your wealth? However indifferent I may be to riches, I am too much a man of the world to so wantonly sacrifice my wife's prospects."

"Upon what grounds?" cried Bosworth. "What proof?" And then suddenly gripping Irene by the arm, "Unfasten your bodice, girl. Let me see your right shoulder."

He almost tore the upper part of the bodice from the fair and dimpled shoulder in his furious impatience, and there at the top of the arm was revealed a deep cicatrice, the scar of a wound healed long ago.

"Out of my sight, you beggar's brat!" he cried huskily. "Yes, I have been tricked, deluded, cozened damnably. But by whom? There could be only two concerned in it. Bridget and that other one – that she-devil. Follow me, both of you. We'll have it out! We'll have it out!"

He dashed out of the room and along the corridor with the rapid movements of a madman, and they followed him to Mrs. Layburne's room.

She who had once been the delight of crowded playhouses, the admired of bucks and wits in the days of the Godolphin ministry, now presented the saddest spectacle of hopeless decay.

She lay on a sofa beside a pinched and poverty-stricken fire, burning dully in one of those iron grates by means of which our forefathers contrived to keep themselves cold while they were

mocked by the semblance and abstract idea of heat. A small table with a basin that had held broth, and two or three medicine bottles, stood near her. Her gaunt and wasted form was clad in a dingy printed calico dressing-gown, over which her white hair fell in neglect and abandonment. Her eyes – once the stars of a playhouse – now looked unnaturally large in her pinched and shrunken countenance – unnaturally bright, too, with the lustre of disease; while on each hollow cheek there burned a hectic spot, which made the sickly pallor of the skin only the more livid by contrast.

She looked up with a startled air when the Squire burst into her room, followed immediately by Herrick and Irene. She struggled into a sitting position, and sat trembling, either with the effort of shifting her attitude, or with the agitation caused by this strange intrusion.

"Do you see this girl?" demanded Bosworth, thrusting Irene in front of him. "Do you see her, woman?"

"Ay, sir, I see her well enough. My sight is not yet so dim but I can recognise a familiar face."

"Who and what is she?"

"Your daughter; your disobedient rebellious daughter, whom you were howling about yesterday, and whom you welcome home to-day."

"She is not my daughter, and you know it. She is a pauper's nameless brat, foisted upon me by you, by you, she-devil, so that you might be able to twit and laugh at me, to revel in the sight of

my discomfiture, before you sink into the grave. *This* was your vengeance upon me, was it – your vengeance upon me for not having been more your victim than I was, though God knows I paid dear enough for my folly! *This* is what your innuendoes and mysterious speeches of yesterday hinted at, though I was too dull to understand them."

"What makes you think she is less than your daughter?" asked Mrs. Layburne, with a mocking smile, a smile that seemed to gloat over the Squire's agony of rage.

"What? – this," pointing to the naked shoulder, from which kerchief and bodice had been so rudely wrenched away. "This scar, which *you* pointed out to me when first this beggar-brat was brought into my house. 'You may always know her by that mark,' you said: "twill last her lifetime.' And I forgot all about the mark, and loved the impostor that was foisted upon me, and believed in her, and toiled for her, and schemed for her as my very daughter. It flashed upon me all at once – the memory of that scar, and your words and voice as you showed it – just now, when her husband yonder told me what his wife is; and I knew in a moment that I had been duped. Why did you do this thing, Barbara?"

"Why? To be even with you, as I told you I would be – ay, swore it by my mother's grave, when you forsook me to marry a fine lady. I told you I would have my revenge, and I have lived to enjoy it. Mr. Durnford has only anticipated my confession. I should have told you everything upon my death-bed. I have

feasted upon the bare thought of that parting hour, when you should learn how your discarded mistress had tricked you."

"Devil!" muttered Bosworth. "What had you to gain by such an infamy?"

"Everything! Revenge! 'the most luscious morsel that the devil puts into the sinner's mouth.' That is what the Preacher says of it. I have tasted that sweet morsel, chewed and mumbled it many a time by anticipation, as I have sat by this desolate hearth. It has been sweeter to me than the applause of the playhouse, the lights, the music, the flattery, the jewels, and savoury suppers, and wines, and rioting. I have watched your growing love for another man's child, while your own, your *wife's* child, lay mouldering in her grave. I have seen you gloating over your schemes for a spurious daughter's aggrandisement – heard you praise her beauty and boast of her likeness to your ancestors. Poor fool, poor fool! To think that a man of the world, a speculator of 'Change Alley, could be so easily hoodwinked!"

"When was the change made?" asked Bosworth, ringing the bell furiously. "Bridget must have been concerned in it. I will prosecute you both for felony."

"Prosecute a dying woman! fie for shame, Squire! Where is your humanity?"

"I would drag you from your death-bed to a gaol if the law would let me. Whatever I can do I will; be sure of that, Jezebel."

"Is it come to Jezebel? I was your Helen once, your Cleopatra, the sovereign beauty of the world."

"Ay, 'tis a quick transmutation which such cattle as you make – from your dupe's brief vision of beauty and love to the hag that will turn and rend him. Where is Bridget?" (to the servant who answered the bell;) "bring her to me this instant."

"I think I had best take my wife from the reach of your violence, sir, now that I have convinced you that I did you no wrong in marrying her," said Durnford, with his arm round Irene, as if to shelter her in this moral tempest, this confusion and upheaval of all the baser elements in human nature.

"Take her away. Yes, remove her from my sight at once and for ever. Let me forget how I have loved her, that I may less deeply loathe her."

"Father," cried Irene piteously, holding out her arms to him, "do not forget that you have loved me, and that I have returned your love measure for measure. Is there no tie but that of blood? I have been brought up under your roof, and you have been kind to me, and I am sure I love you as much as daughters love their fathers. If you scorn me, do not scorn my love."

"You poor beggar's brat," muttered the Squire contemptuously, yet with a relenting look at the pale pathetic face, "you are the lightest sinner of them all, perhaps. But to have been cheated – to have taken a vagabond's spawn to my breast – "

"She is no vagabond's child, but of as gentle blood on the father's side as your own. She comes of a good old Hampshire family – as old as William the Norman. Her father was Philip Chumleigh, the son of a younger son, a gentleman born and

bred."

"I thought as much when I saw him dead and stark upon Flamestead Common," said the Squire. "So-ho, mistress," to Bridget, who came in with a cowed air, and guilt written in every feature; "you were in the conspiracy to cheat your master with a supposititious child; but I'd have you to know that you were accomplice in a felony, for which you shall swing higher than Jack Sheppard, if there's justice in this land."

"O sir, is it hanging?" exclaimed the nurse, "and I as innocent as the unborn babe. Never would such a thought have come into my head, to put another into my darling's place; but she made me do it, and I was half distracted – loving them both so well – so full of sorrow for the little angel that was gone, and of tenderness for her that was left, and she – Mrs. Layburne – threatened me she would say 'twas by my neglect my precious treasure died, though God knows I neglected nothing, and watched day and night. But I was scarcely in my right senses; so I gave way, and held my tongue, and once done it was done for ever – there was no going back upon it. And when I saw your honour so fond of my pretty one, and she growing nearer and dearer to you every day, I thought it was well as it was. You had something to love."

"Something, but not of my own blood – something that had no right to my affection, an impostor, an alien, a sham, a cheat, a mockery. You had better have poisoned me, woman. It would have been a kinder thing to do."

"It was her doing," sobbed Bridget, pointing to Mrs.

Layburne, who listened and looked on with a ghastly smile, the exultation of a fiend doomed to everlasting torment, and rejoicing in the agony of another. "'Twas all her doing, and I knew it was a sin, and have been troubled with the thought of it ever since; yes, I have never known real peace and comfort since I did her bidding. But she told me 'twas a good thing to do; your heart was so set on the child that it would all but kill you to lose her, and one child was equal to another in the sight of God, and the one that was left would grow up to be a blessing to you, did you but think she was your daughter; and so I yielded, and let her lie to you. But, O sir, as you are a Christian, do not punish that innocent lamb for our sin. Do not take your love from her."

"It is gone," cried the Squire. "She has become hateful to me."

"She shall trouble you no more, sir," said Irene, with a quiet dignity, which moved her husband almost to tears. "I am very sorry that you should have been cheated, but you must at least own that I have been an innocent impostor. You have been very good to me, sir, and I have loved you as a father should be loved, and though you may hate me, my heart cannot turn so quickly. It cleaves to you still, sir. Good-bye."

She dropped on her knee again and kissed his reluctant hand, then put her hand in her husband's, and glided from the room with him, Mdlle. Latour following.

"We had best go back to London in the coach that brought us," said Herrick. "Will you come with us, Mademoiselle, or will you follow us later?"

"I will follow in a day or two," answered the little Frenchwoman. "It would seem like sneaking away to go to-day. I will wait till the tempest is lulled. I am really sorry for that poor man, savage as he is in his chagrin and disappointment; I will see the end of it. That woman is a devil."

"Can you forgive me, Rena, for having sprung this surprise upon you?" asked Herrick, drawing his young wife to his breast, and kissing away her tears. "Or do I seem to have been cruel? I feared your courage might fail if I told you what was coming: and I wanted to have you face to face with your sham father and that wicked witch yonder. I was prepared for her denial of the facts."

"How did you make this discovery, Herrick?"

"That is a long story, dearest. You shall know all about it by and by. And now, dear love, you are my very own. No tyrannical father can come between my orphan wife and me. We stand each alone, love, and all in all to each other."

"I am content to be yours and yours only," she said, looking up at him with adoring eyes. "But I hope my – I hope Mr. Bosworth will forgive me some day."

"Be sure he will, my pet, and that he loves you dearly at this moment, though he roars and blusters about hatred. All will come well, dearest, in the end."

"And you have married a pauper, after all," said Irene.

"I have married the girl I love, and that is enough for me," answered Herrick. "But it is not so clear to me but that I have married a fortune into the bargain. Wait and see, love; the end

has not come yet. And now settle your hood and wrap your cloak round you, and we are off again for London."

And thus, clinging to her husband's arm, she who had so long been called Irene Bosworth left the home that had seemed her birthplace. It had been a solitary joyless life which she had lived there, for the most part, yet she looked back at the old panelled hall with a sigh of regret, the instinctive yearning of an affectionate nature.

"We are as unfettered as our first parents, Irene, and the world is before us," said Herrick gaily, as he lifted her into the coach. "Back to Kingston, my men," to the postillions. "We will stay at the inn there to-night, and go on to London to-morrow morning."

"Go," said the Squire to Bridget, when the door had closed upon his sometime daughter; "go about your business, woman, and consider yourself lucky if I do not send you to gaol."

"You had better think twice of that, Squire," said Mrs. Layburne. "To have this business out before a magistrate might lead to the asking of strange questions."

"Do you think *I* care what questions they ask?" cried Bosworth scornfully. "Do you suppose I am such an arrant cur as to quail before my fellow-worms because I have lived my own life, crawled upon this earth after my *own* fashion, and not wriggled in *their* particular mode? No, Barbara Layburne, if I have been a profligate, I have at least been a bold sinner, and I have never feared the face of a man. Were not the grip of death upon you, madam, *you* should answer to the law for the trick you have

played me."

"What if it was an accident?" asked Barbara; "both the children were so reduced by sickness out of their own likeness, that one might easily mistake one for another."

"**You** could not. 'Twas you called my attention to the scar upon the baby's arm when she was but an hour in this house."

"Ay, I remember. I bade you mark it well. I had it in my mind even then to ring the changes on you – to cheat you out of a daughter – you who had cheated me out of name and honour, the world's respect, and a good husband – for I might have made a good match, were it not that I was a slave to my passion for you. When I came into this house and met only scorn and ignominy, I resolved to be quits with you. I have lain awake many a night trying to hit upon the way; but the devil himself would not help me to a plan till you brought that beggar's brat into the house. Then in a moment I saw the chance of being even with you. I knew how you prided yourself on your ancient race, how you heaped up riches, caring not as other men care for the things that gold can buy: only caring for wealth as misers care for it, to heap moneybags upon moneybags. I knew you had made your scheme of leaving a vast fortune, as Marlborough did t'other day, marrying your child to a great nobleman, leaving your name among the mighty ones of the land. I knew this, for though you were rarely civil to me, you could not help confiding in me; 'twas an old habit that remained to you from the days when we were lovers. I knew this, and I meant to drag your pride in the dust;

and so, as the whole scheme flashed upon me, I bade you note the cicatrice on the baby's arm, so that when my hour came you should see the sign-manual of the lie that had been foisted on you. Your son-in-law has anticipated me by a short time – that is all. My play is played out."

"You are a devil!" muttered Bosworth, walking towards the door.

"I am as God made me – a woman who could love, and who can hate."

CHAPTER III
"AND ALL YOUR HONOUR IN A WHISPER LOST."

The great house in Soho Square was alive with movement and light, the going and coming of guests, the setting down of chairs and squabbles of coachmen and running footmen, the flare of torches in the autumn dusk. The Topsparkles were in town again, everybody of importance had come to town, to be present at the coronation, from old Duchess Sarah and her bouquet of Duchess daughters, and her wild grandsons and lovely granddaughters, and the mad Duchess of Buckingham, and Mary Wortley Montagu, otherwise Moll Worthless, and the wits and beaux and Italian singers – all the little great world of brilliant personalities, card-playing, dicing, intriguing, dancing, masquerading, duelling, running away with other men's wives or beating their own. The wild whirlpool of town life was at its highest point of ebullition, all the wheels were going madly round, and the devil and his imps had their hands full of mischief and iniquity.

It was the first winter season of the new reign. Caroline was triumphant in her assurance of a well-filled purse; in her security of dominion over a dull, dogged, self-willed little husband, who was never more her slave than when he affected to act and think

for himself; happy too in the knowledge that she had two of the cleverest men in England for her prime minister and her chamberlain; scornfully tolerant of a rival who helped her to bear the burden of her husband's society; indulgent to all the world, and proud of being admired and loved by the cleverest men in her dominions. King George was happy also after his sober fashion, oscillating between St. James's and Richmond, with a secret hankering for Hanover, hating his eldest son, and with no passionate attachment to any other member of his numerous progeny. Amidst the brilliant Court circle there were few ladies whom the Queen favoured above Judith Topsparkle. She had even condescended so far as to wear the famous Topsparkle diamonds at her coronation; for of all Queen Anne's jewels but a pearl necklace or so descended to Queen Caroline, and it was generally supposed that his late Majesty had ransacked the royal jewel-caskets for gems to adorn his German mistresses, the fat and the lean; while perchance his later English sultana, bold Miss Brett, may have decked her handsome person with a few of those kingly treasures. At any rate, there was but little left to adorn Queen Caroline, who was fain to blaze on her coronation-day with a borrowed lustre.

It was November; the Houses were sitting, and Lavendale, after a period of complete seclusion and social extinguishment, had startled the town in a new character, as politician and orator. Perchance his friend's success in the Lower House may have stimulated his ambition, or his appearance in the senate may

have been a whim of the moment in one whose actions had been too often governed by whim; but whatever the motive, Lord Lavendale startled the peers by one of the finest speeches that had been made in that august assembly for some time; and the House of Lords in the dawn of the Hanoverian dynasty was an assembly which exercised a far more potent influence for good or evil than the Upper House of that triply reformed Parliament which we boast of to-day.

People talked about Lord Lavendale's speech for at least a fortnight. It was not so much that the oration itself had been really fine and had vividly impressed those who heard it, but it was rather that such dignified opposition, such grave invective, and sound logic came from a survivor of the Mohawk and of the Calf's Head Clubs, a notorious rake and reveller, a man whose name five years ago had been a synonym for modish profligacy. It was as when Lucius Junius Brutus startled the Roman Forum; it was as when Falstaff's boon companion, wild Prince Hal, flung off his boyish follies and stood forth in all his dignity as the warrior king; it was a transformation that set all the town wondering; and Lavendale, who had plunged again into the whirlpool of society, found himself the fashion of the hour, a man with a new reputation.

Yes, he had gone back to the bustling crowded stage of Court life: he had emerged from the hermit-like seclusion of laboratory and library, from the wild walks and woodland beauties of Lavendale Manor. He was of the town again, and seemed as

eager for pleasure as the youngest and gayest of the bloods and beaux of Leicester Fields and St. James's. He attended half a dozen assemblies of an evening, looked in nightly at opera or playhouse, gambled at White's, talked at Button's, dawdled away an occasional morning at Dick's, reading the newest pamphlet for or against the Government. He was seen everywhere.

"Lavendale has been in Medea's cauldron," said Captain Asterley. "He looks ten years younger than when I saw him last summer."

"I believe the man is possessed," replied Lady Polwhele; "he has an almost infernal gaiety. There is a malignant air about him that is altogether new. He used to be a good-natured rake, who said malicious things out of pure light-heartedness; but now there is a lurking devilry in every word he utters."

"He is only imitating the mad Irish parson," said Asterley. "Your most fashionable wit, nowadays, is a mixture of dirt and malignity such as the Dean affects. Everybody tries to talk and write like Cadenus, since it has been discovered that to be half a savage and more than half a beast is the shortest road to a woman's favour."

"I believe all you men are jealous of the Dean," retorted her ladyship, "and that is why his influential friends have conspired to keep him on the other side of the Irish Channel. He is a fine personable man, and if he has his savage gloomy moods, be sure he has his melting moments, or that poor Miss Vanhomrigh would not have made such a fool of herself. I saw her once at

an auction, and thought her more than passable, and with the manners of a lady."

There had been no more spurts of jealousy on the part of Mr. Topsparkle. His wife and he had lived on the most courteous terms since last midsummer, Lavendale's disappearance from the scene had appeased the husband's anger. He concluded that his remonstrances had been taken in good part, and that Lady Judith had dismissed her flirt. That Lavendale had been anything more than her flirt Mr. Topsparkle did not believe; but from flirt to lover is but a swift transition, and there had assuredly been an hour of peril.

Mr. Topsparkle also had a rejuvenised air when he came up to town and made his reappearance in distinguished circles; but what in Lavendale was a caprice of nature, an erratic flash and sparkle of brilliancy in a waning light, was in Topsparkle the result of premeditated care and the highest development of restorative art. He had vegetated for the last three months at Ringwood Abbey, leaving his wife to do all the hard work of entertaining visitors, and sleeping through the greater portion of his existence; and now he reappeared in London full of energy and vivacity, and with an air of superiority to most of the younger men, who were content to show themselves in their true colours as exhausted debauchees, men who had drained the cup of sensual pleasure to the dregs, and whose jaded intellects were too feeble to originate any new departure in vicious amusements.

Though in society Mr. Topsparkle affected to be only the

connoisseur, dilettante, and man of fashion, there was a leaven of hard-hearted commercial sagacity in his mind, an hereditary strain which marked his affinity to the trading classes. Keen though he was as a collector of pictures and curios, he was still keener as a speculator on 'Change, and knew every turn in the market, every trick of the hour.

He loved London because it brought him nearer to the money market, brought him, as it were, face to face with his millions, which were for the most part invested in public securities, Alderman Topsparkle having had no passion for adding field to field at two and a half per cent per annum. The alderman put out his wealth safely, in the New River Company and in the best National securities.

Vyvyan Topsparkle had done nothing to hazard those solid investments or to jeopardise his hereditary income; but he liked to trifle with the surplus thousands which accumulated at his banker's, and which even Judith's extravagance could not exhaust; he liked to sail his light bark over the billows of speculation, fanned by the summer winds of chance and change, and glorying in his skill as a navigator. Ombre and quadrille had very little excitement for him, but he loved to watch the fluctuations of a speculative stock, and to sell out at the critical moment when a bubble was on the point of bursting. He had been either wonderfully clever or wonderfully lucky; for he had contrived with but few exceptions to emerge from every risky enterprise with a profit. Such trivial speculations were but

playing with money, and made no tangible impression upon the bulk of his wealth: but as the miser loves to hoard his guineas in a chest under his bed and to handle and toy with them, so Mr. Topsparkle loved to play at speculation, and to warm the dull blood of age with the fever of the money market.

He was sitting before a boule bureau, with three rows of pigeon-holes stuffed with papers in front of him, and a litter of papers on his desk, when Fétis entered, carrying his master's periwig. The room was spacious, half dressing-room and half study, with panelled walls richly adorned with old Italian pottery, and a fireplace in an angle of the room, with a mantelpiece carried up to the ceiling by narrow shelves and quaint divisions, all filled with curios; delf and china, India monsters, Dutch teapots, German chocolate-pots, jars, and tea-cups. In one window stood the toilet-table, a veritable laboratory, before which Mr. Topsparkle sat for an hour every morning while his complexion was composed for the day. In the corner opposite the fireplace was the triangular closet in which Mr. Topsparkle's full-bottomed wig was besprinkled with maréchale powder. The atmosphere of the room was loaded with various perfumes, including a faint suggestion of burnt rappee, a kind of snuff which had been fashionable ever since a fire at a famous tobacconist's, which had thrown a large quantity of scorched snuff upon the market, and had given the bucks a new sensation and a new taste.

Fétis put the wig on a stand near the dressing-table, adjusted

the feathery curls carefully with delicate finger-tips, fell a step or two back to contemplate his work, gazing at it dreamily as at the perfection of beauty, suggesting the august countenance of its wearer, who was looking over a sheaf of documents and seemed preoccupied.

His valet watched him deferentially for some minutes, and then coughed gently as if to attract attention.

Topsparkle looked up suddenly. He had not heard the cautious opening of the door or the velvet tread of his slave.

"Your wig is quite ready, sir."

"I am not ready for it yet."

"Could I speak with you, sir, for a minute?"

"Of course, you can always speak with me. What do you want?"

Mr. Topsparkle laid down his papers, and faced about as he asked the question.

"I am sorry to say, sir, that fortune has been against me since I came back to London. I have lost heavily at basset, and I am in sore need of money."

"Again!" exclaimed Topsparkle impatiently; "you are everlastingly a loser. What right has a fellow of your quality to gamble? Dice and cards are a diversion for gentlemen, sir."

"Fellows of my quality are human, sir, and have minds that are subject to temptation and example. We can but imitate our betters. As for cards and dice, I am drawn into play by gentlemen who come to my house and are gracious enough to invite my

company."

"They should know their position better than to associate with a lodging-house keeper."

"O sir, these are gentlemen of rank; dukes, marquises, earls, who have no fear of derogating by low company. They stand secure in a nobility three and four centuries old. My society cannot degrade *them*."

"How much do you want?" asked Topsparkle, with suppressed rage.

He took some papers out of the pigeon-hole labelled F, and turned them over with a hand that shook a little, till he came to one which he drew out and unfolded. It was a list of figures, headed by the name of Fétis, and against each amount there was a date.

"If you would oblige me with a paltry thousand, sir, I could set myself right. I have the honour to owe seven hundred and fifty to his grace the Duke of Bolton."

"A thousand pounds! Egregious insolence. Do you know that you had three thousand, in sums of five hundred, from me last winter? Four thousand a year! Was ever valet paid such wages since the world began?"

"Nay, sir, it is not every valet who has the honour to serve a gentleman in whose exorbitant income thousands count as hundreds do with meaner men. Nor do I rank with the common herd of servants; I have been your secretary and your confidant, often your nurse, and sometimes even your physician. I have

prescribed for you in some of the most difficult occasions of your life – and successfully. I have made an end of your trouble."

"You are a villain," said Topsparkle, sitting in a brooding attitude, staring at the carpet.

"I do not pretend – never have pretended – to be a saint. A man of rigid principles would not have served you as I have done. I have been useful to your loves and to your antipathies. I do not expect to be paid as a common servant. I have a claim upon your fortune inferior to none."

"O, you are a vastly clever person, and no doubt think you have been useful to me. Well, I will advance this money – mind, as I advanced the last, on your note of hand. It must be a loan."

"I have no objection, sir."

There had been many such transactions. Fétis thought that this loan theory was a salve to his employer's wounded pride. He would not suppose himself completely under the influence of his servant. He would assert an independent position, play the patron, hug himself with the idea of power over his slave.

"He would never dare to sue me for the money," Fétis told himself. "It can be no more than an empty form."

And with this sense of security Fétis signed anything that was offered to him for signature. He had lived a good many years in London, but was still a thorough Frenchman in his profound ignorance of English law, and he had, moreover, a somewhat exaggerated estimate of his influence over his master. He had never yet failed in his attacks upon Mr. Topsparkle's purse, and

he thought his resources in that direction were almost unlimited. This had encouraged him in extravagance, and had fostered the habit of reckless gaming, which was the open vice of the age.

"You ought to be making a fortune, not losing one, Fétis, with such a house as yours," said Topsparkle, counting over a bundle of bank-notes after the note of hand had been duly executed. "I am told that the most fashionable men in town patronise your supper-room, and build their occasional nests upon your upper floors, where you have bachelor quarters, as I understand, for gentlemen who are in town for too short a season to disturb the desolation of their family mansions."

"The business is not unprofitable," replied Fétis deprecatingly, "and my patrons are among the flower of the aristocracy. But I have an expensive wife."

"What can we expect, my good fellow, when at our age we marry reigning beauties," asked Topsparkle lightly. "Your lady was a dancer at the Opera House, as I am told, and a toast among the bloods who frequent the green-room. Did you think she would transform herself into a Dutch housewife, tuck up her sleeves and peel vegetables in the kitchen, because you chose to marry her?"

"Unhappily she has caught the infection of that accursed house, and plays as deep as a lady of fashion," said Fétis ruefully.

"My good Fétis, a young woman must have some kind of diversion. If she does not gamble, she will play you a worse turn. See how indulgent I am to her ladyship on that score. 'Tis

only when her losses become outrageous that I venture a gentle remonstrance. And so your pretty little French wife has learnt the trick of the town, and dreams of spadillo and codille, like a woman of fashion. By the way, I hear Lord Lavendale is in London again. Pray does he ever use your house?"

"No, sir, I have never seen him there. He is not in my set."

"And yet I take it your set is a wild one, and likely to suit his lordship."

"Nay, sir, they tell me Lavendale has sobered down since his return from the Continent, and neither drinks nor plays as deep as he did before he went abroad."

"Is it so? Well, he is a mighty pretty fellow, and a prime favourite with the women. Some one told me the other day that he was in a consumption. You may begin to dress my head. Is that true, d'ye think?"

"The consumption, sir. Nay, I fancy 'tis an idle story got up by his lordship to make him more interesting to the sex. Women love a man who is reported to be dying. I have known men whose lives have been despaired of for ten years at a stretch, and who have wound up by marrying fortunes, having very little but their bad health to recommend them. A fellow who has no other capital may marry a rich widow on the strength of a consumption or a heart complaint."

"I am told Lord Lavendale is looking younger and handsomer than ever," pursued Topsparkle; "but I thought it might be the hectic of disease which imparted a delusive beauty."

"I doubt, sir, the fellow is well enough, and will outlive us all," said Fétis, with a malicious pleasure in blighting his master's hopes.

He finished his work of art upon Topsparkle's countenance, putting in every minute touch as carefully as a miniature painter. He fitted the stately wig upon the bald pate, and then Mr. Topsparkle put his head into the powdering closet for the last sprinkle of maréchale, and emerged therefrom in all the perfection of artificial grace and court fashion. His coat and waistcoat were marvels of the tailor's and embroideress's art; his cravat was a miracle of Roman point worked by Ursuline nuns in a convent amidst the Apennines; his diamond shoe-buckles were of an exquisite neatness and elegance; his red-heeled shoes set off to perfection the narrow foot and arched instep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.