

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Aurora Floyd. Volume 3



Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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CHAPTER I. AT THE GOLDEN LION

Mr. William Dork, the constable, reached Doncaster at about a quarter-past one o'clock upon the morning after the murder, and drove straight to the Reindeer. That hotel had been closed for a couple of hours, and it was only by the exercise of his authority that Mr. Dork obtained access, and a hearing from the sleepy landlord. The young man who had driven Mr. Prodder was found after considerable difficulty, and came stumbling down the servants' staircase in a semi-somnolent state to answer the constable's inquiries. He had driven the seafaring gentleman, whose name he did not know, direct to the Doncaster station, in time to catch the mail-train, which started at 12.50. He had parted with the gentleman at the door of the station three minutes before the train started.

This was all the information that Mr. Dork could obtain. If he had been a sharp London detective, he might have made his arrangements for laying hands upon the fugitive sailor at the first station at which the train stopped; but being merely a simple rural functionary, he scratched his stubbled head, and stared at the landlord of the Reindeer in utter mental bewilderment.

"He was in a devil of a hurry, this chap," he muttered rather sulkily. "What did he want to coot away for?"

The young man who had acted as charioteer could not answer this question. He only knew that the seafaring gentleman had promised him half a sovereign if he caught the mail-train, and that he had earned his reward.

"Well, I suppose it aint so very particklar," said Mr. Dork, sipping a glass of rum, which he had ordered for his refreshment. "You'll have to appear to-morrow, and you can tell nigh as much as t'other chap," he added, turning to the young man. "You was with him when the shot were fired, and you warn't far when he found the body. You'll have to appear and give evidence whenever the inquest's held. I doubt if it'll be to-morrow; for there won't be much time to give notice to the coroner."

Mr. Dork wrote the young man's name in his pocket-book, and the landlord vouched for his being forthcoming when called upon. Having done thus much, the constable left the inn, after drinking another glass of rum, and refreshing John Mellish's horse with a handful of oats and a drink of water. He drove at a brisk pace back to the Park stables, delivered the horse and gig to the lad who had waited for his coming, and returned to his comfortable dwelling in the village of Meslingham, about a mile from the Park gates.

I scarcely know how to describe that long, quiet, miserable day which succeeded the night of the murder. Aurora Mellish lay in a dull stupor, not able to lift her head from the pillows upon which it rested, scarcely caring to raise her eyelids from the aching eyes they sheltered. She was not ill, nor did she affect to be ill. She lay upon the sofa in her dressing-room, attended by her maid, and visited at intervals by John, who roamed hither and thither about the house and grounds, talking to innumerable people, and always coming to the same conclusion, namely, that the whole affair was a horrible mystery, and that he heartily wished the inquest well over. He had visitors from twenty miles round his house, – for the evil news had spread far and wide before noon, – visitors who came to condole and to sympathize, and wonder, and speculate, and ask questions, until they fairly drove him mad. But he bore all very patiently. He could tell them nothing except that the business was as dark a mystery to him as it could be to them, and that he had no hope of finding any solution to the ghastly enigma. They one and all asked him the same question: "Had any one a motive for killing this man?"

How could he answer them? He might have told them that if twenty persons had had a powerful motive for killing James Conyers, it was possible that a one-and-twentieth person who had no motive might have done the deed. That species of argument which builds up any hypothesis out of a series of probabilities may, after all, lead very often to false conclusions.

Mr. Mellish did not attempt to argue the question. He was too weary and sick at heart, too anxious for the inquest to be over, and be free to carry Aurora away with him, and turn his back upon the familiar place, which had been hateful to him ever since the trainer had crossed its threshold.

"Yes, my darling," he said to his wife, as he bent over her pillow, "I shall take you away to the south of France directly this business is settled. You shall leave the scene of all past associations, all bygone annoyances. We will begin the world afresh."

"God grant that we may be able to do so," Aurora answered gravely. "Ah, my dear, I cannot tell you that I am sorry for this man's death. If he had died nearly two years ago, when I thought he did, how much misery he would have saved me!"

Once in the course of that long summer's afternoon Mr. Mellish walked across the park to the cottage at the north gates. He could not repress a morbid desire to look upon the lifeless clay of the man whose presence had caused him such vague disquietude, such instinctive terror. He found the "Softy" leaning on the gate of the little garden, and one of the grooms standing at the door of the death-chamber.

"The inquest is to be held at the Golden Lion, at ten o'clock to-morrow morning," Mr. Mellish said to the men. "You, Hargraves, will be wanted as a witness."

He walked into the darkened chamber. The groom understood what he came for, and silently withdrew the white drapery that covered the trainer's dead face.

Accustomed hands had done their awful duty. The strong limbs had been straightened. The lower jaw, which had dropped in the agony of sudden death, was supported by a linen bandage; the eyelids were closed over the dark-violet eyes; and the face, which had been beautiful in life, was even yet more beautiful in the still solemnity of death. The clay which in life had lacked so much, in its lack of a beautiful soul to light it from within, found its level in death. The worthless soul was gone, and the physical perfection that remained had lost its only blemish. The harmony of proportion, the exquisitely-modelled features, the charms of detail, – all were left; and the face which James Conyers carried to the grave was handsomer than that which had smiled insolent defiance upon the world in the trainer's lifetime.

John Mellish stood for some minutes looking gravely at that marble face.

"Poor fellow!" thought the generous-hearted young squire; "it was a hard thing to die so young. I wish he had never come here. I wish Lolly had confided in me, and let me make a bargain with this man to stop away and keep her secret. Her secret! her father's secret more likely. What secret could she have had, that a groom was likely to discover? It may have been some mercantile business, some commercial transaction of Archibald Floyd's, by which the old man fell into his servant's power. It would be only like my glorious Aurora, to take the burden upon her own shoulders, and to bear it bravely through every trial."

It was thus that John Mellish had often reasoned upon the mystery which divided him from his wife. He could not bear to impute even the shadow of evil to her. He could not endure to think of her as a poor helpless woman entrapped into the power of a mean-spirited hireling, who was only too willing to make his market out of her secrets. He could not tolerate such an idea as this; and he sacrificed poor Archibald Floyd's commercial integrity for the preservation of Aurora's womanly dignity. Ah, how weak and imperfect a passion is this boundless love! How ready to sacrifice others for that one loved object, which *must* be kept spotless in our imaginations, though a hecatomb of her fellow-creatures are to be blackened and befouled for her justification! If Othello could have established Desdemona's purity by the sacrifice of the reputation of every lady in Cyprus, do you think he would have spared the fair inhabitants of the friendly isle? No; he would have branded every

one of them with infamy, if he could by so doing have rehabilitated the wife he loved. John Mellish *would* not think ill of his wife. He resolutely shut his eyes to all damning evidence. He clung with a desperate tenacity to his belief in her purity, and only clung the more tenaciously as the proofs against her became more numerous.

The inquest was held at a road-side inn, within a quarter of a mile of the north gates – a quiet little place, only frequented on market-days by the country people going backwards and forwards between Doncaster and the villages beyond Meslingham. The coroner and his jury sat in a long bare room, in which the frequenters of the Golden Lion were wont to play bowls in wet weather. The surgeon, Steeve Hargraves, Jarvis, the young man from the Reindeer, William Dork the constable, and Mr. Mellish, were the only witnesses called: but Colonel Maddison and Mr. Lofthouse were both present during the brief proceedings.

The inquiry into the circumstances of the trainer's death occupied a very short time. Nothing was elicited by the brief examination of the witnesses which in any way led to the elucidation of the mystery. John Mellish was the last person interrogated, and he answered the questions put to him with prompt decision. There was one inquiry, however, which he was unable to answer, although it was a very simple one. Mr. Hayward, the coroner, anxious to discover so much of the history of the dead man as might lead eventually to the discovery of his murderer, asked Mr. Mellish if his trainer had been a bachelor or a married man.

"I really cannot answer that question," said John; "I should imagine that he was a single man, as neither he nor Mr. Pastern told me anything to the contrary. Had he been married, he would have brought his wife with him, I should suppose. My trainer, Langley, was married when he entered my service, and his wife and children have occupied the premises over my stables for some years."

"You infer, then, that James Conyers was unmarried?"

"Most decidedly."

"And it is your opinion that he had made no enemies in the neighbourhood?"

"It is next to impossible that he could have done so."

"To what cause, then, do you attribute his death?"

"To an unhappy accident. I can account for it in no other way. The path through the wood is used as a public thoroughfare, and the whole of the plantation is known to be infested with poachers. It was past ten o'clock at night when the shot was heard. I should imagine that it was fired by a poacher whose eyes deceived him in the shadowy light."

The coroner shook his head. "You forget, Mr. Mellish," he said, "that the cause of death was not an ordinary gun-shot wound. The shot heard was the report of a pistol, and the deceased was killed by a pistol-bullet."

John Mellish was silent. He had spoken in good faith as to his impression respecting the cause of the trainer's death. In the press and hurry, the horror and confusion of the two last days, the smaller details of the awful event had escaped his memory.

"Do you know any one amongst your servants, Mr. Mellish," asked the coroner, "whom you would consider likely to commit an act of violence of this kind? Have you any one of an especially vindictive character in your household?"

"No," answered John, decisively; "I can answer for my servants as I would for myself. They were all strangers to this man. What motive could they possibly have had to seek his death?"

Mr. Hayward rubbed his chin, and shook his head reflectively.

"There was this superannuated trainer whom you spoke of just now, Mr. Mellish," he said. "I am well aware that the post of trainer in your stables is rather a good thing. A man may save a good deal of money out of his wages and perquisites with such a master as you. This former trainer may not have liked being superseded by the deceased. He may have felt some animus towards his successor."

"Langley!" cried John Mellish; "he is as good a fellow as ever breathed. He was not superseded; he resigned the active part of his work at his own wish, and he retained his full wages by mine. The poor fellow has been confined to his bed for the last week."

"Humph," muttered the coroner. "Then you can throw no light upon this business, Mr. Mellish?"

"None whatever. I have written to Mr. Pastern, in whose stables the deceased was employed, telling him of the circumstances of the trainer's death, and begging him to forward the information to any relative of the murdered man. I expect an answer by to-morrow's post; and I shall be happy to submit that answer to you."

Prior to the examination of the witnesses, the jurymen had been conducted to the north lodge, where they had beheld the mortal remains of James Conyers. Mr. Morton had accompanied them, and had endeavoured to explain to them the direction which the bullet had taken, and the manner in which, according to his own idea, the shot must have been fired. The jurymen who had been empanelled to decide upon this awful question were simple agriculturists and petty tradesmen, who grudged the day's lost labour, and who were ready to accept any solution of the mystery which might be suggested to them by the coroner. They hurried back to the Golden Lion, listened deferentially to the evidence and to Mr. Hayward's address, retired to an adjoining apartment, where they remained in consultation for the space of about five minutes, and whence they emerged with a very rambling form of decision, which Mr. Hayward reduced into a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.

Very little had been said about the disappearance of the seafaring man who had carried the tidings of the murder to Mr. Mellish's house. Nobody for a moment imagined that the evidence of this missing witness might have thrown some ray of light upon the mystery of the trainer's death. The seafaring man had been engaged in conversation with the young man from the Reindeer at the time when the shot was fired; he was therefore not the actual murderer; and strangely significant as his hurried flight might have been to the acute intelligence of a well-trained metropolitan police-officer, no one amongst the rustic officials present at the inquest attached any importance to the circumstance. Nor had Aurora's name been once mentioned during the brief proceedings. Nothing had transpired which in any way revealed her previous acquaintance with James Conyers; and John Mellish drew a deep breath, a long sigh of relief, as he left the Golden Lion and walked homewards. Colonel Maddison, Mr. Lofthouse, and two or three other gentlemen lingered on the threshold of the little inn, talking to Mr. Hayward, the coroner.

The inquest was terminated; the business was settled; and the mortal remains of James Conyers could be carried to the grave at the pleasure of his late employer. All was over. The mystery of death and the secrets of life would be buried peacefully in the grave of the murdered man; and John Mellish was free to carry his wife away with him whithersoever he would. Free, have I said? No; for ever and for ever the shadow of that bygone mystery would hang like a funeral pall between himself and the woman he loved. For ever and for ever the recollection of that ghastly undiscovered problem would haunt him in sleeping and in waking, in the sunlight and in the darkness. His nobler nature, triumphing again and again over the subtle influences of damning suggestions and doubtful facts, was again and again shaken, although never quite defeated. He fought the battle bravely, though it was a very hard one, and it was to endure perhaps to the end of time. That voiceless argument was for ever to be argued; the spirits of Faith and Infidelity were for ever to be warring with each other in that tortured breast, until the end of life; until he died, perhaps, with his head lying upon his wife's bosom, with his cheek fanned by her warm breath; but ignorant to the very last of the real nature of that dark something, that nameless and formless horror with which he had wrestled so patiently and so long.

"I'll take her away with me," he thought; "and when we are divided by a thousand miles of blue water from the scene of her secret, I will fall on my knees before her, and beseech her to confide in me."

He passed by the north lodge with a shudder, and walked straight along the high road towards the principal entrance of the Park. He was close to the gates when he heard a voice, a strange suppressed voice, calling feebly to him to stop. He turned round and saw the "Softy" making his way towards him with a slow, shambling run. Of all human beings, except perhaps that one who now lay cold and motionless in the darkened chamber at the north lodge, this Steeve Hargraves was the last whom Mr. Mellish cared to see. He turned with an angry frown upon the "Softy," who was wiping the perspiration from his pale face with the ragged end of his neck-handkerchief, and panting hoarsely.

"What is the matter?" asked John. "What do you want with me?"

"It's th' coroner," gasped Stephen Hargraves, – "th' coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, th' parson. They want to speak to ye, sir, oop at the Loion."

"What about?"

Steeve Hargraves gave a ghastly grin.

"I doan't know, sir," he whispered. "It's hardly loikely they'd tell me. There's summat oop, though, I'll lay; for Mr. Lofthouse was as whoite as ashes, and seemed strangely oopset about summat. Would you be pleased to step oop and speak to 'un directly, sir? – that was my message."

"Yes, yes; I'll go," answered John absently.

He had taken his hat off, and was passing his hand over his hot forehead in a half-bewildered manner. He turned his back upon the "Softy," and walked rapidly away, retracing his steps in the direction of the roadside inn.

Stephen Hargraves stood staring after him until he was out of sight, and then turned and walked on slowly towards the turnstile leading into the wood.

"*I* know what they've found," he muttered; "and *I* know what they want with him. He'll be some time oop there; so I'll slip across the wood and tell her. Yes," – he paused, rubbing his hands, and laughing a slow voiceless laugh, which distorted his ugly face, and made him horrible to look upon, – "yes, it will be nuts for me to tell her."

CHAPTER II.

"MY WIFE! MY WIFE! WHAT WIFE? I HAVE NO WIFE."

The Golden Lion had reassumed its accustomed air of rustic tranquillity when John Mellish returned to it. The jurymen had gone back to their different avocations, glad to have finished the business so easily; the villagers, who had hung about the inn to hear what they could of the proceedings, were all dispersed; and the landlord was eating his dinner, with his wife and family, in the comfortable little bar-parlour. He put down his knife and fork as John entered the sanded bar, and left his meal to receive such a distinguished visitor.

"Mr. Hayward and Mr. Lofthouse are in the coffee-room, sir," he said. "Will you please to step this way?"

He opened the door of a carpeted room, furnished with shining mahogany tables, and adorned by half a dozen gaudily-coloured prints of the Doncaster meetings, the great match between Voltigeur and Flying Dutchman, and other events which had won celebrity for the northern race-course. The coroner was sitting at the bottom of one of the long tables, with Mr. Lofthouse standing near him. William Dork, the Meslingham constable, stood near the door, with his hat in his hand, and with rather an alarmed expression dimly visible in his ruddy face. Mr. Hayward and Mr. Lofthouse were both very pale.

One rapid glance was enough to show all this to John Mellish, – enough to show him this, and something more: a basin of blood-stained water before the coroner, and an oblong piece of wet paper, which lay under Mr. Hayward's clenched hand.

"What is the matter? Why did you send for me?" John asked.

Bewildered and alarmed as he had been by the message which had summoned him hurriedly back to the inn, he was still more so by the confusion evident in the coroner's manner as he answered this question.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Mellish," he said. "I – I – sent for you – at – the – the advice of Mr. Lofthouse, who – who, as a clergyman and a family man, thought it incumbent upon me – "

Reginald Lofthouse laid his hand upon the coroner's arm with a warning gesture. Mr. Hayward stopped for a moment, cleared his throat, and then continued speaking, but in an altered tone.

"I have had occasion to reprehend William Dork for a breach of duty, which, though I am aware it may have been, as he says, purely unintentional and accidental – "

"It was indeed, sir," muttered the constable submissively. "If I'd ha' know'd – "

"The fact is, Mr. Mellish, that on the night of the murder, Dork, in examining the clothes of the deceased, discovered a paper, which had been concealed by the unhappy man between the outer material and the lining of his waistcoat. This paper was so stained by the blood in which the breast of the waistcoat was absolutely saturated, that Dork was unable to decipher a word of its contents. He therefore was quite unaware of the importance of the paper; and, in the hurry and confusion consequent on the very hard duty he has done for the last two days, he forgot to produce it at the inquest. He had occasion to make some memorandum in his pocket-book almost immediately after the verdict had been given, and this circumstance recalled to his mind the existence of the paper. He came immediately to me, and consulted me upon this very awkward business. I examined the document, washed away a considerable portion of the stains which had rendered it illegible, and have contrived to decipher the greater part of it."

"The document is of some importance, then?" John asked.

He sat at a little distance from the table, with his head bent and his fingers rattling nervously against the side of his chair. He chafed horribly at the coroner's pompous slowness. He suffered an

agony of fear and bewilderment. Why had they called him back? What was this paper? How *could* it concern him?

"Yes," Mr. Hayward answered; "the document is certainly an important one. I have shown it to Mr. Lofthouse, for the purpose of taking his advice upon the subject. I have not shown it to Dork; but I detained Dork in order that you may hear from him how and where the paper was found, and why it was not produced at the inquest."

"Why should I ask any questions upon the subject?" cried John, lifting his head suddenly, and looking from the coroner to the clergyman. "How should this paper concern me?"

"I regret to say that it does concern you very materially, Mr. Mellish," the rector answered gently.

John's angry spirit revolted against that gentleness. What right had they to speak to him like this? Why did they look at him with those grave, pitying faces? Why did they drop their voices to that horrible tone in which the bearers of evil tidings pave their way to the announcement of some overwhelming calamity?

"Let me see this paper, then, if it concerns me," John said very carelessly. "Oh, my God!" he thought, "what is this misery that is coming upon me? What is this hideous avalanche of trouble which is slowly descending to crush me?"

"You do not wish to hear anything from Dork?" asked the coroner.

"No, no!" cried John savagely. "I only want to see that paper." He pointed as he spoke to the wet and blood-stained document under Mr. Hayward's hand.

"You may go, then, Dork," the coroner said quietly; "and be sure you do not mention this business to any one. It is a matter of purely private interest, and has no reference to the murder. You will remember?"

"Yes, sir."

The constable bowed respectfully to the three gentlemen and left the room. He was very glad to be so well out of the business.

"They needn't have *called* me," he thought. (To *call*, in the northern *patois*, is to scold, to abuse.) "They needn't have said it was repri – what's its name – to keep the paper. I might have burnt it, if I'd liked, and said naught about it."

"Now," said John, rising and walking to the table as the door closed upon the constable, "now then, Mr. Hayward, let me see this paper. If it concerns me, or any one connected with me, I have a right to see it."

"A right which I will not dispute," the coroner answered gravely, as he handed the blood-stained document to Mr. Mellish. "I only beg you to believe in my heartfelt sympathy with you in this –"

"Let me alone!" cried John, waving the speaker away from him as he snatched the paper from his hand; "let me alone! Can't you see that I'm nearly mad?"

He walked to the window, and with his back to the coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, examined the blotched and blotted document in his hands. He stared for a long time at those blurred and half-illegible lines before he became aware of their full meaning. But at last the signification of that miserable paper grew clear to him, and with a loud cry of anguish he dropped into the chair from which he had risen, and covered his face with his strong right hand. He held the paper in the left, crumpled and crushed by the convulsive pressure of his grasp.

"My God!" he ejaculated, after that first cry of anguish, – "my God! I never thought of this. I never could have imagined this."

Neither the coroner nor the clergyman spoke. What could they say to him? Sympathetic words could have no power to lessen such a grief as this; they would only fret and harass the strong man in his agony; it was better to obey him; it was far better to let him alone.

He rose at last, after a silence that seemed long to the spectators of his grief.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a loud, resolute voice that resounded through the little room, "I give you my solemn word of honour that when Archibald Floyd's daughter married me, she believed this man, James Conyers, to be dead."

He struck his clenched fist upon the table, and looked with proud defiance at the two men. Then, with his left hand, the hand that grasped the blood-stained paper, thrust into his breast, he walked out of the room. He walked out of the room and out of the house, but not homewards. A grassy lane, opposite the Golden Lion, led away to a great waste of brown turf, called Harper's Common. John Mellish walked slowly along this lane, and out upon this quiet common-land, lonely even in the broad summer daylight. As he closed the five-barred gate at the end of the lane, and emerged upon the open waste, he seemed to shut the door of the world that lay behind him, and to stand alone with his great grief, under the low, sunless, summer sky. The dreary scene before him, and the gray atmosphere above his head, seemed in strange harmony with his grief. The reedy water-pools, unbroken by a ripple; the barren verdure, burnt a dull grayish brown by the summer sun; the bloomless heather, and the flowerless rushes, – all things upon which he looked took a dismal colouring from his own desolation, and seemed to make him the more desolate. The spoiled child of fortune, – the popular young squire, who had never been contradicted in nearly two-and-thirty years, – the happy husband, whose pride in his wife had touched upon that narrow boundary-line which separates the sublime from the ridiculous, – ah! whither had they fled, all these shadows of the happy days that were gone? They had vanished away; they had fallen into the black gulf of the cruel past. The monster who devours his children had taken back these happy ones, and a desolate man was left in their stead. A desolate man, who looked at a broad ditch and a rushy bank, a few paces from where he stood, and thought, "Was it I who leapt that dike a month ago to gather forget-me-nots for my wife?"

He asked himself that question, reader, which we must all ask ourselves sometimes. Was he really that creature of the irrecoverable past? Even as I write this, I can see that common-land of which I write. The low sky, the sunburnt grass, the reedy water-pools, the flat landscape stretching far away on every side to regions that are strange to me. I can recall every object in that simple scene, – the atmosphere of the sunless day, the sounds in the soft summer air, the voices of the people near me; I can recall everything except —*myself*. This miserable *ego* is the one thing that I cannot bring back; the one thing that seems strange to me; the one thing that I can scarcely believe in. If I went back to that northern common-land to-morrow, I should recognize every hillock, every scrap of furze, or patch of heather. The few years that have gone by since I saw it will have made a scarcely perceptible difference in the features of the familiar place. The slow changes of nature, immutable in her harmonious law, will have done their work according to that unalterable law; but this wretched me has undergone so complete a change, that if you could bring me back that *alter ego* of the past, I should be unable to recognize the strange creature; and yet it is by no volcanic shocks, no rending asunder of rocky masses, no great convulsions, or terrific agonies of nature, that the change has come about; it is rather by a slow, monotonous wearing away of salient points; an imperceptible adulteration of this or that constituent part; an addition here, and a subtraction there, that the transformation takes place. It is hard to make a man believe in the physiologists, who declare that the hand which uses his pen to-day is not the same hand that guided the quill with which he wrote seven years ago. He finds it very difficult to believe this; but let him take out of some forgotten writing-desk, thrust into a corner of his lumber-room, those letters which he wrote seven years ago, and which were afterwards returned to him by the lady to whom they were addressed, and the question which he will ask himself, as he reads the faded lines, will most surely be, "Was it I who wrote this bosh? Was it I who called a lady with white eyelashes 'the guiding star of a lonely life'? Was it I who was 'inexpressibly miserable' with one *s*, and looked 'forward with unutterable anxiety to the party in Onslow Square, at which I once more should look into those soft blue eyes?' What party in Onslow Square? *Non mi recordo*. "Those soft blue eyes' were garnished with white lashes, and the lady to whom the letters were written, jilted me, to marry a rich soap-boiler." Even the law takes cognizance of this wonderful transformation.

The debt which Smith contracts in 1850 is null and void in 1857. The Smith of '50 may have been an extravagant rogue; the Smith of '57 may be a conscientious man, who would not cheat his creditors of a farthing. Shall Smith the second be called upon to pay the debts of Smith the first? I leave that question to Smith's conscience and the metaphysicians. Surely the same law should hold good in breach of promise of marriage. Smith the first may have adored Miss Brown; Smith the second may detest her. Shall Smith of 1857 be called upon to perform the contract entered into by that other Smith of 1850? The French criminal law goes still further. The murderer whose crime remains unsuspected for ten years can laugh at the police-officers who discover his guilt in the eleventh. Surely this must be because the real murderer is no longer amenable to justice; because the hand that struck the blow, and the brain that plotted the deed, are alike vanished.

Poor John Mellish, with the world of the past crumbled at his feet, looked out at the blank future, and mourned for the people who were dead and gone.

He flung himself at full length upon the stunted grass, and taking the crumpled paper from his breast, unfolded it and smoothed it out before him.

It was a certificate of marriage. The certificate of a marriage which had been solemnized at the parish church of Dover, upon the 2nd of July, 1856, between James Conyers, bachelor, rough-rider, of London, son of Joseph Conyers, stage-coachman, and Susan, his wife, and Aurora Floyd, spinster, daughter of Archibald Floyd, banker, of Felden Woods, Kent.

CHAPTER III. AURORA'S FLIGHT

Mrs. Mellish sat in her husband's room on the morning of the inquest, amongst the guns and fishing-rods, the riding-boots and hunting-whips, and all the paraphernalia of sportsmanship. She sat in a capacious wicker-work arm-chair, close to the open window, with her head lying back upon the chintz-covered cushions, and her eyes wandering far away across the lawn and flower-beds towards the winding pathway by which it was likely John Mellish would return from the inquest at the Golden Lion.

She had openly defied Mrs. Powell, and had locked the door of this quiet chamber upon that lady's stereotyped civilities and sympathetic simperings. She had locked the door upon the outer world, and she sat alone in the pleasant window, the full-blown roses showering their scented petals upon her lap with every breath of the summer breeze, and the butterflies hovering about her. The old mastiff sat by her side, with his heavy head lying on her lap, and his big dim eyes lifted to her face. She sat alone, I have said; but Heaven knows she was not companionless. Black care and corroding anxiety kept her faithful company, and would not budge from her side. What companions are so adhesive as trouble and sorrow? what associates so tenacious, what friends so watchful and untiring? This wretched girl stood alone in the centre of a sea of troubles, fearful to stretch out her hands to those who loved her, lest she should drag them into that ocean which was rising to overwhelm her.

"Oh, if I could suffer alone!" she thought; "if I could suffer all this misery alone, I think I would go through it to the last without complaining; but the shame, the degradation, the anguish, will come upon others more heavily than upon me. What will they not suffer? what will they not endure, if the wicked madness of my youth should become known to the world?"

Those others, of whose possible grief and shame she thought with such cruel torture, were her father and John Mellish. Her love for her husband had not lessened by one iota her love for that indulgent father, on whom the folly of her girlhood had brought such bitter suffering. Her generous heart was wide enough for both. She had acknowledged no "divided duty," and would have repudiated any encroachment of the new affection upon the old. The great river of her love widened into an ocean, and embraced a new shore with its mighty tide; but that far-away source of childhood, from which affection first sprang in its soft infantine purity, still gushed in crystal beauty from its unsullied spring. She would perhaps scarcely have recognized the coldly-measured affection of mad Lear's youngest daughter – the affection which could divide itself with mathematical precision between father and husband. Surely love is too pure a sentiment to be so weighed in the balance. Must we subtract something from the original sum when we are called upon to meet a new demand? or has not affection rather some magic power by which it can double its capital at any moment when there is a run upon the bank? When Mrs. John Anderson becomes the mother of six children, she does not say to her husband, "My dear John, I shall be compelled to rob you of six-tenths of my affection in order to provide for the little ones." No; the generous heart of the wife grows larger to meet the claims upon the mother, as the girl's heart expanded with the new affection of the wife. Every pang of grief which Aurora felt for her husband's misery was doubled by the image of her father's sorrow. She could not divide these two in her own mind. She loved them, and was sorry for them, with an equal measure of love and sorrow.

"If – if the truth should be discovered at this inquest," she thought, "I can never see my husband again; I can never look in his face any more. I will run away to the end of the world, and hide myself from him for ever."

She had tried to capitulate with her fate; she had endeavoured to escape the full measure of retribution, and she had failed. She had done evil that good might come of it, in the face of that

command which says that all such evil-doing shall be wasted sin, useless iniquity. She had deceived John Mellish in the hope that the veil of deception might never be rent in twain, that the truth might be undiscovered to the end, and the man she loved spared from cruel shame and grief. But the fruits of that foolish seed, sown long ago in the day of her disobedience, had grown up around her and hedged her in upon every side, and she had been powerless to cut a pathway for herself through the noxious weeds that her own hands had planted.

She sat with her watch in her hand, and her eyes wandered every now and then from the gardens before her to the figures on the dial. John Mellish had left the house at a little after nine o'clock, and it was now nearly two. He had told her that the inquest would be over in a couple of hours, and that he would hurry home directly it was finished, to tell her the result. What would be the result of that inquest? What inquiries might be made? what evidence might, by some unhappy accident, be produced to compromise or to betray her? She sat in a dull stupor, waiting to receive her sentence. What would it be? Condemnation or release? *If* her secret should escape detection, if James Conyers should be allowed to carry the story of his brief married life to the grave, what relief, what release for the wretched girl, whose worst sin had been to mistake a bad man for a good one; the ignorant trustfulness of a child who is ready to accept any shabby pilgrim for an exiled nobleman or a prince in disguise!

It was half-past two, when she was startled by the sound of a shambling footstep upon the gravelled pathway underneath the verandah. The footstep slowly shuffled on for a few paces; then paused, then shuffled on again; and at last a face that she hated made itself visible at the angle of the window, opposite to that against which she sat. It was the white face of the "Softy," which was poked cautiously forward a few inches within the window-frame. The mastiff sprang up with a growl, and made as if he would have flown at that ugly leering face, which looked like one of the hideous decorations of a Gothic building; but Aurora caught the animal's collar with both her hands, and dragged him back.

"Be quiet, Bow-wow," she said; "quiet, boy, – quiet."

She still held him with one firm hand, soothing him with the other. "What do you want?" she asked, turning upon the "Softy" with a cold icy grandeur of disdain, which made her look like Nero's wife defying her false accusers. "What do you want with me? Your master is dead, and you have no longer an excuse for coming here. You have been forbidden the house and the grounds. If you forget this another time, I shall request Mr. Mellish to remind you."

She lifted her disengaged hand and laid it upon the window-sash; she was going to draw it down, when Stephen Hargraves stopped her.

"Don't be in such a hoory," he said; "I want to speak to you. I've coom straight from th' inquest. I thought you might want to know all about it. I coom out o' friendliness, though you did pay into me with th' horsewhip."

Aurora's heart beat tempestuously against her aching breast. Ah! what hard duty that poor heart had done lately! what icy burdens it had borne, what horrible oppression of secrecy and terror had weighed upon it, crushing out all hope and peace! An agony of suspense and dread convulsed that tortured heart as the "Softy" tempted her, tempted her to ask him the issue of the inquest, that she might receive from his lips the sentence of life or death. She little knew how much of her secret this man had discovered; but she knew that he hated her, and that he suspected enough to know his power of torturing her.

She lifted her proud head and looked at him with a steady glance of defiance. "I have told you that your presence is disagreeable," she said. "Stand aside, and let me shut the window."

The "Softy" grinned insolently, and holding the window-frame with one of his broad hands, put his head into the room. Aurora rose to leave the window; but he laid the other hand upon her wrist, which shrunk instinctively from contact with his hard horny palm.

"I tell you I've got summat particklar to say to you," he whispered. "You shall hear all about it. I was one of th' witnesses at th' inquest, and I've been hanging about ever since, and I know everything."

Aurora flung her head back disdainfully, and tried to wrench her wrist from that strong grasp.

"Let me go!" she said. "You shall suffer for this insolence when Mr. Mellish returns."

"But he won't be back just yet awhile," said the "Softy," grinning. "He's gone back to the Golden Lion. Th' coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, th' parson, sent for him to tell him summat —*summat about you!*" hissed Mr. Stephen Hargraves, with his dry white lips close to Aurora's ear.

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Mellish, still writhing in the "Softy's" grasp, still restraining her dog from flying at him with her disengaged hand; "what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," answered Steeve Hargraves; "I mean that it's all found out. They know everything; and they've sent for Mr. Mellish to tell him. They've sent for him to tell him what you was to him that's dead."

A low wail broke from Aurora's lips. She had expected to hear this, perhaps; she had, at any rate, dreaded it; she had only fought against receiving the tidings from this man; but he had conquered her; he had conquered her as the dogged obstinate nature, however base, however mean, will always conquer the generous and impulsive soul. He had secured his revenge, and had contrived to be the witness of her agony. He released her wrist as he finished speaking, and looked at her – looked at her with an insolently triumphant leer in his small eyes.

She drew herself up, proudly still, proudly and bravely in spite of all, but with her face changed – changed from its former expression of restless pain to the dull blankness of despair.

"They found th' certificate," said the "Softy." "He'd carried it about with him, sewed up in's waistco-at."

The certificate! Heaven have pity upon her girlish ignorance! She had never thought of that; she had never remembered that miserable scrap of paper which was the legal evidence of her folly. She had dreaded the presence of that husband who had arisen, as if from the grave, to pursue and torment her; but she had forgotten that other evidence of the parish register, which might also arise against her at any moment. She had feared the finding of something – some letter – some picture – some accidental record amongst the possessions of the murdered man; but she had never thought of this most conclusive evidence, this most incontrovertible proof. She put her hand to her head, trying to realize the full horror of her position. The certificate of her marriage with her father's groom was in the hands of John Mellish.

"What will he think of me?" she thought. "How would he ever believe me if I were to tell him that I had received what I thought positive evidence of James Conyers's death a year before my second marriage? How *could* he believe in me? I have deceived him too cruelly to dare to ask his confidence."

She looked about, trying to collect herself, trying to decide upon what she ought to do, and in her bewilderment and agony forgot for a moment the greedy eyes which were gloating upon her misery. But she remembered herself presently, and turning sternly upon Stephen Hargraves, spoke to him with a voice which was singularly clear and steady.

"You have told me all that you have to tell," she said; "be so good as to get out of the way while I shut the window."

The "Softy" drew back and allowed her to close the sashes; she bolted the window, and drew down the Venetian blind, effectually shutting out her spy, who crept away slowly and reluctantly towards the shrubbery, through which he could make his way safely out of the grounds.

"I've paid her out," he muttered, as he shambled off under the shelter of the young trees; "I've paid her out pretty tidy. It's almost better than money," he said, laughing silently – "it's almost better than money to pay off them kind of debts."

Aurora seated herself at John Mellish's desk, and wrote a few hurried lines upon a sheet of paper that lay uppermost amongst letters and bills.

"My dear Love," – she wrote, – "I cannot remain here to see you after the discovery which has been made to-day. I am a miserable coward; and I cannot meet your altered looks, I cannot hear your altered voice. I have no hope that you can have any other feeling for me than contempt and loathing. But on some future day, when I am far away from you, and the bewilderment of my present misery has grown less, I will write and explain everything. Think of me mercifully, if you can; and if you can believe that, in the wicked concealments of the last few weeks, the mainspring of my conduct has been my love for you, you will only believe the truth. God bless you, my best and truest. The pain of leaving you for ever is less than the pain of knowing that you had ceased to love me. Good-bye."

She lighted a taper, and sealed the envelope which contained this letter.

"The spies who hate and watch me shall not read this," she thought, as she wrote John's name upon the envelope.

She left the letter upon the desk, and, rising from her seat, looked round the room, – looked with a long lingering gaze, that dwelt on each familiar object. How happy she had been amongst all that masculine litter! how happy with the man she had believed to be her husband! how innocently happy before the coming down of that horrible storm-cloud which had overwhelmed them both! She turned away with a shudder.

"I have brought disgrace and misery upon all who have loved me," she thought. "If I had been less cowardly, – if I had told the truth, – all this might have been avoided, if I had confessed the truth to Talbot Bulstrode."

She paused at the mention of that name.

"I will go to Talbot," she thought. "He is a good man. I will go to him; I shall have no shame now in telling him all. He will advise me what to do; he will break this discovery to my poor father."

Aurora had dimly foreseen this misery when she had spoken to Lucy Bulstrode at Felden; she had dimly foreseen a day in which all would be discovered, and she would fly to Lucy to ask for a shelter.

She looked at her watch.

"A quarter past three," she said. "There is an express that leaves Doncaster at five. I could walk the distance in the time."

She unlocked the door, and ran up-stairs to her own rooms. There was no one in the dressing-room; but her maid was in the bedroom, arranging some dresses in a huge wardrobe.

Aurora selected her plainest bonnet and a large gray cloak, and quietly put them on before the cheval glass in one of the pretty French windows. The maid, busy with her own work, did not take any particular notice of her mistress's actions; for Mrs. Mellish was accustomed to wait upon herself, and disliked any officious attention.

"How pretty the rooms look!" Aurora thought, with a weary sigh; "how simple and countrified! It was for *me* that the new furniture was chosen, – for me that the bath-room and conservatory were built."

She looked through the vista of brightly-carpeted rooms.

Would they ever seem as cheerful as they had once done to their master? Would he still occupy them, or would he lock the doors, and turn his back upon the old house in which he had lived such an untroubled life for nearly two-and-thirty years?

"My poor boy, my poor boy!" she thought. "Why was I ever born to bring such sorrow upon him?"

There was no egotism in her sorrow for his grief. She knew that he had loved her, and she knew that his parting would be the bitterest agony of his life; but in the depth of mortification which her own womanly pride had undergone, she could not look beyond the present shame of the discovery made that day, to a future of happiness and release.

"He will believe that I never loved him," she thought. "He will believe that he was the dupe of a designing woman, who wished to regain the position she had lost. What will he not think of me that is base and horrible?"

The face which she saw in the glass was very pale and rigid; the large dark eyes dry and lustrous, the lips drawn tightly down over the white teeth.

"I look like a woman who could cut her throat in such a crisis as this," she thought. "How often I have wondered at the desperate deeds done by women! I shall never wonder again."

She unlocked her dressing-case, and took a couple of bank-notes and some loose gold from one of the drawers. She put these in her purse, gathered her cloak about her, and walked towards the door.

She paused on the threshold to speak to her maid, who was still busy in the inner room.

"I am going into the garden, Parsons," she said; "tell Mr. Mellish that there is a letter for him in his study."

The room in which John kept his boots and racing accounts was called a "study" by the respectful household.

The dog Bow-wow lifted himself lazily from his tiger-skin rug as Aurora crossed the hall, and came sniffing about her, and endeavoured to follow her out of the house. But she ordered him back to his rug, and the submissive animal obeyed her, as he had often done in his youth, when his young mistress used to throw her doll into the water at Felden, and send the faithful mastiff to rescue that fair-haired waxen favourite. He obeyed her now, but a little reluctantly; and he watched her suspiciously as she descended the flight of steps before the door.

She walked at a rapid pace across the lawn, and into the shrubbery, going steadily southwards, though by that means she made her journey longer; for the north lodge lay towards Doncaster. In her way through the shrubbery she met two people, who walked closely side by side, engrossed in a whispering conversation, and who both started and changed countenance at seeing her. These two people were the "Softy" and Mrs. Powell.

"So," she thought, as she passed this strangely-matched pair, "my two enemies are laying their heads together to plot my misery. It is time that I left Mellish Park."

She went out of a little gate, leading into some meadows. Beyond these meadows there was a long shady lane that led behind the house to Doncaster. It was a path rarely chosen by any of the household at the Park, as it was the longest way to the town.

Aurora stopped at about a mile from the house which had been her own, and looked back at the picturesque pile of building, half hidden under the luxuriant growth of a couple of centuries.

"Good-bye, dear home, in which I was an impostor and a cheat," she said; "good-bye, for ever and for ever, my own dear love."

While Aurora uttered these few words of passionate farewell, John Mellish lay upon the sun-burnt grass, staring absently at the still water-pools under the gray sky, – pitying her, praying for her, and forgiving her from the depth of his honest heart.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN MELLISH FINDS HIS HOME DESOLATE

The sun was low in the western sky, and distant village clocks had struck seven, when John Mellish walked slowly away from that lonely waste of stunted grass called Harper's Common, and strolled homewards in the peaceful evening.

The Yorkshire squire was still very pale. He walked with his head bent forward upon his breast, and the hand that grasped the crumpled paper thrust into the bosom of his waistcoat; but a hopeful light shone in his eyes, and the rigid lines of his mouth had relaxed into a tender smile – a smile of love and forgiveness. Yes, he had prayed for her and forgiven her, and he was at peace. He had pleaded her cause a hundred times in the dull quiet of that summer's afternoon, and had excused her and forgiven her. Not lightly, Heaven is a witness; not without a sharp and cruel struggle, that had rent his heart with tortures undreamed of before.

This revelation of the past was such bitter shame to him; such horrible degradation; such irrevocable infamy. His love, his idol, his empress, his goddess – it was of her he thought. By what hellish witchcraft had she been ensnared into the degrading alliance, recorded in this miserable scrap of paper? The pride of five unsullied centuries arose, fierce and ungovernable, in the breast of the country gentleman, to resent this outrage upon the woman he loved. O God! had all his glorification of her been the vain-boasting of a fool who had not known what he talked about? He was answerable to the world for the past as well as for the present. He had made an altar for his idol, and had cried aloud to all who came near her, to kneel down and perform their worship at her shrine; and he was answerable to these people for the purity of their divinity. He could not think of her as less than the idol which his love had made her – perfect, unsullied, unassailable. Disgrace, where she was concerned, knew in his mind no degrees.

It was not his own humiliation he thought of when his face grew hot as he imagined the talk there would be in the country if this fatal indiscretion of Aurora's youth ever became generally known; it was the thought of her shame that stung him to the heart. He never once disturbed himself with any prevision of the ridicule which was likely to fall upon himself.

It was here that John Mellish and Talbot Bulstrode were so widely different in their manner of loving and suffering. Talbot had sought a wife who should reflect honour upon himself, and had fallen away from Aurora at the first trial of his faith, shaken with horrible apprehensions of his own danger. But John Mellish had submerged his very identity into that of the woman he loved. She was his faith and his worship, and it was for her departed glory that he wept in this cruel day of shame. The wrong which he found so hard to forgive was not her wrong against him; but that other and more fatal wrong against herself. I have said that his affection was universal, and partook of all the highest attributes of that sublime self-abnegation which we call Love. The agony which he felt to-day was the agony which Archibald Floyd had suffered years before. It was vicarious torture, endured for Aurora, and not for himself; and in his struggle against that sorrowful anger which he felt for her folly, every one of her perfections took up arms upon the side of indignation, and fought against their own mistress. Had she been less beautiful, less queenly, less generous, great and noble, he might have forgiven her that self-inflicted shame more easily. But she was so perfect; and how could she, how could she?

He unfolded the wretched paper half a dozen times, and read and re-read every word of that commonplace legal document, before he could convince himself that it was not some vile forgery, concocted by James Conyers for purposes of extortion. But he prayed for her, and forgave her. He pitied her with more than a mother's tender pity, with more than a sorrowful father's anguish.

"My poor dear!" he said, "my poor dear! she was only a school-girl when this certificate was first written: an innocent child; ready to believe in any lies told her by a villain."

A dark frown obscured the Yorkshireman's brow as he thought this; a frown that would have promised no good to Mr. James Conyers, had not the trainer passed out of the reach of all earthly good and evil.

"Will God have mercy upon a wretch like that?" thought John Mellish; "will that man be forgiven for having brought disgrace and misery upon a trusting girl?"

It will perhaps be wondered at, that John Mellish, who suffered his servants to rule in his household, and allowed his butler to dictate to him what wines he should drink; who talked freely to his grooms, and bade his trainer sit in his presence, – it will be wondered at, perhaps, that this frank, free-spoken, simple-mannered young man should have felt so bitterly the shame of Aurora's unequal marriage. It was a common saying in Doncaster, that Squire Mellish of the Park had no pride; that he would clap poor folks on the shoulder and give them good-day as he lounged in the quiet street; that he would sit upon the cornchandler's counter, slashing his hunting-whip upon those popular tops, about which a legend was current, to the effect that they were always cleaned with champagne, – and discussing the prospects of the September Meeting; and that there was not within the three Ridings, a better landlord or a nobler-hearted gentleman. And all this was perfectly true. John Mellish was entirely without personal pride; but there was another pride, which was wholly inseparable from his education and position, and this was the pride of caste. He was strictly conservative; and although he was ready to talk to his good friend the saddler, or his trusted retainer the groom, as freely as he would have held converse with his equals, he would have opposed all the strength of his authority against the saddler had that honest tradesman attempted to stand for his native town, and would have annihilated the groom with one angry flash of his bright blue eyes had the servant infringed by so much as an inch upon the broad extent of territory that separated him from his master.

The struggle was finished before John Mellish arose from the brown turf and turned towards the home which he had left early that morning, ignorant of the great trouble that was to fall upon him, and only dimly conscious of some dark foreboding of the coming of an unknown horror. The struggle was over, and there was now only hope in his heart – the hope of clasping his wife to his breast, and comforting her for all the past. However bitterly he might feel the humiliation of this madness of her ignorant girlhood, it was not for him to remind her of it; his duty was to confront the world's slander or the world's ridicule, and oppose his own breast to the storm, while she was shielded by the great shelter of his love. His heart yearned for some peaceful foreign land, in which his idol would be far away from all who could tell her secret, and where she might reign once more glorious and unapproachable. He was ready to impose any cheat upon the world, in his greediness of praise and worship for her – for her. How tenderly he thought of her, walking slowly homewards in that tranquil evening! He thought of her waiting to hear from him the issue of the inquest, and he reproached himself for his neglect when he remembered how long he had been absent.

"But my darling will scarcely be uneasy," he thought; "she will hear all about the inquest from some one or other, and she will think that I have gone into Doncaster on business. She will know nothing of the finding of this detestable certificate. No one need know of it. Lofthouse and Hayward are honourable men, and they will keep my poor girl's secret; they will keep the secret of her foolish youth, – my poor, poor girl!"

He longed for that moment which he fancied so near; the moment in which he should fold her in his arms and say, "My dearest one, be at peace; there is no longer any secret between us. Henceforth your sorrows are my sorrows, and it is hard if I cannot help you to carry the load lightly. We are one, my dear. For the first time since our wedding-day, we are truly united."

He expected to find Aurora in his own room, for she had declared her intention of sitting there all day; and he ran across the broad lawn to the rose-shadowed verandah that sheltered his favourite retreat. The blind was drawn down and the window bolted, as Aurora had bolted it in her wish to exclude Mr. Stephen Hargraves. He knocked at the window, but there was no answer.

"Lolly has grown tired of waiting," he thought.

The second dinner-bell rang in the hall while Mr. Mellish lingered outside this darkened window. The commonplace sound reminded him of his social duties.

"I must wait till dinner is over, I suppose, before I talk to my darling," he thought. "I must go through all the usual business, for the edification of Mrs. Powell and the servants, before I can take my darling to my breast, and set her mind at ease for ever."

John Mellish submitted himself to the indisputable force of those ceremonial laws which we have made our masters, and he was prepared to eat a dinner for which he had no appetite, and wait two hours for that moment for whose coming his soul yearned, rather than provoke Mrs. Powell's curiosity by any deviation from the common course of events.

The windows of the drawing-room were open, and he saw the glimmer of a pale muslin dress at one of them. It belonged to Mrs. Powell, who was sitting in a contemplative attitude, gazing at the evening sky.

She was not thinking of that western glory of pale crimson and shining gold. She was thinking that if John Mellish cast off the wife who had deceived him, and who had never legally been his wife, the Yorkshire mansion would be a fine place to live in; a fine place for a housekeeper who knew how to obtain influence over her master, and who had the secret of his married life and his wife's disgrace to help her on to power.

"He's such a blind, besotted fool about her," thought the ensign's widow, "that if he breaks with her to-morrow, he'll go on loving her just the same, and he'll do anything to keep her secret. Let it work which way it will, they're in my power – they're both in my power; and I'm no longer a poor dependent, to be sent away, at a quarter's notice, when it pleases them to be tired of me."

The bread of dependence is not a pleasant diet; but there are many ways of eating the same food. Mrs. Powell's habit was to receive all favours grudgingly, as she would have given, had it been her lot to give instead of to receive. She measured others by her own narrow gauge, and was powerless to comprehend or believe in the frank impulses of a generous nature. She knew that she was a useless member of poor John's household, and that the young squire could have easily dispensed with her presence. She knew, in short, that she was retained by reason of Aurora's pity for her friendlessness; and having neither gratitude nor kindly feelings to give in return for her comfortable shelter, she resented her own poverty of nature, and hated her entertainers for their generosity. It is a property of these narrow natures so to resent the attributes they can envy, but cannot even understand; and Mrs. Powell had been far more at ease in households in which she had been treated as a lady-like drudge than she had ever been at Mellish Park, where she was received as an equal and a guest. She had eaten the bitter bread upon which she had lived so long in a bitter spirit; and her whole nature had turned to gall from the influence of that disagreeable diet. A moderately-generous person can bestow a favour, and bestow it well; but to receive a boon with perfect grace requires a far nobler and more generous nature.

John Mellish approached the open window at which the ensign's widow was seated, and looked into the room. Aurora was not there. The long saloon seemed empty and desolate. The decorations of the temple looked cold and dreary, for the deity was absent.

"No one here!" exclaimed Mr. Mellish, disconsolately.

"No one here but me," murmured Mrs. Powell, with an accent of mild deprecation.

"But where is my wife, ma'am?"

He said those two small words, "my wife," with such a tone of resolute defiance, that Mrs. Powell looked up at him as he spoke, and thought, "He has seen the certificate."

"Where is Aurora?" repeated John.

"I believe that Mrs. Mellish has gone out."

"Gone out! where?"

"You forget, sir," said the ensign's widow reproachfully, – "you appear to forget your special request that I should abstain from all supervision of Mrs. Mellish's arrangements. Prior to that request,

which I may venture to suggest was unnecessarily emphatic, I had certainly considered myself, as the humble individual chosen by Miss Floyd's aunt, and invested by her with a species of authority over the young lady's actions, in some manner responsible for – "

John Mellish chafed horribly under the merciless stream of long words, which Mrs. Powell poured upon his head.

"Talk about that another time, for Heaven's sake, ma'am," he said impatiently. "I only want to know where my wife is. Two words will tell me that, I suppose?"

"I am sorry to say that I am unable to afford you any information upon that subject," answered Mrs. Powell; "Mrs. Mellish quitted the house at half-past three o'clock, dressed for walking. I have not seen her since."

Heaven forgive Aurora for the trouble it had been her lot to bring upon those who best loved her! John's heart grew sick with terror at this first failure of his hope. He had pictured her waiting to receive him, ready to fall upon his breast in answer to his passionate cry, "Aurora, come! come, dear love! the secret has been discovered, and is forgiven."

"Somebody knows where my wife has gone, I suppose, Mrs. Powell?" he said fiercely, turning upon the ensign's widow in his wrathful sense of disappointment and alarm. He was only a big child, after all, with a child's alternate hopefulness and despair; with a child's passionate devotion for those he loved, and ignorant terror of danger to those beloved ones.

"Mrs. Mellish may have made a confidante of Parsons," replied the ensign's widow; "but she certainly did not enlighten *me* as to her intended movements. Shall I ring the bell for Parsons?"

"If you please."

John Mellish stood upon the threshold of the French window, not caring to enter the handsome chamber of which he was the master. Why should he go into the house? It was no home for him without the woman who had made it so dear and sacred; dear, even in the darkest hour of sorrow and anxiety; sacred, even in despite of the trouble his love had brought upon him.

The maid Parsons appeared in answer to a message sent by Mrs. Powell; and John strode into the room and interrogated her sharply as to the departure of her mistress.

The girl could tell very little, except that Mrs. Mellish had said that she was going into the garden, and that she had left a letter in the study for the master of the house. Perhaps Mrs. Powell was even better aware of the existence of this letter than the Abigail herself. She had crept stealthily into John's room after her interview with the "Softy" and her chance encounter of Aurora. She had found the letter lying on the table, sealed with a crest and monogram that were engraved upon a blood-stone worn by Mrs. Mellish amongst the trinkets on her watch-chain. It was not possible therefore to manipulate this letter with any safety, and Mrs. Powell had contented herself by guessing darkly at its contents. The "Softy" had told her of the fatal discovery of the morning, and she instinctively comprehended the meaning of that sealed letter. It was a letter of explanation and farewell, perhaps; perhaps only of farewell.

John strode along the corridor that led to his favourite room. The chamber was dimly lighted by the yellow evening sunlight which streamed from between the Venetian blinds, and drew golden bars upon the matted floor. But even in that dusky and uncertain light he saw the white patch upon the table, and sprang with tigerish haste upon the letter his wife had left for him.

He drew up the Venetian blind, and stood in the embrasure of the window, with the evening sunlight upon his face, reading Aurora's letter. There was neither anger nor alarm visible in his face as he read; only supreme love and supreme compassion.

"My poor darling! my poor girl! How could she think that there could ever be such a word as good-bye between us! Does she think so lightly of my love as to believe that it could fail her now, when she wants it most? Why, if that man had lived," he thought, his face darkening with the memory of that unburied clay which yet lay in the still chamber at the north lodge, – "if that man had lived, and had claimed her, and carried her from me by the right of the paper in my breast, I would have

clung to her still; I would have followed wherever he went, and would have lived near him, that she might have known where to look for a defender from every wrong: I would have been his servant, the willing servant and contented hanger-on of a boor, if I could have served her by enduring his insolence. So, my dear, my dear," murmured the young squire, with a tender smile, "it was worse than foolish to write this letter to me, and even more useless than it was cruel to run away from the man who would follow you to the farthest end of this wide world."

He put the letter into his pocket, and took his hat from the table. He was ready to start – he scarcely knew for what destination; for the end of the world, perhaps – in his search for the woman he loved. But he was going to Felden Woods before beginning the longer journey, as he fully believed that Aurora would fly to her father in her foolish terror.

"To think that anything could ever happen to change or lessen my love for her," he said; "foolish girl! foolish girl!"

He rang for his servant, and ordered the hasty packing of his smallest portmanteau. He was going to town for a day or two, and he was going alone. He looked at his watch; it was only a quarter after eight, and the mail left Doncaster at half-past twelve. There was plenty of time, therefore; a great deal too much time for the feverish impatience of Mr. Mellish, who would have chartered a special engine to convey him, had the railway officials been willing. There were four long hours during which he must wait, wearing out his heart in his anxiety to follow the woman he loved, to take her to his breast and comfort and shelter her, to tell her that true love knows neither decrease nor change. He ordered the dog-cart to be got ready for him at eleven o'clock. There was a slow train that left Doncaster at ten; but as it reached London only ten minutes before the mail, it was scarcely desirable as a conveyance. Yet after the hour had passed for its starting, Mr. Mellish reproached himself bitterly for that lost ten minutes, and was tormented by a fancy that, through the loss of those very ten minutes, he should miss the chance of an immediate meeting with Aurora.

It was nine o'clock before he remembered the necessity of making some pretence of sitting down to dinner. He took his place at the end of the long table, and sent for Mrs. Powell, who appeared in answer to his summons, and seated herself with a well-bred affectation of not knowing that the dinner had been put off for an hour and a half.

"I'm sorry I've kept you so long, Mrs. Powell," he said, as he sent the ensign's widow a ladleful of clear soup, that was of the temperature of lemonade. "The truth is, that I – I – find I shall be compelled to run up to town by the mail."

"Upon no unpleasant business, I hope?"

"Oh, dear no, not at all. Mrs. Mellish has gone up to her father's place, and – and – has requested me to follow her," added John, telling a lie with considerable awkwardness, but with no very great remorse. He did not speak again during dinner. He ate anything that his servants put before him, and took a good deal of wine; but he ate and drank alike unconsciously, and when the cloth had been removed, and he was left alone with Mrs. Powell, he sat staring at the reflection of the wax-candles in the depths of the mahogany. It was only when the lady gave a little ceremonial cough, and rose with the intention of simpering out of the room, that he roused himself from his long reverie, and looked up suddenly.

"Don't go just this moment, if you please, Mrs. Powell," he said. "If you'll sit down again for a few minutes, I shall be glad. I wished to say a word or two to you before I leave Mellish Park."

He rose as he spoke, and pointed to a chair. Mrs. Powell seated herself, and looked at him earnestly; with an eager, viperish earnestness, and a nervous movement of her thin lips.

"When you came here, Mrs. Powell," said John, gravely, "you came as my wife's guest, and as my wife's friend. I need scarcely say that you could have had no better claim upon my friendship and hospitality. If you had brought a regiment of dragoons with you, as the condition of your visit, they would have been welcome; for I believed that your coming would give pleasure to my poor girl. If my wife had been indebted to you for any word of kindness, for any look of affection, I would have

repaid that debt a thousand-fold, had it lain in my power to do so by any service, however difficult. You would have lost nothing by your love for my poor motherless girl, if any devotion of mine could have recompensed you for that tenderness. It was only reasonable that I should look to you as the natural friend and counsellor of my darling; and I did so, honestly and confidently. Forgive me if I tell you that I very soon discovered how much I had been mistaken in entertaining such a hope. I soon saw that you were no friend to my wife."

"Mr. Mellish!"

"Oh, my dear madam, you think because I keep hunting-boots and guns in the room I call my study, and because I remember no more of the Latin that my tutor crammed into my head than the first line of the Eton Syntax, – you think, because I'm not clever, that I must needs be a fool. That's your mistake, Mrs. Powell; I'm not clever enough to be a fool, and I've just sufficient perception to see any danger that assails those I love. You don't like my wife; you grudge her her youth and her beauty, and my foolish love for her; and you've watched, and listened, and plotted – in a lady-like way, of course – to do her some evil. Forgive me if I speak plainly. Where Aurora is concerned, I feel very strongly. To hurt her little finger is to torture my whole body. To stab her once is to stab me a hundred times. I have no wish to be discourteous to a lady; I am only sorry that you have been unable to love a poor girl who has rarely failed to win friends amongst those who have known her. Let us part without animosity, but let us understand each other for the first time. You do not like us, and it is better that we should part before you learn to hate us."

The ensign's widow waited in utter stupefaction until Mr. Mellish stopped, from want of breath, perhaps, rather than from want of words.

All her viperish nature rose in white defiance of him as he walked up and down the room, chafing himself into a fury with his recollection of the wrong she had done him in not loving his wife.

"You are perhaps aware, Mr. Mellish," she said, after an awful pause, "that under such circumstances the annual stipend due to me for my services cannot be expected to cease at your caprice; and that, although you may turn me out of doors," – Mrs. Powell descended to this very commonplace locution, and stooped to the vernacular in her desire to be spiteful, – "you must understand that you will be liable for my salary until the expiration of –"

"Oh, pray do not imagine that I shall repudiate any claim you may make upon me, Mrs. Powell," said John, eagerly; "Heaven knows it has been no pleasure to me to speak as plainly as I have spoken to-night. I will write a cheque for any amount you may consider proper as compensation for this change in our arrangements. I might have been more polite, perhaps; I might have told you that my wife and I think of travelling on the Continent, and that we are, therefore, breaking up our household. I have preferred telling you the plain truth. Forgive me if I have wounded you."

Mrs. Powell rose, pale, menacing, terrible; terrible in the intensity of her feeble wrath, and in the consciousness that she had power to stab the heart of the man who had affronted her.

"You have merely anticipated my own intention, Mr. Mellish," she said. "I could not possibly have remained a member of your household after the very unpleasant circumstances that have lately transpired. My worst wish is, that you may find yourself involved in no greater trouble through your connection with Mr. Floyd's daughter. Let me add one word of warning before I have the honour of wishing you good evening. Malicious people might be tempted to smile at your enthusiastic mention of your 'wife;' remembering that the person to whom you allude is Aurora Conyers, the widow of your groom, and that she has never possessed any legal claim to the title you bestow upon her."

If Mrs. Powell had been a man, she would have found her head in contact with the Turkey carpet of John's dining-room before she could have concluded this speech; as she was a woman, John Mellish stood looking her full in the face, waiting till she had finished speaking. But he bore the stab she inflicted without flinching under its cruel pain, and he robbed her of the gratification she had hoped for. He did not let her see his anguish.

"If Lofthouse has told her the secret," he cried, when the door had closed upon Mrs. Powell, "I'll horsewhip him in the church."

CHAPTER V. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Aurora found a civil railway official at the Doncaster station, who was ready to take a ticket for her, and find her a comfortable seat in an empty carriage; but before the train started, a couple of sturdy farmers took their seats upon the spring cushions opposite Mrs. Mellish. They were wealthy gentlemen, who farmed their own land, and travelled express; but they brought a powerful odour of the stable-yard into the carriage, and they talked with that honest northern twang which always has a friendly sound to the writer of this story. Aurora, with her veil drawn over her pale face, attracted very little of their attention. They talked of farming-stock and horse-racing, and looked out of the window every now and then to shrug their shoulders at somebody else's agriculture.

I believe they were acquainted with the capabilities of every acre of land between Doncaster and Harrow, and knew how it might have been made "worth ten shillin' an acre more than it was, too, sir," as they perpetually informed each other.

How wearisome their talk must have seemed to the poor lonely creature who was running away from the man she loved, – from the man who loved her, and would love to the end of time!

"I didn't mean what I wrote," she thought. "My poor boy would never love me less. His great heart is made up of unselfish love and generous devotion. But he would be so sorry for me; he would be so sorry! He could never be proud of me again; he could never boast of me any more. He would be always resenting some insult, or imagining some slight. It would be too painful for him. He would see his wife pointed at as the woman who had married her groom. He would be embroiled in a hundred quarrels, a hundred miseries. I will make the only return that I can ever make to him for his goodness to me: I will give him up, and go away and hide myself from him for ever."

She tried to imagine what John's life would be without her. She tried to think of him in some future time, when he should have worn out his grief, and reconciled himself to her loss. But she could not, she could not! She could not endure any image of *him* in which he was separated from his love for her.

"How should I ever think of him without thinking of his love for me?" she thought. "He loved me from the first moment in which he saw me. I have never known him except as a lover; generous, pure, and true."

And in this mind Aurora watched the smaller stations, which looked like mere streaks of whitened woodwork as the express tore past them; though every one of them was a milestone upon the long road which was separating her from the man she loved.

Ah, careless wives, who think it a small thing, perhaps, that your husbands are honest and generous, constant and true, and who are apt to grumble because your next-door neighbours have started a carriage, while you are fain to be content with eighteenpenny airings in vehicles procured at the nearest cab-stand, – stop and think of this wretched girl, who in this hour of desolation recalled a thousand little wrongs she had done to her husband, and would have laid herself under his feet to be walked over by him could she have thus atoned for her petty tyrannies, her pretty caprices! Think of her in her loneliness, with her heart yearning to go back to the man she loved, and with her love arrayed against herself and pleading for him. She changed her mind a hundred times during that four hours' journey; sometimes thinking that she would go back by the next train, and then again remembering that her first impulse had been, perhaps, after all, only too correct, and that John Mellish's heart had turned against her in the cruel humiliation of that morning's discovery.

Have you ever tried to imagine the anger of a person whom you have never seen angry? Have you ever called up the image of a face that has never looked on you except in love and gentleness, and invested that familiar countenance with the blank sternness of estrangement? Aurora did this.

She acted over and over again in her weary brain the scene that might have taken place between her husband and herself. She remembered that scene in the hackneyed stage-play, which everybody affects to ridicule and secretly weeps at. She remembered Mrs. Haller and the Stranger, the children, the Countess, the cottage, the jewels, the parchments, and all the old familiar properties of that well-known fifth act in the simple, social tragedy; and she pictured to herself John Mellish retiring into some distant country with his rheumatic trainer Langley, and becoming a misanthropical hermit, after the manner of the injured German.

What was her life to be henceforth? She shut her eyes upon that blank future.

"I will go back to my father," she thought; "I will go back to him again, as I went before. But this time there shall be no falsehoods, no equivocations; and this time nothing shall tempt me to leave him again."

Amid all her perplexities, she clung to the thought that Lucy and Talbot would help her. She would appeal to passionless Talbot Bulstrode in behalf of her poor heart-broken John.

"Talbot will tell me what is right and honourable to be done," she thought. "I will hold by what he says. He shall be the arbiter of my future."

I do not believe that Aurora had ever entertained any very passionate devotion for the handsome Cornishman; but it is very certain that she had always respected him. It may be that any love she had felt for him had grown out of that very respect, and that her reverence for his character was made all the greater by the contrast between him and the base-born schemer for whom her youth had been sacrificed. She had submitted to the decree which had separated her from her affianced lover, for she had believed in its justice; and she was ready now to submit to any decision pronounced by the man, in whose sense of honour she had unbounded confidence.

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