

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Aurora Floyd. Volume 2



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Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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CHAPTER I.

"LOVE TOOK UP THE GLASS OF TIME, AND TURNED IT IN HIS GLOWING HANDS."

Talbot Bulstrode yielded at last to John's repeated invitations, and consented to pass a couple of days at Mellish Park.

He despised and hated himself for the absurd concession. In what a pitiful farce had the tragedy ended! A visitor in the house of his rival. A calm spectator of Aurora's every-day, commonplace happiness. For the space of two days he had consented to occupy this most preposterous position. Two days only; then back to the Cornish miners, and the desolate bachelor's lodgings in Queen's Square, Westminster; back to his tent in life's Great Sahara. He could not for the very soul of him resist the temptation of beholding the inner life of that Yorkshire mansion. He wanted to know for certain – what was it to him, I wonder? – whether she was really happy, and had utterly forgotten him. They all returned to the Park together, Aurora, John, Archibald Floyd, Lucy, Talbot Bulstrode, and Captain Hunter. The last-named officer was a jovial gentleman, with a hook nose and auburn whiskers; a gentleman whose intellectual attainments were of no very oppressive order, but a hearty, pleasant guest in an honest country mansion, where there is cheer and welcome for all.

Talbot could but inwardly confess that Aurora became her new position. How everybody loved her! What an atmosphere of happiness she created about her wherever she went! How joyously the dogs barked and leapt at sight of her, straining their chains in the desperate effort to approach her! How fearlessly the thorough-bred mares and foals ran to the paddock-gates to bid her welcome, bending down their velvet nostrils to nestle upon her shoulder, responsive to the touch of her caressing hand! Seeing all this, how could Talbot refrain from remembering that this same sunlight might have shone upon that dreary castle far away by the surging western sea? She might have been his, this beautiful creature; but at what price? At the price of honour; at the price of every principle of his mind, which had set up for himself a holy and perfect standard – a pure and spotless ideal for the wife of his choice. Forbid it, manhood! He might have weakly yielded; he might have been happy, with the blind happiness of a lotus-eater, but not the reasonable bliss of a Christian. Thank Heaven for the strength which had been given to him to escape from the silken net! Thank Heaven for the power which had been granted to him to fight the battle!

Standing by Aurora's side in one of the wide windows of Mellish Park, looking far out over the belted lawn to the glades in which the deer lay basking drowsily in the April sunlight, he could not repress the thought uppermost in his mind.

"I am – very glad – to see you so happy, Mrs. Mellish."

She looked at him with frank, truthful eyes, in whose brightness there was not one latent shadow.

"Yes," she said, "I am very, very happy. My husband is very good to me. He loves – and trusts me."

She could not resist that one little stab – the only vengeance she ever took upon him; but a stroke that pierced him to the heart.

"Aurora! Aurora! Aurora!" he cried.

That half-stifled cry revealed the secret of wounds that were not yet healed. Mrs. Mellish turned pale at the traitorous sound. This man must be cured. The happy wife, secure in her own stronghold of love and confidence, could not bear to see this poor fellow still adrift.

She by no means despaired of his cure, for experience had taught her, that although love's passionate fever takes several forms, there are very few of them incurable. Had she not passed safely through the ordeal herself, without one scar to bear witness of the old wounds?

She left Captain Bulstrode staring moodily out of the window, and went away to plan the saving of this poor shipwrecked soul.

She ran in the first place to tell Mr. John Mellish of her discovery, as it was her custom to carry to him every scrap of intelligence great and small.

"My dearest old Jack," she said – it was another of her customs to address him by every species of exaggeratedly endearing appellation; it may be that she did this for the quieting of her own conscience, being well aware that she tyrannized over him – "my darling boy, I have made a discovery."

"About the filly?"

"About Talbot Bulstrode."

John's blue eyes twinkled maliciously. He was evidently half prepared for what was coming.

"What is it, Lolly?"

Lolly was a corruption of Aurora, devised by John Mellish.

"Why, I'm really afraid, my precious darling, that he hasn't quite got over –"

"My taking you away from him!" roared John. "I thought as much. Poor devil – poor Talbot! I could see that he would have liked to fight me on the stand at York. Upon my word, I pity him!" and in token of his compassion Mr. Mellish burst into that old joyous, boisterous, but musical laugh, which Talbot might almost have heard at the other end of the house.

This was a favourite delusion of John's. He firmly believed that he had won Aurora's affection in fair competition with Captain Bulstrode; pleasantly ignoring that the captain had resigned all pretensions to Miss Floyd's hand nine or ten months before his own offer had been accepted.

The genial, sanguine creature had a habit of deceiving himself in this manner. He saw all things in the universe just as he wished to see them; all men and women good and honest; life one long, pleasant voyage in a well-fitted ship, with only first-class passengers on board. He was one of those men who are likely to cut their throats or take prussic acid upon the day they first encounter the black visage of Care.

"And what are we to do with this poor fellow, Lolly?"

"Marry him!" exclaimed Mrs. Mellish.

"Both of us?" said John simply.

"My dearest pet, what an obtuse old darling you are! No; marry him to Lucy Floyd, my first cousin once removed, and keep the Bulstrode estate in the family."

"Marry him to Lucy!"

"Yes; why not? She has studied enough, and learnt history, and geography, and astronomy, and botany, and geology, and conchology, and entomology enough; and she has covered I don't know how many China jars with impossible birds and flowers; and she has illuminated missals, and read High-Church novels. So the next best thing she can do is to marry Talbot Bulstrode."

John had his own reasons for agreeing with Aurora in this matter. He remembered that secret of poor Lucy's, which he had discovered more than a year before at Felden Woods: the secret which had been revealed to him by some mysterious sympathetic power belonging to hopeless love. So Mr. Mellish declared his hearty concurrence in Aurora's scheme, and the two amateur match-makers set to work to devise a complicated man-trap, in the which Talbot was to be entangled; never for a moment imagining that, while they were racking their brains in the endeavour to bring this piece of machinery to perfection, the intended victim was quietly strolling across the sunlit lawn towards the very fate they desired for him.

Yes, Talbot Bulstrode lounged with languid step to meet his Destiny, in a wood upon the borders of the Park; a part of the Park, indeed, inasmuch as it was within the boundary-fence of John's

domain. The wood-anemones trembled in the spring breezes, deep in those shadowy arcades; pale primroses showed their mild faces amid their sheltering leaves; and in shady nooks, beneath low-spreading boughs of elm and beech, oak and ash, the violets hid their purple beauty from the vulgar eye. A lovely spot, soothing by its harmonious influence; a very forest sanctuary, without whose dim arcades man cast his burden down, to enter in a child. Captain Bulstrode had felt in no very pleasant humour as he walked across the lawn; but some softening influence stole upon him, on the threshold of that sylvan shelter, which made him feel a better man. He began to question himself as to how he was playing his part in the great drama of life.

"Good heavens!" he thought, "what a shameful coward, what a negative wretch, I have become by this one grief of my manhood! An indifferent son, a careless brother, a useless, purposeless creature, content to dawdle away my life in feeble pottering with political economy. Shall I ever be in earnest again? Is this dreary doubt of every living creature to go with me to my grave? Less than two years ago my heart sickened at the thought that I had lived to two-and-thirty years of age, and had never been loved. Since then – since then – since then I had lived through life's brief fever; I have fought manhood's worst and sharpest battle, and find myself – where? Exactly where I was before; still companionless upon the dreary journey; only a little nearer to the end."

He walked slowly onward into the woodland aisle, other aisles branching away from him right and left into deep glades and darkening shadow. A month or so later, and the mossy ground beneath his feet would be one purple carpet of hyacinths, the very air thick with a fatal-scented vapour from the perfumed bulbs.

"I asked too much," said Talbot, in that voiceless argument we are perpetually carrying on with ourselves; "I asked too much; I yielded to the spell of the siren, and was angry because I missed the white wings of the angel. I was bewitched by the fascinations of a beautiful woman, when I should have sought for a noble-minded wife."

He went deeper and deeper into the wood, going to his fate, as another man was to do before the coming summer was over; but to what a different fate! The long arcades of beech and elm had reminded him from the first of the solemn aisles of a cathedral. The saint was only needed. And coming suddenly to a spot where a new arcade branched off abruptly on his right hand, he saw, in one of the sylvan niches, as fair a saint as had ever been modelled by the hand of artist and believer, – the same golden-haired angel he had seen in the long drawing-room at Felden Woods, – Lucy Floyd, with the pale aureola about her head, her large straw-hat in her lap filled with anemones and violets, and the third volume of a novel in her hand.

How much in life often hangs, or seems to us to hang, upon what is called by playwrights, "a situation!" But for this sudden encounter, but for thus coming upon this pretty picture, Talbot Bulstrode might have dropped into his grave ignorant to the last of Lucy's love for him. But, given a sunshiny April morning (April's fairest bloom, remember, when the capricious nymph is mending her manners, aware that her lovelier sister May is at hand, and anxious to make a good impression before she drops her farewell curtsy, and weeps her last brief shower of farewell tears) – given a balmy spring morning, solitude, a wood, wild-flowers, golden hair and blue eyes, and is the result difficult to arrive at?

Talbot Bulstrode, leaning against the broad trunk of a beech, looked down at the fair face, which crimsoned under his eyes; and the first glimmering hint of Lucy's secret began to dawn upon him. At that moment he had no thought of profiting by the discovery, no thought of what he was afterwards led on to say. His mind was filled with the storm of emotion that had burst from him in that wild cry to Aurora. Rage and jealousy, regret, despair, envy, love, and hate, – all the conflicting feelings that had struggled like so many demons in his soul at sight of Aurora's happiness, were still striving for mastery in his breast; and the first words he spoke revealed the thoughts that were uppermost.

"Your cousin is very happy in her new life, Miss Floyd?" he said.

Lucy looked up at him with surprise. It was the first time he had spoken to her of Aurora.

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I think she is happy."

Captain Bulstrode whisked the end of his cane across a group of anemones, and decapitated the tremulous blossoms. He was thinking, rather savagely, what a shame it was that this glorious Aurora could be happy with big, broad-shouldered, jovial-tempered John Mellish. He could not understand the strange anomaly; he could not discover the clue to the secret; he could not comprehend that the devoted love of this sturdy Yorkshireman was in itself strong enough to conquer all difficulties, to outweigh all differences.

Little by little, he and Lucy began to talk of Aurora, until Miss Floyd told her companion all about that dreary time at Felden Woods, during which the life of the heiress was well-nigh despaired of. So she had loved him truly, then, after all; she had loved, and had suffered, and had lived down her trouble, and had forgotten him, and was happy. The story was all told in that one sentence. He looked blankly back at the irrecoverable past, and was angry with the pride of the Bulstrodes, which had stood between himself and his happiness.

He told sympathizing Lucy something of his sorrow; told her that misapprehension – mistaken pride – had parted him from Aurora. She tried, in her gentle, innocent fashion, to comfort the strong man in his weakness, and in trying revealed – ah, how simply and transparently! – the old secret, which had so long been hidden from him.

Heaven help the man whose heart is caught at the rebound by a fair-haired divinity, with dove-like eyes, and a low tremulous voice softly attuned to his grief. Talbot Bulstrode saw that he was beloved; and, in very gratitude, made a dismal offer of the ashes of that fire which had burnt so fiercely at Aurora's shrine. Do not despise this poor Lucy if she accepted her cousin's forgotten lover with humble thankfulness; nay, with a tumult of wild delight, and with joyful fear and trembling. She loved him so well, and had loved him so long. Forgive and pity her, for she was one of those pure and innocent creatures whose whole being resolves itself into *affection*; to whom passion, anger, and pride are unknown; who live only to love, and who love until death. Talbot Bulstrode told Lucy Floyd that he had loved Aurora with the whole strength of his soul, but that, now the battle was over, he, the stricken warrior, needed a consoler for his declining days: would she, could she, give her hand to one who would strive to the uttermost to fulfil a husband's duty, and to make her happy? Happy! She would have been happy if he had asked her to be his slave; happy if she could have been a scullery-maid at Bulstrode Castle, so that she might have seen the dark face she loved once or twice a day through the obscure panes of some kitchen window.

But she was the most undemonstrative of women, and, except by her blushes, and her drooping eyelids, and the tear-drop trembling upon the soft auburn lashes, she made no reply to the captain's appeal, until at last, taking her hand in his, he won from her a low-consenting murmur which meant Yes.

Good heavens! how hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! The dark-eyed, impetuous creatures, who speak out fearlessly, and tell you that they love or hate you – flinging their arms round your neck or throwing the carving-knife at you, as the case may be – get full value for all their emotion; but these gentle creatures love, and make no sign. They sit, like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief; and no one reads the mournful meaning of that sad smile. Concealment, like the worm i' the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; and compassionate relatives tell them that they are bilious, and recommend some homely remedy for their pallid complexions. They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. The only outward sign Lucy Floyd gave of the condition of her heart was that one tremulous, half-whispered affirmative; and yet what a tempest of emotion was going forward within! The muslin folds of her dress rose and fell with the surging billows; but, for the very life of her, she could have uttered no better response to Talbot's pleading.

It was only by-and-by, after she and Captain Bulstrode had wandered slowly back to the house, that her emotion betrayed itself. Aurora met her cousin in the corridor out of which their rooms opened, and, drawing Lucy into her own dressing-room, asked the truant where she had been.

"Where have you been, you runaway girl? John and I have wanted you half a dozen times."

Miss Lucy Floyd explained that she had been in the wood with the last new novel, – a High-Church novel, in which the heroine rejected the clerical hero because he did not perform the service according to the Rubric. Now Miss Lucy Floyd made this admission with so much confusion and so many blushes, that it would have appeared as if there were some lurking criminality in the fact of spending an April morning in a wood; and being further examined as to why she had stayed so long, and whether she had been alone all the time, poor Lucy fell into a pitiful state of embarrassment, declaring that she had been alone; that is to say, part of the time – or at least most of the time; but that Captain Bulstrode —

But in trying to pronounce his name, – this beloved, this sacred name, – Lucy Floyd's utterance failed her; she fairly broke down, and burst into tears.

Aurora laid her cousin's face upon her breast, and looked down, with a womanly, matronly glance, into those tearful blue eyes.

"Lucy, my darling," she said, "is it really and truly as I think – as I wish: – Talbot loves you?"

"He has asked me to marry him," Lucy whispered.

"And you – you have consented – you love him?"

Lucy Floyd only answered by a new burst of tears.

"Why, my darling, how this surprises me! How long has it been so, Lucy? How long have you loved him?"

"From the hour I first saw him," murmured Lucy; "from the day he first came to Felden. O Aurora! I know how foolish and weak it was; I hate myself for the folly; but he is so good, so noble, so – "

"My silly darling; and because he is good and noble, and has asked you to be his wife, you shed as many tears as if you had been asked to go to his funeral. My loving, tender Lucy, you loved him all the time, then; and you were so gentle and good to me – to me, who was selfish enough never to guess – My dearest, you are a hundred times better suited to him than ever I was, and you will be as happy – as happy as I am with that ridiculous old John."

Aurora's eyes filled with tears as she spoke. She was truly and sincerely glad that Talbot was in a fair way to find consolation, still more glad that her sentimental cousin was to be made happy.

Talbot Bulstrode lingered on a few days at Mellish Park; – happy, ah! too happy days for Lucy Floyd – and then departed, after receiving the congratulations of John and Aurora.

He was to go straight to Alexander Floyd's villa at Fulham, and plead his cause with Lucy's father. There was little fear of his meeting other than a favourable reception; for Talbot Bulstrode of Bulstrode Castle was a very great match for a daughter of the junior branch of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, a young lady whose expectations were considerably qualified by half a dozen brothers and sisters.

So Captain Bulstrode went back to London as the betrothed lover of Lucy Floyd; went back with a subdued gladness in his heart, all unlike the stormy joys of the past. He was happy in the choice he had made calmly and dispassionately. He had loved Aurora for her beauty and her fascination; he was going to marry Lucy because he had seen much of her, had observed her closely, and believed her to be all that a woman should be. Perhaps, if stern truth must be told, Lucy's chief charm in the captain's eyes lay in that reverence for himself which she so *naïvely* betrayed. He accepted her worship with a quiet, unconscious serenity, and thought her the most sensible of women.

Mrs. Alexander was utterly bewildered when Aurora's sometime lover pleaded for her daughter's hand. She was too busy a mother amongst her little flock to be the most penetrating of observers, and she had never suspected the state of Lucy's heart. She was glad, therefore, to find

that her daughter did justice to her excellent education, and had too much good sense to refuse so advantageous an offer as that of Captain Bulstrode; and she joined with her husband in perfect approval of Talbot's suit. So, there being no let or hindrance, and as the lovers had long known and esteemed each other, it was decided, at the captain's request, that the wedding should take place early in June, and that the honeymoon should be spent at Bulstrode Castle.

At the end of May, Mr. and Mrs. Mellish went to Felden, on purpose to attend Lucy's wedding, which took place with great style at Fulham, Archibald Floyd presenting his grand-niece with a cheque for five thousand pounds after the return from church.

Once during that marriage ceremony Talbot Bulstrode was nigh upon rubbing his eyes, thinking that the pageant must be a dream. A dream surely; for here was a pale, fair-haired girl by his side, while the woman he had chosen two years before stood amidst a group behind him, and looked on at the ceremony, a pleased spectator. But when he felt the little gloved hand trembling upon his arm, as the bride and bridegroom left the altar, he remembered that it was no dream, and that life held new and solemn duties for him from that hour.

Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a lifetime? Aurora is married, and settled, and happy; sheltered, as one would imagine, from all dangers, safe under the wing of her stalwart adorer; but it does not therefore follow that the story of her life is done. She has escaped shipwreck for a while, and has safely landed on a pleasant shore; but the storm may still lower darkly upon the horizon, while the hoarse thunder grumbles threateningly in the distance.

CHAPTER II.

MR. PASTER'S LETTER

Mr. John Mellish reserved to himself one room upon the ground-floor of his house: a cheerful, airy apartment, with French windows opening upon the lawn; windows that were sheltered from the sun by a verandah overhung with jessamine and roses. It was altogether a pleasant room for the summer season, the floor being covered with an India matting instead of a carpet, and many of the chairs being made of light basket-work. Over the chimney-piece hung a portrait of John's father, and opposite to this work of art there was the likeness of the deceased gentleman's favourite hunter, surmounted by a pair of brightly polished spurs, the glistening rowels of which had often pierced the sides of that faithful steed. In this chamber Mr. Mellish kept his whips, canes, foils, single-sticks, boxing-gloves, spurs, guns, pistols, powder and shot flasks, fishing-tackle, boots, and tops; and many happy mornings were spent by the master of Mellish Park in the pleasing occupation of polishing, repairing, inspecting, and otherwise setting in order, these possessions. He had as many pairs of hunting-boots as would have supplied half Leicestershire – with tops to match. He had whips enough for all the Melton Hunt. Surrounded by these treasures, as it were in a temple sacred to the deities of the race-course and the hunting-field, Mr. John Mellish used to hold solemn audiences with his trainer and his head-groom upon the business of the stable.

It was Aurora's custom to peep into this chamber perpetually, very much to the delight and distraction of her adoring husband, who found the black eyes of his divinity a terrible hindrance to business; except, indeed, when he could induce Mrs. Mellish to join in the discussion upon hand, and lend the assistance of her powerful intellect to the little conclave. I believe that John thought she could have handicapped the horses for the Chester Cup as well as Mr. Topham himself. She was such a brilliant creature, that every little smattering of knowledge she possessed appeared to such good account as to make her seem an adept in any subject of which she spoke; and the simple Yorkshireman believed in her as the wisest as well as the noblest and fairest of women.

Mr. and Mrs. Mellish returned to Yorkshire immediately after Lucy's wedding. Poor John was uneasy about his stables; for his trainer was a victim to chronic rheumatism, and Mr. Pastern had not as yet made any communication respecting the young man of whom he had spoken on the Stand at York.

"I shall keep Langley," John said to Aurora, speaking of his old trainer; "for he's an honest fellow, and his judgment will always be of use to me. He and his wife can still occupy the rooms over the stables; and the new man, whoever he may be, can live in the lodge on the north side of the Park. Nobody ever goes in at that gate; so the lodge-keeper's post is a sinecure, and the cottage has been shut up for the last year or two. I wish John Pastern would write."

"And I wish whatever you wish, my dearest life," Aurora said dutifully to her happy slave.

Very little had been heard of Steeve Hargraves, the "Softy," since the day upon which John Mellish had turned him neck and crop out of his service. One of the grooms had seen him in a little village close to the Park, and Stephen had informed the man that he was getting his living by doing odd jobs for the doctor of the parish, and looking after that gentleman's horse and gig; but the "Softy" had seemed inclined to be sulky, and had said very little about himself or his sentiments. He made very particular inquiries, though, about Mrs. Mellish, and asked so many questions as to what Aurora did and said, where she went, whom she saw, and how she agreed with her husband, that at last the groom, although only a simple country lad, refused to answer any more interrogatories about his mistress.

Steeve Hargraves rubbed his coarse, sinewy hands, and chuckled as he spoke of Aurora.

"She's a rare proud one, – a regular high-spirited lady," he said, in that whispering voice that always sounded strange. "She laid it on to me with that riding-whip of hers; but I bear no malice – I bear no malice. She's a beautiful creature, and I wish Mr. Mellish joy of his bargain."

The groom scarcely knew how to take this, not being fully aware if it was intended as a compliment or an impertinence. So he nodded to the "Softy," and strode off, leaving him still rubbing his hands and whispering about Aurora Mellish, who had long ago forgotten her encounter with Mr. Stephen Hargraves.

How was it likely that she should remember him, or take heed of him? How was it likely that she should take alarm because the pale-faced widow, Mrs. Walter Powell, sat by her hearth and hated her? Strong in her youth and beauty, rich in her happiness, sheltered and defended by her husband's love, how should she think of danger? How should she dread misfortune? She thanked God every day that the troubles of her youth were past, and that her path in life led henceforth through smooth and pleasant places, where no perils could come.

Lucy was at Bulstrode Castle, winning upon the affections of her husband's mother, who patronized her daughter-in-law with lofty kindness, and took the blushing timorous creature under her sheltering wing. Lady Bulstrode was very well satisfied with her son's choice. He might have done better, certainly, as to position and fortune, the lady hinted to Talbot; and in her maternal anxiety, she would have preferred his marrying any one rather than the cousin of that Miss Floyd who ran away from school, and caused such a scandal at the Parisian seminary. But Lady Bulstrode's heart warmed to Lucy, who was so gentle and humble, and who always spoke of Talbot as if he had been a being far "too bright and good," &c., much to the gratification of her ladyship's maternal vanity.

"She has a very proper affection for you, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, "and, for so young a creature, promises to make an excellent wife; far better suited to you, I am sure, than her cousin could ever have been."

Talbot turned fiercely upon his mother, very much to the lady's surprise.

"Why will you be for ever bringing Aurora's name into the question, mother?" he cried. "Why cannot you let her memory rest? You parted us for ever, – you and Constance, – and is not that enough? She is married, and she and her husband are a very happy couple. A man might have a worse wife than Mrs. Mellish, I can tell you; and John seems to appreciate her value in his rough way."

"You need not be so violent, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, with offended dignity. "I am very glad to hear that Miss Floyd has altered since her school-days, and I hope that she may continue to be a good wife," she added, with an emphasis which insinuated that she had no very great hopes of the continuance of Mr. Mellish's happiness.

"My poor mother is offended with me," Talbot thought, as Lady Bulstrode swept out of the room. "I know I am an abominable bear, and that nobody will ever truly love me so long as I live. My poor little Lucy loves me after her fashion; loves me in fear and trembling, as if she and I belonged to different orders of beings; very much as the flying woman must have loved my countryman, Peter Wilkins, I think. But, after all, perhaps my mother is right, and my gentle little wife is better suited to me than Aurora would have been."

So we dismiss Talbot Bulstrode for a while, moderately happy, and yet not quite satisfied. What mortal ever was *quite* satisfied in this world? It is a part of our earthly nature always to find something wanting, always to have a vague, dull, ignorant yearning which cannot be appeased. Sometimes, indeed, we are happy; but in our wildest happiness we are still unsatisfied, for it seems then as if the cup of joy were too full, and we grow cold with terror at the thought that, even because of its fulness, it may possibly be dashed to the ground. What a mistake this life would be, what a wild feverish dream, what an unfinished and imperfect story, if it were not a prelude to something better! Taken by itself, it is all trouble and confusion; but taking the future as the keynote of the present, how wondrously harmonious the whole becomes! How little does it signify that our joys here are not complete, our wishes not fulfilled, if the completion and the fulfilment are to come hereafter!

Little more than a week after Lucy's wedding, Aurora ordered her horse immediately after breakfast, upon a sunny summer morning, and, accompanied by the old groom who had ridden behind John's father, went out on an excursion amongst the villages round Mellish Park, as it was her habit to do once or twice a week.

The poor in the neighbourhood of the Yorkshire mansion had good reason to bless the coming of the banker's daughter. Aurora loved nothing better than to ride from cottage to cottage, chatting with the simple villagers, and finding out their wants. She never found the worthy creatures very remiss in stating their necessities, and the housekeeper at Mellish Park had enough to do in distributing Aurora's bounties amongst the cottagers who came to the servants' hall with pencil orders from Mrs. Mellish. Mrs. Walter Powell sometimes ventured to take Aurora to task on the folly and sinfulness of what she called indiscriminate almsgiving; but Mrs. Mellish would pour such a flood of eloquence upon her antagonist, that the ensign's widow was always glad to retire from the unequal contest. Nobody had ever been able to argue with Archibald Floyd's daughter. Impulsive and impetuous, she had always taken her own course, whether for weal or woe, and nobody had been strong enough to hinder her.

Returning on this lovely June morning from one of these charitable expeditions, Mrs. Mellish dismounted from her horse at a little turnstile leading into the wood, and ordered the groom to take the animal home.

"I have a fancy for walking through the wood, Joseph," she said; "it's such a lovely morning. Take care of Mazeppa; and if you see Mr. Mellish, tell him that I shall be home directly."

The man touched his hat, and rode off, leading Aurora's horse.

Mrs. Mellish gathered up the folds of her habit, and strolled slowly into the wood, under whose shadow Talbot Bulstrode and Lucy had wandered on that eventful April day which sealed the young lady's fate.

Now Aurora had chosen to ramble homewards through this wood because, being thoroughly happy, the warm gladness of the summer weather filled her with a sense of delight which she was loth to curtail. The drowsy hum of the insects, the rich colouring of the woods, the scent of wild-flowers, the ripple of water, – all blended into one delicious whole, and made the earth lovely.

There is something satisfactory, too, in the sense of possession; and Aurora felt, as she looked down the long avenues, and away through distant loopholes in the wood to the wide expanse of park and lawn, and the picturesque, irregular pile of building beyond, half Gothic, half Elizabethan, and so lost in a rich tangle of ivy and bright foliage as to be beautiful at every point, – she felt, I say, that all the fair picture was her own, or her husband's, which was the same thing. She had never for one moment regretted her marriage with John Mellish. She had never, as I have said already, been inconstant to him by one thought.

In one part of the wood the ground rose considerably; so that the house, which lay low, was distinctly visible whenever there was a break in the trees. This rising ground was considered the prettiest spot in the wood, and here a summer-house had been erected: a fragile, wooden building, which had fallen into decay of late years, but which was still a pleasant resting-place upon a summer's day, being furnished with a wooden table and a broad bench, and sheltered from the sun and wind by the lower branches of a magnificent beech. A few paces away from this summer-house there was a pool of water, the surface of which was so covered with lilies and tangled weeds as to have beguiled a short-sighted traveller into forgetfulness of the danger beneath. Aurora's way led her past this spot, and she started with a momentary sensation of terror on seeing a man lying asleep by the side of the pool. She quickly recovered herself, remembering that John allowed the public to use the footpath through the wood; but she started again when the man, who must have been a bad sleeper to be aroused by her light footstep, lifted his head, and displayed the white face of the "Softy."

He rose slowly from the ground upon seeing Mrs. Mellish, and crawled away, looking at her as he went, but not making any acknowledgment of her presence.

Aurora could not repress a brief terrified shudder; it seemed as if her footfall had startled some viperish creature, some loathsome member of the reptile race, and scared it from its lurking-place.

Steeve Hargraves disappeared amongst the trees as Mrs. Mellish walked on, her head proudly erect, but her cheek a shade paler than before this unexpected encounter with the "Softy."

Her joyous gladness in the bright summer's day had forsaken her as suddenly as she had met Stephen Hargraves; that bright smile, which was even brighter than the morning sunshine, faded out, and left her face unnaturally grave.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "how foolish I am! I am actually afraid of that man, – afraid of that pitiful coward who could hurt my feeble old dog. As if such a creature as that could do one any mischief!"

Of course this was very wisely argued, as no coward ever by any chance worked any mischief upon this earth since the Saxon prince was stabbed in the back while drinking at his kinswoman's gate, or since brave King John and his creature plotted together what they should do with the little boy Arthur.

Aurora walked slowly across the lawn towards that end of the house at which the apartment sacred to Mr. Mellish was situated. She entered softly at the open window, and laid her hand upon John's shoulder, as he sat at a table covered with a litter of account-books, racing-lists, and disorderly papers.

He started at the touch of the familiar hand.

"My darling, I'm so glad you've come in. How long you've been!"

She looked at her little jewelled watch. Poor John had loaded her with trinkets and gewgaws. His chief grief was that she was a wealthy heiress, and that he could give her nothing but the adoration of his simple, honest heart.

"Only half-past one, you silly old John," she said. "What made you think me late?"

"Because I wanted to consult you about something, and to tell you something. Such good news!"

"About what?"

"About the trainer."

She shrugged her shoulders, and pursed up her red lips with a bewitching little gesture of indifference.

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yes; but aint you glad we've got the man at last – the very man to suit us, I think? Where's John Pastern's letter?"

Mr. Mellish searched amongst the litter of papers upon the table, while Aurora, leaning against the framework of the open window, watched him, and laughed at his embarrassment.

She had recovered her spirits, and looked the very picture of careless gladness as she leaned in one of those graceful and unstudied attitudes peculiar to her, supported by the framework of the window, and with the trailing jessamine waving round her in the soft summer breeze. She lifted her ungloved hand, and gathered the roses above her head as she talked to her husband.

"You most disorderly and unmethodical of men," she said, laughing; "I wouldn't mind betting five to one you won't find it."

I'm afraid that Mr. Mellish muttered an oath as he tossed about the heterogeneous mass of papers in his search for the missing document.

"I had it five minutes before you came in, Aurora," he said, "and now there's not a sign of it – Oh, here it is!"

Mr. Mellish unfolded the letter, and, smoothing it out upon the table before him, cleared his throat preparatory to reading the epistle. Aurora still leaned against the window-frame, half in and half out of the room, singing a snatch of a popular song, and trying to gather an obstinate half-blown rose which grew provokingly out of reach.

"You're attending, Aurora?"

"Yes, dearest and best."

"But do come in. You can't hear a word there."

Aurora shrugged her shoulders, as who should say, "I submit to the command of a tyrant," and advanced a couple of paces from the window; then looking at John with an enchantingly insolent toss of her head, she folded her hands behind her, and told him she would "be good." She was a careless, impetuous creature, dreadfully forgetful of what Mrs. Walter Powell called her "responsibilities;" every mortal thing by turns, and never any one thing for two minutes together; happy, generous, affectionate; taking life as a glorious summer's holiday, and thanking God for the bounty which made it so pleasant to her.

Mr. John Pastern began his letter with an apology for having so long deferred writing. He had lost the address of the person he had wished to recommend, and had waited until the man wrote to him a second time.

"I think he will suit you very well," the letter went on to say, "as he is well up in his business, having had plenty of experience, as groom, jockey, and trainer. He is only thirty years of age, but met with an accident some time since, which lamed him for life. He was half killed in a steeple-chase in Prussia, and was for upwards of a year in a hospital at Berlin. His name is James Conyers, and he can have a character from – "

The letter dropped out of John Mellish's hand as he looked up at his wife. It was not a scream which she had uttered. It was a gasping cry, more terrible to hear than the shrillest scream that ever came from the throat of woman in all the long history of womanly distress.

"Aurora! Aurora!"

He looked at her, and his own face changed and whitened at the sight of hers. So terrible a transformation had come over her during the reading of that letter, that the shock could not have been greater had he looked up and seen another person in her place.

"It's wrong; it's wrong!" she cried hoarsely; "you've read the name wrong. It can't be that!"

"What name?"

"What name?" she echoed fiercely, her face flaming up with a wild fury, – "that name! I tell you, it *can't* be. Give me the letter."

He obeyed her mechanically, picking up the paper and handing it to her, but never removing his eyes from her face.

She snatched it from him; looked at it for a few moments, with her eyes dilated and her lips apart; then, reeling back two or three paces, her knees bent under her, and she fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER III.

MR. JAMES CONYERS

The first week in July brought James Conyers, the new trainer, to Mellish Park. John had made no particular inquiries as to the man's character of any of his former employers, as a word from Mr. Pastern was all-sufficient.

Mr. Mellish had endeavoured to discover the cause of Aurora's agitation at the reading of John Pastern's letter. She had fallen like a dead creature at his feet; she had been hysterical throughout the remainder of the day, and delirious in the ensuing night, but she had not uttered one word calculated to throw any light upon the secret of her strange manifestation of emotion.

Her husband sat by her bedside upon the day after that on which she had fallen into the death-like swoon; watching her with a grave, anxious face, and earnest eyes that never wandered from her own.

He was suffering very much the same agony that Talbot Bulstrode had endured at Felden on the receipt of his mother's letter. The dark wall was slowly rising and separating him from the woman he loved. He was now to discover the tortures known only to the husband whose wife is parted from him by that which has more power to sever than any width of land or wide extent of ocean — *a secret*.

He watched the pale face lying on the pillow; the large, black, haggard eyes, wide open, and looking blankly out at the faraway purple tree-tops in the horizon; but there was no clue to the mystery in any line of that beloved countenance; there was little more than an expression of weariness, as if the soul, looking out of that white face, was so utterly enfeebled as to have lost all power to feel anything but a vague yearning for rest.

The wide casement windows were open, but the day was hot and oppressive – oppressively still and sunny; the landscape sweltering under a yellow haze, as if the very atmosphere had been opaque with molten gold. Even the roses in the garden seemed to feel the influence of the blazing summer sky, dropping their heavy heads like human sufferers from headache. The mastiff Bow-wow, lying under an acacia upon the lawn, was as peevish as any captious elderly gentleman, and snapped spitefully at a frivolous butterfly that wheeled, and spun, and threw somersaults about the dog's head. Beautiful as was this summer's day, it was one on which people are apt to lose their tempers, and quarrel with each other, by reason of the heat; every man feeling a secret conviction that his neighbour is in some way to blame for the sultriness of the atmosphere, and that it would be cooler if he were out of the way. It was one of those days on which invalids are especially fractious, and hospital nurses murmur at their vocation; a day on which third-class passengers travelling long distances by excursion train are savagely clamorous for beer at every station, and hate each other for the narrowness and hardness of the carriage seats, and for the inadequate means of ventilation provided by the railway company; a day on which stern business men revolt against the ceaseless grinding of the wheel, and, suddenly reckless of consequences, rush wildly to the Crown and Sceptre, to cool their overheated systems with water souchy and still hock; an abnormal day, upon which the machinery of every-day life gets out of order, and runs riot throughout twelve suffocating hours.

John Mellish, sitting patiently by his wife's side, thought very little of the summer weather. I doubt if he knew whether the month was January or June. For him earth only held one creature, and she was ill and in distress – distress from which he was powerless to save her – distress the very nature of which he was ignorant.

His voice trembled when he spoke to her.

"My darling, you have been very ill," he said.

She looked at him with a smile so unlike her own that it was more painful to him to see than the loudest agony of tears, and stretched out her hand. He took the burning hand in his, and held it while he talked to her.

"Yes, dearest, you have been ill; but Morton says the attack was merely hysterical, and that you will be yourself again to-morrow, so there's no occasion for anxiety on that score. What grieves me, darling, is to see that there is something on your mind; something which has been the real cause of your illness."

She turned her face upon the pillow, and tried to snatch her hand from his in her impatience, but he held it tightly in both his own.

"Does my speaking of yesterday distress you, Aurora?" he asked gravely.

"Distress me? Oh, no!"

"Then tell me, darling, why the mention of that man, the trainer's name, had such a terrible effect upon you."

"The doctor told you that the attack was hysterical," she said coldly; "I suppose I was hysterical and nervous yesterday."

"But the name, Aurora, the name. This James Conyers – who is he?" He felt the hand he held tighten convulsively upon his own, as he mentioned the trainer's name.

"Who is this man? Tell me, Aurora. For God's sake, tell me the truth."

She turned her face towards him once more, as he said this.

"If you only want the truth from me, John, you must ask me nothing. Remember what I said to you at the Château d'Arques. It was a secret that parted me from Talbot Bulstrode. You trusted me then, John, – you must trust me to the end; if you cannot trust me – " she stopped suddenly, and the tears welled slowly up to her large, mournful eyes, as she looked at her husband.

"What, dearest?"

"We must part; as Talbot and I parted."

"Part!" he cried; "my love, my love! Do you think there is anything upon this earth strong enough to part us, except death? Do you think that any combination of circumstances, however strange, however inexplicable, would ever cause me to doubt your honour; or to tremble for my own? Could I be here if I doubted you? could I sit by your side, asking you these questions, if I feared the issue? Nothing shall shake my confidence; nothing can. But have pity on me; think how bitter a grief it is to sit here, with your hand in mine, and to know that there is a secret between us. Aurora, tell me, – this man, this Conyers, – what is he, and who is he?"

"You know that as well as I do. A groom once; afterwards a jockey; and now a trainer."

"But you know him?"

"I have seen him."

"When?"

"Some years ago, when he was in my father's service."

John Mellish breathed more freely for a moment. The man had been a groom at Felden Woods, that was all. This accounted for the fact of Aurora's recognizing his name; but not for her agitation. He was no nearer the clue to the mystery than before.

"James Conyers was in your father's service," he said thoughtfully; "but why should the mention of his name yesterday have caused you such emotion?"

"I cannot tell you."

"It is another secret, then, Aurora," he said reproachfully; "or has this man anything to do with the old secret of which you told me at the Château d'Arques?"

She did not answer him.

"Ah, I see; I understand, Aurora," he added, after a pause. "This man was a servant at Felden Woods; a spy, perhaps; and he discovered the secret, and traded upon it, as servants often have done before. This caused your agitation at hearing his name. You were afraid that he would come here and

annoy you, making use of this secret to extort money, and keeping you in perpetual terror of him. I think I can understand it all. I am right; am I not?"

She looked at him with something of the expression of a hunted animal that finds itself at bay.

"Yes, John."

"This man – this groom – knows something of – of the secret."

"He does."

John Mellish turned away his head, and buried his face in his hands. What cruel anguish! what bitter degradation! This man, a groom, a servant, was in the confidence of his wife; and had such power to harass and alarm her, that the very mention of his name was enough to cast her to the earth, as if stricken by sudden death. What, in the name of heaven, could this secret be, which was in the keeping of a servant, and yet could not be told to him? He bit his lip till his strong teeth met upon the quivering flesh, in the silent agony of that thought. What could it be? He had sworn, only a minute before, to trust in her blindly to the end; and yet, and yet – His massive frame shook from head to heel in that noiseless struggle; doubt and despair rose like twin-demons in his soul; but he wrestled with them, and overcame them; and, turning with a white face to his wife, said quietly —

"I will press these painful questions no further, Aurora. I will write to Pastern, and tell him that the man will not suit us; and – "

He was rising to leave her bedside, when she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Don't write to Mr. Pastern, John," she said; "the man will suit you very well, I dare say. I had rather he came."

"You wish him to come here?"

"Yes."

"But he will annoy you; he will try to extort money from you."

"He would do that in any case, since he is alive. I thought that he was dead."

"Then you really wish him to come here?"

"I do."

John Mellish left his wife's room inexpressibly relieved. The secret could not be so very terrible after all, since she was willing that the man who knew it should come to Mellish Park; where there was at least a remote chance of his revealing it to her husband. Perhaps, after all, this mystery involved others rather than herself, – her father's commercial integrity – her mother? He had heard very little of that mother's history; perhaps she – Pshaw! why weary himself with speculative surmises? He had promised to trust her, and the hour had come in which he was called upon to keep his promise. He wrote to Mr. Pastern, accepting his recommendation of James Conyers, and waited rather impatiently to see what kind of man the trainer was.

He received a letter from Conyers, very well written and worded, to the effect that he would arrive at Mellish Park upon the 3rd of July.

Aurora had recovered from her brief hysterical attack when this letter arrived; but as she was still weak and out of spirits, her medical man recommended change of air; so Mr. and Mrs. Mellish drove off to Harrogate upon the 28th of June, leaving Mrs. Powell behind them at the Park.

The ensign's widow had been scrupulously kept out of Aurora's room during her short illness; being held at bay by John, who coolly shut the door in the lady's sympathetic face, telling her that he'd wait upon his wife himself, and that when he wanted female assistance he would ring for Mrs. Mellish's maid.

Now Mrs. Walter Powell, being afflicted with that ravenous curiosity common to people who live in other people's houses, felt herself deeply injured by this line of conduct. There were mysteries and secrets afloat, and she was not to be allowed to discover them; there was a skeleton in the house, and she was not to anatomize the bony horror. She scented trouble and sorrow as carnivorous animals scent their prey; and yet she who hated Aurora was not to be allowed to riot at the unnatural feast.

Why is it that the dependents in a household are so feverishly inquisitive about the doings and sayings, the manners and customs, the joys and sorrows, of those who employ them? Is it that, having abnegated for themselves all active share in life, they take an unhealthy interest in those who are in the thick of the strife? Is it because, being cut off in a great measure by the nature of their employment from family ties and family pleasures, they feel a malicious delight in all family trials and vexations, and the ever-recurring breezes which disturb the domestic atmosphere? Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, when you quarrel. *Your servants enjoy the fun.* Surely that recollection ought to be enough to keep you for ever peaceful and friendly. Your servants listen at your doors, and repeat your spiteful speeches in the kitchen, and watch you while they wait at table, and understand every sarcasm, every innuendo, every look, as well as those at whom the cruel glances and the stinging words are aimed. They understand your sulky silence, your studied and over-acted politeness. The most polished form your hate and anger can take is as transparent to those household spies as if you threw knives at each other, or pelted your enemy with the side-dishes and vegetables, after the fashion of disputants in a pantomime. Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen. They laugh at you; nay worse, they pity you. They discuss your affairs, and make out your income, and settle what you can afford to do and what you can't afford to do; they prearrange the disposal of your wife's fortune, and look prophetically forward to the day when you will avail yourself of the advantages of the new Bankruptcy Act. They know why you live on bad terms with your eldest daughter, and why your favourite son was turned out of doors; and they take a morbid interest in every dismal secret of your life. You don't allow them followers; you look blacker than thunder if you see Mary's sister or John's poor old mother sitting meekly in your hall; you are surprised if the postman brings them letters, and attribute the fact to the pernicious system of over-educating the masses; you shut them from their homes and their kindred, their lovers and their friends; you deny them books, you grudge them a peep at your newspaper; and then you lift up your eyes and wonder at them because they are inquisitive, and because the staple of their talk is scandal and gossip.

Mrs. Walter Powell, having been treated by most of her employers, as a species of upper servant, had acquired all the instincts of a servant; and she determined to leave no means untried in order to discover the cause of Aurora's illness, which the doctor had darkly hinted to her had more to do with the mind than the body.

John Mellish had ordered a carpenter to repair the lodge at the north gate, for the accommodation of James Conyers; and John's old trainer, Langley, was to receive his colleague and introduce him to the stables.

The new trainer made his appearance at the lodge-gates in the glowing July sunset; he was accompanied by no less a person than Steeve Hargraves the "Softy," who had been lurking about the station upon the look out for a job, and who had been engaged by Mr. Conyers to carry his portmanteau.

To the surprise of the trainer, Stephen Hargraves set down his burden at the park gates.

"You'll have to find some one else to carry it th' rest 't' ro-ad," he said, touching his greasy cap, and extending his broad palm to receive the expected payment.

Mr. James Conyers was rather a dashing fellow, with no small amount of that quality which is generally termed "swagger," so he turned sharply round upon the "Softy" and asked him what the devil he meant.

"I mean that I mayn't go inside yon geates," muttered Stephen Hargraves; "I mean that I've been toorned oot of yon pplace that I've lived in, man and boy, for forty year, – toorned oot like a dog, neck and crop."

Mr. Conyers threw away the stump of his cigar and stared superciliously at the "Softy."

"What does the man mean?" he asked of the woman who had opened the gates.

"Why, poor fellow, he's a bit fond, sir, and him and Mrs. Mellish didn't get on very well: she has a rare spirit, and I *have* heard that she horsewhipped him for beating her favourite dog. Any ways, master turned him out of his service."

"Because my lady had horsewhipped him. Servants'-hall justice all the world over," said the trainer, laughing, and lighting a second cigar from a metal fusee-box in his waistcoat pocket.

"Yes, that's joostice, aint it?" the "Softy" said eagerly. "You wouldn't like to be toorned oot of a pleace as you'd lived in forty year, would you? But Mrs. Mellish has a rare spirit, bless her pretty feace!"

The blessing enunciated by Mr. Stephen Hargraves had such a very ominous sound, that the new trainer, who was evidently a shrewd, observant fellow, took his cigar from his mouth on purpose to stare at him. The white face, lighted up by a pair of red eyes with a dim glimmer in them, was by no means the most agreeable of countenances; but Mr. Conyers looked at the man for some moments, holding him by the collar of his coat in order to do so with more deliberation: then pushing the "Softy" away with an affably contemptuous gesture, he said, laughing —

"You're a character, my friend, it strikes me; and not too safe a character either. I'm dashed if I should like to offend you. There's a shilling for your trouble, my man," he added tossing the money into Steeve's extended palm with careless dexterity.

"I suppose I can leave my portmanteau here till to-morrow, ma'am?" he said, turning to the woman at the lodge. "I'd carry it down to the house myself if I wasn't lame."

He was such a handsome fellow, and had such an easy, careless manner, that the simple Yorkshire woman was quite subdued by his fascinations.

"Leave it here, sir, and welcome," she said, curtsying, "and my master shall take it to the house for you as soon as he comes in. Begging your pardon, sir, but I suppose you're the new gentleman that's expected in the stables?"

"Precisely."

"Then I was to tell you, sir, that they've fitted up the north lodge for you: but you was to please go straight to the house, and the housekeeper was to make you comfortable and give you a bed for to-night."

Mr. Conyers nodded, thanked her, wished her good night, and limped slowly away, through the shadows of the evening, and under the shelter of the over-arching trees. He stepped aside from the broad carriage-drive on to the dewy turf that bordered it, choosing the softest, mossiest places with a sybarite's instinct. Look at him as he takes his slow way under those glorious branches, in the holy stillness of the summer sunset, his face sometimes lighted by the low, lessening rays, sometimes darkened by the shadows of the leaves above his head. He is wonderfully handsome – wonderfully and perfectly handsome – the very perfection of physical beauty; faultless in proportion, as if each line in his face and form had been measured by the sculptor's rule, and carved by the sculptor's chisel. He is a man about whose beauty there can be no dispute, whose perfection servant-maids and duchesses must alike confess – albeit they are not bound to admire; yet it is rather a sensual type of beauty, this splendour of form and colour, unallied to any special charm of expression. Look at him now, as he stops to rest, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and smoking his big cigar with easy enjoyment. He is thinking. His dark-blue eyes, deeper in colour by reason of the thick black lashes which fringe them, are half closed, and have a dreamy, semi-sentimental expression, which might lead you to suppose the man was musing upon the beauty of the summer sunset. He is thinking of his losses on the Chester Cup, the wages he is to get from John Mellish, and the perquisites likely to appertain to the situation. You give him credit for thoughts to match with his dark, violet-hued eyes, and the exquisite modelling of his mouth and chin; you give him a mind as æsthetically perfect as his face and figure, and you recoil on discovering what a vulgar, every-day sword may lurk under that beautiful scabbard. Mr. James Conyers is, perhaps, no worse than other men of his station; but he is decidedly no better. He is only very much handsomer; and you have no right to be angry with him because his opinions

and sentiments are exactly what they would have been if he had had red hair and a pug nose. With what wonderful wisdom has George Eliot told us that people are not any better because they have long eyelashes! Yet it must be that there is something anomalous in this outward beauty and inward ugliness; for, in spite of all experience, we revolt against it, and are incredulous to the last, believing that the palace which is outwardly so splendid can scarcely be ill furnished within. Heaven help the woman who sells her heart for a handsome face, and awakes when the bargain has been struck, to discover the foolishness of such an exchange!

It took Mr. Conyers a long while to walk from the lodge to the house. I do not know how, technically, to describe his lameness. He had fallen, with his horse, in the Prussian steeple-chase, which had so nearly cost him his life, and his left leg had been terribly injured. The bones had been set by wonderful German surgeons, who put the shattered leg together as if it had been a Chinese puzzle, but who, with all their skill, could not prevent the contraction of the sinews, which had left the jockey lamed for life, and no longer fit to ride in any race whatever. He was of the middle height, and weighed something over eleven stone, and had never ridden except in Continental steeple-chases.

Mr. James Conyers paused a few paces from the house, and gravely contemplated the irregular pile of buildings before him.

"A snug crib," he muttered; "plenty of tin hereabouts, I should think, from the look of the place."

Being ignorant of the geography of the neighbourhood, and being, moreover, by no means afflicted by an excess of modesty, Mr. Conyers went straight to the principal door, and rang the bell sacred to visitors and the family.

He was admitted by a grave old man-servant, who, after deliberately inspecting his brown shooting-coat, coloured shirt-front, and felt hat, asked him, with considerable asperity, what he was pleased to want.

Mr. Conyers explained that he was the new trainer, and that he wished to see the housekeeper; but he had hardly finished doing so, when a door in an angle of the hall was softly opened, and Mrs. Walter Powell peeped out of the snug little apartment sacred to her hours of privacy.

"Perhaps the young man will be so good as to step in here," she said, addressing herself apparently to space, but indirectly to James Conyers.

The young man took off his hat, uncovering a mass of luxuriant brown curls, and limped across the hall in obedience to Mrs. Powell's invitation.

"I dare say I shall be able to give you any information you require."

James Conyers smiled, wondering whether the bilious-looking party, as he mentally designated Mrs. Powell, could give him any information about the York Summer Meeting; but he bowed politely, and said he merely wanted to know where he was to hang out – he stopped and apologized – where he was to sleep that night, and whether there were any letters for him. But Mrs. Powell was by no means inclined to let him off so cheaply. She set to work to pump him, and laboured so assiduously that she soon exhausted that very small amount of intelligence which he was disposed to afford her, being perfectly aware of the process to which he was subjected, and more than equal to the lady in dexterity. The ensign's widow, therefore, ascertained little more than that Mr. Conyers was a perfect stranger to John Mellish and his wife, neither of whom he had ever seen.

Having failed to gain much by this interview, Mrs. Powell was anxious to bring it to a speedy termination.

"Perhaps you would like a glass of wine after your walk?" she said; "I'll ring for some, and I can inquire at the same time about your letters. I dare say you are anxious to hear from the relatives you have left at home."

Mr. Conyers smiled for the second time. He had neither had a home nor any relatives to speak of, since the most infantine period of his existence; but had been thrown upon the world a sharp-

witted adventurer at seven or eight years old. The "relatives" for whose communication he was looking out so eagerly were members of the humbler class of book-men with whom he did business.

The servant despatched by Mrs. Powell returned with a decanter of sherry and about half a dozen letters for Mr. Conyers.

"You'd better bring the lamp, William," said Mrs. Powell, as the man left the room; "for I'm sure you'll never be able to read your letters by this light," she added politely to Mr. Conyers.

The fact was, that Mrs. Powell, afflicted by that diseased curiosity of which I have spoken, wanted to know what kind of correspondents these were whose letters the trainer was so anxious to receive, and sent for the lamp in order that she might get the full benefit of any scraps of information to be got at by rapid glances and dexterously stolen peeps.

The servant brought a brilliant camphine-lamp, and Mr. Conyers, not at all abashed by Mrs. Powell's condescension, drew his chair close to the table, and after tossing off a glass of sherry, settled himself to the perusal of his letters.

The ensign's widow, with some needlework in her hand, sat directly opposite to him at the small round table, with nothing but the pedestal of the lamp between them.

James Conyers took up the first letter, examined the superscription and seal, tore open the envelope, read the brief communication upon half a sheet of note-paper, and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket. Mrs. Powell, using her eyes to the utmost, saw nothing but a few lines in a scratchy plebeian handwriting, and a signature which, seen at a disadvantage upside-down, didn't look unlike "Johnson." The second envelope contained only a tissue-paper betting-list; the third held a dirty scrap of paper with a few words scrawled in pencil; but at sight of the uppermost envelope of the remaining three Mr. James Conyers started as if he had been shot. Mrs. Powell looked from the face of the trainer to the superscription of the letter, and was scarcely less surprised than Mr. Conyers. The superscription was in the handwriting of Aurora Mellish.

It was a peculiar hand; a hand about which there could be no mistake; not an elegant Italian hand, sloping, slender, and feminine, but large and bold, with ponderous up-strokes and down-strokes, easy to recognize at a greater distance than that which separated Mrs. Powell from the trainer. There was no room for any doubt. Mrs. Mellish had written to her husband's servant, and the man was evidently familiar with her hand, yet surprised at receiving her letter.

He tore open the envelope, and read the contents eagerly twice over, frowning darkly as he read.

Mrs. Powell suddenly remembered that she had left part of her needlework upon a cheffonier behind the young man's chair, and rose quietly to fetch it. He was so much engrossed by the letter in his hand that he was not aware of the pale face which peered for one brief moment over his shoulder, as the faded, hungry eyes stole a glance at the writing on the page.

The letter was written on the first side of a sheet of note-paper, with only a few words carried over to the second page. It was this second page which Mrs. Powell saw. The words written at the top of the leaf were these: – "Above all, *express no surprise*. – A."

There was no ordinary conclusion to the letter; no other signature than this big capital A.

CHAPTER IV. THE TRAINER'S MESSENGER

Mr. James Conyers made himself very much at home at Mellish Park. Poor Langley, the invalid trainer, who was a Yorkshireman, felt himself almost bewildered by the easy insolence of his town-bred successor. Mr. Conyers looked so much too handsome and dashing for his office, that the grooms and stable-boys bowed down to him, and paid court to him as they had never done to simple Langley, who had been very often obliged to enforce his commands with a horsewhip or a serviceable leather strap. James Conyers's handsome face was a capital with which that gentleman knew very well how to trade, and he took the full amount of interest that was to be got for it without compunction. I am sorry to be obliged to confess that this man, who had sat in the artists' studios and the life academies for Apollo and Antinous, was selfish to the backbone; and so long as he was well fed and clothed and housed and provided for, cared very little whence the food and clothing came, or who kept the house that sheltered him, or filled the purse which he jingled in his trousers-pocket. Heaven forbid that I should be called upon for his biography. I only know that he sprang from the mire of the streets, like some male Aphrodite rising from the mud; that he was a blackleg in the gutter at four years of age, and a "welsher" in the matter of marbles and hardbake before his fifth birthday. Even then he was for ever reaping the advantage of a handsome face; for tender-hearted matrons, who would have been deaf to the cries of a snub-nosed urchin, petted and compassionated the pretty boy.

In his earliest childhood he learned therefore to trade upon his beauty, and to get the most that he could for that merchandise; and he grew up utterly unprincipled, and carried his handsome face out into the world to help him on to fortune. He was extravagant, lazy, luxurious, and selfish; but he had that easy indifferent grace of manner which passes with shallow observers for good-nature. He would not have gone three paces out of his way to serve his best friend; but he smiled and showed his handsome white teeth with equal liberality to all his acquaintance; and took credit for being a frank, generous-hearted fellow on the strength of that smile. He was skilled in the uses of that gilt gingerbread of generosity which so often passes current for sterling gold. He was dexterous in the handling of those cogged dice which have all the rattle of the honest ivories. A slap on the back, a hearty shake of the hand, often went as far from him as the loan of a sovereign from another man, and Jim Conyers was firmly believed in by the doubtful gentlemen with whom he associated, as a good-natured fellow who was nobody's enemy but his own. He had that superficial Cockney cleverness which is generally called knowledge of the world; knowledge of the worst side of the world, and utter ignorance of all that is noble upon earth, it might perhaps be more justly called. He had matriculated in the streets of London, and graduated on the race-course; he had never read any higher literature than the Sunday papers and the 'Racing Calendar,' but he contrived to make a very little learning go a long way, and was generally spoken of by his employers as a superior young man, considerably above his station.

Mr. Conyers expressed himself very well contented with the rustic lodge which had been chosen for his dwelling-house. He condescendingly looked on while the stable-lads carried the furniture, selected for him by the housekeeper from the spare servants' rooms, from the house to the lodge, and assisted in the arrangement of the tiny rustic chambers, limping about in his shirt-sleeves, and showing himself wonderfully handy with a hammer and a pocketful of nails. He sat upon a table and drank beer with such charming affability, that the stable-lads were as grateful to him as if he had treated them to that beverage. Indeed, seeing the frank cordiality with which James Conyers smote the lads upon the back, and prayed them to be active with the can, it was almost difficult to remember that he was not the giver of the feast, and that it was Mr. John Mellish who would have to pay the brewer's bill. What, amongst all the virtues, which adorn this earth, can be more charming than the

generosity of upper servants? With what hearty hospitality they pass the bottle! how liberally they throw the seven-shilling gunpowder into the teapot! how unsparingly they spread the twenty-penny fresh butter on the toast! and what a glorious welcome they give to the droppers-in of the servants' hall! It is scarcely wonderful that the recipients of their bounty forget that it is the master of the household who will be called upon for the expenses of the banquet, and who will look ruefully at the total of the quarter's housekeeping.

It was not to be supposed that so dashing a fellow as Mr. James Conyers could, in the lodging-house-keepers' *patois*, "do for" himself. He required a humble drudge to black his boots, make his bed, boil his kettle, cook his dinner, and keep the two little chambers at the lodge in decent order. Casting about in a reflective mood for a fitting person for this office, his recreant fancy hit upon Steeve Hargraves the "Softy." He was sitting upon the sill of an open window in the little parlour of the lodge, smoking a cigar and drinking out of a can of beer, when this idea came into his head. He was so tickled by the notion, that he took his cigar from his mouth in order to laugh at his ease.

"The man's a character," he said, still laughing, "and I'll have him to wait upon me. He's been forbid the place, has he? Turned out neck and crop because my Lady Highropes horsewhipped him. Never mind that; *I'll* give him leave to come back, if it's only for the fun of the thing."

He limped out upon the high-road half an hour after this, and went into the village to find Steeve Hargraves. He had little difficulty in doing this, as everybody knew the "Softy," and a chorus of boys volunteered to fetch him from the house of the doctor, in whose service he did odd jobs, and brought him to Mr. Conyers five minutes afterwards, looking very hot and dirty, but as pale of complexion as usual.

Stephen Hargraves agreed very readily to abandon his present occupation and to wait upon the trainer, in consideration of five shillings a week and his board and lodging; but his countenance fell when he discovered that Mr. Conyers was in the service of John Mellish, and lived on the outskirts of the park.

"You're afraid of setting foot upon his estate, are you?" said the trainer, laughing. "Never mind, Steeve, *I* give you leave to come, and I should like to see the man or woman in that house who'll interfere with any whim of mine. *I* give you leave. You understand."

The "Softy" touched his cap and tried to look as if he understood; but it was very evident that he did not understand, and it was some time before Mr. Conyers could persuade him that his life would be safe within the gates of Mellish Park. But he was ultimately induced to trust himself at the north lodge, and promised to present himself there in the course of the evening.

Now Mr. James Conyers had exerted himself as much in order to overcome the cowardly objections of this rustic clown as he could have done if Steeve Hargraves had been the most accomplished body servant in the three Ridings. Perhaps there was some deeper motive than any regard for the man himself in this special preference for the "Softy;" some lurking malice, some petty spite, the key to which was hidden in his own breast. If, while standing smoking in the village street, *chaffing* the "Softy" for the edification of the lookers-on, and taking so much trouble to secure such an ignorant and brutish esquire, – if one shadow of the future, so very near at hand, could have fallen across his path, surely he would have instinctively recoiled from the striking of that ill-omened bargain.

But James Conyers had no superstition; indeed, he was so pleasantly free from that weakness as to be a disbeliever in all things in heaven and on earth, except himself and his own merits; so he hired the "Softy," for the fun of the thing, as he called it, and walked slowly back to the park gates to watch for the return of Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, who were expected that afternoon.

The woman at the lodge brought him out a chair, and begged him to rest himself under the portico. He thanked her with a pleasant smile, and sitting down amongst the roses and honeysuckles, lighted another cigar.

"You'll find the north lodge dull, I'm thinking, sir," the woman said, from the open window, where she had reseated herself with her needlework.

"Well, it isn't very lively, ma'am, certainly," answered Mr. Conyers, "but it serves my purpose well enough. The place is lonely enough for a man to be murdered there and nobody be any the wiser; but as I have nothing to lose, it will answer well enough for me."

He might perhaps have said a good deal more about the place, but at this moment the sound of wheels upon the high-road announced the return of the travellers, and two or three minutes afterwards the carriage dashed through the gate, and past Mr. James Conyers.

Whatever power this man might have over Aurora, whatever knowledge of a compromising secret he might have obtained and traded upon, the fearlessness of her nature showed itself now as always, and she never flinched at the sight of him. If he had placed himself in her way on purpose to watch the effect of his presence, he must surely have been disappointed; for except that a cold shadow of disdain passed over her face as the carriage drove by him, he might have imagined himself unseen. She looked pale and care-worn, and her eyes seemed to have grown larger, since her illness; but she held her head as erect as ever, and had still the air of imperial grandeur which constituted one of her chief charms.

"So that is Mr. Mellish," said Conyers, as the carriage disappeared. "He seems very fond of his wife."

"Ay, sure; and he is too. Fond of her! Why, they say there isn't another such couple in all Yorkshire. And she's fond of him, too, bless her handsome face! But who wouldn't be fond of Master John?"

Mr. Conyers shrugged his shoulders; these patriarchal habits and domestic virtues had no particular charm for him.

"She had plenty of money, hadn't she?" he asked, by way of bringing the conversation into a more rational channel.

"Plenty of money! I should think so. They say her pa gave her fifty thousand pounds down on her wedding-day; not that our master wants money; he's got enough and to spare."

"Ah, to be sure," answered Mr. Conyers; "that's always the way of it. The banker gave her fifty thousand, did he? If Miss Floyd had married a poor devil, now, I don't suppose her father would have given her fifty sixpences."

"Well, no; if she'd gone against his wishes, I don't suppose he would. He was here in the spring, – a nice, white-haired old gentleman; but failing fast."

"Failing fast. And Mrs. Mellish will come into a quarter of a million at his death, I suppose. Good afternoon, ma'am. It's a queer world." Mr. Conyers took up his stick, and limped away under the trees, repeating this ejaculation as he went. It was a habit with this gentleman to attribute the good fortune of other people to some eccentricity in the machinery of life, by which he, the only really deserving person in the world, had been deprived of his natural rights. He went through the wood into a meadow where some of the horses under his charge were at grass, and spent upwards of an hour lounging about the hedgerows, sitting on gates, smoking his pipe, and staring at the animals, which seemed about the hardest work he had to do in his capacity of trainer. "It isn't a very hard life, when all's said and done," he thought, as he looked at a group of mares and foals, who, in their eccentric diversions, were performing a species of Sir Roger de Coverley up and down the meadow. "It isn't a very hard life; for as long as a fellow swears hard and fast at the lads, and gets rid of plenty of oats, he's right enough. These country gentlemen always judge a man's merits by the quantity of corn they have to pay for. Feed their horses as fat as pigs, and never enter 'em except among such a set of screws as an active pig could beat; and they'll swear by you. They'd think more of having a horse win the Margate Plate, or the Hampstead Heath Sweepstakes, than if he ran a good fourth in the Derby. Bless their innocent hearts! I should think fellows with plenty of money and no brains

must have been invented for the good of fellows with plenty of brains and no money; and that's how we contrive to keep our equilibrium in the universal see-saw."

Mr. James Conyers, puffing lazy clouds of transparent blue smoke from his lips, and pondering thus, looked as sentimental as if he had been ruminating upon the last three pages of the 'Bride of Abydos,' or the death of Paul Dombey. He had that romantic style of beauty peculiar to dark-blue eyes and long black lashes; and he could not wonder what he should have for dinner without a dreamy pensiveness in the purple shadows of those deep-blue orbs. He had found the sentimentality of his beauty almost of greater use to him than the beauty itself. It was this sentimentality which always put him at an advantage with his employers. He looked like an exiled prince doing menial service in bitterness of spirit and a turned-down collar. He looked like Lara returned to his own domains to train the horses of a usurper. He looked, in short, like anything but what he was, – a selfish, good-for-nothing, lazy scoundrel, who was well up in the useful art of doing the minimum of work, and getting the maximum of wages.

He strolled slowly back to his rustic habitation, where he found the "Softy" waiting for him; the kettle boiling upon a handful of bright fire, and some tea-things laid out upon the little round table. Mr. Conyers looked rather contemptuously at the humble preparations.

"I've mashed the tea for 'ee," said the "Softy;" "I thought you'd like a coop."

The trainer shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say I'm particular attached to the cat-lap," he said, laughing; "I've had rather too much of it when I've been in training, – half-and-half, warm tea and cold-drawn castor-oil. I'll send you into Doncaster for some spirits to-morrow, my man: or to-night, perhaps," he added reflectively, resting his elbow upon the table and his chin in the hollow of his hand.

He sat for some time in this thoughtful attitude, his retainer Steeve Hargraves watching him intently all the while, with that half-wondering, half-admiring stare with which a very ugly creature – a creature so ugly as to know it is ugly – looks at a very handsome one.

At the close of his reverie, Mr. Conyers took out a clumsy silver watch, and sat for a few minutes staring vacantly at the dial.

"Close upon six," he muttered at last. "What time do they dine at the house, Steeve?"

"Seven o'clock," answered the "Softy."

"Seven o'clock. Then you'd have time to run there with a message, or a letter, and catch 'em just as they're going in to dinner."

The "Softy" stared aghast at his new master.

"A message or a letter," he repeated; "for Mr. Mellish?"

"No; for Mrs. Mellish."

"But I daren't," exclaimed Stephen Hargraves; "I daren't go nigh the house; least of all to speak to her. I don't forget the day she horsewhipped me. I've never seen her since, and I don't want to see her. You think I am a coward, don't 'ee?" he said, stopping suddenly, and looking at the trainer, whose handsome lips were curved into a contemptuous smile. "You think I'm a coward, don't 'ee, now?" he repeated.

"Well, I don't think you are over-valiant," answered Mr. Conyers, "to be afraid of a woman, though she was the veriest devil that ever played fast and loose with a man."

"Shall I tell you what it is I am afraid of?" said Steeve Hargraves, hissing the words through his closed teeth in that unpleasant whisper peculiar to him. "It isn't Mrs. Mellish. It's myself. It's *this*" – he grasped something in the loose pocket of his trousers as he spoke, – "it's *this*. I'm afraid to trust myself a-nigh her, for fear I should spring upon her, and cut her thro-at from ear to ear. I've seen her in my dreams sometimes, with her beautiful white thro-at laid open, and streaming oceans of blood; but, for all that, she's always had the broken whip in her hand, and she's always laughed at me. I've had many a dream about her; but I've never seen her dead or quiet; and I've never seen her without the whip."

The contemptuous smile died away from the trainer's lips as Steeve Hargraves made this revelation of his sentiments, and gave place to a darkly thoughtful expression, which overshadowed the whole of his face.

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